

Women of the Daig

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

The history of the *Daig* is usually written as a history of men: merchants, magistrates, professors and pastors. The women of the patrician families played a role that was less visible but essential. They managed households that were at the same time centres of business, with offices, warehouses, employees and a constant stream of visitors. They raised the children and educated the daughters, who would become the wives of the next generation of merchants. They maintained the kinship networks through visits, correspondence and the organisation of family events. And they brought wealth into their marriages through their dowries and inheritances, which were often decisive for the capital of the family business.¹

The legal position of women in Basel, as in the rest of Switzerland, was one of dependence. Married women were under the guardianship of their husbands, who administered their property and represented them in legal matters. Widows had more freedom, and several widows of the Basel elite managed family businesses and fortunes after the death of their husbands. Unmarried women were under the guardianship of male relatives.

Women played a prominent role in the charitable and religious life of the city. They founded and managed institutions for the poor, the sick and orphans, organised associations for the support of missions, and supported education. The Pietist circles of the early nineteenth century, which gave rise to the Basel Mission, relied heavily on the involvement of women, who raised funds, corresponded with missionaries and organised the support networks at home.

The political emancipation of women in Switzerland came late. Women obtained the right to vote at the federal level only in 1971. Basel-Stadt was one of the first cantons to introduce women's suffrage at the cantonal level, in 1966, as the first German-speaking canton to do so.² The legal equality of women in marriage, including equal rights in the administration of

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marital property, was established by the revision of the Civil Code in force since 1988. The history of the women of the *Daig*, who managed wealth without the legal capacity to own it fully, is a reminder of how recent the equal participation of women in the management of wealth is in Switzerland.

1 Notes

1. On the role of women in Basel patrician families (household management, kinship networks, dowries, philanthropy), see the literature on the social history of the Basel bourgeoisie, e.g. Sarasin, Stadt der Bürger, 1990. To be verified. ↩
2. Women's suffrage in the canton of Basel-Stadt was introduced by popular vote on 26 June 1966, making Basel-Stadt the first German-speaking canton to grant women the vote; federal women's suffrage followed on 7 February 1971. To be verified. ↩

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