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**Between mountains and frontiers: the Roman settlement system in the provinces of Germania Superior, Raetia and Noricum**  
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## General introduction

### The aims of this book

*'We urgently need a complete list of cities in various provinces, arranged according to the chronological order of their existence as cities'*.<sup>1</sup> This statement written by M. Rostovtzeff dates back almost a century and can be considered as an early call closely related to the aspirations striven for in this monograph. The aim of this work is to present an overview of the Roman towns in several Roman provinces, more specifically in Germania Superior, Raetia and Noricum. Since these provinces' southern and internal land consisted of the Alps and the Alpine Forelands, the entire region will generally be referred to as the 'the northern Alpine region'.

Instead of providing a single definition of 'town' and applying this to the region-specific settlement systems of the three provinces under investigation, my inquiries into the 'urban' systems of these regions is informed by multiple approaches to 'urbanness', such as definitions based on juridical status, on monumentality and public infrastructure or on central-place functions performed by various types of settlement. As a consequence, this research involves more than only the official Roman towns and also comprises a broad spectrum of other centres with 'town-like' characteristics (Fig. A). To put it differently, the main focus of this book is the pursuit of a functional understanding of various segments of the Roman settlement systems of Germania Superior, Raetia and Noricum rather than an attempt to establish which components of this system were 'urban' rather than 'rural'.<sup>2</sup>

While the inquiries which will be undertaken in this book are bounded geographically, the scope of my investigations is also determined by the quality of the available research and by my personal interests and aspirations. Chronologically, this monograph picks up the development of centres in the region just before the time of the Roman conquest and tries to follow the evolution of its settlement systems through the three subsequent centuries. The middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century is taken as the closing date for this research. This was a period of increased instability which led to a drastic reconfiguration of the so-called limes and to major administrative changes, such as new administrative divisions introduced by Diocletian. The time frame of this thesis is thus set between the Late Iron Age and AD 260.

The first part of my investigations will focus on the transformation of regional settlement systems in the wake of the Roman conquest. What did the Late Iron Age settlement system look like? What impact did the Roman conquest have on the continuity of centres? What political and administrative decisions were made by the Roman rulers to control the conquered territories?

As a next step we will take a closer look at the process of 'municipalisation' in the three provinces. Communities were granted different levels of autonomy, expressed by a municipal status, such as *colonia*, *municipium* or *civitas*. Each of these statuses gave these communities a degree of self-government. My principal aim will be to trace the development and role of these self-governing towns in the northern Alpine region and that within the lines of the Roman administration. This involves questions such as 'What did it mean to be a self-governing community?', or 'Which places in the northern Alpine region gained a municipal status and why?'

Following this discussion of self-governing cities and communities, an attempt will be made to gain a better understanding of the settlement systems of the three provinces by examining a variety of Roman centres which were administratively subordinated to self-governing cities or located in the

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<sup>1</sup> Rostovtzeff 1957, 83.

<sup>2</sup> The research presented was conducted as a PhD project which ran from 2013 until 2018 and was hosted by the University of Leiden (the Netherlands). For more information see: Website: Empire of 2000 Cities.

territories of these cities. Unlike my investigation of the self-governing communities of the northern Alpine region, my investigation of secondary ‘town-like’ places will rely almost exclusively on archaeological evidence.

A separate chapter will be devoted to public buildings and infrastructure typical of Roman urban contexts. In what types of settlements do we find prestigious edifices, such as spectacle buildings, *fora*, aqueducts or bath complexes? Is there a relation to be found between the various juridical statuses Roman settlements might have and the array of public buildings that we find in these places? And what does the presence of such buildings tell us about the wider settlement system?

I will conclude my investigations into various aspects of the ‘urban’ systems of the northern Alpine region by providing a broader analysis of these systems. Where were places with ‘urban’ or ‘central - place’ functions located and how did these centres relate to the landscape, to each other and to their hinterlands? What can be said about the role of urban centres for the rural habitations surrounding them? Finally, what can be said about the settlement system of the Roman period in the northern Alpine region in general?

The theme of the final chapter concerns the remnants of the towns and town-like settlements of the Roman period and the ways they are managed today as heritage. Since the investigation of archaeological remains as well their preservation and meaning are heavily dependent on the societal experience of heritage, this chapter aims to investigate how these remains are taken care of and by whom? This involves further questions such as ‘How are these elements of the past presented to the wider society and used by it?’ and ‘To what extent does the story about Roman cities as it is communicated to the general public correspond to what is debated within the academic world?’.

