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Who lies there? Late antique inhumation graves at *Augusta Raurica*.

ABSTRACT

In the 3rd century AD, the Roman colony of *Augusta Raurica* was suddenly part of the Rhine *limes* again. In the background of the various struggles in the Roman Empire from the 3rd century onwards, the population of *Augusta Raurica* was reduced and moved from the old city centre on the hill to the newly founded *Castrum Rauracense* at the Rhine bank. With few archaeological traces of the settlement during Late Antiquity, the graveyards of *Augusta Raurica* and the *Castrum Rauracense* hold information about the history of the local people. Was the settlement continually in use? Did new political structures, cultures and presumed migration, especially from Germanic peoples, during Late Antiquity lead to a break with Roman traditions, the original settlement and rupture with the local population? The dating and mapping of cemeteries from the 1st to 8th century AD and their burial customs reveals insights about the continuous occupancy of the site, with evidence indicating the incorporation of new people and cultural influences.

KEY WORDS: LATE ANTIQUITY, EARLY MEDIEVAL, GRAVE, BURIAL, INHUMATION, CONTINUITY, DISCONTINUITY, *CASTRUM*

Introduction

Traditional models argued that the Upper Germanic *limes* collapsed in the late 3rd century AD, and the Roman settlements were overrun by Germanic barbarians who slaughtered every Roman that crossed their path. Although this approach has been criticized and disputed, archaeological research has, in fact, indicated a certain abandonment and decline of large Roman settlements, thus proving a declining residential population. Such is the case in the former Roman colony of *Augusta Raurica*, situated directly on the banks of the

Rhine, close to the present-day city of Basel in north-western Switzerland.

Founded at the end of the 1st century BC, as typical with sites in the region, the colony of *Augusta Raurica* declined from the 3rd century onwards when it suddenly found itself – again – at the border of the Roman Empire and part of the Upper Germanic *limes*. The development led to the construction of the *Castrum Rauracense* around AD 300 on the plain adjacent to the south bank of the Rhine (in the lower town or *suburbium*). The population seems to have left the old centre of

the colony and settled in and around the *castrum*. This late antique settlement, however, is largely unknown¹. *Augusta Raurica* slowly lost its importance during the early medieval period, as Basel emerged and grew to become the new regional centre².

The burial landscape of *Augusta Raurica* holds graves from 1st to 8th century AD, and this provides an unrecognised source for further information about the town in Late Antiquity. The present paper will discuss the late antique and early medieval cemeteries surrounding the *castrum*, examining the fluctuation of the population and the possible continuity of the site as a settlement area until the 8th century AD.

But who was actually buried in the cemeteries? Romans, who followed their traditional customs and conventions? Barbarians, who had taken over existing structures? Is it even possible or reasonable to differentiate between ethnicities through archaeological finds, notably grave goods? This article will give a short overview of the different cemeteries in the area of the former colony of *Augusta Raurica*, their chronology, indications of the buried populations' cultural background and their potential for further research on the subject of continuity or discontinuity at the *limes*.

The cemeteries of *Augusta Raurica*

The background of my research on the topic of discontinuity or continuity as seen from the perspective of the late antique and early medieval graves surrounding the *Castrum Rauracense* is my ongoing PhD project at the University of Basel³. The research utilises excavation archives of the 19th and early 20th century⁴ that

unearthed significant material but remain unpublished or are only incompletely reported on in preliminary reports.

Ultimately, the research will result in full publication of the data from these old excavations of the late antique and early medieval cemeteries at the *Castrum Rauracense*, but the current emphasis of the research is the development of the burial custom and the potential distinction between Roman, Alaman and Frankish individuals.

I will approach the question of continuity and discontinuity by outlining the burial landscape of *Augusta Raurica*. To be able to refer to the different cemeteries, smaller groups of graves, necropolises and different excavations, they have been summarised in the four large cemeteries, suitably called the Northwestern, Northeastern, Southeastern and Southwestern cemetery (Fig. 1). A first hint of the development of the settlement can be gained by dating the burials and mapping them in *Augusta Raurica*.

The first graves were cremation burials in the early 1st century AD (Fig. 2, triangles). The custom was practiced continuously until the second half of the 2nd century AD. During this time, the two main areas of activity were the Northwestern⁵ and the Southeastern⁶ cemeteries. They document the important routes to *Vindonissa* / Windisch and Basel from the growing colony and during its bloom in the 2nd century.

