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## St Oswald of Northumbria's Head at Zug

St Oswald, King and Martyr (604-642), is famously credited with effecting the Christian conversion of Northumbria after defeating the Welsh ruler Cadwallon. Bede celebrates Oswald as an English Constantine, waging battle to vanquish the pagan and bring Christianity to the north. After his later death on another battlefield, his body was dismembered and his head relic taken to Bamburgh and then Durham. There are, however, several other alleged head relics of Oswald, including one which was venerated in the Oswaldkirche in Zug, a late fifteenth-century Gothic town church dedicated to the Northumbrian king. This essay traces the movement of Oswald's cult and relics from northern England to Zug via eleventh-century Bavaria, discussing Oswald's utility to Duke Welf IV of Bavaria, where he functioned to legitimate Welf's crusading interests and resistance to the Holy Roman Emperor. Oswald seems to have carried a somewhat similar meaning for the citizens of Zug in the late fifteenth century: the Oswaldkirche is built to celebrate their victory in the Burgundian wars. The essay discusses Oswald's significance for the church's founder, Master John Eberhard, and his iconography on the church's exterior and interior, noting his assimilation with the regional devotion to Anna Selbdritt, and inclusion within a spiritual genealogy of Holy Roman saint-emperors.

Keywords: St Oswald of Northumbria; Judith of Flanders; Duke Welf IV of Bavaria; Oswaldkirche, Zug; John Eberhard

The Oswaldkirche at Zug, one of the largest and most interesting late Gothic town churches in Switzerland, was constructed at the end of the fifteenth century close to Burg Zug. Emphasizing its dedication, the church features multiple sculptures, wood carvings and paintings of its patron saint, the king and martyr St Oswald of Northumbria (604-642), variously dated between the 1490s and 1930s. Why did the seventh-century Northumbrian king become such a focus of fascination and veneration for this small central Swiss city, in particular, at the time of the con-

struction of the church? And how did the cult of St Oswald travel to Bavaria and northern Switzerland in the centuries preceding its construction? This essay will demonstrate that the construction of the Oswaldkirche at Zug is consistent with the presence of Oswald's cult in the diocese of Constance from the twelfth century onwards, and will argue that the specific impetus for the construction came from the Burgundian wars of the mid 1470s in which the Old Swiss Confederacy defeated the Duchy of Burgundy. Oswald is inscribed within the iconography of the church as the saintly warrior-king whose prayers led the Swiss soldiers to military triumph, rendering him the spiritual patron of a landmark event in the formation of Swiss national identity.

### 1. The Evolution of the English Cult of Oswald of Northumbria

Before discussing these late medieval continental developments, it will initially prove helpful to offer a brief account of the saint and his English cult. St Oswald, King and Martyr, is one of the earliest and most notable saints in the early English pantheon. Returning to Northumbria after his childhood exile amongst the Irish monks of Iona off west Scotland, the seventh-century king is famously credited with effecting the Christian conversion of Northumbria after defeating the Welsh ruler, Cadwallon, at the battle of Heavenfield, north of Hexham. In his *Historia ecclesiastica*, Bede represents this battle as a celebration of Christian militarism over Brittonic paganism, and valorises Oswald as a kind of English Constantine, erecting a huge cross upon the battlefield and exhorting his soldiers to pray to it (Bede III.3). After the victory, he relates how Oswald summons missionaries from Iona and accompanies his principal missionary, Bishop Aidan, around the north, translating his Irish sermons into Old Northumbrian. He also highlights Oswald's charity towards the poor, describing how he orders a silver food dish from his table to be sent out to the beggars at his gate. Ambitiously and ambiguously, he describes Oswald's rule extending over all the provinces of Britain and its four language groups, seeming to see in him an ideal of Christian kingship for England (Bede III.6).

In 642, Oswald dies what is later interpreted as a martyr's death, fighting against the Mercians at Maserfelth near Oswestry. His body is dismembered on the battlefield, and while his head and arms initially return north to Lindisfarne and Bamburgh, later transferring to Durham Cathedral and Peterborough Abbey, the rest of his body is taken to Bardney

monastery in Lincolnshire, then Gloucester Priory (Thacker). From an early stage, both battlefield sites and all these body relics are credited with miracles. Oswald's head is given particular prominence, possibly because it becomes closely aligned with the premier northern saint, St Cuthbert (c. 634-687), travelling around the north with him in his coffin before coming to rest at Durham Cathedral, where it is cited in cathedral priory relic lists until the Reformation. The medieval iconography of Cuthbert frequently shows him holding Oswald's head in a variation upon the cephalophore topos, while a lengthy *Vita Sancti Oswaldi*, composed by Reginald of Durham in the mid-twelfth century, devotes one of its three books to an elaborate physiological description and allegorical exegesis of the head (Reginald).<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Oswald's Cult in Bavaria

