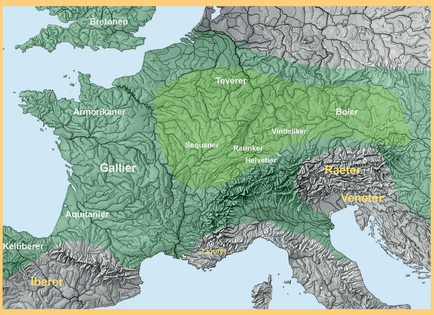
The Celts

According to the accounts of various Greek and Roman writers, “Celts” lived throughout large parts of Europe as early as 400 BC. They had a reputation for being fierce warriors and conquerors, and were not very well liked in the Mediterranean region; in 386 BC, for instance, they destroyed Rome. We assume today that central Europe was populated by Celtic tribes even as early as 800 BC, the beginning of the Iron Age. While they probably exhibited close similarities with regard to language and culture, they would not have formed a political union. The Celts were the first people to live in our country whose name we actually know. Their language belonged to the large group of Indo-Germanic languages. The Celtic culture was characterised by contacts with the Mediterranean region and by highly skilled artisans.

The Helvetii

The Roman general Gaius Julius Caesar wrote extensively about the Celtic tribe of the Helvetii. On their quest for a new place to settle, they clashed with the Romans around 58 BC; after their defeat at the Battle of Bibracte, they were forced to settle in what is now Switzerland. According to Caesar, the Helvetii originally settled on the Swiss Plateau between Lake Geneva and Lake Constance.

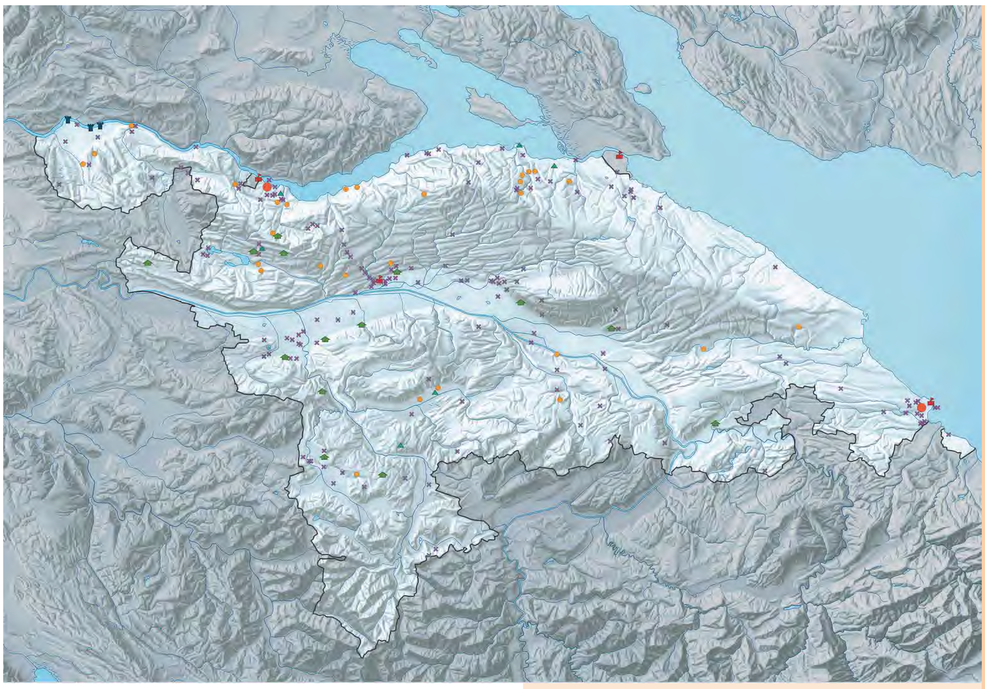


The Celts in central Europe: the greatest extent of the La Tène Culture — Core area

The gold treasure from Erstfeld UR, discovered in 1962.

