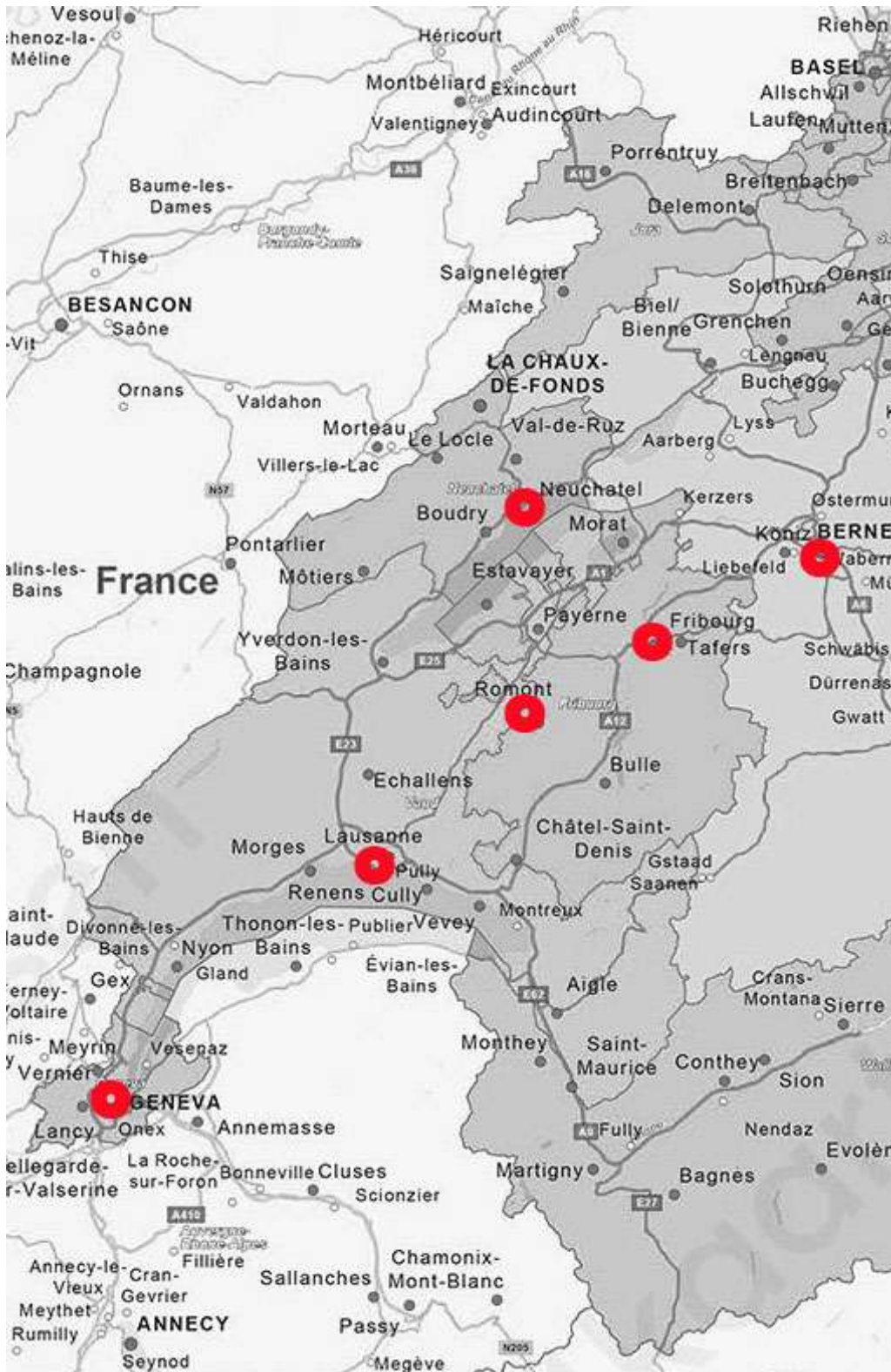


# *Jeu de mail in Switzerland*

In the past, the game of mail also found its followers in Switzerland. However, the traces are limited and only situated in the Western part of Switzerland.

On the following pages, in alphabetical order, are the towns where the game or a variant was popular.



