

THE URBAN LEGACY OF THE DUKES OF ZAEHRINGEN

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In the period following the fall of the Roman Empire in the 5th century, Europe entered the "Dark Ages," a time of small population change, very little trade, and almost no urban development. After 1000AD commercial and urban activity began to increase gradually. Among those mostly anonymous early medieval enterprisers was a family whose energy and creativity have left a legacy of urban development. This family was the Zaehringers, and over a period of less than 150 years they founded or influenced the development of 15 towns which formed a remarkable political and economic network in southwest Germany and what is now northern Switzerland. The continuing viability of these towns, all of which survive and most of which flourish, would seem to be the result of a good combination of location and plan. There could very well be lessons here of interest to contemporary urban planners and architects who today face problems of expanding populations and spreading urbanism. How this remarkable family developed these towns and the political environment in which they worked will be the theme of this paper.

In the late 10th century in southwest Germany, a family named Bertold is first noted. As of 1016 they were counts of Ortenau, an area of land between the Rhine and the east edge of the Black Forest, in what is today northern Baden. Count Bertold I, who ruled from 1024 to 1078, enlarged their holdings to include the Counties of Breisgau, Thurgau and Albgau, in this same area but to the south, in effect the area called Swabia, essentially the modern state of Baden-Wuerttemberg. In 1061, he was given the title of Duke of Carinthia (Kaernten in southeast Austria), but never got possession of it. At this time the family split into two branches. The margraves became counts of Breisgau and Ortenau. The ducal line acquired the family's possessions in Swabia and called themselves Dukes of Zaehringen after the name of a castle they started building in 1078, where the land starts to rise into the Black Forest east of the Rhine. The same year Bertold I died, and the castle was finished in about 1091, by his son Duke Bertold II.

At this time Henry IV was the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, which comprised Germany, northern Italy and Burgundy, the last of which was a much larger piece of eastern France than it is today. He came of age in 1065 and first put down revolts that had taken place, during his minority, in his duchies, especially in Saxony.

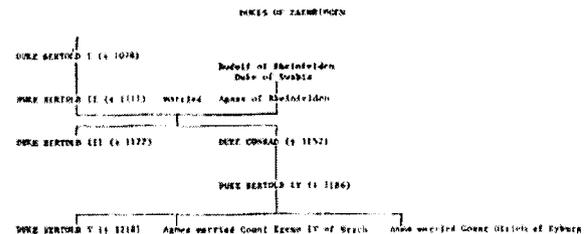


Fig. 1.

Then he turned his attention to his holdings in Italy and thereby ran into problems with the popes. Angered over Pope Gregory VII's refusal to allow him the power to invest German bishops, Henry called a Synod in Worms in January 1076. With the support of most of the Bishops of Germany he declared Gregory deposed. Then Gregory declared Henry deposed, and excommunicated for good measure. This brought about a civil war, and after that the turmoil in the Empire through the rest of the century provided opportunities for the local rulers to take initiative, sometimes with imperial support to try for stability. In 1098 Henry IV created for the Zaehringen dukes a Swabian dukedom of Zurich, but the city itself was then ruled by the Counts of Lenzburg.

It was during this time that the Zaehringers started their town building with the founding of Offenburg, just southeast of and across the Rhine from the city of Strasbourg, and at the head of an important road running southeast through the Black Forest. This road they wanted to control for political and economic reasons. South of it there was not another good road through the forest and across the mountain range before reaching the bend of the Rhine at Basel, the southern end of the Zaehringen's land at that time. Offenburg, which is first mentioned in 1101, was probably founded in the late 11th century by Duke Bertold II of Zaehringen, built on land which had belonged to the Abbey of Gengenbach, now under Zaehringer control.

