

Cattle, cheese and cherries

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Beside mercenary service, the economy of the old canton rested on agriculture. The upland communes of Menzingen and Ägeri specialised in cattle and dairy farming. Their cattle were driven over the Alps and sold in northern Italy, in the trade known as the Welschlandhandel.¹ This trade connected the canton with the markets of Lombardy and brought a second flow of foreign money into the region. It required credit, trust and knowledge of foreign markets. The cattle traders were among the few inhabitants of the canton who conducted business across borders on their own account.

The lowlands produced grain and fruit. The orchards around the lake, in particular the cherry trees, gave the canton one of its best-known products: kirsch, the cherry brandy that later lent its flavour to the Zug cherry cake.² The fruit economy made the lowland farmers more dependent on the town market, whose monopoly on the grain trade and the sale of merchandise gave the town considerable power over the rural producers. This asymmetry fed the tensions between town and countryside that the constitution of "Stadt und Amt" was designed to contain.

The agricultural economy of the old canton was modest. It did not generate the accumulations of capital that trade and banking produced in Geneva, Basel or Zurich. The families that became wealthy did so through office and foreign service and invested their wealth in land, in houses in the town and in country seats. The architectural legacy of this wealth, the houses of the officer families in the old town and the manor houses in the countryside, remains visible. The capital that financed the first industrial enterprises in the nineteenth century came in part from these families, but to a large extent from outside the canton, as Chapter III shows.

1 Notes

1. HLS, "Zug (Kanton)", section on agriculture: the mountain regions emphasised dairy production and cattle exports (Welschlandhandel); valley areas practised grain cultivation and orchard farming. ↩
2. Kulinarisches Erbe der Schweiz / Patrimoine culinaire suisse, "Zuger Kirschtorte", patrimoineculinaire.ch: the Zug confectioner Heinrich Höhn, inspired by the local kirsch, experimented for several years with a kirsch-soaked cake and first advertised it in the Zuger Nachrichten on 23 December 1915; the protected geographical indication requires cherries from traditional high-stem trees in the Zug and Rigi region. ↩

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