Proving the Existence, Significance, and Implications of the Battle of Morgarten

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On November 15, 1315, soldiers from the cantons of Schwyz, Uri, and Unterwalden defeated the Habsburg Duke Leopold of Austria and his retinue. An event shrouded by myth, the Battle of Morgarten is a significant episode in the founding of Switzerland. The sensational nature of the battle is a consequence of the writings of chronicler Ägidius Tschudi of Glarus. In the mid-16th century, Tschudi wrote the *Chronicon Helveticum*, portraying the origins of the Swiss Confederacy as "a battle of liberation against Habsburg oppression."[1] Centuries later, Tschudi's colorful portrayal of characters like Kuoni the Jester and the heroic William Tell are still known to this day. Although such legends are unsubstantiated by any facts whatsoever, Tschudi's narrative was still widely accepted in the 20th century by both scholarly and popular circles. This is especially true for much of the English-language academic literature on the subject. For example, authors Robert Brooks and Joseph Wharton presented the chronicle's version of the story in their book from 1918, *Government and Politics of Switzerland*:

> Duke Leopold, with an army of 15,000 men, officered by the flower of Austrian Chivalry, marched upon Schwyz. At the pass of Morgarten, 1300 Swiss peasants stopped the advance of the invaders by hurling trees and heavy bowlders down upon them from the overhanging crags, and then charging with halberts, scythes, and iron-studded clubs, drove the Austrians into the neighboring lake.[2]

[1] Wall text, Museum of the Swiss Charters of Confederation, Schwyz, Switzerland.
[2] Robert Brooks and Joseph Wharton, *Government and Politics of Switzerland* (Yonkers-On-Hudson: World Book Company, 1918) 24-25.

In the succeeding decades, however, scholars have raised considerable doubts about the chronicle's authenticity. Concerning the early Swiss Confederacy, medieval history specialist Roger Sablonier admits, "we are only ever at the most recent level of misunderstanding."[3]

Undoubtedly, there are countless unsubstantiated claims and errors in the chronicle which form the basis of modern misconceptions. For instance, the Battle of Morgarten is often represented in popular culture as the defense of Swiss territory from foreign invaders. This is due in large part to the connection that the battle has to Swiss nationalism during the second World War, the famous play by Friedrich Schiller, and the *William Tell Overture* by Gioachino Rossini. At the alleged site of the event, there is an information center which dispels such falsehoods, among others. Text on the outside of the building exposes that "Leopold's men were not 'Austrians' but Habsburg subjects from territories in present-day Switzerland."[4] Differentiating fact from fiction is not an easy task for any medieval scholar, but the battle is a mystery worth investigating and a crucial inquiry into the identity of the Swiss people. By examining the relevant body of evidence, one can prove that the Battle of Mortgarten occurred and represented a revolutionary development in military history. Most of all, it illustrates that Morgarten was a fight in defense of liberties enjoyed by the freemen of the forest cantons.

If one does not prove the Battle of Mortgarten's existence, it renders all other conclusions meaningless. It is therefore essential to rely upon recent interdisciplinary research to find links that might help prove the legendary accounts. Tschudi's chronicle alleges that the battle took place on the slopes of the Aegeri lake, which was not corroborated with any material or scientific evidence until 2015. That year, a group of scholars from the University of Zurich used environmental data to reconstruct the landscape around the lake as it was in 1315. They determined that the battle site environment was much different than it is today:

[3] Wall text, Museum of the Swiss Charters of Confederation.
[4] Wall text, *Morgarten Historical Battlefield,* Morgarten Information Center, Sattel, Switzerland.

> Where steep slopes are found today, there is no lake, and where the present-day Lake Aegeri is situated, there are not any really steep slopes. At the time of the battle the lake was at 726m – that is, about 2m higher than today. Together with the cooler climate, the greater extension of the fens and larger lake, the valley floor was wet and unpleasant. If a Habsburg army had to cross this region, they would likely have preferred to walk on a more accessible trail along the footslopes (where they probably were attacked).[5]

This information does not prove Tschudi's account, but it does provide some additional context between myth and reality. Leopold's army of mounted knights would have avoided the muddy terrain surrounding the lake and sought higher ground for fear of the army getting stuck. Therefore, they could have ridden along the angled, wooded slopes that still exist today. Such a position would have kept them off balance and vulnerable to attack.

