

The Discovery of Lake Dwellings on the Lake of Zurich (1854)

C. W. Jeanneret, secretary of the Collège de La Chaux-de-Fonds, put together a book of texts for nine- to twelve-year-old students called *La patrie*, the fourth edition of which appeared in 1890 (figure 168).¹ In 1896, nine-year-old LC was handed this book as required reading. The discovery of lake dwellings is described under the title “Les habitations lacustres” as follows:

In 1854, Doctor Keller from Zurich noticed on the shore at Meilen some half-decayed *piles* and fragments of crude ceramic ware and stone axes that had been found buried in the sand where they had lain hidden for several thousands of years. From the presence of these findings he concluded that there once existed a settlement constructed *on top of pile-work*. As soon as the Zurich scientist had published this discovery, the shore areas of the rest of the Swiss Lakes were actively explored and traces of lake-dwelling settlements were discovered there as well; they were called *constructions lacustres* or *palafittes*.²

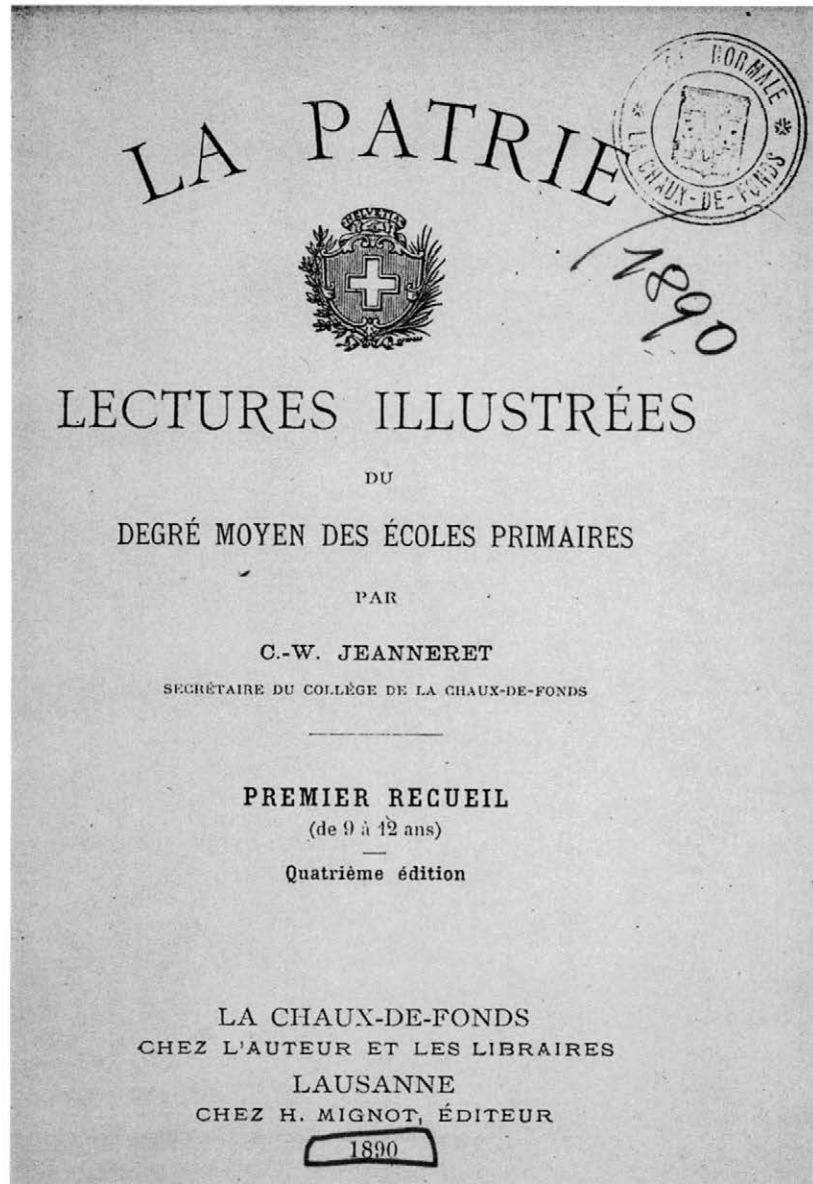
(En 1854, M. le docteur Keller, de Zurich, observa à Meilen, au bord du lac, des piquets à demi décomposés, des fragments de poterie grossière, des haches de pierre que l'on venait de retirer de la plage où ils étaient enfoncés depuis plusieurs milliers d'années. Il conclut de la présence de ces vestiges à l'existence ancienne d'habitations construites sur pilotis. Dès que le savant zurichois ont signalé cette découverte, les rives de nos lacs suisses furent explorées, et l'on découvrit les traces d'habitations semblables; on les nomma constructions lacustres ou palafittes.)

