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The first Swiss emigrants

The first Swiss who decided to leave their home country were the Helvetians, in the year fifty-eight BC. Word had spread that the region of Southern France had a milder climate and, as the Helvetians' huts still had dirt floors and thatched roofs that weren't watertight, Southern France sounded like the place to be.

It was no mean task getting organised. Under their leader, Divico, three hundred and sixty eight thousand Helvetians left – men, women and children with all their belongings and their livestock in ox carts – and, to make sure nobody had second thoughts, they burnt their huts as they left: over four hundred villages in all.

The way was forward: go west – well, southwest. They travelled for many days to the land of their dreams. At nighttime they arranged their carts in a circle against unknown enemies and for comfort. They lit fires, cooked, talked and made plans about what to do in their new homeland. And at first, all went smoothly. They planned to follow the Rhone to the Mediterranean once they reached the Lake of Geneva, but Julius Caesar stopped them there and wouldn't allow them to pass through. He suggested they go home – and stay home. Yet the Helvetians were not to be discouraged so easily. They chose to make a detour via the Jura. This was a gruelling and time-consuming journey and when they finally reached the river Saone, Julius Caesar was there too, with a reinforced army. The Helvetians pleaded with Julius Caesar, but to no avail.

In the following battle of Bibracte 250'000 Helvetian men, women and children were killed. The remaining emigrants – wounded, bruised and disheartened – were forced to return to Helvetia, rebuild their burnt huts, and accept the Romans as their colonial rule.

Helvetia became a province in the Roman Empire, with Aventicum (Avenches) as Helvetian capital. Avenches is well worth a visit when you are in Switzerland next time: The amphitheatre is almost intact, and the wall with the watchtowers around the city and the aqueduct are still there, and quite impressive ruins of temples and a theatre, too. Some of the stones have ended up in medieval buildings, though and can be found in unlikely places.

The Roman occupation and administration had a positive side: Roman traders brought improved grain seed, which made farming more profitable. They also introduced cherries, chestnuts, peaches, plums and improved apple and pear varieties and nuts to Helvetian agriculture. Roman traders exported cheese, honey and wax from Helvetia to the rest of the empire and imported oil and wine. Roman officials lived in houses with mosaic floors, underfloor heating and baths. The indigenous Helvetians still lived in huts with dirt floors, but some worked as servants in Roman houses and learnt that there would be more sophisticated ways of living. *tb*

Hoffnung

*Es reden und träumen die Menschen viel
Von bessern künftigen Tagen,
Nach einem glücklichen, goldenen Ziel
Sieht man sie rennen und jagen.
Die Welt wird alt und wird wieder jung,
Doch der Mensch hofft immer Verbesserung.*

*Die Hoffnung führt ihn ins Leben hinein,
Sie umflattert den fröhlichen Knaben,
Den Jüngling lockt ihr Zauberschein,
Sie wird mit dem Greis nicht begraben:
Denn beschliesst er im Grabe den müden Lauf,
Noch am Grabe pflanzt er – die Hoffnung auf.*

*Es is kein leerer schmeichelnder Wahn,
Erzeugt im Gehirne der Toren,
Im Herzen kündet es laut sich an:
Zu was Besserm sind wir geboren.
Und was die innere Stimme spricht,
Das täuscht die hoffende Seele nicht.*

Friederich von Schiller

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