

The rise of the citizens

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While the bishop ruled, the citizens organised. The merchants, craftsmen and landowners of the city formed associations, obtained privileges and gradually acquired a share in the government of the city. A council, the *Rat*, is attested in Basel from the end of the twelfth century, and in the thirteenth century it became the principal organ of urban self-government, composed of members of the knightly families who served the bishop and of the wealthy burghers.¹

The bishop recognised the council and regulated its competences in a charter, the *Handfeste*, which each new bishop had to confirm at his accession. This practice, which was common in the episcopal cities of the Empire, turned the relationship between the lord and the citizens into a quasi-contractual one: the bishop's rights were confirmed, but so were the privileges of the citizens, and the confirmation had to be renewed at each change of ruler. The *Handfeste* is one of the roots of the constitutional culture of Basel, in which the rights of the community are defined in written instruments and the exercise of power is subject to renewal.

The craftsmen organised themselves in guilds, the *Zünfte*. The oldest surviving guild charter of Basel was granted in 1226 by Bishop Heinrich von Thun to the furriers, the *Kürschner*.² Other charters followed for the butchers, the bakers, the smiths, the weavers, the tanners and many other trades. The guilds regulated access to their crafts, set standards of quality, organised their members' religious and social life, and provided mutual assistance. They also formed military units for the defence of the city. Having obtained representation in the council in the course of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the guilds had come to dominate the government of the city by the fifteenth century. The guild regime, which gave political rights to organised craftsmen and merchants, lasted in Basel until the end of the eighteenth century and shaped the political culture of the city.

Several guilds of Basel united merchants: the guild *zum Schlüssel* was the guild of the cloth merchants and wholesalers, the guild *zum Safran* united the grocers and spice merchants, and the guild *zu Hausgenossen* or *zum Bären* the money changers and goldsmiths. These merchant guilds, sometimes called *Herrenzünfte*, the lords' guilds, occupied the first ranks in the order of precedence and supplied a large share of the city's political leadership.³ The combination of mercantile wealth and political power in the hands of a relatively small group of families, which characterises Basel from the late Middle Ages until the nineteenth century, has its origins here.

1 Notes

1. On the emergence of the council (Rat) of Basel at the end of the twelfth century and its composition, see HLS, article "Basel (Gemeinde)", section on the Middle Ages; Wackernagel, vol. 1, 1907. Dates to be verified. ↩
2. The guild charter of Bishop Heinrich von Thun for the furriers (Kürschner) of 1226 is generally cited as the oldest guild charter of Basel; see HLS, article "Zünfte"; Wackernagel, vol. 1, 1907. To be verified. ↩
3. On the Herrenzünfte of Basel (zum Schlüssel, zu Hausgenossen/zum Bären, zu Weinleuten, zu Safran) and their order of precedence, see HLS, article "Zünfte", section on Basel. To be verified. ↩

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