

Turicum: from Roman customs post to medieval market town — overview and summary

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

Every financial centre rests on a place, and every place carries a history that shapes what can be built on it. Zurich's claim to be one of the world's leading centres for private wealth management, insurance and reinsurance, as well as the home of the Swiss franc's most important trading and settlement infrastructure, is usually explained with reference to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: the railways of Alfred Escher, the founding of the Schweizerische Kreditanstalt in 1856, the neutrality of the Confederation in two world wars and the legal architecture of Swiss banking. Those explanations are correct as far as they go. They leave out, however, a much older layer. Long before the first bank opened on the Paradeplatz, the small hill of the Lindenhof above the river Limmat had served for almost two thousand years as a point at which goods were counted, taxed, reloaded and sent on. The first written evidence of the Latin name of the town is, fittingly, the record of an official whose task was to levy a duty on merchandise crossing a fiscal boundary of the Roman Empire.¹

This chapter follows the continuity of Zurich as a place of exchange from that Roman customs station to the Carolingian foundations and the royal palace of the Ottonian and Salian kings, and on to the self-governing imperial town of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Continuity in this sense is a matter of function. The population of Turicum did not survive the end of Roman rule intact. The Alamannic settlers of the early Middle Ages spoke a different language and followed different customs, while the medieval town that emerged around two great churches bore little physical resemblance to the Roman vicus. What persisted was the logic of the site: a crossing of the Limmat at the outflow of a long navigable lake, at the northern end of a waterway reaching deep into the Alps, on a moraine hill that could be fortified. Each successive power that held the place discovered anew that it paid to control that crossing, to tax the goods

that moved through it, and to guarantee the peace of the market that grew up around it.

For the modern reader, especially the lawyer and practitioner who works in today's financial centre, the period covered here matters for three reasons. First, it established the geographical and commercial position of the town as a transit and transshipment point between the Rhine basin and the Alpine passes, a position that later chapters on trade routes and on money and credit develop in detail (see Chapters A.III and A.IV). Second, it produced a remarkable sequence of institutions through which public rights over coinage, market and toll were exercised, delegated, pledged and eventually absorbed by the civic community. Third, it gave Zurich the habit, visible from the thirteenth century onwards, of governing itself through a council of merchants and landed citizens who legislated in writing, who valued the peace of the town above factional quarrel and who treated rights of lordship as assets that could be bought, pledged and redeemed. These are recognisable ancestors of the attitudes that still characterise the Zurich financial community: a preference for written rules, a cautious and consensual style of governance and a keen sense of the value of territorial and legal position.

The chapter proceeds chronologically. Section I examines the Roman *statio* and the customs system of the *Quadragesima Galliarum*. Section II covers late antiquity and the Alamannic period. Section III discusses the Carolingian foundations of the Grossmünster and the Fraumünster, and Section IV the royal palace on the Lindenhof. Section V turns to the rights of coinage, market and toll exercised by the abbess of the Fraumünster. Section VI traces the rise of the civic community under the Zähringer and after the grant of imperial freedom in 1218, including the *Richtebrief* and the emergence of the council. Section VII sketches, briefly, Zurich's entry into the Confederation in 1351 and its territorial expansion up to the eve of the Reformation. Section VIII draws together what this long history left to the financial centre.

1 Notes

1. The tombstone of Lucius Aelius Urbicus (c. 200 CE), found on the Lindenhof in 1747, contains the earliest attested form of the Latin place name; see "Grabstein des Lucius Aelius Urbicus", Wikipedia (German), https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grabstein_des_Lucius_Aelius_Urbicus; also Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz (HLS), "Zürich (Gemeinde)", section on prehistory and Roman period (Andreas Motschi), <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/000171/2015-01-25/>. ↩

2 Conclusion

The history of Zurich from the Roman customs station to the late medieval city-state is, in the first place, a history of continuity of function. The site at the outflow of Lake Zurich into the Limmat was valued by every power that held it because goods had to stop there. The Roman state collected the *quadragesima Galliarum* at the *statio Turicensis*, where a freedman of the emperor recorded his office on the tombstone of his infant son. The Carolingians organised a royal fisc whose estates extended into Uri, before Louis the German endowed the Fraumünster in 853 and placed it under his daughter. The Ottonian and Salian kings built and rebuilt a palace on the Lindenhof on the foundations of the Roman fort, while from about 1045 the abbess of the Fraumünster held the rights of coinage, market and toll that formed the legal infrastructure of a commercial town.

It is, in the second place, a history of the gradual transfer of public rights to a civic community. The extinction of the Zähringer in 1218 made Zurich an imperial town, with a council attested from 1220 that codified the law of the town in the Richtebrief around 1250. While citizen advocates exercised the rights of the Empire, the abbess's formal lordship was progressively emptied of practical content, until in 1400 the city acquired the imperial advocacy itself. After joining the emerging Confederation in 1351, Zurich built a large rural territory in the following century, largely through purchase and pledge, using its financial strength as an instrument of territorial policy.

For the financial centre of today, this long history left three enduring legacies: a location defined by transit and transshipment, a political culture in which public authority and commercial interests were closely intertwined and a tradition of incremental, contractual institutional change anchored in written law. None of these legacies determined the later rise of Zurich to international financial importance. Each of them, however, shaped the conditions under which that rise took place. The next chapter turns to the guild constitution of 1336, which gave the political economy of Zurich the form it would retain, with modifications, until the end of the ancien régime.

3 In five sentences

1. Zurich first appears in the written record as the *statio Turicensis* of the Roman customs duty of two and a half per cent, the *quadragesima Galliarum*, named on the tombstone of Lucius Aelius Urbicus, son of an imperial freedman who headed the station around 200 CE.

Turicum

2. The site's value lay in its geography: at the outflow of Lake Zurich into the Limmat, goods travelling between the Alps and the Rhine had to be reloaded, a crossing that every later power, from the Carolingian fisc to the Salian palace on the Lindenhof, exploited.
3. The foundation of the Fraumünster by Louis the German in 853 and the grant to its abbess, around 1045, of the rights of coinage, market and toll created the legal infrastructure of a medieval commercial town under the formal lordship of a royal convent.
4. After the extinction of the Zähringer in 1218, Zurich became an imperial town governed by a council of knights and merchants, attested from 1220, which codified the town's law in the Richtebrief around 1250 and progressively absorbed the rights of the abbess and the Empire.
5. Zurich's entry into the Confederation in 1351 and its acquisition of a large territory through purchase and pledge completed the transformation of a customs post into a city-state, leaving the later financial centre a legacy of transit, fiscal pragmatism, written law and incremental institutional change.

For general information only. This article does not constitute legal or tax advice, does not replace advice on an individual case and creates no lawyer-client relationship. It reflects the legal position as of September 2026.

Online version: helveticaregister.com/zurich-turicum-from-roman-customs-post-to-medieval-market-town-overview-and-summary