

Settlements, villas and roads

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Roman settlement is best attested along the lakes and in the Mendrisiotto. A *vicus* at Muralto, on the shore of Lake Maggiore next to the later Locarno, has yielded remains of buildings, cemeteries and a rich collection of glass, which suggests a local centre of some prosperity in the first to fourth centuries AD.¹ Stabio, Riva San Vitale and other places in the Mendrisiotto have produced inscriptions and villa remains. The finds point to an agricultural society of estate owners, tenants and slaves, integrated into the market of Como and supplied with goods from the whole Mediterranean.²

The road network followed the valleys. A road led from Como over the Monte Ceneri or along the lake to Bellinzona and on to the San Bernardino and the Lucomagno, while another used Lake Maggiore and the Ticino river. The Gotthard played no part in Roman traffic. The Romans preferred passes with gentler northern approaches. The route that later made the Leventina a European corridor was still closed by the gorge of the Schöllenen. Bellinzona was already a fortified place in late antiquity. Excavations on the hill of Castelgrande have shown late Roman fortifications. A fortified post at the junction of the valley routes fits the defensive system that the later empire built across the central Alps.³

1 Christianization

The Christianization of the region followed the organization of Roman Como and Milan. The baptistery of Riva San Vitale, at the southern end of Lake Lugano, dates from about 500 and is regarded as the oldest completely preserved church building in Switzerland.⁴ Its octagonal plan belongs to the family of Milanese baptisteries inspired by the one that Bishop Ambrose had built next to his cathedral. Early churches are also known at Muralto, Bellinzona and elsewhere. They mark the first stage of the ecclesiastical geography that would divide the territory between the bishop

of Como in the south and west and the church of Milan in the northern valleys (see the next section).⁵

2 Notes

1. DSS, art. "Locarno (comune)", <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/002108/2022-12-20/>; Roman glass from the necropolis is exhibited in the Museo civico e archeologico in Locarno. ↩
2. DSS, art. "Ticino (cantone)" (above), section on the Roman period; DSS, art. "Riva San Vitale", <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/002242/>, on Roman finds including a stele naming the Subinates. ↩
3. DSS, art. "Bellinzona (comune)" (above), on a fourth-century defensive wall on Castelgrande, probably part of a late Roman castrum. ↩
4. DSS, art. "Riva San Vitale" (above), which describes the baptistery, built around 500 on the foundations of a Roman building, as the oldest completely preserved church building in Switzerland. For the building history see Sergio Bettini and Marco Di Nallo (eds), *Il battistero di San Giovanni a Riva San Vitale. Storia e restauri passati e recenti* (Mendrisio: Mendrisio Academy Press, 2023), <https://susi.usi.ch/usi/documents/327493>. ↩
5. DSS, art. "Como (diocesi)" (above); DSS, art. "Tre Valli Ambrosiane", <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/008551/>. ↩

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