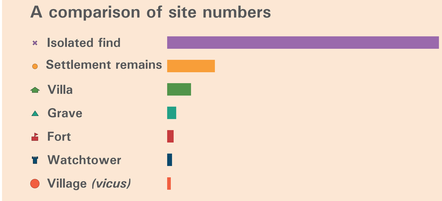
Canton Thurgau in the Roman period

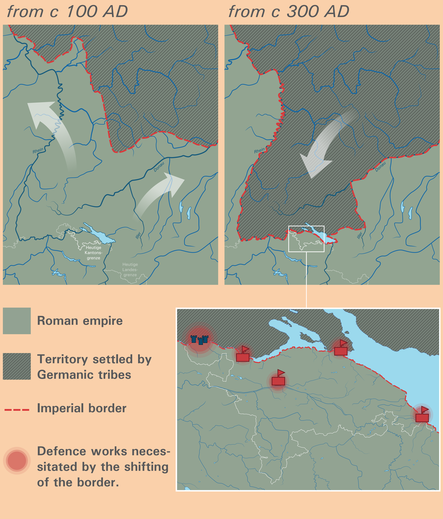
c. 15 BC to AD 400



Traces of civilisation

Of all the prehistoric eras, the 400 years during which the Thurgau region was part of the Roman empire left behind the most evidence. The majority of the findspots represent isolated finds, mainly coins. To date, only two relatively large villages, so-called vici, have come to light: Eschenz *(Tasgetium)* and Arbon *(Arbor Felix)*. Most settlement and building remains probably represent small to medium farmsteads, though very few have been archaeologically examined. When the empire's border, the *limes*, had to be pulled back as far as the River Rhine around AD 300, fortifications were erected at Arbon and Pfyn *(Ad Fines)*. Together with the forts at Oberwinterthur, Stein am Rhein and Constance, they formed the back bone of the empire's border defence.





The Roman road network

We know from ancient sources that the Thurgau region was part of the Late Roman long-distance road network. The Tabula Peutingeriana, or Peutinger Map, is a later copy of a Late Roman road map. It shows west-east links in our region. The southern road leads from *Vindonissa* (Windisch) via *Ad Fines* (Pfyn), *Arbor felix* (Arbon) and *Brigantio* (Bregenz) to *Augusta vindelicum* (Augsburg). This is confirmed by the Antonine Itinerary, which shows Pfyn as the only posting station on the arterial road between Augusta vindelicum and *Treveri* (Trier). A second road leading from west to east also starts at Vindonissa. It crosses the River Rhine at *Tenedo* (Zurzach) and then runs south of the Black Forest via *Iuliomagus* (Schleitheim) and north of Lake Constance to the River Danube. Like today's road maps, the ancient sources too only give us a rough idea of the course of the roads and the length of the road sections. The Itinerary explicitly mentions Pfyn as a place situated between two different systems of measuring distance. Accordingly, the Celtic league (2.22 km) was used to the west of Pfyn, while the Roman mile (1.48 km) was used to the east.

Detail of the Tabula Peutingeriana. Lake Constance and Arbor felix (Arbon) are on the right, Ad Fines (Pfyn) to the left.

The Roman village road at Tasgetium (Untereschenz) discovered in 2005. Photographed during the excavation in 2006.

The Late Roman cemetery of Pfyn-Adelberg

In 1928, a cemetery was discovered 700 m east of the Roman fort at Pfyn and excavated by K. Keller-Tarnuzzer. The excavations uncovered 19 poorly preserved adult inhumations oriented east to west. Because the bones were not recovered, we cannot ascertain the ratio of females to males. Ten of the burials contained grave goods, which allowed us to date them roughly to the period around AD 350, i.e. the period of the nearby Roman fort. The deceased probably lived at the fort. As was the custom at a time when the Christian faith was first introduced to our region, the burials were inhumations. The fact that very few iron nails and no stone slabs were found suggests that the deceased were placed in the ground wrapped only in shrouds, without coffins. The dead were given vessels for eating and drinking (often filled with provisions), personal items (jewellery, perfume) and coins. The coins would be used by the deceased to pay Charon to ferry them across the River Styx to the realm of the dead.

Adelberg hill as seen from the fort.

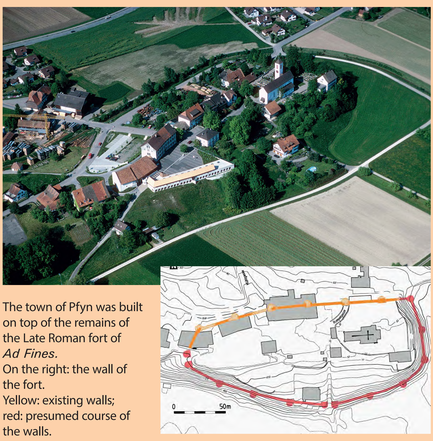
Grave 19 with its grave goods exposed. Photographed during the excavation in 1928

