

Basel after the Council

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The years that followed the departure of the Council were difficult for Basel. The Armagnac invasion of 1444 had devastated the surroundings of the city. The conflict with the Habsburgs and with the nobility of the region, which had continued throughout the Council period, erupted into open war in the years after 1444, in which Basel fought against the Austrian nobility of the Sundgau and the Breisgau. Castles were besieged, villages burned and trade disrupted. Peace was concluded at Breisach in 1449, the year in which the Council ended.¹

The city's finances bore the costs. The wars required soldiers and subsidies at a time when the revenues of the Council period had disappeared. The city sold more rents and increased its debt. Yet the institutional capacity that it had developed, its accounts, its annuity market, its control over the currency, allowed it to weather the crisis. The municipal accounts analysed by Harms show that the city continued to service its debt through the difficult years of the 1440s and 1450s.

The city also drew lessons from the Council. Having seen the benefits of being a centre of learning and of international contacts, it sought to preserve them. The initiative to found a university, which the city presented to Pius II in 1459, was part of this strategy. A university would bring students and scholars to the city, create a permanent intellectual institution and give the city a prestige that did not depend on the fortunes of a council. It would also train the lawyers, physicians and clergy that the city and the region needed. The city was prepared to finance the university from its own resources, which it duly did. The next chapter examines this decision and its consequences.

The period after the Council also saw the beginning of a strategic reorientation of Basel. The conflicts with the Habsburgs and the Austrian nobility, the experience of St. Jakob an der Birs and the growing power of the Swiss Confederation drew the city towards the Confederates. The

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alliance with the Confederates, which Basel had pursued intermittently since the fourteenth century, became the foundation of its security and led, after the Burgundian and Swabian Wars, to its accession to the Confederation in 1501.

1 Notes

1. On the war between Basel and the Austrian nobility after 1444 and the peace of Breisach (1449), see HLS, article "Basel (Gemeinde)", section on the fifteenth century; Wackernagel, vol. 1, 1907. To be verified. ↩

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