



## Historical Note

## The demise of Archbishop Wolf Dietrich – A historical note on a fatal status epilepticus documented at Salzburg in 1617



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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Wolf Dietrich of Raitenau (WD) ruled the archiepiscopal Salzburg from March 2nd 1587 to December 17th 1611. He was condemned by his successor Archbishop Markus Sittikus of Hohenems to spend his last years imprisoned at the Fortress Hohensalzburg, where he died on January 16th 1617. This historical note describes the causes of his death.

**Materials and methods:** The original Latin handwriting, including the detailed medical history and the autopsy of the Archbishop's body performed by his personal physician, was analyzed in conjunction with historical handwritings provided by St. Peter's Abbey, Salzburg handwriting assigned to Markus Sittikus.

**Results:** Wolf Dietrich of Raitenau had his first well-documented left hemispheric stroke in winter 1604/05. He had palsy of his right arm, was unable to write, and, therefore, used a stamp instead of his signature until October 1605. After another stroke, right hemispheric in origin with persisting palsy of his left arm ["*leva corporis pars iam pridem simili ex apoplectico assultu in paralyisin resoluta*"], he developed symptomatic epilepsy with recurring seizures ["*epileptico insultu quo etiam alias correptus est*"].

On January 15th 1617, he suffered from a secondarily generalized convulsive status epilepticus ["*toto corpore convellitur epileptico insultu*"] with stertorous breathing and distortion of his face ["*spuma stertore insigni faciei perversione*"] and was unconscious for 8 h. He recovered from coma and showed dysphagia, buccofacial apraxia ["*abolitam diglutiendi facultatem*"], reversible speech disturbance ["*accisa etiam verba loqui*"], and left-sided hemiplegia ["*leva corporis pars... immobilis prorsus est reddita*"]. The following day, he had speech disturbances, and he died at noon.

His autopsy showed large but intact liver ["*hepar magnum sanum*"] and heart ["*cor magnum in quo lapsus nullus*"]. There was intrapulmonary mucus ["*pituita imbutus*"], and part of the lungs adhered to its pleura. He had five kidney stones and a partly cirrhotic spleen. The cause of his death was assumed to be intracerebral ["*causa mortis in capite requienda fuisset*"].

**Discussion:** The terminal suffering of Wolf Dietrich of Raitenau is the first witnessed case report on a fatal status epilepticus in Salzburg. Most likely, he suffered from vascular epilepsy due to a right hemispheric stroke, leading to status epilepticus with left-sided Todd's palsy and speech disturbances. An acute symptomatic etiology of this disease cannot be ruled out, as for religious reasons, the Archbishop's brain was not autopsied.

**Conclusion:** Meticulous medical reporting including autopsy was already available in Salzburg in 1617, and the symptomatic etiology of epilepsy was diagnosed correctly.

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**Abbreviations:** WD, Wolf Dietrich of Raitenau; SE, Status epilepticus.

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### 1. Introduction

Wolf Dietrich of Raitenau (WD) was born on March 26th 1559. He was one of the most influential Catholic Archbishops (Fig. 1) and ruled Salzburg from 1587 to 1611. He lived together with his mistress Salome of Altenau and their 15 children.



**Fig. 1.** Wolf Dietrich of Raitenau by Kaspar Memberger, Salzburg 1589, © Salzburg Museum.

His failure to live a celibate life and the conflict on the salt mines between Bavaria and Salzburg were the reasons for his imprisonment on December 17th 1611. He was condemned by his successor Archbishop Markus Sittikus of Hohenems to spend his last years at the Fortress Hohensalzburg, where he died on January 16th 1617.

His medical history was documented by his personal physician Vincentius Cratinus, who executed his autopsy on behalf of Markus Sittikus and the Chapter of Salzburg.

## 2. Material and methods

The personal physician's original Latin handwriting, including the medical history and the autopsy report of the Archbishop's body, was translated (GK, ET) and interpreted in conjunction with historical handwritings provided by St. Peter's Abbey, Salzburg; handwriting assigned

to Markus Sittikus; Claudius Galen's Commentary III on Hippocrates' book IV; and historical records of the archives of the Institute for Applied Geographics (*Landeskunde*) Salzburg and the University of Salzburg.

## 3. Results

Wolf Dietrich of Raitenau had his first well-documented left hemispheric stroke in winter 1604/05 with palsy of his right arm. He was not able to write and used a seal instead of his signature from June to October 1605 [1].

He realized his own mortality and tried to serve his heirs. He commissioned the construction of the castle of *Altenau*, today called *Mirabell*, for his mistress and their children. The marble inscription placed above the castle's entrance is now placed at the Faculty of Law, University of Salzburg. Its text clearly describes his health condition and intentions (Fig. 2).

Later, he suffered from another stroke, which was right hemispheric in origin with palsy of his left arm [*leva corporis pars iam pridem simili ex apoplectico assultu in paralyisin resoluta*] and recurring symptomatic epileptic seizures [*epileptico insultu quo etiam alias correptus est*] [2].

On January 15th 1617 he suffered from a secondarily generalized convulsive status epilepticus (SE) [*toto corpore convellitur epileptico insultu*] with stertorous breathing, salivation, and facial distortions [*spuma stertore insigni faciei perversione*] (Fig. 3) and was unconscious for exactly 8 h. He recovered from coma and showed speech disturbances [*accisa etiam verba loqui*], buccofacial apraxia, dysphagia [*abolitam diglutiendi facultatem*], and a complete left-sided hemiplegia [*leva corporis pars... immobilis prorsus est reddita*] [2] (Fig. 4).

Markus Sittikus described, in a letter addressed to WD's brother, speech disturbances after the generalized convulsions [*fräßig angegriffen*] but noted that he completely recovered from them that night [*die Sprach, wie auch den Verstand völlig widerumben erlangt*] [3], although hemiplegia, dysphagia, and buccofacial apraxia persisted. Liquor made of oriental pearls and other medications were administered to suppress the status [2].

The next day, WD's speech was impaired again [*loquela amplius impediri cepit*], and he died at noon that same day [2].

His autopsy was performed by his personal physician and witnessed by several physicians, natural scientists, politicians, and representatives of cleric dignity [2].

His body was obese and unviolated. His limbs were emaciated and covered with ulcers [*Corpus ... symmetricum se exhibuit et pingue,*



**Fig. 2.** Marble inscription, decorating the entrance at the Castle of Altenau, nowadays placed at the Faculty of Law, University of Salzburg, 2nd floor, room "Wolf Dietrichs Ruh". © Gudrun Kalss.

"Raitenauiae stirpis divino e munere princeps, ad rapidas salzae praetereuntis aquas, impatiens oculi et spirans magis ardua quondam; nunc, ubi morbus corpore deficio: has tactas aedes fessus, portumq; siletem hunc mihi, semestri tempore, constituo."

"born in the house of Raitenau, sovereign by grace of God, at the fast flowing river Salzach, once impatiently longing for outstanding achievements; now, that my body is decayed by diseases: I build this quiet house, this silent port for me within six months."

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