2-1-2024

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Translation and Commentary

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A Biographical Note on William Tell

Text by Heinrich Pantaleon

Translation and Commentary by Richard Hacken

I - TEXT from 1565

The Historical Background

William Tell was born and raised in Uri, Switzerland. Due to his remarkable intellectual and physical capabilities, he quickly gained great respect among the local people. At the same time, Emperor Henry VII of Luxembourg ruled the Holy Roman Empire with great success (1308-1313). He reaffirmed the privileges previously grant-

1 Heinrich Pantaleon, né Pantlin, (1522-1595) was a Swiss physician. He was also a professor of physics, philosophy, and medicine at the University of Basel. As a writer he produced histories, biographies, and one drama.

2 Richard Hacken holds a doctoral degree in German Studies from the University of California at Davis. For over 40 years he served as the European Studies Librarian at Brigham Young University’s Harold B. Lee Library. He is currently working on a book to be entitled Helvetic Heights: A Human History of the Swiss Alps.

3 This excerpt on William Tell is taken from Pantaleon’s main work, a set of related biographies in Latin entitled Prosopographiae heroum atque illustrium virorum totius Gerrmaniae (Prosopography of Heroes and Illustrious Men of Germany). 3 volumes (Basel: Brylinger, 1565-1566), II, 310-312. For purposes of translation, the German edition of 1578, Teutscher Nation warhaffte Helden (True Heroes of the German Nation) was also consulted online—as shown in footnote 4 below.

4 The footnotes and other commentary here are paraphrased in part from those of the online Humanistica Helvetica German-language version of this work: https://humanistica-helvetica.unifr.ch/de/versions/242 - Retrieved 12/31/2023. In publishing the German translation, Pantaleon augmented it somewhat by making some additions to the text.

5 Henry VII had been born between 1274-1279, elected “German” King in 1308, and on June 29, 1312, crowned emperor. He died the next year on August 4, 1313.
ed to the inner “Orte” of Uri, Schwyz, and Unterwalden, and even enhanced them with various additional immunities, bestowed upon them in Constance due to their commendable conduct. This occurred in the year 1309. Furthermore, he granted them the concession of not having to obey any prince except the emperor and of not being summoned before any judge except those appointed over them by Emperor Henry VII.

It must be understood that at that time, Austria boasted powerful [Habsburg] princes in the neighboring regions, who repeatedly attempted to subjugate these lands and incorporate them into their own dominions. However, after Emperor Henry’s death in 1313 and a roughly year-long interregnum in the realm, the neighboring nobles began harassing the Swiss and inflicting various injustices upon them. The nobles also received secret backing from the Austrian dukes, aiming to deplete the resources of these exceedingly capable men of the “Orte” and eventually forced them to voluntarily submit to the neighboring princes as a means of seeking aid against the nobility’s audacity.

Later, however, the electors appointed two emperors: Louis IV the Bavarian and Frederick of Austria. This triggered widespread unrest throughout [“Germany.”] Consequently, the imperial governors stationed amongst the Swiss, whose possessions all lay under the influence of the Austrian dukes, sided with the party of Freder-

6 “Orte” (“places,” “villages” or “towns”) was the earliest official term referring to member states of the Old Swiss Confederation. The three founding “Orte” mentioned here had the specific name “Waldstätten” (“forest settlements”). The designation “Canton” did not appear until the late fifteenth century.

7 In 1309, Henry VII recognized the Imperial Freedom of Uri, Schwyz, and— for the first time—Unterwalden, countering the Habsburg claims.

8 Louis the Bavarian (1281/1282-1347) was elected “German” King by a plurality of electoral princes. His ongoing struggle against the Pope finally led in 1347 to the act of Emperor Charles IV of Luxembourg being chosen as an “Anti-King.” Louis died before he could take up the fight.

9 The term “Germany” at this time referred to German-speaking realms generally, including the Swiss German.
ick. But upon learning that a majority of electors had agreed upon Louis, the Swiss recognized the latter as the duly elected Emperor, hoping that his authority would restrain the Austrians from their violent actions, and that he would defend the loyal subjects of the realm.

