

February 1529

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

The decisive crisis came in the winter of 1528 to 1529. The adoption of the Reformation by Bern in 1528 changed the balance of power in the Confederation and encouraged the reform party in Basel. In December 1528, the guilds assembled in arms to demand the abolition of the mass, and the council made concessions but did not yield completely. In early February 1529, the guilds assembled again, several thousand men in arms on the market square, and demanded the exclusion of the Catholic members from the council and the immediate abolition of the mass.¹

The council, under the pressure of armed citizens, yielded. Once the Catholic councillors had left the council or been excluded, the remaining members agreed to the demands. On 9 February, groups of citizens entered the Minster and the other churches and destroyed the images, altars and statues. The destruction was extensive, although some works of art were saved and others were sold or taken away. The wooden images were burned on the Minster square in fires that, according to the chroniclers, burned for hours.

The iconoclasm of 1529 was a violent act that destroyed a large part of the artistic heritage of medieval Basel. It was also a symbolic act that expressed the rejection of the old religious order and of the wealth that the Church had accumulated in its images and treasures. The treasure of the Minster, which included precious objects donated by Henry II and other benefactors, was secured by the council and stored; it remained in the possession of the city until the division of the canton in 1833, when it was divided between Basel-Stadt and Basel-Landschaft, and Basel-Landschaft sold its share, which was dispersed among collectors and museums.² The story of the Minster treasure, divided and sold after the separation of the canton, is an example of the fate of cultural property in times of political upheaval, a theme that returns in Part H.

1 Notes

1. On the armed assemblies of the guilds in December 1528 and February 1529 and their demands, see Wackernagel, vol. 3, 1924; Burckhardt, 1942. To be verified. ↩
2. On the fate of the Basel Minster treasure after the Reformation, its division between Basel-Stadt and Basel-Landschaft after 1833 and the sale of the Basel-Landschaft share in 1836, see HLS, article "Basler Münsterschatz"; the publications of the Historisches Museum Basel. To be verified. ↩

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