

Paper, scribes and the preparation of printing

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

The Council was an enormous consumer of paper. Its chancery issued thousands of documents, its sessions produced protocols and decrees, its theologians wrote treatises, and its members corresponded with their home countries. Manuscripts were copied, collected and exchanged. The demand for paper stimulated the establishment of paper mills in Basel.

Paper had come to Europe from the Islamic world through Spain and Italy. The first paper mills north of the Alps were established in the late fourteenth century. In Basel, the first paper mill is attributed to the merchant Heinrich Halbisen, who set it up in the 1430s, during the Council, using the water power of the St. Alban canal. In the 1450s, the Galliziani family, papermakers from Piedmont, settled in Basel and developed the St. Alban valley into a centre of paper production that supplied the region for centuries.¹ One of their mills now houses the Basel Paper Mill, the Swiss Museum for Paper, Writing and Printing, where paper is still made by hand.

The paper industry was one of the conditions of the printing industry that developed in Basel from the 1460s onwards. Because printing required large quantities of paper, the presence of paper mills in the city gave Basel printers a competitive advantage. The Council also left behind a population of scribes, copyists and scholars accustomed to the production and circulation of texts, and a network of contacts with the intellectual centres of Europe. Part B examines how these conditions made Basel one of the capitals of European printing in the sixteenth century.

The paper mills of the St. Alban valley are also an early example of the industrial use of water power in Basel, and of an industry established by immigrants with capital and skills from abroad. The Galliziani came from Piedmont; later, the silk ribbon manufacturers would come from France and Italy as religious refugees. The pattern of industrial innovation brought by immigrants recurs throughout the history of Basel, up to the

chemical industry of the nineteenth century, several of whose founders came from outside the city.

1 Notes

1. On the beginnings of paper production in Basel (Heinrich Halbisen, 1430s) and the Galliziani family from Piedmont (from 1453), see HLS, articles "Papier" and "Galliziani"; the publications of the Basler Papiermühle (Swiss Museum for Paper, Writing and Printing). Dates to be verified. ↩

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