

The colonial goods trade

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The most widespread form of Basel's involvement in the colonial economy was the trade in colonial goods. Sugar, coffee, cocoa, tobacco, cotton and indigo, produced on plantations in the Caribbean, Brazil and North America largely by enslaved Africans, were imported into Europe through the Atlantic ports of France, the Netherlands and England, and distributed from there to the interior of the Continent. Basel, at the head of Rhine navigation and at the junction of routes from France, was a natural centre for the distribution of these goods in Switzerland and southern Germany.¹

The consumption of colonial goods grew dramatically in the eighteenth century. Sugar, once a luxury, became a common ingredient of the diet of the European middle classes. As coffee houses spread from London and Paris to the cities of the Continent, coffee became the drink of the bourgeoisie. Tobacco was smoked, chewed and taken as snuff by all classes. Cotton textiles, printed with colourful patterns, became fashionable. The demand for these goods fuelled the expansion of the plantation economies and of the slave trade that supplied them with labour.

The Basel merchants who traded in colonial goods were several steps removed from the plantations and the slave ships. They bought sugar and coffee from wholesalers in Nantes, Bordeaux, Amsterdam or Hamburg and sold them to retailers in Switzerland and Germany. They did not see the plantations or the enslaved people who worked on them. But their trade was part of a chain that began with the capture of Africans, their transport across the Atlantic and their forced labour in the Americas. Their profits were a share of the wealth that this chain produced. The distance between the merchant and the plantation, which allowed the merchant to ignore the conditions of production, is a feature of global supply chains that remains familiar today.

The fortunes made in the colonial goods trade contributed to the capital of Basel. As Chapter I noted, the merchant house of Christoph Merian-

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Forcart built a large part of its fortune through trade in colonial goods in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, including during the Continental System. This fortune later formed the basis of the Christoph Merian Foundation, which serves the city of Basel today.² The Christoph Merian Foundation has itself commissioned research into the origins of the fortune, a step that reflects the growing willingness of Swiss institutions to confront the colonial dimensions of their history.

1 Notes

1. On the trade in colonial goods (Kolonialwaren) through Basel in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, see the literature on Basel's trade history; Stettler/Haenger/Labhardt, 2004. To be verified. ↩
2. On the colonial goods trade of the house Merian-Forcart and its contribution to the fortune that formed the basis of the Christoph Merian Stiftung, see HLS, article "Merian, Christoph"; the history of the Christoph Merian Stiftung, which has addressed this question. To be verified. ↩

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