

Bullinger as Historian: The Tigurine Chronicle

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The latest research makes it increasingly clear how much Bullinger was guided by history as a standardised authority. Historical argument served him as the most important instrument in his work of persuasion in theological and church policy journalism, as well as in dealing with daily political issues.

His works on the church and theological history, like "Der alte Glaube" [The Old Faith] from 1535 or the "Geschichte der Wiedertäufer" [History of the Anabaptists] from 1560 are well known. Less known is that Bullinger also wrote profane history, basically political history. This is not least a problem of transmission; these extensive works still rest – with the exception of the "Reformationsgeschichte" [History of the Reformation] – as hand-written copies in archives and are therefore regarded as difficult to access.

While in Kappel, Bullinger had early on discovered the field of Swiss history. At that time, he later wrote, while occupied with Greek and Roman history, the thought crossed his mind that he should also get to know and explore his own country's past. And in his early work "Anklage und Ermahnung Gottes" [Charge and Admonition from God] from 1525 his knowledge about the Swiss confederacy's history is actually used for the first time. This little edition was a Reformed pamphlet in which Bullinger justified the Zurich Reformation and admonished the rest of Switzerland to follow – so to speak as a national commitment. In this writing God speaks personally to the Swiss, praising the virtues and achievements of the old Swiss people to whom He was always especially merciful. Bullinger describes in detail the origin and qualifying of the Swiss alliances, comparing the old Swiss people's fight for independence against the repressive aristocracy with the liberation of Israel from Egyptian slavery. He vividly outlines their defensive wars against super powers like Austria, Milan, and France, in which they were led by God from success to success.

This magnificent history then ends, however – brought on by mercenary service and pension management practices – in the politico-military decline and the moral-ethical degeneration of the late 15th century. But above all, by the adoption of the papal statutes, Bullinger intimates, the Swiss people had also turned ungratefully away from God. A turning back – like Zurich had already done – had therefore become urgently necessary. With that, Bullinger connected the history of the Swiss with the demand for a national-religious start – the Reformation, naturally.

History is being exploited here, of course, but Bullinger nevertheless imparts to us for the first time an extensive outline of Swiss history, and at the same time he reveals his understanding of history. This salvational interpretation – which sees God as being in control, who directs history to a goal, and therefore uses nations (in this case the Swiss) as signposts – remained also the ideological basis of his "profane" historiography.

The research of his native country's history remained a lifelong private passion for Bullinger. But in 1531 two conditions radically changed: The second Kappel war constituted a Switzerland confessionally divided into two parts, and Bullinger became the head of the leading Reformed church.

Yet, in patriotic admiration for the forefathers, he still continued to be deeply engaged with the history of the Swiss people. However, in the course of the '30s he broke off his first attempt to write an entire history. For more than three decades he was content with collecting material, drawing up single studies, and assisting other chroniclers like Johannes Stumpf, who, with Bullinger's help, could publish his famous "Eidgenössische Chronik" [Swiss Chronicle] in 1548.

In the '60s, however, a period of intensive productivity began, and within a short time, extensive works on Swiss and Zurich history were written. In his diary he noted down under the year 1567 the completion of the "Reformationsgeschichte" [History of the Reformation], that is, the history from 1519 until 1533; under the year 1568, the finishing of a Swiss history, which extends from the founding of the federation until the eve of the Reformation. Of these two works, which apparently were meant to be a set, the latter remained unfinished; this "Eidgenössische Chronik" [Swiss Chronicle] is hardly more than a collection of studies and materials, while the "Reformationsgeschichte" [History of the Reformation] is passed on as a perfected draft and also became known by an edition in the 19th century.

Bullinger subsequently didn't pay any more attention to these two works, but instead in 1571 started to work on a history, which in a very short time would grow into a monumental work on the history of Zurich, encompassing 1800 folio-size pages: the "Tigurinerchronik" [Tigurine Chronicle]. Bullinger doesn't provide us with any reasons why he took up this material. He must have recognized that the national history couldn't be fitted in his salvational history pattern. Because the vision from his early writing from 1525 ("Anklage und Ermahnung Gottes" [Charge and Admonition from God]), with the chosen Swiss people turning in the end to God, had only taken place in part – in Zurich and under its leadership, in some other Swiss cities. So it was the obvious thing to do – to place Zurich alone in the context of the universal church history.