Oswald's cult flourishes in England, at Durham, Peterborough and Gloucester, until the end of the Middle Ages, but it is also remarkable for its swift expansion into mainland Europe, as noted by Bede (III.13). Willibrord, the Northumbrian missionary known as the apostle to the Frisians, initially brings Oswald's cult, and reputedly his head relic, to his monastic foundation at Echternach (in present day Luxembourg) before 703. By the eleventh century, there is also a cult centre at the Abbey of Saint-Winnoc in Flanders, where a monk from the community, Drogo, writes a continental *Vita Oswaldi* around 1038. In the centuries that follow, his cult is celebrated all the way from Scandinavia and Iceland in the north, where we find a late *Ósvalds saga*, through the German-speaking lands of central Europe, to the northern Italian Alps, home to a lively devotion to Oswald's left thumb (Kalinke; Di Sciacca; Vizkelety).

But it is the German-speaking lands that must hold our attention now, in particular, Swabia and Switzerland. The third attested head relic of Oswald arrives at the Benedictine monastery of St Martin at Weingarten,

<sup>1</sup> Reginald's *Vita* proves too complex to be widely popular. By contrast, the standard Latin *Vita Oswaldi*, formed from select chapters of Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica* III, survives in nine manuscripts (s.xi–s.xiii) from the Durham scriptorium where it is situated alongside *vitae* of Cuthbert and Aidan, and histories of the northern church (Whitehead 27–30). There is also an Old English *Life* of Oswald by Aelfric, and a thirteenth-century metric *Vita Oswaldi* (c. 1227) by Henry of Avranches, a professional Latin poet and hagiographer, which seems to have been commissioned by the Peterborough Benedictines (Henry of Avranches I, 204–257).



above Lake Constance, in the late eleventh century, through the agency of an enterprising aristocratic woman.<sup>2</sup> Judith of Flanders (c. 1027-1094), stepdaughter of Baldwin IV of Flanders, makes an early marriage around 1051 to Earl Tostig of Northumbria (Dockray-Miller). Based at the ancestral seat of the earls of Northumbria at Bamburgh Castle, the couple perform Tostig's aristocratic Northumbrian identity by showing devotion to the great saints of the region and offering their secular patronage in return for spiritual favours. Judith frequently features in contemporary monastic histories and miracle collections as a significant donor to northern saints' shrines. However, she is also known for challenging gendered restrictions on veneration, deliberately sending her maidservant ahead of her into the space prohibited to women close to St Cuthbert's shrine at Durham Cathedral (which also contained Oswald's head) to perform an act of devotion. Because it is Cuthbert's monks who chronicle the episode, this challenge ends badly. A fiery wind strikes the poor girl dead, and the repentant countess donates lots of treasure to the shrine (Symeon 3.11). It is nonetheless a story that shows Judith in active, independent, engagement with Cuthbert. She does better in another contemporary hagiography, assisting Bishop Aethelwine in 'discovering' and acquiring the relics of another northern saint-king, St Oswine of Deira (d. 651) (*Vita S. Oswini regis* 4; Dockray-Miller 13–47). Royal northern saints clearly mattered to her.

When Tostig is killed in 1066, Judith flees to Denmark. Five years later, in 1071, she marries Duke Welf IV of Bavaria, and moves to Regensburg, his dynastic seat (Ó Riain-Raedel 216–222). It is thought that she must have brought a little cache of northern saints' relics along with her, including relics of St Oswald, because, when the couple visit Weingarten monastery in 1094 to prepare the ground for Welf's future burial there, Judith makes an extensive endowment of ecclesiastical treasure, relics and manuscripts to the monastery:

Domina vero Judith fletibus uberrimis lacrimosa obtulit pallam auro purissimo intextam, maspas habentem dispositas per loca aurifrigias; scrinea eburnea, auro et argento circumornata; cruces aureas cum reliquiis sanctorum, gemmis optimis plene ornatas; calices aureos, thuribula et candelabra aurea, plenaria plurima, *arcellam fabrefactam, plenam reliquiis*

<sup>2</sup> Additionally, there is a twelfth-century head reliquary with an inscription identifying the head as Oswald's in Hildesheim, Germany (Bailey 202).

