

The fairs of Frankfurt and the distribution of books

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The principal market for Basel books was the Frankfurt fair, held twice a year, in spring and autumn. In the sixteenth century, the Frankfurt fair became the central market of the European book trade, where printers and booksellers from Germany, Switzerland, France, Italy and the Low Countries met to sell their books, to exchange stock and to settle their accounts.¹ Basel printers sent their books to Frankfurt by boat on the Rhine, selling them to booksellers who distributed them throughout Europe.

The book trade at Frankfurt operated on credit. Books were sold to booksellers against payment at the next fair, or exchanged against other books. The accounts between printers and booksellers were settled at each fair, with balances carried forward. This system of periodic settlement at the fairs resembled the system of the medieval fairs of Champagne and Geneva, where merchants settled their debts at fixed intervals. It required trust, records and the possibility of enforcing claims against defaulting debtors. In return, it created a network of credit relationships between the book trade centres of Europe.

The Frankfurt fairs were also a centre of the exchange business. Bankers and merchants from different countries met there, drew and paid bills of exchange and settled payments. Frankfurt's role as a fair city prepared its later role as a financial centre, which the companion volumes on Germany examine. For Basel printers, the fairs of Frankfurt were a gateway to the credit and payment networks of Europe, and their participation in these networks gave them experience in international finance that the traditional crafts of Basel did not provide.

Lyon was the second important market for Basel books, particularly for trade with France and Italy. The Lyon fairs, which had supplanted those of Geneva in the 1460s, were a centre of both the book trade and of international banking, dominated by Italian houses. Basel printers had

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agents and partners in Lyon, and some books were printed jointly or distributed through Lyon booksellers. The connection with Lyon links the Basel printing industry with the history of Geneva's fairs, which the companion volume describes.

1 Notes

1. On the Frankfurt book fair in the sixteenth century as the central market of the European book trade and the participation of Basel printers, see the literature on the history of the book trade. To be verified. ↩

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