## Bern

In the part of Switzerland where the language is German-related, the so-called Schwyzerdütsch, several documents refer to the game of mail, although not on 'glorious umbrageous' alleys, but played in streets, on tracks, in cemeteries, and in the countryside. This kind of mail (or 'mailspiel', 'mylenschlan', 'kugelschlagen', 'mailleschlagen') was played in the regions of Bern, Zürich and Fribourg.

According to the Berner Rathsmanualen (council reports [1465-1565]), the game of mail was played in Bern as early as 1550, marking it as the oldest known reference to the game outside Italy.

In 1648, the chapter of Bern admonished the priest of Mühlenberg, Nikolaus Hürner, for wanting to play the game of mail or 'Myle' with his parishioners on Sundays. He was not the first nor the last to receive a reprimand for neglecting the Mass to play games instead.

The game was also played from tavern to tavern (Staatsarchiv des Kantons Bern, 1633, 29th July). Religious and public authorities often banned the game due to the danger of injuring passersby or playing on Sundays.

In 1735, the 'Bernische Avis Blättlein' (evening paper) wrote about the 'Languedocer Maille' played with balls for sale at Bern at a reasonable price.

The players used hardwood balls, typically with a diameter of 8 centimetres, and a wooden club with a 6-centimetre diameter and 14-centimetre length. The shaft was fairly whippy and approximately 1 metre long (from a manuscript about 'Bewegungsspiele' [movement games], Canonici Stalder, 1791).

The players themselves often made the mail clubs. As the measurements show, we are talking about real mail clubs, not 'Hornussen' sticks (a very popular longest drive-like game). Teams of different villages often played the game, and sometimes, the players of each team hit the ball in turn towards a predetermined target. The team which reached the target in the fewest number of strokes was the winner. From there, the teams decided upon the next target, and so on.

*Information about Bern derived from:*

*Fluri, Adolf - 'Altbernische Spiele', article in the magazine of the 'Schweizerisches Archiv für Volkskunde', Band 22, 1918-1920*

*Gorini, Pietro - 'Jeux et fêtes traditionnels de France et d'Europe', 1994  
Volkskunde', Band 22, 1918-1920*

*Masüger, Johann Baptist - 'Schweizerbuch der alten Bewegungsspiele', 1955*

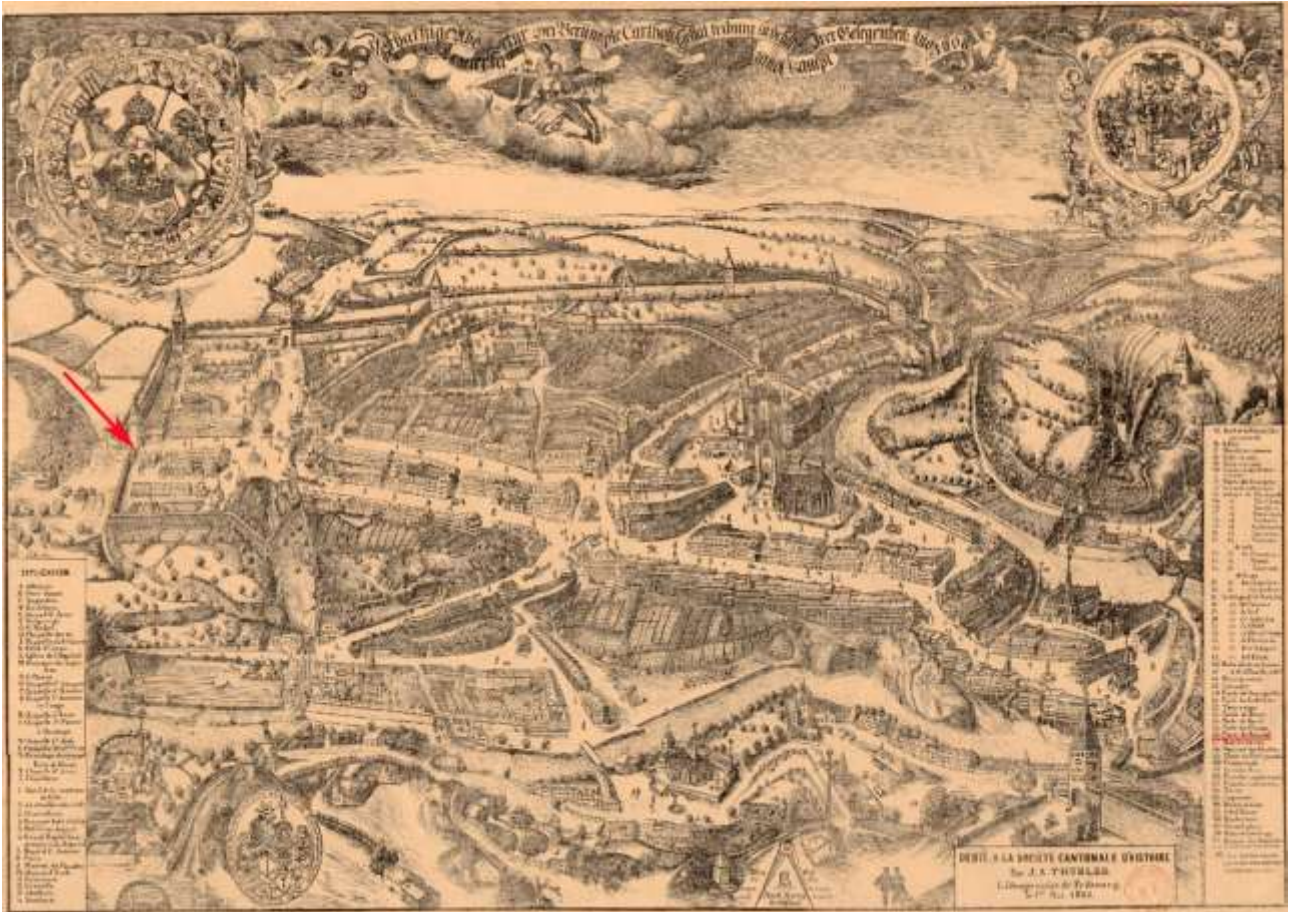
*Palomino, Michael - 'Kinderspiele in der Schweiz vor der Industrialisierung', 2006*

