



View of the historical centre of Bern from Schwellenmätteli across the River Aare. The mint, built in 1795, and Münzgraben ditch can be seen in the centre of the picture, the theology school (the so-called High School), established in 1528, is on the right edge.

Reuse of the area from the Reformation period onwards

The Reformation period in Bern from 1528 was not just an historical break. The confessional conflict, evidence of which can be seen in the Bernisches Historisches Museum and in the archaeological exhibition room on the cathedral platform, also had an impact on urban planning. The Franciscan friary, for instance, was dissolved and a theology school set up in the former monastery. The roots of Bern university, founded in 1834, can be traced back to this so-called High School. After the demolition of the monastic church, Herrengasse lane was extended towards the west and a cathedral mason’s lodge was constructed in 1535 in the former graveyard be-side the church. In the following centuries the building was altered several times.

In the period between 1788 and 1795, a new mint was es-tablished on the western edge of Gerberngraben, where Bern issued its own coins (kronen, batzen and kreuzer). They were the official currency for the territory of Bern, then the largest city-state north of the Alps. Because of its significance, the area became known from that time onwards as Münzgraben [coin ditch].

Creating new quarters in the city

In view of the rapid population growth, the urban residential area had to be further extended after 1850. Thanks to new construction techniques, the areas north and south of Casin-oplatz and the historical city centre became accessible for the first time in the late 19th century with the building of via-ducts. The construction of Kirchenfeld (1882/83) and Korn-haus bridges (1895-98) also created a transport axis running north – south through the city centre. The so-called slope vi-aduct, an arched construction built in 1883 along the eastern flank of Münzgraben terminated at the northern bridgehead of Kirchenfeldbrücke. Since 2004 the course of the viaduct can be traced in the archaeological exhibition room at Casi-no Carpark. A viaduct arch has also survived there.

Alteration work was carried out between 1935 and 1937 to simplify routing of the traffic across the slope viaduct to Kirchenfeldbrücke. For this purpose, a carpark was built in Münzgraben ditch, which was still open at that stage. A broad public thoroughfare was created above it. Because of the casino, built between 1906 and 1908 to the east of it, the square became known as Casinoplatz. The area was re-developed in 2004.



The archaeological exhibition room reinstalled in 2012 in Casino Car-park. A section of the medieval wall can be seen in the background.

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Casinoplatz

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Front cover: The archaeological excavation at Casinoplatz in Bern in 2002.

Picture credits: ADB: front cover and photograph of the ditch wall (Badri Redha); schematic cross section and ground plan of Casinoplatz (Eliane Schranz); photographs of coins (Markus Detmer); photograph of the archaeological exhibition room at Casino Carpark (Philippe Joner). – State Archive of Canton Bern: photograph of Münzgraben, FN Fotograf E N 1. – Kunstmuseum Bern: Christoph Rheiner, Bern vom Schwellenmätteli, 1815. A 6385, watercolour, 39,0 × 48,5 cm.

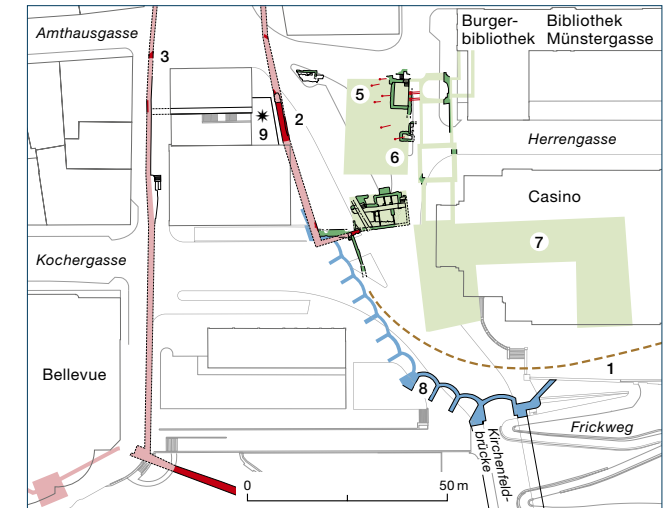
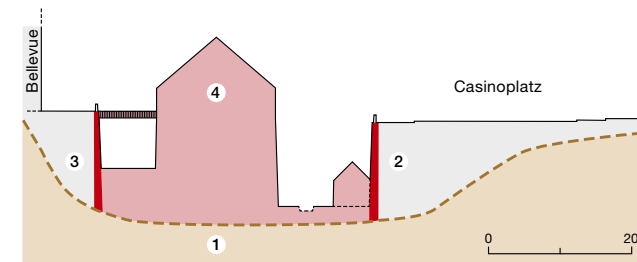