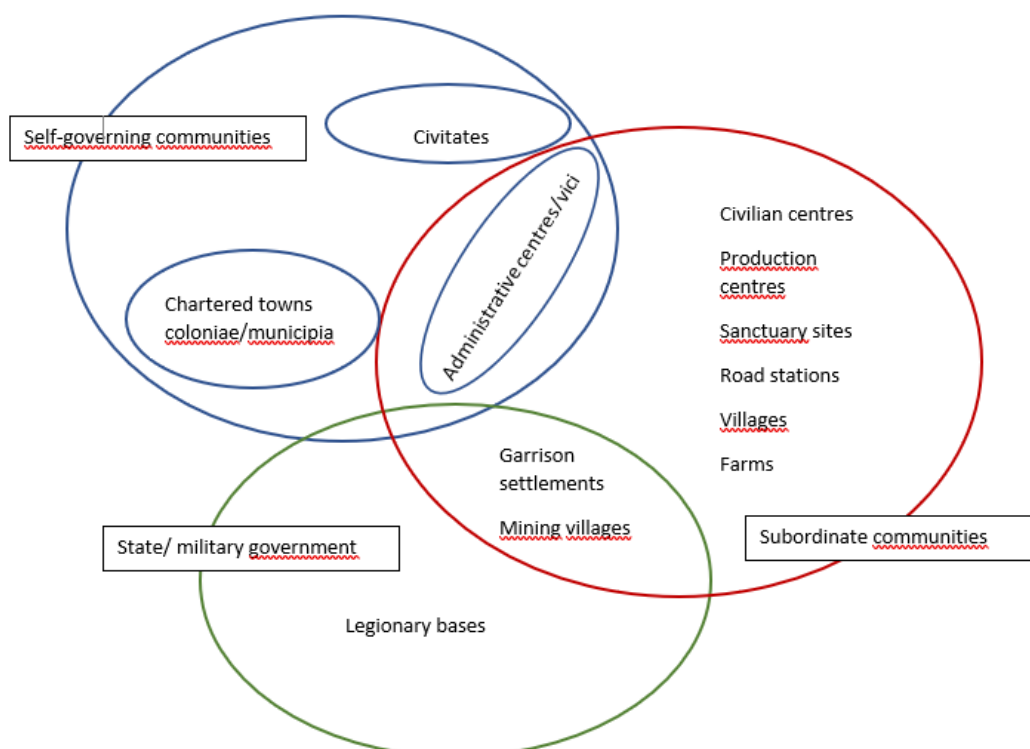


Fig. A: Diagram of different type of Roman settlements

## Sources and methodological problems

Despite the fact that research on the Roman period in the northern Alpine region has been characterised by a strong military viewpoint, the theme of urbanism is not new to the regional scholarship. The continuing fieldwork has resulted in many publications which are directly or indirectly related to the central topic of this book. Nevertheless, no monograph has so far been published that considers the three provinces of Germania Superior, Raetia and Noricum as one study area. All too often, the region has been (partly) integrated in studies concerning Roman Gaul or the Balkan region. The provinces have also been studied separately, as is illustrated by the following publications: M. Klee (2013) *Germania Superior: Eine römische Provinz in Frankreich, Deutschland und der Schweiz*; G. Alföldy (1974) *Noricum*, T. Fischer (2002) *Orbis Provinciarum Noricum*, or M. Šašel Kos and P. Scherrer (2002), *The Autonomous Towns in Noricum and Pannonia*. The study of the Roman period is furthermore embedded in a very regionally orientated tradition, often focused on developments of specific (modern) regions or countries. The serials of *Die Römer in [...]* are a perfect illustration of this.<sup>3</sup> Many new discoveries have been published in regional journals, such as the *Jahrbuch des Römisch-Germanischen Zentralmuseums Mainz*; *Jahrbuch des Oberösterreichischen Musealvereines* or the *Bonner Jahrbuch*, to name but a few. The proceedings of workshops and conferences often contain important contributions to various questions concerning specific aspects of the Roman period and its settlement pattern, such as the papers in the volume *Ländliche Besiedlung und Landwirtschaft in den Rhein-Donau-Provinzen der römischen Reiches*, edited by Schwarz and Weithmann, those in *Neue Forschungen zu zivilen Kleinsiedlungen (vici) in den römischen Nordwest-Provinzen*, edited by Heising, and those in *Römische Landnutzung in der Eifel. Neue Ausgrabungen und Forschungen*, edited by Grünewald and Wenzel. In brief, there is more than enough information available to improve our insights into the problems and questions that will concern us in this monograph.

This is not to say that the archaeological remains relating to the Roman towns and town-like places of the northern Alpine regions is always easily accessible or that the interpretation of these remains is unproblematic. A relatively high number of Roman towns have been overbuilt by later structures from the Medieval up to modern times, making it difficult to locate key buildings and to reconstruct town plans. The problems surrounding the location of the *forum* of the Roman town of *Iuvavum*, currently buried somewhere underneath the centre of modern Salzburg (Austria), are a typical illustration. Many 'gaps' in the reconstruction of the Roman town have been proposed as possible location but despite many attempts no consensus has been reached.<sup>4</sup> Sometimes our knowledge is unexpectedly extended by new discoveries, as happened when rescue excavations carried out at the Roman garrison settlement of Künzing in 2003 revealed the imprint of a wooden amphitheatre.<sup>5</sup> The application of more modern research methods, such as geophysical survey, has also contributed to new discoveries and to new insights into the nature and complexity of various settlement types. While many 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century excavations in the frontier region focused mainly on the forts themselves, new survey methods have brought to light the many (civilian) structures that surrounded these military installations.<sup>6</sup> The geophysical surveys carried out at the site of the garrison settlement of *Iciniacum* in Theilenhofen, for example, have revealed traces of a possible *forum* and even those

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<sup>3</sup> Filtzinger, Plack and Cremer 1976; Baatz and Herrmann 1982; Drack and Fellmann 1988; Cüppers 1990; Czysz 1995; Fischer 1999; Flutsch, Niffeler and Rossi 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Thüry 2014b, 307-318.