The Romans in Canton Thurgau

As a result of the Alpine campaign of around 15 BC, the area of what is now Canton Thurgau came under Roman rule. The local population quickly adopted the economy, the technologies and the customs of the conquerors. The first stone buildings with glass windows, underfloor heating systems and tiled roofs were constructed, fortified roads were built, a monetary system based on coinage was established and a flourishing trade network grew up. The largest settlement in the Thurgau region was the market town of Tasgetium (Eschenz). Even at the time, its attractive location on the outlet of the lake as well as its Roman wooden bridge via Werd Island across the River Rhine were important advantages. Thanks to the excellent preservation conditions, wooden buildings and organic finds were very well preserved at the site. The remains of several rural estates (villae rusticae) also came to light in the area, where intensive farming had been carried out. The site of a Roman villa near Stutheien in the Seebach Valley was excavated in 1928 and is still open to the public today. From the mid-3rd century AD to around AD 400, the border along the River Rhine was newly fortified because of various Germanic incursions. Watchtowers and the forts at Arbor felix (Arbon), Ad Fines (Pfyn) and Tasgetium (Stein a. Rh.) are evidence of this. From AD 401, the Romans retreated and after a considerable period of transition, Alamanni began to settle in the region.

The vicus of *Tasgetium* (Untereschenz), 1st century AD. Drawing: Roland Gäfgen.

The villa at Stutheien, Hüttwilen. The 1928 excavation.

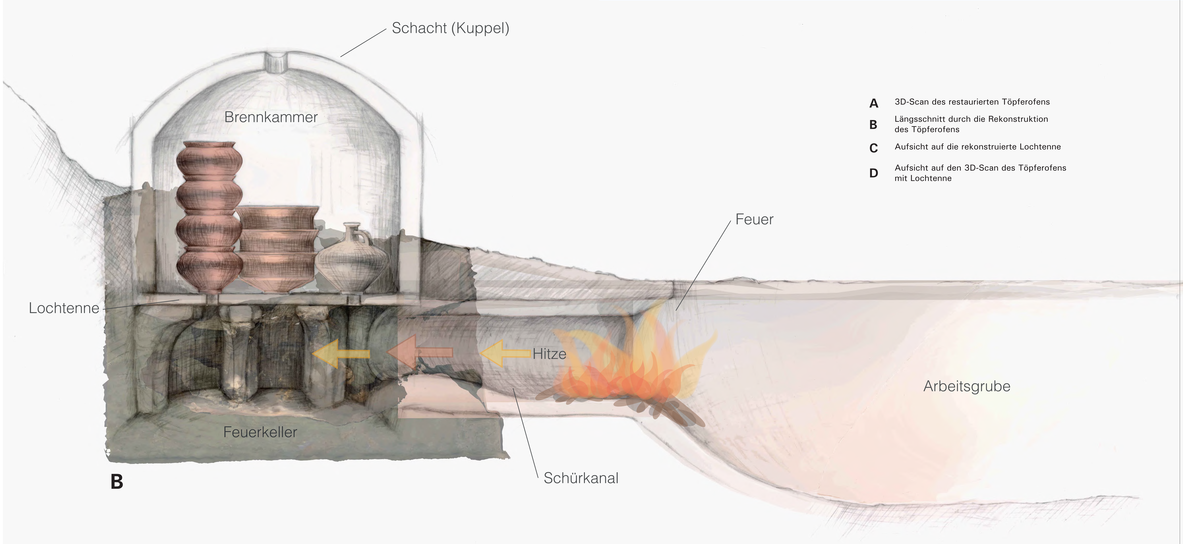


The town of Pfyn was built on top of the remains of the Late Roman fort of *Ad Fines*.
On the right: the wall of the fort.
Yellow: existing walls; red: presumed course of the walls.

