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Autor: Germann, Georg / Lenzin, René
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Summer in Berne – the Swiss capital is worth a journey

Of bears, fountains and Burgundian wars

Berne was one of the most powerful members of the old Swiss Confederation. Since 1848 it has been Switzerland's capital. It is worth a journey – particularly in the summer. So it is the main subject of this forum. We examine its name and its myths. And we begin by talking to Professor Georg Germann, director of the Historical Museum of Berne, about its past and its significance.

Swiss Review: Professor Germann, Berne is the capital of Switzerland. Shouldn't this really be the National Museum and not "just" the Historical Museum of Berne?

Georg Germann: When the new federal state was founded in 1848 it was intentional that federal bodies such as the Federal Institutes of Technology, the Federal Supreme Court and the Federal Insurance Court were not all concentrated in Berne. Following this principle thought was given to where the Swiss National Museum should be. In 1891 the Federal Assembly decided on Zurich. The central Swiss cantons had originally been in favour of Berne, and in order to swing them over to Zurich one thing the Zurichers did was to promise the Roman Catholic diaspora a fine building plot for a new church. Zurich's main competitors, Basle and Berne, both had important historical collections, however, and in 1894 each opened its own museum. The Historical Museum of Berne was built to plans which had been already submitted to the Federal Assembly. This is why the building – steeped in the historical tradition which at that time was a strong current in architecture – is a sort of Swiss architectural encyclopaedia. The main facade is dominated by a pavilion whose design is taken from Avenches Castle, a corner tower which reminds us of Vufflens Castle in Canton Vaud, an oriel like that of the Neuchâtel Corn Exchange and a round tower based on the Capuchin's Tower on the old fortifications of Zug.

Returning to the subject of the capital, why did that choice fall to Berne in 1848?

It seemed natural. After the ancien régime the Swiss Diet met alternately in the capitals of the cantons of Zurich, Berne and Lucerne, all of which were possible capitals for the new federal state. Apart from its central position and tradition, however, there was a third reason for choosing Berne which gradually came into the forefront and which Berne politicians still like to emphasise: the bridging role of this bilingual canton. In the city itself by the way resistance was fairly strong. Evidence of this may be seen in the fact that in front of the old Federal Council Building, which is now Parliament West, stands not a statue of Helvetia but one of Berna – who has her back turned to the building.

One of the jewels of your museum is the Burgundian Room with all the valuable pieces of booty captured in the war against Charles the Bold. What was the significance of this war for Berne and the old Confederation as a whole?

The 1476 surprise victory over the very powerful and enormously rich Duke Charles of Burgundy increased respect for the Confederates throughout Europe and gave them the reputation of being excellent fighters and therefore potential mercenaries. It brought them a huge amount of booty but almost no territory. The riches were shared up amongst the Confederates. The only things which



In the capital the interests of all cantons come together.

A city prohibits the tarot and draws its water – the life element par excellence – from fountains linked to the tarot! (Photos: Marcus Gyger)

remain are the trophies: arms, standards, other symbols of state. Neuenstadt Museum has the canons, while the Historical Museum of Berne has many of the standards and as its most valuable piece the Thousand Flower Tapestry adorned with the arms of the Duke of Burgundy, which had been made in Brussels as part of a series. Only the one in Berne has come down to us. Gold and silver were not really admired for the fineness of their decoration but were mainly valued and used for making coins.

The defeat of Charles the Bold shattered his dream of a Middle Kingdom. Did the victorious Bernese and the other Confederates have any ambition of becoming a great power?

Not really at that time. Berne's declaration of war on Charles was already strong stuff from a 15th century point of view. But the happy outcome of the war for the Confederates should not be seen as great power policy, as if the aim were to grab large chunks of territory. Another thing was that right up to 1798 the Confederates always saw Berne as a bit of a threat because of its size. The gradual expansion of the eight-canton Con-

federation was conceded grudgingly by the original central Swiss cantons.

What would be the main incentive for Swiss Abroad to visit your museum? The museum's historical collections, which are incidentally supported financially in equal parts by the canton, the city and the citizens' corporation, have always been central to Swiss history and culture. They are genuine collections –

not objects just purchased and put together – which bear witness to the great deeds not only of medieval Berne but of the old Confederation as a whole. They cover the conquest of Aargau, the Burgundian wars and the conquest of Vaud, and they include all the famous reconciliation pictures with which the Berne City Hall was decorated in the 1580s when attempts were being made to patch things up between the Roman

Catholic and Protestant Confederates. In addition to this, our museum gives an insight into the development of the Swiss industrial and consumer society from the 18th to the 20th centuries. In this way it reaches out towards the present, just as the towers and oriels of its architecture literally look out not only over the Alps but also over contemporary Switzerland.

Interview: René Lenzin

Esoteric symbols: Berne has an exciting past

Mysterious Berne

The townscape of Berne makes us wonder what the magnificent facades, the courtyards difficult of access and the rooms under the eaves really conceal. Scarcely anyone who wanders through the streets of Berne can escape the city's mysterious atmosphere. This is no coincidence, since a peninsula jutting out into a river is always full of secret energy.

In earlier times not fully open to historical research people had a particular feeling for places of energy. They liked to make their settlements in such locations so they could replenish their own resources. The symbolic animal of

Hans-Dieter Leuenberger*

Berne is ample evidence of this. The bear played a special role for the Celts. There are traces of this in the sagas surrounding ancient Britain's King Arthur. His link with the bear takes him to the centre of the myth of the Holy Grail. Most probably there was a religious shrine at the place which juts out into the Aare long before the foundation of the city.

In contrast to places like Chartres and Stonehenge, Berne's field of energy cannot be measured with scientific precision. But it is obvious that the forces which build up in a peninsula do not disperse into the river banks but build up and concentrate. Even if it cannot be proved, there is no doubt that Berne is subject to impulses of energy which are

* Hans-Dieter Leuenberger is a writer, bio-energetic analyst and specialist in the esoteric recognised throughout Europe.

particularly conducive to all that is secretive and mystic and which are still effective today. We have to put up with the fact that the mystery of this energy is something which we will never be able to unravel. But this is typical of such phenomena. Esotericism, or the occult, is defined as "that which is hidden, not accessible to all".

Berne's act of folly

One of the most important sources of esoteric knowledge is the tarot. This consists of 78 symbols which are drawn on cards and which are known to be at the origin of all today's card games. It was probably brought to Europe at the beginning of the 13th century by nomad peoples originating in the western Himalayan region and in India. Today the tarot is commonly known as a means of fortune-telling, but in reality it is one of the great works of wisdom of mankind, comparable in its significance to the Bible, the Koran and the Upanishads. But it is distinguished from these books of wisdom by the fact that its content is transmitted not by words but by images.

The tarot must have aroused lively interest in Berne, for in 1367 the city council issued an edict prohibiting use

