

# *Aventicum* (Avenches), capital of the *Helvetii*: a history of research, 1985-2010.

## Part I. Early Roman *Aventicum* and its origins

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### Introduction

*Aventicum* was the capital of the territory of the *Helvetii* during the Roman period. It extended over a large part of what is now Switzerland, from the right bank of the Rhône near Geneva to Lake Constance, and from the Alps in the south to the Jura Mountains in the north; it also included the territory of the *Rauraci* with *Augusta Raurica* as its centre.<sup>1</sup> The Roman city, which once boasted up to 20,000 inhabitants, was located on the site of the small community of Avenches in the French-speaking Canton Vaud, just west of the border with the German-speaking part of the country.

The memory of the ancient past was always kept alive in Avenches.<sup>2</sup> An active interest in the Roman city began in the 17th c. and gradually intensified, until it found an institutional expression in the 19th c. with the founding of the Roman Museum in 1824<sup>3</sup> and the Association Pro Aventico in 1885.<sup>4</sup> Only since 1964, however, has the site been cared for by experts.

The authorities of Canton Vaud introduced legislation to protect the archaeological remains as early as 1898, which eventually led to the creation of the Spatial Planning Act in 1987. This law regulates construction and development within the area of the ancient city, outlining preventive archaeological measures within the development zone and designating as untouchable the preserved monuments and a considerable area around the forum.<sup>5</sup> In spite of these restrictions, Avenches underwent a phase of intensive development between 1985 and 2008, which included the construction of residential areas and industrial estates, the installation of a district heating system for the community, and a reparcelling of the agricultural zone within the municipality.<sup>6</sup>

The past 25 years of excavation and research in Avenches have yielded a great deal of information, which has significantly improved our understanding of the chronology of ancient *Aventicum*, its economic significance, and its integration into the Roman Empire. Because the most recent summary of the archaeology of Avenches was published in 1972,<sup>7</sup> it seems appropriate now to attempt a new synthesis that incorporates this abundance of new information and places it within a larger historical and topographical context.<sup>8</sup>

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1 Frei-Stolba 1999, 69-73; Meylan Krause 1999, 9, fig. 2.

2 Meylan Krause 2004.

3 In 1838 the Roman Museum was installed in the mediaeval tower of the amphitheatre.

4 Tuor-Clerc 1984; Brodard, Castella and Dal Bianco 2008; Dal Bianco *et al.* 2010, 4-14.

5 Meylan Krause 2004, 103, fig. 81.

6 See the "Chroniques des fouilles archéologiques" published annually in the *BPA* (for all abbreviations of the local series, see n.8 below).

7 Bögli 1972; Drack and Fellmann 1988, 337-48.

8 I managed the site of Avenches from 1995 to 2010. This paper summarises and interprets the research carried out during that period and in the preceding years by many former employees and colleagues. The list of references is incomplete; in many cases I have listed only the most