

A city at the bend of the river

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Every financial centre begins as a place where goods, people and information pass. Basel owes its existence to a bend in a river. Coming from Lake Constance, the Rhine flows westwards along the northern edge of the Swiss plateau, separated from the Black Forest by a narrow valley and fed by the Aare, which brings the waters of most of the Swiss plateau. At Basel the river turns sharply to the north and enters the Upper Rhine plain, the wide rift valley between the Vosges to the west and the Black Forest to the east. This turn, known in German as the *Rheinknie*, the Rhine knee, is the geographical key to the city.¹

Three natural regions meet here. To the south lies the Jura, whose folded ridges separate the city from the Swiss plateau and whose passes, above all the Upper and Lower Hauenstein, have for two thousand years carried the road from the Rhine to the Aare valley, and from there to the Alpine passes and Italy. To the north and north-east lies the Black Forest, a forested upland of modest height that was for a long time an obstacle to traffic and later became a source of timber, iron and water power. To the west lies the Sundgau and, beyond it, the Burgundian Gate, the low gap between the Vosges and the Jura that connects the Rhine valley with the valleys of the Doubs and the Saône and hence with the Rhône and the Mediterranean.²

The consequence is that Basel sits at a crossroads of routes running in four directions. The Rhine leads north through the Upper Rhine plain to Strasbourg, Mainz, Cologne and the Low Countries. The Jura passes lead south to the Swiss plateau and, through the Gotthard, to Lombardy. The Burgundian Gate leads west to Burgundy, the Champagne fairs and later to Lyon. The Rhine valley upstream leads east to Lake Constance, Swabia and Bavaria. No other Swiss city combines these directions in the same way. Zurich lies on the plateau and looks to the Alps and to Germany; Geneva sits at the western end of the plateau and looks to the Rhône and to France. Basel is the Swiss city that opens to the Rhine.

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For the history of trade, one fact matters above all. Because the Rhine becomes navigable for larger vessels below Basel, the river, with all the interruptions caused by shoals, rapids and later by tolls, offered a continuous waterway to the North Sea. Upstream, the falls at Laufenburg and Schaffhausen interrupted navigation and forced goods to be unloaded and carried overland. Basel was therefore the natural point where land transport from the south and west met the water route to the north. Goods coming from Italy across the Gotthard, from Burgundy or from the Swiss plateau were reloaded onto boats; goods coming up the Rhine were unloaded and continued by cart or pack animal. Every such break of transport creates a need for warehouses, carriers, commission agents, customs officers and, eventually, for people who advance money on goods in transit.³

The site itself offered protection. On the left bank of the Rhine, a spur of high ground, bounded to the north by the steep bank of the river and to the south-west by the valley of the Birsig, a small tributary, rises above the water. This spur, the *Münsterhügel* or cathedral hill, carries today the Minster and the old episcopal quarter. As a natural fortress, the hill was the place where the Celtic, Roman and early medieval settlements that preceded the city were concentrated. The Birsig valley, running below the hill, became the axis of the medieval market town; the market square lies in it to this day. On the right bank, a flat terrace offered space for a second settlement, later known as Kleinbasel, which the construction of a bridge in the thirteenth century connected with the main city.

Geography defines the options open to a place. Three features of the Basel site recur throughout this book. The first is the border. From the Roman frontier on the Rhine to the Swiss national border of today, which runs through the suburbs of the city, Basel has almost always been a place at the edge of a political space, facing another political space across a line. A border creates costs and opportunities alike: exchange, arbitrage, the transfer of goods and money from one legal order to another. The second feature is transit. The city lives on flows that pass through it: goods, travellers, pilgrims, students, refugees and, in the modern period, commuters, containers and capital. The third feature is the river. The Rhine is a trade route, a source of energy, a border and a symbol, and the port facilities built on its banks in the twentieth century still connect Switzerland with the sea.

1 Notes

1. On the geography of the Rhine knee and the Upper Rhine plain, see HLS, article "Basel (Gemeinde)", section on topography; Kreis/von Wartburg (eds.), Basel – Geschichte einer städtischen Gesellschaft, 2000, introductory chapters. ↩
2. The Burgundian Gate (Burgundische Pforte, Trouée de Belfort) as the natural link between the Rhine and Rhône basins is described in all standard regional geographies; see e.g. HLS, article "Sundgau"; Berchtold, Bâle et l'Europe, vol. 1, 1990, introduction. ↩
3. On the significance of breaks in transport (Umschlagplätze) for the formation of trading cities, and on Basel's role on the Rhine route, see Wackernagel, Geschichte der Stadt Basel, vol. 2/1, 1911, chapters on trade; Kreis/von Wartburg (eds.), 2000, chapter on medieval trade. ↩

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