

From the bishop's coinage to the Rappen monetary union

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

The bishop's right of coinage passed to the city in the fourteenth century. In 1373, the bishop pledged the mint to the city of Basel, which from then on exercised the right of coinage.¹ Because the pledge was never redeemed, the right of coinage became in effect a right of the city. The transfer was part of a broader movement in which the bishops, deeply indebted, pledged or sold their rights to the city, a process examined at the end of this chapter.

The acquisition of the mint allowed the city to pursue a monetary policy of its own. The citizens and merchants of Basel had an interest in a stable, reliable currency that would be accepted beyond the city walls. This interest was shared by the other cities of the Upper Rhine, whose markets were closely interwoven and whose merchants suffered from the multiplicity of local coinages and from the frequent debasements practised by the lords of the mint. The answer was a monetary union.

In 1377, the city of Basel, the Habsburg dukes of Austria, who ruled large parts of the Breisgau, the Sundgau and Alsace, and other lords and cities of the region concluded an agreement to strike coins of a common standard. In 1403, a formal monetary treaty was concluded between Basel, Freiburg im Breisgau, Colmar and Breisach, under the protection of the Habsburgs. This union, known as the *Rappenmünzbund*, the Rappen monetary union, fixed the weight and fineness of the coins that its members would strike, organised regular meetings of their representatives, the *Münztage*, to adjust the standard to the price of silver and supervised the quality of the coinage.²

The name of the union came from the coin of Freiburg, a penny showing an eagle's head that was popularly known as the *Rappen*, the raven, because the eagle looked like a raven to the users of the coin. The name spread to the coins of the whole union and survived the union itself. The hundredth part of the Swiss franc, called *centime* in French and *centesimo* in Italian, is

called *Rappen* in German to this day. Every time a German-speaking Swiss pays in *Rappen*, he or she uses a word that goes back to the monetary union of the Upper Rhine cities, of which Basel was a leading member.

The *Rappen* union lasted until 1584, when it dissolved under the pressure of the new silver coinages of the sixteenth century and of the political divergence of its members. It is an early example of monetary cooperation between independent political entities that share an economic space. It shows the benefits of a common currency for trade, the difficulty of maintaining a common standard when the members face different fiscal needs, and the importance of regular consultation and supervision. It would be anachronistic to call it a precursor of the Latin Monetary Union of 1865, of which Switzerland was a founding member, or of the euro. But the problems it faced are recognisably those of every monetary union: the tension between common discipline and national interest, the risk of free riding by members who debase their coins, and the need for institutions to adjust the standard to changing conditions.³ Basel's later role as the seat of the Bank for International Settlements, where central bankers meet to discuss precisely these questions, gives the *Rappen* union a certain retrospective resonance.

1 Notes

1. The acquisition of the right of coinage by the city of Basel from Bishop Johann von Vienne in 1373 is reported in the general literature; see HLS, article "Basel (Gemeinde)", section on the late Middle Ages; Wackernagel, vol. 2/1, 1911. Date and legal form (pledge or sale) to be verified. ↩
2. On the *Rappenmünzbund* (1377/1403–1584) among Basel, Freiburg im Breisgau, Colmar, Breisach and other members under Habsburg protection, see HLS, article "*Rappenmünzbund*". Dates to be verified. ↩
3. On the Latin Monetary Union of 23 December 1865 (Belgium, France, Italy, Switzerland; Greece from 1868), see the literature on nineteenth-century monetary history; Switzerland left the union with effect from 1927. ↩

For general information only. This article does not constitute legal or tax advice, does not replace advice on an individual case and creates no lawyer-client relationship. It reflects the legal position as of September 2026.

Online version: helveticaregister.com/basel-from-the-bishop-s-coinage-to-the-rappen-monetary-union