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# A historical overview of medieval archaeology in Switzerland

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## 1. The beginnings

The birth of cultural societies in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century played a crucial role in raising the public awareness about the importance of Swiss archaeological heritage. In Geneva, the Geneva Society of History and Archaeology was officially founded on March 2, 1838, at a constitutive meeting. Its statutes declare that "... the Society intends to carry out excavations in locations where certain clues are likely to lead to successful finds...". The birth of this Geneva-based institution was undoubtedly directly influenced by the creation of French antiquarian societies. Indeed, the Geneva Society of History and Archaeology maintained close links with Arcisse de Caumont, who in 1834 founded the French Society for the Conservation of Historical Monuments. It was in the same period, specifically in 1837, that the Society for the History of French-speaking Switzerland was also created. As for the city and canton of Zürich, it was endowed with a Society of Antiquarians from 1832 on the initiative of the erudite Ferdinand Keller who wished to study, through this new institution, the antiquities which he named Celtic, Roman and Medieval.

In this period, scholars were particularly focused on castle ruins, viewed with a romantic sensibility. A first census of these monuments

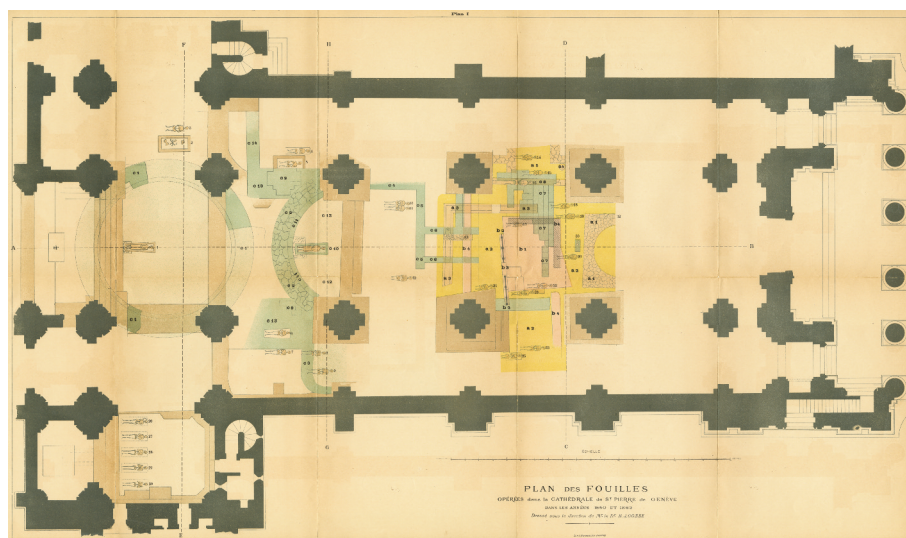


Fig. 1. Map of the excavations carried out in the Saint-Peter's Cathedral in Geneva in 1850 and 1869. Produced under the direction of Mr. Hippolyte-Jean Gosse (credit: The Geneva Iconography Centre).

throughout Switzerland was published in 1839. Burial sites also raised their interest, particularly for necropolises with goods in the tombs. In 1845, Frédéric Troyon was the first to distinguish between materials from the Roman period and that belonging to the following centuries, building on a study of the early medieval necropolis of Bel-Air in Lausanne. Two years later, Ferdinand Keller published a first article in Zürich on pagan burials in Switzerland, analysing both tombs in rows and those under large burial mounds. They also had a vested interest in grand Christian buildings, like the first archaeological investigations carried out in 1850 by Jean-Daniel Blavignac in Saint-Peter's Cathedral in Geneva (fig. 1).

## 2. The dawn of a truly medieval archaeology

Johann Rudolf Rahn (1841-1912) could be considered to be the true father of art history in Switzerland. He was the first to use the concept of medieval archaeology in 1900 and oversaw a vast number of castle restoration projects throughout Switzerland, including a thorough analy-