*sancti Oswaldi*; postremo quidem in timore Domini sacrosanctum Christi crucorem adolevit.<sup>3</sup>

(But the Lady Judith, with abundant tears, offered a shawl woven with the purest gold, having tassels arranged in gold-plated places; ivory caskets adorned with gold and silver, golden crosses containing the relics of the saints, plentifully adorned with the finest gems; golden chalices, golden censers and golden candlesticks, plentiful and many, *a wrought-iron chest full of the relics of St Oswald*, and finally, in the fear of the Lord, she made a gift of the sacred cross of Christ.)

Oswald is the only named saint here; clearly his relics are considered the most significant of Judith's relic donations. Weingarten responds in kind, fostering his cult with increasing enthusiasm (Clemoes 593–595; Baker “The Cult of St Oswald”). In 1182, his relics are positioned close to the burial vault of the Welf dynasty within the new abbey church. In 1217, he is named with St Martin as co-patron of the monastery (Baker, “St Oswald and His Church at Zug” 106).

It is worth pausing for a moment to speculate about why Oswald was so significant to Duke Welf IV and his family. First, it may simply be a sign of Judith's power within their marriage and of her nostalgia for her Northumbrian past: she transplants a cult from the landscape of her first marriage into the religious soil of southern Bavaria. Like Bede and Wilibrord before her, she perceives the Northumbrian saints to hold exemplary value for Swabian spiritual culture. Second, more broadly, the Welf dynasty were significant patrons of Irish monasticism in southern Germany (Folz). Oswald's youthful exile on Iona and his use of Irish missionaries must have raised his status within this Irish-inflected milieu. Third, we should note that Welf IV was a crusader, eventually dying in 1101 on his way home from the First Crusade. It is easy to see how Oswald's wars against the ‘pagans,’ Cadwallon and Penda, to instigate and protect the Christian kingdom of Northumbria, offer a valuable saintly antecedent for aristocratic crusading activities in the Middle East. In the late twelfth century, Oswald's bones are repositioned close to the tombs of the Welf dynasty, underlining their affinity as Christian warrior lords engaged in holy war. Fourth, it is intriguing to learn that Manegold of Lautenbach (c. 1030–c. 1103), a theologian active in south-west Germany,

<sup>3</sup> A twelfth-century Weingarten manuscript, following ‘De inventione et translatione sanguinis Domine’. Monumenta Germaniae Historica, *Scriptores* 15, 923. Quoted in Baker, “St Oswald and His Church at Zug” 106. My italics and translation.

cites Oswald as an exemplary precedent in his treatise, *Ad Gebehardum*, on the theological legitimacy of waging war against the Emperor Henry IV if he fails to live up to his Christian responsibilities:

Hinc est quod sanctissimus uir rex Oswaldus contra barbaros pro patria et pro fide dimicans et a Penda rege Merciorum bello superatus et occisus signis atque miraculis martyris probatur coronatus. (Manegold 399; Baker, "St Oswald and His Church at Zug" 107)

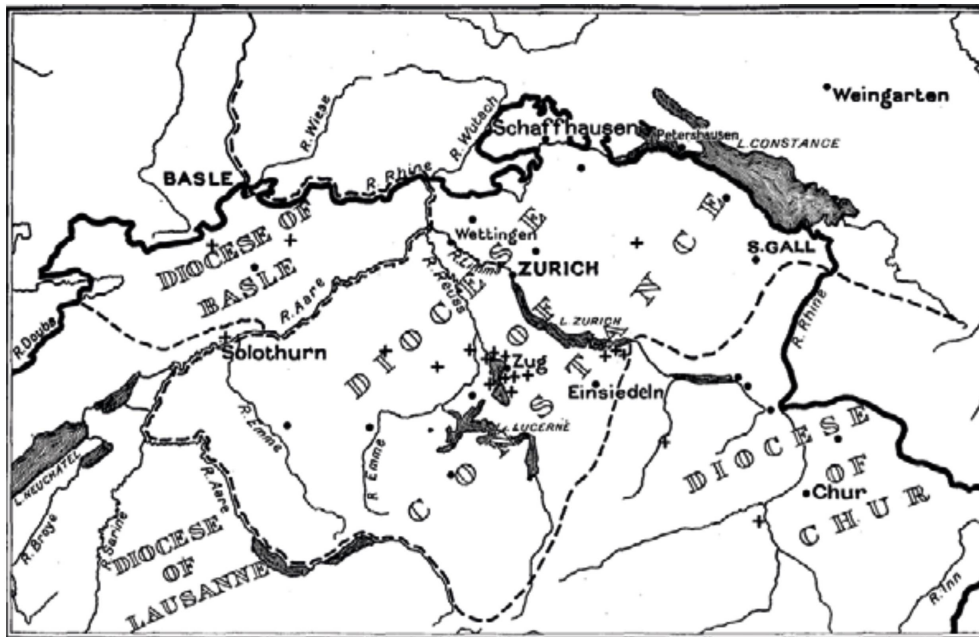
(Hence it is that the most holy man, king Oswald, fighting against the barbarians for his country and for his faith, and having been defeated and slain by Penda, king of the Mercians, is crowned with the signs and miracles of martyrdom.)

