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Augusta Raurica

Augusta Raurica was founded around 44 BC in the area of a local Gallic tribe, the Rauraci, relatives of the Helvetii, but no archaeological evidence from this period has yet been found.

Successful colonization of the site had to wait for Augustus's conquest of the central Alps around 15 BC. The oldest find to date at Augusta Raurica has been dated to 6 BC by dendrochronology.

Augusta Raurica played an important role in Augustus's plans of conquest with two other colonies that bear his name; Augusta Praetoria, modern Aosta at the southern end of the Great Saint Bernard Pass, and Augusta Vindelicum, modern Augsburg, an outpost on the Danube. These three Augustae form the corners of a triangle that reaches across the Alpine conquests of Augustus, forming the frontier against unconquered Germania.



Augusta Raurica's amphitheatre

The city was founded on a high plateau just south of the Rhine river. Two small rivers, the Ergolz and Violen, have carved a triangle in the plateau; the city is therefore well defended by steep slopes to the north, east, and west.

Every important public building had its specific place, starting with the temple of Jupiter as the sacred high point from which the street network would spread. The architect next laid a longitudinal axis to form the main street of the settlement. Other longitudinal streets were laid out parallel to the main street at intervals of 55 meters. The main street was then divided into sections of 66 meters, which formed the corners of 10 crossing streets. This created a series of rectangular blocks of around 50 by 60 meters. The streets were laid on a solid bed of gravel and flanked by gutters on both sides. The more important roads featured covered sidewalks behind rows of columns.

By the second century AD Augusta Raurica was a prosperous commercial trading centre and in its

glory days the capital of a local Roman province. It is estimated that the population reached approximately twenty thousand people. Augusta Raurica prospered between the first and third century, and exported smoked pork and bacon to other parts of the Roman Empire. In the city were the typical amenities of a Roman city, an amphitheatre, a main forum, several smaller forums, an aqueduct, a variety of temples, and several public baths and the largest Roman theatre north of the Alps with 8,000 to 10,000 seats. Many of these sites are open to visitors all year round.

In 250 AD a powerful earthquake damaged a large part of the city. Shortly after, Alemanni tribes and/or marauding Roman troops destroyed the city. The Romans attempted to maintain their military position by building a fortress on the Rhine, Castrum Rauracense, the walls of which are still partly intact. Augusta Raurica was resettled on a much smaller scale on the site of the castrum.

Augusta Raurica today

The excavation site and the late Roman castle, the Castrum Rauracense, are listed as heritage sites of national significance, as are the early Christian baptistery and a brick kiln.

Many of the Roman buildings have been discovered and conserved through excavations, and most are open to the public:

- the temples on both sides of the street form an architectural unit
- the main forum with the temple of Jupiter
- the amphitheatre, of which only modest remains exist
- the aqueduct which supplied Augusta Raurica with drinking water.

Several private commercial buildings have also been found (a taberna, a bakery, a potter, and a tile kiln) as well as portions of a sewer. Around 80% of the built-up area has not yet been excavated. Augusta Raurica is the best preserved Roman city north of the Alps that has not been built over in medieval or modern times.

The Roman Museum houses the most important finds from the Roman city and presents the history of Augusta Raurica. In the museum the visitor will often find special exhibits as well as the most significant archaeological find at Augusta Raurica, the silver treasure of Kaiseraugst. This treasure hoard was found in the fortress in 1961/62 and is presumed to have once been the property of a commander. The museum also has a reconstruction of a Roman house with artifacts and reconstructions showing daily domestic and commercial life from the Roman period.

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