Nevertheless, the actual location of the battle is still a mystery, a point that Markus Egli et al. readily admit in "Multi-Methodological Reconstruction of the Lake Level at Morgarten in the Context of the History of the Swiss Confederation"; within the article, they state, "with our investigation, we are not able to determine the exact location of the battle. Room for speculation still exists and the myth of the Morgarten battle remains unresolved."[6] The exact landscape and location of the battle is still in question as well. However, in the months after the study was published, material evidence was discovered around the lake. As reported by Malcolm Curtis on June 19, 2015:

> In what is being hailed as a significant discovery, the find includes coins, knives, arrows and a cavalier's spur in the Morgarten plain. The objects found do not prove that the Battle of Morgarten, one of the most famous in Swiss history books, took place at the site,

[5] Markus Egli, et al, "Multi-Methodological Reconstruction of the Lake Level at Morgarten in the Context of the History of the Swiss Confederation," *The Holocene* 25, no. 11 (2015): 1727, https://doi.org/10.1177/0959683615591360.
[6] Egli, 1739.

> but they appear to support that possibility. The finds mark the first time 'archeological objects' have been found in the area where the famous battle is suspected to have taken place.[7]

This discovery represents a breakthrough, not because it definitively proves anything, but because remnants of battle have been found in the location specified by Tschudi's chronicle. Before this, the only other material evidence that can be linked to Morgarten is the original battle flag from 1315. According to historian Albert Winkler, the banner was given to Schwyzer mercenaries by King Rudolf (Duke Leopold's grandfather) as a reward for their decisive participation in the siege of Besançon in 1289.[8] Winkler states, "King Rudolf awarded the Schwyzers a red banner of the Holy Roman Empire. This was a red banner with a white Christian symbol on it, which the Schwyzers carried at Morgarten."[9] Such objects are the only material evidence found which support the Battle of Mortgarten's existence. Winkler explains that the site was likely picked clean of loot and corpses by both sides after the battle:

> The victors took weapons and armor from the fallen men and horses, and they also retrieved corpses from the lake to take anything of value from them. This effort was so thorough that few artifacts relating to the engagement have been found on the battlefield. Scores of important nobles had been killed, and their relatives retrieved many of these bodies to inter them in family vaults.[10]

Much of the physical evidence was displaced from the site. Most, if not all, artifacts from the battle are hopelessly lost to time. Anything else undiscovered could prove crucial, especially since there is so little contemporary literature

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[7] Malcolm Curtis, "Artifacts Found on 700-Year-Old Battle 'Site'," *The Local*, June 19, 2015, https://www.thelocal.ch/20150619/artifacts-found-on-700-year-old-swiss-battle-site.
[8] Albert Winkler, "The Battle of Morgarten in 1315: An Essential Incident in the Founding of the Swiss State," *Swiss American Historical Society Review* 44, no. 3 (2008): 8-9, https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2827&context=facpub.
[9] Winkler, 8-9.
[10] Winkler, 24.

about the Battle of Mortgarten itself. The Pact of Brunnen, supposedly written shortly after the encounter at Morgarten, "makes no mentions whatsoever of the battle."[11] Despite the importance that Tschudi ascribes to Morgarten, the Schwyzers themselves did not see fit to record this moment in their history. What accounts do exist only make indirect mention of a battle or grossly exaggerate the truth. This is especially true concerning the actual number of participants at Morgarten. As researchers at the University of Zurich explain:

> The chronicles usually glorified this event and grossly exaggerated the numbers of warriors involved. The battle of Morgarten was first mentioned in a few sentences (e.g. AD 1316 by the abbot Peter von Zittau or in the chronicles of 1340–1344 by the abbot Johannes von Viktring). The Minorite Johannes von Winterthur mentioned in his report (1340–1348) that the Habsburg army had 20,000 warriors – a completely exaggerated number. Currently, the general opinion oscillates between two extremes: a large battle with c. 2000 deaths (and 3000–5000 Habsburgs involved) and a little brawl with only a few casualties. It nonetheless seems certain that an event took place near Morgarten."[12]

There is no consensus among academics as to the exact numbers of participants or where the battle occurred. In the absence of further archaeological and scientific data, questions of the battle's existence will persist. That should not, however, discourage future study and analysis, nor should it downplay the significance of the battle itself. While the evidence is not conclusive, existing data supports the chronicle's account of the battle's location. If Tschudi was at least correct in this aspect, it is possible that other elements of the story could be true as well.

