

The history of the Engadine

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THE HISTORY OF THE ENGADINE

It is not known how long the Engadine has been inhabited. Until the early years of this century, documentary and other evidence relative to the culture and history of the region did not go back further than the end of the Roman period. It was therefore thought reasonable to assume that this high-lying Alpine region had been colonized only at a comparatively late date. This opinion, however, had to be revised in 1907, when it was discovered that the chalybeate waters of the springs of St. Moritz had been secured already in remotely ancient times. In fact, two mighty larch trunks, hollowed out and used as conduits, were brought to light. They were held in place by joists. Deeper still, in the mud, were found two swords, one fragment of another, a dagger, and clasp, all of bronze. Thus, already in the Bronze Age, there lived in the Engadine a race of men who had attained a relatively high standard of living and who were not indifferent to technical matters. If we bear in mind the tools that these primitive men had at their disposal, the securing of the spring of St. Moritz may be termed a marvel of invention. The finds have been deposited in the Engadine Museum at St. Moritz, as have also the fragments of a Roman statue found on the Julier pass.

The inhabitants of the Grisons during the Bronze Age belonged to the great race of Rhaetians, probably of Illyrian origin. For a long time the Romans tried to subdue this war-like, liberty-loving nation. They succeeded only in the year 15 B.C. Generally speaking, the five centuries of Roman rule had a happy influence on the country, whose destiny they determined, at least as regards civilization. For instance, the idiom or dialect of the Engadine is still "Ladin", as much a complete and independent language derived from Latin as is French, Italian and Spanish. Christianity was also introduced by the Romans. The crumbling of the Roman Empire left the Grisons, separated from Greater Rhaetia in 483, to pass under the rule of Theodoric, king of the Ostrogoths, and finally in 537 under that of the Franks, both of whom respected and left untouched the Roman institutions and works. Instead of the old "imperial prefect" there was a "praeses", who resided at Coire, and the bishop was often elected representative of the civil power. From 916-1256, the Grisons formed part of the Holy Roman Empire, governed in fact by the Bishop of Coire, who relegated to intendants, especially to the Plantas of Zuoz, the administration of the Upper Engadine and the Val Bregaglia, with rights of jurisdiction. This function was hereditary.

One Bishop of Coire, Pierre de Bohème (Peter of Bohemia) made known his intention of selling his domain to Austria in return for an annual payment. In order to meet and ward off the danger, the people of the "House of God" came together at Zernez in 1367. At first their intention was merely to supervise episcopal politics, but they ended up by founding the League of the House of God. The union of this league with the Gray League and the League of the Ten Jurisdictions later constituted the free republic of the three leagues. But these aspirations towards independence provoked long and bloody strife with the Plantas. The will of the people, however, was imposed, sometimes by armed conflict, sometimes by peaceful means. The Val Bregaglia achieved liberty at the same time as the eleven autonomous communes of the Engadine.

During the Swabian war, the Leagues received their baptism of fire at Calven in 1499. Their troops inflicted a crushing defeat on an Austrian army greatly superior in numbers. The Engadine was unable to repulse a second

Austrian invasion otherwise than by the tactics of the "scorched earth". These conflicts raised to its zenith the warlike reputation of the men of the Grisons, who succeeded, on the occasion of the Italian wars, in annexing to their own territory, for the space of 300 years, the valley of Bormio, the Valtellina and Chiavenna.

The religious schism, on the other hand, had disastrous consequences, although the new faith, wherever it could take root, was tolerant toward those who remained faithful to the old denomination. But the religious discord favoured the intrigues of foreign powers, who tried incessantly to make use of one or other of the parties for their own purposes. The lands belonging to the Leagues occupied a position of strategic importance, which brought upon them much trouble and distress during the Thirty Years War. Austria wished to extirpate Protestantism and to impose on the country the domination of the archducal house. France and Venice were opposed to these designs. But the Grisons succeeded in extricating themselves from the disputes of which they themselves were the stake, thanks to the policy, audacious and bold to the point of foolhardiness, of the national hero, Jürg Jenatsch, a fervent and impassioned patriot.

Once more, however, the Grisons were to be the seat of a foreign war. When Napoleon, in 1799, was at war against half Europe in order to impose on others the benefits of the revolution, Republican and Austrian troops pillaged the Engadine.

At the same time, Napoleon dealt the Leagues a painful blow by annexing to the Cisalpine Republic the valley of Bormio, the Valtellina and Chiavenna, in order to liberate them from the guardianship of "those gentlemen of the Grisons". To-day, in the Canton where scarcely any wine but that of the Valtellina is drunk, it is jokingly said that the former subjects are being bought back "by the pint".

In this period of political and social upheaval and change, what was to be the fate of the Grisons? Napoleon himself advised them to apply for admission to the Confederation. That is what happened, to the great advantage of the region, in 1803. By the Act of Mediation the Grisons became a Swiss Canton. Ancient Rhaetia has since that time occupied a position of respect in the Helvetic family, to whom it has given many a proof of its patriotism.

(PTT)

("St. Moritz Courier")

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