The Wickedness of Gessler

At that time, Gessler was governor in Schwyz and Uri on behalf of the empire. When he noticed that residents of the forest settlements around the lake followed Louis’s authority and were less obedient to himself, Gessler thought with great arrogance to find those responsible for this situation. Therefore, he placed a hat on a pole on a public path in Altdorf and ordered that it be worshipped with great reverence, as if he himself were personally present. He also placed guards at that place to watch over those who disobeyed the commandment. When William Tell, that great-minded man, passed by, he disregarded the worthless sign. When he was admonished about this, he replied that he had always received and honored the governor with the highest reverence and would continue to do so but that it is wrong that a human being—of God—should show such reverence to a discarded hat.

When the cruel Governor Gessler found out about this, he immediately ordered William to be captured and brought to him, as he hoped that through Tell’s statements he would be able to obtain information about a wider conspiracy. But when he denied having allies in this matter, Gessler decided to tempt his conscience in another way. He called William’s children together and asked them which of his sons he loved the most. When they had told him this, the governor ordered the handsome boy to be tied to a post and an apple to be placed on his head.

10 Frederick I of Habsburg (1289-1330) was selected by four electoral princes and supported by Zurich. He placed an Imperial Ban on the forest settlements for their support of Louis the Bavarian. Duke Leopold I of Habsburg then attempted to take them over by force but was beaten at the Battle of Morgarten in 1315. Frederick I ultimately lost power after his defeat at Mühldorf in 1322 and was held captive until 1325.
William Tell with his Crossbow.

Courtesy: DepositPhotos.
He then ordered the father to stand one hundred and twenty steps away from the boy and aim a bolt at that apple. If it struck the apple, Gessler would treat him more leniently; but if he were to miss, he would face the death penalty. William, shocked by this evil monstrosity, tried to apologize, and asked that a different punishment be imposed. But he was preaching to a deaf ear. Therefore, once the crossbow had been brought to him, which he often used to hit the target with admirable skill, he prepared himself for this task. After comforting his son and imploring the assistance of God, he shot, hitting the apple, and sweeping it from his son’s head with the bolt.

**Tell’s Skill with the Crossbow**

But as Tell had been preparing himself for this work, he fastened a second bolt to his doublet at the back of his neck.\(^{11}\) When the governor asked him why, William replied that he had done it in the manner of archers, who always have two missiles ready when shooting, so that they can use the other if one is broken or damaged. But the governor insisted more forcefully on his question and promised him freedom to force the truth out of him. That is why William said bluntly that if he had accidentally killed his son with the bolt, he would have aimed the other at the governor himself who had ordered this evil monstrosity. This confession made the latter burst into anger, and he said that he had promised him life but that he would punish him with eternal imprisonment.

Then Gessler ordered Tell to be tied up, immediately put aboard a ship, and taken by well-secured custody on a voyage down the lake to Lucerne. But as they were sailing on the lake, it happened through God’s providence that a very big storm suddenly arose, and the storm winds hit the ship so that the governor and his family themselves were in great danger. His bodyguards began to encourage Gessler to free Tell from his bonds and assign him to work at the helm, since he was a strong

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\(^{11}\) The early clothing adaptation designed to hold arrows or bolts, akin in purpose to what archers today would call a “quiver.”
man and very experienced in nautical arts. He could steer the ship with ease and lead it to the shore. For this reason, William was untied. He steered the ship and led it very skillfully towards the harbor. But since he knew of a huge rock in this lake not far from the shore, he quickly steered the ship towards this place. And when he got there, he suddenly grabbed his crossbow, jumped onto this rock and with his other foot pushed the ship back into the lake with great force. The place is still called “Tellsplatte” (“Tell’s Landing”) today. But then the governor is said to have shouted at him that he would punish him severely for this crime and that William and his entire family would be killed.

Therefore, after going ashore, William carefully observed the governor’s route. When the latter had also reached shore and was riding through a deep ravine to Uri, Tell was waiting for him with a drawn crossbow above Küsnacht. From that spot he pierced Gessler with a bolt as he passed by, so that the governor fell from his horse and gave up his last breath of life there.

The Swiss Form a Covenant

Afterwards, William Tell immediately went to Uri and told everyone what had happened. Then he was told to be of good cheer, and he heard various general complaints made against the tyranny of the governors and noblemen. Therefore, William counseled with some others and secretly concluded the Swiss alliance in 1314, which gradually grew and was ratified in the same year by the public consent of the three “Orte.” That is why the residents of this forest settlement generously agreed to an alliance and drove the nobles out of the entire territory, destroyed their castles from the ground up, and freed themselves and their homeland. Their descendants have lived under the aegis of Tell and against the resistance of the nobles and princes with great fame, preserving the land intact ever since.