The events at Morgarten were an early sign of significant changes to come in European military tactics. In their analysis of Swiss military strategy, Douglas Miller and G. A. Embleton articulate that:

[11] Wall text, Museum of the Swiss Charters of Confederation.
[12] Egli, "Multi-Methodological Reconstruction," 1727.

> During the 14th and 15th centuries military tactics in Europe underwent a period of sustained transformation of which the outcome was the rejuvenation of the footsoldier as the major tactical unit. One nation alone stands principally responsible for these developments - the Swiss Confederation. For centuries, the mounted knights had ridden roughshod over the populations of Europe. It was in the Swiss halberdier and later the pikeman that the mounted man-at-arms were to meet their match in the 14th and 15th centuries.[13]

The dominance of the mounted unit is not surprising, for it offered an array of tactical advantages over foot soldiers. Winkler describes mounted knights in Leopold's retinue as "the most formidable part of the army, and the impressive throw weight of a heavily armored man charging on horseback was well known."[14] The Schwyzers did not have the resources of the Habsburgs, including their heavy armor and extensive use of cavalry. However, the Schwyzers were not defenseless; Morgarten was not the battle of David versus Goliath as it is often portrayed. Contrary to the mythical characterization of the Swiss soldiers as simple peasants, the Morgarten battlefield information center clarifies, "the Schwyz fighters were likely to have been battle-hardened mercenary soldiers."[15]

Tschudi's account of Swiss soldiers, by contrast, could not have been more wrong. According to the Museum of the Swiss Charters of Confederation, several generations of Schwyzers had served as mercenaries before the battle of Morgarten.[16] "For young men unable to find work in agriculture, mercenary service poses an attractive alternative. A mercenary earns around twice as much as a journeyman."[17] Therefore, a large segment of the population would have ample economic motivation to serve as a mercenary. This is especially true

[13] Miller and Embleton, *The Swiss at War: 1300-1500*. (London: Osprey, 1979), 3.
[14] Winkler, "The Battle of Morgarten in 1315,"19.
[15] Wall text, Morgarten Information Center.
[16] Wall text, Museum of the Swiss Charters of Confederation.
[17] Wall text, Museum of the Swiss Charters.

if one considers estimates of the Swiss troop strength at Morgarten. On this matter, Winkler theorizes that:

> The population of these states at that time cannot be determined precisely, but each likely contained several thousand persons at most. Certainly, no more than one quarter of the total population was an adult, physically-fit male, and a reasonable estimate of the troop strength of Schwyz, was 1200 to 1500 men.[18]

Many of these men were likely professional fighters. Therefore, almost all of the physically-fit adult men in the forest cantons were likely committed to mercenary work, and it was probably a community-driven operation. Soldiers drew their strength from unit cohesion and their weapon of choice: the halberd. Winkler provides a detailed description of the weapon and the tactical advantage that it provided:

> The principal weapon wielded by the men of the Forest States was the halberd, a variation of the battle ax, that had an iron ax blade with a sharp point on it. Often there was also a hook on the side opposite to the ax blade. This metal accessory was attached to a wooden shaft 5 to 8 feet long, and the weapon was light, versatile, and relatively inexpensive. The device was used for stabbing and slashing, and, when the hook was available, it could snag a knight's armor and be used to pull him from his mount. Once on the ground, a heavily armored cavalryman was out of his element and at a disadvantage. Johannes von Winterthur wrote that the Schwyzers had these "very terrible" weapons with which they could cut up their heavily-armored enemies into pieces as though "with a razor.[19]

[18] Winkler, "The Battle of Morgarten in 1315," 13.
[19] Winkler, 14.