Audaciously, Oswald's campaign against Penda is used to vindicate armed resistance to Emperor Henry IV. This *also* has a specific relevance to Welf IV. During the Investiture Controversy of 1076, Welf supports Pope Gregory VII against Emperor Henry, and as a consequence, Henry deposes him from his duchy. Unsurprisingly, Welf resists this deposition, joining together with other discontented princes to support the alternative election of Rudolf of Rheinfelden, Duke of Swabia, as German anti-king in 1077 (Bauer and Becher). In Manegold's apologia, Oswald is effectively made the saintly precursor and guarantor of this act of aristocratic resistance.

### 3. Oswald's Cult at Zug and the Construction of the Fifteenth-Century Oswaldkirche

It is now time to turn our gaze further south. Figure 1, taken from Baker ("St Oswald and His Church at Zug" 104), displays the distribution of church dedications to St Oswald within Switzerland, all of them twelfth century or later. The map shows the proximity of Weingarten north east of Lake Constance, the preference for the diocese of Constance, and in particular, the cluster around Zug. Because of the prestige and influence of Weingarten within the region, Oswald's cult seems to have gradually spread south west from it over the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. An Oswald chapel at Petershausen is dedicated in 1129; chapels to Thomas of Canterbury and Oswald at St Gall are dedicated in 1206, and there is a late thirteenth-century altar dedicated to Oswald at Wettingen.





**Figure 1.** Map of Church Dedications to St Oswald in Switzerland, taken from Baker “St Oswald and His Church at Zug”, 104

At Schaffhausen, fragments remain of a twelfth-century chapel which once contained Oswald’s head relic (Baker, “St Oswald and His Church at Zug” 104–105). This must have travelled west from Weingarten, although no documentary evidence survives to explain the transfer.

Nor did the cult come to an abrupt halt in central Switzerland. Claudia di Sciacca has described how German-speaking immigrants pushed into the Alpine regions of the south Tyrol and Friuli between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, bringing with them a rustic and popular devotion to Oswald in which he was invoked to protect their cattle, and ensure an abundant harvest and good weather (Baker, “The Cult of St Oswald” 179–181; Jansen 237; Di Sciacca 417). He also became popular as a spiritual healer, most importantly at the village of Sauris in the Carnian Alps, where the relic of the king’s left thumb continued to attract northern Italian pilgrims in search of a cure up until the nineteenth century (Bergamini and Bianco; Di Sciacca 417–419).

But while Oswald’s cult took a distinctively agrarian and curative direction in the southern Alpine regions, in central Switzerland other characteristics were brought to the fore. By the fifteenth century, the cult of Oswald had been present in Zug for several centuries. However, it was given a huge lift in 1477, in the immediate aftermath of the Burgundian Wars between the Old Swiss Confederacy and the Duchy of Burgundy, when the parish priest John Eberhard (1435–1497) decided to commission a

grand new church dedicated to St Oswald in the centre of the city. This church, built by Hans Felder, also responsible for the Zurich Wasserkirche, is one of the finest large, late Gothic buildings in Switzerland. Given the timing, it seems to have been principally intended as an act of thanksgiving for hard-won Swiss independence from the Burgundians. Moving on from siding with Bavarian dukes against the Emperor, Oswald's repeated representation as a victorious warrior throughout the Oswaldkirche might hint that he has now been appropriated to the Old Swiss cause and opposed to Burgundian ambition. His reputation as the founder of Christianity in Northumbria, following the slaying of Cadwallon, subtly renders the recent war a *religious* conflict, equating the Burgundians with the pagan Cadwallon, and interprets the late 1470s as a new Christian beginning for the city.

