

Three decisions that shaped a city

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

In the four decades that followed the Council, Basel took three decisions that defined its future. In 1460, it opened a university, the first on the territory of present-day Switzerland. In 1471, it obtained from the Emperor the privilege of holding annual fairs, which it has held without interruption to this day. And in 1501, it joined the Swiss Confederation, turning away from the Empire and the Upper Rhine cities with which it had shared its history towards an alliance of rural and urban cantons that had just proved its military strength in the Burgundian and Swabian Wars.

Each of these decisions has a financial dimension. The university required the city to finance an institution whose returns were intellectual and long-term. The fair privilege was an attempt to establish Basel as a centre of trade and payments, at a time when the fairs of Geneva were declining and those of Lyon were rising. The accession to the Confederation changed the political and economic framework in which the city operated. It also imposed on Basel an obligation of neutrality that is one of the historical roots of the Swiss neutrality on which the modern financial centre has built its reputation. This chapter examines the three decisions and their consequences.

For general information only. This article does not constitute legal or tax advice, does not replace advice on an individual case and creates no lawyer-client relationship. It reflects the legal position as of September 2026.

Online version: helveticaregister.com/basel-three-decisions-that-shaped-a-city