

The Upper Rhine as an economic region

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Basel's position cannot be understood in isolation from the region around it. The Upper Rhine plain, stretching from Basel to the area of Mainz and Frankfurt, is one of the most fertile and densely populated regions of Europe. In the Middle Ages it was studded with cities: Strasbourg, Colmar, Freiburg im Breisgau, Breisach, Mulhouse, Speyer, Worms, Mainz. These cities formed a network of markets, of monetary unions and of political alliances. They shared a language, Alemannic German in the southern part, and a legal culture shaped by imperial and canon law. They competed with each other, but they also cooperated, as the Rappen monetary union of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries shows, to which Chapter II returns.¹

The region's agriculture produced grain and wine, and the vineyards of Alsace and of the Markgräflerland supplied Basel with wine, one of the most important commodities of medieval trade and one of the principal sources of indirect taxation. The Black Forest supplied timber, which was floated down the rivers, and iron. The Jura supplied iron ore and, later, water power for the mills that the paper, textile and metal industries used. The Sundgau was a granary. Basel, at the southern tip of this region, acted as its gate to the south, and as the natural market for the exchange of goods from the north with the products of the Swiss plateau and of the Alpine and Italian south.

This regional role has a modern equivalent. Since the 1960s the trinational region around Basel, with the adjoining parts of Alsace and of Baden, has been organised as a cross-border economic area, the *Regio Basiliensis*, and today as the Trinational Eurodistrict of Basel. More than fifty thousand cross-border commuters from France and Germany work in the Basel region, and the EuroAirport Basel-Mulhouse-Freiburg is the only airport in the world operated jointly by two states under a bilateral treaty.² Part H examines this trinational economy in detail. Its roots lie in the medieval

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network of the Upper Rhine cities and, before that, in the Roman organisation of the frontier.

1 Notes

1. On the Upper Rhine as a medieval urban landscape and its monetary cooperation, see HLS, article "Rappenmünzbund"; Wackernagel, vol. 2/1, 1911, section on coinage. ↩
2. Figures on cross-border commuters to the canton of Basel-Stadt and the region are published by the Federal Statistical Office (FSO), "Grenzgängerstatistik"; on the EuroAirport, see the Franco-Swiss Convention of 4 July 1949 on the construction and operation of the Basel-Mulhouse airport (SR 0.748.131.934.91). Figures to be verified for the current year. ↩

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