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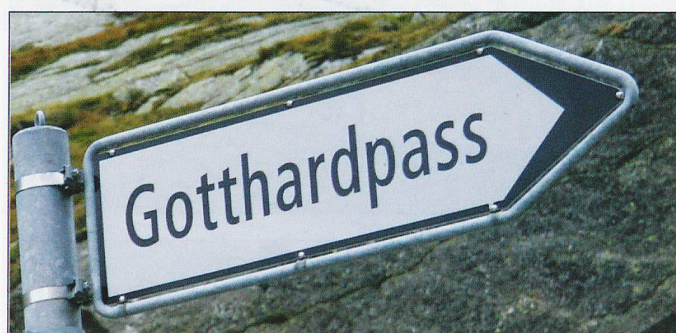
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What Gotthard do we mean?

Bryan Stone



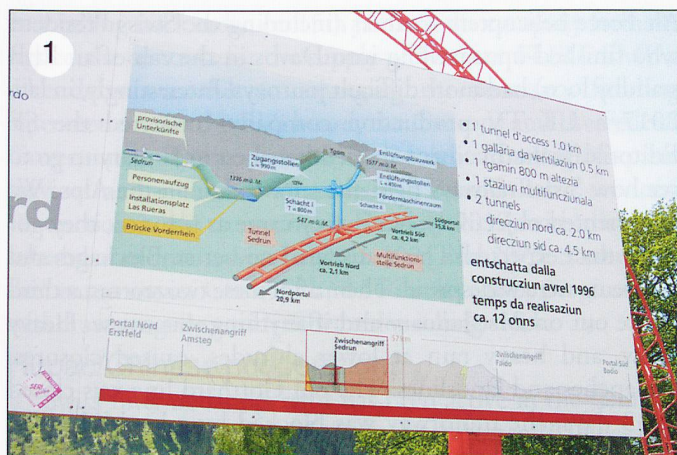
ABOVE: Just before Christmas 2019 a Cisalpino passes Airolo.
LEFT: Gotthardpass this way. Photos: Bryan Stone

We all talk regularly about the 'Gotthard'. Sometimes we say 'Saint Gotthard'. We have had a Gotthard Railway with its tunnel since 1882, a road tunnel followed 50 years ago, and now have a new Gotthard Base Tunnel. But there is no Gotthard mountain, or Gotthardberg, in Switzerland. There is a high altitude pass, and this gives its name to a transalpine communication route, once extremely dangerous, often suffering the extremes of storm and snow. Although many of our Swiss Alpine pass routes were known to Celts and Romans, the Gotthard was not. Only opened in the 13 C., it changed trade and history in Europe. What are we talking about?

Hildesheim is a German town south of Hannover. There was, in 1038, a chapel to St Maurice, and within it the personal cell of a devout Bishop, Godehard. On 4th May 1038 he died there, and rapidly became known in north Germany as 'Gotthard-the-Holy'. He had been born in Bavaria, and was a loyal follower of the Holy Roman Emperor Heinrich II. On 14th May 1004 he was with other northern dignitaries at Heinrich's coronation in Pavia, Italy, and is known to have celebrated, on the long way home, Pentecost (Whitsuntide) in Lugano. His journey north continued, not unusually at that time, over the Lukmanier Pass. Arriving in Zürich, in June 1004, he became involved in settling feuds and regional wars in that area and in southern Germany. He tried to reconcile fundamental conflicts of interest between the Pope and the Emperor. One result was to secure the land rights, under Heinrich II, of the Monastery of Einsiedeln, so that when in the 14th C. war between the Cantons seemed inevitable, peace could be negotiated based on established law. This was in a real sense the founding of Confederate Switzerland. 'Gotthard-the-Holy' had become a peacemaker.




The records show that by 1386, there was a church dedicated to St Gotthard where Lugano stands today, and in Switzerland there are other dedications to Gotthard. It seems that the link between St Maurice in Canton Valais, and the St Maurice chapel in Hildesheim was his personal concern too. But there is no chapel to his honour on the present pass. Use of the Gotthard Pass became practicable in the early 12th C. when a foot and mule passage Gotthard Base Tunnel works at Erstfeld.



1. A Gotthard Base Tunnel sign at Sedrun.
2. A southbound freight headed by 11617 and a Re 4/4 II arrives at Göschenen.
3. A Re10/10 at Airolo.

through the Schöllenen gorge, between Andermatt and Göschenen, was established. We know of no named pioneer to thank for establishing this route; like many things it emerged, and shortly afterwards the 'Devil's Bridge' came to the gorge. Legend tells us that it was the Devil himself who built the structure, asking as payment for the soul of the first to cross it. Canton Uri's canny mountain men apparently sent a goat across first!

We cannot judge today how it happened, but within a few years the route over the Gotthard Pass came to dominate trade between Lombardy, Basel and the Rhineland. We will never know why, or when, St Gotthard was chosen to honour the new pass. But it is this Bishop Gotthard of Hildesheim whom we so lightly remember today every time we talk of it – high alpine pass, modern road, railway tunnels, and all. How many medieval clerics are remembered so frequently? 

4. The bleak pass.
5. The Devil's Bridge in the Schöllenen gorge.
6. One of the many hairpin bends on the old pass.
7. One of the old coaches that still ply for the tourist trade over the pass.

