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Ways through Switzerland – Ways to Switzerland

# Cultural rebirth

Since Switzerland lies at the heart of Europe our subject must also include ways to and from the rest of our continent. For almost thirty years cultural flows have been up for discussion at the European level. In 1984 the Council of Europe recommended that the European pilgrim ways, particularly the Ways of St. James to Compostela, should be revived. The avowed aims were to increase consciousness of our common European identity, to protect and maintain our cultural heritage and to fructify leisure activities in new ways. What has Switzerland done about this?

Acting on this request from Strasbourg the Swiss National Tourist Office (SNTO) started in 1985 on its ambitious project «Ways to Switzerland». A number of its review, «Switzerland», entirely devoted to the Ways of St. James, was a great success and quickly went out of print. After this encouraging start, two more numbers on the Great Walser Route appeared in 1987 and 1988, and these have now been put together in a book. This year the SNTO has decided to concentrate on the Roman roads passing through Switzerland: again in two numbers of the review, «Switzerland», also available together in book form, covering the western and eastern parts of the country. As part of the SNTO's longterm project «Ways to Switzerland», baroque trails, mule tracks and textile trails have been chosen as new subjects for the coming years.

The very use of these expressions shows clearly enough how pleasant (and publicity-wise) the subject is. But of course the old roads of our country cannot really be divided into categories. A road is a road for all that. The Ways of St. James were not used only by pilgrims on their way to Compostela, and

the baroque trails were simply lines of communication between one cultural centre and another. What exactly does the SNTO hope to achieve with this very wide-ranging cultural history project? It is aiming to discover the traces left by the builders and users of these tracks across our country and to show the visitor the wonderful process by which they have marked architecture, language, roadbuilding and art as a whole across vast regions. The project has been carried out in full cooperation with experts and specialised institutes such as cantonal archaeologists, the

Swiss Walkers Federation and the Inventory of Historical Transport Routes through Switzerland. Those who follow these old ways, many now newly uncovered, will feel the impact of magnificent landscapes and make many interesting cultural discoveries. They will also come to understand the important transit role of our country down the ages, since almost all the ways begin and end abroad. For the Roman legionary as for the medieval pilgrim, Switzerland was simply a road to somewhere else.

Heidi Willumat

## Roman roads: That is the question!

This is the great controversy which still haunts research into old roads. There are many experts in this field, writing in dozens of different periodicals – and still the question of what is really Roman seems only partially unveiled, clouded with secrecy and myth. Year by year new books appear on the subject – which shows that readers have an unquenchable desire to come to terms with the Romans.

The ability to lay out a vast and highly efficient transport system throughout the huge empire is certainly one of the most fascinating aspects of the Roman achievement in building, planning and technology. The best original information about the course of the Roman roads, and particularly the important stage points along them, is found in the "Itinerarium Antonini", a Roman handbook for travellers, and the Peutinger



Juf in the Averser valley (Canton Grisons), a Walser Settlement at 6,998 feet, the highest permanently inhabited village in Europe. (Photo: SNTO)

Panel, which is a medieval copy of a Roman road map. This document contains only places and distances, and there are no descriptions of topography, contours or particularly difficult passages. But it does tell us that even at that time a number of important transit routes crossed the territory of what is now Switzerland. In the west of our country the crossing of the Great St. Bernard was the shortest link between Rome and the north. The St. Gotthard was considered unpassable because of the great barrier of the Schöllenen gorge. The eastern passes through what is now the Grisons were used, but they had nowhere near the importance of the Great St. Bernard, mainly because traffic was shared between them and the Brenner and Reschen-scheideck passes farther to the east. These main transport routes were supplemented by a whole network of regional roads and ways, and the traces of many of these have never been dis-

### Specialised walking guides

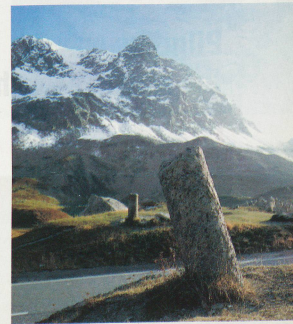
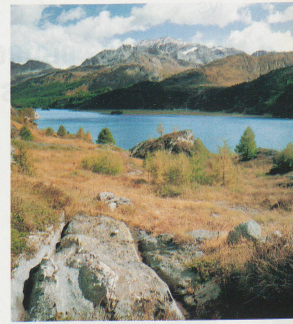
Judith Rickenbach, *Auf den Spuren der Kelten und Römer. 20 walks in Switzerland. Ott Verlag Thun 1992 220 p., Sfr. 39.80.*

*Inventar historischer Verkehrswege der Schweiz (IVS). Walks along historical routes, 17 excursions to monuments of art and transport history. Ott Verlag Thun 1990 264 p., Sfr. 39.80.*

covered. Historians spend much time attempting to reconstruct the Roman road network in Switzerland on the basis of individual finds, small stretches of road suddenly discovered and the upwards of 50 Roman milestones found throughout the country.

