

The integration of refugees into the elites

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Families of refugee origin did not remain outside power. Over the generations, many acquired burgher status and then allied themselves with the old families through marriage. Several lineages from the first Refuge, notably of Italian and French origin, figured in the eighteenth century among the ruling families of the Republic, sitting in the Petit Conseil (Small Council) and holding the offices of syndic.¹

This integration followed implicit rules. It presupposed a fortune sufficient to purchase burgher status and to maintain one's rank, conduct in keeping with the moral requirements of the community, judicious marriage alliances and participation in the institutions of the city. It took several generations. Fewer of the refugees of the second Refuge, who arrived at the end of the seventeenth century, reached the summits of power during the eighteenth century, owing to the progressive closing of the patriciate.

The Genevan patriciate of the eighteenth century formed a narrow elite, which often resided in the upper town and owned country houses in the surrounding area. It combined political power, wealth and cultural prestige. Its members were magistrates, officers, pastors, professors, merchants and bankers. They invested their capital in foreign public funds and in the business of the Parisian houses. They formed, in short, the social core of the Genevan financial centre.

This concentration of power and wealth in a small number of families had advantages: continuity, cohesion, mutual trust and the capacity to mobilise capital. It also had disadvantages: closure, conservatism and tensions with the excluded categories. Chapter V will show how these tensions led to the Genevan revolutions of the end of the century.

1 Notes

1. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS) [Historical Dictionary of Switzerland], art. “Réfugiés protestants”: Geneva received some 8,000 refugees between 1549 and 1587, of whom around 3,000 settled permanently, or 30 per cent of the population; families from Lucca such as the Burlamaqui, Diodati, Micheli and Calandrini entered the patriciate; dozens of Huguenot printers made the city a centre for the publishing of bibles and psalters; the refugees stimulated textiles, silk weaving, international banking and the luxury industries. ↩

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