

A mistake with consequences - or how the ram got into the Schaffhausen coat of arms

Autor(en): **[s.n.]**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand**

Band (Jahr): **75 (2009)**

Heft [2]

PDF erstellt am: **29.05.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-944409>

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The earliest Swiss

The Kesslerloch is a prehistoric cave in Thayngen, SH, used, probably during summer, by the earliest people living in what is now Switzerland, the reindeer hunters 17'000 to 13'000 years ago.

A teacher, Konrad Merk, found the cave in 1873 and in subsequent diggings bones of 53 different animal species were found, amongst others: mammoth, reindeer, woolly rhinoceros, ibex and chamois.

There were stone implements and pendants, one with the intricate carving of a reindeer. No human bones were found.

Reindeer yes – bear no

In the spring of 1874 two very unusual bones were found during the archaeological excavation of the Kesslerloch. One bone bore the crude image of a sitting bear. The other bone bore the image of a fox.

During the previous months many Stone Age implements had already been found in the cave. When the worker who found the bones, Albert Stamm, presented them to the two men leading the dig, Albert Heim and Konrad Merk, they grew excited because the carved bones were quite unlike any other Stone Age tools ever found. As Merk noted in the paper he later published about the bones, the carvings lacked the "grace and correctness" of most Stone Age images. Nevertheless, no one doubted that they were real.

Two years later, in 1876, a rival scientist named Ludwig Lindenschmitt made a stunning discovery. He realized that the images of the bear and the fox that graced the bones had actually been crudely copied from a children's book that his son happened to be reading.

The perpetrator of the hoax

turned out to be Albert Stamm, the worker who had originally presented the bones to Heim and Merk. Stamm, hoping to earn the bonus customarily paid to workers for extraordinary finds, had enlisted a friend to carve pictures on some bones. His friend had then turned to the children's book for inspiration.

Detectives at work

When I wanted to know how the ram got into the Schaffhausen coat of arms I asked Schaffhausen members of the Wellington Swiss Club. They did not know, but Monika Soerensen rang her brother in Schaffhausen, who wasn't quite sure. He rang the Schaffhausen Stadtarchiv, and Ingeborg Treier from the Schaffhausen Stadtarchiv was most helpful. She sent us all the relevant information; so now we know. Thank you to all the helpers!

A mistake with consequences – or how the ram got into the Schaffhausen coat of arms

Schaffhausen owes its existence to the favourable site on the banks of the river Rhine. All goods shipped on the river from Lake Constance in the direction of Basle and vice versa had to be unloaded and transported overland to by-pass the Rhine-Falls. A lively market developed near the wharf and a settlement grew and flourished at the crossroad where trade routes from Klettgau and Hegau met the road to the landing place below the waterfall. Trade and commerce were the foundations of the growing city.

On 10 July 1045 King and later Emperor Heinrich III. bestowed upon Count Eberhard von

Nellenburg the right to mint and issue coins in "villa Scafhusun". The imperial deed, an impressive parchment sheet with the king's seal, is the oldest surviving document that features the city's name. It is now one of the greatest treasures of the city's archives. It may be assumed that the settlement by this time already held market rights and was protected by a wall or a rampart.

Historians now believe that the city was originally not named after sheep, but after ships. It was Schiffhausen rather than Schaffhausen, but already in the 12th century the original meaning was lost, and when it was time to create a coat of arms, the original meaning had vanished and the name Scafhusun was associated with sheep or, a bit more glamorous, with a proud ram. In the beginning he stood on four legs, but was made to stand up in the late middle ages.

Colour in politics

Although Schaffhausen's black ram is on a golden background, the Schaffhausen heraldic colours are black and green. For an explanation of this discrepancy we have to turn to history again.

In 1330 King Ludwig pledged Schaffhausen to the house of Habsburg-Austria.

Under Habsburg rule the city's military and economic potential was stressed to its limits. At the end of the 14th century Schaffhausen was heavily in debt and several distinguished families had either left or had become extinct because of the disastrous fights against the Swiss Confederates. At the beginning of the 15th century the citizens were able to reclaim their civic liberties. In 1411 the guilds passed the first constitution of the city that defined the political structures for almost four centuries. As the Habsburg colours were gold and black, Schaffhausen made sure theirs were different – hence green and black.