During the same year, Ferdinand Keller himself gave an account of the event. Probably no other text in the *Mitteilungen der Antiquarischen Gesellschaft in Zürich* ever created such a public stir and exploratory zeal and speculation as did his first report, entitled “Die keltischen Pfahlbauten in den Schweizerseen” (The Celtic Lake Dwellings in the Swiss Lakes).

In the second sentence of the preface Keller points out “the fact that, in the earliest epoch of dawning history, groups of families dwelt in huts which they had built not on dry land but on the shallow shoreline on top of *pile-work*.” He calls “this strange kind of settlement” also “pile-work habitations” or “dwellings on water.” In the main part of the report the circumstances of

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The title page of the elementary school textbook *La patrie*, which LC like all his schoolfellows encountered in class.



the finding are described in detail: “As a result of the exceptional drought and the continuing wave of cold weather during the winter months of 1853 and 1854, an unusual event occurred in the Alpine regions: the rivers shrank within their banks and the water level of the lakes sank considerably.” Thus, “on the shore of the Lake of Zurich came to light a settlement from the dawn of history that had been spotted in 1829 but could be examined more closely only recently.”³

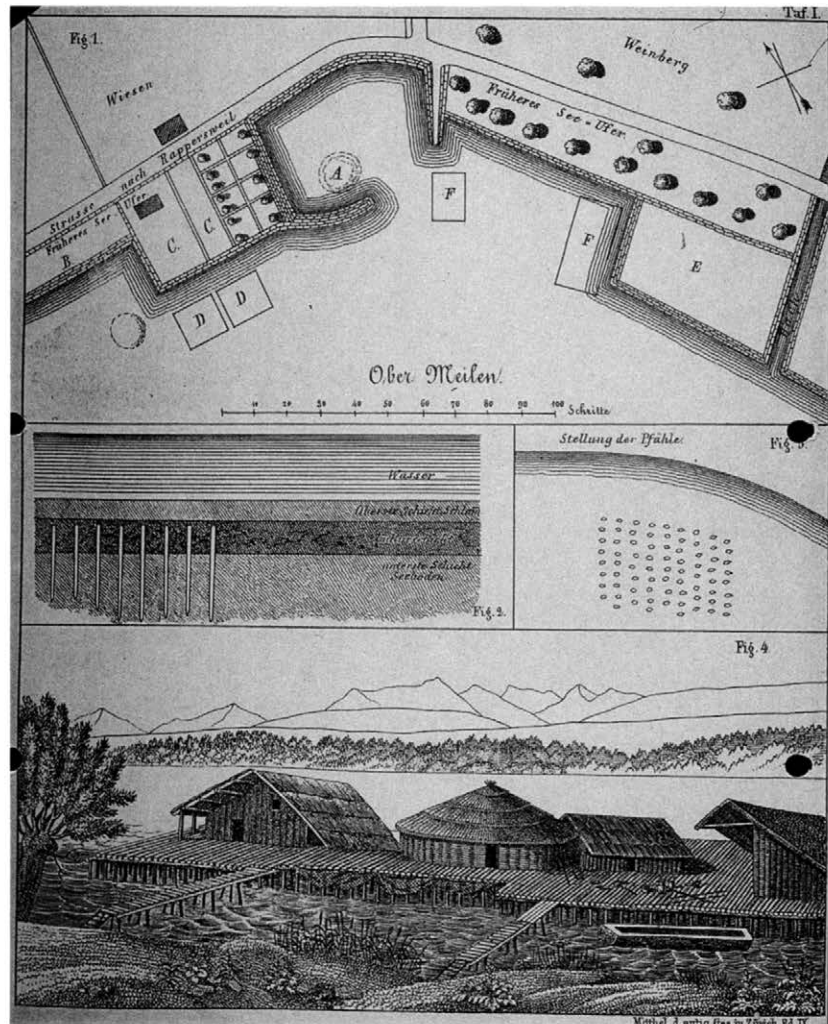
“In January 1854 Mr. Aeppli, a teacher in Obermeilen, . . . reported that in the vicinity of his house he picked up relics of human habitation on the lake’s bottom left dry since the water had receded.” During an attempt to profit from the low water level to build an embankment extending the available ground for gardening further into the lake, workers came across “the pointed tips of piles,” and across “a great many antlers and a lot of various utensils.” Keller explains these circumstances in some pictures. In his Table I (see figure 169) he shows a plan of the shore zone as well as a vertical section through the lakebed near the shore, including the location of the discovered piles, and a plan of the “placement of the piles.” Like a *Fata Morgana* emerges a drawing at the bottom of the table, not mentioned in the text at all, that suddenly conjures up for the observer a full picture of such a primordial settlement in the water. Aha, that’s how it must have been, that’s how it was!

