

Jews, Cahorsins and the question of credit

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The history of credit in medieval Basel cannot be written without the history of the Jewish community, and that history includes one of the darkest episodes of the city's past. It must be told with the seriousness it deserves, because the persecution of the Jews of Basel and of other European cities was closely connected with the role that Christian society had assigned to them in the economy of credit, and with the resentments that this role generated.

A Jewish community is attested in Basel from the early thirteenth century. Its cemetery lay outside the walls near today's Petersplatz, where tombstones were found during the construction of the university buildings.¹ The members of the community were under the protection of the bishop and, later, of the city, to which they paid taxes for this protection. They were excluded from the guilds and hence from most crafts and from trade in many goods. Money lending, which canon law prohibited for Christians, was one of the few occupations open to them, and the lords who protected them had an interest in their lending, because they could tax it. Jewish lenders provided credit to nobles, to clerics, to citizens and to peasants, often against pledges, charging interest at rates that reflected the risks and the taxes they bore.

This arrangement made the Jewish community both useful and vulnerable. It was useful to the lords, who derived revenue from it, and to borrowers, who needed credit. It was vulnerable because debtors resented their creditors, because religious hostility was preached from the pulpits, and because the lords could at any time withdraw their protection, confiscate the pledges and cancel the debts. The persecutions of the Jews in medieval Europe often had an economic dimension: the cancellation of debts owed to Jewish lenders was a benefit for debtors and a temptation for rulers.

When the Black Death spread through Europe in 1348 and 1349, the Jews in many cities were accused of having caused the plague by poisoning wells.

In January 1349, before the plague had even reached the city, the Jewish community of Basel was murdered. The victims were burned in a wooden house built for the purpose on an island in the Rhine, and their children were forcibly baptised.² Similar massacres took place in Strasbourg, Freiburg and many other cities of the Upper Rhine and of the Empire. The debts owed to the murdered lenders were cancelled or appropriated.

A second Jewish community settled in Basel in the 1360s, under conditions set by the city, and left the city again at the end of the fourteenth century. For several centuries thereafter, Jews were not allowed to reside permanently in Basel. It was only in the nineteenth century, with the emancipation of the Jews in Switzerland, which the federal constitution guaranteed completely only after the revision of 1866 and 1874, that a new Jewish community could establish itself in the city.³ In 1897, Basel hosted the first Zionist Congress, convened by Theodor Herzl, an event that associated the city with the history of Zionism. The Jewish Museum of Switzerland, founded in Basel in 1966, preserves the tombstones of the medieval cemetery and documents the history of the Jews in the region.

The massacre of 1349 is part of the history of Basel as a place of money and carries a lesson that remains relevant. The organisation of credit carries moral and political weight. When credit is concentrated in groups that stand outside the protection of the law, or whose protection depends on the goodwill of those in power, credit relationships become relationships of domination and resentment, and the settlement of debts can take the form of violence. The modern law of credit, with its protection of both creditors and debtors, its insolvency procedures and its equality before the law, is among other things a response to this history.

Christian lenders were also active in medieval Basel. Merchants from Asti, Chieri and other cities of Piedmont, and from Cahors in southern France, known in German-speaking lands as *Lombarden* and *Kawertschen* (from Cahorsins), operated as licensed lenders in many cities north of the Alps from the thirteenth century onwards. They obtained concessions from lords or cities, paid fees for them and were allowed to lend at interest against pledges within limits set by the concession. Such lenders are attested in Basel and in the cities of the Upper Rhine and of the Swiss plateau.⁴ Their presence shows that Christian lending at interest continued under the prohibition of usury, confined to licensed, taxed and often stigmatised forms. The Piedmontese lenders are a first link between Basel and the world of Italian finance, which would become more visible during the Council of Basel.

1 Notes

1. On the first Jewish community of Basel (thirteenth century to 1349) and its cemetery near the Petersplatz, see HLS, article "Basel (Gemeinde)", section on the Jewish community; publications of the Jüdisches Museum der Schweiz, Basel. To be verified. ↩
2. On the massacre of the Jewish community of Basel in January 1349 during the persecutions associated with the Black Death, see HLS, article "Basel (Gemeinde)", section on the Jewish community; the literature on the persecutions of 1348/49 in the Upper Rhine cities. Details to be verified against the sources. ↩
3. On the second medieval Jewish community (c. 1362–1397) and on the emancipation of Swiss Jews (freedom of establishment 1866, freedom of worship 1874), see HLS, article "Judentum". Dates to be verified. ↩
4. On Lombard and Cahorsin lenders (Lombarden, Kawertschen) north of the Alps and in the Swiss cities, see HLS, article "Lombarden"; for Basel, Wackernagel, vol. 2/1, 1911. To be verified. ↩

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