

2.b.2. From ancient to modern: state, society, economy and culture in the Albula / Bernina region

The Albula/Bernina region shares the destiny of alpine Rhaetia. The entire region was incorporated in the Roman Empire and christianised; later it fell to the emergent Germanic Empire. The feudalisation process led to the dominion of the Bishop of Chur. However, the communities soon became the most important political players: they joined forces in the Drei Bünden, the political predecessor of the Canton Graubünden. Under their auspices traffic flourished on the Albula/Bernina route from the late Middle Ages. In pre-modern times, the autonomy of the communities led to confessional schism in the Albula/Bernina region while maintaining trans-local solidarity. The social order presented a similar pattern: aristocratic families dominated the Drei Bünde, but they always had to seek their power base in several communities.

Late antiquity: Christianisation

The central alpine region was integrated in the Roman Empire relatively late. However, the influence of Roman civilisation was all the more long-lasting. The alpine peoples, primarily the Rhaetians, developed into loyal custodians of the Roman cultural heritage: Christianity and the Latin language.

About 300 AD, Chur was promoted to the capital of the province “Raetia Prima” – the alpine part of the province Raetia – and is already mentioned as a bishopric in 451. The Chur church association of the time remained restricted to the town and its immediate environs; the territorial diocese came later.

The first missionising waves to reach Rhaetia came from within the empire, from the south, gradually building up a network of extensive country parishes. The patron saints help to differentiate the various phases of this process. Dedication to St. Peter indicates papal influence on the founding of the church, particularly in the 5th century. It has been observed that the churches lining the pass routes frequented in Roman times were dedicated to Peter the apostle. This

also applies for the Albula/Bernina route. There are churches dedicated to St. Peter in Alvaschein (Mistail), Bergün/Bravuogn, Samedan and Poschiavo.

Early Middle Ages: Regionalisation

After the collapse of the western Roman Empire only the “Raetia Curiensis” or “Churrätien” – significant elements of the provincial organisation – survived in Raetia Prima. Political power was in the hands of the local landowners. The most respected dynasty took charge of government and also filled the office of Bishop of Chur. The church citadels – old retreats that became places of worship – were a characteristic feature in Churrätien. The best known of these retreats and citadels is the “Hohenrätien” on a rocky outcrop overlooking Sils in the Domleschg valley. Its church, a baptistery on the left side of the valley, is dedicated to St. Johannes Baptista [St. John the Baptist]; the bridge over the Rhine at Thusis was used principally for going to church. Churrätien was semi-autonomous, but subject to various overlords over the years: first the Ravenatic Ostrogoths then, from 536, the Merovingian



Sils i.D. > Ehrenfels Castle. Built in the first half of the 13th century. Renovated as a youth hostel in 1934.
Ch. Meisser / Staatsarchiv, Chur



Sils i.D. > The Campi fort. Founded around 1200 by the von Campell lords. Given up around 1740.
Ch. Meisser / Staatsarchiv, Chur



Brienz/Brinzauls > Belfort fortress. Built in 1228. Expanded to a noble residence in several stages. Destroyed 1499.
Ch. Meisser / Staatsarchiv, Chur



Pontresina > The Spaniola tower. Pentagonal residential tower, built 1210 under the lords of Pontresina. Given up around the end of the 14th century.
Ch. Meisser / Staatsarchiv, Chur

Franks. The bishopric of Chur – the diocese was now identical with the territory of Churrätien – was able to shake off the close ties with Milan; the Bishop even attended the Frankish imperial synod in Paris as early as 614. With the introduction of the regional constitution of 806, Churrätien fell to the Carolingian regency and the territory was divided into two districts or counties: Oberrätien and Unterrätien or Upper and Lower Rhaetia. The districts were broken down into several “ministeria”, fiscal-military administrative areas. The district count (Gaugraf) assumed the secular rule in Churrätien on this basis, together with the administration of most of the churches. However, the bishop lost almost all his possessions by this move.

How were things organised now, particularly in the Albula/Bernina region? The Upper Engadin, the “ministerium de Endena”, the Albula the “ministerium de Impetinis” were now administrative districts in Oberrätia. Centre of the latter was “Castellum Impetinis”, Tiefencastel/Casti. The local churches were part of the royal possessions; there were others in the upper Albula valley.