This small picture, only a strip in the lower third of Table I, is drawn in a dilettantish but careful manner, with a faulty perspective foreshortening of the roofs yet painstaking in its detail. Overnight it became the most popular picture in both the German and French parts of Switzerland and remained so for several decades, at least until World War I, and again during the 1930s. As we will see, it became the favorite illustration of calendars for farmers and tradespeople, yet for historians, archaeologists, and those interested in scientific exploration it was also an exciting icon that suddenly succeeded in unveiling the primordial aspect of Switzerland.

A representation that can be assigned neither to high art nor to folk art I would like to call an alternative image. Keller’s drawing—based, as we shall see, on a representation of a Pacific island culture by the illustrator Sainson—floats in from the wild blue yonder and takes its place next to the world of Swiss vernacular images (from naive paintings of alpine herdsmen to popular lithographs) and next to the realm of Swiss high art aspirations, at

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The discovery of the lake dwellings in the Lake of Zurich, 1854. Ferdinand Keller shows the findings (plan, section, location of the pilotis). At the bottom of this table he also shows a bold derivation thesis that produces a lot of consequences.



that time under the custody of Calame or Arnold Böcklin, Bocion or Anker, Valotton or Ferdinand Hodler. But for now let's leave this question open, because it will emerge that with Keller's proposition, a new kind of appropriating or substituting of pictures begins to infiltrate the world of high art in a downright subversive way.

Ferdinand Keller takes his time to let the silently introduced picture of the dwellings on water take effect, describing first in his unruffled, strong

language all the characteristics of the piles and the objects that had been found, even to hazelnuts as “the only objects from the vegetable realm discovered there in great quantities. They were not recent ones deposited by the undertow, but were found in the earth layer of the earlier cultures. All the nuts had been cracked open.”⁴

Only at the end does he return to the full picture drawn at the bottom of Table I and pose the question “whether earlier generations had lived here on land, on the dry though sandy and loamy ground of the shore, or whether one was allowed to assume that the pile-work had originally stood in the lake as it did now . . . and the huts . . . had been built at the height of the pile-work *as on a kind of a bridge*.”⁵

After weighing the evidence of the findings, Keller arrives “fully convinced” at the conclusion that the second view is the correct one. “These dwellings were similar to the fishermen’s huts that were to be seen earlier on in the Swiss lakes and can be seen even now.” Groups of pilings like those in Obermeilen obviously confirmed Keller in his conviction that these fishermen’s huts were not set up as isolated single bridges but had formed a kind of village square above water. Therefore he writes: “Inside and next to the dwellings there was enough space for the kind of activities and enterprises serving people’s daily needs as well as for the production of the utensils necessary for household affairs.”⁶

Only with this passage is inserted the illuminating footnote in which Keller states *why he knows so exactly* how the village in the water at Obermeilen must have looked: “We have based the drawing . . . on the views of the village of Doreï reported by Dumont d’Urville.” He mentions Dumont’s big travel report, abbreviating the title but correctly citing “Histoire Vol. IV, pag. 607.” The report in question is one that covers several trips to the Pacific region by Jules S. C. Dumont d’Urville on the corvette *Astrolabe* on a royal commission; its full title is *Voyage de la corvette Astrolabe exécuté par ordre du Roi pendant les années 1826–1827–1828–1829. Histoire du voyage* (1830–1833).⁷

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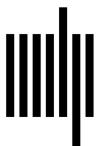
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