

The episcopal legacy

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After the bishop's rule over the city of Basel ended in the fifteenth century, the Reformation of 1529 severed the last ties between the city and its bishop. Yet the episcopal period left a lasting imprint on the institutions and the culture of the city.

The first legacy is the coat of arms. The black crozier of Basel-Stadt, which appears on the flag of the canton, on public buildings and on the logos of many institutions, is the bishop's staff. The canton that expelled its bishop has kept his symbol.

The second legacy is monetary. The right of coinage, which the city acquired from the bishop, was exercised by Basel until the creation of the federal currency in 1850, when the Swiss franc replaced the cantonal currencies. For almost five centuries, the city of Basel struck its own coins: pennies, Rappen, batzen, thalers and gold guilders. The Basel coinage was a symbol of its autonomy and an instrument of its trade.¹

The third legacy is institutional. The practice of the *Handfeste*, the quasi-contractual regulation of the relationship between ruler and ruled, the organisation of the guilds, the council as the organ of self-government, the municipal treasury and the management of public debt all took shape in the episcopal period, in the space that the bishop's weakness left to the citizens.

The fourth legacy is territorial. The Prince-Bishopric, separated from the city, continued to exist as a state of the Empire until 1792. Its territory shapes the political map of north-western Switzerland to this day. The canton of Jura, the Laufen valley and the Bernese Jura all bear the imprint of the episcopal state. Close relationships still link the Basel region and the Jura.

The fifth legacy is cultural. The Minster, rebuilt after the earthquake of 1356 in the Gothic style and dominating the Rhine from the Münsterhügel, remains the symbol of the city. Its cloisters contain the tombs of the

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notables of Basel, while Erasmus of Rotterdam, who died in the city in 1536, is buried in its nave. The humanists and the reformers of the sixteenth century transformed the religious meaning of the building, but they preserved it as the centre of the city. Part B follows this transformation.

1 Notes

1. On the coinage of the city of Basel from the late fourteenth century to the introduction of the federal franc by the Federal Coinage Act of 7 May 1850, see HLS, article "Münzwesen". To be verified. ↩

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