With the end of the Ostrogoth hegemony over the alpine region, the Lombards had moved into Upper Italy in the 6th century; the start of the Frankish era in Churrätien. This cut off the southern link to the Albula route. Only with Charlemagne’s victory over the Lombards in 774, did the Veltlin and Poschiavo valleys open up again to influence from the north. Charlemagne placed his possessions in these valleys at the disposition of St. Denis abbey near Paris. In 824, his grandson Lothar I, ceded the parish churches in the upper Veltlin to St. Denis; these included the church in Poschiavo which is mentioned as “postclave” or “post lacum”: the area “behind” the Lake of Poschiavo. The fact that the

name given has a Latinate derivation, indicates that the valley was developed under southern influence.

High Middle Ages: Feudalisation

At the partition of the Carolingian empire in 843, Churrätien fell to the east Frankish or “German” Carolingians and the bishopric of Chur was allocated to the archbishopric of Mainz. From the 10th century, Churrätien belonged to the German Empire that had developed from the east Frankish empire. Emperor Otto and his successor rescinded the Carolingian measures. They again vested the Bishop of Chur with goods and privileges. The county of Oberrätia was not formally abolished but lapsed in the course of the 11th century. This shift in authority laid the foundation for episcopal power.

The feudalisation process started at the same time: the exercise of power by a prince of the church was always indirect and had to be implemented by vassals; but the feudal lords craved independence and set up their own rule. Vice versa, the bishop managed to force free noble families into dependence. The castles of Ehrenfels and Campi above Sils in the Domleschg valley were at first the seats of two independent lords; by the 14th century they were part of the Bishop’s retinue. Hohenrätia had been feudalised: the citadel now had a residential tower housing the bishop’s bailiffs.

The Albula valley was ruled first by the lords of Greifenstein and then by their heirs, the Wildenbergs: Rhaetian branches of noble families from Swabia. Their residence was Greifenstein castle at Filisur, their bailiffs occupied the tower at Bergün/Bravuogn where they held the patronage rights of the parish church. By 1400 the Bishop of Chur had managed to acquire all these offices. On the lower reaches of the Albula river, the



Samedan > "La Tuor" village tower. Formerly a residential tower. The seat of the lords of Samedan in the 13th century. Also used as a prison.
Denkmalpflege Graubünden, Chur



Poschiavo > Torre di Municipio. Built as a defence tower for the episcopal bailiff in the first half of the 13th century. Later the seat of the Olgiati family. Converted for use as the Rathaus in the mid 16th century. The belfry was added in 1651.
Denkmalpflege Graubünden, Chur



Poschiavo court flag >
(Comun grande di Poschiavo).
Rhätisches Museum, Chur



Bergün/Bravuogn > The "Platz" or "Roman Tower". Built in the 13th century as official seat of the lords of Greifenstein. Converted to a bell tower in the early 17th century.
Denkmalpflege Graubünden, Chur

episcopal overlordship was interrupted by the power base of the lords of Vaz. The latter had achieved independence by building the stronghold of Belfort at Brienz/Brinzauls; from there they organised the colonisation of the Landwasser valley (Davos). They also held the patron rights to Alvaneu. Tensions escalated in 1323: the Bishops vassals and the Vaz retainers feuded at Davos and Bergün/Bravuogn; the latter was burned to the ground.

Relics of the county of Oberrätia were preserved in the Upper Engadin. The Swabian heirs of the counts sold these possessions – including the parish churches of Zuoz, Samedan and St. Moritz – to the Bishop of Chur in 1139 and the source of the Albula river was defined as the most northerly limit of the entire region. The office of the episcopal magistrate (judge throughout the valley) had been in the hands of the von Planta family since 1300; the Planta's had ousted the noble families who had previously resided in the towers of Samedan and Pontresina. The Bishop of Chur claimed dominion over the Poschiavo valley as well, although the valleys south of the Bernina were actually part of the diocese of Como. Citizens of Como owned land in the Veltlin and Poschiavo valleys. Nevertheless, it was a vassal of the Bishop of Chur, who leased the silver mines on the Bernina Pass in 1200; Poschiavo took one half and a private citizen of Como the other.

