



Historical fact sheets

« Geneva from the Roman Empire to the Reformation »

Inventaire des monuments d'art et d'histoire du canton de Genève

2nd century BC to 3rd century AD

The Allobrogian fortified settlement of Geneva was conquered by the Romans as early as 120 BCE. The town and the bridge over the Rhone are first attested in 58 BCE at the time of Julius Caesar's Gallic campaign. The small Roman outpost, a dependency of the city of Vienne, was already a flourishing market town, and benefited from the busy boat trade on Lake Geneva and the Rhone. From the 1st to 4th centuries AD, a large edifice, probably an official building, was built close to the Cathedral's current location. Repeated raids and pillages by the Alamans during the latter half of the 3rd century probably helped change the course of Geneva's history, as the township was elevated to the status of a city during this time.

4th–5th century

Bolstered by state patronage, Christianity spread rapidly across the Roman Empire. The emperors Constantine and Licinius had tolerated the new religion in 313; as of 391, Theodosius began to actively oppose paganism. In Geneva, an episcopal cluster comprising places of worship and residential and administrative buildings was built around 380 on the location of the present cathedral. The first known bishop, Isaac (ca. 400), governed a diocese that soon extended to over 6800 km² and included Chamonix, Evian, Nyon, Gex, Seyssel, Rumilly and Annecy. During the barbarian invasions, in 443, the Burgundians took over Geneva. The city became one of the capitals of their new kingdom and developed rapidly even as the western Roman Empire was disappearing.

6th–11th century

In 534, the Franks annexed the kingdom of the Burgundians and set up new institutions. As of the 9th century, under the Carolingian kings, Geneva was governed by counts; it was later incorporated into the kingdom of Burgundy, founded in 888. The bishops surrounded themselves with a group of ecclesiastics (canons) who made up the cathedral chapter. The number of rural parishes in the diocese grew significantly: there were 453 by the end of the Middle Ages. The episcopal cluster underwent fundamental changes: in addition to the three places of worship and annexes built in the 4th–5th centuries, a large cathedral was erected in the 7th–8th centuries, which rapidly supplanted the secondary churches. In the year 1000, a monumental crypt was added and the choir extended. To the north, the bishop built a palatial dwelling, which was demolished only in 1840. Following the annexation of the kingdom of Burgundy, in 1032, Geneva became part of the Holy Roman Empire; the emperor was crowned king of Burgundy in the Cathedral of Saint-Pierre-aux-liens.



**SITE ARCHEO-
LOGIQUE**
CATHEDRALE
SAINT-PIERRE
GENEVE

12th–14th century

With the support of the papacy and the emperors, the bishops of Geneva managed to hold their own against the counts: they obtained governance of the city and in 1162 were awarded the rank of imperial princes. But their dominance over Geneva and its hinterland was vigorously contested by the surrounding noblemen: wars raged around the Lake of Geneva until the mid 14th century. The cathedral of Geneva was the theatre of battles, although the district was by then enclosed by a cathedral wall. In the end, the bishops were forced to accept the ascendancy of the House of Savoy over Geneva. Despite these conflicts, the city and its diocese flourished during this period: the city expanded, monasteries were built, as was the present cathedral (1160–1250), Geneva became a financial centre of international rank, and the diocese gained many abbeys, castles and fortified towns.

14th–15th century

The end of the wars marked the emergence of Geneva as a strong city sustained by its merchants and artisans. The citizens obtained a charter of franchise in 1387, and asserted themselves as a power to be reckoned with by the House of Savoy and the bishops, who were themselves subjects of the counts, later dukes, of Savoy. Furthermore, despite the onset of the plague, Geneva enjoyed a cultural and economic development that peaked in the 15th century. The Geneva fairs attracted French, German and Italian merchants and bankers; they contributed to the city's fame and the growth of its suburbs. Geneva also saw the development of a flourishing printing and publishing trade, and played host to many artists protected by the Dukes of Savoy, who hoped to establish Geneva as the capital of their duchy. The cathedral was embellished by the building, between 1397 and 1405, of the monumental Chapelle des Macchabées on the south side of the nave.

15th century – The Reformation

As of the 15th century, Geneva was rocked by several deep crises. Trade was affected by competition from the Lyon fairs, while the city came under threat from the Swiss Cantons opposed to the dukes of Savoy. The citizens of Geneva established close ties with Bern and Fribourg, claimed their independence, and entered the fight against the House of Savoy. This political conflict was soon made worse by a grave religious argument. Under the influence of German merchants and Bernese pastors, the Genevans were gradually won over to the ideas of Luther and Zwingli. In 1528, after a series of bloody tussles, the citizens reorganised the municipality's political institutions, ejected the House of Savoy and the bishop in 1529 and 1533 respectively, cancelled the Mass in 1535, and officially adopted the Protestant Reformation on 21 May 1536. A few years later, under the leadership of John Calvin, Geneva was recognised as the "citadel of the Protestant Reformation". The Cathedral became a Protestant church and was stripped of its interior furnishings and decorations. The seat of the Catholic diocese of Geneva was transferred to Annecy in 1568.