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Digging in the archives - The 19th century excavations of J. J. Schmid in *Augusta Raurica* (CH)

ABSTRACT

The late antique *Castrum Rauracense*, successive settlement of the Roman colony of *Augusta Raurica*, lies on the southern bank of the Rhine some 10 kilometres east of the city of Basel in north-western Switzerland. Surrounding the *castrum* are several necropolises, combined in the Northeastern cemetery. Most of the graves have been excavated more than 50 years ago. This article will focus on the cemetery's discoverer, Johann Jakob Schmid, and his excavations in the first half of the 19th century. Is it possible to reconstruct the *c.* 150 graves with their grave goods? Is their re-evaluation worth the effort and are they going to help us with modern research analyses? The article will describe the extensive documentation and material that resurfaced due to archival research.

KEY WORDS: 19th CENTURY, BURIAL, GRAVE, SCHMID, VIOLLIER, MARTIN

Introduction

The Roman colony of *Augusta Raurica* is situated in present-day north-western Switzerland, today beneath the communities of Augst (canton of Basel-country) and Kaiseraugst (canton of Argovia). It has been of great interest for researchers since the 16th century. An early discovery were the late antique and early medieval inhumation burials surrounding the *Castrum Rauracense*. The *castrum*, built around AD300, lies directly on the southern bank of the Rhine and was

part of the late Roman frontier. The people of *Augusta Raurica* supposedly left the colonial city centre on the hilltop and moved to the *castrum* when times became more unstable¹.

It is in the early 4th century AD that the first necropolises surrounding the *castrum* emerged (Fig. 1). Officially summarised as the Northeastern cemetery of *Augusta Raurica*, the cemetery is best known for the excavations of the Landesmuseum Zürich², conducted by Daniel Viollier in 1907-1913 and published in

¹A general overview of the site's history and research can be found in Berger *et al* 2012. On Late Antiquity see also Schatzmann 2013.

²Today Schweizerisches Nationalmuseum.

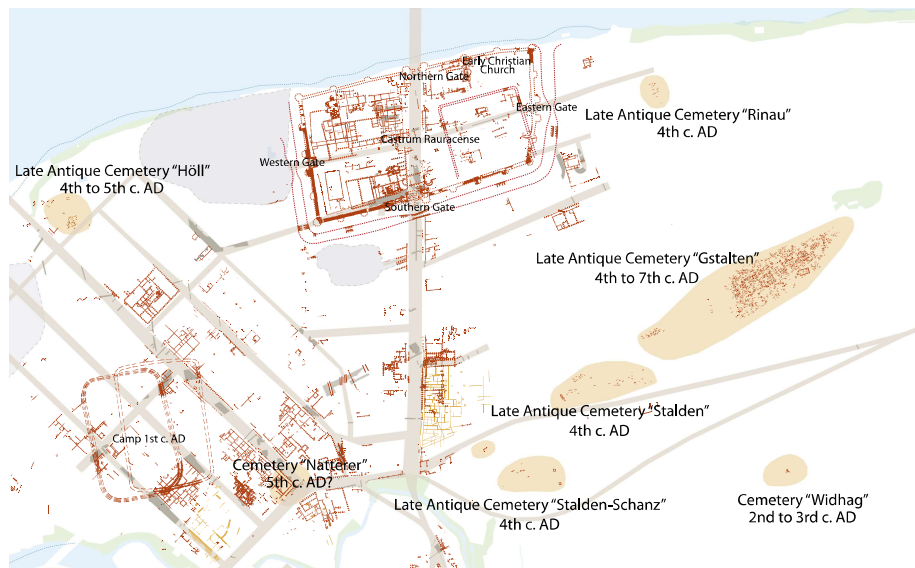


Fig. 1 - A map of the excavated Roman and Early Medieval structures in Kaiseraugst, AG. The Northeastern cemetery with inhumation burials from the 4th to the 8th century AD is located south of the *Castrum Rauracense*. Supplement Berger *et al.* 2012, modifications S. Mayer.

1976 and 1991 by Max Martin³. Smaller parts of the cemetery have been excavated during the 20th century, most of them are unpublished or only published in preliminary reports⁴.

This article will focus on the excavations in the first half of the 19th century, when the cemetery was first discovered and examined by Johann Jakob Schmid, the local owner of the paper mill⁵. He kept the finds sorted by grave and had an artist draw them, as he was planning on publishing his results. Unfortunately, he died before he could finish his work. His heirs sold the collection of finds and drawings to different institutions in Basel and Zurich.