Late Middle Ages: Communalisation

In 1367, the Chur cathedral chapter, the noble retainers of the bishop and valley communities joined forces. Their association – the “Gotteshaus” (House of God) or “Chadè” – was to control episcopal policy and administration. In the 15th century the Gotteshausbund (House of God Union) linked up with the two other Bünde

that had formed alongside it: with the upper or Grauen Bund (Grey Union) and the Bund der Zehn Gerichte (Union of Ten Courts). The new political entity, the Drei Bünden (Three Unions) would form a small, but self-assured little republic in early modern times: the predecessor of the Canton Graubünden.

The Gotteshausbund integrated most of the valley communities in the Albula/Bernina region. The community of Belfort (Lantsch, Brienz/Brinzauls, Surava, Alvaneu and the villages in the outer Landwasser valley), which belonged to the Zehngerichtebund was an exception: this was a late consequence of the dominion of the lords of Vaz.

The community of Poschiavo – the “Comun grande” or greater community covering the whole valley – did not join the Gotteshausbund until later. They had long sworn allegiance to the bishop and he had promised protection against Como. But in 1350 the military occupation of Poschiavo by Milan – Como's overlord – severed the connection with the Gotteshaus. Subsequently the Podestà or most important office (president and judge) in Poschiavo was repeatedly filled from Milan or Como.

In 1408, the people of Poschiavo managed to shake off the dominion of Milan. They rose up against the Olgiati family from Como, the Milanese governor, and joined the Gotteshausbund. From then on the community enjoyed extensive autonomy. However, the bishop reserved the right to appoint the Podestà; this right did not revert to the community until the 1540s. The former Palazzo Olgiati in Poschiavo was now taken over as Rathaus or town hall.

The communities in the Upper Engadin also became more powerful and soon broke free from the dominance of the von Planta family. When the Gotteshausbund was founded, three members



The New Testament translated into Rumansh by Jachiam Bifrun. Fundaziun Not Vital, Ardez



of this family still represented the entire community. After 1460 the dispute over the magistrate's office became open, with the bishop playing a precarious mediating role. In 1526 the community acquired the right to elect their district magistrate independently.

The struggle against the von Planta family also led to the secession of the upper part of the valley. In 1462, the jurisdiction area fell into two independent civil court districts: Samedan with Bever and the other villages in the upper valley took its place with equal rights alongside Zuoz, the von Planta power base. This partition corresponded to the borders between the old parishes or "Pleifs".

The 15th century was not only the time when the political communities in Graubünden were established, but also a peak period for transalpine traffic (cf. 2.b.2). The Dukes of Milan allowed the people of Poschiavo to import certain quantities of Veltliner wine free of duty. Later Veltliner wine was exported, above all over the Bernina Pass. Tirano and Bormio were regional markets. The volume of traffic rose again in 1512, when the Drei Bünde gained power over the Veltlin valley together with Bormio and Chiavenna.

The organisation of transport on the Albula/Bernina route followed the local-focus mentality of the people from Graubünden: haulage and road maintenance were the responsibility of the communities. The carters in each community organised themselves on a cooperative basis; the "Port".

Early Modern Times: Confessionalisation

Establishment of the Drei Bünde on a community basis led to dual confessionalisation. With the advance of the Reformation, every parish was free to go over to the new movement. This principle, pronounced in the 1520s, was followed a generation later by the declaration of protection

of minorities: Protestant families were to be tolerated in Catholic communities and vice versa. Confessionalisation did not start in the Albula/Bernina region until the mid 16th century. The initiative came from the south: Italian faith refugees found a safe haven in Poschiavo. A printing press was soon set up which also supplied the Engadin with Protestant texts. Even by 1600 both Poschiavo religious communities lived together, virtually unseparated: parish churches and cemeteries were used by both faiths, priests and pastors were both paid from community funds.

The Upper Engadin communities also acknowledged their allegiance to the Reformation about the middle of the century. Besides the Italian exiles, Jachiam Bifrun from Samedan – the author of a protestant catechism (first printed in Romansh 1552) and translator of the New Testament, also worked here. Gian Travers, the district magistrate of the Upper Engadin for many years and episcopal bailiff was also active as a Protestant preacher. He was the author of a verse epos and bible dramas in the vernacular.

Bergün/Bravuogn was entirely under the influence of the Upper Engadin; Gian Travers was one of the last episcopal bailiffs at Greifenstein castle. But the change of religious confession remained uncertain here for many years. The decision was not taken until 1601. The last two Catholics moved away of their own free will and the parish church was "cleansed" of images and an altar was sold to Brienz/Brinzauls.