Already in the title of the "Tigurinerchronik" [Tigurine Chronicle], Bullinger announces that he intends to write not only about the history of the city, but also about its past in the framework of European Christianity's history.

In the first part, which covers the period until 1400, he describes the origin of Zurich, which he places far back into the pre-Christian era, then he unfolds the history of Europe in the early and High Middle Ages, where he lends special emphasis to the Christianisation, the usurpation of the power by the papacy and the "decay" of the church. He describes the formation of the confederation as a liberation process from the tyranny of the Hapsburgs; at the same time he still embraced local themes, for instance the development of the Grossmünsterstift [cathedral] in Zurich.

This mixture of ecclesiastical and profane, of European, Swiss, and Zurich topics can also be found in the second part, where he deals with the period until 1516, that means, up to the Reformation. Focal points are the ecclesiastical schism and the Council of Constance, the history of the so-called Alten Zürichkrieg [old Zurich war], the military success of the Swiss against foreign potentates, and the military and moral decline through corruption in the mercenary business. An excursus on the history of the Grossmünster [cathedral] of his own time concludes the "Tigurinerchronik" [Tigurine Chronicle]. Bullinger added also a copy of the 1567 "Reformationsgeschichte" [History of the Reformation] and presented the extensive work, bound in four large tomes, to the collegiate church chapter for faithful safekeeping on December 14, 1574.

The working methods of the historian Bullinger could be almost called modern, far removed from the medieval annalist; he demonstrates developments, works combinatorially, and – above all: he discloses his source basis by frequently citing his references, and often asks critical questions, trying to get to the bottom of something.

But of course his "Tigurinerchronik" [Tigurine Chronicle] also carries the attributes of early modern recording of historical events. He frequently quotes documents at length or reproduces them in full, and in the politico-historic description, one finds anecdotes sprinkled in again and again, spectacular events, news about plagues of locusts, earthquakes and flooding, or about rising prices and famine.

But Bullinger also expresses himself on problems, which once again are of interest today, for instance about the treatment of Jews or about homosexuality. It is probably the intolerance of that time, when he sums up the pogroms from 1348: "No wonder, that the Jews had it so bad. They deserve it because of their impenitence and their fierce anger against Christ" or when he justifies the burning at the stake of the knight Richard von Hohenberg because of "his wild and dissolute deeds" [meant are so-called sexual aberrations]. At times he makes observations which have the character of small lessons. For example, his comments about the aristocracy (about the origination, titles, terminology) or the explanation of Frankish terms are vivid examples for his didactic efforts in remaining understandable for everyone. The material, based on an immense number of historical documents and from works of old and contemporary historians is, despite its great variety, subordinate to a strict and goal-oriented concept.

Anything conclusive on the concept of history on which the "Tigurinerchronik" [Tigurine Chronicle] is based can only be said when the manuscript can be made available. However, some tendencies are clear: The political development of Switzerland is important to Bullinger, and is given special emphasis, especially in the second part of the chronicle. We once again recognise the patriot of 1525, who proudly notes down the accomplishments of the forefathers, who broke away from the tyranny of the Hapsburgs, and proved themselves in battles for their freedom.

Bullinger wasn't sparing in the "Tigurinerchronik" [Tigurine Chronicle] either when indicating God's grace and help behind the magnificent achievements and the flourishing of the Swiss political system. This unique success story ends – as we already know – in the late 15th century. In the service of foreign lords and no longer for their own matters, the Swiss had given up their old virtues. Like for Zwingli, Bullinger also sees the mercenary services and pension management practices as the political basic evil of the late Middle Ages. However, he doesn't fail to emphasize that it was in Zurich where the resistance against this evil had already formed up in 1503.