Again, as is a typical problem in the larger region, the third century is largely unknown in terms of burial practice. From around AD200, we only know of about

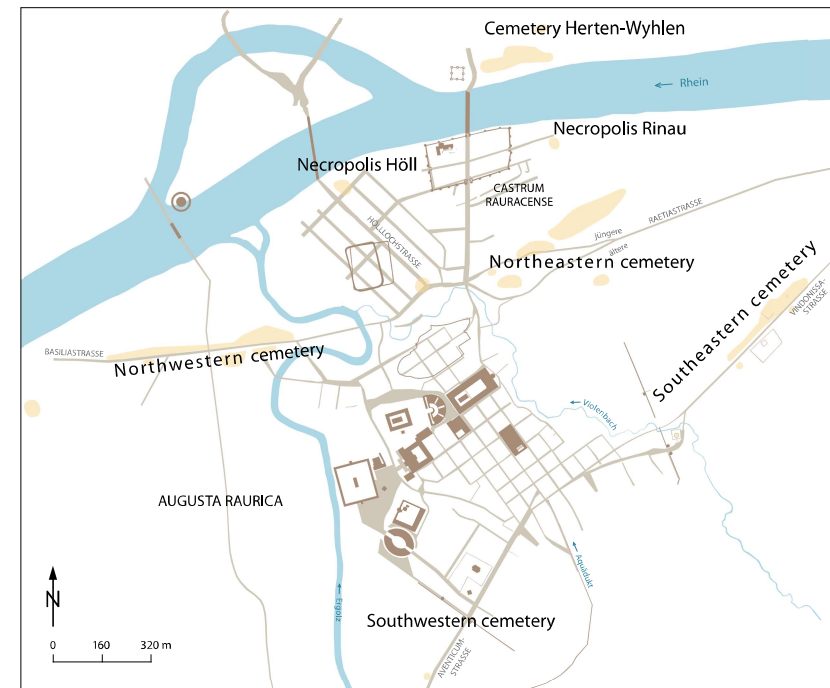


Fig. 1 - The colony of *Augusta Raurica* with its cemeteries: Northwestern, Southeastern and Southwestern cemetery, the Northeastern cemetery with the necropolises Höll and Rinau surrounding the *Castrum Rauracense* and the cemetery of Herten-Wyhlen in today Germany. Map 1:16000, Römerstadt *Augusta Raurica*, edited S. Mayer.

30 cremation graves⁷ (Fig. 2, star).

Inhumation emerges as the dominant burials form from the late 3rd to first half of the 4th century (Fig. 2, squares). The burials are either simple earth graves or

different forms of tile cists, primarily in the Southeastern⁸, the Northwestern⁹ cemetery, and in the Stalden¹⁰ necropolis (part of the Northeastern cemetery). Only one grave is known in the Southwestern cemetery. Found in 1879, it remains unclear if it is a single burial

¹For more information about the recent research results about the late antique settlement see Anna Flückiger's article in this volume about the results of her PhD "The *Castrum Rauracense* and its "suburbium" from the late 4th to the 6th century AD" at the University of Basel. See also Flückiger 2021.

²The history of *Augusta Raurica* is excellently summarised in Berger *et al.* 2012.

³S. Mayer "Untersuchungen zu den spätantiken und frühmittelalterlichen Gräberfeldern von Kaiseraugst AG" (working title). PhD project with Prof. Dr. P.-A. Schwarz, Vindonissa Professur, Departement Altertumswissenschaften, University of Basel.

⁴I will not describe those excavations further here, information on the topic can be found in a separate article about the old excavations in *Augusta Raurica's* cemeteries in this volume.

⁵Latest excavations and research summary in Fankhauser 2022a / 2022b.

⁶The Southeastern cemetery is subject of two completed but as yet unpublished PhD projects at the University of Basel: S. Ammann, C. Alder, S. Deschler-Erb, Ö. Akeret, mit Beiträgen von S. Fünfschilling, M. Peter, Ph. Rentzel, A. Schlumbaum, R. Känel "Das Südostgräberfeld „Im Sager“. Eine gallo-römische Nekropole in Augusta Raurica - eine archäologische und naturwissenschaftliche Auswertung (Grabungen 1991-1992)" (working title); C. Alder "Anthropologische Untersuchungen zu den Bestattungen aus der römischen Nekropole Kaiseraugst-Im Sager" (working title). - The latest excavations are published as a report in Grezet, Grolimund 2017.