It seems strange, on the face of it, that a parish priest would have the resources to commission and oversee the construction of such a grandiose church. However, it transpires that John Eberhard was the younger son of the Eberhards of Burg Zug, immediately above the church, who enrolled at the University of Erfurt in 1451 and received a master's degree, before returning to Switzerland to take up a series of parish preferments in his home canton. We see him depicted in a painting from the Oswaldkirche from 1492 (figure 2), reading a missal and venerating Anna Selbdritt (the iconographic group of St Anne, the Virgin and Christ, seated on one another's knees).<sup>4</sup> An apple lies in front of the Holy Family, focalising the theme of apple-picking by further unidentified holy women and children in the left background, and presumably signalling Mary's reversal of Eve's original sin through her obedience, and Christ's identity as the new Adam.<sup>5</sup> The apple-picking takes place within fortified city walls, while in the right background a city on a lake backed by mountains is probably intended to represent Zug. An armoured depiction of St Oswald stands in the middle of the painting, linking Eberhard's act of devotion with the Holy Family that he venerates. A contemporary Swiss helmet in front of Oswald (perhaps his own helmet since he is bare-headed) associates his militarism with that of the Swiss soldiers whose spirited campaign has secured the independence of the city and protected the character of the

<sup>4</sup> A copy of the painting is located above the door to the vestry on the left side of the chancel, the original measuring 44x55 cm is now in Burg Zug museum. It remains anonymous although attempts at attribution have been made.

<sup>5</sup> A later painted wood sculpture of Mary as Queen of Heaven, on the pillar to the right of the chancel steps, also shows her presenting an apple to the Christ child.



devotion within its shrines. At the same time, his hand gestures, from Eberhard to the Holy Family, suggest that the recent war has been won and the city secured by his efficacy in invoking the protection of Anna Selbdritt. Oswald embodies and sanctifies the victorious Swiss fighters. And in a marked shift from earlier representations of his Christian militarism in which he exhorts the adoration of the Holy Cross on the battlefield,<sup>6</sup> here, we see his devotion directed toward a distinctively late medieval, German, feminised focus, that of Anna Selbdritt.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to his contemporary armour and regal red robe, Oswald also holds a covered golden cup and a raven bearing a ring, in his right hand. In late medieval metrical romances from the southern German-speaking lands, Oswald is reconfigured as a crusading King of England who journeys East to win the hand of the daughter of a pagan emperor with incestuous designs on her.<sup>8</sup> A talking raven acts as a messenger between the separated lovers, carrying letters and a ring. When the couple are finally united in marriage, Christ appears at the celebration disguised as a pilgrim to beg for food, and Oswald immediately offers him his golden cup, a romance reiteration of his largesse toward beggars in Bede's originary *Historia ecclesiastica*. The raven and the covered cup have become Oswald's standard attributes in the German-speaking lands by the late Middle Ages; we see them elsewhere in the Zug Oswaldkirche in Ulrich Rosenstein of Lachen's wood carving of Oswald bearing a covered cup and sceptre on the south quire stall from the 1480s (figure 3).<sup>9</sup> Their inclusion on the quire stall and in this painting indicate that these romance

<sup>6</sup> Oswald's adoration of the Cross is still a pronounced feature of the thirteenth-century metrical *vita* by Henry of Avranches.

<sup>7</sup> Having said this, Oswald's principal devotion to the cross re-emerges in a large, late seventeenth-century painting by Johannes Brandenburg, now on the west wall of the church to the right of the door, depicting Oswald and his soldiers kneeling before the cross prior to battle.

<sup>8</sup> These pious romances include the 'Munich Oswald,' a metrical romance of 3550 lines in which Oswald is king of England, and the 'Vienna Oswald,' a fourteenth-century poem of 1465 lines in the Silesian dialect, in which Oswald is reconfigured as the king of Germany. While the 'Munich Oswald' used to be viewed as twelfth-century production, it has recently been placed much later on the basis of manuscript evidence. It is worth noting that one of its surviving manuscripts originates from Schaffhausen, north of Zug: Schaffhausen, Stadtbibliothek Cod. Gen. 10 (1472). (Curschmann 1964, 1974; Bowden 102–136; Jansen 230–240).

<sup>9</sup> The statue of St Oswald that forms part of the twentieth-century high altar assemblage (1935) retains the cup and raven.