<sup>5</sup> Schmotz 2006

<sup>6</sup> Sulk 2011, 35-36.

of a theatre.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, geophysical surveys often do not reveal wooden constructions. Since perishable materials were often used to erect public buildings during the first decades following the Roman conquest, and also because not all areas in the northern Alpine region had easy access to good building stone, this most probably means that a considerable number of buildings remain undetected. The study of the Roman settlement system presented in this book is thus dependent on the current state of research.

### Geographical introduction to the northern Alpine region: the provinces

The Roman provinces of Germania Superior, Raetia and Noricum overlap with parts of modern-day Austria, France, Germany, Liechtenstein, Slovenia and Switzerland (Fig. B). With their sizes of respectively 93,500 km<sup>2</sup>, 80,000 km<sup>2</sup> and 62,000 km<sup>2</sup>, they formed some of the Empire's smallest provinces.<sup>8</sup>

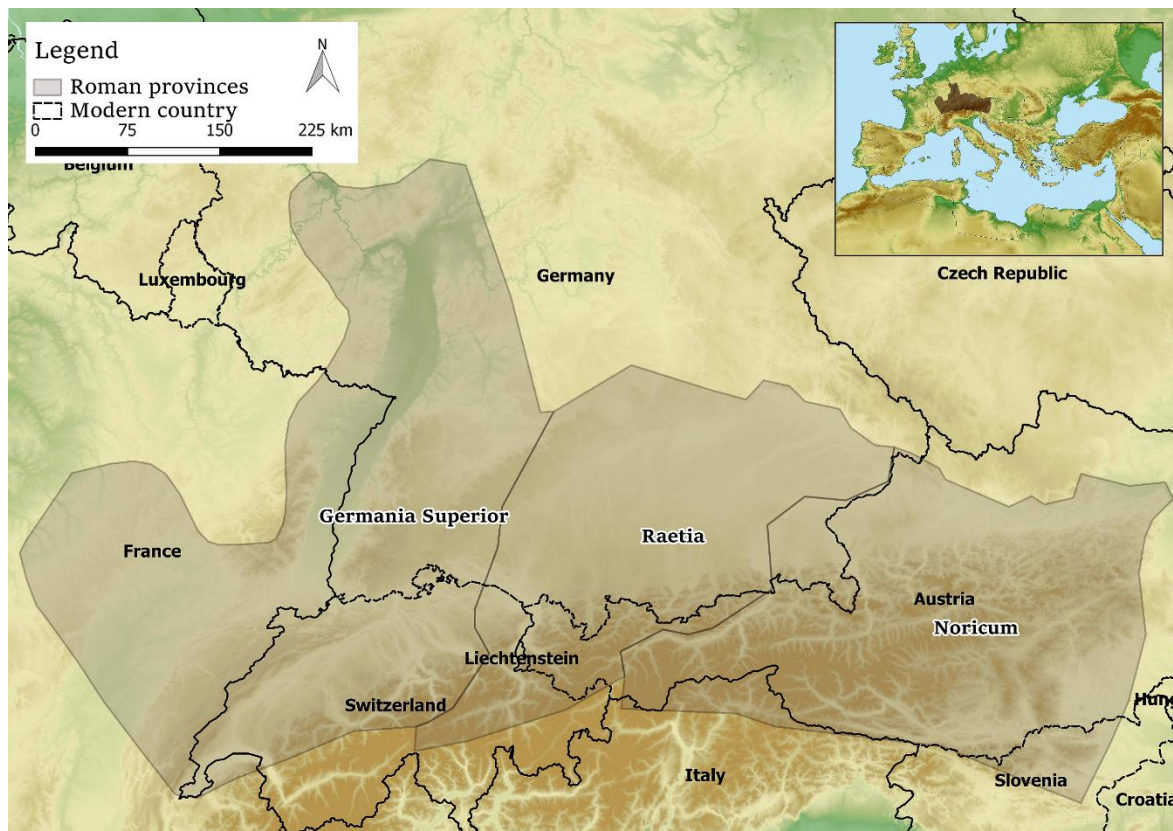


Fig. B: The modern countries within the study area of the northern Alpine region

The province of Germania Superior (Upper Germany) gained its final dimensions under the reign of Domitian in the late 1<sup>st</sup> century AD and was the biggest of the three Roman provinces that are of interest here. This Roman province stretched out over several modern countries and subregions (Fig. C). In the south-west, Germania Superior covered parts of what is now modern north-east France, including the Alsace region, Franche-Comté and a small part of Bourgogne. The south-east of the province also included north and central Switzerland, stretching from Geneva in the west to Uri and Sankt-Gallen in the east. The northern half of Germania Superior was located in modern Germany, stretching out over parts of the states (*Bundesländer*) of Baden-Württemberg, Bayern, Hessen and Rheinland-Pfalz. The province had a rather diverse landscape and relief (Fig. D). The southern most border of the province of Germania Superior was formed by one of the biggest lakes in the entire

<sup>7</sup> Mischka, Obmann and Henrich 2010

<sup>8</sup> Fischer 2002, 18.

northern Alpine region, today known as the Lake of Geneva, but in Roman times as *Lacus Lemannus*. More lakes characterised this southern part of the province, such as the lake by Neuchâtel located between the Alps and the Jura mountains. To the west of the Jura mountains, the Plateau of Langres marked the western border of the province. Since several significant rivers, such as the Aube, the Marne and the Saône rise here, this was a vital area for the region's connection with important contact networks involving the north-south route along the rivers Rhône and Saône. The western border of the province followed the Vosges, excluding the Plateau of Lorraine.

