

**ROMAN TREASURES – buried and rediscovered**

21 November 2008 – 22 March 2009

Special exhibition in the Swiss National Museum, Zurich

## A WALK THROUGH THE EXHIBITION

### An Exploration of the Roman Gold Jewellery from Lunnern

The exhibition begins with an explanation of how a gold treasure was dramatically unearthed in Lunnern (canton of Zurich) in 1741. In early 1741, the chance discovery of a Roman bottle in the form of a monkey with an erect penis caused a sensation. Zurich's government decided to undertake further research. In the spring, Johann Georg Sulzer, the young vicar of Maschwanden, carried out excavations and discovered a Roman temple, a bathhouse and a cemetery. In Roman times, Lunnern had been a small town settlement, or "vicus". Further excavations were conducted in late autumn. On Friday 17 November 1741, Sulzer discovered 17 pieces of gold jewellery and 84 silver coins hidden in a wall recess in one of the houses.

#### **The gold jewellery and the painting of the excavations by Zurich painter Johann Balthasar Bullinger**

The gold jewellery is one of the most precious finds from the mid-3rd century AD. It consists of family jewels including both heirlooms and contemporary jewellery. There are children's necklaces, fashionable necklaces with pelta- and wheel-shaped clasps as well as ornamental discs and a snake-bracelet, which would have been worn by an older generation.

News of the sensational discovery reached Zurich within three days. Zurich painter Johann Balthasar Bullinger was commissioned to paint a picture of the excavation site. This unique picture shows a series of landscape views, excavation areas and archaeological finds.

#### **The Wasserkirche church as a museum and archaeology in the Age of Enlightenment.**

Following the presentation of the gold jewellery and the excavation painting, the focus shifts to the Age of Enlightenment, the era of discoveries. It was during this period that the "Kunstkammern", or chambers of art, and cabinets that are the forerunners of today's museums were created. One of them was in the Wasserkirche church, Zurich.

The Age of Enlightenment was an era of ground-breaking scientific research, with knowledge systematically collated into seminal works of academic literature, lexica and encyclopedias. Johann Georg Sulzer, who discovered the gold jewellery and who was later to become a professor of

philosophy and art theorist in Berlin, published a report of the excavations that was unique in that for the first time, the finds were precisely located and illustrated, and accompanied by detailed descriptions of archaeological structures.

### **The crisis of the Roman Empire**

The scene then abruptly changes, and a three-dimensional map of Europe transports visitors back to the world of the 3rd century AD. Why did the Roman inhabitants of Lunnern hide their gold jewellery? How was it that so many valuable items were buried during this period in the western part of the Roman Empire?

The 3rd century AD was a period of great crisis for the Roman Empire. Power struggles and a quick succession of emperors led to unrest and instability. There were frequent incursions into Roman territory at the frontiers of the powerful empire. Along the Rhine, numerous attacks were launched by the Germanic tribes, especially the Alamanni. Attempts to consolidate power consumed vast sums of money and further exacerbated an already precarious economic situation. It was a time of fear and insecurity.

### **Gold treasures buried and rediscovered**

That insecurity prompted many people to seek a safe haven for their valuables. They hoarded and concealed them in their houses or gardens, somewhere nearby or at holy places. Huge amounts of money, gold and silver jewellery, silver and bronze tableware were buried in Switzerland and the surrounding regions during the 3rd century AD. In many cases, the treasures buried centuries ago are only now being rediscovered by archaeologists.

Spectacular finds from Switzerland and abroad provide a graphic illustration of the importance of these hidden and buried treasures to cultural history. This is the first time that these treasures are exhibited together, and many have never been shown in Switzerland before.

### **The art of goldsmithing**

These finds are an important source of information about the historical and social situation in the 3rd century AD. For women, jewellery was an important sign of their cultural identity.

The items on display are testimony to the excellence of antique goldwork. The exhibition presents and explains some of the key techniques used by the goldsmiths of that time, some of which are still practised today.

### **The lootings**

The concluding part of the exhibition features a re-creation and a brief text highlighting the modern-day problem of looting. When treasures are illegally removed from their places of burial, the history that surrounds them is lost forever.