**Figure 2.** Anon, “Anna Selbdritt, St Oswald and John Eberhard.” painting on wood, 1492. Copyright notice: Museum Burg Zug, Inventarnummer 3235. Leihgabe Katholische Kirchgemeinde Zug.

narratives play an important role in the way that Zug citizens understand their city saint in the fifteenth century. Oswald establishes Christianity through the sword, he slays the pagan foe, but he is also a romantic suitor oriented towards a female goal in the Middle East (a romance sublimation of crusading ideology) whose miraculous capacities shade into the marvellous.



**Figure 3.** St Oswald holding covered cup and sceptre. South quire wood carving by Ulrich Rosenstein. Oswaldkirche, Zug. Author photo.

#### 4. The Acquisition of Relics for the Oswaldkirche

Building the Oswaldkirche at Zug seems to have been an extraordinary labour of love for John Eberhard. He kept meticulous accounts of the benefactors to the project,<sup>10</sup> and a personal journal detailing the stages of construction. From this journal we also learn of his determination to ac-

<sup>10</sup> These included Charles VIII of France, Archduke Sigismund, Duke René of Lorraine, and representatives of the cantons, together with a papal letter of indulgence to the church from Pope Sixtus IV, presumably intended to encourage pilgrimage to Oswald's relics at Zug (Baker, "St Oswald and His Church at Zug" 109–110).



quire relics of Oswald to sanctify the church. In 1481 he sends a messenger named Frederick to Peterborough Abbey, one of the centres of Oswald's veneration in England, to attempt to procure a relic of the saint. The sealed letter which Abbot William Ramsey of Peterborough sends back to Eberhard details how Frederick fasts and prays before being brought into the presence of Peterborough's prize relic, Oswald's right arm:

Brachium dextrum ipsius gloriosi regis et martiris Oswaldi uti in bello a quodam Penda pagano et rege Merciorum a corpore resectum et abscisum erat cum neruis, iuncturis, palma et digitis integrum et incorruptum in hodiernum diem permanere claro lumine conspexit. (Baker, "St Oswald and His Church at Zug" 122–123)<sup>11</sup>

(He saw in a clear light the right arm of the glorious king and martyr Oswald cut off from his body by Penda, the pagan king of the Mercians, together with the nerves, joints, hands and fingers whole and uncorrupt to this day.) (Baker, "St Oswald and His Church at Zug" 111)

Frederick offers money to it, and receives in return:

porciunculamque panni precioso sanguine dicti gloriosi regis et martiris tinctam *ad te deferendam*, *magister Johannes*, tue deuocionis causa a nobis accepit. (Baker, "St Oswald and His Church at Zug" 123)

(a piece of the garment stained with the precious blood of the said glorious king and martyr *to bring back to you*, *Master John*, on account of your devotion). (Baker, "St Oswald and His Church at Zug" 111)

Effectively, the Swiss envoy's perception of the arm's incorruption and ongoing spiritual efficacy (*claro lumine conspexit*) precipitates the gift of the secondary relic. It is interesting to note Abbot William's intimate second-person address to Eberhard (*ad te [...] magister Johannes*). It seems unlikely that these men can ever have met; nonetheless the letter creates a personal textual bond spanning from Peterborough to Zug, founded on their common devotion to St Oswald.

The envoy to Peterborough is only the start of Eberhard's indefatigable relic search. In 1484, he manages to obtain a finger from Oswald's left hand from the abbot of Wettingen, while in 1485 he writes in his journal that he has ridden to Weingarten, had dinner with the abbot, and

<sup>11</sup> The Latin letter remains in Zug record office (Baker, "St Oswald and His Church at Zug" 110).

managed to procure ‘a fine piece of the arm of St Oswald,’ presumably his left arm (Baker, “St Oswald and His Church at Zug” 111). The people of Zug give the monks of Weingarten in return a perpetual right of hospitality. Baker suggests that Weingarten’s generosity is motivated by the abbey’s ongoing feud with Archduke Sigismund and need to seek protection from the canton of Zurich, Zug’s close ally (112). Also in 1485, Eberhard’s clerical colleague from Zurich travels to Schaffhausen to attempt to get a part of Oswald’s head for Zug. On this occasion his embassy fails but, undeterred, Eberhard’s successor makes another request in 1502 which this time meets with success (Bailey 201). A portion of Oswald’s head is triumphantly brought back to Zug Oswaldkirche to join his other body parts and garments. Countering Oswald’s violent dismemberment on English soil at Maserfelth, we can interpret Eberhard’s campaign as an attempt to *re-member* Oswald, in Zug, as an efficacious regal protector and spiritual patron for the city, and perhaps, at a time of growing national awareness and expansion, for the Old Swiss Confederacy more broadly. Gathering these relics from assorted monastic foundations, his campaign also exemplifies the transfer of saintly thaumaturgical power from monasteries to town churches in the late fifteenth century. No longer curated by monastic guardians, Oswald’s cult and physical remains pass into the hands of the secular clergy, making them more readily available to the urban bourgeoisie.

