

A general council in a provincial city

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In the summer of 1431, the city of Basel became the meeting place of a general council of the Latin Church. For almost two decades, prelates, theologians, canon lawyers, envoys of kings and princes, secretaries, scribes, merchants and bankers from all over Europe gathered in a city of some ten thousand inhabitants. The Council of Basel was one of the great political events of the fifteenth century. It negotiated with the Hussites of Bohemia, discussed the union with the Greek Church, reformed the finances of the papacy, deposed a pope and elected another. It ended in failure, dissolved in 1449 after the victory of the papacy. But for Basel, the Council was a turning point. It brought the city into contact with the elites of Europe, with the Italian banking houses and with the humanist culture of the Renaissance. It stimulated the production of paper and prepared the rise of printing. And it left behind a network of connections that led directly to the foundation of the university in 1460.¹

This chapter examines the Council as a financial event. A vast literature has studied the ecclesiastical and political history of the Council. This chapter asks what the presence of a general council meant for the economy and the finances of the city, and what it reveals about the relationship between international institutions and the cities that host them. The question has a modern resonance. Since 1930, Basel has hosted the Bank for International Settlements. Geneva, the subject of the companion volume, hosts dozens of international organisations. The economics of hosting international institutions, their benefits and costs, their effects on local prices, employment and reputation, are a subject of contemporary debate. The Council of Basel is one of the first cases in which these questions can be studied in a documented way.

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1 Notes

1. On the Council of Basel generally, see Helmrath, Das Basler Konzil 1431–1449. Forschungsstand und Probleme, 1987; HLS, article "Basler Konzil". ↩

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