The central part of *Germania Superior* was dominated by the river Rhine flowing through the Upper Rhine Plain. The northern half of the province was characterised by even more river networks, including the Main, the Neckar or the confluents of the Moselle and the (Lower) Rhine at present-day Coblenz. The latter also determined the border with the province of *Germania Inferior*. Overtime these rivers played an important role in the alignment of the border between the Roman Empire and so-called *Barbaricum*. The frontier in Upper Germany reached its final extent around the mid 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD and was characterised by many forts and watch towers built at intervals along either man-made or natural defence works and included some of the streams mentioned earlier. From the border with *Germania Inferior* to the fort of Grosskrozenberg on the banks of the river Main, the border was formed by a land frontier consisting of a ditch and/or palissade. The Main river itself marked the border as far as Miltenberg where it again transferred into a land frontier till the fort of Lorch on the border with the province of Raetia (Fig. D).<sup>9</sup>

The province of Raetia shared its border with the province of *Germania Superior* in the west and the province of Noricum in the east. The southern part of the province stretched out into today's Swiss and Austrian Alps, including the Austrian region of Voralberg. Parts of the present-day German regions of Baden-Württemberg and Bayern belonged to the northern half of the Raetian province (Fig. E). The landscape in Raetia was characterised in the south by the high peaks of the Alps, reaching up to 2,000-3,000 metres and higher (Fig. F.). Lake Constance (*Bodensee*) formed the most important feature on the border with *Germania Superior* in the west.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore two major streams crossed the territory of Raetia: the river Lech ran from south to north joining the Danube just north of modern Augsburg, and the second river, the Danube, ran from west to east through the entire province. In the north-east, the territory of Raetia extended beyond this river. In that area north of the Danube, the landscape was characterised by the hills of the Swabian Jura (*Schwabische Alb*), with elevations up to 1,000 metres. The border in this particular part was also a land frontier. From the fort of Schirenhof, east of the border with *Germania Superior*, to just west of the military base of Regensburg, the frontier was demarcated by a palissade and ditch which were upgraded during the 2<sup>nd</sup> century with a stone wall.<sup>11</sup> To the east of Regensburg, the Danube marked the border of both the province of Raetia and of the Roman Empire.

The territory of the province of Noricum corresponds roughly with most regions of present-day Austria west of Vienna, including Ober- and Niederösterreich, Osttirol, Kärnten and Steiermark. A small area in the north-western part of the Roman province is today located in the German region of Bayern. In the Roman period, the area around the modern town of Celje in the northern region of Styria in Slovenia also belonged to the province of Noricum (Fig. E). Of the three provinces, the landscape in Noricum was probably most heavily dominated by the Alps (Fig. F). The mountain ranges came as far north as modern Salzburg and the Chiemsee. Most likely the river Inn demarcated the border between Raetia in the west and Noricum in the east; today it still functions as the boundary between Germany and Austria. The river Danube marked the northern edge of the

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<sup>9</sup> Website: Deutsche Limeskommission and Limes Congress.

<sup>10</sup> Konrad 2012, 22-23.

<sup>11</sup> Website: Deutsche Limeskommission and Limes Congress.

province and at the same time it again formed the Empire's frontier with military installations on its southern bank.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Konrad 2012, 23.

