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Ruins of ancient Roman road in Valais, Switzerland.

I
CHRISTIANITY COMES OVER THE ALPS

A SHORT HISTORY OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY IN SWITZERLAND

An Orthodox convert of German-Swiss heritage, Popadia Margaret Bauman speaks with *Road to Emmaus* about Switzerland's early Christian history.

ROAD TO EMMAUS: Popadia Margaret, can you give us an overview of the conversion of Switzerland to Christianity?

PDA. MARGARET: We know that after the prehistoric period, parts of Switzerland and western Europe were occupied by Celtic peoples, and in 15 BC this territory became part of the Roman Empire after a massive military campaign that entered the region over the Alpine passes from Italy. After arriving on the Swiss Plateau, the Romans continued northward, conquering territory to the Danube, including most of present-day Switzerland and into Germany.[1]

As everywhere, the Romans built their famous roads, towns, and military outposts, as well as bringing in army veterans as settlers, which made it easier for merchants and civil officials to follow them into new areas. Settlements and forts were built along rivers, lakes, and transit roads that crossed the great passes over the Alps into Switzerland.

1 Ed. Note: At the time of Christ, the territory of modern-day Switzerland was divided between the Roman provinces of Raetia et Vindelicia, Gallia Belgica, and at one point the province of Upper Germania. but as with all Roman provinces, boundaries changed over time and Diocletian's reforms in the third century divided the Swiss territory between five different provinces. These amalgamated over hundreds of years, but Switzerland as we know it today only came into being in the early 19th century.

Opposite: Roman theatre ruins, Kaiser-Augst, Switzerland.

As active Roman defense was mostly along the northern borders, the 150 years after Rome's conquest were relatively peaceful for the Swiss territories. The Roman and Celtic populations intermarried, and Rome's more sophisticated administrative structure and laws, agriculture and water systems, architecture, art, and literature took hold – mostly in the cities, although there were also large country villas engaged in agriculture and viniculture.

From the Time of the Apostles to the Early Fourth Century

Christianity began to spread soon after Pentecost and Christians also came to the area we now call Switzerland. There is little factual information about Christians in Switzerland in the first centuries, but traditions were passed down and we can make educated guesses from what was happening in adjacent parts of the empire. For example, St. Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna (70-155), and disciple of St. John the Theologian, had this to say:

> And although there are different languages throughout the world, yet the content of what has been passed down is one and the same. For the churches which were founded in Germania do not believe or pass on anything different from the ones in Spain or the Celts, those in the Orient or those in Egypt, those in Libya or in the middle of the world. Just as God's sun is one and the same throughout the whole world, so does the news of the Truth penetrate everywhere and enlightens all people who desire to come to the Truth.

By "Germania" (plural in the original text) both "Germania inferior" and "Germania superior" are meant. Upper Germania includes those who inhabited the Jura and the Middle Land in western and central Switzerland.[2] Another early report of Christianity in Switzerland is found in St. Irenaeus' work, *Against Heresies*, written in 180.

We also have evidence from the nearby city of Lyon in Gaul (present-day France), at the confluence of the Rhône and Saône Rivers, which was a great pagan religious site, and later a center of Christianity. It was inhabited by a variety of peoples including Greek and Middle Eastern Christians, as well as

2 Steudler, Andreas, *Aus den Anfängen des Christentums in der Schweiz*, self-published, Bern, 1994, p. 9.

Opposite: Sts. Exuperantus, Felix, and Regula, martyred in Zürich.

Gallo-Romans. Lyon's Christians underwent a fierce persecution in the year 177, when many were martyred under Marcus Aurelius. Among them was St. Pothinus, first bishop of Lyon, sent to Gaul by St. Polycarp around 150.

We know about these remarkable events because of a letter sent to the Christians of what was then called Asia and Phrygia, describing what happened. It is extraordinary that this letter has been preserved, and without it we would know little of early Christianity in Gaul. It is quite probable that Christian activity also existed in the more established Roman settlements of what is now Switzerland, including missionary activity and martyrdom. There were certainly many Greek merchants traveling through, as well as soldiers from Rome and other parts of the empire who may have come from Christian families or been converts themselves. Who knows what other documents or artifacts may eventually turn up?

There are also legends, written down centuries later, concerning the early apostolic period in Switzerland: one tells of a St. Lucius who baptized people at the time of the Apostle Paul; another concerns St. Beatus, who was purportedly baptized in Britain by St. Barnabas and ordained in Rome by St. Peter. He was then sent to Switzerland with a companion named Achates and became a successful missionary in the Aargau and Thurgau regions, finally retiring to a hermitage in a cave above Lake Thun.

These traditions of Lucius and Beatus are complicated by the likelihood that their stories got mixed with the lives of later saints. Still, it is interesting that the belief in apostolic missionary work lingers in post-Reformation Switzerland, and we cannot rule out a core of truth in these stories or the role they played in strengthening the faith of the early Christians.

