

## *History of Obwalden*

### *Early period*

The term "Obwalden" is not as old as the history of the small state that it describes. The name first appeared locally in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and only became official around the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Before, the area was called "Unterwalden ob dem Wald" ("Unterwalden above the forest"), "Unterwalden" meaning "within the forest." In spite of the dense tree cover that gave the area its name in the Middle Ages, the first settlements were established in prehistoric times. The earliest finds, which date back to the 7<sup>th</sup> millennium BC, were discovered in Lungern (Brand). In the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC, there was probably a pre-Celtic settlement on the shores of the Lake of Sarnen. Various place names, as well as certain Alpine terms, stem from the Celtic period and were handed down from the romanised Celts. A Roman villa in Alpnach shows that the Romans were present in Obwalden from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD. Traces of the Celts and the Romans yield to traces of the Alemanni, who first appeared in the area in the 7<sup>th</sup> century.

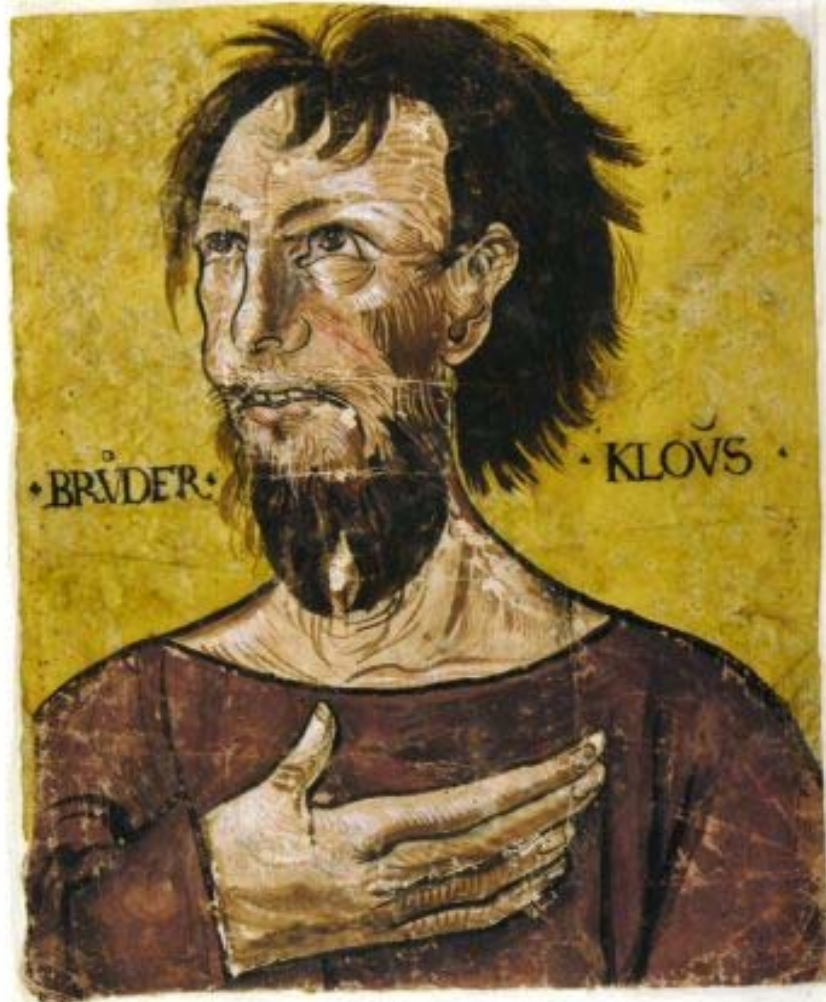
### *The Alemanni*

The Alemanni had their own concepts of law and government (*lex alamannorum*). Dependence on land ownership continued beyond the fall of the Alamannic duchy, when the valley became part of the Frankish and later of the Holy Roman Empire. Obwalden and the Brünig Pass constituted the border region between the kingdom of Burgundy and the duchy of Swabia. In the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, a large part of the cleared land belonged to the nobility. From the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the nobles bequeathed their possessions to ecclesiastical institutions, in particular to the monasteries of Murbach, Lucerne, Muri, Beromünster and, from 1120, Engelberg. In addition to these dependencies, Obwalden still had free inhabitants; these constituted about a third of the population.

### *Obwalden, the beginnings of the Swiss Confederation and the road to independence*

The ecclesiastical framework was decisive for the development of the local power structure. This is shown, for example, by the inclusion of the term "*universitas vallis*" ("valley community"), which stems from ecclesiastical law, in the state seal of Obwalden and Nidwalden. Only Nidwalden joined the general peace alliance of 1291; Obwalden joined later on. King Henry VII made Obwalden and Nidwalden directly subordinate to the crown in 1309, after the two states had been combined to form Unterwalden ob und nid dem Wald ("Unterwalden above and below the forest") as part of the imperial district of Waldstätte. Obwalden then joined the nascent Swiss Confederation along with the rest of the three original cantons; however, the domestic politics of Obwalden and Nidwalden developed independently of each other. In 1415, Obwalden received jurisdiction over capital offences, and hence constitutional independence, from King Sigismund, a fact that manifested itself in the construction of an imposing town hall in 1419.