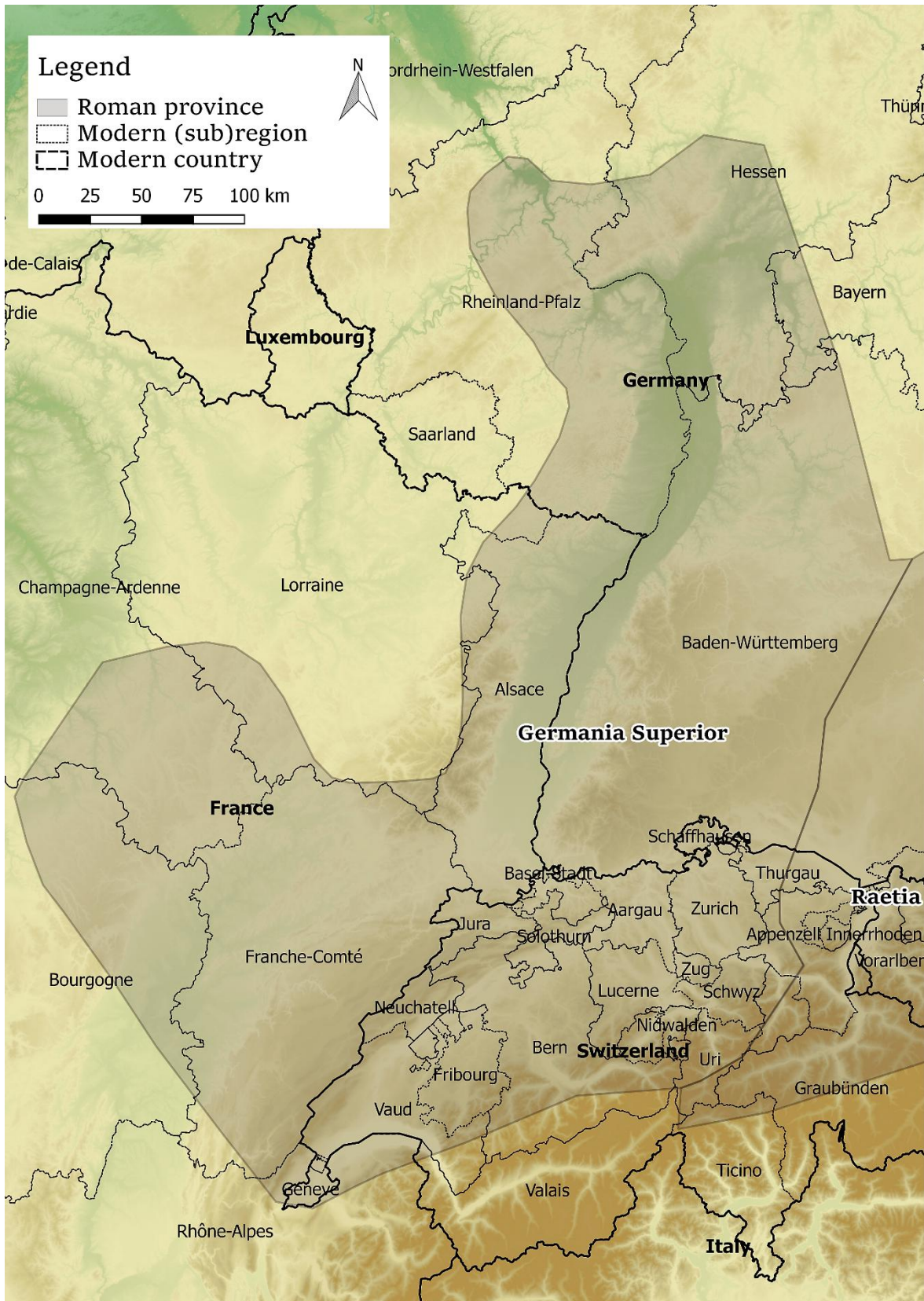


Fig. C: The modern countries and regions within the borders of Germania Superior

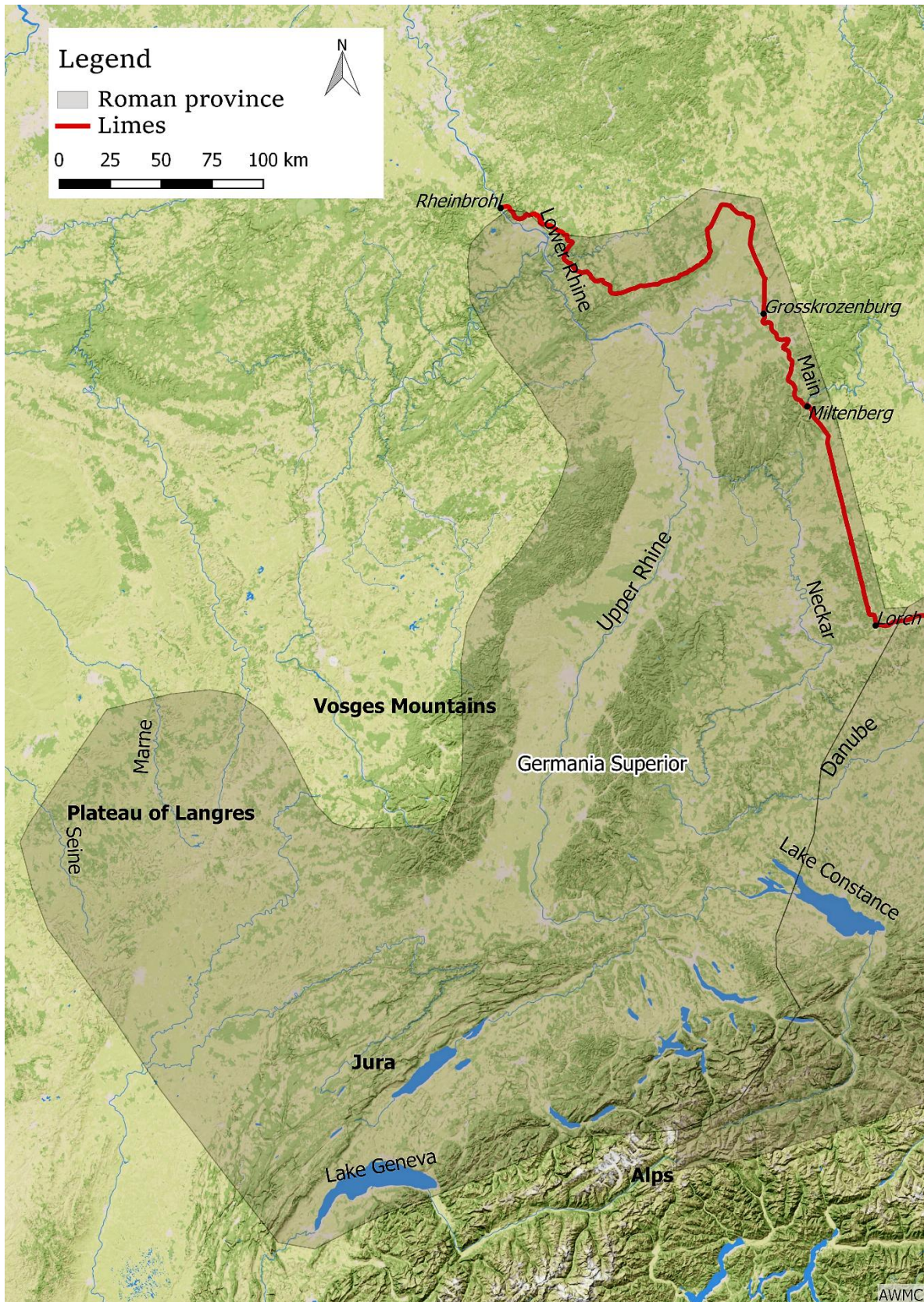


