

From political emancipation to religious rupture

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Between 1526 and 1535, Geneva gradually freed itself from its old powers. The bishop, Pierre de La Baume, whose position wavered between the citizens and the duke, lost his authority and eventually left the city.¹ The citizens took over the judicial functions that had until then been exercised in the name of the bishop and the Savoyard vidomne, and created their own magistracies.² Step by step, the city thus acquired the attributes of a sovereignty that it did not yet openly claim.

The religious question entered this process. Bern adopted the Reformation in 1528 and became one of the principal Protestant powers of the Confederation.³ Its influence on Geneva now operated in two directions: political protection and the spread of Reformed ideas. Fribourg, which had remained Catholic, looked unfavourably on the city's religious evolution and eventually broke off the *combourgeoisie*.⁴ Geneva then found itself in a delicate situation, since its alliance now rested on Bern alone, whose support presupposed a compatible religious orientation.

The Reformed preachers arrived in Geneva in the early 1530s under Bernese protection. Guillaume Farel, a reformer from the Dauphiné, preached there from 1532 onwards, soon joined by Antoine Froment and Pierre Viret.⁵ Their preaching won converts and provoked resistance. Clashes broke out between supporters and opponents of the Reformation. The Council, anxious to accommodate Bern without breaking with the Catholics, at first tried to maintain a balance.

The balance broke down in 1535. A public disputation held at the convent of Rive pitted the reformers against defenders of the Catholic faith.⁶ During the summer, acts of iconoclasm took place in the churches, and the Council decided to suspend the Mass.⁷ Part of the clergy left the city. Ecclesiastical property passed under the control of the civil authorities, who assigned it in particular to public assistance: the Hôpital général, created at this time,

brought the former charitable institutions together under a single administration.⁸

This secularisation of Church property had considerable economic significance. It transferred substantial landed wealth and revenues to the city. It made it possible to finance assistance, education and part of the public expenditure. It also altered the structure of property ownership and the relations between the city and the surrounding countryside, where much ecclesiastical property was located. Chapter IV will return to the organisation of assistance, which was one of the pillars of the Calvinist moral economy.

The city also began to mint its own coinage, thereby asserting one of the classic attributes of sovereignty.⁹ The motto *Post tenebras lux*, “After darkness, light”, which would become that of the Republic, expresses the reading the Genevans made of their own history: the emergence from an age of religious and political darkness into a new era.

1 Notes

1. Archives d'État de Genève (archives-etat-ge.ch), “De la combourgeoisie au blocus, 1526-1534”: Bishop Pierre de La Baume “left the city in July 1533 and never returned”. ↩
2. Archives d'État de Genève, “Première période (1517-1555) : une Réforme “zinglienne”” (exhibition Côté chaire, côté rue): abolition of the vidomne’s jurisdiction in 1529 and creation of the offices of lieutenant and auditeurs; Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Eidguenots” (combourgeoisie of 8 February 1526 definitively excluding the House of Savoy from Geneva). ↩
3. Archives d'État de Genève (archives-etat-ge.ch), “De la combourgeoisie au blocus, 1526-1534”: “Bern went over to the Reformation following the religious disputation of 1528”. ↩
4. Archives d'État de Genève (archives-etat-ge.ch), “De la combourgeoisie au blocus, 1526-1534”: “In 1534, the Fribourgeois, faithful to the old faith, withdrew from the combourgeoisie. The seal of Fribourg was torn off in 1534”; Savoyard blockade from the summer of 1534 to January 1536. ↩
5. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Farel, Guillaume”: born in 1489 at Gap, died on 13 September 1565 at Neuchâtel; “From 1532 to 1536, he preached in Geneva on several occasions”; in May 1536 the Council adopted the Reformation and two months later Farel

- retained Calvin; Archives d'État de Genève (archives-etat-ge.ch), “De la combourgeoisie au blocus”: arrival of Farel in September 1532. ↩
6. Archives d'État de Genève (archives-etat-ge.ch), “La Réforme”: disputation held at the convent of Rive from 30 May to 24 June 1535, the outcome of which led to the abolition of the Mass and the removal of images. ↩
 7. Archives d'État de Genève (archives-etat-ge.ch), “La Réforme”: decision of 10 August 1535 “that the Council of Two Hundred should be assembled” to determine whether the citizens intended to live according to the evangelical faith without Mass or papal ceremonies. ↩
 8. Archives d'État de Genève (archives-etat-ge.ch), “La Réforme”: on 14 November 1535 the Conseil général decreed the creation of a single hospital bringing together the existing institutions; Hospice général, “Notre histoire” (hospicegeneral.ch): “Foundation of the Hôpital général, bringing together the Genevan charitable works” (1535). ↩
 9. Archives d'État de Genève (archives-etat-ge.ch), “La Réforme”: on 10 October 1535, the Petit Conseil decided “that debeamus facere monetam sub nostris signis” (that we should strike coinage under our own marks); the coins bear the motto “Post Tenebras [Spero] Lucem” (Vulgate, Job XVII, 12), simplified to “Post Tenebras Lux” in 1542. ↩

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