

Forum Schweizer Geschichte Schwyz.

The Alps in legend

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Tour of the exhibition

Introduction

The cause of goosebumps in those who sit listening to them, traditional tales relate extraordinary, supernatural or miraculous events. Folk tales are short narratives handed down by word of mouth that have been subsequently written down. They tell of ghosts, witches and devils, or historical incidents and figures.

Unlike fairy tales, folk tales are datable and place-specific, and so can claim to have taken place; the narrative aims to be credible. The German word 'Sage' was coined by the Brothers Grimm, who collected folk tales in an attempt to preserve a literary oral tradition. Traditional tales are known in all Swiss regions, but central Switzerland is particularly rich in them.

Narrating and collecting folk tales

Folk tales were first related in the 15th and 16th centuries by chroniclers such as Johannes Stumpf, Renward Cysat, Christian Wurstisen, Aegidius Tschudi and Petermann Etterlin. The naturalist Johann Jakob Scheuchzer also passed them on. While travelling in the Swiss Alps between 1702 and 1711, he asked the locals to tell him stories. The *German Legends* of the brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm pointed the way ahead for subsequent collections. Traditional tales by region began to be collected in the 19th century.

The Grimms' German Legends

The Brothers Grimm had no first-hand experience of Switzerland. In their 1816/1818 collection, they made use of several Swiss sources, including Petermann Etterlin's chronicle, Johann Jakob Scheuchzer's natural history and Johann Müller's Swiss history. The collection includes 40 stories from Switzerland.

As told by ordinary folk

Josef Müller, a hospital chaplain in Altdorf (Uri), compiled an outstanding collection of 1,600 Swiss folk tales between 1909 and 1926, as narrated by 350-odd informants. Müller recorded them in long-hand, usually in Standard German tinged with dialect (and some entirely in dialect).

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Late collector

This wood chest bears carved, folk religious motifs (Hand of Fatima, pentagram). Made by Hanspeter Niederberger (1952-2000), a Giswil teacher who researched customs and traditional tales, he used it in his talks on folk tales and folk beliefs. It contains selected items from his extensive collection.

Uri's 'underworld'

Hans Jörg Leu's spray paintings introduce viewers to traditional tales of Uri, acquainting them metaphorically with the 'underworld' of Uri. They give expressive form to archaic imaginings of traditional tales that are often imbued with the inexplicable phenomena of magic and animism.

Folk tales and the invention of history

The tale of the Habsburg governor 'Gijssler', a Swiss rebellion, the Rütli Oath and Tell's 'apple shot' first appeared in the *White Book of Sarnen* in about 1470. It was compiled by Hans Schriber, the chronicler of Obwalden, who was opposed to compromise with Austria. Tell's story was soon reproduced in public chronicles and found expression in all sorts of mediums and in public memorials. The figure of William Tell as a freedom fighter achieved Europe-wide fame through Schiller's drama of 1804.

William Tell

Embedded in the history of Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden, the earliest William Tell legend tells of his 'apple shot', his refusal to salute the governor, his arrest, escape and the assassination of Gessler. It also includes the Rütli Oath sworn by the men representing the three founding cantons and their rebellion.

Tell's crossbow

'William's crossbow' became the main attraction in Zurich's Great Arsenal after the mid-17th century. The authenticity of this particular 'relic' was not in doubt: arsenal inventories, encyclopaedias and history books attest to the historical authenticity both of the legend and the weapon.

Doubts surrounding Tell

Published anonymously in 1760, *Wilhelm Tell. Ein Dänisches Märchen* (A Danish Myth) was the first publication to allege that Tell's tale was borrowed from the Norse world of myth. It provoked an angry backlash: the work was burned in Uri and was followed immediately by a written defence of Tell.

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Folk tales and superstition

The appearance in folk tales of devils, witches and nature spirits is often an expression of folk belief. Legend has it, for instance, that the first bridge to span the Schöllenen Gorge was built not by men, but the Devil himself. In 1306, it was still known as the 'Gushing Bridge'; its name changed to 'Devil's Bridge' after 1587. Its builders are unknown, but Walser men who settled in the Urseren in the 12th century are thought to have had a hand in it.

The Devil's Bridge

When the men of Uri failed to bridge the Schöllenen Gorge, they made a pact with the Devil. In return for building it, he claimed the soul of its first user – whereupon the wily folk of Uri drove a billy goat across it! Enraged, the Devil wanted to destroy the bridge, but was thwarted by a hastily installed sign of the cross.