But it wasn't the Swiss context that formed the deciding framework, but the Christian-ecclesiastical development. Contrary to the profane history of Switzerland, Bullinger describes the (European) church history with unrestrained fierceness and with evident personal engagement. Purposefully he portrays the history from the spreading of early Christianity, over its changes in the Middle Ages up to his own time. The Christian doctrine was intact until the 4th century, and in a state of apostolic simplicity, but subsequently was adulterated through human fabrications. He enumerates all of them, from the worship of saints to mass to the "indulgence rummage sale." He sees the Benedictine monasticism, which he covers in detail, as one of the most influential factors for this defective development. Of course the papacy is the cause of all evil, and Bullinger is not afraid to use any rudeness or sarcasm in order to run down the Roman organisation. They were "evil scoundrels", those popes; Gregory IX. a "contemptible blackguard", Clemens VI. was a "murderous devil", and Bullinger called John XII. a "disgraceful, shameful, blasphemous, diabolical scoundrel" and so on. They, the popes, had not only snatched the ecclesiastical, but – which is especially reprehensible – the worldly power, and set themselves above the authority placed by God, over the emperor. Pope Bonifacius VIII. claimed both swords (the spiritual as well as the secular), which for Bullinger very clearly seemed to be the announced anti-Christ of Apocalypse 13.

However, Zurich had again and again resisted this development. Yet Bullinger makes this city – unspoken, certainly – to the counterpart of Rome. Just the age of the city – he sees its beginning at the time of Abraham, therefore far before that of Rome – speaks for a certain independence. And with the assumption that Christianity was preached in early Christian times by two of Peter's disciples, he obtained for Zurich its own apostolic connecting point. In the city's history during the following centuries, he discovers again and again criticism about Rome, which he of course duly emphasizes.

Thus Zurich has defended itself for a long time against the settlement of the mendicant order, and in the important imperial-papal power struggles always kept on the emperor's side, which even resulted with the papal ban being imposed several times on the city. In the Zurich of the Middle Ages, Bullinger always sees an essence of the pure preserved, even though the good was covered up for a while with the Roman ecclesiastical system and only brought to light again during the Reformation. He also speaks then about the revitalisation of the old "Zurich faith".

The "Tigurinerchronik" [Tigurine Chronicle] clearly conveys, but no longer as sensationally as in 1525, Bullinger's eschatological understanding of history. His attempts to write Swiss chronicles had to fail, since not all of Switzerland – but only a minority of cities – had kept the eschatological schedule. Despite Swiss patriotism, Bullinger's highest admiration was for Zurich, which in the "last days" – in which he believed to be, at the latest since the '50s – had found its way back to true Christianity.

Perhaps Bullinger thought about publishing the "Eidgenössische Chronik" [Swiss Chronicle] while writing it, but printing the "Tigurinerchronik" [Tigurine Chronicle] was totally unthinkable. The shrill anti-papacy, the attacks against the confessional opponents and their institutions, but also the ethical-moral super-elevation of Zurich's position would have badly disturbed or destroyed the bearable agreement between Reformed and Catholic Switzerland. He could hardly expect approval by the Zurich authorities for the printing, and so right from the start he produced a hand-written clean version.

His work, however, became – probably because of its very ideological unambiguity – in the inner Protestant area highly-valued reading matter that was much in demand, quasi the history primer of the Reformed Protestants, as it were. It spread quickly over Zurich and Switzerland in numerous hand-written copies. We know of dozens of copies of the "Tigurinerchronik" [Tigurine Chronicle], the "Reformatingsgeschichte" [History of the Reformation], and occasionally also the "Eidgenössische Chronik" [Swiss Chronicle] from the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, which are kept in archives all over Europe.

The "Tigurinerchronik" [Tigurine Chronicle] – an edition in Zurich is presently being prepared – should be of interest for research concerned with the history of ideas, because it conveys a wealth of historical knowledge and the contemporary thinking of the 16th century. It establishes at the same time the personal legacy of Bullinger to the city, which has become his home.

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