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# Eighteen new pieces from the late Roman silver treasure of Kaiseraugst: first notice

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From January 23 to March 7, 1999, a remarkable group of 18 Roman silver plates — all of them unrestored, some badly damaged — was placed on exhibition at the Art Gallery (Aargauer Kunsthhaus) at Aarau, Switzerland. The items had never been on show before. It was only in the summer of 1995 that they had been handed over to the Archaeological Service of the Kanton Aargau as being part of the famous late Roman silver treasure from Kaiseraugst. The purpose was to show the public what this totally unexpected new group looks like before any restoration or scholarly work was begun. As extensive publicity was not possible during the exhibition, this preliminary report is intended to present the new material to a wider section of the scholarly public without anticipating the results of any research to be undertaken in the near future.<sup>1</sup> One very promising source of information, for example, are the countless graffiti on the new plates, which will be dealt with by specialists.

At a moment hopefully not too distant, both the old and the new parts of the Kaiseraugst treasure will be on display in the Römermuseum Augst.

## Brief history of the discovery in 1961/62

On December 27, 1961, a bulldozer working on a muddy area within the Roman *Castrum Rauracense* at Kaiseraugst (c.10 km east of Basel) unearthed one of the biggest late Roman silver treasures to have been discovered in modern times. The discovery itself over the winter of 1961/62 was a kind of detective story — to be continued, as it turns out, 35 years later. What is true for many extraordinary finds is even more true for the Kaiseraugst treasure: the “story is a complex and obscure one”.<sup>2</sup> Thus it is unfortunate that many questions concerning the concealment of the treasure in antiquity and its rediscovery in modern times will remain unanswered.

The operator of the bulldozer must have struck the cache of silver tableware and other valuable objects, which had probably been stored away in a wooden crate. Not realising what was happening, he scattered most of the objects, all covered by mud and earth, in an area of c.200 square meters. A few items had already been carried to a dump some kilometers away. The actual discovery of the treasure began on February 19, 1962. That was the day on which an alert member of the public from Basel, who had on the day before been for a walk through the *Castrum*, showed the big silver plate (no. 57<sup>3</sup>) which he had found to R. Laur-Belart, then in charge of the excavations at the Roman site of Augusta Raurica. They both went back to the find-spot of the plate, hoping that there might be more around. The owner of the nearby restaurant joined them, bringing 5 more silver plates (nos. 55, 56, 58, 60, 62), which she had picked up and stored away a month before. Gradually more and more items appeared: a schoolboy had taken home the Achilles dish (no. 63); the Ariadne dish (no. 61) was recovered from a rubbish pit; and the dump proved to hold three deep bowls (nos. 41, 51, 52) and a fish plate (no. 53).

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2 C. Johns, “Research on Roman silver plate,” *JRA* 3 (1990) 33.

3 Object numbers from 1 to 69 refer to the items published 1984 in the monograph (H. A. Cahn and A. Kaufmann-Heinimann [edd.], *Der spätrömische Silberschatz von Kaiseraugst* [Derendingen 1984]); the items that made their re-appearance in 1995 bear the provisional numbers 101 to 118.