

Caesar's bridge and the memory of crossings

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

The first written mention of Geneva concerns precisely this bridge. When, in the spring of the year 58 BC, the Helvetii prepared to migrate westwards by crossing the territory of the Allobroges, Caesar hastened to *Genava*, the last town of the Allobroges and the nearest to Helvetian territory, where a bridge crossed the Rhône. He ordered it to be cut.¹ He then had a defensive work built, from the lake to the Jura, intended to bar the passage.²

There is something emblematic about the episode. The first written trace of the city recounts the decision of an external power to close a crossing. This gesture — opening or closing the road, letting the flows pass or halting them — will recur in various forms throughout this book: the prohibition imposed by Louis XI on French merchants attending the Geneva fairs, the blockades and annexations of the revolutionary era, the exchange controls and restrictions of the inter-war period, the economic sanctions of the twenty-first century. A trading centre lives by circulation. It is vulnerable to anyone who can interrupt it.

After the conquest, *Genava* became part of the Roman world. The Allobroges had been subdued from the end of the second century BC, and their territory attached to the province of Transalpine Gaul, the future Narbonensis.³ The town developed as a secondary settlement with a lake port. Inscriptions from the Roman period attest the existence of organised boatmen on the lake, a sign that navigation already constituted a structured economic activity there.⁴ Trade in wine, oil, pottery and agricultural produce passed through the lake and along the Rhône road, which linked the region to Lyon, the capital of the Gauls, and to the Mediterranean world.

In late Antiquity, Geneva acquired a new importance. It became the seat of a *civitas* in the Roman administrative sense and of a bishopric. The archaeological excavations conducted beneath the cathedral of Saint-Pierre have brought to light a vast episcopal complex whose earliest phases date

from this period, bearing witness to the town's role as a religious and administrative centre.⁵ The hill, protected by a wall, dominates the port and the bridge. The urban pattern that would last until the modern era was in place: an upper town, seat of religious power, and a lower town, turned towards the lake and trade.

In the fifth century the Burgundians, settled in the region by the Roman authorities, made Geneva one of their royal residences.⁶ After the Frankish conquest, the town passed under the authority of the Merovingian and then the Carolingian sovereigns, before being incorporated into the kingdom of Burgundy and then, in the eleventh century, into the Holy Roman Empire.⁷ This distant attachment had a lasting consequence: imperial authority, remote and intermittent, left local powers considerable latitude. The bishop of Geneva gradually asserted himself as the temporal lord of the city, with the status of a prince of the Empire.⁸

This succession of dominations may seem remote from financial questions. It is not. Each change of sovereignty altered the regime of tolls, coinage and justice, that is to say the three parameters that determine the cost of a transaction. And each left a layer of rights and customs that merchants had to know. Legal complexity, which is often presented as a modern invention, was already the daily lot of medieval commerce. It created a need for intermediaries capable of finding their way through it: notaries, brokers, well-informed innkeepers.

1 Notes

1. Caesar, Gallic War, I, 6–7; Wikipedia (fr), “Histoire de Genève”: “In 58 BC, Caesar prevented the crossing of the Rhône at the site of what would become Geneva”; Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS; Historical Dictionary of Switzerland), art. “Genève (commune)”: “When Caesar temporarily established himself with his troops in 58 BC near the oppidum of Genua, the town grew further”. ↩
2. Caesar, *De bello Gallico*, I, 8 (Latin text, thelatinlibrary.com): “a lacu Lemanno, qui in flumen Rhodanum influit, ad montem Iuram, qui fines Sequanorum ab Helvetiis dividit, milia passuum XVIII murum in altitudinem pedum sedecim fossamque perducit”; the work was thus nineteen Roman miles long and sixteen feet high. ↩
3. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Genève (commune)”: “The Roman subjugation of the country of the Allobroges took place as early as 121 BC”; an organised port laid out in 123–105 BC according to dendrochronology; Wikipedia (fr), “Histoire de Genève”: “The Roman

subjugation of the country of the Allobroges (Vienne) took place in 121 BC”. ↩

4. Wikipedia (fr), “Nautes”: the corporation of the “nautae lacus lemani” providing water transport from Geneva to Lyon, whose college met in a schola at Lousonna (Lausanne) with a branch at Genava; inscription discovered at Vidy in the 1930s (“[...] nautae [lac]u lemanno qui Leso[nn]ae consistunt [...]”), dating from before the end of the first century AD; Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Genève (commune)” (the Nautae of Lake Geneva managed the traffic in goods). ↩
5. Charles Bonnet, Les fouilles de l’ancien groupe épiscopal de Genève (1976-1993), Fondation des Clefs de Saint-Pierre (Cahiers d’archéologie genevoise, 1), 1993, 90 pp.; Charles Bonnet, with Alain Peillex et al., Les fouilles de la cathédrale Saint-Pierre de Genève. Le centre urbain de la protohistoire jusqu’au début de la christianisation, 2009, and Les fouilles de la cathédrale Saint-Pierre de Genève. Les édifices chrétiens et le groupe épiscopal, 2012 (distributed by Droz, ISBN 978-2-88442-024-2), reviewed in the Bulletin monumental, vol. 173, 2015 (persee.fr). ↩
6. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Genève (commune)”: “The settlement of the Burgundians in 443 (Sapaudia) [...] and the choice of G. as capital strengthened the political role of the town”; Wikipedia (fr), “Histoire de Genève”. ↩
7. Wikipedia (fr), “Histoire de Genève”: “In 1032, the last sovereign died without issue and bequeathed his possessions, including Geneva, to the Holy Roman Empire”. ↩
8. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Genève (commune)”: “By a diploma of 1162, the Emperor Frederick Barbarossa definitively established the independence of the bishops, henceforth recognised as immediate princes of the Empire”; DHS, art. “Genève (diocèse, évêché)”: Bishop Arducus of Faucigny “obtained imperial immediacy (diplomas of 1154 and 1162)”. ↩

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