Fig. D: Landscape and relief features in Germania Superior

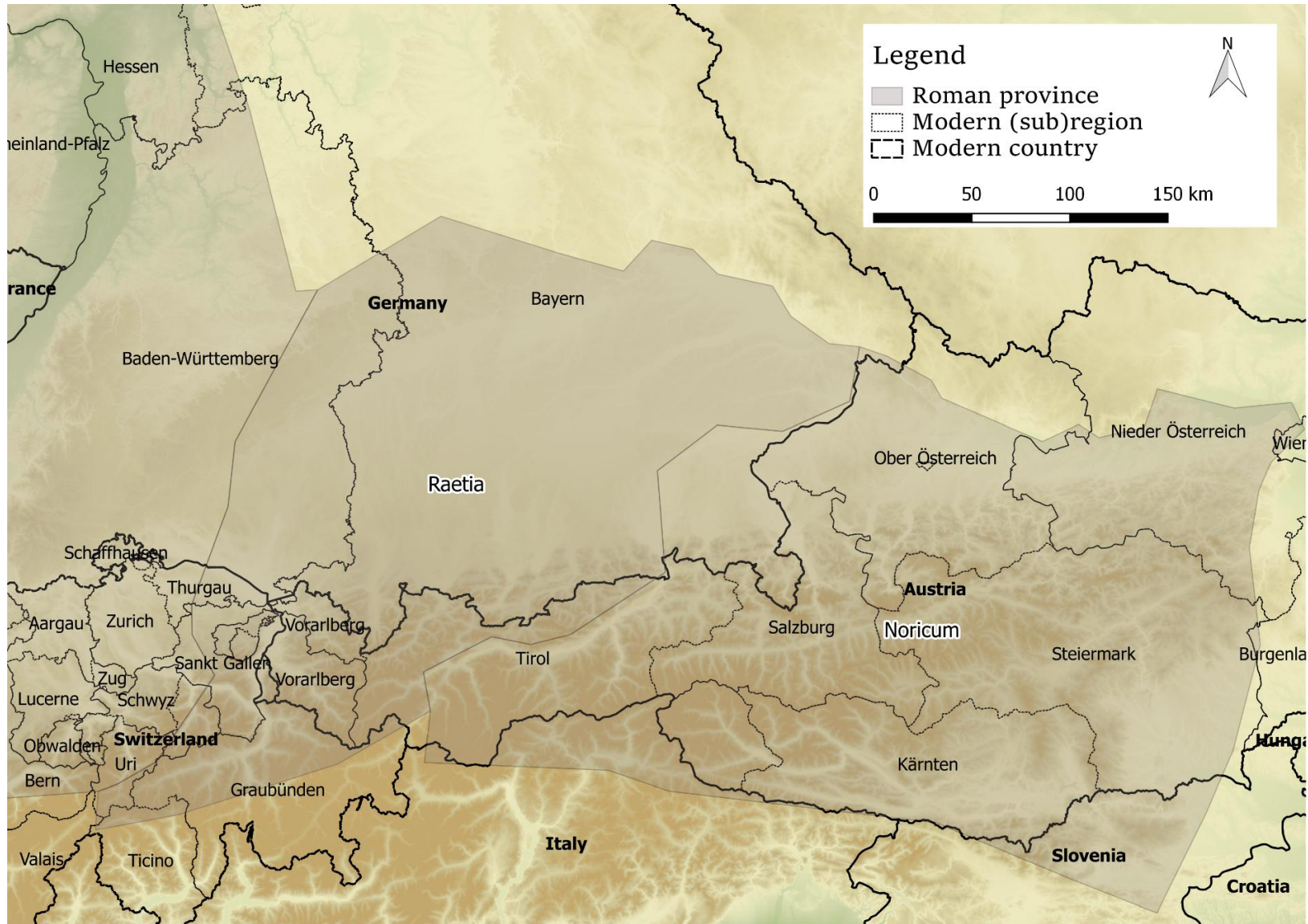


Fig. E: The modern countries and regions within the borders of Raetia and Noricum