A potter’s kiln from Eschenz

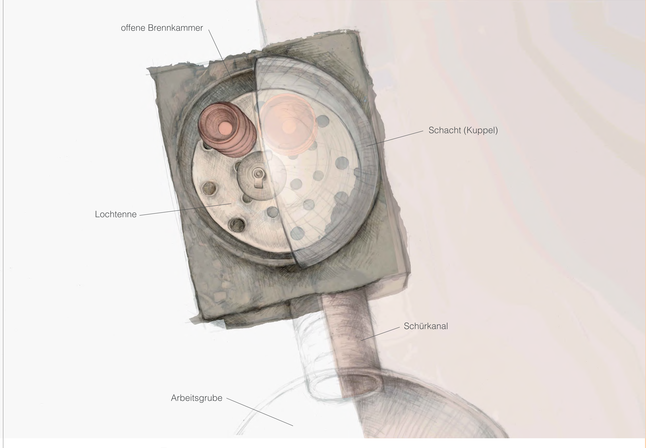
Three well-preserved Roman potters’ kilns and numerous waste pits with “rejects” were discovered in the year 2000 south of Mettlenstrasse in Unter-Eschenz. A loam floor and postholes were also uncovered and interpreted as the remains of a roofed workshop. The excavation brought to light considerable amounts of crockery, mainly bowls with red and black colour-coating, fine beakers with sanded surfaces, jugs and mortaria. The potter’s workshop dated from the late 1st century AD.

A



B

A 3D-Scan des restaurierten Töpferofens
B Längsschnitt durch die Rekonstruktion des Töpferofens
C Aufsicht auf die rekonstruierte Lochtenne
D Aufsicht auf den 3D-Scan des Töpferofens mit Lochtenne



C

D

Roman wooden objects

Wood has been an important raw material since the beginning of time. It was used as early as 500,000 years ago as fuel for cooking and as a vital source of heat, protection and light. Large amounts of wood were needed to make numerous items and for building shelters. Even in the 21st century it is hard to imagine life without it.

Because organic materials decay fast, wooden archaeological finds are rarely recovered. Hermetically sealed in waterlogged soils, frozen in ice, deposited in salt, charred or in arid desert environments, wood can survive for thousands of years because the decaying fungi and bacteria etc. cannot survive in these extreme conditions.

Wooden objects from the Roman period in Switzerland have been found at the legionary camp of *Vindonissa* (Windisch) and the small towns of *Vitudurum* (Oberwinterthur) and *Tasgetium* (Eschenz). Most wooden objects at Eschenz did not come to light until recently. The wooden objects on display here, including the cult figure from Eschenz, and evidence of writing such as tablets, brands and stamps as well as graffiti on barrels shed light on both economic and social aspects of everyday Roman life. The wooden finds from the waterlogged layers at Eschenz had to be expertly conserved immediately after they were found, or they would have dried out very quickly and shrunk like raisins. After cleaning, the objects were soaked in a solution of polyethylene glycol and then freeze-dried. Conservation is often followed by restoration.

The most important Swiss sites where Roman wooden objects came to light.

Sill beams from a Roman building in Unter-Eschenz TG. Excavated in 2003.

Boxwood combs during conservation in the laboratory.

The panpipes from Eschenz

Archaeological excavations mounted at Römerweg in Eschenz in 2004 brought to light a completely preserved set of panpipes (syrinx). The object was found in a peaty layer deposited around AD 50–60. Made from a small boxwood board, the instrument had seven drilled pipes. It had a hole so that it could be worn around the neck on a piece of string. After their recovery the pipes were immediately brought to Canton Thurgau Hospital in Frauenfeld, where they were examined in detail and recorded in the CT scanner of the radiological department. The high-resolution scan was then used to create a stereolithographic synthetic copy of the pipes at the Department of Anthropology at the University of Zurich. At the same time, the original find was brought to the restoration laboratory for conservation. The instrument was soaked in polyethylene glycol and then freeze-dried. To reconstruct the panpipes' ancient sound, a flute maker created an exact boxwood replica. It allowed us to play ancient sheet music and hear almost 2000 year-old sounds and melodies.

CT scan of the panpipes still wet from the ground

Photo Radiologie Spital Thurgau AG.

The pastoral god Pan with his pipes.
Roman mural, probably from Pompeii, 1st century AD. Museo Nazionale, Naples.

The legend of Syrinx and Pan

Syrinx was a nymph from Arcadia, whose chastity and passion for hunting inspired her to become a servant of the goddess Artemis. She also dressed like the goddess, and could have been mistaken for her, had it not been for her bow, which was made of horn, while Artemis's was made of gold. One day, on her way home from Mount Lykaion, Syrinx encountered the god Pan. She rejected his lovesick advances and fled through the wilderness until she came to the River Ladon, which halted her flight. She appealed to her sisters, the river-nymphs, to conceal her and when Pan finally caught up and tried to embrace her, he realised that he was holding nothing but a bunch of reeds. When he heard the wind whistle through the reeds, he was struck by their haunting sound, which inspired him to cut several of them to different lengths and join them together using wax, thus continuing his dialogue with Syrinx. … or so told by Ovid in his „Metamorphose".