⁷Mayer 2013.

⁸Preliminary report naming the inhumation burials: Lassau 1995.

⁹An overview over the different excavations and discovered graves in Pfäffli 2004, esp. 114-115 tab. 1. See also Fankhauser 2022a / 2022b.

¹⁰Partly published as a preliminary report by Laur-Belart 1947.

or if we are lacking other graves in the area due to either earlier destruction by man or nature; burials may have been buried even deeper under sand and clay after later floods from the surrounding rivers¹¹.

From the 4th century onwards, several smaller and larger necropolises begin to surface around the *Castrum Rauracense* in the Northeastern cemetery¹² (Fig. 2, circles). Corresponding to the shift in the settlement with the assumption that the population deserted the old colony centre in order to live in or near the *castrum*, we see the abandonment of the “traditional” cemeteries in the Southeast and Northwest. A new cemetery is also founded on the northern bank of the Rhine, directly across the *castrum* at Herten-Whylen¹³ – at this time outside of the Roman Empire. After the beginning of the 6th century, the only cemeteries still in use were parts of the Northeastern cemetery and the cemetery at Herten-Whylen on the Germanic side of the river. Does that mean that there is a discontinuity with new people living in the *castrum*, who abandon the old cemeteries and found new ones? Let us take a closer look at the burial customs.

The burial customs in Late Antiquity

We must understand the Northwestern and Southeastern cemeteries as the traditional burial grounds, as they were founded in the early days of the settlement of *Augusta Raurica*. It seems that burial practice either continued unbroken or was resumed in the Southeastern and Northwestern cemeteries until the middle of the 4th century. Since we are lacking the burials from the mid-3rd century and different signs of crisis during the 3rd century are discussed¹⁴, it is highly possible that we have a shift in the population of *Augusta Raurica* with intensive migration.

But the people burying their dead in those traditional cemeteries at least remembered the graveyards AND

wished to continue the rites there – either because they were descendants of people buried there or because they associated themselves with the buried society from the colony. Tile cists are clearly a burial custom that originated from earlier Roman rites mainly for cremation burials, as they are occasionally recorded in the 1st and 2nd century AD¹⁵.

As mentioned above, the inhumation burials of the late 3rd and early 4th century in the Northwestern and Southeastern cemeteries consist of earth graves, tile cists and a single lead sarcophagus from the late 3rd century AD that was discovered in 2016 in the Northwestern cemetery¹⁶. These customs were continued in the newly founded early necropolis of Stalden with tile cists. Single parts of lead sarcophagi are known from the Northeastern cemetery and date to the first half of the 4th century¹⁷. Stone cists seem to appear slightly later than tile cists but preserve the general idea of a cist to contain and protect the mortal remains of the deceased. The lone inhumation burial from the Southwestern cemetery lay in a stone cist and held rather rich grave goods: a bracelet of gold foil beads, an iron ring with an engraved carnelian gem, a silver pyxis and three glass bottles. The grave goods date the burial to the late 3rd or first half of the 4th century¹⁸. Thus, the two traditional cemeteries are complemented by two new foundations: the Southwestern cemetery and the Northeastern cemetery with the Stalden necropolis, adopting the same custom of tile cists and possibly lead sarcophagi as in the two cemeteries founded in colonial times.

The abandonment of the two old cemeteries in the second half of the 4th century might be explained simply by the shift of the settlement to the *Castrum Rauracense*. The Northeastern cemetery, especially the large necropolises south of the *castrum*, became the main graveyard due to its vicinity to the *castrum*. This only indicates discontinuity in the burial community if we leave aside the continuation of the burial customs.

