

Tithes, rents and the countryside after 1529

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The Reformation changed the religious life of the countryside of Basel, but it did not free the peasants from the dues they owed. The tithes, which had been paid to the Church, were now collected by the city's stewards and used for the purposes of the Reformed church, the schools and the poor. The rents and dues owed to the monasteries passed to the city. For the peasants, who had hoped that the Reformation would reduce their burdens, the change was a disappointment. The unrest of 1525 had shown their expectations. The concessions made at that time were partly withdrawn after the Reformation.¹

The tithe was one of the most important revenues of the city and one of the most resented burdens of the rural population. It was a tax in kind, a tenth of the harvest of grain, wine and other crops, collected in the fields and stored in the tithe barns of the city. Its collection required a considerable administration, while its value depended on the harvest and on the price of grain. The city leased the collection of certain tithes to private tithe farmers, who paid a fixed sum and collected the tithe at their own risk, a practice that shifted the risk of bad harvests to the farmers and assured the city of a stable income.

The tithe was abolished in Basel in the course of the nineteenth century, after the Helvetic Revolution had declared its abolition in principle in 1798 and the cantons had organised its redemption against compensation.² The redemption of the tithes, which required the peasants to pay a capital sum to extinguish the annual obligation, was financed in part by loans. It contributed to the development of rural credit and of the cantonal banks in the nineteenth century. Part D examines the foundation of the Basler Kantonalbank in 1899 in this context.

1 Notes

1. On the continuation of tithes and dues in the Basel countryside after the Reformation and the disappointment of rural expectations, see HLS, article "Basel-Landschaft", section on the sixteenth century. To be verified. ↩
2. On the abolition and redemption of tithes and feudal dues in Switzerland after 1798 and in the canton of Basel in the nineteenth century, see HLS, articles "Zehnt" and "Grundlasten". To be verified. ↩

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