The finds have been inventoried several times over the last 200 years. The original notes that came along with

the finds have been lost and are only passed down in the notes of researchers from the 20th century, while the preserved notes and letters are written in old German handwriting.

The article's aim is to present the work of J. J. Schmid and to demonstrate that it is possible to work up those entangled old excavations and to show the necessity of such re-examinations.

Johann Jakob Schmid and the Northeastern cemetery

In 1820 Johann Jakob Schmid (born in 1794) bought the paper mill in Augst and soon developed an interest in the history of the place⁶. He started to excavate at different sites in *Augusta Raurica* and bought land

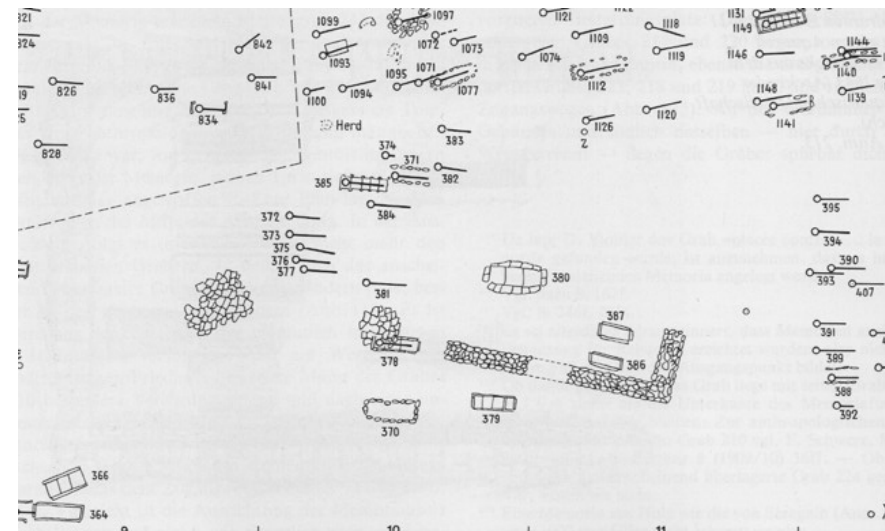


Fig. 2 - The burials inside the cemetery chapel on D. Viollier's plan of the Gstalten necropolis. Martin 1991, 210 fig. 120.

from the local farmers to save the Roman theatre and temple district from destruction. He was in contact with the leading regional archaeologists of the time, like Ferdinand Keller and Frédéric Troyon. He was also the first to recognise that the *Castrum Rauracense* was chronologically later than the actual colony of *Augusta Raurica*⁷.

Schmid started his work in the Northeastern cemetery in 1833 and continued it until 1843. He planned to publish the results and assigned a local artist, Johann Jakob Neustück, to draw the inventories of the graves. He also insisted on the importance of publishing an exact description of the graves and the grave goods, which got him into an argument with Keller⁸. Unfortunately, his death in 1849 kept him from going through with the project.

The necropolis, which Schmid started excavating, lies some 200m south of the *Castrum Rauracense* (Fig. 1), along the "older and younger Raetiastreet" that lead from the former colony to *Vindonissa* / Windisch (AG). I will focus on the necropolis "Gstalten" or "Gstält-

ly" where Schmid unearthed 100 to 150 inhumation graves.

It was in this same area that Daniel Viollier conducted the excavations for the Landesmuseum Zürich from 1907 to 1913. The documentation and finds from those campaigns are preserved today at the Swiss National Museum. Max Martin's fundamental work on the Northeastern cemetery of *Augusta Raurica*⁹ was the result of his extensive research on the Viollier excavations. Martin was aware of the earlier excavations by Schmid but could not include them in his research that already consisted of more than 1300 graves (see below).

It is not easy to reconstruct Schmid's excavations. He kept no diary to describe his work progress or list the excavated graves. Neither is there any documentation of his work in the archives of the Römerstadt *Augusta Raurica* itself. But Schmid was corresponding with contemporary Swiss archaeologist Ferdinand Keller, then president of the Society of Antiquities in Zürich. The archives of said society hold some 34 letters from

³Martin 1976 / 1991.

⁴Most important Laur-Belart 1947.

⁵This is part of my ongoing PhD project with Prof. Dr. P.-A. Schwarz, Vindonissa Professur, Departement Altertumswissenschaften at the University of Basel: S. Mayer "Untersuchungen zu den spätantiken und frühmittelalterlichen Gräberfeldern von Kaiseraugst AG" (working title).

⁶Information about J.J. Schmid and his work in *Augusta Raurica* can be found most recent in Martin 1978, 104–110.

