

The most famous resident of Basel

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Of all the people who have lived in Basel, none was more famous in his own time than Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam. Born in Rotterdam around 1466 or 1469, educated by the Brethren of the Common Life, ordained a priest, he became the most celebrated scholar of Europe in the first decades of the sixteenth century. His editions of the New Testament and the Church Fathers, his collections of proverbs and dialogues, his satires and his treatises on education, politics and religion were read from Portugal to Poland and from Scotland to Italy. Popes, emperors and kings sought his favour, while scholars across Europe considered a letter from him a distinction.¹

Erasmus came to Basel for the first time in 1514, attracted by the reputation of Johann Froben's printing house. He stayed long enough to supervise the printing of his edition of the New Testament and of the works of Jerome, which appeared in 1516. He returned several times and settled in the city in 1521, where he lived until 1529. When the Reformation was introduced in Basel in 1529, he moved to Freiburg im Breisgau, a Catholic city under Habsburg rule. In 1535 he returned to Basel to supervise the printing of his last works and died there on 12 July 1536. He was buried in the Minster, where his tomb can still be seen.²

This chapter examines Erasmus and the humanist network of which Basel was a centre, from a perspective that is unusual in the literature on Erasmus: that of money, reputation and information. Erasmus was a scholar and a moralist, but he was also an author who lived from his pen and from the generosity of patrons, a man who had to manage his income, transfer his money across borders and protect his reputation in a competitive market of ideas. The humanist network he animated was a network of information and reputation that functioned in many respects like the financial networks of the period. And his views on money, war,

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taxation and the duties of princes remain surprisingly relevant for the ethics of a financial centre.

1 Notes

1. On Erasmus's life, see the standard biographies (e.g. Huizinga, Erasmus, 1924; Halkin, Érasme parmi nous, 1987); on his years in Basel, HLS, article "Erasmus von Rotterdam". Birth year disputed (1466/1469). ↩
2. On Erasmus's residences in Basel (1514–1516 intermittently; 1521–1529; 1535–1536), his move to Freiburg in 1529, his death in Basel on 12 July 1536 and his tomb in the Minster, see HLS, article "Erasmus von Rotterdam". To be verified. ↩

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