

A new industry in an old city

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Around 1500, Basel was home to one of the most productive printing industries in Europe. In a city of ten thousand inhabitants, dozens of printing shops employed compositors, pressmen, correctors, illustrators and binders. These shops sent their books to the fairs of Frankfurt and Lyon and to the bookshops of Paris, Venice, Antwerp and London. Basel editions of the Church Fathers, of the classical authors, of the Bible in its original languages and of the works of Erasmus set standards of scholarship and craftsmanship that made the city's name known throughout learned Europe.¹

The printing industry of Basel is usually studied as part of the history of humanism, of the Reformation or of art. This chapter looks at it from a different angle: as an enterprise. Printing was the first industry in the history of Basel, and one of the first anywhere, in which the scale of investment, the length of the production cycle, the distance of the markets and the risks of the business required financial techniques that went beyond the resources of an individual craftsman. The printers of Basel were entrepreneurs who raised capital, formed partnerships, extended and received credit, managed stocks, sold in distant markets and sought protection for their investments. In doing so, they trained a generation of merchants in the management of an industrial business and created fortunes and networks that would later be used in trade and banking.

1 Notes

1. On the Basel printing industry around 1500 and its European significance, see HLS, article "Buchdruck"; Hieronymus, Basler Buchillustration 1500–1545, 1984; Berchtold, Bâle et l'Europe, 1990, vol. 1. To be verified. ↩

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