Duke Bertold II was the son-in-law of Rudolf, Duke of Swabia, who was based in a castle at Rheinfelden on the south, or left bank of the Rhine, in what is now Switzerland. But Bertold "had succeeded in 1090 to the heritage of the extinct house of Rheinfelden, and with it obtained a firm foothold in Switzerland."¹

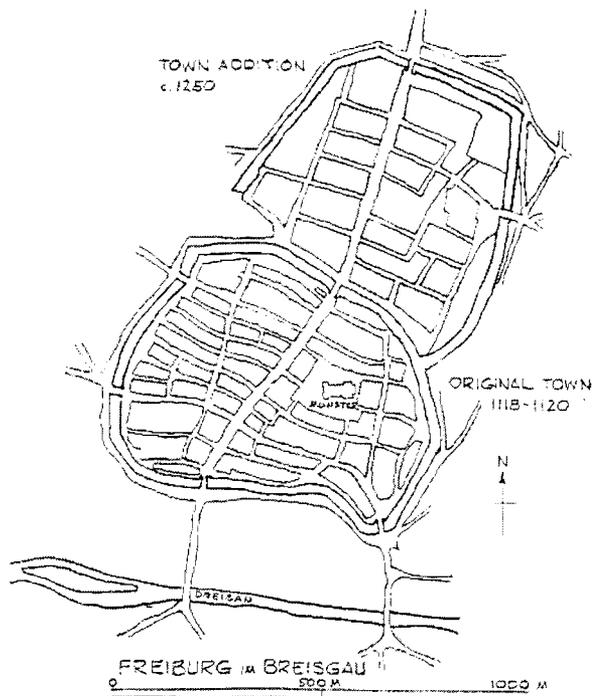


Fig. 2.

The Zaehringers then went on to develop their new holdings, combining a few earlier settlements into the town of Rheinfelden, with a market street leading to a Rhine bridge.

But the plan for which the Zaehringers become so well known is first developed in the founding of Freiburg im Breisgau, located just below their castle, in 1120. This town was the inspiration of Duke Bertold III, who died in 1122, and carried on by his brother Duke Conrad, who lived until 1152. The Dukes enticed merchants to settle in Freiburg by promising them "peace, security, and if necessary compensation for stolen goods out of their own pocket."² Each merchant could build his own house on a piece of land he was allotted, part of a systematic plan of rectangular blocks laid out to provide for buildings and open spaces. "Besides freedom from toll each citizen was assured of unrestricted right of inheritance, as well as use of pasture, streams, and forests."³ Systems were set up for settling disputes, and the citizens could choose their own bailiff and priest.

As the seat of craftsmen, traders, and merchants, its economic function was to exchange the agricultural products of the surrounding countryside for the goods produced in and imported to the town. Silver mining, and in the latter middle ages cutting and polishing precious stones, were the specialized industries carried on in the neighborhood or in the town.⁴

Freiburg is considered to be the most famous example of a market foundation in medieval times.⁵ It may also be a good illustration of the farsightedness of the Zaehringer



Fig. 3. Villingen, Germany. View north along market street toward gate.

family, and a clue to their long-range success. The principles of planning and market function which they developed for Freiburg they applied to later town plans.

Freiburg was laid out in a rough oval, about 1600 feet by 2000 feet, with a wide market street bisecting the oval across its narrower dimension. Running more or less at right angles to this market street were narrow cross streets, on which were built the houses. The city was walled in 1200 and had five gates. The more traditional market square, such as found in the later and more numerous "Bastides" built in France by the kings of France and England, was difficult to expand because it was surrounded by buildings. In contrast, the market street was remarkably flexible, allowing for systematic expansion having the advantage over a market square that it could be enlarged by extending it in length, which was done in Freiburg with a large addition to the north in the 13th century.

About this same time, the Zaehringers decided to anchor the east end of the road crossing the northern Black Forest from Offenburg, where it came to the edge of Wuerttemberg, by developing another new town. This town, Villingen, which is mentioned as early as 817, was under the control of Bertold, Count of Breisgau, ancestor of the Zaehringens, in 999, and he gave the town rights for markets, minting coins, and collecting customs duties. But around 1130 Duke Bertold III, the great-great-grandson of this count, began to rebuild the town into a rough oval with two main wide market streets intersecting each other in the middle, and extending to gates. "Thus the road and land policy of the Zaehringer was completed by the creation of the urban triangle: Offenburg, Villingen, Freiburg."⁶

To further stabilize the east end of the road from Offenburg, the Zaehringers refounded, or relocated, the ancient town of Rottweil, a few miles northeast of Villingen. The Romans had founded a castrum on this site about 73 AD, and Duke Conrad founded his new town in 1140 a little northwest of the Roman town. It was like Villingen, laid out in a rough oval, but with an extension to the west, giving the plan the shape of a blunt boat. The main part of the town also had two wide cross streets meeting at the center, three arms leading to gates, and the fourth, the north arm, ending against the side of a monastic church.

