

Geneva in the age of the Reformation (1519-1541): from combourgeoisie to Protestant Republic — overview and summary

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Within the space of a generation, between 1519 and 1541, Geneva changed its nature. The episcopal lordship under Savoyard influence became an independent republic, allied to the Swiss cantons, which had broken with the Church of Rome and entrusted the organisation of its Church to a reformer from France. There was nothing inevitable about this transformation. It resulted from a succession of conflicts, alliances, accidents and choices, in which economic interests played an important part alongside religious convictions. This chapter retraces that sequence, with emphasis on what it meant for the city's economy and institutions.

1 In five sentences

1. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, Geneva, weakened by the decline of its fairs, came under strong pressure from the House of Savoy, which sought to absorb it into its territories.
2. The supporters of the Swiss alliance, often connected with trade with Fribourg and Bern, obtained in 1526 a treaty of co-citizenship (combourgeoisie) that placed the city under the protection of the cantons.
3. The support of Bern, which had gone over to the Reformation, led to the adoption of Protestantism, the secularisation of Church property and, in 1536, the independence of the Republic.
4. Calvin, who arrived in 1536 and was expelled in 1538, returned in 1541 after an exile in Strasbourg that had given him pastoral experience and a European stature.

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5. The compromise of 1541 between the Republic and the reformer, laid down in the Ordonnances ecclésiastiques (Ecclesiastical Ordinances), founded the moral and legal framework of Genevan economic life.

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