

Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini and the image of Basel

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Among the participants of the Council was a young Sienese humanist, Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini, who came to Basel in 1432 as secretary of a cardinal and later served the Council and Felix V in various capacities. Piccolomini, a gifted writer, left descriptions of Basel that are among the earliest literary portraits of the city. He praised its clean streets, its well-built houses, its churches, its gardens and the order of its government, and he described the citizens as honest, pious and prudent, if somewhat stiff.¹

Piccolomini later changed sides, reconciled with the papacy, became a bishop, a cardinal and, in 1458, pope under the name of Pius II. As pope, he remembered Basel. In 1459, at the request of the city, he issued the bull that authorised the foundation of the University of Basel, which opened in 1460. The Council, which had brought the young humanist to Basel, thus led indirectly to the foundation of the institution that would make Basel a centre of learning. Chapter V examines this foundation.

Piccolomini's descriptions are also an early example of the importance of reputation for a city that hosts foreigners. His letters circulated among the humanists of Italy and Europe and shaped the image of Basel as a clean, orderly, well-governed city. This image, which has survived into the present, is part of the intangible capital of a financial centre. A city whose inhabitants are known for honesty, prudence and good government attracts people and money. The reputation of Swiss cities for reliability, order and discretion, which the Swiss financial centre has sold to its clients for two centuries, has one of its first literary expressions in the letters of a young Italian humanist who came to Basel for a council.

1 Notes

1. Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini's descriptions of Basel appear in two letters, usually dated to 1434 and 1438; see the editions of his letters and HLS, article "Pius II.". Dates and content to be verified. ↩

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