

The nobles, the Habsburgs and the Evil Carnival

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The emancipation of the citizens from the bishop was complicated by the presence of a third power: the nobility. The knightly families who served the bishop as vassals and officials lived in the city, held seats in the council and competed with the guilds for influence. Two factions of nobles, the *Psitticher*, named after the parrot in their coat of arms, and the *Sterner*, named after their star, fought each other in the thirteenth century, and their feud drew in the bishop and the neighbouring dynasties.¹

The most powerful neighbouring dynasty was the house of Habsburg, whose ancestral lands lay in the Aargau and whose possessions extended over the Sundgau, the Breisgau and Alsace. In 1273, Count Rudolf of Habsburg besieged Basel in the course of his conflict with Bishop Heinrich of Neuenburg. When the news arrived during the siege that Rudolf had been elected King of the Romans, the city opened its gates to the new king.² For two centuries the Habsburgs would remain the most dangerous neighbour of the city, whose struggle against their influence shaped Basel's alliances and eventually led it into the Swiss Confederation.

The tension culminated in 1376 in an event known as the *Böse Fasnacht*, the Evil Carnival. During the carnival celebrations, when Duke Leopold III of Austria was present in the city with his knights, a riot broke out between the citizens and the duke's retinue, in which several nobles were killed. The duke obtained from the Emperor the imposition of the imperial ban on the city and demanded heavy compensation. Basel had to pay a considerable sum and to accept the duke as its lord for a time.³ The humiliation was short-lived: ten years later, in 1386, Duke Leopold was killed at the battle of Sempach by the Confederates, and Habsburg power in the region was permanently weakened. Basel used the respite to acquire rights from the bishop and to extend its territory.

The Evil Carnival is a reminder that the carnival of Basel, the *Basler Fasnacht*, which UNESCO inscribed on its Representative List of the

Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2017, has a long history. It is also a reminder that the security of a commercial city depends on its capacity to defend itself against more powerful neighbours. Basel, located at the junction of the Habsburg territories, the Empire and later France, had to pursue a policy of alliances that would bring it into the Confederation in 1501. Neutrality, which the Confederates imposed on Basel as a condition of its accession, became an instrument of survival and later a foundation of the Swiss financial centre. Chapter V of this part returns to this question.

1 Notes

1. On the feud between the noble factions of the Psitticher and the Sterner in thirteenth-century Basel, see HLS, article "Basel (Gemeinde)"; Wackernagel, vol. 1, 1907. ↩
2. On the siege of Basel by Rudolf of Habsburg in 1273 and the news of his election as King of the Romans, see HLS, article "Rudolf I. (von Habsburg)". To be verified. ↩
3. On the Böse Fasnacht of 26 February 1376 and its consequences for Basel, see HLS, article "Böse Fasnacht". Date and amount of compensation to be verified. ↩

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