

## The guild economy and the regulation of work

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The guilds that governed Basel in the fifteenth century also governed its economy. Each guild held a monopoly over its craft or trade within the city: only its members could exercise the craft, open a workshop or sell its products. Membership required an apprenticeship, several years as a journeyman and, for the rank of master, the production of a masterpiece and the payment of a fee. The guild regulated the number of apprentices and journeymen that a master could employ, the quality of the materials, the methods of production, the prices of certain products and the hours of work. It inspected workshops and punished violations.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of these rules was to guarantee each master an adequate livelihood, the *Nahrung*, and to prevent any member from growing at the expense of others. The guild economy was an economy of sufficiency and equality among members. It protected the craftsman against competition, the consumer against bad quality and the city against social unrest. It also limited the accumulation of capital in the crafts, discouraged innovation and excluded outsiders, among them immigrants, women in many trades and those who could not pay the fees.

This conception had consequences for the development of finance. Capital accumulation took place mainly in the merchant guilds, whose members engaged in long-distance trade that the guild rules did not restrict to the same extent. The merchants of the *Schlüssel* and *Safran* guilds bought raw materials, organised production and sold finished goods in distant markets, extending credit to craftsmen and suppliers. When new industries emerged in the sixteenth century, above all printing and later silk ribbon weaving, they developed partly outside the traditional guild structure, often led by immigrant entrepreneurs who brought capital and skills from abroad. Part B examines how the printers and the refugees of the sixteenth century transformed the economy of Basel, and Part C how the silk ribbon

manufacturers organised production through the putting-out system, which escaped the constraints of the guilds.

The guild regime also shaped the political culture of Basel. Because the guilds formed the constituencies of the council, economic interests were directly represented in government. As masters of their guilds, the members of the council defended the interests of their trades. This representation gave the government legitimacy and stability, but it also made it conservative and resistant to change. The guild constitution of Basel lasted, with modifications, until the Helvetic Revolution of 1798, when its abolition opened the way for the freedom of trade that the federal constitution of 1874 guaranteed throughout Switzerland.<sup>2</sup>

## 1 Notes

1. On the economic regulation by the Basel guilds (apprenticeship, mastership, limits on employees, quality control, prices), see HLS, article "Zünfte"; Füglistner, *Handwerksregiment*, 1981. To be verified. ↩
2. Freedom of trade and industry (Handels- und Gewerbefreiheit) was guaranteed by Art. 31 of the Federal Constitution of 1874; today economic freedom is guaranteed by Art. 27 of the Federal Constitution of 1999 (SR 101). ↩

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