View of the channel, now called Münzgraben (prior to 1791 it was known as Gerberngraben), during construction of Casino Carpark in 1935–1937. The slope viaduct can be seen on the right-hand side and the tip of the Zytgloggen tower is visible behind it. The construction remains in the ditch were archaeologically examined in the course of alteration work carried out at Casino Carpark in 2002/03. This allowed archaeologists to safeguard important construction details pertaining to the UNESCO World Heritage Site “Old City of Berne”.



View of the late 12th century scarp during the archaeological examination (left).

Schematic cross section of Casinoplatz square prior to 1937 (below).



The archaeological remains beneath Casinoplatz square.

- 1 Original edge of the River Aare's post-Ice Age course
- 2/3 Medieval scarp and counter-scarp
- 4 Constructions in the former Gerberngraben (later Münzgraben)
- 5 Burials in the Franciscan graveyard
- 6 Wall remnants of the mason's lodge and later police station
- 7 “Hohe Schule” [High School], later the university
- 8 Slope viaduct
- * 9 Archaeological exhibition room

From a naturally formed ditch to a modern city square

Casinoplatz square in the centre of the Unesco World Heritage city of Bern is an important thoroughfare for traffic and pedestrians. However, the area has only served as such for the past one hundred years. The ground still contains archaeological evidence that tells of a varied history of construction. This is known not least because of a rescue excavation mounted in 2002/03 in advance of an extension to Casino Carpark.

The River Aare flows around an elongated remnant of a moraine, upon which the historical centre of the city is situated. The promontory is divided up by three former channels (old courses of the river). One of these, since infilled, runs beneath the axis of Casinoplatz–Theaterplatz–Kornhausplatz. When Duke Bertold V of Zähringen founded the city of Bern in 1191, its boundary was marked by the western city wall.

Once the city had extended further west, the deep channel was no longer outside the city wall but became an obstacle to inner-city traffic. It was therefore infilled, creating an open space with various potential uses. The same was later done with the ditches further to the west beneath the axes Bundesplatz–Bärenplatz–Waisenhausplatz and Kleine Schanze–Christoffelgasse–Bahnhofplatz–Bollwerk. They are still characteristic elements in the cityscape as sequences of empty spaces.



Obverse and reverse of a Bern krone issued between 1795 and 1798 by the mint on Münzgraben. Sc. 1:1.

Founding and fortification of the city

When Bern was founded in 1191, the builders utilised the natural riverchannel running along today's axis between Casinoplatz, Theaterplatz and Kornhausplatz as part of the city's defences outside its walls. The sides of the ditch, which rose to a height of 20 m, were secured by a scarp and a counter-scarp which also protected the slopes. The actual city wall was built just east of the scarp and the Zytgloggen tower served as its gate-tower. A bridge was built over the ditch.

The remains of the ashlar masonry from the metre-thick scarp were recorded during the 2002/03 rescue excavations on Casinoplatz square. A short section of the wall is now on display in the archaeological exhibition room at Casino Carpark. Besides the Lenbrunnen well near the city hall, it is one of just a few architectural remains from the founding period of Bern still accessible today.

A Franciscan friary and Gerberngraben

The town council established a Franciscan friary in what was the south-western corner of the planned town around 1250. It also had a church and a graveyard the remains of which were discovered on Casinoplatz square in 2002/03.

In 1255 the municipal area was for the first time extended west as far as today's Käfigturm tower. The ditch, which had been fortified at the time of the founding, was now located in the centre of the town.

In 1326 the council moved tanners to the fortified ditch, now rendered useless, and from then on it became known as Gerberngraben [tanners' ditch]. Tanning, i. e. making leather from the hides of slaughtered animals, created quite a stench. At the same time, however, it was the most important craft in the medieval city of Bern whose primary export commodity was leather. The tanners were also the first society of craftsmen to form their own guild.