

Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK

Herausgeber: Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom

Band: - (1969)

Heft: 1583

Artikel: Our fiery ancestors

Autor: [s.n.]

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-696732>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 14.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

perhaps at this date Ursen was not settled at all. Moreover, the superior culture of the Celts seems to have exercised a pervasive influence well inside Raetian territory. Yet at least it is clear that when men first began to describe the inhabitants of Switzerland they distinguished between two dominant races; the composition of the layers beneath cannot be determined precisely.

Among the Celts a number of different peoples can be named and localized. The valleys of the Ticino and the Vorderrhein were occupied by the Leontii, whose Celtic culture was strongly tintured by that of the primitive Ligurian inhabitants. Four Celtic tribes held the Valais, and Geneva and the region to the south of its lake belonged to the Allobroges, who had been conquered by the Roman in 121 B.C. and incorporated into the province of *Gallia Narbonensis*. To the west of the Jura, between Rhine and Rhone, was the territory of the Sequani; it was perhaps not till the middle of the first century B.C. that the Raurici became established in the neighbourhood of Basle. Most extensive of all were the lands of the Helvetii. On the east they marched with those of the Raeti; to the west they were limited by the Jura; to the south by the Alps and lake Geneva. Northwards their boundary was indeterminate; at one time it had extended to the river Main, and at the beginning of the first century B.C. there were still Helvetian settlements to the north of the Rhine. But here was being felt the increasing pressure of the Germanic tribesmen, who, driven by what impulses we cannot know, were moving relentlessly from their homes in north-eastern Europe towards the kindlier climates of the south.

Celts and Germans

It is unnecessary to suppose a primordial and permanent antagonism between Celts and Germans; indeed, so much Celtic influence did the latter absorb that it is sometimes difficult to be certain of their identity. Thus when in the last decade of the second century B.C. a branch of the Celtic Helvetii, the Tigurini, allied themselves with the Germanic Cimbri to raid the Roman provinces, it remains doubtful whether the third party to the plan, a tribe called the Teutoni, were Celts or celticized Germans. However this may be, the movement seemed for a time to imperil the Roman republic. By 107 B.C. the Tigurini had defeated a Roman army and slain a Roman consul on the middle Garonne; two years later the united Celtic and Germanic hordes broke two consular armies on the lower Rhone in the neighbourhood of Orange. After ravaging Gaul and marching about in Spain they planned nothing less than a double attack on Italy. The Teutoni were to advance from Gaul along the coast; the Cimbri and the Tigurini were to cross the eastern Alps into Lombardy. The danger to Rome was averted by the

military genius of Marius. In the autumn of 102 B.C. he crushed the western division of the invaders at Aix in Provence; in the following summer he annihilated the Cimbri near Vercelli. The Tigurini, who had remained in reserve in the Alps to the east of the Brenner pass, escaped the slaughter and returned to the north, perhaps at this time taking up their permanent settlement in south-west Switzerland about Avenches.

Commonly it is the activities of the Cimbri in these events which have attracted most attention, for they provide the first instance of conflict between the Romans and Germans who were ultimately to overrun the Roman empire in the west. No less significant is the part played by the Celts, the Tigurini, and perhaps also the Teutoni. They appear as belligerent peoples, capable in this instance of co-operation with the Germans. But the alliance of Celt and German was a matter of temporary convenience which did not long check Germanic penetration into Celtic territory. A generation after the expedition of the Cimbri the German advance southwards had become more urgent, and it was favoured by divisions among the Celts. When about 70 B.C. the German leader Ariovist led his confederation of tribes across the Rhine near Mainz, he was welcomed by the Sequani of Alsace as an ally against their enemies, the Celtic Aedui of central Gaul. But the ally soon showed that he intended to be master; by 61 B.C. Ariovist had shattered the Aedui; then he turned to deprive the Sequani of their lands. A wedge of German settlement threatened to separate the Celts of Switzerland from those of the west. At this the Helvetii took fright, and planned a mass migration from the area south of the Rhine where many of them, who had been forced from their more northerly homes by the pressure of the Germans during the last two generations, had hardly yet had time to become established settlers. Their goal was the Atlantic seaboard of south-west Gaul, known to some of the elders by the expedition of the Tigurini nearly half a century before.

This project, instigated by the nobleman Orgetorix and complicated by his personal ambitions of achieving kingship over the Helvetii and of promoting a confederation of monarchies among the peoples of Gaul, persisted beyond his death. By the spring of 58 B.C. the Helvetii were ready to start their journey; contingents of other Celtic peoples had joined to swell the total to 368,000 men, women, and children; the fighting men may be estimated at a quarter of that figure. The evacuation was to be complete and final; the Helvetii had burnt their towns, their villages, their crops. Their easiest route to the mouth of the Garonne was to cross the Rhone at Geneva, and then, skirting the southern end of the Jura, to pass through the Roman province of Transalpine Gaul. For permission to

do this they addressed themselves to the Roman authority. That authority was Caesar, and permission was refused.

The Disastrous Exodus

Caesar's refusal to tolerate the passage of a vagrant horde through Roman territory may readily be understood. But how are we to explain his continued hostility to the migration when the Helvetii had chosen another route which, crossing the Jura further north and passing by arrangement through the lands of the Sequani, no longer touched Transalpine Gaul? Was it the calculation of a politician, determined to provoke a conflict for the sake of the prestige which victory would bring? The imputation is not wholly just: the interests of Rome were involved as well as the personal ambitions of Caesar, for the establishment in western Gaul of a new Helvetian state near the Roman frontier might well be thought to represent a menace to the Roman peace. Whatever may have been his motives, Caesar took the offensive; he pursued the Helvetii into Aeduan territory and defeated them, after stubborn battle, at Bibracte (Mont Beuvray, near Autun). The Helvetii who survived the battle he forced to return as dependent but privileged allies of Rome (*foederati*) to the Swiss lands which they had abandoned, lest the vacant area should attract further German advances.

