

Why Basel?

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Erasmus had lived in Paris, Oxford, Cambridge, London, Venice, Rome, Louvain and other cities before he settled in Basel. His choice of Basel requires explanation. It was not the largest or richest city he knew, nor the seat of a court or of a great university. Several reasons explain it.

The first reason was the printing house of Froben. Erasmus needed a printer who could produce his works with speed, accuracy and elegance, who had Greek types and learned correctors, and who was willing to follow his instructions. Froben was such a printer. The collaboration between the two men was the basis of Erasmus's productivity in the 1520s. Because an author of Erasmus's ambition needed to be close to his press, Basel suited him: it offered the best press north of the Alps.

The second reason was the intellectual environment. Basel had a university, a circle of scholars and correctors, and a stream of visitors who came to meet Erasmus or to work in the printing houses. The city was a crossroads of the humanist network, connected with Strasbourg, Freiburg, Zurich, Constance, Augsburg, Nuremberg and the Low Countries, and letters and books circulated quickly between these centres.

The third reason was political. Basel was a free city, a member of the Swiss Confederation and outside the direct control of any prince. Erasmus valued his independence and avoided binding himself to a court, although he accepted pensions from several rulers. In Basel, he could live as a private scholar, protected by the city's laws and by the neutrality of the Confederation, and could correspond freely with rulers and scholars on all sides of the conflicts of the time.

The fourth reason was personal comfort. Being a man of delicate health, Erasmus appreciated the quiet, the order and the relative cleanliness of Basel, as well as the Burgundian wine he could obtain there. His letters

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contain complaints about the climate, the food and the stoves of Germany, but also expressions of satisfaction with the city that had become his home.

These reasons foreshadow the arguments that the Swiss financial centre has made to attract foreign clients and institutions for two centuries: the quality of its services, the concentration of expertise, the independence and neutrality of the country, the protection of its laws and the quality of life. Erasmus chose Basel for reasons that a wealth manager of the twentieth century would recognise.

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