

The accession of 1501

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The Swabian War demonstrated to Basel that it could not remain indefinitely between the Empire and the Confederation. Because its neutrality during the war had satisfied neither side, its security required a clear choice. The Confederates, for their part, had an interest in securing the city that controlled the Rhine crossing on their north-western border. Negotiations led to the treaty of alliance of 9 June 1501, by which Basel was admitted as the eleventh member of the Confederation. The citizens swore the oath of alliance on 13 July 1501, the day of the Emperor Henry II, patron of the city.¹ Schaffhausen joined the Confederation a few weeks later, in August 1501, as the twelfth member.

The treaty of alliance contained a remarkable provision. In the event of conflicts between the Confederates, Basel was to remain neutral, to "sit still" (*stillsitzen*), and to offer its mediation to the parties.² Similar provisions were included in the treaties with Schaffhausen and later with Appenzell. The Confederates, whose alliance had been shaken by internal conflicts, notably the Old Zurich War of the 1440s, wanted to ensure that the new members would not take sides in their quarrels, and that they would help to settle them. The new members accepted a status that limited their freedom of action in exchange for the protection of the alliance.

The obligation to "sit still" is one of the historical roots of Swiss neutrality. It is an internal neutrality, applying to conflicts within the Confederation. It differs from the external neutrality that the Confederation as a whole adopted towards the European powers after the defeat at Marignano in 1515 and that was recognised internationally at the Congress of Vienna in 1815. But it expresses the same idea: that a political community can secure its survival and its prosperity by abstaining from conflicts between others and by offering its services as a mediator. For a commercial and financial city, this idea has a particular value. A neutral city can trade with all sides, receive the money of all sides and offer a safe place to those who are

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threatened by conflict. The Swiss financial centre, which built its prosperity in the twentieth century on the money of clients fleeing wars, revolutions and confiscations, is the heir of this idea, with all its benefits and all its moral ambiguities.

1 Notes

1. On the accession of Basel to the Confederation by the treaty (Bundesbrief) of 9 June 1501 and the oath of 13 July 1501, see HLS, article "Basel (Kanton)", section on the accession. To be verified. ↩
2. On the provision in the Basel Bundesbrief of 1501 requiring Basel to remain neutral (sittsamen) and to mediate in disputes among the Confederates, see HLS, articles "Basel (Kanton)" and "Neutralität". To be verified against the text of the treaty. ↩

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