

Spices, sugar and the Basel household

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The colonial trade shaped the daily life of Basel in ways that are still visible. The *Basler Läckerli*, the spiced honey biscuits that are one of the culinary specialities of the city, are made with honey, sugar, almonds, candied peel and spices, cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, that were imported from distant places through the spice trade. Their origins go back to the late Middle Ages. Their ingredients show how early the city's consumption was connected with the long-distance trade in spices and sugar.¹

In the eighteenth century, the consumption of colonial goods spread beyond the elite. Coffee was drunk in the houses of the bourgeoisie and in the guild houses, sugar sweetened the tables of the middle classes, while tobacco was consumed by all ranks. The merchants who imported these goods, the grocers who sold them and the households that consumed them formed the European end of a chain whose other end lay on the plantations of the Caribbean and Brazil. The spread of consumption created the demand that sustained the plantation economy and the slave trade.

The connection between everyday consumption and distant exploitation is a theme that the modern debate on supply chains has brought back to public attention. Consumers of chocolate, coffee, clothing and electronic devices are today confronted with information about the conditions under which the raw materials of these products are produced: child labour in cocoa plantations, forced labour in cotton fields, dangerous conditions in mines. The Swiss chocolate industry, which grew in the nineteenth century from the processing of cocoa imported from the colonies, faces this question directly, and the Basel Mission's role in the introduction of cocoa cultivation in the Gold Coast, which the next chapter examines, connects Basel with the history of cocoa.

1 Notes

1. On the history of the Basler Lächerli and its ingredients (honey, sugar, almonds, candied peel, spices), see the local culinary literature. To be verified. ↩

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