

A city of ten thousand

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At the end of the Middle Ages, Basel was a city of about ten thousand inhabitants. By the standards of the time, this was a respectable size: larger than Zurich, Bern or Lucerne, comparable to Strasbourg's rivals on the Upper Rhine, but far smaller than the great commercial cities of Italy, Flanders or the Rhineland, such as Venice, Florence, Bruges or Cologne.¹ Reduced by the plague epidemics of the fourteenth century and by the earthquake of 1356, the population recovered slowly in the fifteenth century, with temporary peaks during the Council of Basel, when thousands of visitors crowded into the city.

The economy of the city rested on four pillars. The first was the craft production of the guilds, which supplied the city and its hinterland with textiles, leather, metal goods, food and building materials. The second was trade: the market of Basel served a region extending from the Jura to the Black Forest and from the Sundgau to the Aargau, and the merchants of the city engaged in long-distance trade in cloth, spices, wine, salt, iron and other goods. The third was the Church: the bishop, the cathedral chapter, the monasteries and the parishes employed a large number of people and consumed goods and services. The fourth was transit: the traffic over the bridge and along the Rhine generated revenues for innkeepers, carriers, boatmen and the city itself.

To these pillars, the fifteenth century added two new ones that would transform Basel's position in Europe: the Council of 1431 to 1449, which made the city for almost two decades the centre of Latin Christendom, and the university of 1460, which made it a centre of learning. Chapters IV and V examine them. This chapter concentrates on the institutions through which the city managed its money: the municipal treasury, the taxes, the public debt, the customs house and the municipal exchange.

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1 Notes

1. Population estimates for late medieval Basel range between about 8,000 and 12,000 inhabitants in the fifteenth century; see HLS, article "Basel (Gemeinde)", section on population; Kreis/von Wartburg (eds.), 2000. To be verified. ↩

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