

Theme Text, May 2015

Reformation in Zurich



In the 16th century, under Huldrych Zwingli and his successor, Heinrich Bullinger, Zurich became the birthplace and center of the Reformation in German-speaking Switzerland. Nowadays, churches, monuments and buildings invite visitors to explore Zurich on the trail of Christianity and the Reformation. In 2019, Zurich celebrates the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. zuerich.com

Further information, special offers and hotel reservation

Zürich Tourism, Tourist Service at Zurich main station, CH-8001 Zurich
Tel +41 44 215 40 00, touristservice@zuerich.com, zuerich.com

Zwingli and Bullinger Reform Zurich

The First Christians in Zurich: The Legend of Felix and Regula

Felix und Regula lived in the 3rd century AD. They were siblings and members of the Theban Legion. Due to their Christian faith, they were persecuted, and so they fled from Southern Switzerland to Zurich. Unfortunately, the Roman rulers of the time were not very sympathetic towards the two Christians either, and they died a martyrs' death, beheaded on the site where the Wasserkirche (Water Church) stands today. According to legend, after being decapitated, Felix and Regula miraculously got to their feet, picked up their heads and walked 40 paces up the hill to the place where they wished to be buried. Five hundred years later, while out hunting a stag, Charlemagne heard this story and immediately had the Grossmünster Church – today one of Zurich's most famous landmarks – built on the spot where Felix and Regula were buried. It is not known how much of these two intertwined legends is actually true, but what is certain is that Felix und Regula entered into Zurich's history as its patron saints and still to this day are depicted on the city seal. It is also an established fact that thanks to the legend of Felix and Regula, Zurich served as an important place of pilgrimage right up to the Reformation.

Zurich as a Pilgrimage City

During the Middle Ages, it was not buildings – no matter how magnificent they might have been – but relics that determined a city's importance. Thanks to the mortal remains of Felix and Regula, Zurich became an important place of pilgrimage. The pilgrimage route began at the Fraumünster abbey, which was built by Charlemagne's grandson, Louis the German. The story of the founding of the Fraumünster, too, is enshrouded in legend. One story tells of a stag with burning lights on its antlers that guided Louis the German's daughters, Hildegard and Bertha, through the darkness of the early hours of the morning as they made their way to church to worship. The two women were later to become the first abbesses of the Fraumünster convent for noblewomen. In the 13th century, the abbess was entitled to hold markets, collect tolls and mint coins, thus effectively making her the ruler of the city. The pilgrims' path led over a wooden bridge from the Fraumünster to the Wasserkirche (Water Church), where the martyrs, Felix and Regula, were said to have been beheaded, and from there to their burial site on the Grossmünster hill.

Huldrych Zwingli at the Grossmünster Church

Several centuries later, the Grossmünster once again became the scene of a major historical event, when Huldrych Zwingli came to Zurich in 1519 to work here as pastor. The fervent lay preacher broke with Catholic tradition and began to preach a whole new interpretation of the Word of God. He was of the opinion that everything that was not mentioned in the Bible and that distracted people from following its teachings should be banned from religious life – from holy images and Sunday sermons to singing hymns in church and fasting for Lent. He preached against the veneration of relics, celibacy and the Eucharist, and sought to eliminate the selling of indulgences and the mercenary army. Together with the City Council, who were interested in the new, more stringent rules and the increased power that came with it, Zwingli introduced his reforms within both the Church and society. From 1530, the citizens of Zurich were subjected to a whole series of strict moral mandates. These dictated, among other things, the wearing of gray, high-fitting clothing, a strict division of gender roles, compulsory attendance of Sunday services and the closure of inns and taverns at 9.00pm. Huldrych Zwingli retained his fighting spirit to the end of his life. He was killed in 1531 during the Battle of Kappel, Europe's first religious war between the Reformed cantons under Zurich leadership and the cantons in Central Switzerland, which are still predominantly Catholic today.

Heinrich Bullinger Consolidates the Reformation

Zwingli's successor, Heinrich Bullinger, was completely opposite to him in character. He was a quiet thinker, who wrote a total of around 12,000 letters. In 1549, Bullinger worked with the Western Swiss reformer, John Calvin, on the Consensus Tigurinus (Consensus of Zurich), a document intended to bring unity to the Reformed churches with regard to their doctrines of the sacraments, particularly the Lord's Supper. Bullinger set down the Reformatist beliefs in the form of the Second Helvetic Confession of 1566, which is still the official statement of faith for the Reformed Churches of Eastern Europe today. Next to the Heidelberg Catechism, this work is the most generally recognized confession of the Reformed Church.

