

Erasmus's household and the cost of living

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Erasmus lived in Basel in the style of a scholar of standing. He rented houses, first in the property of Froben and later a house of his own choosing, maintained servants and secretaries, the *famuli*, who copied his letters and manuscripts and carried his correspondence, kept a horse and received visitors. His correspondence shows how carefully he watched his expenses, which were considerable.¹

The *famuli* deserve a mention. They were young men, often students, who served Erasmus in exchange for board, lodging, instruction and the prestige of association with the great scholar. Several of them later became scholars, printers or officials. They were also his messengers and agents, who travelled to England, the Low Countries and Italy to deliver letters, collect payments and bring back news. Erasmus sent *famuli* to collect his English pension. Some of them carried considerable sums of money on their persons, a risky undertaking in a period of poor roads and frequent robberies.

The household of Erasmus was thus also a small business, with employees, expenses, receivables and a network of agents. Its management required the same skills as the management of a merchant's business: accounting, the supervision of employees, the collection of debts and the management of cash. Erasmus, who mocked merchants in the *Praise of Folly*, had to act as one in the management of his own affairs.

The cost of living in Basel was a recurring theme in Erasmus's letters. He complained about the price of wine, of firewood and of lodging, comparing them with prices elsewhere. Basel has remained an expensive city: surveys of living costs regularly place the Swiss cities, Basel among them, among the most expensive in the world. For a financial centre, high living costs are both a sign of prosperity and a competitive disadvantage in attracting talent. The salaries of the financial and pharmaceutical sectors reflect them.

1 Notes

1. On Erasmus's residences in Basel (in houses belonging to Froben and later in the house zum Luft where he died) and his household, see HLS, article "Erasmus von Rotterdam"; the local literature on Erasmus in Basel. To be verified. ↩

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