"...Rottweil was not founded at the crossing of two country roads, but rather as an architectural form consisting of two broad street spaces of which the more level north-south street is somewhat broader and should be considered the actual market space..."⁷

In 1152, Frederick I, known as Frederick Barbarossa, "Redbeard," became the first emperor of the Hohenstaufen dynasty. A previous emperor had made an agreement with the Pope that he would come to Rome with an army to put down an uprising of the Roman people, and go to war against Roger, the King of Sicily. Frederick felt obliged to carry through with this, as also it would mean that he would be crowned by the Pope, and he set off for Rome in late 1154 with a large army made up of his German princes and their troops. This expedition was almost a complete failure, although Frederick was quickly crowned by the pope, and then with what was left of his army returned to Germany within a year.

This experience convinced Frederick that he was going to have to rethink the way he ran the empire; that he could no longer rule by just traveling around visiting his princes, of which there was an ever increasing number. And specifically there was a touchy problem concerning who would rule Bavaria. One relative held the duchy, and another relative wanted it.

Frederick had in the meantime developed what one author calls the "Great Design," in which he would base himself in what is now southern Switzerland, (near St. Gotthard's pass) close to the sources of three rivers: the Rhine flowing north into Germany, the Rhone flowing southwest into the then-enormous Burgundy, and the Ticino, on the other side of the pass, flowing south into Italy.⁸ He really wanted to give his attention to Italy, which had so humiliated him on his expedition of 1155, and he believed this base near the Alps just north of Italy would provide him a strategic headquarters for the control of his empire. But first he needed to stabilize the situation in his German lands so that he could safely turn his back on them while he attended to his Italian problems.

Frederick took as the first step the reconciliation of the two claimants to Bavaria. He proposed to the holder of Bavaria that he relinquish control of it to the other claimant and in return the former would receive a newly formed duchy of Austria. But this wasn't all. This new duke of Austria would get an imperial charter. This duchy was not to be based on "odd remnants of tribal feeling or on an ill-defined conglomeration of rights and immunities such as other dukes had managed to collect in their hands over the centuries."⁹ This duke and his heirs would have almost complete sovereignty within a specifically bordered territory, and have many rights and privileges to go with it. The agreement was called the "privilegium minus" and was in effect the "magna carta" of the German territorial state.¹⁰ This was then the beginning of the modern territorial state in Germany. It was not Frederick's idea to create this; it came about with this charter, conceived by him to grant him some stability in his German lands. It developed that in the long run the rulers of these territorial states further weakened the authority of the emperor. But for the time being it provided the



Fig. 4.

basis for additional opportunities for the Zähringers.

Duke Bertold IV, having succeeded to the dukedom of Zähringen upon the death of his father Conrad, in 1152, the same year as the election of Frederick as emperor, had claims to upper Burgundy and Provence. Frederick accepted these claims in return for support from the family for his ill-fated expedition to Italy. This extended the Zähringers' holdings across the Rhine. They had also spread a bit east from the Black Forest into Wuerttemberg. In 1156 Frederick married Beatrice, the heiress of the free county of Burgundy; he wanted the Zähringers out of there, as well as out of Wuerttemberg. Bertold IV was convinced to accept something like this "privilegium minus" charter, although there is no text of the agreement preserved. He was to pull out of Burgundy, and pull back from Wuerttemberg to the Black Forest. In recompense he was to be given some further holdings in northern Switzerland. Bertold's new duchy was smaller than before, but had fixed borders, and privileges similar to those given the Duke of Austria. The Duke of Zähringen was quite content, and further development of the family's town building was now begun.

Frederick thereby established his control over Burgundy, which extended into what is now western, French speaking Switzerland. Duke Bertold IV founded Fribourg (in German, Freiburg, the same name as the earlier Freiburg im Breisgau) in 1157 and fortified it. This was at a southwest point of the Zähringen holdings, just at the German to French linguistic frontier, built on a ridge above a bend and a ford in the Sarine (Saane in German) river. The site was so narrow and precarious that the plan was necessarily adapted to these conditions. However, it still manages to have a wide market street running parallel to the ridge's axis. The overall effect is that it is the most dramatic setting of any of the Zähringen

