

Remembering the colonial past in Basel

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Since the early 2000s, the colonial entanglements of Switzerland have become a subject of research and public debate. Historians have documented the participation of Swiss merchants, investors, manufacturers and soldiers in the slave trade and the colonial economy. Journalists and activists have drawn attention to monuments, street names and institutions that commemorate persons involved in the colonial economy. And institutions, among them foundations, museums, universities and companies, have begun to examine their own histories.¹

In Basel, this debate has concerned the history of several patrician families, the origins of certain fortunes and foundations, the collections of the museums, which include objects acquired in colonial contexts, and the history of the Basel Mission. The Museum der Kulturen Basel, one of the largest ethnographic museums in Europe, has engaged in research on the provenance of its collections and in dialogue with the communities from which objects came. The question of the restitution of objects acquired in colonial contexts, which has become a major issue in European museums, is also posed in Basel.

For a financial centre, the colonial past raises questions of reputation and responsibility. Financial institutions whose origins are connected with the slave trade or the colonial economy have in some cases acknowledged this history and made gestures of reparation. The question of legal responsibility for historical wrongs is complex. Claims for reparations for slavery have generally not succeeded in the courts. But the question of moral responsibility, and of the obligations that arise from the recognition of historical wrongs, is part of the public debate and affects the reputation of institutions and of the financial centre as a whole.

1 Notes

1. On the public debate in Switzerland and in Basel on the colonial past since the early 2000s, including research commissioned by institutions and debates on monuments and street names, see the recent literature and press coverage. To be verified. ↩

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