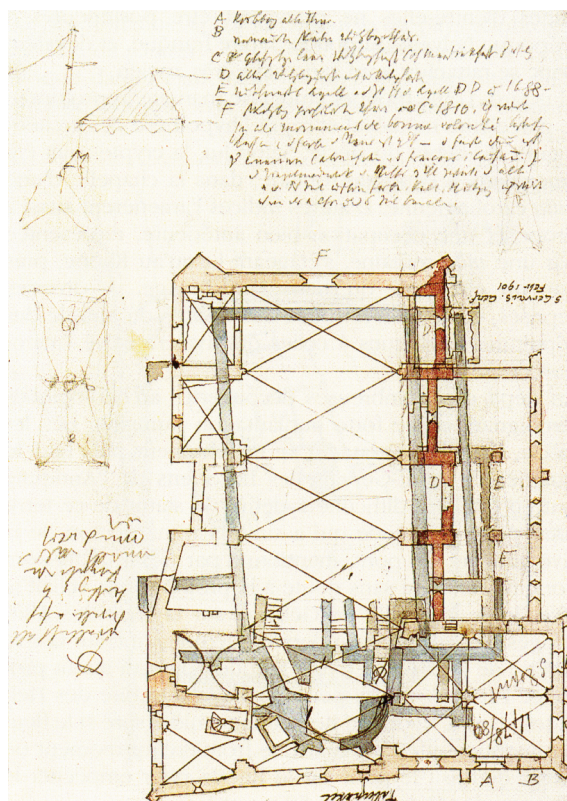


Fig. 2. Interpretations of the excavations of the church of St. Gervais in Geneva by Johann Rudolf Rahn in 1901 (credit: Federal Archives of Historic Monuments, Berne).

sis of these buildings. He was also invited to collaborate as an expert in the archaeological analyses of vestiges unearthed in various contexts, like the church of Saint-Gervais in Geneva (fig. 2). As a full art history professor at the University of Zürich from 1878, he trained a generation of students who later contributed to the development of medieval archaeology in Switzerland. Albert Naef (1862-1936) developed the methodology of building analysis related to medieval archaeology in French-speaking Switzerland. Coming from the architectural world of Viollet-le-Duc, Albert Naef led the long-lasting restoration project at Chillon Castle in 1897 (fig. 3), which marked the beginning of his collaboration with Johann Rudolf Rahn. In 1899 he was the first cantonal archaeologist to be appointed in Switzerland as well as the first curator of historical monuments of the canton of Vaud.

The first systematic excavations carried out in the field of medieval archaeology were undertaken during the Great Depression of the 1930s as well as in the Second World War amid public works. These major proj-

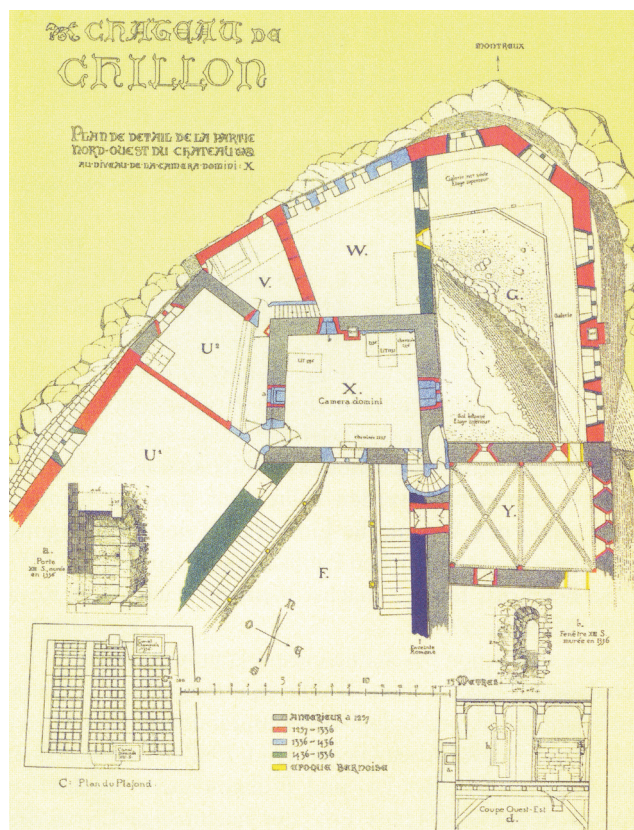


Fig. 3. Castle of Chillon. General plan of the medieval construction phases based on the restorations carried out by Albert Naef from 1896 onwards (credit: Albert Naef, 1908).

ects were carried out by prehistorians who applied the archaeological methods developed in their field to medieval archaeology. There is for instance the exemplary excavation of the Lindenhof in the city of Zürich, under the direction of Emil Vogt in 1937 and 1938 (fig. 4). It is also in this period that stone-by-stone building surveys appear both in floor plans and elevation views. These excavations of castle ruins, deserted villages and religious buildings can be described as scientific.

