

French as the language of commerce and the patriciate

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When French became the language of European courts, diplomacy and polite society in the eighteenth century, the merchant aristocracy of Basel followed this fashion with enthusiasm. Sons of the leading families completed their education with a stay in Geneva, Neuchâtel or Lausanne, where they learned French and the manners of the francophone elite before entering the family business. Some served as officers in French regiments of the Swiss foreign service, which brought them to Paris, Versailles and the garrisons of the French frontier.¹ Correspondence between members of the same Basel family was often written in French. The inventories of patrician libraries show how widely French literature, philosophy and periodicals circulated in the city.²

The city houses built in this period reflected the same orientation. The Weisses Haus and the Blaues Haus on the Rheinsprung, commissioned by the silk merchants Lukas and Jakob Sarasin in the 1760s and 1770s, follow French models of the *hôtel particulier* and were furnished inside in the French taste.³ Part D described the culture of discretion that the patrician families, the so-called *Daig*, developed in the nineteenth century. Its roots lie partly in this eighteenth-century world, in which French served as a marker of education and social distinction because knowledge of the language separated the merchant elite from the guild craftsmen who spoke only dialect.⁴

The career of Peter Ochs illustrates how deep these French connections could run. Born in Nantes in 1752 into a Basel merchant family active in the French Atlantic trade, Ochs grew up with French as one of his native languages. He became chief guild master of Basel and was the Swiss negotiator in the talks that led to the Peace of Basel of 1795 between France and Prussia. In 1798 he drafted the constitution of the Helvetic Republic under the influence of the French Directory.⁵ The Helvetic Republic, which

was a French satellite state until 1803, made French, German and Italian equal languages of government for the first time, a principle that the Federal Constitution of 1848 later took up in a lasting form.⁶

1 Notes

1. On the education of Basel patrician sons in French-speaking Switzerland and on Swiss foreign military service in France, see HLS, articles "Fremde Dienste" and "Patriziat". To be verified. ↩
2. On French as the language of correspondence and reading in the Basel elite of the eighteenth century, see the literature on the cultural history of Basel in the Enlightenment. To be verified. ↩
3. On the Weisses Haus and Blaues Haus (Reichensteinerhof and Wendelstörferhof) built for the Sarasin brothers in 1763–1775, see the publications of the Basel cantonal monument preservation office. Dates to be verified. ↩
4. On the Basel Daig and its culture of discretion, see Part D of this book. On language as a marker of social distinction in early modern elites, see the general literature on the sociology of language. To be verified. ↩
5. On Peter Ochs (1752–1821), his birth in Nantes, his role in the Peace of Basel of 1795 and his draft of the Helvetic constitution of 1798, see HLS, article "Ochs, Peter". On the Peace of Basel, see also Part F of this book. ↩
6. On the language regime of the Helvetic Republic and the recognition of German, French and Italian as national languages in Article 109 of the Federal Constitution of 1848, see HLS, article "Mehrsprachigkeit". To be verified. ↩

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