

A weakened city under Savoyard pressure

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At the beginning of the sixteenth century, Geneva emerged diminished from the long decline of its fairs. Its population was no longer growing, its trade had withdrawn to a regional scale, and its finances were fragile. The city remained an episcopal lordship, but the influence of the House of Savoy there reached its peak. Duke Charles III, who reigned from 1504, intended to make Geneva one of the cities of his territories.¹ The episcopal see was occupied by prelates connected with the ducal dynasty, notably Jean de Savoie, bishop during the 1510s.² The vidomne, a Savoyard officer, exercised his judicial functions in the city.

Savoyard pressure made itself felt on several fronts. The duke sought to control the appointment of magistrates, to extend the jurisdiction of his officers and to obtain from the citizens recognition of his sovereignty. He had considerable means of economic pressure at his disposal, since the Genevan territory was almost entirely surrounded by Savoyard lands: he could obstruct the city's supplies, hinder the passage of merchants and impose tolls. For a city that lived by its trade, these means were formidable.

Faced with this pressure, Genevan society divided. Some of the notables, tied to the court of Savoy by offices, pensions or family alliances, considered that the city's future lay in gradual integration into the duke's territories. Others, in particular merchants trading with the Swiss cities, held that Geneva's autonomy could be preserved only by relying on the cantons. The divide was political, but it was economic too, since it set two commercial orientations and two networks of clients against each other.

This configuration recalls a reality that all small financial centres have known: the geopolitical orientation of a merchant city derives largely from the geography of its trade. The Genevan merchants who worked with Fribourg and Bern had a direct interest in a Swiss alliance, which would protect their routes and their receivables. Those whose fortune rested on Savoyard offices and favours had the opposite interest. Convictions and

interests intermingled in proportions that the sources do not always allow us to disentangle.

1 Notes

1. Wikipedia (en), “Charles III, Duke of Savoy”: “Duke of Savoy from 1504 to 1553”; surprise attack on Geneva in July 1534 repelled, second siege in October 1535 broken by the arrival of the Bernese; French invasion of Savoy in 1536; died in 1553, succeeded by Emmanuel Philibert. ↩
2. Wikipedia (en), “Jean de Savoie”: Bishop of Geneva “from 1513 to his death in 1522”, illegitimate son of François de Savoie, appointed by Duke Charles III under a right granted by Leo X; died on 8 June 1522; his appointment provoked a revolt in 1515. ↩

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