

## Why Geneva lost: the multiple causes of the decline

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It would be reductive to attribute the decline of the Geneva fairs solely to the decision of Louis XI. The *Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse* (Historical Dictionary of Switzerland) lists several causes: the privileges granted to the rival fairs of Lyon by Louis XI from 1462, competition from other commercial centres, the decline of the luxury trade in favour of everyday consumer goods, the Burgundian Wars, in which Geneva sided with the duke, and finally the troubles connected with the Reformation.<sup>1</sup> Each of these causes deserves examination.

### 1 The sovereign decision

The decision of Louis XI acted as the trigger. It deprived Geneva of part of its clientele and of its routes, and it accelerated the shift of flows towards Lyon. Without it, the decline would no doubt have been slower. The Wikipedia article on the history of Geneva summarises the historiography by noting that the period of expansion came to an end in 1462, when the king forbade French merchants to attend the Geneva fairs in order to favour Lyon.<sup>2</sup>

### 2 Competition from other centres

Lyon was not the only competitor. At the end of the fifteenth century, Antwerp established itself as the great market of north-western Europe, while the Frankfurt fairs gained in importance within the German-speaking world. Direct navigation between Italy and the Low Countries, through the Strait of Gibraltar, reduced the value of the overland routes. The great merchants of southern Germany, such as the Fuggers of Augsburg, developed their own networks, which ran through Venice, Antwerp and Lyon.<sup>3</sup> Geneva thus found itself facing competition from several directions at once.

### 3 The transformation of trade

The decline of the luxury trade in favour of everyday consumer goods altered the geography of exchange. Mass-market goods — grain, salt, fish, timber, ordinary cloth — travelled preferably by water, and in particular by sea. The centres that profited from this were the ports and the towns located on the great navigable rivers. An inland centre specialising in luxury goods, such as Geneva, lost part of its advantage.

### 4 The Burgundian Wars

The Burgundian Wars, which from 1474 to 1477 set the Swiss cantons and their allies against Duke Charles the Bold, placed Geneva in an untenable position. The city, under Savoyard influence, sided with the duke, while the cantons, its trading partners, were his adversaries.<sup>4</sup> After the Swiss victories, Geneva had to pay a substantial sum to the Confederates to avoid being plundered.<sup>5</sup> The Archives d'État de Genève (Geneva State Archives) relate that, to make up the sum owed, the city wished to raise the salt tax and the toll tariffs, which risked irritating the Confederate merchants. Fresh difficulties arose on the part of the small cantons, accompanied by new threats, so that the city had to resign itself to borrowing 3,500 écus of the King of France from the Medici bank in Lyon.<sup>6</sup>

This episode brings together several lessons. A poor choice of alliance can cost a trading centre dearly. An increase in taxes intended to finance a debt can drive away the very merchants on whom prosperity depends. And resorting to borrowing from a foreign creditor, in this case the bank established in the rival city, reflects a weakening of the city's position.

### 5 The troubles of the Reformation

Finally, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, the conflicts between supporters and opponents of Savoy, and then the troubles connected with the Reformation, completed the disorganisation of the fairs.<sup>7</sup> The chapters of Part B describe these events. It is enough to note here that political and religious insecurity discouraged merchants, and that the Geneva fairs, already weakened, never recovered from it.

The conjunction of these causes explains the lasting character of the decline. Any one of them alone might perhaps have been overcome. Their accumulation over a few decades transformed the prosperous transit centre of the early fifteenth century into a medium-sized, weakened and

dependent town by the early sixteenth century. The population ceased to grow, and commercial activity withdrew to a regional scale.<sup>8</sup>

**Caution.** The narrative of a sudden decline brought about by the decision of Louis XI alone is a simplification. The decline of the Geneva fairs extended over several decades and resulted from a combination of political, commercial, military and religious factors. The royal decision acted as trigger and accelerator, in a context where other forces were already weakening the centre.

## 6 Notes

1. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse, article “Foire”, hls-dhs-dss.ch (accessed September 2026). ↩
2. Article “Histoire de Genève”, Wikipédia (fr) (accessed September 2026). ↩
3. Larousse, Encyclopédie, art. “Anvers”: after 1450 the city became the second-largest port in Europe; English merchants settled there after leaving Bruges, and the regional fairs developed from around 1320; in 1550 Antwerp imported some 132,767 pieces of English cloth a year; the Portuguese merchant colony settled there in 1488 and after 1499 the city became the redistribution centre for Asian spices; the great houses of Augsburg and Nuremberg, Fugger and Welser, established permanent trading posts there between 1500 and 1550 for credit and speculation; the New Exchange, inaugurated in 1532, served as the model for the London exchange of 1566; the sack of the city by Spanish mercenaries on 4 November 1576, its capture in 1585 and the closure of the Scheldt, confirmed by the treaties of Westphalia in 1648, brought its golden age to an end to the benefit of Amsterdam. ↩
4. DHS, article “Foire”, cited above. ↩
5. Archives d’État de Genève, exhibition “Économie” (archives-etat-ge.ch): the ransom demanded by the Confederates amounted to 26,000 Rhenish florins; to raise it, a levy was imposed on all Genevans, which produced an inventory register of movable and immovable property, a first-rate source on the material condition of the city at the end of the fifteenth century; Geneva also borrowed from the Medici bank in Lyon. ↩
6. Archives d’État de Genève, page “Troubles politiques à Genève au XVIIIe siècle”, which repeats this historical account (accessed September 2026). ↩
7. DHS, article “Foire”, cited above. ↩

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8. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Genève (commune)” (Liliane Mottu-Weber): population estimated at more than 5,000 inhabitants in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, at around 13,150 in 1550 and 17,330 in 1580; after Louis XI favoured Lyon (1462), the great Florentine houses left Geneva, the fairs declined and disappeared in the second half of the sixteenth century, with textiles and luxury goods remaining the principal activities. ↩

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