

A growing city: suburbs, communities and exclusions

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The prosperity of the fairs brought strong demographic growth. It made Geneva the principal city of the region, a rank it would retain until the middle of the nineteenth century, and led to the expansion of the suburbs of Plainpalais and Saint-Gervais.¹ Historians' estimates put the population of the city, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, at more than five thousand inhabitants, an order of magnitude that made it a significant city for the period and for the region.²

This growth rested largely on immigration. The city attracted Savoyards, Burgundians and Italians, as well as a small number of Jews. The latter were confined in 1428 to a closed quarter, the "cancel", before being expelled from the city in 1490.³ This episode is a reminder that the openness of a merchant city had its limits, and that tolerance towards foreigners depended on their perceived usefulness and on the prejudices of the time. It is also a reminder that the question of credit and interest, at the heart of Calvinist thinking a century later, carried a history of exclusion: in a large part of medieval Europe, lending at interest had been relegated to groups placed at the margins of Christian society, which helped to perpetuate the stigma attached to them.

Italian merchants occupied a place apart in Geneva society of the fifteenth century. Florentines, Genoese, Lucchese and Milanese kept factors there, rented houses and maintained trading houses. The most prestigious presence was that of the Medici, who opened a branch in Geneva in 1424.⁴ The following chapter returns to the role of this establishment, which made Geneva one of the links in the most powerful banking network of Renaissance Europe.

The merchants of southern Germany formed the other great foreign community. The trading companies of Nuremberg and Ravensburg attended the Geneva fairs, where they sold linens, fustians and metal goods

and bought spices, silks and cloth.⁵ These merchants brought with them accounting techniques, networks of correspondents and commercial practices that enriched the economic culture of the city.

The urban space bears the mark of these activities. The lower town, between the hill and the lake, concentrated the trade. The Molard, the city's former port, and the Rues Basses housed market halls, shops and warehouses.⁶ The Bourg-de-Four, on the hill, served as a market place. The bridges over the Rhône linked the city to the suburb of Saint-Gervais on the right bank. Inns multiplied, and some became veritable business centres where deals were negotiated, debts settled and news exchanged.

Geneva society of this period was a society of services. Craftsmen were numerous there — cobblers, goldsmiths, tailors, butchers, drapers — but the wealth of the city came first of all from the reception of merchants and the circulation of goods. Innkeepers, brokers, carriers, notaries and money changers formed the cogs of this economy. Many citizens drew part of their income from letting houses, rooms, cellars and market stalls during the fairs.

1 Notes

1. Article “Histoire de Genève”, Wikipédia (fr) (accessed September 2026), which summarises the Geneva historiography on this point. ↩
2. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS; Historical Dictionary of Switzerland), art. “Genève (commune)” (Liliane Mottu-Weber): population estimated at more than 5,000 inhabitants in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, at about 13,150 in 1550 and 17,330 in 1580. ↩
3. Article “Histoire de Genève”, Wikipédia (fr), cited above. ↩
4. Article “Histoire de Genève”, Wikipédia (fr), cited above; for the history of the branch, see de Roover, *The Rise and Decline of the Medici Bank*. ↩
5. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Compagnie de Ravensburg”: “one of the largest trading companies of southern Germany in the late Middle Ages” (c. 1380–1530), exporting textiles, metals, hardware, furs and leather and importing spices, sugar, rice, southern fruits and precious stones; factor established in Geneva “from 1454”; establishments in Italy, Spain, France, Bruges, Antwerp and London. ↩

6. Wikipedia (fr), “Place du Molard”: “the port at this spot is mentioned as early as 1271 (in Latin ad portum)”; in 1309, Bishop Aymon de Quart ordered the construction of “a market hall at the Molard, needed for storing the goods intended for the fairs”; Molard tower rebuilt in 1591; Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Genève (commune)”: “Shortly after 1309, the hall requested by the bishop was built at the Molard”; Le Temps, “1309-2002 : les Halles du Molard”. ↩

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