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The origins and name of the city of Berne

What became of the Bear?

This year Berne is celebrating its 800th anniversary. The legend about its foundation is well known: the Duke of Zähringen, hunting in the forest that covered the land within the loop of the River Aare in those days, named the city after the first animal he killed, a bear. Researchers, however, have long known that the name Berne is probably older and that the story of the bear hunt could be what is called an «explanatory legend».

Over decades researchers have kept a careful eye on the area covered by Berne's old town. During building excavation work no traces or archeological finds dating back to before the Middle Ages have ever been found. It is therefore probably true that the medieval city of Berne is a "foundation city" constructed on land hitherto not built on.

There also appears to be no serious reason to doubt the date traditionally given for the city's foundation.

Before Berne was built

There had, however, been a settlement before the medieval city of Berne was founded. But this was not located on the site of the present-day federal capital but down river in the next big loop of the River Aare, in the so-called Enge Peninsula. There are clear traces there of two big successive Celtic fortifications, or "oppida" as Julius Caesar called such constructions. It would not be incorrect to recognise in these fortified settlements important strongholds of the Helvetii, a Gallic tribe. Following the Roman occupation of the Helvetii's territory a flourishing settlement with busy artisan activity developed from the Gallic oppidum. The old religious focal point also appears to have remained intact. This Roman settlement flourished into the third century A.D. and in parts also into the fourth century.

The two Enge peninsulas

This is the point at which problems arise. Why did the Duke of Zähringen not found his city on the site of the Celtic and Roman settlement? Experts say it was because the Enge Peninsula was poorly supplied with water. Additionally, the river loop was probably too big for a new medieval city and the embankments not stable enough for a city wall to be built on them.

The situation in the smaller loop, in which the old quarter of Berne now nestles, was different. The city brook could be led there

without great difficulty, solving the water supply problem in a way typical of Zähringen cities. A further problem is that of continuity. The latest researches indicate that there was a gap of several centuries between the end of the settlement on the Enge peninsula and the foundation of the Zähringen city. Yet there do appear to have been some links and memories. In the Middle Ages a chapel consecrated to St. Aegidius was built on the ruins of a Gallo-Roman temple and until the Reformation there was a procession out to it every year. Without placing undue weight on these connections it must be said that an interesting tradition exists here.

An important new find

The ancient name of the settlement on the Enge peninsula was not known. A new find has now begun to throw some light on this matter but at the same time it has, as so often happens, raised a number of new problems and questions. In one of the temple areas was recently found – unfortunately by unauthorised people – a small metal plate with a Gallic inscription from which, among other things, the place name "Brenodor(on)" can be deciphered. Assuming, with all due caution, that this is genuine, it immediately raises a number of questions. "Brenodoron", which corresponds to the Latin "Brenodorum" is a typical Gallic name for fortifications which would be entirely appropriate for the oppidum on the Enge peninsula. The inscription also makes reference to the Aare valley or its inhabitants, thus increasing probability. Thus the name of one of the big Helvetic centres would be known.

Bremgarten as an example

Does this name still live on? Not necessarily, but it could. On the Enge peninsula itself there is no place name that could help us here. But there could be an echo in the name of Bremgarten, a locality situated in a neighbouring and much smaller, though more promi-

nent, loop of the Aare. One of the names under which this little town was referred to in early documents was "Brennegart". Place name experts have long made the point that the trio of Bernese place names, Bremgarten, Muri and Wohlen occurs in the same constellation in Canton Aargau, raising the question whether some relationship exists.

One must of course also ask what the root "Breno-" means. It appears to be a Celtic formative element which has something to do with "cliff, thicket, undergrowth by the water". In the area of Orléans and Bourges in France is a strip of land called "La Brenne" which contains many swamps and ponds. River and place names like "Breno" or "Briançon" come from the same root. And the "Bernkastel" on the Moselle, well-known for its wine, was called "Princastellum" in the eighth century. The development of the place name Bernkastel shows that changes readily occur in words containing the letter "r". Another appropriate example is that of place name Bernex, which was referred to as Brenay in old documents and has the same root.

One thing is important. We must not think that the different changes in ruler always meant the extermination of the previous population. When Rome became ruler of Helvetia, very few Romans came up from the south into our land. The former, settled population remained, soon became Romanized and also adopted the standard Latin language. But in remote areas of Gaul – possibly including the upper part of the Aare valley- the Gallic language stubbornly persisted for a long time. So when the Duke of Zähringen founded the city of Berne, was the old name of the area in the loop, of the river downstream (remembering "La Brenne") still known? A fascinating possibility, a hypothesis and a lead well worth following up.

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