

Poverty, charity and the hospital

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The medieval city was also a community of mutual assistance, whose institutions of charity were among its most important holders of capital. The *Spital*, the hospital of the city, was founded in the thirteenth century as a religious foundation for the care of the sick, the poor and pilgrims, and passed under the control of the city in the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.¹ Like other hospitals of the period, it received donations and bequests of land, rents and money, which it invested in rents and property. By the end of the Middle Ages, the hospital was one of the largest landowners and rent holders of the city. Its administration was one of the most important financial offices.

The hospital was not alone. Almshouses, foundations for the poor, confraternities and the religious institutions distributed alms and cared for the needy. Their resources came from the same sources: donations, bequests and the income of invested capital. They formed, in modern terms, a sector of charitable foundations that managed endowments and distributed their income for purposes defined by their founders.

This sector has a direct modern successor in Basel. The *Bürgerspital Basel* still exists as a public institution of the civic community of Basel, the *Bürgergemeinde*, which runs care homes and sheltered workshops. The Christoph Merian Foundation, which goes back to the bequest of the merchant Christoph Merian (d. 1858) and began its work in 1886, is one of the largest foundations of Switzerland and supports social and cultural projects in the city. The Society for the Promotion of the Good and the Public Benefit, the GGG, founded in 1777, supports numerous social institutions.² The Swiss foundation sector, which is among the largest in Europe relative to the population, and the legal regime of foundations under the Civil Code, which Part E discusses in connection with wealth planning, have their roots in this tradition of civic charity.

1 Notes

1. On the Basel Spital (Bürgerspital), founded in the thirteenth century and placed under municipal administration, see HLS, article "Bürgerspital Basel". Date of foundation to be verified. ↩
2. On the Christoph Merian Stiftung (established under the will of Christoph Merian, who died in 1858, and operational since 1886) and the Gesellschaft für das Gute und Gemeinnützige (GGG, founded 1777), see HLS, articles "Merian, Christoph" and "Gesellschaft für das Gute und Gemeinnützige". Dates to be verified. ↩

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