

Basel, 16 October 2026

People on the move! For thousands of years

Why do people leave their homelands and how does human mobility alter societies? In this year's special exhibition, *People on the move! For thousands of years*, the Antikenmuseum Basel und Sammlung Ludwig shows that these questions are far from new. The exhibition examines the causes and consequences of human mobility and how foreigners were dealt with by societies and political establishments in the ancient world, opening up a historical perspective on one of the most pressing topics of our time.

People have been on the move since time immemorial. Ever since our ancestors left the African continent over 100,000 years ago, mobility, migration and cultural exchange have played a crucial role in human development. For this was how technologies, knowledge, raw materials, religious ideas and whole conceptual worlds were disseminated. At the same time, however, in the ancient world as in our world today, encounters with foreigners produced contradictory reactions: curiosity and fear, openness and segregation, enthusiasm and rejection.

"Dealing with 'foreigners' has always been a highly relevant issue for societies of every epoch and every culture", observes exhibition curator, Dr. Esaù Dozio. The exhibition is thus a conscious contribution to a current societal debate, although its aim is not to give concrete answers to topical questions, but rather to open up opportunities for historical comparisons and encourage new perspectives.

After a thematic introduction, the exhibition leads visitors through four different sections. First, it shows an ancient world in constant motion; then it asks why people left their homelands, either of their own free will or under compulsion; it then investigates the social consequences, and finally, it looks at the policy measures adopted to deal with those consequences, ranging from assimilation to exclusion, integration to segregation. At the end of the exhibition, a "space for reflection" invites visitors to contemplate the ancient world's ideas of a shared humanity and the importance of these ideas for the present day.

A world in constant motion

Mobility was an integral feature of the ancient world. People travelled overland, along rivers and across seas to trade, open up new areas for settlement and establish contacts with other cultures. On arrival at their destinations, these travellers had to come to grips with unfamiliar environments, other languages and foreign ways of life. The Greek myths reflect the hopes and perils inherent in such journeys.

Why did people leave their homelands?

The reasons were as varied then as they are today. Many set off of their own free will, to trade, find work, acquire new knowledge or built a better life elsewhere. Curiosity, matrimonial politics and the desire for adventure could also take them to distant lands.

Others, however, were forced to flee or emigrate by war, political persecution, enslavement, hunger, lack of resources or changes in climate. Every story was different.

What were the consequences of human mobility?

Also on the move, along with people, were trade goods, ideas, technologies, religions and other cultural achievements. Farming and literacy spread. Artistic styles and ways of life influenced each other.

Contact between native populations and new arrivals was not always frictionless, however. Societies, when they encountered “foreigners”, would often develop a stronger awareness of their own identities. Questions of belonging, assimilation and exclusion came increasingly to the fore.

The exhibition therefore examines not only progress and cultural exchange, but also fear of foreign influence, religious persecution, racist ideas and the spread of disease. Human mobility is thus revealed as a phenomenon with complex consequences, which can profoundly alter societies.

Political answers, from exclusion to integration.

Ancient societies were already looking for answers to the questions that still occupy us today. Should people of foreign origin be excluded or welcomed? What conditions should new arrivals be obliged to meet in order to join a political community?

The exhibition juxtaposes ancient migration and integration policies with different models. The spectrum ranges from the restrictive rules of citizenship adopted by Athens to the strategies of cultural assimilation pursued in the empires of Alexander the Great and the Ptolemies to the policy of political integration implemented by Rome. Using concrete examples, it shows that people in the ancient world experimented with various approaches, ranging from exclusion to integration – and that the debates surrounding these experiments still seem familiar today.

“The Earth belongs to all people”

At the end of the tour, a “space for reflection” invites visitors to contemplate ancient ideas of a shared humanity. “This cosmos is like a single city”, wrote the philosopher Epictetus, for example. Seneca described people as “members of one great body”, while Aelius Aristides declared: “The Earth belongs to all people.”

These voices show that ideas of world citizenship and a shared human nature were already familiar to people in the ancient world.

The *Wege* (Paths) project, curated by *Kuverum Kulturvermittlung* and integrated directly into the exhibition, provides a contemporary counterpoint to these ideas from the ancient world. Taking as its subject the real lives of undocumented migrants in Basel, it draws attention to topical questions of belonging and participation.

Part of a cross-border museum project

The exhibition *People on the move! For thousands of years* is part of a cross-border museum project which runs from autumn 2026 to summer 2027 and includes a total of 30 exhibitions in Germany, France and Switzerland on the theme “Home – on the move”.

Our thanks to patrons and foundations

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The exhibition at a glance

People on the move! For thousands of years

18 October 2026 to 18 April 2027

The exhibition texts are available in three languages: German, French and English.

Ticket prices, opening times, free-entry days, offers for schools and a detailed programme of events can be found at aufunddavon.antikenmuseumbasel.ch.

An accompanying publication with a local emphasis: the richly illustrated publication accompanying the exhibition explores its themes in more depth, with a whole section devoted to migration and integration in Late Antique and early medieval Basel. New archaeological and scientific studies paint a picture of a lively, dynamic town, with a mixture of superimposed origin stories, traditions and social roles.

Audio guide: free in German, French and English. Visitors will require their own smartphones and earphones.