## 5. Reading the Exterior of the Oswaldkirche

With this urban audience held in mind, let us return to the iconographic record of the church exterior, turned out to face the parishioners of Zug as they came each week to hear mass. Contemporaneous with the completion of the church structure, in the 1490s, two symmetrically-positioned Gothic lancet doors were opened in the west wall. A large sculpture of Oswald slaying Cadwallon appears in a niche to the left of the doors (figure 4). This is balanced, in the righthand niche, by a sculpture of St Michael the Archangel, patron of Zug town, slaying the devil as a dragon (Rev. 12:7–12). The two face toward an image of the Virgin and Child in the central niche, and higher upon the same wall, an image of Anna Selbdritt, echoing parts of the devotional programme of the Eberhard painting in more public, monumental terms (figure 5). The correspondence between Oswald and Michael the Archangel is unsurprising since Oswald had joined Michael in the late fifteenth century as spiritual co-patron of



the town; indeed, it reappears several times in sixteenth-century stained glass from Zug and Wettingen depicting the arms of the canton of Zug. In the stained glass however, Oswald is always identified by his covered cup and raven; it is solely in these wall sculptures that we find the additional provocative correspondence between the killing of Cadwallon and the apocalyptic dragon. How should we interpret this correspondence?



**Figure 4.** Oswald slaying Cadwallon. Stone sculpture, 1490s. West exterior. Oswaldkirche, Zug. Author photo.

Clearly, Oswald's seventh-century victory over Cadwallon at Heavenfield is equated in some way with the celestial battle between good and evil at the end of time, collapsing a past into a future temporality and giving a local Northumbrian victory universal dimensions. Positioned in the temporal middle, Oswald's exemplarity for the Swiss defeat of the Burgundians in the 1470s, which underpins the construction of the entire church, gives that war additional ambitious associations, making it part of a Christian typology. The Swiss have overcome the wicked Burgundians as Oswald has defeated Cadwallon, and as St Michael will set his lance into the devil at the end of time. The iconographic possibilities of these doors can be developed even further by an examination of the four smaller figures carved within their Gothic arches on each side. On the left, we

find the three kings, Melchior, Caspar, and Balthazar with their gifts, and St Joseph (intriguingly, Balthazar with his crown and covered cup bears a significant resemblance to Oswald's standard late medieval depiction). On



**Figure 5.** Iconographic programme above Gothic lancet doors, showing Oswald slaying Cadwallon, Archangel Michael slaying the devil, the Virgin and Child, and Anna Selbdritt. West exterior. Oswaldkirche, Zug. Author photo.

the right, we find the saint-emperors Constantine, Charlemagne, Henry II (973-1024), and St Louis, King of France (1226-1270), all brandishing swords (Figure 6).<sup>12</sup> There is an obsessively regal, imperial and military iconography on display here. In keeping with his German veneration throughout the Middle Ages, in particular by the Welf dynasty, Oswald, prioritised above the doors, arguably becomes a participant in an imperial lineage stretching from Constantine (with whom he was explicitly compared), through Charlemagne and Henry II, to the heavenly imperium at

<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, Henry II was the son of the Duke of Bavaria. As such, it is possible that his inclusion here may be a product of Zug's links with Weingarten, the burial site of the Bavarian dukes.

the end of time.<sup>13</sup> Having witnessed the Swiss dispel contemporary threats from the Habsburgs and Burgundians, it would seem that Eberhard and his artistic collaborators also aspire to align the contemporary Confederacy with this earlier genealogy (perhaps in contrast to the present imperial incumbent), extolling an explicitly military, but also idealised and saintly form of rule.



**Figure 6.** Constantine, Charlemagne, Henry II, and St Louis of France. Righthand lancet door. West exterior. Oswaldkirche, Zug. Author photo.