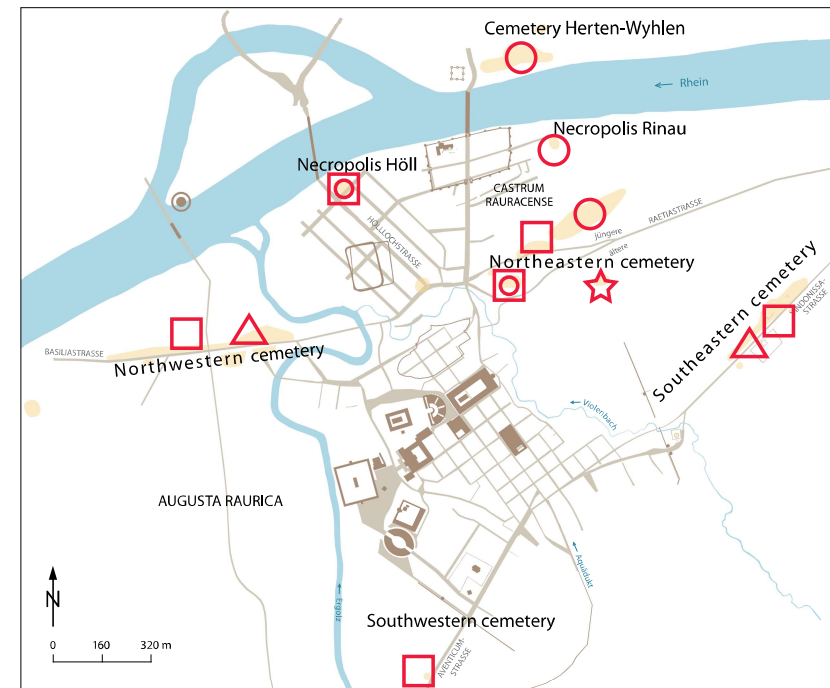


Fig. 2 - The cemeteries of Augusta Raurica. The symbols represent the dating of the different burials: triangle = 1st/2nd c.; star = 3rd c.; square = 1st half 4th c.; circle = 2nd half 4th c. onwards; circle in square = unclear, 1st or 2nd half 4th c. Map 1:16000, Römerstadt Augusta Raurica, edited S. Mayer.

The Northeastern cemetery was already in use when the Northwestern and Southeastern cemeteries were abandoned. Its burial rites seem to continue directly from the tile cists to stone cists into the 5th century.

The problem of dating any finds or structures to the 5th century¹⁹ is partly the reason why it is commonly seen

as a time of breaking with old customs and traditions. The grave goods date to the 4th century and then again to 6th to 8th century. But this does not mean that no graves were dug in the 5th century. Firstly, it was à la mode to bury people without grave goods, and secondly, the dating material from earlier centuries, such as pottery, is no longer the predominant accessory and

¹¹Rychener 2010, 120–122.

¹²Most important literature: Brunner 2014; Martin 1991; Müller 1989.

¹³Garscha 1970.

¹⁴Last Schatzmann 2013.

¹⁵In the Southeastern cemetery (Tomasevic-Buck 1982); different forms of tile cists for different kinds of burials see for example Hintermann 2000, 35.

¹⁶Hodel 2017, 28–47. For the lead sarcophagus see Baumann 2021.

¹⁷Rütti 1994.

¹⁸Schwarz 1997.

¹⁹See also Anna Flückiger's paper in this volume, where she presents methods for dating the 5th century in future research.

thus new forms develop more slowly. Also, archaeological research of the 5th century material is still in its beginnings.

So, we just do not “see” the 5th century graves because we cannot date them. It has been argued that one reason for the decline in grave goods is the rise of Christianity. Although this still requires further research, it remains a fact that there are many burials with no grave goods. For the Northeastern cemetery, Max Martin already proposed to regard burials without grave goods as the missing 5th century burials and that one might be able to trace them by distribution mapping in a cemetery and possibly by the development of grave structures²⁰. The occupation of the Northeastern cemetery continues in the 6th century. If there were no graves in the 5th century, why should a community keep the connection to the (former) population and its customs? The question remains: who lies there?

In addition, there are two smaller cemeteries in front of the eastern and western gates of the *castrum*. The western one, the necropolis of Höll/Ziegelhofweg, has been researched and published by Stefanie Brunner: the archaeological and anthropological analyses showed that an unusually large part of the dead were men between 20 and 45 with very few grave goods, but among those crossbow brooches that might indicate a possible connection to the military and other objects indicating a connection to the *Barbaricum*²¹. It seems possible that Höll was a special necropolis for Germanic soldiers (and their families?) in Roman service maybe living in the *castrum* – although new excavations in 2018 unearthed more data and indicate a different composition of the buried population as well as earlier graves from the 1st half of the 4th century²². A similar necropolis however has been found in front of the eastern gate of the *castrum*. The small group of skeletons without grave goods unfortunately have not been scrutinised more closely²³.