In the 1950s, the first settlement excavations are carried out at Berslingen near Schaffhausen by Walter Ulrich Guyan, cantonal archaeologist of Schaffhausen and lecturer at the University of Zürich. It is also from this period onwards that we begin to see large scale excavations of necropolises, like for example the exhaustive study of Joachim Werner





Fig. 4. Extract from the general plan with the survey carried out in 1937-1938 of the various medieval construction phases discovered at the Lindenhof in Zürich (credit: Emil Vogt, 1948).

on the early medieval necropolis of Bülach. From the 1960s, there is a growing awareness of the *Romani*, the descendants of the Romans who at that time accounted for most of the population in the provinces. Thereafter we find typologies of objects, *fibulae* and buckles that were attributed to the *Romani*, the Burgundians or the Alamans. This approach, consisting in giving an identity to the burials, to the various ethnic groups that occupied present-day Switzerland, the *Romani*, Burgundians, Lombards, Alamans or Franks, would still be a major concern for scientists in the 1970s.

The study of religious buildings is also of paramount importance in Switzerland and owes much to the founding of the first chair of early Christian and patristic archaeology founded in 1890 at the faculty of theology of the University of Fribourg. Christian archaeology really took off in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the great excavations of Robert Durrer and Josef Zemp in Münstair, of Pierre Bourban and later Louis Blondel in Saint-Maurice d'Agave, of Albert Naef in Romainmôtier and Ursins, and of Father

Iso Müller in Disentis. From the early 1960s Hans Rudolf Sennhauser undertook a vast series of church excavations, imposing the archaeological layer as a sampling unit instead of arbitrary stripping and systematizing detailed stone-by-stone surveys. This intense activity would earn Hans Rudolf Sennhauser an international recognition. He greatly influenced other Swiss archaeologists such as Walter Drack in Zürich or Charles Bonnet in Geneva who carried out large-scale works both in the Cathedral and in suburban churches (figs. 5-6) as well as in rural churches. The extensive excavations developed over many years at the Münstair Abbey in Graubünden and St. Peter's Cathedral in Geneva, would be the most enriching undertakings in this discipline. It is also thanks to the work of pri-



Fig. 5. General view in 1994 of the vestiges of the funerary apsidal chapel of the church of Saint-Gervais in Geneva (credit: Jean-Baptiste Sevette).