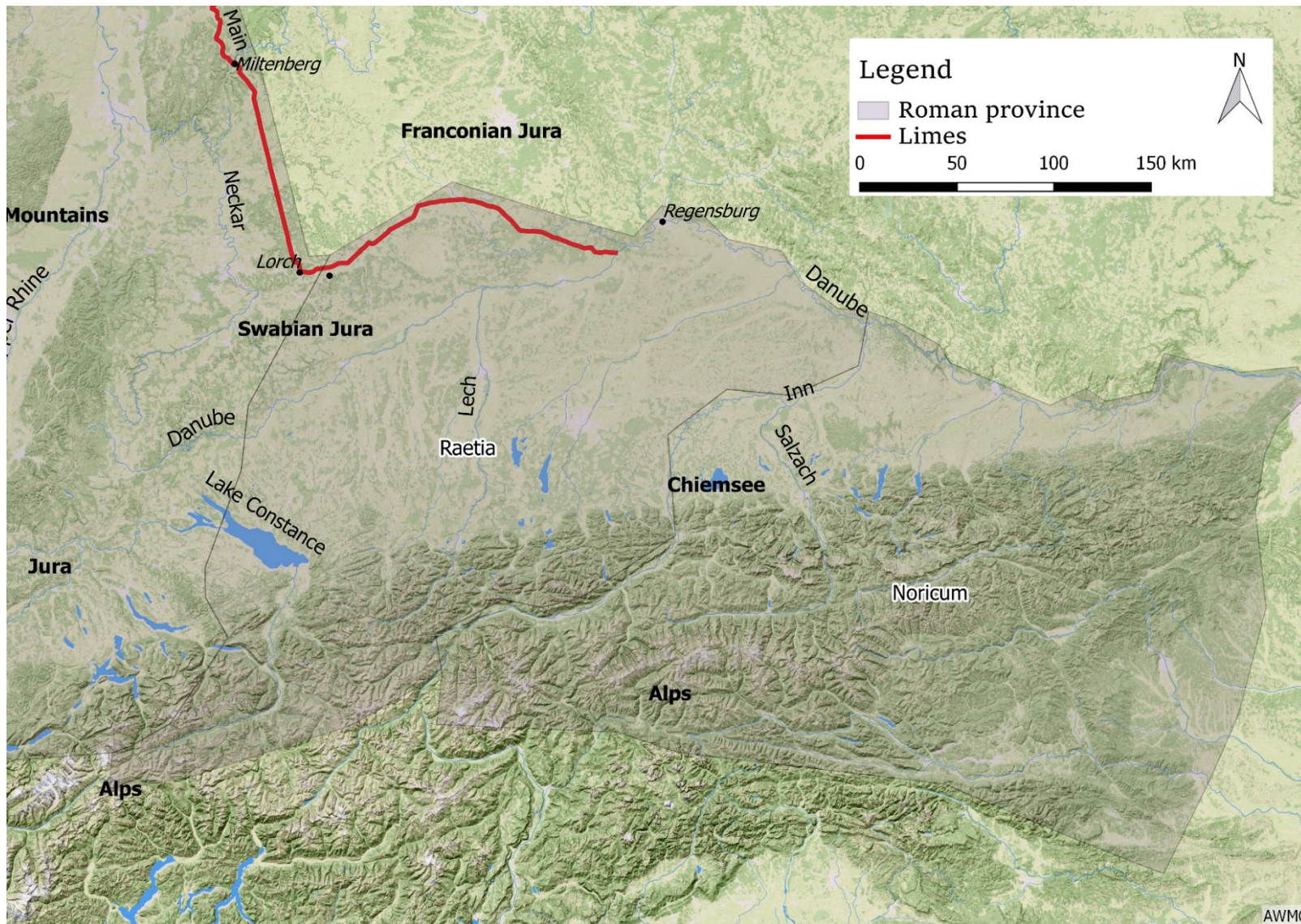


Fig. F: Landscape and relief features in Raetia and Noricum

## Access and climate

We know from various ancient sources, such as Polybius' *Histories* and Strabo's *Geography*, that the Alpine region was mainly perceived as a very inaccessible stretch of land. It was hard to force a way through the massive rocks and over the steep cliffs and in some places the roads were so narrow that they brought dizziness to travelers, human or animal.<sup>13</sup> Generally, there were only four ways to cross the Alps (Fig. G). One route crossed the territory of the *Ligures* in north-western Italy, and was located close to the Tyrrhenian Sea. It is also known as the Turbia Pass and might have been part of the *Via Julia* or *Via Aurelia*. A second one ran almost parallel with the first, but lay more to the north, close to or even similar to the St. Bernhard pass. The third pass was used by Hannibal and traversed the land of the *Taurini* who lived north of the river Po. The last route to cross the Alps was more centrally located and cut through the territory of the *Rhaeti*; today it is better known as the Brenner Pass. Both Polybius and Strabo considered the Alps more or less uninhabitable, with most of the area being depressing and barren, due to permanent frost and rugged soils. They concluded that it drove the inhabitants to invade other people's land, including Italy.<sup>14</sup> However, according to G. Patzelt, such descriptions are too coloured and subjective since the Romans had only the Mediterranean environment with which to compare it.<sup>15</sup>