*Seiler, Walter - 'Alte Kinderspiele. Eine Sammlung volkskundlicher Bewegungsspiele', 1979*

## Freiburg im Üechtland (German)/Fribourg (French)

According to the 'Schweizerisches Idiotikon. Wörterbuch der schweizerdeutschen Sprache' (Swiss-German dictionary) from Huber Frauenfeld, 1881, a challenge match took place over wasteland from Romont to Freiburg/Fribourg, a distance of approximately 23 kilometres. The players hit their balls in turn. The winner of this challenge reached the end target in 400 strokes. Compared to earlier challenge matches, in which players needed almost 600 strokes, this result was an exceptional performance in terms of swing quality and endurance.

*'Der Wettkampf in der Alten Eidgenossenschaft. Zur Kulturgeschichte des Sports vom 13. bis in das 18. Jahrhundert. Anmerkungsband zum Schweizer Heimatbuch 156/157/158', 1972 – Verlag Paul Hault Bern*



One can imagine that people played the game from Romont to Freiburg/Fribourg from town gate to town gate. On this map from Freiburg/Fribourg, number 56 indicates 'Porte de Romont', which one sees on the left side of the town. – Author Martini, Martino (1614-1661), published in 1863 by Imprimerie J. A. Thurler (Fribourg) –  
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## Genève

In the centre of Genève (Geneva), one of the main avenues, which runs alongside the Place de Plainpalais, is called Avenue du Mail and is almost 700 metres long. It was constructed in 1637, along with the plain of Plainpalais, as a field for the amusement of the inhabitants of Genève, proposed and paid for by the French Duke of Rohan. He ordered the plantation of a double row of lime and elm trees to create the mail alley.



'Le jeu de mail', Atlas cantonal genevois, Jean Rodolphe Mayer, 1828 –  
<https://histoire-et-historiettes.ch>

The Duke, as a youngster, was a favourite of King Henri IV of France, who, as we know, was an active mail player. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, public executions also took place on the plain. The main building of the famous University of Genève still refers to the jeu de mail: Uni Mail.



