

The river as a trade route: from Roman boatmen to the Rhine ports

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The Romans organised navigation on the Rhine, which had carried goods since prehistoric times, on a large scale. Boatmen's associations, the *nautae*, are attested on several Gallic and Rhine rivers, and the fleets of the Rhine, the *classis Germanica*, protected the frontier and transported supplies. At Augusta Raurica, finds of river harbour installations and of goods transported by water show that the colony used the Rhine both upstream and downstream.¹

In the Middle Ages, navigation on the Rhine was organised by the boatmen and fishermen of the riverside towns. In Basel, the boatmen and fishermen formed their own guild, the *Zunft zu Schifflenten* and the *Zunft zu Fischern*, which regulated access to the trade, the prices of transport and the division of cargoes. Transport downstream was relatively easy; boats descended the river with the current, carrying wine, grain, salt, iron, cloth and other goods to Strasbourg, Mainz and Cologne. Transport upstream was much harder and was often done by towing from the bank. Many boats were broken up and sold as timber at the end of their journey downstream.²

Tolls were the principal obstacle to Rhine trade. Between Basel and the Netherlands, dozens of toll stations belonging to the Emperor, to the archbishops of Mainz, Trier and Cologne, to princes, counts and cities levied charges on passing goods. The tolls raised the price of goods, encouraged overland transport and made the Rhine a patchwork of jurisdictions. Their abolition became one of the great projects of European economic liberalism. The Congress of Vienna in 1815 proclaimed the principle of freedom of navigation on international rivers and established the Central Commission for the Navigation of the Rhine, which sits in Strasbourg and is today the oldest international organisation in the world still in existence.³ The Revised Convention for the Navigation of the Rhine, signed at Mannheim on 17 October 1868 and known as the

Mannheim Act, established freedom of navigation from Basel to the sea, abolished tolls and created a system of Rhine navigation courts.⁴

The Mannheim Act names Basel as the upstream end of the free navigation regime. Yet for most of the nineteenth century, the upper stretch of the river between Strasbourg and Basel was hardly used by commercial shipping, because the Rhine in this section was wild, with shifting channels and a strong current, and because the railways offered faster and cheaper transport. It was only at the beginning of the twentieth century that the Basel engineer Rudolf Gelpke campaigned for the revival of Rhine navigation to Basel. In 1904, a steam tug with a barge reached Basel from Strasbourg, and the success of this voyage led to the construction of the first Rhine port in Basel, at St Johann, and after the First World War to the development of the port of Kleinhüningen.⁵ The regulation of the Upper Rhine and the construction of the Grand Canal d'Alsace by France in the twentieth century made the route navigable throughout the year.

Today the Swiss Rhine Ports, operated by a public-law institution of the cantons of Basel-Stadt and Basel-Landschaft, handle a significant share of Switzerland's imports, in particular of mineral oil products, and a growing number of containers. As Switzerland's only direct connection to the sea for cargo shipping, they give the landlocked country access to the ports of Rotterdam and Antwerp.⁶ Part H returns to the ports and to the legal questions they raise, from customs and export control to the financing of shipping and the role of Basel as a logistics hub for the pharmaceutical industry. The Roman *nautae* and the medieval boatmen's guild are the distant ancestors of an industry that remains strategic for Switzerland.

1 Notes

1. On the *nautae* and Roman river transport on the Rhine and in Gaul, see the epigraphic literature; on the river harbour of Augusta Raurica and Kaiseraugst, Berger, *Führer durch Augusta Raurica*, 2012. ↩
2. On the Basel guilds of boatmen and fishermen and on medieval Rhine navigation from Basel, see Wackernagel, *Geschichte der Stadt Basel*, vol. 2/1, 1911; HLS, article "Rheinschiffahrt". ↩
3. Final Act of the Congress of Vienna of 9 June 1815, Art. 108–117 and Annex 16B on the navigation of rivers; on the Central Commission for the Navigation of the Rhine (CCNR) as the oldest international organisation, see the CCNR's own publications (www.ccr-zkr.org). ↩
4. Revised Convention for the Navigation of the Rhine of 17 October 1868 (Mannheim Act), for Switzerland SR 0.747.224.101; see in

particular Art. 1 (freedom of navigation from Basel to the open sea) and Art. 3 (prohibition of tolls). Switzerland became a member of the Central Commission after the First World War. To be verified. ↩

5. On Rudolf Gelpke (1873–1940) and the voyage of 1904, and on the construction of the ports of St Johann (1911) and Kleinhüningen (from 1919), see HLS, article "Gelpke, Rudolf" and "Rheinhäfen". Dates to be verified. ↩
6. On the Swiss Rhine Ports (Schweizerische Rheinhäfen), established as a public-law institution by the Staatsvertrag between Basel-Stadt and Basel-Landschaft of 2006/2008, and on their share in Swiss foreign trade, see the annual reports of the Schweizerische Rheinhäfen. Figures to be verified. ↩

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