

The Roman era and the Bergheim mosaic

From 52 BC, Alsace was part of the Roman Empire, and would remain so for five centuries. This was a period of profound change, as is demonstrated by the construction of a dense network of roads, the development of large settlements and a great increase in the numbers of small villages and farms.

Whilst there is no Roman presence attested in Colmar itself before the construction of a villa in the 4th century AD, the same cannot be said of the surrounding areas, which were densely occupied from the first century. Major sites include Biesheim “Oedenbourg” and Horbourg, but the farms, villas and little settlements in the territories of Rouffach, Bergheim, Eguisheim, Wettolsheim and Turckheim formed a network across the Colmar area.

The Roman room is organised around the Bergheim mosaic in the centre. All around it, a fine series of stone works (stelae, an altar and statues) is arranged on three walls, along with two themed display cases providing an overview of Gallo-Roman civilisation in the Colmar region.

The Bergheim mosaic



Bergheim mosaic, 3rd century AD, tesserae of marble and coloured stone, Bergheim (Haut-Rhin), “Bockenbruck”, chance discovery, 1848

The discovery of a large mosaic in Bergheim in 1848 and the need to find a place in which to preserve it led to the Unterlinden convent’s rescue from its planned partial demolition. After initially being displayed in the chapel choir, it was

installed in this room in 1974.

Even though only an eighth of its original surface survives, this polychrome mosaic resembling an ornately decorated carpet is still a fine example of the art of flooring that was so characteristic of Roman villas. A two-stranded plait surrounds a complex composition based principally on geometric motifs, but also including some figurative motifs. Nine circles inside four-lobed squares alternate with eight squares contained in curved quadrilaterals and eighteen small concave-sided squares; all these motifs are also edged with interlacing motifs formed from two strands. The density of the decoration is characteristic of the workshops of the Trier region in the 3rd century AD.

Collections of stone works



Gaul in combat, low relief, 2nd – early 3rd century AD, sandstone, Biesheim, chance discovery, 1770

Gallo-Roman stelae were carved from sandstone, which is the main local material. A significant proportion of them were found at the ancient site of Horbourg, where they had been reused in later buildings. The very expressive low relief of a Celtic warrior from Biesheim “Oedenbourg” is one of the most remarkable pieces in the room, along with an altar dedicated to Jupiter from Mittelwihr.

Two display cases

The first is devoted to the numerous finds unearthed in the Gallo-Roman settlement of Horbourg over the years, since the first discoveries made by the clergyman A.E. Herrensneider in the 19th century. The intermittent excavations carried out during the 20th century under Charles Bonnet and the recent excavations undertaken by various preventative archaeology teams have completed the picture of a small settlement (or *vicus*) located on the frontiers of the Roman Empire.

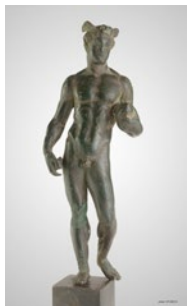
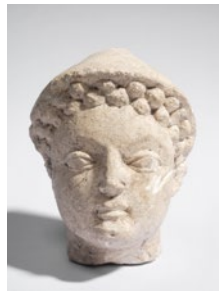
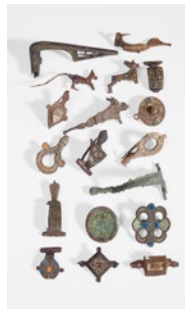


Figure of Mercury, Early 2nd century AD, copper alloy, Turckheim (Haut-Rhin), "Thalweg", chance discovery, 1811

The second display case is thematic, illustrating everyday life in Alsace in the Roman era, through objects from sites within the region. The themes include tableware in all its forms (ceramics, glass, bronze), religion, with statuettes of deities, including a very fine figure of Mercury in bronze discovered in Turckheim, a limestone head of a dadophor (one of the torch-bearer companions of the god Mithras) and a bronze serpent from the Mithraeum* of Biesheim, jewellery, including a major collection of fibulae and rings, oil lamps; tools; millstones, and finally construction materials (tiles).



Head of a dadophor, 2nd century AD, limestone, Biesheim (Haut-Rhin) "Oedenbourg", excavation, 1973–74



Selection of fibulae discovered in Alsace, 1st – 2nd century AD, copper alloy

Fibula: accessory used as a clasp to fasten a garment, but also as a decorative item.

Mithraeum: sanctuary devoted to the worship of Mithras, a god of Near Eastern origin