Thus the history of Roman Switzerland may be said to have opened at Bibracte, which proved the prelude to Caesar's complete conquest of Gaul, a political achievement fundamental for western civilization. And Caesar knew how to defend the empire he was founding: in the year of Bibracte he defeated Ariovist in Alsace and drove the Germans back across the Rhine.

The Settlement

Yet at Caesar's death much was still provisional in the relations of Rome to the Swiss area. An attempt in 57 B.C. to establish Romans in the Valais, and to secure the route from Italy to Gaul over the St. Bernard, broke down. But the Helvetii remained Roman allies, and two colonies of legionary veterans, at Nyon on lake Geneva (*Colonia Julia Equestris*) and at Augst near Basle (*Colonia Augusta Raurica*, founded after Caesar's death but apparently on his instructions) served as eastern outposts to defend Roman communications between the Rhone at Lyons and the new frontier on the Rhine. It was left to Augustus to complete Caesar's work and to bring the territory of the Helvetii into the provincial system of the empire. In the Augustan re-organization of Gaul the Helvetii were attributed to *Provincia Belgica*. The same reign saw their eastern and southern neighbours lose their independence. Between 16 and 13 B.C. Augustus's stepsons, Drusus and

Tiberius, carried out completely successful converging attacks on the Raetians and the Vindelician Celts who lay south of the Danube in the neighbourhood of Augsburg. These new conquests were thrown together with the Valais, where the Celtic tribes had submitted to Roman rule some dozen years earlier, to form the province of *Raetia*. The whole area of modern Switzerland had thus been brought under Roman administration, though it was far from being consolidated into a single unit of government.

Helvetii and Romans

Any account of the Roman occupation must draw its material almost exclusively from Celtic Switzerland; about Roman *Raetia* we are very ill-informed. Two elementary considerations are fundamental. First, the fact of Roman rule brought no great influx of strangers into Switzerland. The soldiers and administrators must always have been comparatively few, and they were drawn from every province of the empire: their origin might be Spanish, or African, or oriental; frequently, of course, it was Celtic. Of all the inscriptions which have been collected for the Roman period in Switzerland, not one must imperatively be referred to an inhabitant of the city of Rome. What

united these soldiers and officials was not racial or national feeling but a common legal status as Roman citizens and the common enjoyment of a civilization which they were convinced was the only tolerable way of life. And, secondly, the Celts among whom they came were not barbarians, separated from them by an impassable abyss of cultural inferiority. The Helvetii prized wit as well as military prowess. In weapons and tactics and discipline the Celts in Switzerland, as elsewhere, were inferior to the Romans who defeated them. Their social organization seems to have been loose; the kings of earlier times had disappeared and an aristocracy of great landowners lorded it over masses of slaves and half-free men. But they had known permanent settlements; in preparation for the great migration of 58 B.C., Caesar tells us, they had twelve towns to burn and 400 villages. In agricultural technique they had much to teach their conquerors, and they were capable of fine decorative art, until native feelings were distorted by imitation of alien models. Nor were they wholly ignorant of the higher civilization of the Mediterranean world. From about 600 B.C. there existed at the mouth of the Rhone the Greek colony of Massilia (Marseilles), and though the importance of Massilia as a channel through which Greek in-

fluences made themselves felt on the Celts has perhaps been exaggerated, there is reason to believe that considerable communication took place by way of the Danube valley. The Celts of Switzerland, with gold washed from the Kleine and the Grosse Emme, had imitated the coins of Philip of Macedonia; in the absence of a native alphabet, Greek characters were borrowed to write Celtic words, and presumably the muster lists which, on Caesar's testimony, the Helvetii carried in 58 B.C. were drawn up in Greek letters in the Celtic tongue. We must not set the cultural level of the Swiss Celts in pre-Roman times too high: the imitations of Greek coins, originally excellent, soon degenerated, and literacy on any extensive scale awaited the introduction of Latin speech and script. But clearly the Helvetii had an appetite, an eager receptivity, for the new refinements and amenities which Rome could offer, and something indigenous to contribute, which would amalgamate with the importations from the Mediterranean to form a new regional civilization.

(Reproduced from "A Short History of Switzerland" by E. Bonjour, H.S. Offer and G. R. Potter with the permission of the Clarendon Press, Oxford).

THESE VEHICLES



TRAVEL TWICE MONTHLY TO AND FROM SWITZERLAND AND ENGLAND

Providing DOOR TO DOOR SERVICES
with vans specially equipped to carry

- Household Removals. — Exhibition Goods.
- Works of Art. — Machinery.

For full information contact

In Switzerland

KEHRLI + OELER,
Nachf. A. Oeler,
3001 Berne,
Bubenbergplatz 9.
Tel. 031 22 00 22.

In England

NEALE & WILKINSON LTD.,
1 and 2 Rangoon Street,
London, E.C.3.
Tel. 01-480 6351, ext. 51 or 56.

Winter Holidays twice as grand, in Switzerland



Have no fear to sleep up here,
Way up high the air is clear.

Switzerland

Contact your TRAVEL AGENT for all-inclusive arrangements within the Travel Allowance Information: Swiss National Tourist Office, Swiss Centre, 1 New Coventry Street, London W.1, Tel. 01-734 1921