The crude but effective halberd, combined with a mastery of terrain, took down a stronger and allegedly much larger army than that of the Swiss. Whether consciously or not, the tactics of the forest cantons herald a new era in the military history of Europe. As Winkler claims, "this victory was among the first of its kind, and it signaled the development of infantries and the decline of cavalries in the armies of Europe."[20]

It is also important to acknowledge the high level of military organization within the forest cantons. This was demonstrated in the years prior to the battle of Morgarten. The canton of Schwyz had come into violent conflict with the monastery of Einsiedeln. Winkler explains the conflict was the result of a boundary dispute, stating:

> Schwyz and Einsiedeln had contested the ownership of important lands since the tenth century, and the controversy was only solved in 1394 when Schwyz achieved formal control of the religious community. The people of Schwyz believed that much of the wealth of Einsiedeln belonged to them, which justified taking the monastery's goods. In 1307, the Schwyzers launched a series of assaults on the cloister, and the official list of complaints about these raids, written by the monks in 1311, gave insights into how the men of Schwyz waged war. The men of Schwyz broke into stalls and plundered storage facilities taking food, horses, and cattle, and they also killed a few monks while abusing others. Even though the attackers assaulted largely defenseless friars, the Schwyzers deployed their forces with careful military efficiency, and they almost always came at night meaning they were able to march and deploy after dark.[21]

Since the details of the conflict are largely unknown, it is not clear if this was arbitrary, merciless raiding on the part of Schwyz, or if there was an underlying political motivation. Not only did the forest cantons develop revolutionary tactics, but they were also participants in a conflict for the imperial

[20] Winkler, 25.
[21] Winkler, 9.

crown. James Heywood believes that the boldness of their attacks was a result of assurances from Ludwig the Bavarian, who would eventually become Holy Roman Emperor:

> Louis of Bavaria rejoiced to find in the forest cantons a powerful ally within the Austrian territory; and when the Abbot of Einsiedeln had excommunicated the Schwyzers, Louis released them from the ban of the empire, and persuaded his powerful partisan, the Archbishop of Mayence, to promise absolution from the sentence of the Church.[22]

In fighting against the monastery and their noble allies, the Habsburgs, the forest cantons risked much of their future safety and prosperity. Their reason for doing so is the subject of intense debate. Yet according to the Museum of the Swiss Charters of Confederation, their efforts were designed to secure imperial privileges from a grateful imperial candidate; they state, "in 1316 King Ludwig of Bavaria confirms Schwyz's imperial immediacy. Such confirmation is needed to preserve an imperial privilege. A request must be made to every new emperor."[23] The forest cantons believed that "imperial privilege" was worth the struggle of warfare. This is an important factor in considering the overall importance of the Battle of Morgarten.

An analysis of the available evidence and relevant accounts can prove that Morgarten was a fight for the freedom and privileges of freemen in the forest cantons. It was not a battle for freedom in the modern sense of democracy and equality, but certainly a battle for freedom in the medieval sense. According to the Museum of the Swiss Charters of the Confederation, "in the Middle Ages, *freedom* equates to freedom from obligation or to the bestowal of rights. It has nothing to do with freedom in the sense of a modern autonomous state."[24] Although the myths and legends portray many aspects of the story incorrectly, its connection to the Swiss identity may be based on something more profound.

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[22] James Heywood, "On the Establishment of Swiss Freedom, and the Scandinavian Origin of the Legend of William Tell," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 5 (1877): 219.
[23] Wall text, Museum of the Swiss Charters of Confederation.
[24] Wall text, Swiss Charters of Confederation.

Many scholars have articulated the growing powers that the Habsburg exercised over the forest cantons. "Dr. Huber observes that as Habsburgs, in their capacity as counts and bailiffs, had high jurisdiction over nearly all the inhabitants of the land, whether freemen or people belonging to the Church."[25] Therefore, Habsburg-elected bailiffs were in a position to violate the judicial rights of the Swiss confederates. Winkler supports this idea, explaining that the struggles of the forest cantons were motivated by free peasants trying to remain independent of manorial rule:

> At that time, there were sharp distinctions between the peasants who were free and unfree. The serfs were held in bondage, they owned no land, were tied to the manor, and could even be sold with it. They owed service without payment to the landowner, and the lord controlled local justice in the manorial court. Serfs even had to get permission from the lord to marry. Critically, the nobles held the right to provide military protection, and those in bondage could not perform this vital function. The authority to defend the state was a necessary step toward individual liberties and the independence of society and the state. In fact, the right to bear arms was often the most obvious privilege which separated the free from the unfree. The free peasants could also leave the service of the landowner and appeal to higher courts thus circumventing local manorial justice to look for fairer judgments to their petitions. The peasants coveted these rights, and those who enjoyed them wanted to keep and protect them from any threat.[26]