The Anabaptists

Among Zwingli's closest followers were Conrad Grebel and Felix Manz, but for them Zwingli's Reformatist measures did not go far enough. The Anabaptists, as they were called, pressed for the strict separation of Church and State, the adoption of the community of goods (in which all assets and possessions are shared among the

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community and the needy), the seclusion of the religious community and adult baptism. However, their conflicting views, in particular relating to infant baptism, led to the Anabaptists under Grebel and Manz severing their ties with Zwingli. Due to Zwingli's close relationship with Zurich's City Council, the Anabaptists' disputes about the reforms fell on deaf ears. In 1525, they were in effect forbidden to practice their beliefs and ordered to leave the city immediately. From then on, the supporters of the Anabaptist movement suffered persecution, and Felix Manz went down in history as their first martyr, after being executed by drowning in the River Limmat. Despite this, over the following centuries, the Anabaptist movement continued to spread, giving root to the modern-day Mennonite, Amish and Hutterite communities.

Zurich Develops into a Textile Center

Subsequently, many Reformation religious refugees fled to Zurich from the south. Here, in the place where the Reformation started, they were welcome. Thanks to their extensive knowledge and business connections, the religious refugees transformed Zurich into a textile center, with its hub at Schipfe, now one of the city's oldest quarters. Raw materials were imported and exquisite garments exported. Zurich remained one of the main European centers for the silk industry right into the 20th century – although the strict moral laws forbade the women of Zurich from wearing this “queen of all fabrics” themselves.

On the Trail of the Reformation

Grossmünster Church

The crypt of the Grossmünster contains original paintings depicting the legend of Felix and Regula. Visitors can also come face to face with a larger-than-life statue of Charlemagne. A copy of this statue adorns the outside of the Karlsturm (Charlemagne Tower), the more southerly of the Grossmünster's twin towers. Ascending the tower is one of the few ways of obtaining a glimpse into the hidden inner courtyards and the plant-laden roof terraces of Zurich's Old Town. The cloister houses a museum with exhibits relating to the Reformation. The stained-glass window in the choir was created by Swiss artist, Augusto Giacometti. A further 12 church windows are the work of German artist, Sigmar Polke, who won the competition to design the new windows. grossmuenster.ch

Fraumünster Church

The Fraumünster Church is the best proof of the fact that since the 20th century it has also been possible to admire art in Reformed churches in Zurich's city center. The stained-glass windows in the choir by Marc Chagall are renowned all over the world. Augusto Giacometti also designed a window both here and in the Wasserkirche. In the wake of the Reformation, the last abbess donated the church to the City of Zurich in order to “preserve the city from unrest and adversity, and to do what is good and beneficial to Zurich”. From 2014, the remains of the former buildings in the Fraumünster's crypt will be accessible to the public. fraumuenster.ch

Wasserkirche

The name of the Wasserkirche (Water Church) dates back to the time when the church stood on a small island in the River Limmat. Evidence of several earlier buildings has been found beneath the present Late Gothic church, the oldest dating from around 1000 AD. Archaeological excavations were carried out in the middle of the 20th century. The crypt was redesigned in 2006. Besides viewing the Martyr's Stone, visitors can listen to the legends in the form of an audio play. zuerich.com/en/visit/attractions/wasserkirche

Monuments

A memorial to Huldrych Zwingli was erected in front of the Wasserkirche in 1885. A statue of Heinrich Bullinger, holding a Bible in his hands, can be seen on the outside wall of the Grossmünster.

Guided City Tours

The two-hour guided tour, “Reformation and Religion – The Zwingli effect in Zürich”, leads through the city of Zurich past significant sites and buildings, and tells of how the Reformation started and the impact it has had on the city of Zurich. zuerich.com/touren

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Contact

International Media Team

Zürich Tourismus, Stampfenbachstrasse 52, CH-8006 Zürich
Tel +41 44 215 40 96, media@zuerich.com
zuerich.com/medien

Images & text

zuerich.thirdlight.com

Username: media_access

Password: media4zuerich

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Zürich Tourism, Tourist Service at Zurich main station, CH-8001 Zurich
Tel +41 44 215 40 00, touristservice@zuerich.com, zuerich.com