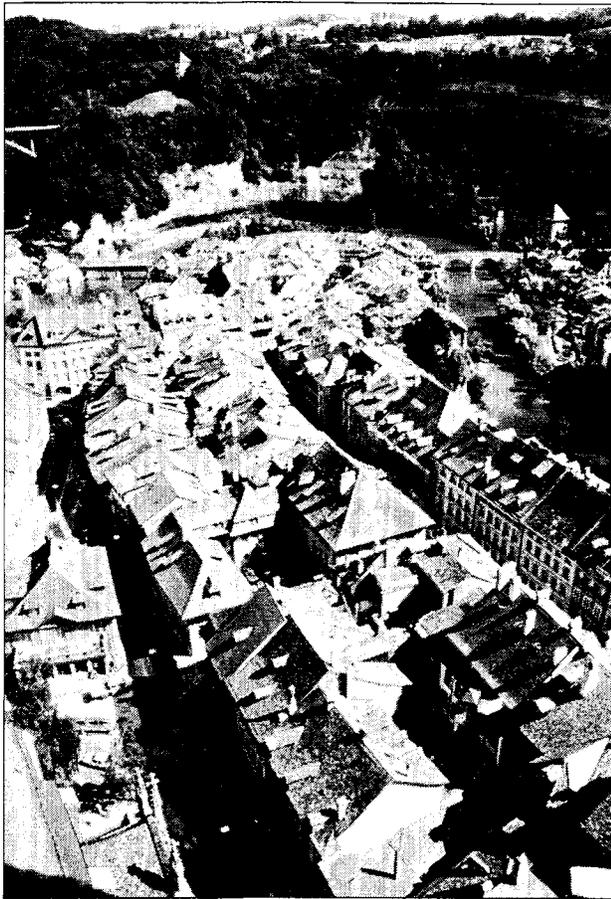


Fig. 5. Fribourg, Switzerland. View southeast from Cathedral tower over town.

towns.

The Swiss town of Burgdorf had its beginning with a castle built in the 7th century and then rebuilt in 1127 by Duke Conrad of Zähringen, near the beginnings of this family's involvement in Switzerland. But between 1170 and 1185 Duke Bertold IV enlarged it. The castle was again rebuilt about 1200 by his son, Duke Bertold V.

It was during this period of the development in Switzerland that the Zähringens founded their last town in Germany. This was Neuenburg, built between 1171 and 1181, located at an important crossing of the Rhine about midway between Freiburg and Basel. It is the Zähringen town which has thrived the least, and today has about 2000 inhabitants.

In contrast, Zurich, the great banking and business city of Switzerland, has thrived the most with about half a million population, and is by far the largest city growing from a Zähringen background. It is located where the Limmat river exits north from Lake Zurich, on its way to the Aare and then to the Rhine. The first settlements were in prehistoric times, and fell under Roman control in 58 BC. Its medieval development began in the mid-9th century when two convent churches were built there. It was imperial land, but held by the Counts of Lenzburg, who died out in 1172, when control of the city was given to Duke Bertold IV who greatly enlarged it. Zurich has grown and changed the most of all these Zähringer

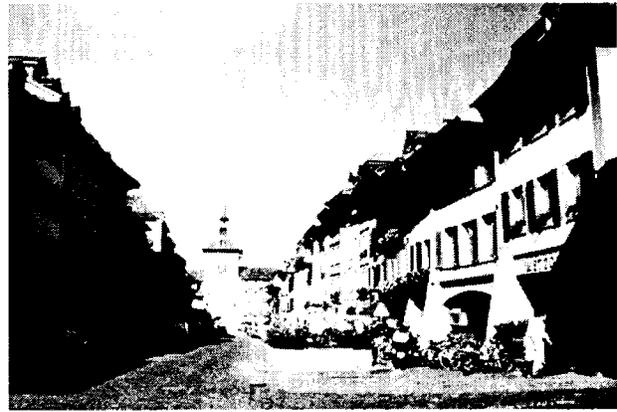


Fig. 6. Murten, Switzerland. View northeast along market street toward gate.

towns, and today the market street, which is parallel to the east side of the Limmat, is still to be found but has been narrowed over the years by later buildings.