But many errors have crept into the picture over the years by virtue of the fact that in the past roads were very often attributed to the Romans when in fact they were built much later. In many cases, when a piece of "old road" was discovered it was quite simply assumed by the locals to have been Roman. It slowly entered into the regional folklore and there are many wellknown "Roman" ways and bridges all over the country which certainly stem from much later periods. The problem of dating the roads is inextricably bound up with the study of cart ruts. It used to be thought that the existence of cart ruts in stone was a sure sign of the Romans, but more recently it has been discovered that some of the ruts originated with the much earlier Celts, while others stemmed from as late as the eighteenth century. But this has done nothing to dispel the fascination of Roman roads, witnesses of the past which are attracting new researchers, both professional and amateur, almost every day.

In Roman days two of Europe's main transit routes crossed today's Switzerland – known as the eastern and the western routes. The western route across the Great St. Bernard was the quickest way from Rome to the north. The eastern route through today's Canton Grisons never had the same importance because of strong competition from the Brenner and other passes farther east. From top: Roman road by Lake Sils – Roman columns on the Julier Pass – Roman carriage ruts near St. Croix. (Photos: Lucia Degonda)



SWISS  
REVIEW 3/92



# Landscape protection, tourism and transport history in one!

**T**he changes in our environment which have been going on for centuries have finally led to a situation in which the traditional elements of our cultural landscape are being subjected to ever greater threat.

So it has become necessary to provide an inventory of these endangered species in order to provide a basis for area planning in the future, e.g. to protect ancient routes still visible. However, there is no intention here to provide a "landscape museum"; the aim would

rather be to bring the old routes back to life and to provide them with a new use suitable to modern times, for example setting them up as cultural history walks to enrich the supply of tourism facilities. In the last few years the IVS (see box) has been performing the valuable service of bringing these ancient routes to the attention of the public. A few years ago the Council of Europe defined a number of such routes as "a cultural heritage of the first order", and this should be taken as an important sign of

## Inventory of Historical Transport Routes in Switzerland (IVS)

The IVS is a federal inventory which has been set up by the Federal Office for the Environment, Forests and the Landscape in application of the Federal Law on the Protection of Nature and the Landscape. It provides a comprehensive stock-taking of our historical transport routes, as well as an overview of the history of transport in Switzerland. Contact address: IVS, Finkenhubelweg, CH-3013 Berne, Tel. 41 31 64 86 64.

the greatly increased sense of responsibility which we must all have for these historical transport routes in our midst. ■

## Pilgrims ways: the way is also the goal!

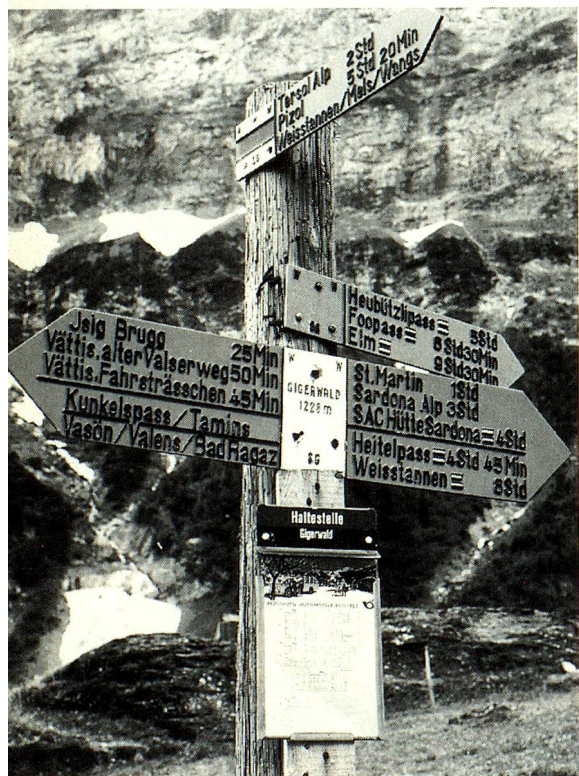
**I**n recent times the great pilgrim routes of the past have rivalled Roman roads in interest and attraction. In our hectic life they provide symbols of feelings and associations linked to values which have long since crumbled away – a unique mixture of curiosity, independence, the search for spiritual, religious or cor-

poral salvation, challenge, longing for distant climes, desires for travel and adventure. The preliminary work which has been carried out over many years on the IVS project "The ways of St. James through Switzerland" have shown above all that it is not possible to speak of a single pilgrims' way crossing straight through the territory of Switzerland. We must rather think in terms of a network of ways, which had one or two fixed points like Einsiedeln but which then spread out once more in the nature of a spider's web.

