

Augusta Raurica: a Roman colony on the Rhine

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The Roman presence in the region began shortly after Caesar's victory. According to the inscription on his mausoleum at Gaeta, Lucius Munatius Plancus, governor of Gallia Comata and one of Caesar's generals, founded two colonies: Lugdunum, today's Lyon, and Raurica.¹ The foundation is conventionally dated to 44 BC. It is possible that the first foundation was not followed by an actual settlement, and that the colony was re-founded under Augustus, hence the name *Colonia Augusta Raurica*. The archaeological evidence shows an urban settlement from about 15 BC onwards, in the context of the Augustan campaigns that brought the Alpine region and the upper Danube under Roman control.

The site chosen for the colony lies about ten kilometres east of Basel, on the plateau above the confluence of the Ergolz with the Rhine, in the territory of today's municipalities of Augst (canton of Basel-Landschaft) and Kaiseraugst (canton of Aargau). The border between two cantons runs through the ancient town. The colony was a planned city, laid out on a regular grid, with a forum, a basilica, temples, baths, a theatre that could hold several thousand spectators, and residential quarters with houses of considerable comfort. At its height in the second century AD, the town may have had between ten and twenty thousand inhabitants, a size that no settlement in the region would reach again until the late Middle Ages.²

Augusta Raurica was a commercial town. It lay on the road that ran from Italy over the Great St Bernard pass through the Swiss plateau to the Rhine, and on the road along the Rhine to the north. The colony was also a river port. Archaeological finds show a wide range of imported goods: olive oil and wine from Spain, Italy and southern Gaul in amphorae, fine tableware from the potteries of Gaul, glass, metal objects and luxury goods. They also show local production: pottery, bronze casting, bone and leather working, butchery on an industrial scale. The town was integrated into a monetised

economy in which Roman coins circulated in large quantities, from the gold *aureus* to the bronze *as*.

For the historian of finance, the Roman period introduced institutions that would shape Europe for two millennia: a unified currency issued by a central authority, written contracts, a law of obligations with a developed theory of loan, deposit, mandate and partnership, and professional money changers and bankers, the *argentarii* and *nummularii*. There is no direct evidence of banking activity at Augusta Raurica, but the density of coin finds and the scale of trade suggest that credit and money changing were practised. The Roman law of contracts would return to Basel in the late Middle Ages through the reception of Roman law in the universities, among them the University of Basel founded in 1460.³

1 Notes

1. The funerary inscription of L. Munatius Plancus at Gaeta (CIL X 6087) names the colonies Lugudunum and Raurica. The foundation date of 44/43 BC is conventional; see Berger, *Führer durch Augusta Raurica*, 7th ed., 2012, introduction; HLS, article "Augusta Raurica". ↩
2. Population estimates for Augusta Raurica vary between 10,000 and 20,000 inhabitants at the height of the town in the second century; see Berger, *Führer durch Augusta Raurica*, 2012; HLS, article "Augusta Raurica". ↩
3. On the reception of Roman law at the University of Basel, see Bonjour, *Die Universität Basel von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart 1460–1960*, 1960, chapter on the Faculty of Law. ↩

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