

Erasmus's income

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Erasmus had no inherited wealth, no permanent office and no fixed salary for most of his life. He was an independent author who lived from several sources of income, which he managed with care and sometimes with anxiety. His correspondence allows a reconstruction of his finances that shows how a scholar of the sixteenth century made his living.¹

The first source was pensions from patrons. In 1516, Erasmus was appointed councillor to the young Charles of Burgundy, the future Emperor Charles V, with a pension that was paid irregularly. From England, he received an annual income from the rectory of Aldington in Kent, which Archbishop William Warham had given him and then converted into a pension. He also received gifts from English patrons such as Thomas More, John Fisher and Lord Mountjoy. Other princes and prelates offered him pensions, positions and gifts, some of which he accepted and others he declined to preserve his independence.

The second source was gifts for dedications. When Erasmus dedicated his books to rulers, prelates and wealthy patrons, the dedicatees were expected to reward the dedication with a gift, often a golden cup or a sum of money. The dedication of a book was a form of exchange in which the author gave prestige and the patron gave money. Erasmus chose his dedicatees carefully and sometimes rededicated works in new editions to obtain new gifts.

The third source was payments from printers. Froben and other printers paid Erasmus for his work as author and editor, in cash, in lodging and meals, and in copies of his books, which he could give to patrons and friends. The payments of printers to authors were not yet regulated by copyright law. They depended on the goodwill of the printer and the bargaining power of the author. Erasmus's power was considerable, because his name sold books. Froben therefore had every interest in keeping him in Basel.

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The fourth source was the income from his ecclesiastical status. As a priest, Erasmus could hold benefices, although he had obtained dispensations from the Pope that freed him from the obligations of his religious order and allowed him to live in the world.

This combination of income sources made Erasmus financially independent, but it also required him to manage relationships with many patrons, to collect payments from distant places and to protect himself against the risk that one or another source would dry up. His correspondence is full of requests for the payment of overdue pensions, of thanks for gifts received and of complaints about the difficulty of transferring money. He was, in a sense, the manager of a portfolio of patronage relationships, and his financial security depended on the diversification of this portfolio.

1 Notes

1. On Erasmus's income from pensions, gifts and printers, see the literature on Erasmus's finances, including studies based on his correspondence. To be verified. ↩

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