The counter-reformation began to take effect at the beginning of the 17th century. The first Baroque churches were built at that time in the Poschiavo valley, in the spirit of the Council of Trent; they were dedicated to St. Borromeo. The council programme stipulated that the "heresy" in the diocese of Como was to be stamped out. This Catholic hegemony became the motive force of

the 1620 revolt in Veltlin, which was again under the dominion of the Bündner. The massacre of the Protestants spread from Tirano into the Poschiavo valley where about a hundred people were murdered.

It was not until 1642, that the Drei Bünde, rent by confessional and party political strife and oppressed by foreign powers, were able to patch up an internal peace. A confessional distribution key for the utilisation of community possessions was drawn up in Poschiavo. All the church wealth went to the Catholics while the Protestants built their own parish churches in Poschiavo and Brusio. The coexistence of both “Religionen” or “Corpi” in the valley of Poschiavo even entailed the development of two distinct forms of dialect. The people’s schools, introduced in the 19th century, remained confessionally distinct until 1969.

Virtually all the parishes in the lower Albula valley remained loyal to the old faith. The Capuchin monks from Brescia missionised here from 1635. Their regional base was at Tiefencastel; from there they went out to preach in Mon and Stierva. The somewhat remote German-speaking community of Mutten had been the only village in the lower Albula valley to go over to the Reformation (1582); it remained Protestant.

Alvaneu was particularly devoted to the Capuchin monks, retaining their services until 1890. However, Wiesen, the sole Protestant village in Belfort, broke away from the union with Alvaneu and attached itself to the Protestant parish of Filisur.

Ancien Régime: Social and economic differentiation

A new leadership group emerged gradually in Drei Bünden. The prominent families came partly from the noble retainers of the Bishop of

Chur, and in part they were social climbers from the farming classes. Their financial resources had been amassed during military service as mercenaries for European princes, from landholdings or from trade and also from holding community offices. The communities granted the high offices for the administration of Veltlin to the citizens, or rather: they sold them.

The new elite distinguished itself from the “common man” solely by financial clout and lifestyle, not by formal privileges. The aristocratic families were able to increase their influence as they moved into various communities. From the late 16th century the Jecklin, Planta and Juvalta families from Zuoz moved to Bergün/Bravuogn, whereas the Buol family (originally from the Bergell) from the Zehngerichtebund, moved to Salis. However, there were limits to the freedom of movement. When the Protestant Sprecher family from Davos, who owned Bad Alvaneu, wanted to settle in Alvaneu, the village community reacted with a ban on the settlement of “heretics”.

The aristocrats liked to engage in mining. The bishop had granted the prospecting rights for the Upper Engadin to the Planta family in 1295. In the mid 15th century the overlord and the vassal were in dispute on this issue but it was the community which carried the day. The contested mines were located on the Bernina Pass. Subsequently, the centre of mining in Graubünden shifted to the Albula valley. Capitalists from Ulm and Bergamo were interested in the Bergün iron mines; the mines were taken over by Johann von Salis-Samedana, a grandson of Gian Travers, in 1576. The charcoal stacks and smelting sheds were concentrated in Filisur (where the electricity works are today); ores from the Landwasser valley, Schmitten and the Davos “Silver Mountain” (Silberberg) were smelted here.

In return Johann von Salis supplied the communities with salt, which he imported from the Tyrol and had brought over the Albula Pass to Thusis. However, all his undertakings eventually failed. Later mining ventures were based on the Bellaluna (a typical mining name) smelting works on the floor of the valley between Bergün/Bravuogn and Filisur; this continued until about 1850. Since early modern times, people from Graubünden have gone abroad to work. Occupational emigration became the most important branch of the economy in old Graubünden. It was not only mercenary service that called for seasonal or prolonged emigration. Until the mid 18th century, people from Graubünden were active as shoe makers, spirits dealers, pastry cooks and innkeepers in Venice and on the mainland. Later they exercised their craft as confectioners and kept coffee houses throughout Europe. Traders from Graubünden operated primarily in northern Italy. One of the most important enterprises was founded in Samedan, in 1789, by Tosio and Giuliani from Poschiavo.

