

Salt, wine and grain: the commodity trades

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Three commodities dominated the trade and the public finances of late medieval Basel: salt, wine and grain. Each of them was necessary to life, each was subject to public regulation, and each generated revenue for the city.

Salt was indispensable for the preservation of food and for cattle breeding, yet the Basel region produced none until salt deposits were discovered at Schweizerhalle on the Rhine in 1836. It had to be imported, mainly from the salt works of Lorraine, of the Franche-Comté at Salins and later from the Tyrol and Bavaria. Because the supply of salt was a matter of public order, in the course of the late Middle Ages and the early modern period the city established a salt monopoly: the city bought salt from the producers under contracts, stored it in the salt house and sold it to the population at controlled prices, with a margin that went to the treasury.¹ The salt monopoly survives in modified form: the Swiss cantons retained the salt regale, and the Schweizer Salinen AG, owned by the cantons, operates salt works at Schweizerhalle and elsewhere. The chemical industry of Basel, which Part D examines, settled at Schweizerhalle partly because of the availability of salt, one of the basic raw materials of chemistry.

Wine was the principal beverage of the medieval city, drunk by all classes, which made its trade a major commercial activity. Basel imported wine from Alsace, from the Markgräflerland and from the Swiss vineyards along the Rhine and the lakes. The guild *zu Weinleuten*, the wine merchants' guild, was one of the *Herrenzünfte*. The wine trade was the principal basis of the *Ungeld*, and the council regulated it strictly: it licensed taverns, controlled measures and fixed the duties. The Alsatian wine trade connected Basel with Colmar, Strasbourg and the Rhine cities, and it was one of the channels through which commercial credit circulated in the region.

Since grain was the basis of the diet, its supply in times of shortage was the most important economic task of the city government. The council maintained grain stores, the *Kornhaus*, which it filled in years of good harvest and emptied in years of dearth, selling grain to the population at controlled prices. It prohibited the export of grain in times of shortage, fixed the price of bread and controlled the mills. The grain policy of Basel, like that of most European cities, was a policy of security of supply, which sacrificed the freedom of trade to the stability of prices and the prevention of famine.²

The management of these commodities by the city is the medieval precursor of a function that the modern Swiss state continues to exercise: the security of supply. Switzerland maintains compulsory reserves of food, fuel, pharmaceuticals and other essential goods under the National Economic Supply Act. The Rhine ports of Basel, through which a large share of Switzerland's mineral oil imports pass, are a strategic element of this system.³ The companion volume on Geneva devotes two parts to the commodity trade, which has become one of the pillars of the Geneva economy. Basel's commodity history is more modest, but it includes an element that Geneva lacks: the transformation of raw materials, from salt and dyestuffs to the molecules of the pharmaceutical industry.

1 Notes

1. On the salt supply of Basel from Lorraine, Salins and later Hall in Tyrol, on the municipal salt house and salt monopoly, and on the discovery of salt deposits at Schweizerhalle in 1836, see HLS, articles "Salz" and "Schweizerhalle". Dates to be verified. ↩
2. On the grain policy of Basel (municipal grain stores, export prohibitions, bread prices), see Harms, 1909–1913; HLS, article "Kornhaus". To be verified. ↩
3. Federal Act of 17 June 2016 on National Economic Supply (National Economic Supply Act, NESA, SR 531), in particular the provisions on compulsory stocks (Pflichtlager). To be verified. ↩

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