

The Diet, instructions and the recesses

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The Diet was a congress of envoys without the powers of a parliament. Each canton sent one or two delegates who voted according to written instructions, and decisions recorded in the recess (*Abschied*) bound the cantons only when they had been approved by their governments. Matters concerning a common lordship were decided by the cantons that shared it, in practice by majority, although the minority could and did refuse to accept decisions that touched its fundamental interests.¹ For Locarno the voting arithmetic was simple. Of the twelve ruling cantons, seven were Catholic, four were Reformed and Glarus was divided. A strict majority vote would have allowed the Catholic cantons to order the punishment of the Locarnese heretics. Zurich, which looked to the support of the other Reformed cantons, refused to accept a majority decision on a question of faith.²

The procedural answer to such a deadlock was arbitration. The federal pacts from the fourteenth century onwards had provided that disputes between confederates should be settled by arbitrators chosen by the parties, with an umpire if the arbitrators disagreed. The historical dictionary describes arbitration as the essential link between the individual alliances of which the Confederation was composed.³ In confessional disputes, however, the procedure had become difficult to use after the Reformation. The same article observes that the Old Confederation, unlike the Holy Roman Empire with its Peace of Augsburg of 1555, never introduced a territorial separation of confessions between the cantons, so that confessional disputes recurred until the wars of 1656 and 1712, after which a parity-based arbitral tribunal for religious differences was reintroduced.⁴ The Locarno case of 1554 falls in the middle of this history: it was one of the confessional disputes that the federal institutions still managed to settle without war.

1 The Diets of July and November 1554

The case of the Locarnese Reformed was discussed at two Diets in Baden, in July and November 1554.⁵ Between and around these sessions the Locarnese themselves were subject to growing pressure. According to the account summarized in the literature, the authorities required in the spring of 1554 that all inhabitants of Locarno go to confession and take communion according to the Catholic rite, which forced the Reformed either to conform or to declare themselves.⁶ The confession of July 1554 was the community's answer. Its transmission to Zurich by a Zurich bailiff raised the stakes for both sides.

The Catholic cantons demanded that the Locarnese return to the Church or be punished. They were supported by the papacy, which saw in Locarno a bridgehead of heresy on the border of Lombardy, and, according to the older literature, by the Spanish government of Milan, which had ruled the duchy since 1535 and had its own reasons to watch a Protestant community on the shore of Lake Maggiore with suspicion.⁷ Zurich defended the community as a church of its own confession. Its theologians, above all Heinrich Bullinger, the successor of Zwingli, advised the Zurich council throughout. The historical dictionary describes the final decision as an arbitral award reached in a tense climate after prolonged and difficult disputes, and summarizes its content as a choice imposed on the Reformed between recantation and emigration.⁸ The terms of that award and the way they were applied are the subject of the next section.

2 Notes

1. Andreas Würgler, "Dieta federale", DSS, version of 25 September 2014, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/010076/> ("Gli inviati esprimevano l'unico voto del proprio cant. in base alle istruzioni di quest'ultimo"; recesses had to be "portati a casa", that is submitted to the cantonal authorities for ratification; "Solo per gli affari riguardanti i baliaggi comuni [...] veniva applicato il principio maggioritario"); Andreas Würgler, *Die Tagsatzung der Eidgenossen. Politik, Kommunikation und Symbolik einer repräsentativen Institution im europäischen Kontext (1470– 1798)* (Epfendorf: Bibliotheca Academica, 2013). On the constitution of the common lordships see Chapter A.II. ↩
2. Meyer, *Die evangelische Gemeinde in Locarno* (above); Mark Taplin, *The Italian Reformers and the Zurich Church, c. 1540–1620* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003). ↩

3. Marcel Senn and Elisabetta Fiocchi, "Schiedsgericht", HLS, version of 21 June 2021, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/009602/> ("Das Schiedsgericht erwies sich als wesentliches Verbindungsglied zwischen den einzelnen Bündnissen der Eidgenossenschaft"). ↩
4. Senn and Fiocchi, "Schiedsgericht" (above) ("Da die alte Eidgenossenschaft im Gegensatz zum Reich (Augsburger Religionsfrieden 1555) keine territoriale Abgrenzung der Konfessionen zwischen den Ständen einföhrte, kam es immer wieder zu konfessionellen Zwistigkeiten"). ↩
5. Crivelli, "Duno, Taddeo" (above) (two Diets at Baden, in July and November 1554). ↩
6. Miriam Nicoli, "Muralto, Barbara", DSS, version of 27 January 2026, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/062270/> ("Nel marzo 1554 venne imposto a tutti i Locarnesi l'obbligo di partecipare alla confessione e alla comunione cattoliche"). ↩
7. Nicoli, "Muralto, Barbara" (above) (role of the papal nuncio); Taplin, The Italian Reformers and the Zurich Church (above); Adriano Prosperi, preface to the Italian edition of Meyer (above). Spanish rule in Milan from 1535 is set out in Chapter A.IV. ↩
8. Crivelli, "Duno, Taddeo" (above) (the final arbitral award, reached after long and difficult disputes in a tense climate, confronted the Reformed with the choice of recanting or emigrating). ↩

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