The necropolis on the right (north) bank of the Rhine of Herten-Whylen (in modern Germany) is traditionally seen as the graveyard of the Alamans that was completely separated from the Roman settlement²⁴. A newer article on the brooches from Herten by Andreas Grosskopf proposes that most of the brooches are Germanic types of Roman inspired military brooches²⁵. The necropolis’ closeness to the *Castrum Rauracense* and a structure on the right bank of the Rhine that is a possible fortlet or - more likely - a bridgehead, in addition to the brooches related to the military, indicate that the buried could originally have been auxiliary troops or *foederati*. So rather than evil barbarians storming the border we might see allies that were willingly settled at the site by an official authority.

Conclusion

Arguably, there are no clear signs of discontinuity during the late antique period. Even while situated at the *limes* and during heavy political, cultural and religious changes, there are always burials that follow certain traditions and remain close to the settlement. This certainly indicates that the 5th century burials remain undetected due to the inability of researchers to confidently identify remains of that period.

Apart from the military presence, there are no signs of fighting (mass graves, heavy injuries on bones etc.) in Late Antiquity - though there is a pressing need for new anthropological data and further re-examination of the scarce skeletal material from the old excavations.

If there was discontinuity in the settlement and thus possibly a change in population, then it most likely took place in the early 4th century with the abandonment of the colony and its cemeteries and the founding of the *castrum* and its surrounding necropolises²⁶. Even so, there were always people living at the site. Instead of a forced completely new culture, the customs in-

dicating a more peaceful scenario: immigrants brought new cultural influences, which seem to have turned into a peaceful creation of a new culture (romano-germanic?).

Further research results can only be reached by us trying to examine and publish all the burials from the old excavations in order to provide the data for new research projects, where, for example, sites in larger regions are compared. Modern GIS and databases facilitate international research and the same database might be used for different analyses, such as mapping of certain grave types, chronological markers or special grave goods.

New knowledge and research possibilities also include possible isotope analyses. I propose that this might be helpful to test burials with foreign grave goods to further identify “foreigners” relative to foreign grave goods, further comparing data with “local” graves with grave goods typical of the region. Either the isotope markers will be similar, in which case both test subjects grew up locally, or they will differ thus indicating first generation immigrants. Such methods could result in interesting new details to further our understanding of Late Antiquity and its societies.

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²⁰Martin 1991, 238–254; 311–312.

²¹Brunner 2014.

²²Baerlocher 2019; Baerlocher 2022.

²³Müller 1989.

²⁴I will not discuss the possible division of late antique and early medieval population in different ethnicities, as this is still a vast discussion in archaeological research. An important article on the subject for the region of *Augusta Raurica* is Fehr 2013.

²⁵Grosskopf 2002.

²⁶Any correspondences between this possible breach in the local traditions and the political transformations in Rome during the same time span remain to be analysed further.

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Zusammenfassung

Im späteren 3. Jahrhundert n. Chr. findet sich die römische Koloniestadt *Augusta Raurica* plötzlich wieder direkt am Rhein Limes. In der krisenreichen Folgezeit reduziert sich die Bevölkerung der Stadt und zieht schliesslich vom alten Stadtzentrum auf dem Hügel ins neu gegründete *Castrum Rauracense* in der Rheinebene. Siedlungsspuren sind in der Spätantike archäologisch kaum nachgewiesen. Deswegen

können die Gräberfelder mit einer Belegung vom 1. bis ins 8. Jahrhundert vielleicht mehr Aufschluss über die Geschichte des Ortes geben. Durch die Datierung und Kartierung der Gräber und einen Blick auf die Bestattungssitten, kann zu der Frage nach Unterbrüchen in der Besiedlung und im Brauchtum beigetragen werden. Auf dieser Basis zeichnet sich eher das Bild einer Kontinuität vor Ort ab, die Gemeinschaft scheint neue kulturelle Einflüsse aufgenommen und mit alten Traditionen verbunden zu haben.