

From regional fair to international fair

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The word “fair” covers a variety of realities. The *Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse* (Historical Dictionary of Switzerland) points out that fairs are held on fixed dates in public places and are intended for trade, and that German speakers traditionally distinguish the great fairs (*Messen*) from annual and weekly markets (*Märkte*), whereas in French, Italian and English the same word has for centuries designated the great fairs and the small ones alike.¹ The essential difference lies in the reach of the exchanges. A regional fair brings together producers and consumers from the same economic basin. A great international fair gathers merchants from far away, who trade high-value products and settle among themselves transactions entered into elsewhere.

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, great fairs multiplied in Champagne, in south-eastern Britain, in Flanders and in the Rhine valley, while the small Swiss fairs of Zurzach, Schaffhausen and Bern became part of a network extending from Lake Constance to the bend of the Rhine, towards Alsace.² At the end of the Middle Ages, other great fairs reached their peak in Italy, in France, notably at Chalon-sur-Saône, and in Geneva.³ Geneva thus belongs to this second generation of international fairs, which took over from the Champagne fairs at the moment when the latter were losing their central role.

The precise origins of the Geneva fairs remain a matter of debate. Markets and regional fairs certainly existed from the thirteenth century. Their transformation into fairs of international reach took place during the fourteenth century, and their peak falls in the decades preceding 1460.⁴ The classical historiography refers to a cycle of four annual fairs, spread over the year so as to dovetail with the calendar of the other great European fairs.⁵ This dovetailing is essential: a merchant could move from one fair to the next with the seasons, and payments could be fixed from one fair to the following one.

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The calendar of fairs indeed played a role comparable to that of quarterly settlement dates in contemporary finance. A sale concluded at one fair could be paid for at the next; a debt contracted elsewhere could be made payable “at the Geneva fair”. The fairs thus became settlement dates recognised well beyond the city. This function as a payment centre explains the interest that the Italian bankers took in them.

1 Notes

1. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse, article “Faires”, hls-dhs-dss.ch (accessed September 2026). ↩
2. DHS, article “Faires”, cited above. ↩
3. DHS, article “Faires”, cited above. ↩
4. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Faires”: the fairs, “mentioned from the middle of the thirteenth century, reached their peak around 1450”; “The Italians, often bankers, dominated in the fifteenth century, followed by people from Rhenish and Danubian Germany, the Kingdom of France or the Low Countries”; decline linked to the “privileges granted to the rival fairs of Lyon by Louis XI from 1462”; “Around 1550, however, the great fairs disappeared”; DHS, art. “Genève (commune)”: economy dominated by the fairs from the thirteenth century, from 1260 onwards. ↩
5. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Faires”: fairs held “four times a year, at Epiphany, Easter, St Peter’s Day (1 August) and All Saints”, lasting seven, ten and later fifteen days. ↩

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