The German-Italian Frontier: Felix Fabri, *Wanderings* (1486)

Abstract

In these excerpts from his famous travel account, the Dominican friar Felix Fabri (1441–1502) describes the experience of crossing from German into Italian lands. Among other observations, Fabri notes that a swift mountain stream running through the village of Nova marked the physical frontier between Germany and Italy. An attention to boundaries also comes through in Fabri's description of Trent, which he describes as two cities: upper and lower, or Italian and German, respectively. Unsurprisingly, German lands and peoples are portrayed more favorably in such comparisons.

Source

[…] A few years ago this town was Italian, and the Italian language was the common speech of the people; indeed, I know an Italian Father who cannot speak a word of German, and who in the time of his youth was a runner (cursor) and preacher in the convent at Botzen; but in process of time, as the Germans increased in numbers, the town has become a German town; and that convent which formerly belonged to the province of St. Dominic, has now been added to our province. We passed the night in this town, and saw much misery, for many people were living among the ruins of their houses, without any roof or place of shelter, and many were leaving the town as beggars who had heretofore been rich men. But at the present day the town is being rebuilt, and the buildings which they are putting up are more costly than those which stood there before the fire.

[…]

I asked the governor what object the lord Duke could have in incurring such great expense in thus strangely fortifying this castle, when all the country round about belonged to the country of Tyrol. He answered that he did it in order that if the common people were to attempt to drive out their lord, and free themselves from their allegiance, as the Helvetians, or Swiss, had done, then the Duke might take refuge in that castle, and so harass them that they would be forced to submit; for the castle is, as one may say, impregnable, and stands in the throat of that valley. We rode on our way and came to Neumarkt, a large village, where we stayed for an hour in an inn to bait and rest our horses. Here a serving-man came to me from a house which stood opposite, and said that he had been sent by a brother of the Order of Preaching Friars to ask me who I was and whence I came. I answered that if that friar wished to know who I was and whence I came, he might come to me and I would give him a civil answer; "but," said I, "I will not give any answer to a servant." I spoke thus to him because I suspected him of being one of those wandering brethren of our order who range about the hill country — for discontented and runaway brethren both of our order and of other orders betake themselves to these parts and to the hill country, where they find the safest of hiding-places, and as everything there is very cheap, they are able to live a dissolute life, and they visit the country people, telling them about the value of Masses, so that their hearers buy Masses of them, both for themselves and their dead relatives, not knowing that the sin of simony is incurred by so doing. So they give these men money that they may read Masses, whereas they had much better give them the money as a free gift, for they never would approach the altar to do any honour to God. I have seen wretches of almost every religious order wandering in those mountains, and they are actually tolerated by the bishops and priests. From Neumarkt we rode through the valley which leads towards Trent. The vulgar have a tradition that through this valley or channel the

sea once came up as far as Meran, and that the Adige ran down from the mountains above Meran and fell into the sea there. In proof of this in the rock on the mountains of Tyrol are found to this day iron rings, to which ships used to be fastened; thus the whole district through which the Adige now flows into the Mediterranean was once sea. This I can well believe, because the sea in old times was much higher than it now is. We came to a village named Nova, where there runs a rapid mountainstream, which marks the frontier of Italy and Germany. Above the stream on our side stands a chapelin which the bowels of St. Udalrich, Bishop of Augsburg, are buried. The story goes that the aforesaid saint had been at Rome, and on his way home began to be seriously ill. So he begged God that He would permit him to die in Germany, and not in Italy; and so it was, for as soon as he had crossed the bridge over this stream he died, and his bowels were buried there, but his body was taken on to Augsburg. From this place we rode to the city of Trent, and stayed the night there. Trent is one of those very ancient cities which were founded in these mountains by the Trojans, who came thither with Antenor; the Adige runs past its walls. It is placed in a most beautiful, airy and healthy position, and consists, one may say, of two cities, an upper and a lower, on account of the two races which inhabit it. In the upper town dwell the Italians, and in the lower the Germans. They are at variance both in language and habits of life, and seldom are at peace with one another; indeed, before our own times the city was often ruined, sometimes by the Italians out of hatred for the Germans, and sometimes by the Germans out of hatred for the Italians. Not many years ago the Germans were but a few strangers in that city; now they are the burghers and rulers of the city. The day will soon come — indeed, has virtually come — when Duke Athesis (sic) of Innspruck will altogether join it to his dominions and to Germany, as has been done at Botzen, for the number of Germans there increases daily. What the reason of this increase is, and why our race should spread over other people's countries instead of theirs spreading over ours, I have never learned, unless we choose to say, to the shame of our land, that on account of its poverty and sterility we are driven to other countries, or on account of the fierceness of the Germans, whose near aspect no other race can endure, but all make way for them, yielding to their rage, which no man can resist.

[...]

Source of English translation: Felix Fabri, *The Wanderings of Felix Fabri*, vol. I (part I). Translated (from the Latin) by Aubrey Stewart. The Library of the Palestine Pilgrims' Text Society, vol. VII. London. London: Committee of the Palestine Exploration Fund, 1897, pp. 65, 67–69. Available online at: https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.b4936446

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