

What was sold: a luxury market

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According to the Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (Historical Dictionary of Switzerland), luxury products dominated the goods on offer: textiles, notably cloth and silks, spices and dyestuffs, metals, arms, leather and hides.¹ There is nothing surprising about this composition. Overland transport over long distances was expensive, and only products whose value was high in relation to their weight could bear those costs. A bale of silk from Lucca or a sack of pepper easily carried the cost of the journey, which was hardly the case for a load of wheat.

Cloth held first place. Woollen cloth from Flanders and Brabant, renowned for its quality, arrived by the northern routes. English cloth grew in importance in the fifteenth century. Fribourg cloth, produced in quantity in the town on the Sarine, supplied part of the regional and international market.² Silks and velvets came from Italy: Lucca, Florence, Genoa, Venice and Milan produced luxury fabrics much sought after by princely courts and wealthy burghers.

Spices formed another category of great value. Pepper, ginger, cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg and saffron reached Europe through the Mediterranean ports, notably Venice and Genoa, which bought them in the Levant. From there they travelled north over the Alpine passes. Dyestuffs — woad, madder, kermes — and the mordants needed for dyeing, such as alum, were indispensable to the textile industry. Their trade linked the producing regions to the cloth-making centres.

Metals and metal products came largely from southern Germany and central Europe: copper, tin, brass, iron wire, utensils, hardware. Arms and armour, of which Milan was one of the great production centres, also figured among the high-value goods. Leather, hides and furs completed the offer. Alongside this long-distance trade, the fairs also served as an occasion for exchanging regional products: cattle, horses, cheese, wine, salt.

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The Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse notes that one of the causes of the decline of the Geneva fairs was the retreat of the luxury trade in favour of everyday consumer goods.³ This observation deserves emphasis. A centre specialised in a high-value segment can prosper as long as that segment dominates trade. When the structure of trade changes, it must reinvent itself or decline. The question will arise again for Geneva private banking when its clientele and products evolve, and for commodity trading when the energy transition alters the composition of commodity flows.

Category	Main origin	Clientele
Woollen cloth	Flanders, Brabant, England, Fribourg	nobility, burghers, convents
Silks and velvets	Lucca, Florence, Genoa, Venice, Milan	princely courts, higher clergy
Spices	Levant via Venice and Genoa	wealthy households, apothecaries
Dyestuffs and mordants	Italy, Languedoc, the Orient	dyers, clothiers
Metals and hardware	southern Germany, central Europe	craftsmen, building sites, households
Arms and armour	Milan, southern Germany	nobility, towns, sovereigns
Leather, hides, furs	Alpine regions, central and eastern Europe	craftsmen, elites

1 Notes

1. DHS, article “Faires”, cited above. ↩
2. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Faires” (Anne Radeff): the Geneva fairs were held four times a year (Epiphany, Easter, St Peter in Chains on 1 August, All Saints) and lasted seven, ten and later fifteen days; they drew merchants from Savoy, the Pays de Vaud, Valais, Piedmont, the Swiss cantons, Burgundy, Dauphiné and Provence, among them sellers of Fribourg cloth, who were also present at the fairs of Chalon-sur-Saône; the Italians, often bankers, dominated in the fifteenth century. ↩

3. DHS, article “Foiress”, cited above. ↩

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