

1462–1463: the economic war of Louis XI

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Louis XI came to the throne in 1461. From his accession, he surrounded himself with an informal council of finances, made up of specialists in budgetary, economic and financial questions.¹ The new king conceived of the economy as an instrument of power. He invested in mines, encouraged the silk industry, notably in Lyon, and used the fairs, a royal privilege, as a lever of his policy. He resorted to a wide range of customs measures and used international trade as a means of pressure on his neighbours. Among the economic conflicts he conducted were those that set him against Geneva, Venice and Antwerp.²

The measure against Geneva came as early as 1462. In confirming the Lyon fairs, Louis XI supplemented them with provisions directed against the rival city. He forbade French merchants to attend the Geneva fairs and prohibited foreign merchants from crossing French territory to get there, on pain of confiscation and an arbitrary fine. Bernese merchants passing through the kingdom would be allowed neither to buy nor to sell. Genoese merchants who had breached these orders had to pay a fine of 10,000 livres.³

The reach of these measures was considerable. French merchants made up an important part of the clientele of the Geneva fairs. Above all, the prohibition on crossing the kingdom cut the routes that linked Geneva to the Iberian peninsula, to south-western France and, to some extent, to Flanders by the western itineraries. The fine imposed on the Genoese demonstrates that the king intended to have his orders obeyed, including against foreign merchants. The message was clear: attending Geneva exposed one to sanctions in the kingdom of France.

On 8 March 1463, Louis XI completed this arrangement with letters patent that transformed the Lyon fairs. They now numbered four, and their duration rose from three to fifteen days. The merchants attending them were placed under royal safeguard and exempted from the droit d'aubaine.

The seneschal was appointed guardian and conservator of the fairs, with jurisdiction over all disputes of a commercial nature.⁴ The Lyon fairs now amounted to sixty days a year. The burghers of the city, unhappy to see the justice of the fairs entrusted to a royal officer, obtained the right to appoint a person of their own choosing: Jean Grant, lieutenant of the seneschal and doctor of law, was the first to be elected as prud'homme charged with judging commercial cases, which marks the origin of the tribunal de la Conservation.⁵ The importance of this text is attested by the care with which the aldermen of Lyon, in 1494, had its eleven articles calligraphed and illuminated.⁶

The exemption from the droit d'aubaine deserves an explanation. In the kingdom of France, the droit d'aubaine allowed the king to take the property of foreigners who died on his territory. For a foreign merchant staying in Lyon with substantial goods and receivables, this right represented a major risk to his estate: his death during the fair could deprive his heirs and his partners of all or part of his property. The exemption guaranteed the orderly transmission of the estate. In contemporary terms, it was a guarantee of succession security offered to foreign investors. The example shows that estate planning and the protection of heirs have long been among the arguments with which a financial centre attracts international clients.

The reorganisation of justice answered another expectation of the merchants: to have a specialised, swift and accessible judge. The creation of a jurisdiction specific to the fairs, followed by the election of a prud'homme by the burghers, shows that legal certainty was perceived as a central element of the centre's attractiveness. The tribunal de la Conservation would become one of the most important commercial courts of the kingdom.

Historians report, finally, that Louis XI is said to have made the dates of the Lyon fairs coincide with those of Geneva, so as to force the merchants to choose.⁷ If this information is confirmed, it reveals a subtle understanding of competition between centres: by making it impossible to attend the two fairs in succession, the king obliged the merchants to decide, and the combination of prohibition and privileges was bound to push them towards Lyon.

Measure	Content	Economic logic
Prohibition on French merchants	ban on attending the Geneva fairs	deprive the rival centre of an essential clientele

Measure	Content	Economic logic
Prohibition on transit	ban on foreigners crossing France to go to Geneva	cut the western and southern routes
Sanctions	confiscation, arbitrary fine, fine of 10,000 livres imposed on Genoese merchants	make the threat credible
Lengthening of the Lyon fairs	four fairs of fifteen days, or sixty days a year	increase the liquidity and convenience of the rival centre
Royal safeguard	protection of merchants and their property	reduce the risk of travel and residence
Exemption from the droit d'aubaine	guaranteed transmission of foreign merchants' property	offer succession security
Specialised jurisdiction	seneschal as conservator, then elected prud'homme	guarantee swift commercial justice

Key points. The policy of Louis XI combined two levers that are found in every war between financial centres: the constraint exerted on the rival centre, through prohibition and sanction, and the attraction exerted by the favoured centre, through fiscal, legal and succession privileges. Neither of these levers would have sufficed on its own; it was their combination that proved formidable.

1 Notes

1. Association pour l'histoire de l'administration des douanes, "Louis XI (1462-1483) : les instruments douaniers au service de l'interventionnisme économique", histoire-de-la-douane.org (accessed September 2026). ↩
2. [Histoire-de-la-douane.org](http://histoire-de-la-douane.org), article cited above. ↩
3. Archives municipales de Lyon, "Quatre foires annuelles pour Lyon", cited above. ↩
4. Archives municipales de Lyon, "Quatre foires annuelles pour Lyon", cited above. ↩
5. Article "Foires de Lyon", Wikipédia (fr), cited above. ↩
6. Archives municipales de Lyon, cited above. ↩

7. Archives municipales de Lyon, “Quatre foires annuelles pour Lyon” (archives-lyon.fr): in 1444 Charles VII granted three fairs of two days each (the Wednesday after Easter, 26 July, St Andrew’s Day); Louis XI confirmed them in 1462 and, by letters patent of 8 March 1463, instituted four fairs of fifteen days placed under royal safeguard, with exemption from the droit d’aubaine, on the dates of Epiphany, Quasimodo Sunday, 4 August and All Saints’ Day, “to counter the influence of Geneva”; the ordinance of 1462 forbade French merchants to attend the Geneva fairs and foreign merchants to cross the kingdom to get there. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Foire”: the Geneva fairs were held at Epiphany, Easter, St Peter in Chains and All Saints’ Day. ↩

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