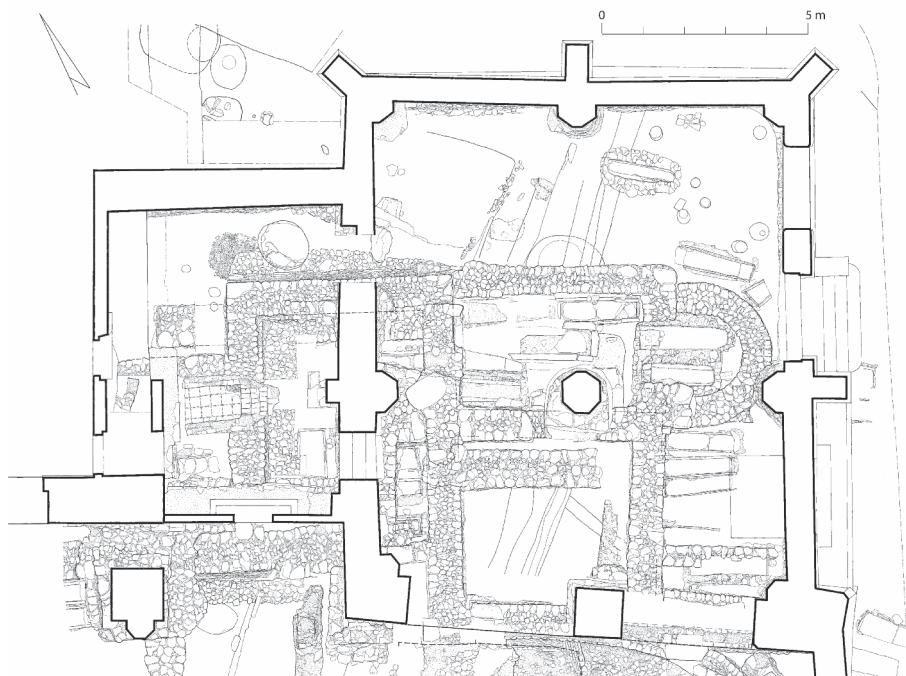


Fig. 6. A detailed survey of the remains of the funerary apsidal chapel of the church of Saint-Gervais in Geneva (credit: Cantonal Service of Archaeology, Geneva).

vate archaeological companies that the archaeology of the churches developed in other regions, with the Medieval Archeology Workshop of Moudon for the cantons of Vaud and Bern as well as the Lehner office for the canton of Valais, which was succeeded by the Tera office under the direction of the archaeologist Alessandra Antonini, to whom we owe the precious studies carried out on the funerary church of Sion Sous-le-Scex and the abbey of Saint-Maurice d'Agaune.

### **3. The institutionalization of medieval archaeology**

Archaeology would gradually become institutionalized throughout most of Switzerland during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with cantonal services taking precedence over associations, museums and universities in the management of archaeology. The principle of preventive or rescue excavations appears from this period onwards to preserve the archaeological memory at the expense of the excavations programmed

mainly for the interest of the research. Archaeology underwent a complete professionalization from the excavation, through documentation to the publication and dissemination of results. From the 1980s onwards archaeological maps were first used to implement a real prospective policy aimed at protecting areas defined as having archaeological potential.

In this context, Professors Werner Meier, Hans Rudolf Sennhauser and Max Martin can be considered to be the three main promoters of medieval archaeology as a recognized discipline in Switzerland. Werner Meier, for his work on fortified castles and deserted alpine habitats in the Alps which he integrated into a more general study taking into account the material culture to address the specific functions of each site; Hans Rudolf Sennhauser, for his investigations of churches and religious foundations, establishing links between architectural and historical aspects; and finally Max Martin, for his studies on the necropolises and the funerary furniture of the Early Middle Ages as a source of knowledge to understand the settlement patterns.

At university level and from the 1970s, the discipline of medieval archaeology was taught at the University of Basel by Professor Werner Meier who held the chair of ancient Swiss history and medieval archaeology until 2004 with an emphasis on castles and alpine habitats. It was also at the University of Basel that Max Martin taught the archaeology of the Gallo-Roman provinces and the Early Middle Ages as part of the pre- and proto-history seminar until 2004, with the study of the necropolis being the focus of these courses. Today, only the University of Zürich offers a full training with a recognized master in medieval archaeology since 2006. We owe this privileged situation to Professor Hans Rudolf Sennhauser who was the first holder of the chair and focused his teaching on the archaeology of churches until 1996. The universities of Geneva, Lausanne and Bern currently offer a limited curriculum, closer to an awareness or initiation to medieval archaeology taught at a professorship level in the classical archaeology unit in Geneva and lectureship level in the Gallo-Roman provincial archaeology unit in Lausanne and in the archaeology of the Roman provinces unit in Bern.

The new generation of medieval archaeologists who benefited from this higher education took part in the numerous excavations carried out within the framework of these organizations, which resulted in a better knowledge of this historical period while diversifying research themes. This scientific vigour is reflected in part in two publications from 2001 and 2002. The proceedings of the colloquium held in Bern in March 2001 and published in 2002, "From Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages (300-800) – Continuity and Change" ("De l'Antiquité tardive au haut



Moyen Âge (300-800) – Kontinuität und Neubeginn”) and the colloquium held in Fribourg in September 2001 and published in 2002, “Towns and villages. Tombs and churches. Switzerland in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages” (“Villes et villages. Tombes et églises. La Suisse de l’Antiquité tardive et du haut Moyen Âge”). These two works took stock of developments in the fields of housing, textiles, iron production and ceramics. This period was also marked by the development of multidisciplinary research, combining archaeology with history, art history, anthropology, palaeobotany, palaeozoology, dendrochronology and <sup>14</sup>C dating. Some studies in these disciplines were carried out by university institutes and others by private companies or authorised representatives.