To the southwest of Zurich, Murten is situated on a high hill looking down onto Lake Murten, in an area of once dense Roman settlements, and was first documented in 515. It became the Zähringen's property in 1156, and they founded the present town about 1179-91, making it the western-most location of any of their towns. It is the smallest of the Swiss towns but one of the most picturesque. It is almost a perfect rectangle with a central market street one hundred feet wide, and not more than one thousand feet long, showing very clearly and beautifully the strength of the Zähringer's ideas. The town was not walled until 1238, 20 years after the death of the Zähringens, and the lovely arcades may be later also.

Thun, to the southeast of Murten, is located on a prominent point where the Lake of Thun empties into the Aare river upstream from Bern. There is a small island in the river at this point where settlement first took place at least by 660. And adjacent to this on the right or northeast bank a castle was built up on the hill, called the Schlossberg. "Lords of Thun are first mentioned around 1150."¹¹ But beginning in 1186, the year Duke Bertold IV of Zähringen died, his son Count Bertold V took over the town, enlarged it and rebuilt the castle on the Schlossberg, which became the main Swiss residence of the family. There is on the island a long wide street called Baelliz, and a parallel if slightly narrower one called the Hauptgasse on the mainland beneath the castle. It is not clear which of these was the original market street.

The last town founded by the Zähringers, and in some ways the town most representative of their planning ideas, is Berne (Bern in German), built on a site perfectly suited to the basic market-street idea that the family had been developing for a century. The city is based on a long curved east-projecting peninsula made by a tight loop in the River Aare. Although there are Roman remains in the nearby countryside there seems to have been no building on this site until the construction of Nydegge Castle at the very tip from 1160 to 1191 when Duke Bertold V founded the town. The duke laid out a wide main street, starting from the Castle (which was dismantled 1266-72), running

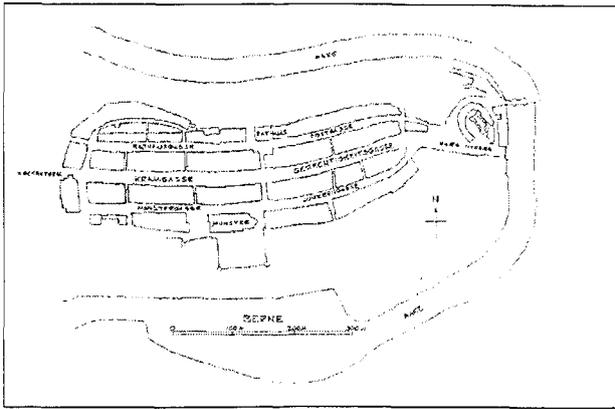


Fig. 7.

up the center of the peninsula, with a narrower parallel street on each side. The central street was for the market, the street to the south contains the cathedral (built 1421-1573) and its adjoining square, and the street to the north contains the city hall (1406-17). There are very few, and narrow, cross streets along this whole length. It would appear that the building of this first part of the city took the rest of the lifetime of Duke Bertold V, who died in 1218, because at the west end of this street a wall was built, and a combination gate and clocktower, the Zeitglockenturm was erected in its first form in 1218-20. The appropriateness of the plan to this site is shown by the fact that two extensions were made to the market street after the end of the Zaehringen dynasty, the first completed by about 1250, the second by about 1350. Since then the city has expanded even more to the west, and there is a street which is a further extension of these earlier streets, but the width is narrower. The original city was built largely of wood, then a great fire in 1405 destroyed most of it, and it was rebuilt in stone, with the arcades which exist today.

Three other towns in Germany, all located in or near the Zaehringen holdings, are worth noting because of the strong plan influences from that family. The most interesting is the hilltop town of Breisach overlooking the Rhine just west of Freiburg. Around 1185 Bertold V got some control over the town and apparently the rectangular residential portion was laid out at this time, and built a castle here. There is also a church on this promontory built from the 10th to the 15th centuries.

North of Breisach, but inland from the Rhine, is the town of Kenzingen. This town is first documented around 880. In the early 13th century it was held by the Lords of Uesenberg who were followers of the Zaehringers, and following their basic plan type founded this town in 1249.

The last town, Kirchheim unter Teck, is far off to the northeast, beyond the Zaehringen territories, but one that the Zaehringers had a hand in. Documented since 960, it fell to the Zaehringers about one hundred years later. After the death of Bertold V the property went to the Dukes of Teck.

With the death of Bertold V in 1218, whose only son had predeceased him, the Zaehringen family died out.



Fig. 8. Berne, Switzerland. View west along market street toward Zeitglockenturm.