12 The town of Küsnacht is situated in Schwyz, on the northeast shore of Lake Lucerne.
13 Note the deviation from the traditional date of 1291.
II - COMMENTARY

Heinrich Pantaleon (1522-1595) published the second of his three Latin volumes of *Prosopographiae heroum atque illustrium virorum totius Germaniae*—in which the entry on William Tell is found—in 1565. The dedication is dated April 1565, so the work itself was completed sometime before that. The first volume of the set had begun with the life of Adam, the second with that of Charlemagne, and the third with the Emperor Maximilian I. The entry on William Tell is one of approximately 1,700 biographical notes.

The first section, “The Historical Background,” sets the presentation in its historical context and introduces the story of William Tell as a struggle against tyranny of the Austrian local variety, not of the empire writ large. Thus, the author is careful not to make any remarks against the emperor, but rather praises him. The real target of his attacks here are the Dukes of Austria (the Habsburgs) and, more generally, the noble neighbors and governors who want to make themselves masters of the Swiss lands. They would exploit the current weakness of the Holy Roman Empire—after the recent death of Henry VII—to take advantage of the subsequent succession dispute.

For the second and third sections of the entry on “The Wickedness of Gessler” and “Tell’s Skill with the Crossbow,” William and his family are represented as a small subset of the many victims of Gessler’s repression and inhumanity. All the traditional elements and episodes of the story are present: the hat on one of Altdorf’s paths (presumably near

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14 As with the footnotes, much of the commentary has been paraphrased and translated from the extra-textual apparatus found in the online *Humanistica Helvetica* German-language version of this work: https://humanistica-helvetica.unifr.ch/de/versions/242 - Retrieved 12/31/2023.

15 Review footnote 3 for more details.

16 Adam is perhaps the least clearly Germanic of the heroes!

17 Charlemagne (Karl der Grosse) was of a Frankish-Germanic tribe, whose native tongue was Old High German.

18 The Holy Roman Emperor who died three years before Pantaleon was born.

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its public square); the challenge of the high-stakes apple target; the storm on the lake leading to Tell’s escape; and then the death of the Austrian governor. The personal injustice suffered by William Tell becomes the trigger, so to speak, for a collective Swiss uprising against tyranny.

In relation to the final section in his biographical entry, “The Swiss Form a Covenant”—relating the oath taken between comrades and brothers—Pantaleon dubbed William Tell “The Founder of the Swiss Covenant.” His source for this claim—on which also partially hinges the question of differentiating a “historical person” from a “legendary figure”—is the Swiss Chronicle of Johannes Stumpf.21

In the spirit and motto of humanistic scholarship, “Ad Fontes” (“Go to the Sources”), Pantaleon viewed history through the lens of a supposed cultural transplantation: for him, Germania had become the successor to the Roman Empire and had brought to fruition the imitation of antiquity. Hence, Pantaleon cannot be considered a true Swiss patriot, as even the title of his work demonstrates: he had for an ideal the greater German community in mind [rather than a Swiss nation] as incarnated in the “Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation.” The Basel biographer represents the idea of a community that is defined, on the one hand, by its language and by its ability to stand out among other nations, but also, on the other hand, by its membership in a larger cultural community— that of the Latin language.

20 Pantaleon also wrote a separate biographical entry about the Scandinavian hero Toko, who was likewise sentenced to shoot at an apple on the head of his son because of an unpleasant encounter with the Danish King Harald. He makes the following comment there: “Obviously, the case of William Tell and the Swiss played out in almost the exact same manner [as the Danish one], as we shall later explain.” (Pantaleon, Prosopographiae, II, 73-74). For this legend as well as other stories that may have played an influence on the story of the Swiss hero, see H. de Boor, “Die nordischen, englischen und deutschen Darstellungen des Apfelschussmotifs” (“The Nordic, English and German Representations of the Apple Shot Motif”) in: H.G. Wirz, ed., Das Weisse Buch von Sarnan (Aarau: Sauerländer, 1947), Appendix 1*-53*.

21 Johannes Stumpf, Gemeiner loblicher Eydgenoschafft Stetten Landen und Völckeren Chronick wirdiger Thaaten Beschreybung [Chronicle Describing the Worthy Deeds of the Shared Admirable Confederation of Villages, Lands and Peoples] (Zurich: Froschauer, 1548). The topic of William Tell as “legend” versus “reality” is a topic too extensive for this essay. However, see footnote 20 above for a possible indication.