

Stadt und Amt: a federal constitution in miniature

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

The constitution of the old canton of Zug was itself a federation. The canton consisted of the town of Zug and the "Äusseres Amt", the outer district, which comprised the three rural communes of Baar, Ägeri and Menzingen, the latter also known as "Berg".¹ Town and communes governed the canton together. The common institutions, in particular the council of "Stadt und Amt", brought together representatives of the town and of the three communes. After 1803 this council had 54 members.² The town and the communes shared the canton's offices, including the office of Ammann, according to a system of rotation.³

The town was more than an equal partner. It had acquired, by purchase and by pledge, a number of lordships in the surrounding area, which it governed as its own subject territories through bailiffs, the Vögte. The town acquired the bailiwick of Walchwil in 1379 and later the lordships of Cham, Risch and Steinhausen, which had belonged to the lords of Hünenberg. By around 1500, the territory of the canton approximated its present boundaries.⁴ The inhabitants of these subject territories had no share in the government of the canton. They became equal citizens only in 1798, when the town released them under the pressure of the revolution.⁵

This structure had three consequences that deserve attention in a book about a modern business location.

The first is a habit of negotiated government. In a polity composed of four partners, none of which could impose its will on the others, decisions required compromise. The distribution of offices, revenues and burdens was a constant subject of negotiation. The institutions of the old canton were designed to manage these negotiations, a task they performed with varying success. The quarrels of the eighteenth century, described below, show what happened when the balance broke down.

The second is an experience of fiscal federalism within the canton itself. Revenues were not pooled in a central treasury in the modern sense. The foreign pensions that formed the most important public income of the early modern canton were distributed to the communes and within them. Each commune had its own resources and its own obligations.⁶ The question of who received what, and on what basis, was a political question of the first rank. The modern Swiss debates about intercantonal fiscal equalisation, in which Zug is the largest contributor per inhabitant, have a long prehistory in the canton's own distributive quarrels.⁷ The third is a distinction between those who governed and those who were governed. The inhabitants of the subject territories, the residents who were not full citizens and, above all, the non-citizens who settled in the town as craftsmen or servants had few or no political rights. Citizenship was a privilege, transmitted by birth and granted to newcomers only rarely and at a price. The distinction between citizens and residents, between the old families and the newcomers, shaped the social history of the town into the twentieth century. It returns, in a different form, in the relationship between the long-established population and the international community that has settled in the canton since the 1970s.

1 Notes

1. HLS, "Zug (Kanton)", section on the "Stadt und Amt" structure: the joint council of town and Amt, with the communes of Baar, Ägeri and Menzingen (Berg) as equal partners. ↩
2. HLS, "Zug (Kanton)": joint council of "Stadt und Amt" with 54 members after 1803. ↩
3. HLS, "Zug (Kanton)", version of 24 April 2019, hls-dhs-dss.ch: from 1410 the Ammann was a Zuger; by the sixteenth century the office rotated in a rigid order ("starre Kehrordnung") with a defined sequence among the four communes of town and outer Amt. ↩
4. HLS, "Zug (Kanton)", section on territorial development: acquisition of the bailiwick of Walchwil in 1379; acquisition of Cham, Risch and Steinhausen from the lords of Hünenberg; territory approximating the modern cantonal boundaries by about 1500. ↩
5. HLS, "Zug (Kanton)" and "Zug (Gemeinde)": release of the subject territories by the town on 11 February 1798. ↩
6. HLS, "Zug (Kanton)", section on the early modern economy: foreign military service and state pensions as critical financial instruments, controlled by the political elite and distributed through the communes. ↩

7. Federal Department of Finance, press release "Finanzausgleich: Die Ausgleichszahlungen steigen 2026 stark an", 11 June 2025, efd.admin.ch: taking the other equalisation instruments into account and on a per capita basis, Zug remains the largest contributor; Geneva is the largest contributor in absolute terms, followed by Zurich and Zug. Treated in Part B. ↩

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