Barrels and wine

Depictions of wine-laden merchant ships and ancient texts attest to the fact that barrels were important containers for transporting large volumes of liquid during the Roman period. Roman barrels could hold up to 800 litres, or the equivalent of 30 amphorae. The wine probably came from Gaul or Italy, and some was perhaps already produced locally. Wine was generally traded over long distances and transported by water. We find the coopers' names carved into the bottom of the barrels. One example is the craftsman SENATVS. From brands and stamps, we also know that GAIVS ANTONIVS SPENDIVS was a wine producer. Having filled the fine wines into smaller clay jugs for sale, the local wine merchants recycled the empty barrels, most of which were made from silver fir wood. They were used as tanning vats, as cladding in wells or as sedimentation chambers in drainage systems.

Roman barrel at TASGETIVM/Eschenz. Uncovered in June 2004.

Roman stone relief from Metz (F).

Woodworking

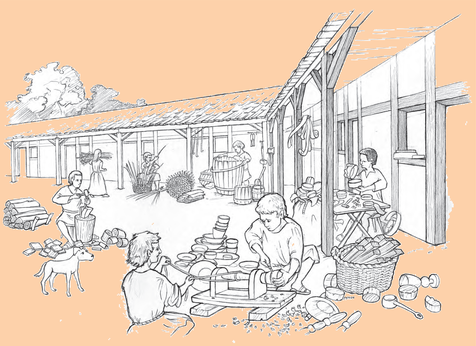
Wooden finds provide important insight, not only into the wood species selected and what each one was used for, but also into the individual woodworking techniques used. The Roman period had various specialist woodworkers:

Wood-turning
Hand-operated woodworking lathes were used for both long grain turning and face work. Wood-turners made furniture parts, boxes with lids, bowls, plates, small wheels, bobbins, spindles and musical instruments. Turning waste and traces of working (cones, imprints from the centres) have helped us to reconstruct the wood-turning techniques used.

Coopering, barrel making
Known since the Neolithic period, the technique was used, mainly to make barrels, but also drinking vessels and transportation containers. Roman coopers preferred to use coniferous wood to make the bottoms and staves because they are pliable, full of resin and easy to split.

Carving/sawing
The boxwood comb is a product that was typically made using this technique. First, a blank was made from a suitable piece of wood. Then the outlines of the teeth were carved into the wood. Using a fine saw or an angular, taut wire, the teeth were cut out of the wood.

Wood chipping
Chips for making chipwood boxes were produced using iron drawknives. The walls of the boxes were attached to the oval or round bottoms using small dowels made of wood or iron.



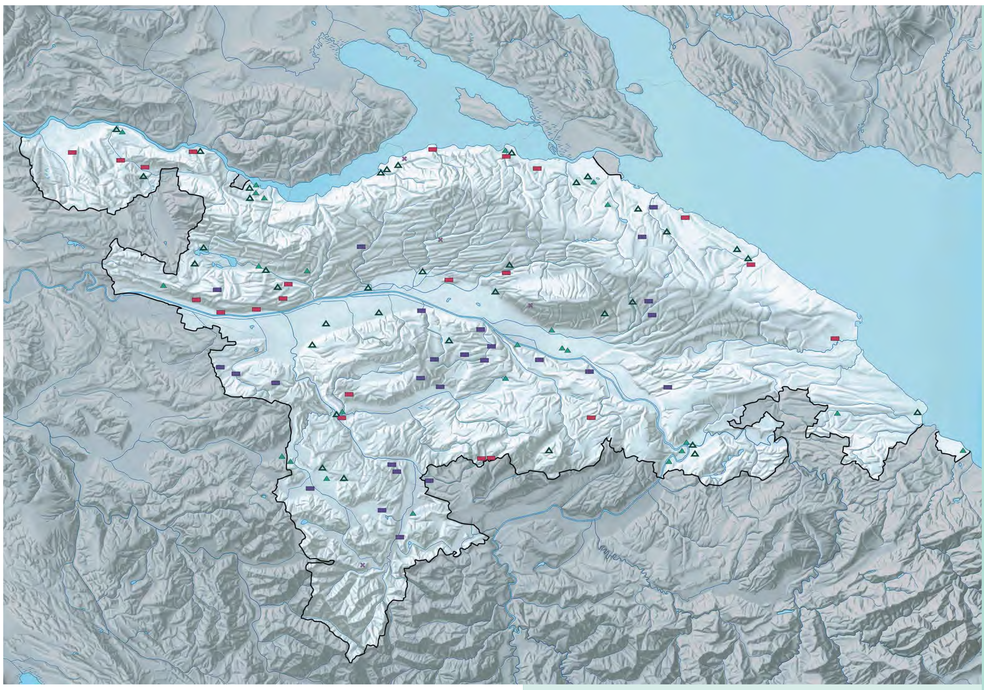
Basketry
Wickerwork and basketry were important crafts in the Roman period. Weavers mainly used willow and hazel switches.

