

The dough of Basel

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In Basel, the old families that have shaped the city for centuries are known collectively as the *Daig*, a word of the Basel dialect that means dough. The term is informal and slightly ironic: it suggests a mass of families so interwoven by marriage and kinship that they form a single substance, kneaded together over generations. The families usually counted as part of the *Daig* include the Burckhardt, Iselin, Merian, Sarasin, Vischer, Staehelin, Christ, La Roche, Bernoulli, Geigy, Hoffmann, Speiser, Socin, Bachofen, Heusler, Faesch, Preiswerk and others. While some of them are of old Basel origin, others, as Part B showed, descend from religious refugees of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.¹

The *Daig* is not an aristocracy in the legal sense. Basel had no nobility after the Reformation: the knightly families of the Middle Ages had lost their privileges and left the city or merged into the citizenry. The families of the *Daig* were merchants, manufacturers, bankers, professors, pastors, physicians, lawyers and public officials. They owed their position to wealth, education, public service and a dense network of kinship, maintaining it through careful marriage strategies, the transmission of wealth and the cultivation of a distinct style of life.

This chapter examines the *Daig* as a social formation and as the carrier of a culture that shaped the Basel financial centre. It describes the families, their kinship networks and their management of wealth, their role in public office, their religious and intellectual life, and their culture of discretion. It argues that this culture, with its emphasis on understatement, reliability, long-term thinking and the separation of private wealth from public display, is one of the foundations of Swiss private banking.

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1 Notes

1. On the term Daig for the old patrician families of Basel and the families usually counted among them, see the literature on the social history of Basel, e.g. Sarasin, Stadt der Bürger, 1990; HLS, articles on the respective families. To be verified. ↩

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