#### **4. Medieval archaeology today**

Although archaeology has become more professional in recent decades with the creation of specialized services in most cantons to study, preserve and transmit archaeological heritage, it must be said that the federal system introduces a certain disparity in the management of archaeology which lacks cohesion at the national level. Thus, depending on the canton, some periods are better studied than others, the density of research may be different and infrastructures are sometimes uneven. Some cantons being extremely well endowed and others, a rarer situation, having no specialized service. This situation also has positive aspects in allowing a certain degree of autonomy at the regional level, which simplifies the procedures for management and decision-making. It also establishes a direct contact with the reality of the field, which is an advantage when it comes to convincing the local population and elected officials about the importance of an archaeological intervention.

In this system which sometimes lacks cohesion when it comes to implementing a global archaeological policy by defining lines of research to be carried out throughout the national territory, associations still have a unifying role to play in the interest of medieval archaeology. The association “Swiss Archaeology” (“Archéologie Suisse”) was founded in 1907 under the name “Swiss Society of Prehistory” (“Société suisse de préhistoire”) which highlighted that it did not take into account the historical periods. In 1965 it was renamed the “Swiss Society of Prehistory and Archaeology” (“Société suisse de préhistoire et d’archéologie”), finally adopting the term “Swiss Archaeology” in 2006, which meant it covered all the periods involved in archaeology, from Prehistory until modern

times. Since then, "Swiss Archaeology" manages papers relating to medieval archaeology such as monographs in its collection "Antiqua" or articles in its Yearbook and in its Quarterly Bulletin. In recent years, it has published two books on the achievements of medieval archaeology in its series "Switzerland from Palaeolithic to the Middle Ages" ("Die Schweiz vom Paläolithikum bis zum Mittelalter"), specifically, SPM VI published in 2005, focusing on the Early Middle Ages, and SPM VII, published in 2014 and summing up the current state of research on the period between 800 and 1350. The founding of the "Swiss Castles Association" dates from 1927. Since 1974 it has published a series of monographs in the series "Swiss contributions to the archaeology and cultural history of the Middle Ages" ("Contributions suisses à l'archéologie et à l'histoire culturelle du Moyen Âge") and articles on the whole of Switzerland in its quarterly Bulletin "The journal of Swiss Castles Association" (Zeitschrift des Schweizerischen Burgenvereins). Finally, the "Swiss Working Group for Medieval and Modern Archaeology" ("Groupe de travail suisse pour l'archéologie du Moyen Âge et de l'époque moderne"), created in 1974, became an association in 1998. This association brings together professionals in archaeology, art history and history concerned with medieval and modern material testimonies on the territory of present-day Switzerland. It facilitates the exchange of information between public and private institutions and researchers as well as related sciences and is a serious discussion partner for policy-makers and the authorities. The Annual General Meeting provides an opportunity for participants to attend papers on excavations and ongoing research and to keep up-to-date on research on a wider scale.

A difficulty that has been encountered in recent years by medieval archaeologists in Switzerland concerns the budgetary restrictions which they face, as archaeology is not on the public policy agenda. Consequently, archaeology must participate in the social dialogue to find a purpose beyond fundamental research by fostering contacts with the public, an essential relay to the decision-making bodies which alone can support a genuine archaeological policy. In this context, the great strength of medieval archaeology stems from the fact that it deals with a period whose testimonies, castles, churches, cathedrals and other fortified enclosures, are still omnipresent in the current landscape closely interwoven with the local population. It is this close relationship with the preservation of a monumental heritage that has lead medieval archaeology in Switzerland to combine both the analysis of buildings and subterranean archaeology, two disciplines which have difficulty communicating and which are sometimes separate in some countries.

Another challenge for medieval archaeologists concerns surveying techniques and documentation methodology that evolve at the frantic pace of digital innovations. These new tools induce an even faster and sustained rhythm during fieldwork without taking enough time to reflect, which is a necessary condition for a proper archaeological analysis. There is inherently a great risk in working superficially at a time when planners are increasingly putting pressure on archaeologists with the cost of severe cuts because of economic competition and the financial crisis. Taking these problems into account and finding appropriate solutions is of paramount importance if we wish to develop, or at least maintain, a high quality medieval archaeology in Switzerland.

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