Upholding the rights and privileges of freemen was absolutely worth every effort in the mind of the confederates. This can be shown in their efforts leading up to the battle of Morgarten: the construction of earthworks. Winkler explains, "the extensive fortifications constructed shortly before the battle of Morgarten

[25] Heywood, "On the Establishment of Swiss Freedom, and the Scandinavian Origin of the Legend of William Tell," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 5 (1877): 218.
[26] Winkler, "The Battle of Morgarten in 1315," 5.

demonstrated that the people of Schwyz and Unterwalden, which were poor countries with small populations, made significant sacrifices in funds and effort to protect their lands from attack."[27] There is, therefore, clear evidence of co-operation between the forest cantons towards what was presumably a common goal.

H.J. Fleuke expands on the concept of community within the forest cantons, stating, "there was no difference of religion or language within these original units."[28] If culture were shared between the cantons, they also likely shared the same values. According to M.V. Clarke, the early confederates shared a common enemy:

> The peasants of Uri were nearly all serfs, bound to perform certain fixed duties for imperial officers; the peasants of Unterwalden were mainly serfs and those of Schwyz freemen. For this reason the men of Schwyz took the lead and finally gave their name to the whole confederation. The alliance was at first purely defensive and was directed against the exercise of arbitrary power by Habsburg bailiffs.[29]

While the cantons did have elections, they were far from modern democracies, thus dispelling another commonly-held misconception. Like every other society in their day, they were still beholden to the same power structures and social divisions. According to the Museum of the Swiss Charters of Confederation, "until the second half of the 14th century, the political community in the confederate cantons is headed by just a handful of families. Some of these families are members of the high nobility, such as Attinghausen in Uri."[30] This does not lessen the confederate's genuine desire for independence from their Habsburg neighbors. In this way, the Confederates were not fighting for a literal independence from the territorial borders of the Holy Roman Empire. However,

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[27] Winkler, 13.
[28] H.J. Fleuke, "Notes on the Evolution of Switzerland," *Geography* 26, No. 4 (1941): 172.
[29] M.V. Clarke, *The Medieval City State; an Essay on Tyranny and Federation in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, MA: Speculum Historiale, 1966), Chapter VIII.
[30] Wall text, Museum of the Swiss Charters of Confederation, Schwyz, Switzerland.

if a member of the Habsburg dynasty held the title of Emperor, it would mean surrendering his rights to a lord who was local enough to control them. That was why the Confederates supported Emperor Henry VII, whose center of power was in Luxembourg, too far from the forest cantons to exercise any real control.

Moreover, the power of the Emperor had waned so significantly by the 14th century that the only thing left for the confederates to fear was a expansionist lord in region—in this case, the Habsburgs. Therefore, the actions of the confederates were consistently done in the interest of maintaining greater territorial sovereignty against their most powerful neighbor. In other words, if the Confederates could keep the Habsburgs from controlling the empire, then they would be on the same legal grounds as the Habsburgs. The Confederates wanted the right to collect their own taxes and tolls, and to handle matters of justice internally. M.V. Clarke echoes these ideas about the Schwyzers, maintaining that:

> As long as the Habsburgs were excluded from the imperial throne, the way of safety for the confederates lay in dependence on the Emperor. When the double imperial election occurred in 1314 the three cantons prepared to support Lewis of Bavaria against the Habsburg candidate, Frederick of Austria. Their adhesion to the Wittelsbach cause made the outbreak of war inevitable.[31]

It is important to remember that the forest cantons could not simply abstain from the conflict before them. Doing so was no longer an option. Winkler characterizes the conditions that the confederates faced as a desperate fight for their very survival:

> Political realities in the German Empire at the beginning of the fourteenth century were harsh, and communities that wanted to gain or maintain their autonomy had to deal with serious external

[31] Clarke, *The Medieval City State*, Chapter VIII.