⁷Martin 1978, 105.

⁸Martin 1978, 107.

⁹Martin 1976 / 1991.

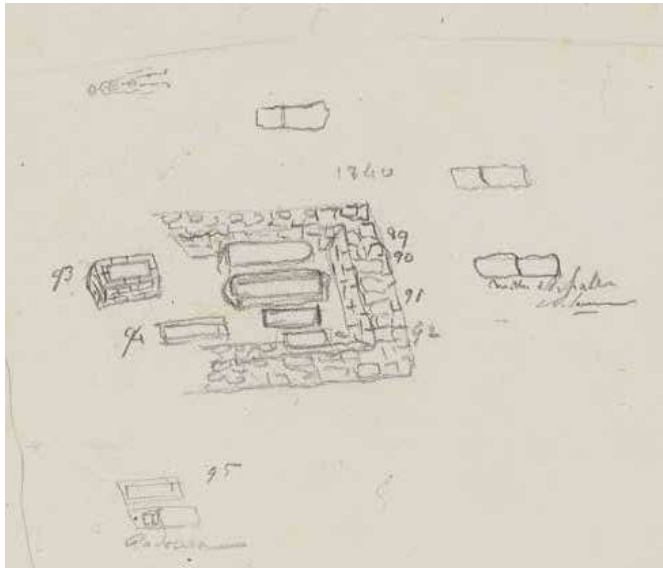


Fig. 3 - The burials inside the cemetery chapel on J. J. Schmid's sketch of the Gestalten necropolis. Detail of Reproduction Staatsarchiv Zürich, Archive AGZ, Sign. W I 3 400.31, first folder, 6.

Schmid to Keller¹⁰, in which he describes his finds and work progress. They also contain the drawings that Schmid had Johann Jakob Neustück¹¹ make of the finds and some of the graves and which he planned to use in his publication. And, maybe most importantly, there is a map¹² where Schmid had not only sketched the graves but also gave a short description of most of them on the side of it.

Reworking Schmid's legacy

After collecting all documentation from Schmid, we can compare it with the documentation from D. Viollier's campaigns: Viollier excavated some burials that he suspected had been opened before. If we can match those suspicious cases with some of the sketched graves on Schmid's map, we have an actual location for the 19th century excavations.

M. Martin already proved that this approach is working¹³: the easiest structure to recognise on the two maps from the cemetery (Schmid's sketch and Viollier's drawing) is a rectangular stone building interpreted as a cemetery chapel (Figs. 2 and 3). In comparing the two maps, one can be certain that Viollier's and Martin's grave no. 380 is the same burial as Schmid's no. 93. This also applies to Viollier/Martin no. 87 and Schmid no. 91 as well as Viollier/Martin no. 386 and Schmid no. 92.

After locating and linking Schmid's burials to the results of newer excavations, is it also possible to reconstruct the contents of the graves and to allocate the grave goods?

After Schmid's death, his collection was sold to the Historical Museum in Basel. They acquired the main



Fig. 4 - Bronze fittings from Schmid's grave 84. Collection Historical Museum Basel, Inv. 1906.839.91. Photo S. Schenker, Römerstadt Augusta Raurica.

corpus in 1857¹⁴ and a second part was donated by Schmid's heirs in 1924¹⁵. After almost 200 years, you can imagine that some finds got mixed up after exhibitions and enjoyed different treatments in restauration.

Various archaeologists took an effort to publish the material but could never finish their work. Most importantly, Rudolf Moosbrugger and Max Martin¹⁶ looked at the finds in the 1970s and 1980s, collected documentation and wrote their own notes on the finds. Fortunately, those notes are preserved: both researchers had copied the original scraps of paper with notes from Schmid himself and his son about the inventories that were kept with the respective finds until they got "misplaced". With those notes it is possible to reconstruct most of the original inventory for each grave.

With the following example I will show the possibilities of understanding some of the more enigmatic finds. Amongst the finds from grave no. 84, we find today several small fittings¹⁷ (Fig. 4). They seem to be very small and delicate for a belt, but we might assume that they originate from some kind of leather strap. Examining the drawings from J. J. Neustück, we find our fittings again (Fig. 5) as a nice arrangement on a strip of leather that was apparently still preserved.

Schmid's notes for grave 84, passed on by Rudolf Moosbrugger and Max Martin, describe a female burial with a leather bracelet at the woman's left wrist.

«Steinsarg mit Grund angefüllt enthielt weibliche Überreste. Am linken Vorderarm oder Handgelenk ein Armband von Leder, dessen Spuren sich deutl.