Modern Times: Modernisation

In the 1780s the definitive defection of the Veltlin, a subject state, seemed imminent. In an attempt to fend off the loss, the people of Graubünden proposed to grant the Veltlin communities equal rights, or at least to relocate the Graubünden capitals to the south, to Samedan. But it was too late: in 1797, under the aegis of Bonaparte, the people of Veltlin allied themselves to Cisalpine Republic, to Lombardy. They put up a blockade against Poschiavo – and encouraged the people of Poschiavo to follow them to “liberty”. However, Poschiavo which had received military reinforcements from Samedan and Bergün/Bravuogn, countered that as citizens of Graubünden, they had long been free.

However, the defection of the Veltlin valley hit Graubünden hard; 130 families lost private possessions and the loss of customs and excise revenue from the Veltlin wiped out a large part of the income of the Drei Bünde. The balance of power situation also spoke against the continuation of Graubünden as an independent state. The outcome was the transformation into the Swiss Canton Graubünden in 1803.

But, the old decentralised structure continued in a new guise. The quasi-sovereign communities, the Bünde, remained. The definitive end of the Dreibünde state came in 1851. The valley communities were declared jurisdiction districts and the village communities were promoted to autonomous political units. However, now even the most modest hamlets wanted to be recognised as political communities; Cavaione, for example, a tiny village in the Poschiavo valley, clinging to the mountainside 800 m above the valley floor craved autonomy but it was attributed to Brusio in 1874.

Customs and traditions

The life style of broad sections of the people underwent a radical change during the 19th and 20th centuries. The seasonally dictated rhythms of everyday life vanished with the declining importance of farming. Religious customs continued, above all the number of feast days and the way they were celebrated differing according to confession, but the once universal, even obligatory, participation declined.

Of the cyclic-seasonal customs, above all those celebrated from Christmas to Epiphany are still observed: performances of Christmas, New Year and Twelfth Night carols, traditional drinking and feasting, giving and returning visits, sometimes unwelcome, particularly on New Year’s Eve. In contrast the Protestant moral court



“Chalandamarz” in the Engadin > Drawing by Alois Carigiet from the much loved children’s book “Schellen-Ursli”.
Orell Füssli Verlag AG, Zurich



Schlitteda > The young lads, dressed in the Sunday traditional dress, would take their sweethearts, in horse-drawn sledges with the horses also decked out for the occasion, to the lakes or the foot of the Albula Pass. Picture painted by Anny Vonzun.

largely repressed the carnival customs and carnival tomfoolery. Ball-hitting games associated with winter fire customs (“Scheibenschlagen” – whispering the beloved’s name and making a wish as you hit a burning disc of wood into the night, “Mazza” a form of “Hornissen or Hornets”) are well documented but have died out. There was a gradual change in the groups behind the customs practised by young people: the exclusively male youth fraternity (Societad da mats), which specialised in begging and ‘shaming’ customs, was displaced by the ‘young and single’ groups of both sexes (la Giuventetgna) who enjoyed dancing; these were joined by the choir and music societies about 1850.

More recently, some of the old customs have been reintroduced and revitalised. Above all the schoolchildren’s spring procession “Chalanda-marz” in the Engadin, “al Popocc da marz” in Poschiavo (when a straw ‘guy’ is burned). The procession to the accompaniment of large and small bells and cracking whips, is intended to drive off the winter; along the way the participants are rewarded with goodies. This custom was not reintroduced in Bergün/Bravuogn, where it had been banned as heathen in 1760. The 20th century saw the reintroduction of the “Schlittedas” in the Upper Engadin; the lively sledge parties which had been so popular in the 18th century. The party starts and ends in a centrally situated village, usually Samedan; the horse-drawn sledges then drive up the valley to the lakes or down the valley to the end of the Albula Pass. The “Schlittedas” are followed by dances.

Eating and drinking

The customary eating habits are oriented to the needs and resources of an alpine rural population. This is expressed in Rhaeto Romansh say-

ings like “Mincha trat ha sia saschun” (Every food has its season) or “Tut dil nies; dalla vacca e da noss èrs” (It is all our own; from our cow and from our fields). The need to keep stores and preserve them determined the form of most of the foods, and therefore the eating habits in the broadest sense.

