

The lock of Lake Geneva

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The Rhône leaves Lake Geneva at Geneva. This geographical commonplace has governed the history of the city for two millennia. The river leaves the lake at a point where the shores narrow, where an island divides the current and where a hill offers, above the water, a site that is easy to defend. A little further downstream, the Arve, an Alpine torrent laden with silt, joins the Rhône and marks the landscape with its grey colour. Between the Jura to the north-west, the Salève to the south-east and the first foothills of the Alps, the Geneva basin forms a bowl with few exits: the Rhône valley towards Lyon and the Mediterranean; the north shore of the lake towards the Vaud country and the Swiss Plateau; the south shore towards the Chablais, the Valais and the Alpine passes; the roads of Savoy towards the passes leading into Italy; and finally the passes of the Jura towards Burgundy and northern France.

The lake itself constitutes a communication route of the first order.¹ Before the railway, the transport by water of heavy goods — salt, wine, timber, stone, grain — cost far less than transport by road. Geneva lay at the western extremity of this lake network, precisely at the spot where goods coming from the Valais, the Chablais or the Vaud country had to leave the boats and take to the road, or the reverse. Geographers call this phenomenon a break of bulk. Every break of bulk generates needs: goods must be unloaded, stored, weighed, taxed, sold, bought and transported again. Around these operations a service economy is born.

To this first function a second is added: the crossing. For centuries the bridge of Geneva was one of the very few permanent crossings of the Rhône between the lake and the Lyon region. Anyone who wished to travel from the left bank to the right bank of the river, from Savoy to the Pays de Gex and Burgundy, or from Italy towards the kingdom of France by the north, had good reason to pass through the city. A compulsory point of passage, however, is also a point of control. Whoever holds the bridge can

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open or close the road, levy a toll, protect or ransom travellers. The whole political history of Geneva can be read as the struggle of several powers for control of this crossing and its revenues.

The mountains that ring the basin channel the flows as much as they slow them. The Swiss Plateau, which stretches from Lake Constance to Lake Geneva between the Jura and the Alps, forms a natural corridor between the Rhine basin and the Rhône basin, that is to say between northern Europe and the Mediterranean. Geneva occupies its south-western extremity. Goods coming down from southern Germany towards Lyon, Provence or Spain, and those going up from the Mediterranean towards the fairs of the Rhineland, found in this corridor a relatively easy route, punctuated by merchant towns. Geneva's position at the mouth of this corridor, close to the passes leading into Italy, made it a natural crossroads between three worlds: the Germanic world, the Italian world and the French world.

This crossroads nevertheless had a weakness that history would reveal on several occasions. Almost all the roads leading to it crossed territories controlled by other sovereigns: Savoy to the south and east, Burgundy and later France to the west, the Swiss cantons to the north-east. Geneva could live only if its neighbours let the merchants through. Its prosperity therefore depended on constant diplomacy and on a reputation for security sufficient for travellers to prefer its route to others.

Key point. Geneva owes its first prosperity to a double function: a crossing point of the Rhône and a break-of-bulk point between the lake and the road. The services that grow up around these two functions — warehousing, lodging, brokerage, money changing — form the embryo of an economy of intermediation. Yet all the roads leading to the city cross foreign territory, which makes it dependent on the goodwill of its neighbours.

1 Notes

1. République et canton de Genève, “Le lac Léman et le petit lac genevois” (ge.ch): “a total surface area of 580.1 km²”, “the largest lake in western Europe”, maximum depth of 309.7 m, volume of 89 km³, the Geneva portion representing 6 per cent of the total surface area. ↩

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