

Jacob Burckhardt and the Basel mind

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The intellectual culture of the *Daig* produced, in the nineteenth century, one of the great historians of Europe. Jacob Burckhardt, born in 1818 into a family of the Basel patriciate, the son of a pastor of the Minster, studied theology and history, taught at the University of Basel for almost fifty years and wrote *The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy*, published in 1860, which shaped the modern understanding of the Renaissance.¹

Burckhardt was a critic of his age. He distrusted the power of the modern state, the mass politics of democracy and nationalism, and the materialism of industrial society. In his lectures on world history, published after his death as *Reflections on World History*, he wrote that power was in itself evil, warning against the concentration of power in the hands of states and the reduction of culture to the service of power and profit. He preferred the small republic of Basel to the great nation-states of his time, declining calls to prestigious chairs in Germany to remain in his native city.

Burckhardt's attitude expresses an aspect of the Basel mind: a scepticism towards power, grandeur and ostentation, a preference for the small, the durable and the cultivated, and a sense of independence that refuses to be absorbed by larger entities. The same attitude can be found in the Basel jurist Johann Jakob Bachofen, whose *Mother Right* of 1861 was a pioneering study of the history of the family, and in the young Friedrich Nietzsche, who taught classical philology at the University of Basel from 1869 to 1879 and was influenced by Burckhardt.²

For a financial centre, the Basel mind has a particular value. Scepticism towards power and grandeur translates into prudence, conservatism and a preference for durable relationships over spectacular transactions. Independence translates into a reluctance to be absorbed by larger players and a willingness to remain small and specialised. And the cultivation of learning translates into an appreciation of expertise. These qualities have

characterised the Basel private banks, which have remained small and independent while the large banks of Zurich grew into global institutions.

1 Notes

1. On Jacob Burckhardt (1818–1897), professor at the University of Basel, author of *Die Cultur der Renaissance in Italien* (1860) and the lectures published posthumously as *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen* (1905), see HLS, article "Burckhardt, Jacob". To be verified. ↩
2. On Johann Jakob Bachofen (1815–1887), author of *Das Mutterrecht* (1861), and Friedrich Nietzsche's professorship at the University of Basel (1869–1879), see HLS, articles "Bachofen, Johann Jakob" and "Nietzsche, Friedrich". To be verified. ↩

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