

What Geneva learned from it

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The experience of the fairs left a political lesson in Geneva's memory: an isolated merchant city is at the mercy of its neighbours. Geneva's answer to this lesson was built up in several stages, which the following chapters describe.

The first stage was the search for alliances with the Swiss cantons. After the intervention of 1462, relations between Geneva and the cantons developed. Treaties of co-citizenship (*combourgeoisie*) were concluded with Fribourg and then with Fribourg and Bern at the beginning of the sixteenth century.¹ These alliances would enable Geneva to resist Savoy and to attain independence.

The second stage was political emancipation. During the 1530s, Geneva freed itself from the authority of the bishop and from Savoyard influence. It became an independent republic, endowed with its own institutions. This independence, won with the support of Bern, was accompanied by the adoption of the Reformation.

The third stage was economic reconstruction. Deprived of its fairs, Geneva had to find new sources of prosperity. It would find them largely in receiving Protestant refugees, who brought printing, cloth-making, silk-weaving, goldsmithing and later watchmaking, and in the development of trade and banking.

The fourth stage, finally, was the building of a culture of prudence. The Genevans learned that prosperity is reversible, that alliances are necessary, and that a reputation is won slowly and lost quickly. This culture, which Calvinist morality would reinforce, left a lasting mark on the practices of the financial centre.

The paradox of this history is that the loss of the fairs prepared the birth of the modern financial centre. By weakening the Genevan economy, it made the city more receptive to the political and religious changes of the

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sixteenth century. By depriving it of its traditional revenues, it forced the city to reinvent itself. And by making it feel its own vulnerability, it pushed the city towards the alliances that ensured its survival. The next part describes this turning point, in which Calvin was one of the principal actors.

1 Notes

1. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS; Historical Dictionary of Switzerland), art. “Berthelier, Philibert” (co-citizenship negotiated with Fribourg in 1519); Archives d’État de Genève, “De la combourgeoisie au blocus, 1526-1534”: treaty of co-citizenship concluded in February 1526 with Bern and Fribourg, despite the opposition of the bishop and the Duke of Savoy. ↩

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