

Bishop Heinrich von Thun and the Rhine bridge

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The most important economic act of the episcopal period was the construction of the bridge over the Rhine. Bishop Heinrich von Thun, who ruled from 1216 to 1238, had a bridge built across the river around 1225, which connected Basel with the right bank. It was for a long time the only bridge over the Rhine between Lake Constance and the sea. Its construction required considerable capital: the sources report that the bishop pledged the treasure of the cathedral to finance it.¹ The bridge, which has been rebuilt several times, still stands on the same site: the *Mittlere Brücke*, the Middle Bridge, whose stone arches date from the early twentieth century.

The bridge changed the economic geography of the region. It made Basel the crossing point of the Rhine for traffic between the Black Forest, Swabia and the Swiss plateau on the one hand, and Alsace, Burgundy and France on the other. It generated toll revenues for the bishop. And it gave rise to a new settlement on the right bank, which the bishop founded as a town in its own right: Kleinbasel, Lesser Basel, as opposed to Grossbasel, Greater Basel, on the left bank. Kleinbasel received its own walls, its own council and its own guild organisation, and it remained a separate town under the bishop's lordship until the fourteenth century.

The bridge is a reminder that infrastructure is the foundation of a financial centre. Merchants choose routes where they can cross rivers, find warehouses and obtain protection. The investment of Heinrich von Thun, financed by the pledge of the cathedral treasure, created a flow of traffic that the city would exploit for centuries. It is also an early example of a practice that would become central to public finance: the financing of infrastructure by borrowing against future revenues.

1 Notes

1. On the construction of the Rhine bridge (Mittlere Brücke) by Bishop Heinrich von Thun around 1225 and its financing, including the pledging of the cathedral treasure, see HLS, article "Heinrich von Thun"; Wackernagel, vol. 1, 1907. The financing details are to be verified against the primary sources. ↩

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