*The mail court in Genève was constructed in 1637 outside the city walls together with the Plainpalais for the amusement of the people of the town. The mail alley was approximately 700 metres long and had a slight bend halfway. The alley is now known as the 'Avenue du Mail' and lies in the heart of the city. – Postcard of 1906*

## *Neuchâtel*

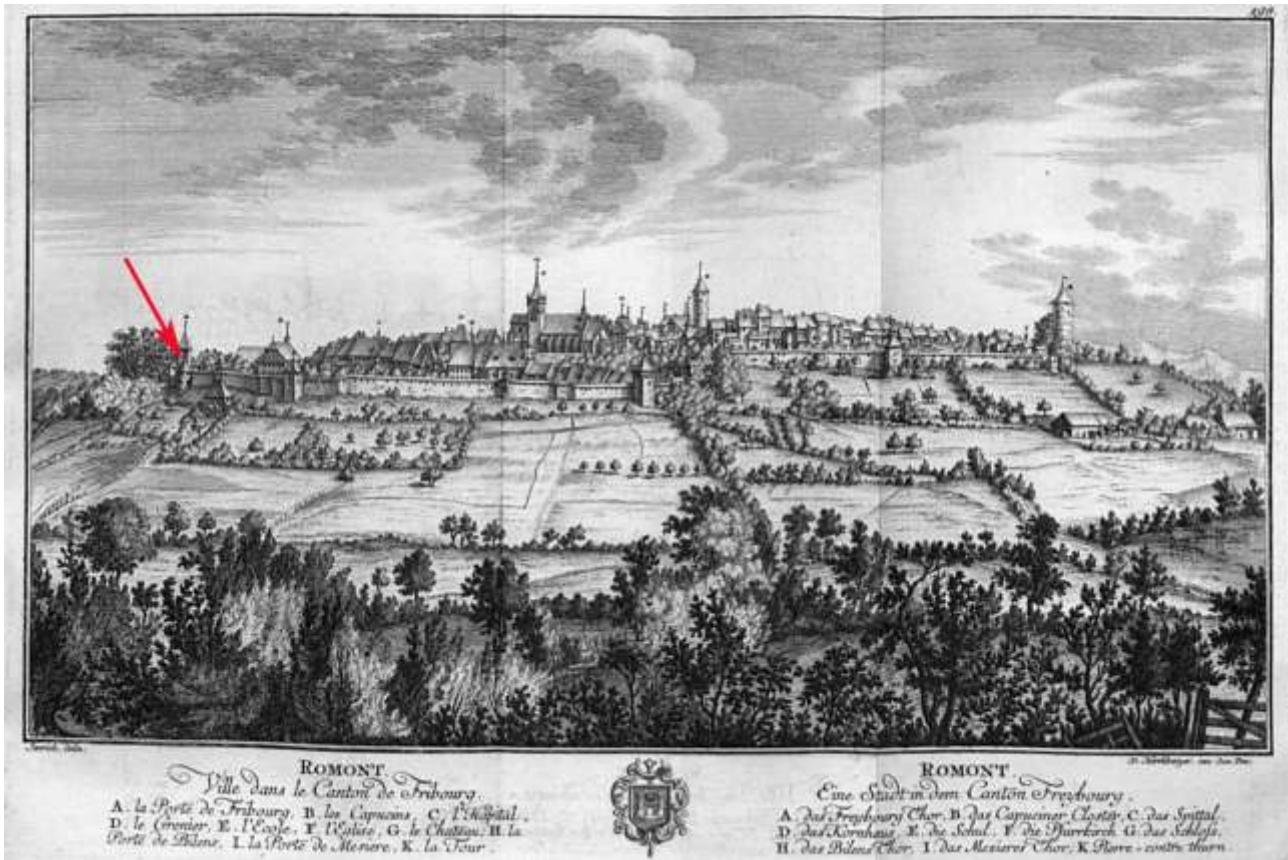
In 1706, Neuchâtel also got a jeu de mail. According to the curator of the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire de Neuchâtel, it was in that year that the local authorities allocated a budget for a mail alley in a valley in the Maladière Forest. At some distance from the town, it took some time before this terrain attracted the inhabitants. Today, the name of the district where people once played jeu de mail still bears the name 'Mail'.



*An impression of the Mail in 1901. – <https://www.geneanet.org>*

## Romont

When my assumption about the picture of Freiburg/Fribourg is correct, people played towards the 'Freybourg Thor/Porte de Fribourg' in Romont, left in the image.



The town of Romont is situated on a hill in the Swiss Plateau. From here, the mail players started the traditional match to Freiburg/Fribourg over a distance of 23 kilometres. The players needed between 400 and 600 strokes, quite an accomplishment in this kind of environment. – Engraving, Jenrich in David Herrliberger's 'Neue und vollstaendige Topographie der Eydgnossenschaft', 1754-1758 – <https://catima.unil.ch>