The Alps are a relatively young mountain range and form a transition from the Mediterranean to temperate Europe. They provide the space for a diverse landscape both in a geological and a climatological sense. The western part of the Alps, for example, is geologically more pronounced, with higher mountain peaks. The northern area is influenced by the colder European mainland climate, while the southern region benefits from the warmer Mediterranean air. However, humans first inhabited the region as early as 6,500-5,500 BC. While a hunter-gatherer and later transhumance lifestyle dominated, it is assumed that in the more fertile southern areas of the Alps a sedimentary agricultural lifestyle developed. During the Roman period, there was an intensification of agricultural production. Because of improved farming techniques, more valleys and slopes were used for growing crops.<sup>16</sup>

The climate in the entire northern Alpine region during the Roman Imperial period is assumed to have been comparable with that of today. It is worth noting that there was a small increase in temperature (a maximum of one degree Celsius) during the first decades that followed the Roman conquest. Forestry, output and livestock are presumed to have continued between the pre-Roman and Roman period. The minor increase in temperature may have contributed though to the successful introduction of certain southern cultivations, such as herbs, grapes and other kind of fruit, into the area.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, this minor climate change cannot be seen as a driving force behind the rise and fall of the Roman rule in the region and its impact on urban development will have been negligible.

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<sup>13</sup> Strabo, *Geography* 4.6.

<sup>14</sup> Strabo, *Geography* 4.9-12.; Polybius *The Histories* 2.15 and 18; Livy, *History of Rome* 21, 32.

<sup>15</sup> Patzelt 1994, 7-9.

<sup>16</sup> Bätzing 2015, 48-57.

<sup>17</sup> Patzelt 1994, 7-9; Küster 1994, 31-33; Bätzing 2015, 48-57.

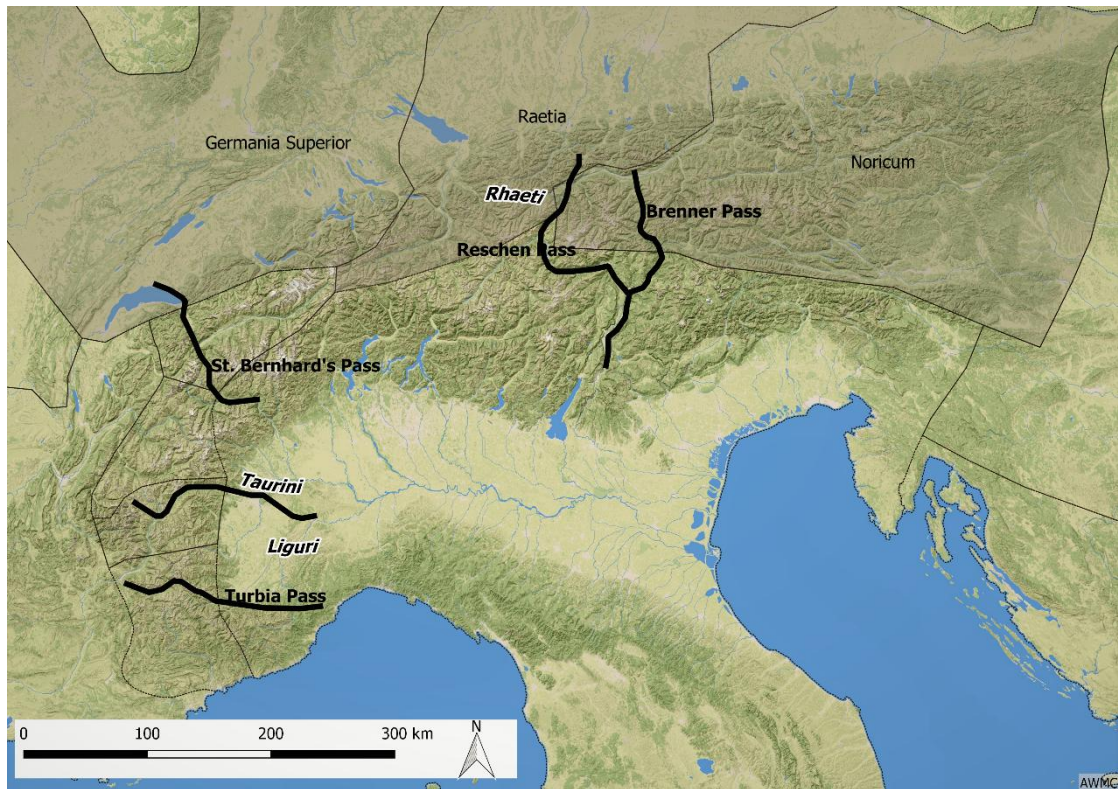


Fig. G: Rough situation of Alpine passes and Alpine tribes mentioned in the text