

The ribbon weavers' villages

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The putting-out system transformed the countryside of Basel. In the villages of the rural territory, in particular in the valleys of the Jura that today form the districts of Waldenburg, Sissach and Liestal in the canton of Basel-Landschaft, thousands of households acquired engine looms, installed them in their houses and wove ribbons for the merchants of the city. The looms, large wooden machines that occupied a whole room, became a characteristic feature of the rural houses of the region. The weavers, the *Posamentier*, combined weaving with small-scale farming. The income from weaving allowed families to survive on holdings that were too small to support them from agriculture alone.¹

The relationship between the merchants and the weavers was a relationship of economic dependence. The merchant supplied the silk, the patterns and often the loom, which the weaver rented or bought on credit; the weaver supplied the labour and delivered the finished ribbons, for which he was paid by the piece at a rate fixed by the merchant. Whereas the weaver bore the risk of illness and of periods without work, the merchant bore the risk of the market. When demand fell, the merchants reduced orders and the weavers suffered. When demand rose, the villages prospered with the merchants' increased orders. The rhythm of the international fashion market was transmitted directly to the households of the Jura valleys.

The putting-out system also created a financial relationship. The weavers were often indebted to the merchants, who advanced them silk, looms and money, and whose accounts recorded the debts and the deliveries. The merchants thus acted as creditors of a large rural population, with their capital tied up in materials, looms and advances distributed over dozens of villages. The management of this dispersed capital required careful accounting, trusted intermediaries in the villages, the *Fergger* or agents who

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distributed materials and collected ribbons, and a system of control that prevented the embezzlement of silk.

The ribbon villages of Basel-Landschaft preserved their home weaving until the early twentieth century, when the factory system and the decline of the ribbon trade ended it. The Museum.BL in Liestal and several local museums preserve looms and document the history of the *Posamenter*. The economic tension between the city merchants and the rural weavers contributed to the conflict between city and countryside that led to the division of the canton in 1833, which Part D examines.

1 Notes

1. On the rural ribbon weavers (Posamenter) in the Basel countryside, their looms and their combination of home weaving and farming, see HLS, article "Posamenterei"; the publications of the Museum.BL (Liestal) on the history of ribbon weaving. To be verified. ↩

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