We also know of the continuous veneration of other early saints who played an important role in the spread of Christianity in the Swiss territories. First the martyrs of the Theban Legion, including: St. Maurice and the legionnaires in Agaunum (now the town of St. Maurice); Sts. Felix and Regula, with their servant Exuperantius in Zürich; Sts. Urs and Victor in Solothurn; as well as the Egyptian hermitess and healer St. Verena who was associated with the Theban Legion, but escaped martyrdom. All of these are said to have lived around the year 300, and the sites of their martyrdoms and St. Verena's ministry became important pilgrimage destinations.

Opposite: Romanesque crypt under Cathedral of St. Pierre, Geneva.

After the Persecutions: Fourth-Century Christianity

From the second century, Christians worshipped secretly in families or small groups during periods of persecution, until they were guaranteed freedom of worship and restoration of property under the Edict of Milan of 313, an agreement between Emperors Constantine and Licinius. Emperor Constantine's conversion and support of Christianity was another impetus to growth, and soon we start seeing churches and baptisteries, even within Roman fortresses. Archeologists have found such traces in Geneva, Kaiseraugst, Zurzach, Martigny, and other places in Switzerland. In the fourth century, we also begin seeing Christian gravestones and objects with Christian symbols (mostly fish, anchors, or the Chi-Rho), and records of the first bishops, such as the signature of St. Theodor of Martigny at a synod in Aquileia (Byzantine Italy) in 381.

I have seen some of these early artifacts in the State Museum in Zürich and in the Roman Museum in Augst (outside of Basel), where there are also excavations of an old baptistery in a cave on a riverbank. They all attest to the presence of Christianity in the Roman settlements of fourth-century Switzerland, particularly a red sandstone grave marker from 350, the oldest known witness to Christianity in Switzerland. Headed by an inscribed anchor, a typical Christian grave symbol, the Latin text follows:

> To the Manes and the eternal
> memory of Eustata, the
> much-loved wife, who lived
> for 65 years. Amatus (her husband)
> has placed this stone.[3]

These historical finds also help us to locate individual Christian parishes, which would have followed the routes of Rome's territorial gains. In the eastern part of present-day Switzerland, Roman roads led over the Raetian passes to Chur; and in the West, over the Great St. Bernard Pass to Martigny

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3 Ed. note: "Manes" refers to the spirits and souls of one's ancestors, while the anchor is undoubtedly a Christian symbol. In these early centuries, Christian belief and pagan custom sometimes existed side by side, but if "manes" here is in fact a memorial to family forebearers, it would not necessarily have been in conflict with Christian belief.

and up the Rhône River to Geneva. Radiating from these points, a circle of cities with Christian traces can be drawn along the Rhine border from Chur to Arbon, Stein am Rhein, Zurzach, Kaiseraugst and Basel, and coming from western Switzerland through Lausanne, Yverdon, Avenches, Solothurn, Olten, Windisch and Zürich.

According to Bonjour et al., in *A Short History of Switzerland*[4]: "By the end of the fourth century we may assume a thin network of Christian churches over western Switzerland, with bishops at Lyon, Avenches, Basel, Martigny and Geneva." It is likely that the sparse Celto-Roman population in isolated areas still sacrificed to the old gods.

The growth of Christianity continued under the Romans who made Christianity the state religion in 380, but this was only a few decades before Roman troops withdrew to protect Italy, leaving Switzerland to the incoming Germanic tribes.

The Germanic Invasions

RTE: Who ruled these territories after the Romans, and how did new rulers affect the spread of Christianity?

PDA. MARGARET: Let me just point out that even though I say Switzerland, under Roman rule, today's Swiss regions were part of provinces which also included territories of present-day France, Italy, Germany or Austria. These divisions sometimes corresponded to language differences, and to how quickly Christianity was being assimilated.

Secondly, most of the so-called "barbarian tribes" that later ruled parts of Switzerland were not totally alien to Roman culture or even to Christianity. Some of them had lived in border areas where they not only traded with Romans, but observed and even imitated Roman practices. Great numbers also served in the Roman armies. Before the Romans left, groups of Burgundians had already been allowed to settle in Switzerland with their capital in Geneva. Later, they spread northwest through what are now the French-speaking areas of Switzerland. The Burgundians initially followed the Arian heresy, but in time became Christian and supported the growth of the Church. In 534 they were conquered and annexed by the Franks, who had only been Christian for a generation, since the conversion of King Clovis

4 E. Bonjour, H.S. Offler, and G.R. Potter, *A Short History of Switzerland*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1952.

in 496. Conversion to Christianity in the west of Switzerland seems to have occurred between 350 and 700.

Christianity did not spread as quickly or smoothly to the eastern regions of Switzerland, arriving there about 200-300 years later. The Roman influence was weaker here and fewer Celto-Roman Christian outposts remained after the imperial troops withdrew. A further obstacle to conversion were the Alemanni, the pagan Germanic tribe that crossed the Rhine and settled in the eastern part of the country. Initially fiercely opposed to Christianity, they destroyed whatever churches and monasteries they found.

