

Moral discipline and economic life

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The Reformation Ordinance and the subsequent moral mandates regulated the private lives of the citizens in detail. They prohibited luxury in dress, jewellery and feasts, limited the number of guests at weddings and the expense of funerals, prohibited gambling and card games, regulated the opening hours of taverns, punished drunkenness, adultery and fornication, and required attendance at sermons. The council enforced these rules through fines, imprisonment and public shaming.¹

The sumptuary laws deserve a comment from the perspective of economic history. They limited the display of wealth and the consumption of luxury goods, prescribing modest dress for all classes. Their purpose was moral and social: to prevent pride, envy and waste, and to maintain the distinction between social ranks. Their economic effect was to encourage saving: wealth that could not be displayed in dress, jewels and feasts was invested in land, rents, trade and later in industry and banking. The discretion that became the hallmark of the Basel merchant, who lived modestly and did not display his wealth, has one of its roots in the sumptuary laws of the Reformation.

This discretion is still proverbial in Basel. The old Basel families, the *Daig*, which Part C examines, are known for their understatement: they live in houses whose modest façades hide rich interiors, dress without ostentation, avoid publicity and regard the display of wealth as vulgar. The culture of discretion, which is also the culture of Swiss private banking, is thus the product of a long history in which the Reformation played a decisive role.

1 Notes

1. On the moral mandates (Sittenmandate) of Basel after the Reformation, including sumptuary laws, prohibitions of gambling and regulation of taverns, see HLS, article "Sittenmandate". To be verified.



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