

Alemanni, Franks and the early medieval town

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In the fifth century, Roman rule on the upper Rhine collapsed. The Alemanni settled on both banks of the river, and the region came under the rule of the Franks after Clovis defeated the Alemanni around 496 and 506. Early medieval cemeteries in Kleinbasel and in the surroundings of the city, among them the large cemetery at Bernerring, show the presence of Alemannic and Frankish populations in the sixth and seventh centuries.¹ As the Romanised population and the Germanic settlers gradually merged, the language of the region became Alemannic German, which it has remained. The language border between German and French, which runs today some thirty kilometres to the west of Basel in the Jura and the Sundgau, took shape in this period.

The town on the Münsterhügel survived as a seat of the bishop and as a small centre of craft and trade. Bishop Haito, who was at the same time abbot of the monastery of Reichenau on Lake Constance and a counsellor of Charlemagne, rebuilt the cathedral in the early ninth century.² Charlemagne sent him on an embassy to Constantinople in 811, a sign that the bishops of Basel belonged to the circle of the imperial elite. Basel belonged to the Carolingian Empire and, after its divisions, to the Middle Kingdom and later to the kingdom of Upper Burgundy.

In 917, Hungarian horsemen raided and destroyed Basel, killing the bishop. The town recovered slowly. In 1006, King Rudolf III of Burgundy ceded Basel to the German king Henry II, and after the death of Rudolf in 1032 the whole kingdom of Burgundy passed to the Empire. Henry II, who was canonised later, became the great benefactor of Basel. He endowed the bishopric with lands and rights and attended the consecration of the new Minster in 1019. He is still venerated in Basel as the patron of the city, and his image appears on the Minster and on the golden altar frontal he donated, which is today in the Musée de Cluny in Paris.³

The golden altar frontal is a reminder of the economic role of the Church in the early Middle Ages. Ecclesiastical treasures were objects of devotion and, at the same time, reserves of precious metal that could be pledged or melted in times of need. Bishops and abbeys were the largest landowners, the most important lenders and borrowers, and the holders of rights that generated income: tithes, tolls, markets, mints. The next chapter shows how the bishops of Basel used these rights and how the gradual transfer of these rights to the citizens laid the institutional foundations of the city's economy.

1 Notes

1. On the early medieval cemeteries of Basel (Bernerring, Kleinhüningen, Gotterbarmweg), see HLS, article "Basel (Gemeinde)", section on the early Middle Ages; publications of the Archäologische Bodenforschung Basel-Stadt. ↩
2. On Bishop Haito (c. 763–836), bishop of Basel c. 805–823 and abbot of Reichenau, see HLS, article "Haito". Dates to be verified. ↩
3. On Henry II and Basel, the cession of 1006, the consecration of the Minster on 11 October 1019 and the golden altar frontal (today Musée de Cluny, Paris), see HLS, articles "Heinrich II." and "Basler Münster". Date of the consecration to be verified. ↩

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