

Basel's place in the European book trade

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By the standards of the sixteenth century, Basel was a leading printing centre of the German-speaking world, alongside Cologne, Strasbourg, Nuremberg, Augsburg, Leipzig and Wittenberg. It was distinguished among them by the quality and the learned character of its production. Its printers specialised in Latin and Greek works for an international market of scholars, clergy and universities, and sold their books throughout Europe. The Basel editions of the Church Fathers, of Erasmus, of the Greek classics, of Vesalius and of Münster were among the most important books of the century.¹

This specialisation had economic consequences. The learned market was international, relatively stable and willing to pay for quality, but it was also limited in size and exposed to the religious and political conflicts that divided Europe. The confessional division of Europe after the Reformation reduced the market for Basel books in Catholic countries, where Protestant printers were suspect and their books increasingly prohibited. The Index of Prohibited Books, first published by the papacy in 1559, listed the works of many authors printed in Basel, among them Erasmus, whose works were placed on the Index in various forms.² The market for Basel books thus shrank in the second half of the century, which led the Basel printing industry into decline.

The decline of Basel printing illustrates the dependence of an export industry on open markets. An industry that specialises in serving an international clientele benefits from the openness of its markets and suffers when political conflicts close them. The Swiss financial centre, which serves an international clientele, has experienced the same dependence: its business has grown in periods of open markets and suffered when foreign governments restricted the cross-border provision of financial services or put pressure on their citizens' accounts in Switzerland. The access of Swiss financial institutions to the markets of the European Union, which remains

limited in the absence of a comprehensive agreement on financial services, is a modern expression of this dependence, which Part K examines.

1 Notes

1. On Basel's rank among the printing centres of the German-speaking world in the sixteenth century and its specialisation in learned Latin and Greek publishing, see the literature on the history of the book in the Empire; bibliographic data from VD16 (Verzeichnis der im deutschen Sprachbereich erschienenen Drucke des 16. Jahrhunderts). To be verified. ↩
2. On the Roman Index of Prohibited Books (first issued 1559 under Paul IV; Tridentine Index 1564) and its treatment of Erasmus and of books printed by Protestant printers, see the literature on the history of the Index. To be verified. ↩

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