A basket in situ at Eschenz, 1997 excavation.

Iron woodworking tools from *Vitudurum* (Oberwinterthur).

The Thurgau region in the Early Middle Ages

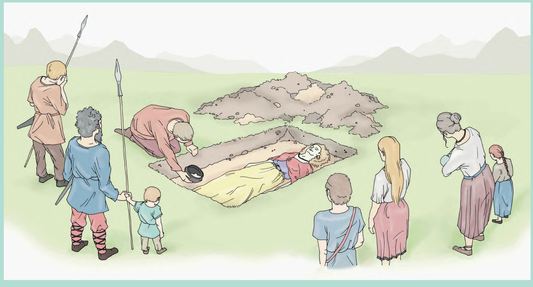
c. AD 400 to AD 800



Germani began to arrive

Finds attesting to a Romanised population from the post-Roman period in what is today Canton Thurgau are extremely rare. Nor have any of their graves been found. This is because from around AD 400, no more offerings were placed in graves. In the first half of the 6th century, Germanic population groups gradually began to arrive; first there were the Franks, who came from the west, then Alamanni from what is now southern Germany. It was then that the German language became established in the region. This early wave of migration is attested to by place names ending in - ingen. Place names ending in - ikon, - inghofen, - ighofen and - ikofen bear witness to the consolidation and spread of the Alamannic occupation during the 7th and 8th centuries. A large majority of the early medieval burials date from this period. The graves, usually found in cemeteries are generally situated near settlements, often in prominent locations.

A comparison of site numbers

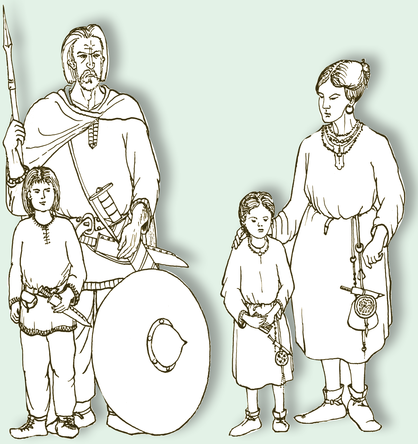


An early medieval funeral scene.

Image: Natalie Neff / Livia Enderli

Early medieval society

Burials and legal texts that have survived give us a lot of information about the structure of society and the social conditions during the Merovingian period (5th–7th centuries). The Alamanni were ruled by a duke who was directly subordinate to the Frankish king. Neither the king nor the duke had a permanent residence. The duke was supported by a ruling class of noblemen and their retinue. The ordinary people were made up of free and semi-free peasants, serfs and slaves. Only free men had the right to bear arms. In the 7th and 8th centuries, the free peasantry came under increasing pressure. Frequent military campaigns and the obligation to pay for one's own weapons, which became ever-more costly, led to an accumulation of debt and ultimately forced many to become dependent on big landowners.

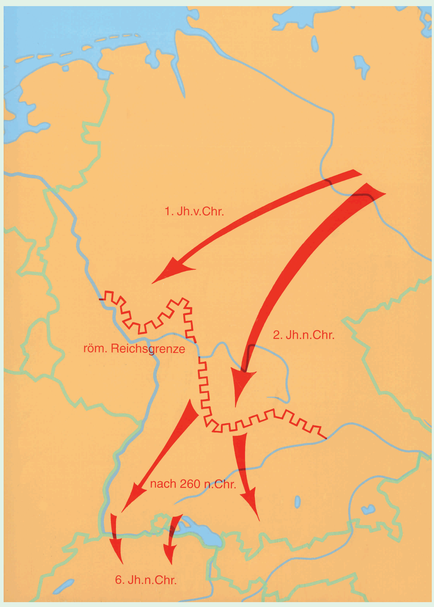


A free Alamannic family.
The man's better-than-average weaponry consisting of a long sword (spatha), a short sword (seax), a lance and a shield points to his wealth and high social standing.

