

# Roman roads : that is the question!

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# Cultural rebirth

Since Switzerland lies at the heart of Europe our subject must also include ways to and from the rest of our continent. For almost thirty years cultural flows have been up for discussion at the European level. In 1984 the Council of Europe recommended that the European pilgrim ways, particularly the Ways of St. James to Compostela, should be revived. The avowed aims were to increase consciousness of our common European identity, to protect and maintain our cultural heritage and to fructify leisure activities in new ways. What has Switzerland done about this?

Acting on this request from Strasbourg the Swiss National Tourist Office (SNTO) started in 1985 on its ambitious project «Ways to Switzerland». A number of its review, «Switzerland», entirely devoted to the Ways of St. James, was a great success and quickly went out of print. After this encouraging start, two more numbers on the Great Walser Route appeared in 1987 and 1988, and these have now been put together in a book. This year the SNTO has decided to concentrate on the Roman roads passing through Switzerland: again in two numbers of the review, «Switzerland», also available together in book form, covering the western and eastern parts of the country. As part of the SNTO's longterm project «Ways to Switzerland», baroque trails, mule tracks and textile trails have been chosen as new subjects for the coming years.

The very use of these expressions shows clearly enough how pleasant (and publicity-wise) the subject is. But of course the old roads of our country cannot really be divided into categories. A road is a road for all that. The Ways of St. James were not used only by pilgrims on their way to Compostela, and

the baroque trails were simply lines of communication between one cultural centre and another. What exactly does the SNTO hope to achieve with this very wide-ranging cultural history project? It is aiming to discover the traces left by the builders and users of these tracks across our country and to show the visitor the wonderful process by which they have marked architecture, language, roadbuilding and art as a whole across vast regions. The project has been carried out in full cooperation with experts and specialised institutes such as cantonal archaeologists, the

Swiss Walkers Federation and the Inventory of Historical Transport Routes through Switzerland. Those who follow these old ways, many now newly uncovered, will feel the impact of magnificent landscapes and make many interesting cultural discoveries. They will also come to understand the important transit role of our country down the ages, since almost all the ways begin and end abroad. For the Roman legionary as for the medieval pilgrim, Switzerland was simply a road to somewhere else.

Heldi Willumat

## Roman roads: That is the question!

This is the great controversy which still haunts research into old roads. There are many experts in this field, writing in dozens of different periodicals – and still the question of what is really Roman seems only partially unveiled, clouded with secrecy and myth. Year by year new books appear on the subject – which shows that readers have an unquenchable desire to come to terms with the Romans.

The ability to lay out a vast and highly efficient transport system throughout the huge empire is certainly one of the most fascinating aspects of the Roman achievement in building, planning and technology. The best original information about the course of the Roman roads, and particularly the important stage points along them, is found in the "Itinerarium Antonini", a Roman handbook for travellers, and the Peutinger

Juf in the Averser valley (Canton Grisons), a Walser Settlement at 6,998 feet, the highest permanently inhabited village in Europe. (Photo: SNTO)

Panel, which is a medieval copy of a Roman road map. This document contains only places and distances, and there are no descriptions of topography, contours or particularly difficult passages. But it does tell us that even at that time a number of important transit routes crossed the territory of what is now Switzerland. In the west of our country the crossing of the Great St. Bernard was the shortest link between Rome and the north. The St. Gotthard was considered unpassable because of the great barrier of the Schöllenen gorge. The eastern passes through what is now the Grisons were used, but they had nowhere near the importance of the Great St. Bernard, mainly because traffic was shared between them and the Brenner and Reschen-scheideck passes farther to the east. These main transport routes were supplemented by a whole network of regional roads and ways, and the traces of many of these have never been dis-

### Specialised walking guides

Judith Rickenbach, *Auf den Spuren der Kelten und Römer*. 20 walks in Switzerland, Ott Verlag Thun 1992 220 p., Sfr. 39.80.

*Inventar historischer Verkehrswege der Schweiz (IVS)*. Walks along historical routes, 17 excursions to monuments of art and transport history, Ott Verlag Thun 1990 264 p., Sfr. 39.80.

covered. Historians spend much time attempting to reconstruct the Roman road network in Switzerland on the basis of individual finds, small stretches of road suddenly discovered and the upwards of 50 Roman milestones found throughout the country.

But many errors have crept into the picture over the years by virtue of the fact that in the past roads were very often attributed to the Romans when in fact they were built much later. In many cases, when a piece of "old road" was discovered it was quite simply assumed by the locals to have been Roman. It slowly entered into the regional folklore and there are many wellknown "Roman" ways and bridges all over the country which certainly stem from much later periods. The problem of dating the roads is inextricably bound up with the study of cart ruts. It used to be thought that the existence of cart ruts in stone was a sure sign of the Romans, but more recently it has been discovered that some of the ruts originated with the much earlier Celts, while others stemmed from as late as the eighteenth century. But this has done nothing to dispel the fascination of Roman roads, witnesses of the past which are attracting new researchers, both professional and amateur, almost every day.

In Roman days two of Europe's main transit routes crossed today's Switzerland – known as the eastern and the western routes. The western route across the Great St. Bernard was the quickest way from Rome to the north. The eastern route through today's Canton Grisons never had the same importance because of strong competition from the Brenner and other passes farther east.

From top: Roman road by Lake Sils – Roman columns on the Julier Pass – Roman carriage ruts near St. Croix. (Photos: Lucia Degonda)