In the old days just as today, there existed a whole variety of reasons for undertaking a pilgrimage. Some were based on a desire to receive help in a concrete emergency, some on the instruction to undertake a pilgrimage in order to expiate some great sin. Desire for adventure and sometimes even the wish to earn money – you could hire yourself out as a pilgrim to undertake a holy journey on behalf of someone else – were often important motives. But in many cases a pilgrimage was quite simply the expression of the eternal search of mankind for inner salvation. Who knows not the text of the famous "Song of Beresina": "Our life is like the jour-

ney of a wanderer through the night...?" The concept of the pilgrimage was indeed often linked to the arduous journey through life, whose desirable and liberating end could be reached only in paradise. Salvation was not attainable in this world, although the way to the great beyond (the ultimate goal of the pilgrimage) was also part of the way to paradise and had both a holy and a healing effect on the pilgrim. The journey of every pilgrim was that of an individual on his own road to self-knowledge and self-experience. Along his way the pilgrim overcame the great barriers of distance and danger finally to attain his geographical goal. But in tune with this was also the conquest of inner barriers. With every step along the road he came nearer to his own destiny. It was his own way towards paradise that he was treading – a way which, as we all know too well, is rarely a straight line.

*Texts: Hans Schüpbach  
IVS Press Office* ■



**Walser Ways are now walkers' ways: a cross-ways in Canton St. Gall. (Photo: SNTO).**

## Inheritance

in Switzerland:

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The Walser Ways

## Once vital, now simply to charm

**The Walser Ways were first travelled in the thirteenth century. That was the time when life in European cities was just beginning to bloom, when the cathedrals of Reims and Chartres were being built, when Dante was born and when the Swiss peasants around Lake Lucerne were fighting for their freedom...**

**A**round the year 1000, a group of the Alemanni tribe arrived on the high plateau of the Goms in today's Canton Valais. This was the highest Alpine settlement and the first real attempt by the men of medieval times to learn the secrets of the mountain world. We know little about the way these people lived or what it was that pushed some of them, about two hundred years later, to leave their homes and wander through the huge Alpine region. A natural catastrophe perhaps, or a change in climate – or simply over-population. A vital role was played in those days by the feudal lords and their broad network of relationships throughout the Alpine region. These were interested in consolidating their rule, in getting more money from the produce of the soil and in controlling the Alpine passes. In exchange for their efforts to cultivate the inhospitable mountain soil, the wanderers from the Valais – who became known as the Walser – gradually won for themselves a whole series of special rights and freedoms. One was the right to dispose freely of their property, which meant that they could leave their worldly goods to their children or transfer it to other Walser. They also had their own courts and chose their own magistrates.

### Discovered in the 19<sup>th</sup> century

This independence was the condition of living amongst the wild mountain fastnesses and surviving from the meagre fruit of the soil. For about two hundred years the Walser wandered from one Alpine region to another, from Valais to Piedmont in northern Italy, from there to the Grisons, later to the St. Gall uplands, through Liechtenstein and finally to Austrian Tirol and Vorarlberg, where around 1500 the most distant of them

finally settled down in the Little Walser Valley.

The Walser were then lost sight of for several centuries – and this was very good for them, for it is because of it that their culture, their architecture, their customs and their language have survived into the present. It was not until the mid-nineteenth century, with the gathering interest in the Alpine regions, that the Walser were rediscovered – in over 150 settlements scattered across 300 km.

But these tracks were not originally used for pleasure, nor for cultural or sporting reasons. For the Walser who lived in the highest mountain regions they were absolutely essential for daily life. These were the tracks along which they brought home the goods which they needed for their daily existence: flour and rice, salt and wine, linen and cotton... They also used the tracks to bring to market their own products: cheese and butter, and above all the cattle which they bred. An example: the people of Vals regularly travelled over the Valsler Mountain to the upper Rhine valley and then over the San Bernardino Pass to Bellinzona and Lugano.

