

## Morgarten and the entry into the Confederation

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On 15 November 1315, on the shore of Lake Ägeri near Sattel, the forces of Schwyz, Uri and Unterwalden ambushed an Austrian army under Duke Leopold I of Habsburg.<sup>1</sup> The battle of Morgarten took place on the border between the later cantons of Zug and Schwyz, which both claim it as part of their history. Its size and its course are disputed. Modern historians estimate the forces on each side in the low thousands. Some doubt whether it was a battle at all or the ambush of a column strung out along a narrow path between a steep slope and a marsh.<sup>2</sup> Its political effect is clearer: the victory consolidated the alliance of the Forest Cantons and opened the way to the expansion of the Confederation, which Lucerne, Zurich and Zug joined within four decades.<sup>3</sup>

Zug's entry into the Confederation was not voluntary. In 1352, Zurich besieged the town and compelled it to conclude an alliance with the confederate cantons.<sup>4</sup> Because the alliance reserved the rights of the Habsburgs, Zug remained in an ambiguous position for several decades, a member of the Confederation in some respects and a Habsburg possession in others. In 1365, Schwyz conquered the town. From 1370 to 1404, Schwyz appointed the Ammann, the head of the government of Zug. In 1404, an armed uprising in the town against the dominance of Schwyz led Zurich and Lucerne to intervene militarily.<sup>5</sup> Only after these struggles did Zug become a confederate canton with its own government.

The episode teaches a lesson that runs through the history of the canton. Zug was a small canton between larger neighbours and could not rely on force. Its autonomy depended on the balance between Zurich and Schwyz, and later on the balance within the Confederation as a whole. A small polity in this position learns to negotiate, to offer something to each of its neighbours and to make itself useful. When the canton later chose to compete for companies through low taxes, it acted on a similar calculation:

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a small state with few natural resources can attract activity by offering conditions that its larger neighbours cannot or will not match.

### 1 Notes

1. Wikipedia (English), "Battle of Morgarten", accessed September 2026: date 15 November 1315; location near Sattel along Lake Ägeri; belligerents the Forest Cantons of Schwyz, Uri and Unterwalden against the Duchy of Austria under Leopold I. ↩
2. Wikipedia (English), "Battle of Morgarten", section on troop strength and on the historiographical debate: estimates of 1,000 to 3,000 fighters on the Swiss side and 2,000 to 3,000 on the Austrian side; scholarly dispute whether the encounter was a battle or the ambush of a column stretched over some two kilometres. ↩
3. Wikipedia (English), "Battle of Morgarten", section on historical importance. ↩
4. HLS, "Zug (Gemeinde)": siege by Zurich in 1352 and compelled alliance with the confederates; HLS, "Zug (Kanton)": confederate member ("eidgenössischer Ort") from 1352, subject to the reservation of Habsburg rights. ↩
5. HLS, "Zug (Gemeinde)": conquest by Schwyz in 1365; appointment of the Ammann by Schwyz from 1370 to 1404; armed uprising in 1404 and military intervention by Zurich and Lucerne. ↩

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