

Politics and the Alps in the XVIth century

Geographical Determinism and Political Imagination in the Early Modern Period

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Illustration of the coats of arms of those killed in the Battle of Sempach on the side of the Austrian Habsburgs; painting of the Battle of Sempach 1386, parchment and paper, 33x5x23cm, Joseph Leodegar Bartholomäus Tschudi, for the Abbey of St Gall, 1738, Cod. Sang. 1276. © e-codices (<https://www.e-codices.unifr.ch/en/list/one/csg/1276>)

The Alps, long regarded in medieval thought as an inhospitable no-man's-land, gain new symbolic and political significance in the sixteenth century. Renaissance writers revive ancient theories of geographical determinism (Hippocrates, Tacitus, Strabo) to explain the character of Alpine populations and to conceptualise the role of mountains in shaping liberty, martial spirit, and political order.

In this way, in the sixteenth century, Alps are invested with meaning as both a natural boundary and a political resource, particularly in the territories of Switzerland, Savoy, and Tyrol. In the Swiss Confederacy, Alpine ruggedness becomes associated with freedom and republicanism, while in Savoy, poets and chroniclers transform the dynasty's Alpine setting into a claim to princely majesty, forging the image of the duke as "king of the Alps". Drawing on humanist texts, maps, and panegyrics, this talk will analyse how geographical features are mobilised to construct distinct identities and to legitimize political ambitions in the early modern period.

Wann: 30.07.2025 – 18:00 Uhr

Wo: Seminarraum 6 - 1. Stock - Ágnes-Heller-Haus