### For marriage and death

These Walser Ways were also used to create family relationships. A young man from Davos might marry a girl from the Schanfigg, a girl from Alagne would be courted by a peasant's son from Macugnaga, a muleteer from Splügen would find his happiness with a woman from Safier. These old tracks and paths also had an administrative sense, for many of the Alpine slopes and meadows were held in common by the Walser. Sometimes too the Walser Ways were ways of mourning; the bodies of the deceased were taken from one Walser settlement to another for burial. From Capello Monti the bodies of the dead were carried for four hours over the pass to holy burial ground in Rimella; and the same was true for those from Valsesia who crossed the Colle Valdobbia to earn their bread in Savoy and then had to be brought back when they died.

### Passes at over 13,000 feet

The Walser Ways can be divided up into three categories, each with its own highly specific character. There were the high mountain passes from the Valais along the flanks of Monte Rosa



**An ancient Walser Way crosses Monte Moro from Saas-Almagell to Piedmont. (Photo: Kurt Wanner)**

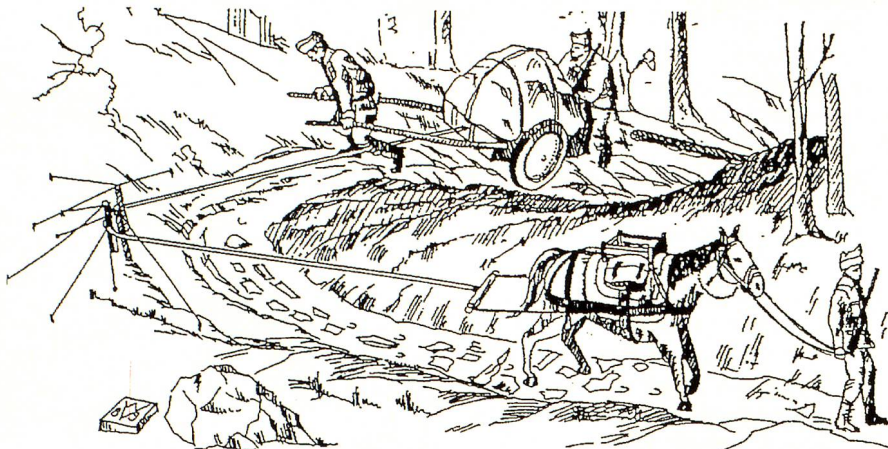
to Italy. These could easily reach heights well above 13,000 feet; but most of them (the second category) were around 8,000 feet – as, for example, Monte Moro, the Albrun, the Turlo, the Fallerfurga and the Safierberg...

Then there were the paths of those amongst the Walser whose eyes were on the lowlands and whose high mountain ambitions were limited. Most of these are in the easterly regions: the track from Zillis to Obermatten, for example, or the much lower Duranna and Auenfeld passes, or the track around the Widderstein. But all these tracks had one thing in common: they existed to maintain connection and contact within this remarkable mountain world between men and women of the same kind, who spoke the same ancient language, who were marked by stillness and dignity, and whose hospitality was legendary. And if others wish to get some feeling of this strange world as it still exists today, they must bring some small contribution to it as well – something spiritual not material, an open mind, plenty of time, and a pinch of that pioneering spirit which has marked the Walsers for generation after generation down the centuries.

**Kurt Wanner, Splügen (GR)** ■



# The mule tracks live again: new polish on an old glory?



Zeichnung: Werner Vogel NVS

**M**any of the historical transport routes, especially those which crossed the great mountain passes, were amongst medieval Europe's most important trading ways. Even in the old days, such routes could have an international fame and status, and they could also be of central importance for the economies of the regions through which they travelled. The organisation of trade

in goods was largely a matter of the ownership of mules; it was run either by individuals or by transport companies of some great size, as the so-called "Ports" of Canton Grisons. The mule tracks of old are not only a wonderful experience in terms of landscape, but they were also very well-built roads in their day. They had to be, for they were heavily used and needed to be efficient.

After two years of careful renovation, the Septimer mule track was reopened in its new form in October 1991. On the Berne side of the Susten Pass, the old mule track is also being renovated so that the future walker will be able to reach the summit in peace far from the madding traffic of the road. And many stretches of the great Simplon mule track which flourished in the seventeenth-century under the celebrated Valais trading baron, Kaspar Jodok von Stockalper, have been renovated over the last few years.

Even if these mule tracks are no longer used for trading purposes, we can

**Thanks to turnaround posts (or rollers) it was possible in the old days to climb steep slopes, as this experiment on the Little Maloja, Canton Grisons, shows.**

nevertheless rejoice that some of the old contours of the great mountain passes have been brought back to life. The modern walker will not be subject to most of the strains and dangers which were the lot of the muleteers of old, but as he passes along these great ways of medieval times he will be able to let his imagination work.

*Hans Schüpbach* ■



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