The white cross in the red field : the Schwyz cross is not the Swiss cross

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Objekttyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad**

Band (Jahr): **18 (1991)**

Heft (2): **700 years**

PDF erstellt am: **13.09.2024**

Persistenter Link: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907785

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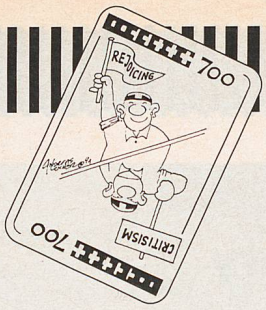


The white cross in the red field

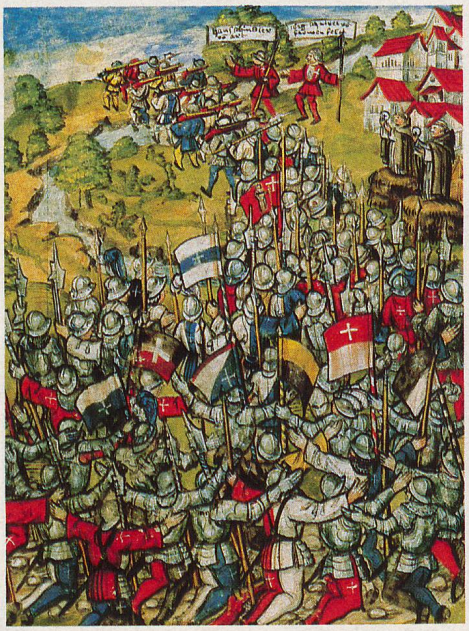
The Schwyz cross is not the Swiss cross

"Many people believe that the small white cross of the people of Schwyz gave its form to the Swiss cross, in much the same way as Schwyz gave Switzerland its name." (The country's name is written "Schweiz" in German and pronounced "Schwyz" in Swiss German dialect.) This common explanation corresponds to a widely-held view, rather than to a historical fact. The confederate cross and that of the inhabitants of Schwyz are entirely independent of each another.

The coat of arms of Schwyz was, for a long time, a simple red shield, which probably goes back to the first regional banner. A cross on a coat of arms appeared occasionally in the 17th and early 18th century, mostly in unofficial depictions. The national seal of 1729 is an important piece of evidence of its official use. At the same time, the small cross appeared on the coins of Schwyz. It did not take on a fixed form, but mostly showed a so-called "paw cross", with splayed, elongated arms. When the confederate assembly of the "Tagsatzung" decided to create a seal of the confederation in 1815, the government of Schwyz finally determined the form of the coat of arms of Schwyz: place was made for the small long-armed cross in the heraldic top left hand corner (the right hand side from the onlooker's point of view). However, the proportions of the cross were only finally determined in 1963. The picture becomes more difficult, when we look at the flag of Schwyz and its cross. Up until now, people thought that the flag stemmed from a banner of war of the Holy Roman Empire, wich had been granted the people of Schwyz by the German emperors. This cannot be proved. According to the latest research, the flag cannot be the ancient. "Blutbanner" of Empire because its characteristic was not the colour, but the cross on a ground, without any fixed colour. The banner of the people of Schwyz was just a plain red cloth. There was a connection between piousness in the late medieval period and the spilling of blood by Christ and by the people of Schwyz, since red is the colour which celebrates Christ's suffering.

The Quarter

The uniqueness of the Schwyz banner does not lie in its colour but in its oldest quarter. It depicts the crucifixion and the implements of martyrdom. The inhabitants of Schwyz apparently received this from King Rudolf I after a campaign near Besançon in 1289. According to the latest findings, this motif on the flag is scarcely possible before the middle of the 14th Century. The oldest regional banner from the time of Morgarten (1315) actually appears not to have had any such quarter, unlike the one from the battle near Laupen (1339).. Picture chronicles often show a free-floating, long-armed cross in a stylized form. However, the small cross of Schwyz that appears on flags and coat of arms did not develop directly from this early example. It appears only occasionally towards the end of the 18th Century and then in the 19th Century (after fixing of the coat of arms' form), it was consistently displayed on the flags of Schwyz.



For many centuries the white cross accompanied the Confederates as a sign of recognition and a symbol of solidarity in battle. Picture: The Confederates at prayer before joining battle with Charles the Bold at Nancy in 1477. From Diepold Schilling's "Lucerne Chronicle", 1513 (Photo kindly made available)

From the cross of the Confederates...

Not only did the cross play an important role for the people of Schwyz but it was also important for the Confederates as a whole. In the old days, a common confederate standard did not exist for use in battle. The white cross, which the Confederates attached to themselves in the battle near Laupen, expressed their common bond. One should not underestimate the religious meaning of the symbol. The Swiss were confronting an opponent who bore the blessing of the German Emperor, thus bearing a higher, Christian authority. A connection to the cross of Maurice is feasible. This holy martyr and his "ten thousand knights" were revered by the Confederates.
From this point onward, the cross accompanied the Confederates on their campaigns. Some of their weapons also bore its emblem. The pennants, the ensign of the cantons, displayed a slim white cross as a symbol of their solidarity. It had become the badge of the Confederates, quite independently from the quarter of Schwyz. However, already by the late middle ages the Confederates felt a need to have their own Swiss standard for their common enterprises. And so the little confederate flag was devised that, contrary to the small flag of the cantons with its free-floating cross, showed a white cross which was fixed at the edges. Later this became the badge of the Swiss troops serving in foreign armies.

... to the Swiss Cross

After the Helvetic period (1798–1803) and the occupation of the country by the French, the Swiss cantons were in a hurry to restore the old order. Their efforts met only with partial success because in the meantime too much had changed and the new cantons were voicing their own ideas. The decision of the assembly of the "Tagsatzung" in 1814 was a symbolic one: the image on the seal of the Confederation, "the white cross in the red field", was to be viewed as the standard of the old Confederates. They looked back and, thus, prepared the way for something new. In 1841, the first confederate flags with the familiar form we know today came into official use. Yet it took a long time before the cross took on its contemporary and aesthetically pleasing form.
These short remarks about the development of the cross of Schwyz and the Swiss cross are certainly neither complete nor do do they try to give a full account. Nevertheless, they are an attempt to honour the cross as an old and contemporary Swiss symbol: a cross, based on true religious beliefs and, for our forefathers, both a symbol of unity in the shared Christian belief and of common political goals. Here is the link between the cross of the Confederates and the small cross of the people of Schwyz, who incidentally have made their own way through history.

Josef Wiget
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