The Early Middle Ages

Of all the historical events it was the arrival of Germanic population groups in the Early Middle Ages that had the most profound effect on the language and culture of what is today Canton Thurgau. In AD 536, the region came under the rule of the Frankish Merovingian empire and from AD 600, the Alamanni began to settle here. The Roman language was gradually replaced, and German became the spoken language in the Thurgau region.

As the name Alamanni (= all men) suggests, these migrants were not a cohesive tribe but a union of people of different origins. The Alamanni, who would not actually use the name until later, were identical to the Suebi (Swabians). Their original territory was on the Middle Elbe River. In around 50 BC Suebic tribes began to lay claim to the fertile regions on both sides of the Middle and Upper Rhine. In the 3rd century, the Alamanni managed to make several incursions into Roman territory. When the Roman limes was pulled back to the River Rhine, they took possession of the land between the rivers Danube and Rhine that had been freed up. It was not until the 7th century, however, that Alamannic population groups crossed the Rhine in large numbers and settled on the Swiss Plateau.



The migration of the Alamanni from the River Elbe to the Swiss Plateau.

The Unterhof at Diessenhofen

The Unterhof at Diessenhofen is the best-researched medieval building in Canton Thurgau. Built around 1186 on a promontory above the River Rhine by a Kyburg liegeman, the medieval aristocratic seat originally consisted of a massive tower with a timber clerestory. The site was extended considerably in 1278 and again in 1318. The result included a palas building with lavishly decorated great halls. In 1294, the Unterhof was first mentioned in records as a "seneschal's residence". The site was examined by the Department of Archaeology between 1988 and 1991 because the insurance company "Winterthur Versicherungen" had decided to install a modern training facility at the property. The detailed architectural examination and excavation brought to light numerous finds dating from the Neolithic period to the modern era. The display case only contains modern-era finds from the false floors. The objects had fallen through the cracks in the floors and had thus survived. Only the examinations brought them back to light. Archaeologists are not just interested in the ancient evidence of the pile dwellers and Romans, but also in tin Indian toys, school reports and rosary beads from yesteryear.

A depiction of the Unterhof in the Edlibach Chronicle (c. 1486).

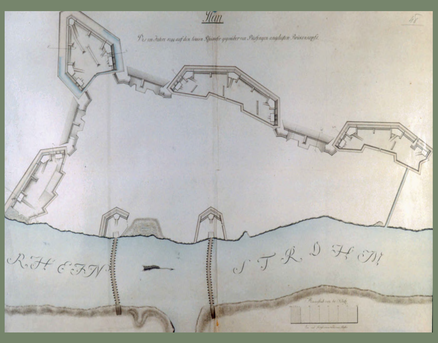
The inside of the great hall door of 1318 with original heraldic vair.

The Unterhof after the renovation work.

Plan of the construction phases.

The bridge head in the Schaarenwald area

In 1799, the leadership of the Second Coalition launched a two-pronged attack with the objective of driving the French army out of Switzerland. Russian troops were to advance from the south across the Alpine passes, while Austrian forces would come from Vorarlberg in Austria and from southern Germany. On 22nd May Archduke Charles of Teschen chose the Rhine knee at Büsingen to cross the river with the majority of his troops. Workers from Schaffhausen, Thurgau and southern Germany were ordered to reinforce the bridgehead by building ramparts, ditches and abattises. After initial successes at the Battle of Frauenfeld and the first Battle of Zurich, the tide turned and at the end of September 1799, following defeat at the second Battle of Zurich, the coalition troops retreated across the pontoon bridges at Schaaren. After their victory, the French forced the same workers to raze the defences.



The war archive in Vienna holds ground-plans and sectional drawings from 1799. The Department of Archaeology had the surviving remains of the defences surveyed. The new records largely correspond to the plans drawn up by the Austrian engineers 200 years ago.

Reconstruction drawing of the entrenchment.

In 2001, the "Rheinkastell" Society reconstructed parts of the east bastion and put up signs along the entire 1400 m long structure. The educational trail also includes a bunker from the Second World War, which can be visited by prior arrangement. Go to http://www.rheinkastell.ch.