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Chur

Chur – from the history books

History of Chur

The Roman past of today's city of Chur began a good 2,000 years ago with the conquest by the emperor's stepsons Drusus and Tiberius. However, Chur's settlement history is much older with traces dating back to around 11,000 BC. In prehistoric and early historic times, the area to the left (Welschdörfli) and right (Sennhof/Karlihof) of the Plessur was inhabited, and in late Roman times a fortress was built higher up on the site of today's cathedral. A bishop of Chur, Asinio, was first mentioned in 451, but the beginnings of the diocese probably date back to the 4th century. Towards the end of the first millennium, the bishop also assumed an increasingly important role in secular matters. He benefited from the favour of the German emperors, who granted him important privileges such as the Chur customs tax in 952. From 1299 onwards, the bishop held high jurisdiction over Chur and several neighbouring villages. As sovereign, he also had the right to appoint the town council and various municipal offices. Towards the end of the Middle Ages, his secular power began to wane. The town had been in conflict with the "court" for some time, with the predominantly merchant citizens trying to seize the town's rights and revenues. The bishop's palace was even plundered twice in the process. After a devastating fire in 1464, which destroyed large parts of the town, the citizens sent an envoy to the imperial court. Frederick III not only confirmed the few old rights, but also granted almost complete liberation from episcopal rule.

The new town constitution made possible by this was essentially based on the newly founded five guilds (winegrowers, shoemakers, tailors, blacksmiths, bakers). Only citizens of the city could become guild members. Non-citizens, poor folk, illegitimate children and women were excluded. Guild regulations governed the organisation and activities down to the smallest detail. There were regulations on working hours, the number of apprentices and journeymen per business, the admission of new masters and the quality of goods. Agriculture, which continued to play an important role in Chur until well into the modern era, was also controlled by the guild regulations. For example, the guilds had to provide shepherds for the cattle kept in the town. The new guild constitution transferred political power from the bishop to the craftsmen associations; a political career in Chur was only possible as a member of a guild. For this reason, noblemen and patricians also joined the guilds.

The bishop's remaining influence in the city was further diminished by the Reformation. As Chur adopted the new doctrine, not only citizenship and guild membership, but also the Protestant denomination became a prerequisite for a political career.

Chur Cathedral

Chur was repeatedly devastated by great fires, not only in 1464, but also up until the 19th century. In 1574, 1576 and 1674, for example, entire parts of the town were destroyed, and in 1811 the canons' houses in the courtyard as well as the cathedral tower and roof were burnt down. During the turmoil in the Grisons associated with the Thirty Years' War, the people of Chur had to endure the occupation of foreign troops - first Spanish-Austrian, then French. The town also had to bear a heavy burden of war debts. Just over 160 years after the Grisons Turmoils, Chur was again occupied by foreign troops. During the French Revolution and the

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Napoleonic campaigns, Graubünden became a theatre of war from 1798/99, and depending on the fortunes of the war, the town fell into French or Austrian hands.

Although the Chur guilds had survived the fall of the Ancien Régime and had been revived, the guild regulations increasingly proved to be a stumbling block. The fact that only a relatively small number of people had a say in politics and the lack of freedom of trade were increasingly criticised by the disadvantaged citizens. It was not until 1840 that the guilds were abolished and a new, liberal city constitution was introduced.

In 1803, the Grisons became an additional canton of the Swiss Confederation, and Chur succeeded in establishing itself as the capital after initial competition from Ilanz and Davos. In the 20th century, especially after the Second World War, the city grew inexorably and today has 15 times more inhabitants than 200 years ago. The small guild town, characterised by agriculture and transit traffic, has become a modern administrative town which, due to its function as a centre, is home not only to numerous municipal but also cantonal administrative branches and cultural institutions.

Further information
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