

From the privilege of 1471 to the Herbstmesse

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The privilege of 1471 allowed Basel to hold two annual fairs, of which the autumn fair has survived to the present day. Part A examined the circumstances of the grant and its place in the competition among the fair cities of the fifteenth century, so a brief summary suffices here. The Basel fairs never became international centres of payment of the kind that Lyon, and later Frankfurt and the Genoese exchange fairs, represented. They served merchants from the Upper Rhine, the Swiss cantons and southern Germany. Over time they turned into markets for consumer goods and, from the nineteenth century, into popular festivals with fairground attractions.¹

The *Herbstmesse* still opens each year on the Saturday before 30 October, when the bell of St Martin's church rings in the fair at midday. It lasts about two weeks and spreads over several squares in the city, among them the Petersplatz, the Barfüsserplatz, the Münsterplatz and the area around the Messeplatz, where rides, stalls and the traditional sweets such as *Mässmogge* draw visitors from the whole region. The canton organises the fair through its administration and grants the pitches to showmen under public-law licences. In 2021, Basel celebrated the 550th anniversary of the privilege, after the fair of 2020 had been cancelled because of the pandemic.²

The *Herbstmesse* is often described as the oldest and largest fair of its kind in Switzerland. Such superlatives are difficult to verify, since many Swiss towns held markets and fairs in the Middle Ages and since the distinction between a market, a fair and a popular festival is fluid. What matters for this chapter is the continuity of the institution. Basel has held an autumn fair, with few interruptions, for more than five centuries. The city therefore possesses an administrative tradition of granting pitches, regulating trade and policing crowds that long predates the modern trade fair, which helps to explain why the idea of a national fair found a receptive audience in Basel during the First World War.³

1 Notes

1. On the development of the Basel Herbstmesse from an imperial fair to a popular festival, see HLS, article "Messen"; the publications of the Präsidialdepartement des Kantons Basel-Stadt on the Herbstmesse. To be verified. ↩
2. On the opening ritual of the Herbstmesse at St Martin's church, the locations of the fair and the 550th anniversary in 2021 after the cancellation of the 2020 edition, see the publications of the canton of Basel-Stadt and press reports. Dates and details to be verified. ↩
3. On the claim that the Basel Herbstmesse is the oldest and largest fair of its kind in Switzerland and on the historical distinction between markets and fairs in the Swiss towns, see HLS, articles "Messen" and "Märkte". To be verified. ↩

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