Bridge across the Atlantic

The story of the Devil's Bridge found fame far beyond Uri, thanks to countless depictions of it in the form of paintings, prints, photographs and postcards. An impressive painting called *Devil's Bridge* was used to promote the Gotthard Railway at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893.

Protective and magic symbols

Popular belief knows many ways and means to keep threats at bay. A cross often serves to ward off evil, and charms, amulets, Einsiedeln Abbey caps, medals and house blessings promise protection against demonic influences, witchcraft, black magic, illness and assorted other dangers.

The supernatural reflected in folk tales

The first source to mention the Lucerne 'Dragon Stone', dropped by a fiery dragon flying towards Pilatus, is the *Collectanea* of Renward Cysat, the town's chronicler, at the end of the 16th century. Early adherents of the Enlightenment, such as Moritz Anton Kappeler and Johann Jakob Scheuchzer, questioned the origins of the stone. Nevertheless, by the end of the 18th century, the stone had achieved universal fame on account of its marvellous origins and alleged ability to cure various illnesses.

The Lucerne 'Dragon Stone'

On a hot and sticky summer's day in 1420, farmer Stempfflin watched as a dragon flying towards Pilatus dropped a stone out of the sky. One of Stempfflin's

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descendants later sold the stone to the barber-surgeon Martin Schryber, who in 1523 had the stone's healing power certified by the city council.

Unusual natural phenomena

In the early modern era, the imagination of observers and eyewitnesses often prompted them to interpret unusual occurrences or finds as manifestations of dragons or ghosts. It is possible that farmer Stempfflin, the man who found the Lucerne 'Dragon Stone', had in fact observed a meteor shower.

Helvetian dragons

Johann Jakob Scheuchzer's 1706 excursion into 'Helvetian Dragons' contains a survey of dragon sightings in several cantons. These dragons had a snake-like appearance; some had feet, others did not. They often had the head of a cat with a forked tongue, or were winged creatures that breathed fire.

Widespread motifs

Many traditional tales deal with universal themes; they are timeless and range across borders. As with the *Blüemlisalp* tale, *Sennenpuppen* stories about a doll fashioned by mountain herdsman occur in countless variations across the Alps. Even more widespread is the tale of the spectral visitant known in Switzerland as *Toggeli* or *Schrättlig*. Also far-travelled is the story of William Tell, whose original model was an expert crossbowman in Denmark. The story is found in the US, France, South America and Russia.

The Blüemlisalp

A local herdsman working a rich alpine pasture is profligate in his use of food, idolises his mistress and treats his mother abominably. As punishment for his misdeeds, his 'flowering alp' is transformed into a stony and icy wasteland. The dead culprit's plaintive cries resound across it for all time.

Popular reads

In the 19th century, folk tales were disseminated among the masses thanks to the publication of 'readers' and almanacs. These types of book were for a long time the only secular reading material available to certain social classes. The *Appenzell Almanac* is one of the oldest and commonest in Switzerland.

Sennentuntschi

Bored, some Alpine herdsman make a doll just for fun. They feed her cheese and cream, play with and talk to her – but also sexually abuse her. To their surprise, the

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doll suddenly comes to life. She takes her revenge on one of the men by killing him and stretching his skin across the roof.

Toggeli

Toggeli is a spirit being that appears in various guises. It usually visits through the night, forcing its way through cracks or knotholes to settle on a sleeper's chest. It weights the sleeper down or throttles them and causes nightmares. If its victim wakes up, Toggeli vanishes into thin air.

Traditional tales are chilling but also educational

Folk tales often contain a didactic element. *The Black Spider* by Jeremias Gotthelf is one such example. He blends a number of legends into a tale of godlessness and superstition. As a clergyman and a politician with a focus on schooling, Gotthelf was concerned with education for all. Other writers also looked to the themes of traditional tales and refashioned them into new literary works, such as *Derborence* by Charles-Ferdinand Ramuz, *Güldramont* by Meinrad Inglin and *Quatemberkinder* by Tim Krohn.

The Black Spider

A village strikes a fateful deal with the Devil. Tricked out of the soul of a newborn baby, he visits a plague of spiders on the villagers and their animals. Gotthelf's tale combines the story told locally about the plague at Sumiswald with tales of a cattle plague, a knight and a strange lady.