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Morat

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It is above all one event which has imprinted the name of this little town in Western Switzerland – well-known for its beautifully preserved fortifications and attractive compactness – on the European historic conscience: the battle against the Burgundian Duke Charles the Bold on 22nd June 1476; a battle fought outside the walls of the town, and of which it is said, justly, that it influenced decisively the fate of the Occident. The whole of the early history of the district of Murten or Morat lies in the dark, from the Stone Age right into the Middle Ages, except possibly for a few episodes. It was only in 1127 when Western Switzerland fell under the influence of the Zaehringen territorial policy and with it into the tension of the Burgundian realm of politics, that the picture gradually becomes a little

The «Rübenloch»

(Photo Buchs)



Commemorative escutcheon made by the graphist Kurt Wirth, Bern.

clearer. At that time, the Dukes Berthold IV and Berthold V founded a number of towns – Fribourg, Burgdorf, Berne, Thun and not least Morat – in order to secure their Western borders. Even today the Zaehringen pattern can be clearly detected in Morat's basic urban outline. In addition, a civic charter was granted the new town, whose contents have been handed down in a document dating from the middle of the 13th century.

With the death in 1218 of Berthold V, the ducal house became extinct, and a new situation arose. Whilst the personal Zaehringen estate fell to the House of Kiburg, the feudal territories, amongst them Berne and Morat, passed over rightfully to Emperor Frederic II who handed them to his son Conrad for administration. Thus Morat became an imperial city. In view of the fact that its position on the edge of the powerful Staufen domain was constantly threatened by the local lords of its surroundings, King Conrad decreed in 1238 that the town had to construct a strong wall around it.

For this he donated the fallen timber in the Morat district to the citizens for four years and released them from all dues and taxes for the same period. During the following years of great political arguments, it became increasingly clear that the Empire's protection was not sufficient to cover Morat. Above all, the growing influence of Savoy asserted itself, first in a protective treaty which the town concluded with Count Peter II in May 1255, and

finally in the fact that King Henry VII mortgaged Morat to Savoy for 4000 Silver marks in 1310. From then until 1475, Morat was part of the Savoyan realm. Those changing decades, however, were not only marked by external struggles for the possession of Morat, but also by internal activities; the town's population with Mayor und Council at the head got involved in the political game, and a number of mutual protection treaties with neighbouring towns like Berne, Fribourg, Solothurn, Bienne and Payerne were concluded, they showed how much Morat had become integrated in the gradually created Confederation in Western Switzerland (under Bern's leadership), and that in spite or perhaps because of the Savoyan overlords.

Parallel with the activities in foreign policy, the inner life of Morat also thrived; its constitutional basis was formed by the already mentioned civic document. It safeguarded free mayoral elections, elections of civil servants, sovereign jurisdiction, fishing privileges and various additional rights; these were complemented and adjusted to new circumstances many times in the course of the later Middle Ages.

With the conquest of Morat by the Bernese and Fribourgeois in the autumn of 1475, not only the Savoyan but also the medieval epoch in Morat's history came to an end. The town and district of Morat formed a commune authority under the two states of Berne and Fri-

bourg, recognized since 1484 by the other Confederates, until the Old Confederation collapsed in 1798. Constitutionally this meant that the two ruling bodies confirmed the charter and all appertaining privileges dating to Savoyan times, but appointed one of their own men as mayor alternately every five years and put the town under an obligation to give military aid.

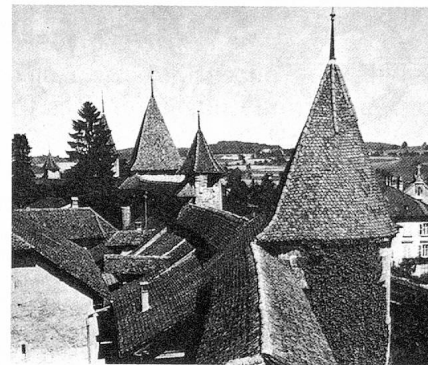
It is just that last stipulation which became of greatest importance for the foreign policy of Morat as time went on. The subject town had to send military contingents to all martial altercations in which Berne and Fribourg were involved. As long as the two overlords had roughly similar aims such as in the Swabian War or in the Italian campaigns, there were no difficulties; but when Berne accepted the Reformed faith and thus put itself in religious conflict with Fribourg, exact rules were needed, especially when the two towns fought on different sides as was the case in the first as well as the second Villmergen Wars. Under these circumstances Morat had to remain neutral, but otherwise the town had to send troops alternately to two overlords. Nevertheless, it became increasingly evident that in spite of all discussions Morat's troops were drawn more and more to Fribourg ever since the middle of the 16th century, and when the Federal defence forces were set up, Morat was simply attached to a Fribourg regiment which, with the new Fribourg military organisation of 1744, became a separate regiment under Fribourg staff officers.

Whilst Fribourg thus strengthened the military connections with Morat, Berne was successful in exerting considerable influence on the internal relations of the town, and above all to introduce Reformation. Fribourg opposed this at first, but in a plebiscite on 7th January 1530 Morat decided to accept the Reformed faith. In this, the efforts of Guillaume Farel were

of particular and decisive importance. The introduction of Reformation brought many changes to Morat. The population was probably hit hardest by the numerous strict church mandates issued by the Bernese government and which prohibited all jollifications. On the other hand, instruction of the children by the ministers gradually led to a disciplined school system.

Between the two pillars of military policies mainly directed from Fribourg, and a denominational and spiritual attitude considerably influenced by Berne, Morat's history unfolded during the *Ancien Régime* and at the same time made a not inconsiderable contribution towards the coming together of the two religiously opposed overlords. For the joint administration of the domain, the regularly convened meetings in order to check accounts and the supervision carried out by both sides over the mayor always coming from one and then the other state, managed at least at political level more than once to overcome the religious differences. This situation gave the town of Morat the chance of saving its face and to profit from the best of both ruling states. This development is evident, too, in brisk building activities and in trade which developed at that time very considerably. Morat became an important transfer centre for goods coming by road and waterway and attracted craftsmen accordingly: tanners, leather workers, wheel-wrights, brewers and wrought-iron workers. The superior consciousness of the inhabitants was reflected in the administration where a Council of twelve and later of twenty performed their duties under the supervision of Vernese and Fribourg mayors.

Once more in its history, Morat was again in the same position as in the early summer of 1476: in the first months of 1798 when the French revolutionary army pressed on Fri-



View of Morat's roofs

bourg more and more. As previously, Berne set up its main troop formation near the town; but when, on 2nd March, Fribourg and Solothurn surrendered to the French army without resistance, the Bernese supreme command withdrew its troops from the town quietly in the evening and retreated to a line of defence behind the Aare, Saane and Sense. The Morat people were greatly disappointed, and the next day, the French marched into the town without opposition.

When, after the fall of the Old Confederation, constitutional battles raged for decades, Morat was not spared either. The main problem here was the settlement of cantonal allegiance. Without much ado, Morat was allotted to the Canton of Fribourg in the Helvetic Republic, although its population desired union with Berne. Napoleon did not make any changes with the Mediation Constitution imposed by him. And although the Morat people fought again and again against this decision, town and district of Morat remained with Fribourg.

Morat's history of our time is marked above all by an increase in population in connection with a certain industrialisation. The little town is spreading ever more into the country around its fortification on the hill. But inside the old walls not even today can any traveller ignore the historic heritage of this Zaehring foundation.

Pascal Ladner