

## The Minster and the economy of the Church

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Before turning to the bishop's money, it is worth recalling the scale of the ecclesiastical economy in the medieval city. The Minster on the Münsterhügel was the seat of the bishop and of the cathedral chapter, a college of canons who administered its estates, elected the bishop and formed a powerful corporation of their own. The chapter held lands, tithes, rents and rights in the city and the surrounding countryside, managing them through a sophisticated administration with its own records, accounts and officials. Its archives, today in the State Archives of Basel-Stadt, are one of the principal sources for the economic history of the region.

Around the Minster, other religious institutions multiplied. The Cluniac priory of St Alban was founded in 1083 by Bishop Burkhard of Fenis and became one of the richest monasteries of the region; its lands in the valley of the St Alban pond, the *St. Alban-Teich*, a canal derived from the river Birs, would later provide the water power for Basel's paper mills.<sup>1</sup> The collegiate church of St Peter, the Augustinian canons of St Leonhard, the Dominican friars who arrived in 1233, the Franciscans, the Carthusians who settled in Kleinbasel in 1401, and numerous convents of nuns completed the religious landscape. By the late Middle Ages, a significant part of the land within the city walls belonged to religious institutions.

The Church was a landowner, a lender and a borrower at the same time. Monasteries accumulated capital through donations and bequests and invested it in land and in rents. They lent money to nobles, to peasants and to the city itself, often in the form of purchases of rents secured on land, a technique examined in the next chapter. They also borrowed, especially when they undertook building works or faced bad harvests. The bishop himself was the largest borrower of the region, and his debts, as will be seen, shaped the political history of the city.

The ecclesiastical economy was governed by canon law, which prohibited usury, understood as any profit on a loan. The prohibition, which the councils of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries had extended to laymen, shaped the forms that credit took. Credit was disguised as sale, partnership or rent; interest was presented as compensation for damage or for lost profit; and lending at interest in its open form was left to groups that stood outside the Christian community or were tolerated as exceptions. The history of credit in Basel, as in other medieval cities, is therefore also a history of legal constructions designed to reconcile economic needs with the moral and legal prohibition. Part B returns to this question in connection with the Reformation, which transformed the theological assessment of interest.<sup>2</sup>

## 1 Notes

1. On the foundation of St Alban by Bishop Burkhard von Fenis in 1083 and the St. Alban-Teich, see HLS, articles "St. Alban (Basel)" and "Burkhard von Fenis". Date to be verified. ↩
2. On the canonical prohibition of usury and its extension to laymen by the Third and Fourth Lateran Councils (1179, 1215) and the Council of Vienne (1311–1312), see the standard literature on medieval economic ethics; for Basel, Harms, *Der Stadthaushalt Basels im ausgehenden Mittelalter, 1909–1913*, introduction. ↩

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