The first wave of Alemanni crossed the Rhine and settled in Alsace and on the Swiss plateau in 406, after eleven battles with the Romans. We have little documentation as theirs was an oral tradition centered on heroic tales. Initially independent, the Alemanni later sought protection from the Franks and became a part of the Ostrogoth kingdom. The Ostrogoths in turn were conquered by the Christian Franks, who thus also came to govern the Alemanni, although at first, they apparently did not missionize them.

The conversion of the Alemanni was accomplished peacefully and over a long period – not as might be expected, by the bishops (who tended to be responsible for large territories with scattered parishes), but rather through the influence of local monasteries and the lords of large villas, who provided churches and priests for the families who worked their lands. In both the east and west of Switzerland, the pilgrimage places of saints and martyrs played a large role as centers of veneration, healing, and worship.

Switzerland's Missionary Saints

RTE: Can you tell us now about the area's missionary saints?

PDA. MARGARET: Major saints who contributed to the conversion of eastern Switzerland include the Irish saints Columbanus, Gall, and Fridolin[5], as well as the native Swiss saints Otmar and Lucius.

Although St. Columbanus only stayed about two years before moving on to Italy, he made a lasting impression and was remembered for centuries. According to his *Life*, he once came upon some men solemnly gathered in the woods with a keg of beer, a fire, and a kettle. Discovering that they were about

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5 Some now believe that St. Fridolin may have come from Gaul instead of Ireland.

Opposite: St. Gall and the bear, St. Gallen, Switzerland.

to make a beer sacrifice to Wotan, he "upset the vessel with such violence that the hoops burst asunder and all the contents were spilt. Overawed by the kindling eye and the majestic presence of the Abbot, the idolaters dispersed without daring to utter a word of protest..."[6] Another version says "with his breath he caused a keg of beer being offered to Wodan to explode and expel the devils in it. He taught them about Christ and many were baptized."[7]

St. Gall, a disciple of St. Columbanus, lived as a hermit in the woods with his disciples, but influenced the entire area south of Lake Constance by his holy life, his ability to preach in the Alemannian language, and through miracles which continued after his repose. A century later, St. Otmar, known for his humility, poverty, and service to lepers, turned the ruins of St. Gall's hermitage into a monastery, and many local men became monks there. The 6th-7th -century monk St. Fridolin lived on an island in the Rhine, where he established monasteries for men and women, and also converted the Alemanni who surrounded him. St. Lucius, probably from east-central Switzerland, proclaimed the faith in the region of Chur.[8]

Another influence in eastern Switzerland were Alemanni who had at first lived in closer proximity to Christian Franks to the west. After their own conversion, some of these anonymous missionaries brought the Christian faith to their eastern brothers, although the process of conversion continued until the early tenth century.

There were many other early saints, such as Sigisbert, Ursanus, Imier, Meinrad and Beatus, who we will describe later.

The Role of Early Monasteries: Fifth-Seventh Centuries

RTE: What can you tell us about the monasteries?

PDA. MARGARET: Monasteries were important in the Christianization of Switzerland, first in the west in the fifth century and later in the east. While early Christian influences were mostly from Roman Italy, in the fifth and sixth centuries, monks and hermits also began coming from Gaul. There,

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6 *Life and Writings of St. Columbanus*, p. 187.

7"Die Alemannen und das Christentum." http://www.archaeologie-online.de/magazin/thema/die-alamannen/die-alamannen-und-das-christentum/seite-1/. 1/16/2001.

8 Later legends developed concerning St. Lucius, one of which says he came from Britain.

Opposite: Church of the early medieval Monastery of Romainmotier.

eastern desert monasticism had been absorbed and was then directed back over the Jura mountains to Switzerland via the monasteries of Lérins and Lyon by saints like St. Martin of Tours and Sts. Romanus and Lupicinus of the Jura Mountains. They also brought writings such as *The Conferences and Institutes* of St. John Cassian and Athanasius' *Life of St. Antony of Egypt*.[9] In 450 the monastery of Romanmotier was founded in the Swiss Jura mountains; then in 515, the St. Maurice foundation began in Valais.

In the first half of the seventh century we see at least two monasteries founded by disciples of the Irish St. Columbanus, who had come from his foundation in Luxeil (Gaul) along with his disciple St. Gall. While Columbanus moved on to Italy, Gall lived as a hermit with a small group of followers near Arbon on Lake Constance, later the site of the famous Monastery of St. Gall. In the eighth century, monasteries were founded in eastern Switzerland which not only brought Christian Latin and Greek culture to the Alemanni, but also introduced new agricultural methods in the increasingly settled mountains and forests. In addition to the Monastery of St. Gallen, these were the foundations of Reichenau, Pfäfers, and Rheinau.

These are highlights of the growth of Christianity until the tenth century. Later developments included the tragic dismantling of traditional Christian practices and pilgrimage sites at the Reformation, yet traces of these first-millennium foundations of the universal Church can still be found in Switzerland. ✤

9 Vischer, Lukas; Schenker, Lukas; & Dellsperger, Rudolf, ed., *Ökumenische Kirchengeschichte der Schweiz,* Paulusverlag, Freiburg, Switzerland, 1998, p. 28.

Opposite: Contemporary view of the Monastery of Romainmotier.