Some of the holdings of this family reverted either to other noble families, as with Kirchheim, or to relations of the Zaehringers, such as Bertold V's two sisters: Agnes who had married the Count of Urach, and Anna who had married the Count of Kyburg. But these in-laws were not dukes and did not retain the privileges given to them by Frederick Barbarossa. Eventually most of the Zaehringen lands came under imperial control, and some became Free Imperial Cities, responsible directly to the Emperor, now Frederick II, grandson of Frederick Barbarossa. Frederick II also spent a lot of time fighting in Italy, and even died there in 1250. This was the end of the Hohenstaufen emperors.

This was also the end of the "Great Design" of Frederick Barbarossa. He had never created his base in Switzerland. And his efforts in Italy helped bring about the downfall of his dynasty. The French finally got Burgundy, and he had, unwittingly, formed the basis for the development of territorial states in Germany which made subsequent control by later emperors ever more difficult.

But the "great designs" of the Zaehringers have survived. Through a combination of factors, location and design probably being the most important, all their towns exist today. Their property was at a very significant crossroads in Europe. The river Rhine was the lifeline of this area, its connection with the north, with Holland and the open sea, and to the east, to Austria, and to the south to Italy. And the Zaehringens ended up with control of land on both sides of this river in its stretch before Basel where it turns north heading for the North Sea.

Also, there was not so much building in the 12th century as there would be later, and the number of inhabitants, the critical urban mass, it took to create a viable town was less than it would be in later centuries. In the 13th century many more towns were founded but many of them did not survive. There were not enough people to fill these later towns and make them work. Many of the "Bastides" have died out, and none have really grown. And one does not find historic evidence of such an extensive, coordinated development of urban centers by a single noble dynasty as the Zaehringers, who picked the right sites for their towns, spaced out so that each one could become a center for trade. Other factors

certainly affected their choices and actions.

...the 'Zaebringer Town' was not simply the scheme of the applied idea of a city planner, but rather something that developed in the course of time - under consideration of regional, topographical and functional conditions...¹²

Yet their town plans, perhaps not "invented" by them but certainly developed to a high degree of sophistication by them, provided the possibility for these towns to grow and thrive in the future. Natural and other conditions notwithstanding this is a remarkable application of human intelligence to the problems of expanding urbanization and commercial activity. And the fact that this took place eight centuries ago does not lessen its importance to us as an example of successful planning and building.

386

NOTES

- ¹ Theodor Mayer, "The State of the Dukes of Zaehringen," in *Medieval Germany 911-1250*, ed. Geoffrey Barraclough, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961), p. 181.
- ² Alfred Haverkamp, *Medieval Germany 1056-1273* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 177.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ E.A. Gutkind, *Urban Development in Central Europe*, vol.1 of *International History of Urban Development* (London: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1964), pp. 314-315.
- ⁵ Haverkamp, *Medieval*, p.177.
- ⁶ Mayer, *Dukes*, p. 190.
- ⁷ Karl Gruber, *Die Gestalt der Deutschen Stadt* (Muenchen: Verlag Georg D.W. Callwey, 1977). p. 61.
"Auch Rottweil ist nicht entstanden aus der Kreuzung zweier Landstrassen, sondern als architektonische Form, als Durchdringung zweier breiter Strassenraeume, von denen die horizontal liegende nordsuedliche Strasse etwas breiter und wohl als der eigentliche Marktraum zu betrachten ist..."
- ⁸ Peter Munz, *Frederick Barbarossa: A Study in Medieval Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), pp. 102-103.
- ⁹ Munz, *Barbarossa*, p. 106.
- ¹⁰ Munz, *Barbarossa*, p. 107.
- ¹¹ Rolf Hager, *The Zaehring New Towns* (Thun, Switzerland: J. Vettters Erben, 1966), p. 39.
- ¹² Hartmut Hofrichter, *Stadtbaugeschichte von der Antike bis zur Neuzeit* (Braunschweig: Vieweg, 1995), p. 57. "Dabei wird deutlich, dass die 'Zaehringstadt' nicht die als Schema anwendbare Idee eines Stadtgruenders gewesen sein kann, sondern sich erst im Laufe der Zeit - unter Beruecksichtigung regionaler, topographischer und funktionaler Gegebenheiten - entwickelt hat..."

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