

The prince-bishop as lord of the city

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

For most of the Middle Ages, Basel was the city of its bishop. The bishop was its spiritual head and its temporal lord. He appointed the officials who administered justice and collected revenues, he held the rights of market, toll and coinage, and he owned or controlled a large part of the land within and around the walls. The citizens lived under his lordship, paid his dues and used his money. The history of Basel's emancipation from this lordship, which occupied the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, is at the same time the history of the formation of its financial institutions. The rights that the citizens acquired from the bishop, one by one and often against payment, were precisely those on which a commercial and financial economy depends: the right to issue money, to hold markets, to levy tolls and taxes, to administer justice and to borrow on the credit of the community.

The temporal power of the bishops of Basel rested on the grants of the Ottonian and Salian emperors. Henry II, who acquired Basel in 1006, endowed the bishopric with extensive rights and lands, which his successors confirmed and extended. The emperors of the eleventh century relied on bishops as pillars of their rule, because bishops could not found hereditary dynasties and their offices returned to the disposal of the crown at each vacancy. The system of the imperial Church, the *Reichskirche*, gave bishops the rights of counts and made them princes of the Empire.¹ After the bishop of Basel received the county of the Augstgau or Sisgau in 1041, the bishops acquired extensive territories in the Jura over the following centuries, from the Birs valley to the Lake of Biel, which formed the Prince-Bishopric of Basel.

The Prince-Bishopric was a state of the Holy Roman Empire and survived as such until the French Revolution, although the city of Basel itself escaped the bishop's rule from the late fourteenth century onwards and the bishop left the city at the Reformation. Its territory corresponds largely to today's

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canton of Jura, the Bernese Jura, the Laufen valley, now part of the canton of Basel-Landschaft, and parts of the canton of Solothurn. From 1527 the bishops resided at Porrentruy, where their palace, the *château de Porrentruy*, remains the seat of the government of the canton of Jura.² The Congress of Vienna allocated most of the former Prince-Bishopric to the canton of Bern, which led to the long conflict that ended with the creation of the canton of Jura in 1979. The Jura question is therefore, in a sense, a late consequence of the separation between the city of Basel and its bishop.

Within the city, the bishop exercised his lordship through officials. The most important was the *Vogt*, the advocate, who exercised high justice in the bishop's name. The office of *Vogt* was often held by noble families as a hereditary fief, and for a long time by the counts of Frohburg and later by the Habsburgs, which gave these dynasties an influence in the city that the bishops and the citizens alike tried to contain. Below him, the *Schultheiss* presided over the lower court, and the *Zöllner*, the toll collector, the *Münzmeister*, the master of the mint, and other officials administered the bishop's revenues. Each of these offices generated income and could be granted as a fief, sold or pledged.³

This is the crucial point for the economic history of the city. In the medieval conception, public offices and rights were assets. They could be alienated, mortgaged and inherited like land. A lord in need of money could pledge the revenues of an office to a creditor, who then collected them until the loan was repaid. If the lord was unable to redeem the pledge, the right remained with the creditor. Many medieval cities acquired their autonomy in this way: by lending money to their lords against the pledge of their rights, and by keeping the rights when the lords defaulted. Basel is a textbook example.

1 Notes

1. On the Ottonian-Salian imperial Church system and the position of the bishop of Basel as prince of the Empire, see HLS, article "Basel (Fürstbistum)"; Wackernagel, *Geschichte der Stadt Basel*, vol. 1, 1907. ↩
2. On the residence of the prince-bishops at Porrentruy from 1527/28 and the territorial extent of the Prince-Bishopric until 1792/1815, see HLS, article "Basel (Fürstbistum)"; on the *château de Porrentruy*, the publications of the République et Canton du Jura. ↩

3. On the episcopal officials of Basel (Vogt, Schultheiss, Zöllner, Münzmeister) and their enfeoffment and pledging, see Wackernagel, vol. 1, 1907; HLS, article "Basel (Gemeinde)", section on the Middle Ages. ↩

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