

The Kaufhaus: the city's warehouse and customs house

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In the late fourteenth century, the city established a central warehouse and customs house, the *Kaufhaus*. All goods that entered the city for trade, other than local produce sold on the market, had to be brought to the Kaufhaus, where they were weighed, recorded, stored and taxed. The *Kaufhaus* also served as a place where merchants could meet, conclude contracts and obtain information about prices and markets.¹

The *Kaufhaus* had several functions that later institutions would separate. It was a customs office that collected duties on goods; a public warehouse that stored goods for merchants; a public weigh-house that guaranteed the weights of goods; a market place for wholesale trade; and an information centre. Its records, which registered the goods passing through the city, are a source for the history of trade. Its regulations imposed the compulsory use of the Kaufhaus on foreign merchants, which gave the city control over trade and revenues, and which protected local merchants against competition.

The *Kaufhaus* is a distant ancestor of several modern institutions that play a role in the Basel economy: the customs offices at the border, the bonded warehouses and free zones, among them the Freilager (free port) that Part H discusses in connection with the art market, and the exchanges on which goods and securities are traded. The medieval *Kaufhaus* combined public control of trade with services to merchants, and this combination remains characteristic of the relationship between the Swiss state and its financial and trading sector.

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1 Notes

1. On the Basel Kaufhaus, established in the late fourteenth century and later located on the Freie Strasse (on the site of the present main post office), see HLS, article "Basel (Gemeinde)"; Wackernagel, vol. 2/1, 1911. Date of establishment to be verified. ↩

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