¹⁰Archive AGZ, Staatsarchiv Zürich, Sign. W I 3 174.1, letters no. 80-92; W I 3 174.2, letters no. 104-109; W I 3 174.3, letters no. 130-140.

¹¹Archive AGZ KRF IV.7-26, Staatsarchiv Zürich, Sign. W I 3 400.31, second folder, no. 7-26.

¹²Archive AGZ, Staatsarchiv Zürich, Sign. W I 3 400.31, first folder, no. 6.

¹³Martin 1991, 209-211.

¹⁴Vischer 1858.

¹⁵Archives Historical Museum Basel, letter R1-a2-014_0024.

¹⁶Martin planned to publish Schmid's work but never found the time to continue the extensive archival research (Martin 1978, 111, fn. 19; Martin 1991, 1).

¹⁷Historical Museum Basel, Inv. Nr. 1906.839.91.a/b.



Fig. 5 - Leather bracelet with bronze fittings from Schmid's grave 84. Detail of a drawing by J. J. Neustück from 1845. Photo S. Mayer, Archive AGZ, KRF IV.23, Staatsarchiv Zürich Sign. W 13, 400.31, second folder, 23.

zeitigen; auf dem ledernen Armband waren die metallenen Verzierungen angebracht, zwischen den Stäbchen, welche um das Leder gebogen u. mit Stiften dran befestigt waren hingen die glockenähnlichen Verzierungen. [Skizze] Die dabei befindl. Zunge scheint am Ende des ledernen Bandes angeheftet gewesen zu sein. [...]»¹⁸.

So, thanks to the drawing in the archives of the Society of Antiquities in Zürich, we can reconstruct the small finds in the archives of the collection from the Historical Museum Basel and know about their original finding position because Max Martin copied J. J. Schmid's notes. Thus, it is actually possible to reconstruct the inventories and produce a catalogue of the 19th century excavation finds.

Conclusion

It certainly is a lot of work to reconstruct the documentation and thus the graves and their inventory from the old 19th century excavations. Working with old ex-

cavations consists of a lot of research history and the excavations must be set into their historical period as well, if only to understand what happened to the finds and documentation. As illustrated above, it is worth the effort: by combining the different archival finds we can reconstruct a catalogue of the results from the 19th century campaigns.

Contemporary research questions concern larger patterns of migration and cultural interchanging during the Late Antique and Early Medieval time periods. The scarce archaeological remains of settlement traces in the area can be complemented with the analysis of the better-preserved burial structures. The cemeteries of *Augusta Raurica* and the later *Castrum Rauracense* contain graves from the 1st to 8th century AD – providing a possibility to study the development of the burial landscape at the site. But many parts of those cemeteries have been excavated in different smaller campaigns over the last 200 years.

If we want to get information about the local people and their cultural and social development and maybe try to understand larger changes by comparing different sites, then we need to research and publish those old excavations to get an entirety of the accessible data. After what I have seen in the documentation and finds it is well worth the effort to complete the research on the Northeastern cemetery.

The objects are very well preserved, and they deserve to finally be published. And this also applies to the work of the contemporary researchers, in this case J. J. Schmid: he did a very profound job in his time and he deserves that his project is finally going to be completed.

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Zusammenfassung

Die Gräberfelder der Spätantike und des Frühmittelalters im Umfeld des *Castrum Rauracense* in der heutigen Nordwestschweiz wurden in verschiedenen kleineren Kampagnen über die letzten 200 Jahre ausgegraben. Lohnt es sich überhaupt, die Daten zu diesen Altgrabungen in den Archiven zusammenzutragen? Der Artikel beschäftigt sich mit dem Beispiel der Grabungen von Johann Jakob Schmid in der ersten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts. Die intensive Archivarbeit hat nicht nur das Fundmaterial seiner Ausgrabungen, sondern auch Schmid's Korrespondenzen, Notizen und Fundzeichnungen hervorgebracht. Mit diesen Unterlagen lassen sich die Grabinventare rekonstruieren. Die Aufarbeitung von Altgrabungen ist notwendig zur Vorlage möglichst vollständiger Datengrundlagen aus Gräberfeldern um Augusta Raurica. Auf dieser Basis können moderne Forschungsprojekte, vor allem auch überregionale Untersuchungen zur Migration, Sozialgeschichte und Kulturentwicklung in Spätantike und Frühmittelalter durchgeführt werden.

¹⁸Documentation M. Martin, quotation of Schmid or Schmid's son.