

The leading industry of Basel

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For almost two centuries, from the late seventeenth century to the late nineteenth, the silk ribbon industry was the leading industry of Basel. It employed a large part of the population of the city and its countryside, it generated the fortunes of the leading families and connected Basel with the fashion markets of Europe and the world. In the eighteenth century, Basel was one of the principal centres of silk ribbon production in Europe, alongside Saint-Étienne in France, Coventry in England and Krefeld and the Wupper valley in Germany.¹

The industry was organised by merchant-manufacturers, the *Bandherren* or *Bündelherren*, who controlled the whole chain of production and distribution. They bought raw silk in Italy and later in the Levant and the Far East, had it thrown and dyed, distributed it to weavers in the city and the countryside, collected the finished ribbons, finished and packed them, and sold them through agents and correspondents in the markets of Europe and the Americas. They owned or financed the looms, set the patterns, fixed the prices paid to the weavers and bore the risks of the market. Their houses in the city were at the same time residences, offices, warehouses and meeting places for business.

This chapter examines the organisation of the silk ribbon industry as an economic and financial system. It describes the chain of production, the putting-out system, the relationship between merchants and weavers, the markets, the financing of the industry and its crises. It shows how the industry created the capital and the commercial expertise from which Basel's banking emerged, and how its need for dyes prepared the chemical industry that would succeed it.

1 Notes

1. On the Basel silk ribbon industry in the eighteenth century and its position among the European centres of ribbon production (Saint-Étienne, Coventry, Krefeld, Wuppertal), see HLS, article "Posamenterei"; Kreis/von Wartburg (eds.), *Basel – Geschichte einer städtischen Gesellschaft*, 2000, chapters on the eighteenth century. To be verified. ↩

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