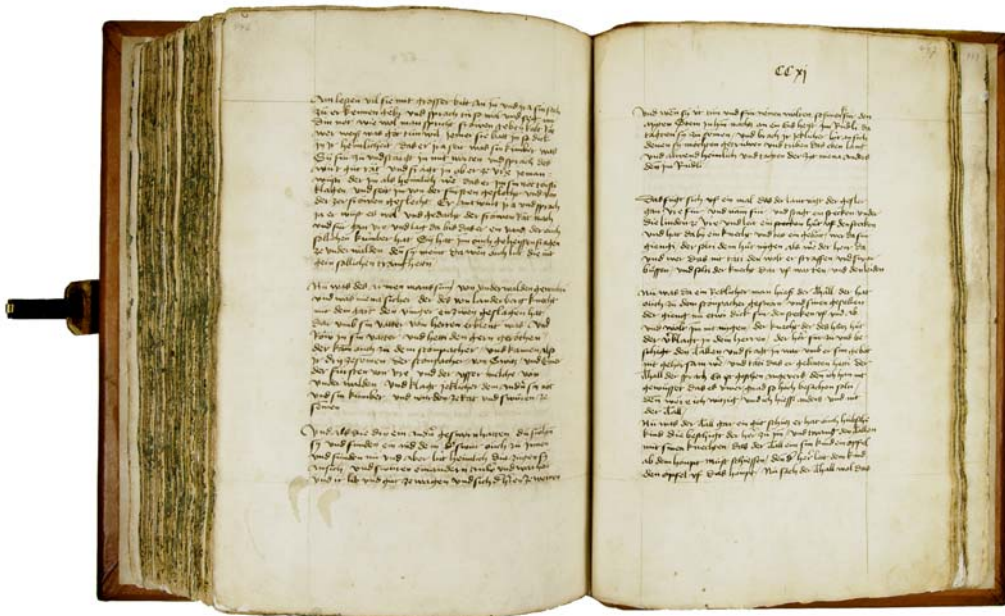
The imperial privileges that it received and the alliances that it formed with the states belonging to the Swiss Confederation presuppose Unterwalden as a political entity, which is why we find only the one state seal in connection with international agreements, alliances, armistices and peace treaties. It was not until the late Middle Ages that the independence of Obwalden and Nidwalden became readily apparent.



### *Italian politics*

Until the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, matters of state were decided by the gentry, but in 1382 the higher agricultural class gained power and adopted policies that were different from those of the stewards of Sarnen and the lords of Hunwil, Rudenz and Vitringen, who were related to the gentry of Lucerne and the Bernese Oberland. The politics of these farmers were mainly concerned with Italy as a market for livestock and agricultural products (especially cheese). It is no coincidence that Obwalden was involved in the early stages of Uri's Italian politics (conquest of the Leventina valley in 1403). Starting in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, trade became a key economic factor that left its mark not only on the area's culture, but also on its legislation. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the duchy of Milan had a flourishing economy.

Obwalden, an eminent state at that time, was frequently involved in explosive political ventures (e.g., the coup attempts of Koller, Mötteli and Amstalden). In the turbulent and warlike 15<sup>th</sup> century, the noteworthy Niklaus von Flüe of Obwalden appeared, the conciliator of the infighting Swiss confederates, who is responsible for the treaty of Stans (*Stanser Verkommnis*), the first law that applied to all the members of the Swiss Confederation. The times of Niklaus von Flüe also saw the production in 1470 of the famous White Book of Sarnen (*Weisses Buch von Sarnen*), which contains the earliest account of the Swiss Confederation's struggle for independence (as well as the legend of William Tell).



### *Foreign military service*

In addition, Italy was regarded as an opportunity to perform foreign military service. Niklaus von Flüe warned against the risks of such mercenary work (as Zwingli did later on), but even his admonishments were unable to prevent it. From the 16th century, the terms and conditions of mercenary service were governed by payment contracts (capitulation documents) between military commanders and the Swiss states that supplied the men. In Obwalden, it was mainly the officer families of Imfeld, Wirz and von Flüe that organised mercenary companies. In the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, the mercenary troops operated mainly in Italy, but during the religious wars, mercenaries from Obwalden were primarily engaged in France and the Netherlands, and in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, they fought in the wars against the Turks. Of particular note is the battle of Negroponte (Peleponnese) of 1688, at which a company of mercenaries from Obwalden was utterly destroyed. Families with high-ranking officers in the armies of France and Spain achieved great wealth; such officers often returned with significant funds in order to serve their home cantons in unpaid government positions.

