

The lake takes the town: 4 March 1435

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On 4 March 1435, the lowest of the three streets of the old town of Zug, the one nearest the lake, slid into Lake Zug. Two rows of houses disappeared into the water. The chronicles speak of an event that shook the town like an earthquake. The number of victims is uncertain: the Historical Dictionary of Switzerland states that perhaps one fifth of the inhabitants lost their lives, while a local historical account puts the number of dead at around sixty and the number of destroyed buildings at twenty-six.¹ The town at that time had perhaps three to four hundred inhabitants.² Relief goods, above all food, were sent to Zug from many parts of the Confederation.

The catastrophe of 1435 was the first of two occasions on which the lake claimed part of the town. The second, in 1887, is described in Chapter III. Both events resulted from the geology of the lakeshore, which consists of soft lake marl that can lose its stability under load. Both demonstrate a vulnerability that no fiscal policy can remove: the town is built on ground that is less solid than it looks. The metaphor, to which later parts of this book will return, is tempting for a business location whose prosperity depends on conditions set by others. For the present, the historical point is simpler. The response to the catastrophe of 1435 shows the Confederation as a community of mutual assistance. The small canton could rely on the support of its allies when disaster struck. That solidarity, formalised in modern times in the national fiscal equalisation, is the counterpart of the competition between cantons and has its own history.

A legend grew up around the catastrophe. It tells of a daughter of the king of the waters who fell in love with a young man of the town and used a magic potion to allow the inhabitants of the sunken street to live on beneath the lake.³ The legend emerged long after the event. It is a reminder that communities remember their disasters through stories, which often console more than they explain.

1 Notes

1. HLS, "Zug (Gemeinde)": on 4 March 1435 the lakeside street sank into the lake, perhaps one fifth of the inhabitants died; zentralplus, Damals-Blog, "Die Seejungfrau, der Jüngling und die Katastrophe in der Zuger Altstadt", accessed September 2026: about sixty dead and twenty-six buildings destroyed; relief supplies, above all food, sent from many places in the Confederation. ↩
2. HLS, "Zug (Gemeinde)": population of about 300 to 400 around 1450. ↩
3. zentralplus, Damals-Blog, "Die Seejungfrau, der Jüngling und die Katastrophe in der Zuger Altstadt": the legend of the Zug mermaid emerged long after the event. ↩

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