The energy required for the heavy work of mountain farming is reflected in the high nutritional value of the traditional dishes like Capuns (little ‘parcels’ wrapped in Swiss chard leaves) with a buttery filling containing bacon and egg; the Romansh name “capun/chapun” also means a plump, stocky man. Several sayings reflect a certain disregard for salad, for example: “Chi chi mangia erba, dvainta bescha” (If you eat grass, you’ll turn into a sheep).

Meat, accompanied by barley broth (“schoppa da giutta”), was eaten as the Sunday roast or as boiled beef (in soup). It was also made into sausages (Salsiz) or preserved by air-drying or smoking. This was the origin of the Graubünden dried beef speciality of “Bindenfleisch” (“puolpa”). Milk and flour based foods and high calorie recipes using cream, butter or cheese were part of the traditional every day menu. The cream brose “put in gromma” even gave its name to the Upper Engadin dialect of “puter”. Eggs come to the table in every form from “tatsch” (similar to the Austrian Kaiserschmarrn) or as “bizzocals”; maize as “polenta”; maize or semolina as “maluns”; semolina also as “gnocs” (gnocchi); potatoes which were introduced in the 18th century, as “maluns” (in the Engadin also called “micluns”) or, with the addition of bacon or sausage as oven-baked “plain in pigna”. Egg pasta prepared with savoy or Swiss chard leaves or leek, but also with a little dried meat and bacon become “bizzocals cun ravitscha” (“with leaves”) dark “pizzoccheri” – dark because



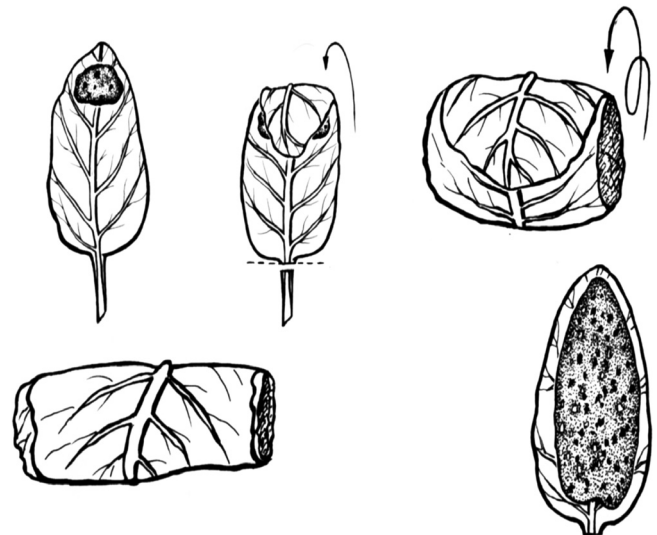
Pizzoccheri > This pasta speciality made from buckwheat flour is typical of the Poschiavo and Veltin valleys. Tourismusverein Valposchiavo



Brasciadella > The bread speciality from Poschiavo is shaped into a ring. Tourismusverein Valposchiavo



Capuns > These little 'parcels' wrapped in Swiss chard are a typical Graubünden dish; there are numerous variations. S. Eberle



Capuns > There are various different ways of wrapping up the chard parcels 'properly'. E. Lengler

they are made from buckwheat flour – are a speciality of the Poschiavo valley.

A talent for culinary art and inventive flair were a prerequisite for the success of the emigrants from Graubünden who established themselves as confectioners in the European capitals. After their return they enriched the menus of the valleys of their homeland with their successful creations, for example the Engadin nut tart (“tuorta da nuschi engiadinaisa”). Traditional sweet dishes were made with almost as much butter as flour like the “fuatschas grassas” (literally “fat pancakes”), “grassins” and “grassets”. In Poschiavio there are deserts made from sweet chestnuts (chestnut pudding). Liquid specialities include the traditional Kirsch liqueur (“Röteli”) or the hazel nut liqueur.

Despite all these delicacies, one must not forget the daily bread. In Poschiavio this is usually made from rye flour and is traditionally ring shaped. For many centuries the most popular and most widespread drink was wine from the Veltlin.

Eating together has always encouraged bonding, either within the family, for example a sausage meal or the “bacharia” (after the family pig had been slaughtered), or in the extended family or village community context on the occasion of church rites like christenings or weddings but also at a wake – the “palorma” (“per l’orma” – for the soul).