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Lord Byron's Autograph at the Castle of Chillon



Contributor: Patrick Vincent

Location: Chillon Castle, Avenue de Chillon 21 · CH 1820 Veytaux · Switzerland

Description:

Au milieu de tous les noms obscurs qui égratignent et encombrant la pierre, il reluit seul en trait de feu. J'ai plus pensé à Byron qu'au prisonnier. [In the midst of all the obscure names which scar and clutter the stone, his alone glows with fire. I thought more of Byron than of the imprisoned.] Gustave Flaubert (1845)

As enthusiastic readers of Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley sailed around Lake Geneva from 22 to 30 June 1816, visiting settings made famous by the novel, including Chillon Castle at the eastern end of Lake Geneva (or Lemán), on Tuesday, June 25, 1816. This first visit inspired Byron's poem *The Prisoner of Chillon*, composed in Ouchy two days later on the subject of François Bonivard (1493-1570), a famous political prisoner held there by the Duke of Savoy between 1530 and 1536. Byron returned to Chillon with his friend John Cam Hobhouse on 18 September 1816, on the first day of their Alpine tour. Louis Simond, who visited Chillon a full year after Byron, on 4 August 1817, was the first to record the presence of Byron's autograph in the castle's souterrain, or dungeon, carved into the southern side of the third column, 1.45 meters from the lower edge of the shaft.

The authenticity of this autograph has been a matter of controversy and criticism almost from the very beginning.

None of the members of the Byron-Shelley circle, and no traveller who visited the castle before Simond, mentions it. It was only on returning to Chillon in August 1828, that Hobhouse noted, with telling amusement, that 'the woman who showed Chillon pointed out to us "Monsieur Lord Byron's" name'. Furthermore, the lettering of Byron's autograph at the Temple of Poseidon in Suniun, Greece, supposedly carved by the poet in 1810, looks nothing like the Chillon autograph, strongly suggesting that either one, or both, of these signatures are fakes.

The Romantic pilgrims who flocked to Chillon to see Byron's signature regularly debated its authenticity. One tourist, for example, Austin Henry Layard, remarks in his 1835 journal that it was doubtful that the poet could have signed his name. Others, inspired by the age's Byronmania, preferred believing that it was real and sometimes even embroidered the myth surrounding it. The notoriously unreliable Alexandre Dumas, for instance, claimed that Byron engraved his name on the column alone, and at night. In 1842, Victor Hugo added that Byron did this using an old ivory-handled awl ('un vieux poinçon à manche d'ivoire') found in the very chamber of the Duke of Savoy. John Ruskin in 1833, and Nikolai Gogol in 1836 carved their names on the same pillar, presumably in homage and emulation. Dorothy Wordsworth, Maria Edgeworth, Charles Dickens, Matthew Arnold, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Mark Twain, and William Dean Howells are only a few of the nineteenth-century literary personalities who remarked on the inscription in their journals, letters and travel-writings.

So far, literary historians have been unable to definitively prove or disprove the autograph's authenticity. Most agree with Ernest Giddey, who has argued that Byron's established celebrity coupled with the immediate popularity of *The Prisoner of Chillon*, published in late 1816, would have led the castle's gaolers or guides to inscribe the author's name in order to boost the site's appeal. More recently, however, David Ellis has cited the fact that, according to John Cam Hobhouse, on the same day in 1816 Byron also wrote his name in the neighbouring Castle of Châtelard and, a week later, on a scrap of paper at the top of the Lauberhorn in the Bernese Alps, strong indications that the Chillon autograph is the real thing. What is certain is that the inscription, along with Byron's poem, helped transform Chillon from a setting branded to Rousseau to a place branded to Byron, and so into one of European Romanticism's most sacred places from 1816 onwards, in turn making it Switzerland's most visited monument.

Date: 25 June 1816–4 August 1817

Creator: possibly Lord Byron

Subject: George Gordon, Lord Byron (1788-1824)

Media rights: photos courtesy of the Chillon Castle Foundation

Object type: inscription

Format: inscription in stone

Publisher: Chillon Castle Foundation

Digital collection record: <https://www.chillon.ch/fr/P7712/1816-2016-byron-is-back-lord-byron-le-retour>

References:

Clubbe, John and Giddey, Ernest. *Byron et la Suisse: Deux Etudes*. Genève: Droz, 1982.

Ellis, David. *Byron in Geneva : That Summer of 1816*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011.