

The Reformation and the guild economy

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The Reformation strengthened the guilds politically, but it did not change their economic role. The guilds continued to regulate the crafts, to control access to trades, to set prices and to protect their members against competition. The moral discipline of the Reformation reinforced the guild ethic of sufficiency and the suspicion of excessive gain. The council, dominated by the guilds, pursued an economic policy that favoured the interests of the established masters.

This policy created a tension that would become acute in the seventeenth century. The new industries introduced by the refugees, above all the silk ribbon industry, did not fit into the guild structure. Their entrepreneurs were merchants who organised production on a large scale, employed wage workers and sold in distant markets. Since the guilds regarded them as a threat, the council had to find compromises that allowed the new industries to develop without destroying the guild economy. Chapter V examines the most important of these compromises, the regulation of the engine loom in the ribbon industry.

The Reformation thus contributed, paradoxically, both to the preservation of the guild economy and to its eventual transformation. It preserved it by strengthening the political power of the guilds and by reinforcing their moral economy. It prepared its transformation by attracting refugees who brought new industries and new forms of enterprise, and by encouraging a culture of work and accumulation that favoured capital. The tension between these two effects runs through the economic history of Basel until the abolition of the guild constitution in 1798.

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