### *Counter-Reformation*

During the Counter-Reformation, the absolutism observable at the royal courts of Europe also manifested itself in Obwalden. Daily life became subject to ordinances that regulated and, in some cases, even prohibited excessive eating, drinking, smoking, swearing, gambling, conspicuous dress and inn visits. The authorities passed moral laws such as these not only in order to exercise control over the population, but also in order to maintain peace, quiet, safety and compliance with the ten commandments. Everyday life was governed by religious customs. The period of the Counter-Reformation also produced the infamous witch trials. Obwalden discontinued them only after the intervention of Kaspar Muff, a curate from Sarnen, in 1667. In a speech held in 1754 before the cantonal legislative assembly, Johann Wolfgang von Flüe, the president of the canton, said that the welfare of a free state was based on religion, laws and alliances with other states, for if one did not "have allies more powerful than oneself, our religion and our freedom would have been taken from us a long time ago." Even during the *ancien régime*, Obwalden's form of government remained absolutist. This absolutism was tempered, however, by the involvement of the people and the cantonal legislative assembly (*Landsgemeinde*).

### *The French Revolution and its implications*

In 1798, Obwalden's government was in favour of merging with France, so in March of that year, Obwalden became the first state of the three original cantons to join the new Helvetic Republic. This decision was reversed, however, when troops from Nidwalden and Obwalden appeared on 22 April, and was enforced only after the defeat of troops from the canton of Schwyz on 8 May. Obwalden now constituted the district of Sarnen in the canton of Waldstätte.

In 1803, under Napoleon's mediation constitution, Obwalden once again became part of the old state (or canton) of Unterwalden, albeit only as a demicanton rather than constituting two thirds of the canton, as it had before. However, the resistance of Nidwalden against the federal treaty of 1815 brought about a territorial increase, for the formerly independent ecclesiastical government of Engelberg was subsequently united with (or rather annexed by) Obwalden. During the mediation period, Obwalden reasserted the rights and practices that it had abandoned in 1798. Little remained of the achievements of the Helvetic Republic. In Sarnen, the conservative states (Uri, Schwyz, Unterwalden ob und nid dem Wald, Fribourg, Valais, Basel-City and Neuchâtel) united in the alliance of Sarnen (*Sarnerbund*). Obwalden held a prominent position in the resistance against the (liberal) Regeneration. After the abolishment of the monasteries of Aargau in 1841, Obwalden invited the monks of Muri to Sarnen to complement the faculty that had been established in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (grammar school).

### *Obwalden in the Swiss Federation*

After the defeat of the *Sonderbund* ("separate league"), the new federal constitution of 1848 required a revision of the cantonal constitution. One radical change brought about by the constitution of 1850 was the introduction of political communities as the electoral bodies for courts and councils. Before, the old church communities had served as the political communities. Only established members had had voting rights, and admission to church-member and corporation law had been completely out of the question since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Now, however, all Swiss citizens had equal rights, and this included new arrivals.

### *Economy and society*

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Obwalden remained a distinctly agricultural canton. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, several local businesses and sawmills developed into wood-processing enterprises, some large, some small. The hotel and railway pioneers Franz Josef Bucher and Josef Durrer became well-known. From the 1860s, outwork became important as well. Straw hats were manufactured for the Georges Meyer company in Wohlen, and in 1910 and 1930, this Aargau-based firm built a factory in Sarnen (which was in operation until 1974). Agriculture, outwork and factories failed to feed the population, however, so in 1854, as well as in the 1880s, entire families emigrated to North and South America, where many of them still reside. A prominent example is the Colônia Helvetia in Brazil.

## *Tourism*

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Obwalden also started to attract tourists. Engelberg was particularly popular. Felix Mendelssohn, the composer, wrote as early as 1837 that "this valley will become one of my favourite ones." In the second half of the 19th century, Engelberg developed into a fashionable health resort. The Sarneraatal became a popular destination as well, especially with the completion of the road over the Brünig Pass in 1857, the inauguration of the Brünig railway in 1888 and the construction of the world's steepest rack railway up to the Pilatus in 1889.

## *The 20<sup>th</sup> century*

The 20<sup>th</sup> century was marked primarily by the debate surrounding the abolishment of the cantonal legislative assembly, which is mentioned in historical records dating back to 1373. After various unsuccessful attempts (in 1919, 1922 and 1975), it was replaced with the ballot box so that "the democratic problem-solving system could be made more flexible in a constantly changing economic society" (cantonal government, 1999).

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Obwalden underwent an "industrial revolution" and became the home of companies such as Sarna, Maxon Motor, Elfo and Leister, which have since expanded into foreign markets. More and more, Obwalden is becoming a "micro-valley," a fact that is symbolised by the Mars surface vehicle *Sojourner*, which is driven by eleven Maxon motors.



Kleinstmotoren aus Obwalden bewegen Marssonden.

Since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, and especially since the appearance of the first cars around 1900, road construction has always been an important issue in the politics of Obwalden. In particular, the projected route of national highway N8 was strongly

criticized in the 1980s; there was a widespread desire for untouched landscape and an aversion against its large-scale use for road construction. Due to this massive opposition, the bypass tunnel of Sachseln was built in 1997, and the Giswil and Lungern sections of the N8 were conceived as unconnected bypasses.

### *Outlook for the 21<sup>st</sup> century*

The accelerated change brought about by industrialisation and advanced technology has created a postmodern society. "The nationwide social, political, economic and technological changes make demands of the canton of Obwalden and its political institutions on multiple levels. The long-term objective of creating a lively and open economic environment und an intact living environment for the canton remains a constant challenge" (cantonal government, 1999).