> threats. Most frequently, this meant that military success was essential for survival. Many forces vied for authority, influence, and domination over the regions that formed the Swiss Confederation, which later developed into the modern state of Switzerland. The largest threat to Swiss sovereignty in this period was factions of nobles, most importantly the house of Habsburg, which were expanding their control over the region. Their autonomy was severely tested in 1315 when a large Habsburg army came to plunder and subjugate these states. The sovereignty of the Swiss republics was clearly at stake, and the significant victory in the battle of Morgarten meant that they would survive and continue to develop their own national expression. This success probably kept the modern cantons of Switzerland from being little more than the nearby Austrian provinces of the Voralberg and Tirol. The achievement at Morgarten was also significant in a social sense because it was an early victory of free peasants, which allowed them to keep their liberties and independence in the face of challenges from the feudal forces that attempted to control them.[32]

However, much of this theory is complicated by the enigmatic figure of the Imperial bailiff Werner von Homberg. There seems to be no agreement over his role in the affairs of the cantons. James Heywood explains the role of Werner von Homberg in the relation to political situations that arose after the double election of 1314. "The new Emperor, Henry VII, confirmed the previous charters of Frederich II and King Adolphus. He appointed Count Werner de Homberg to be his bailiff and administrator, but this officer was recalled before the end of the year."[33]

Whether or not the Swiss acted in complete loyalty to von Homberg or accepted him for purely political reasons is another mystery entirely. According to Roger Sablonier, the battle of Morgarten was simply a proxy war between the

[32] Winkler, "The Battle of Morgarten in 1315," 3.
[33] Heywood, "On the Establishment of Swiss Freedom," 218.

rival nobles Leopold von Habsburg and Werner von Homberg.[34] However, this does not take into account other information about von Homberg and his relations to the Habsburgs. According to the historical dictionary of Switzerland: "From 1314, Werner von Homberg belonged to the retinue of King Friedrich the Fair, but in the Morgarten war he took a mediating position."[35] If Werner von Homberg was a member of King Friedrich's retinue, it greatly complicates Sablonier's theory. Von Homberg was closely linked to the Habsburgs and may not have entirely worked against them. More importantly, the independently-minded Schwyzers might have accepted the rule of a foreign governor, but it is unlikely that they would have risked as much as they did for the sake of von Homberg alone. After all, the Schwyzers likely recognized the threat they faced from the Habsburgs after the victory at Morgarten was achieved. Either way, it is unlikely that Morgarten was fought exclusively as a proxy war between Werner von Homberg and Leopold von Habsburg. Rather, the Schwyzers likely had their own motivations for risking as much as they did. Freedom has proven to be worth the price of blood in many episodes of history; for the people of the Swiss Confederacy, their dedication to defending the rights of freemen is both inspirational and unique for its time period.

After the battle of Morgarten, the Swiss confederacy persisted their fight, even in the face of renewed hostilities with the Habsburgs. M.V. Clarke explains, "the Habsburgs did not abandon their rights over the cantons without a prolonged struggle. After Morgarten the danger either from peaceful penetration or from armies of invasion was continual."[36] Despite the victory at Morgarten, the forest cantons did not achieve a lasting independence from the Habsburgs. It would take another two centuries until the efforts of the growing Confederacy were finally successful. The Museum of the Swiss Charters of Confederation proudly elaborates that, "in 1515, Emperor Maximilian is the first Habsburg to confirm a Schwyz privilege. Peaceful coexistence is more important to him than futile efforts to regain Habsburg territories."[37] There can

[34] Wall text, Museum of the Swiss Charters of Confederation.
[35] Hans Stadler, "Homberg, Werner Von," *Historical Dictionary of Switzerland*, http://www.hls-dhs-dss.ch/textes/d/D46348.php.
[36] Clarke, *The Medieval City State*, Chapter VIII.
[37] Wall text, Museum of the Swiss Charters of Confederation.

be no doubt that this new and growing nation exaggerated their own story of origin in order to promote unity and cultural pride. Nevertheless, that does not mean that all the elements of the chronicles and legends are fictitious. On the contrary, the chronicler could have compiled and composed a Swiss saga that has been passed down for generations through oral tradition rather than written records. Regardless of its point of origin, the battle of Morgarten should be recognized for what it is: the extent that freemen will put their lives on the line in defense of individual autonomy. While it represents a different definition of freedom, the wars of the forest cantons have never been more relevant.