In addition to appearing in the right door arch, and perhaps as a consequence of his family ties with the Dukes of Bavaria, Henry II also reappears in monumental form at the other end of the church on one of the chancel buttresses, flanked by sculptures of Mary, St Josse and St Oswald by Ulrich Rosenstein on adjacent buttresses. In the sculpture of Oswald, tallying with his anachronistic representation in German romances as the King of *England* rather than Northumbria, he is depicted carrying a shield

<sup>13</sup> A twelfth-century reliquary of the saint-emperor Henry II, probably commissioned by the Welf duke, Henry 'the Lion' (1129-1195), on the occasion of his marriage with Matilda, daughter of Henry II of England, also depicts Oswald of Northumbria and Sigismond of Burgundy as analogous saint-kings: <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010111471>. An eighteenth-century picture, which Baker describes as being in the priest's house in Zug in the late 1940s, shows Oswald invested with the imperial crown (Baker, "St Oswald and His Church at Zug" 119).



with the coat of arms adopted by the kings of England since 1340: three lions quartered with the fleur-de-lis of France (Figure 7).<sup>14</sup>



**Figure 7.** Oswald bearing the English coat of arms. Stone sculpture on chancel buttress by Ulrich Rosenstein. Oswaldkirche, Zug. Author photo.

This adds a further contemporary and nationalistic dimension to his meaning for Zug, reconfiguring him there as the Christian founder of a unified English *nation* at a time when the Swiss were moving from *Acht Orte* to *Dreizehn Orte*, and developing an expanded idea of the Swiss confederation, in the years succeeding their Burgundian triumph and defeat of the Holy Roman Emperor in 1499.

<sup>14</sup> In the eighteenth century, an English visitor to the church also noted the presence of a wooden statue of Oswald on horseback with a shield of England, inscribed ‘Sanctus Oswaldus Rex Angliae’ (Baker, “St Oswald and His Church at Zug” 114). Interpretation of these buttress statues is problematised by the fact that their originals are now preserved in the Burg Zug museum, where the labels given to them differ from the fifteenth-century inscriptions identifying the four statues on the exterior of the church. In the museum, the crowned figure with the English shield is identified as King Henry VI of England, although there is certainly no other evidence of any Swiss cult to this fifteenth-century saint king, while the crowned figure to his left, admittedly holding what looks like a cup, is identified as St Oswald. I have opted to interpret the crowned figure with the English shield as Oswald as the most plausible solution to this quandary.

## 6. Conclusion

To conclude: the seventh-century cult of King Oswald of Northumbria is remarkable for its early transition to the Continent and malleability within new religio-political contexts. This essay has traced one particular line of transmission, culminating in Zug in Switzerland. After an initial alignment with the eleventh-century dukes of Bavaria, where he is commandeered as a crusading prototype and exemplary figure of righteous resistance to corrupt imperial rule, Oswald reappears in late fifteenth-century Zug to affirm and sanctify Swiss confederal resistance to the Burgundians and Habsburgs. Here, in addition to performing as the questing suitor of German vernacular romance and turning toward more feminine objects of spiritual *amor* (vis, the iconographic group of Anna Selbdritt), he also continues the continental practice of assimilation to a genealogy of saintly Holy Roman emperors (Charlemagne, Henry II, and others), perhaps intended in this instance as a didactic corrective to the oppressive present-day incumbent, Maximilian I (1486-1519). In times to come, he will also take on a stridently denominational function, appearing as the hero of an early seventeenth-century play, the *Theatrespiel von St Oswald* by the controversial Zug priest and schoolmaster Johannes Mahler (c. 1590-1634). In Mahler's play, Oswald initially defeats the Protestant figure of Heresy, but is subsequently driven from his native land, England, now under the curse of the Reformation, before being received triumphantly in Catholic Zug (Mahler; Baker, "St Oswald and His Church at Zug" 120). The approach taken in the *Theatrespiel* suggests that, by the seventeenth century, Eberhard's late medieval re-membering of the saint at Zug would have been interpreted as the safeguarding and preservation of a precious Catholic icon, abused on home soil. Similarly, the image of Oswald defeating Cadwallon on the west wall exterior could perhaps have been read as an allegorical victory over Protestantism, reiterating the subject of the enormous seventeenth-century wall painting over the chancel arch in which Christ and his archangel consign a winged devil bearing the sign 'Lüge!' (Lie!) to the abyss, along with the theological authors of those lies. Oswald's ideological transformation within Switzerland takes yet another turn!



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