

## Merchants and the state: the Constaffel, the Saffran and the Meisen

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP  
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),  
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

The revolution of 1336 was directed against a merchant oligarchy, yet merchants kept their access to power through new channels. The long-distance merchants who survived the purge entered the Constaffel alongside the knights. The regional merchants, the shopkeepers who sold spices, cloth, iron and small wares, formed the core of the guild zur Saffran, while the wine trade dominated the guild zur Meisen.<sup>1</sup> These three bodies became the institutional homes of Zurich's commercial elite. Their relationship with the state is the thread that connects the medieval guild order to the later financial centre.

### 1 The Saffran: the shopkeepers' guild

The Saffran stood first among the guilds in the order of precedence. Its members were originally the *Krämer*, the retail merchants who sold imported goods. The guild's very name, taken from the most expensive of spices, advertised the international orientation of their trade.<sup>2</sup> The inscription on its guild house describes the owner in 1418 as the society of the belt-makers and merchants, a reminder that the Saffran also included craftsmen working in metal and leather accessories.<sup>3</sup> As natural intermediaries between the long-distance trade and the local consumer, its members were the group most directly affected by the city's market regulation, tolls and coinage. The Saffran's eighteenth-century balance sheet, with its large portfolio of loans to rural communities, shows how the wealth of such a guild had by then moved from trade into credit.

### 2 The Meisen: wine, inns and the Münsterhof

The Meisen ranked second. Its original members were the wine-dealers, the innkeepers, the saddlers and the painters. Among the wine trades the sources mention wine-servers, wine-criers and wine-carriers as well as

brokers.<sup>4</sup> Wine was among the principal commodities traded on the Zurich market, alongside grain, salt and iron, and was also one of the principal sources of the city's indirect revenue. The guild that controlled its distribution therefore occupied a strategic position between trade and the fisc.<sup>5</sup> The baroque guild house on the Münsterhof, completed in 1757, signalled the wealth and ambition of the guild in the eighteenth century. In the nineteenth century it hosted the city's official standard clock, by which Zurich's timepieces were set, and counted Gottfried Keller among the patrons of its café. In the twentieth century it received Winston Churchill in September 1946 and Queen Elizabeth II in April 1980.

### 3 From craft government to merchant and rentier government

The long-run trend in the relationship between merchants and the state is clear. For the early modern period Otto Sigg has quantified it. In the Small Council, craftsmen made up 40 per cent of the members in 1637 and only 6 per cent in 1790, while rentiers rose from 36 to 58 per cent and merchants from 20 to 36 per cent. In the Great Council the share of craftsmen fell from 50 per cent to roughly 17 per cent over the same period. Of the 135 heads of state, the *Standeshäupter*, who held office between 1601 and 1798, only fourteen were craftsmen, while eighty-five were rentiers and thirty-four merchants.<sup>6</sup> The Historisches Lexikon concludes that, after Brun's death, trading craftsmen and merchants increasingly dominated the actual exercise of political power. In its account, the monopolisation of export enterprises served the corporate interests of a merchant oligarchy.<sup>7</sup>

The process began well before 1519. The free choice of guild granted in 1498 allowed merchants and rentiers to enter the craft guilds and represent them.<sup>8</sup> In this way the guild constitution, which formally gave the crafts half the power, became the vehicle through which a commercial and capital-owning elite governed the city. Electoral practice reflected this. Guild elections required an oath to choose the wisest and best, yet the records report bribery through banquets and gifts as well as manoeuvres to disqualify rivals. In 1582 a newly elected guild master, Beat Hirzel, was removed for electoral manipulation. An election scandal in the guild zur Waag in 1629 cost two members of the Leu family their eligibility and sent eleven ordinary members to prison on bread and water for three days.<sup>9</sup>

The consequences for the relationship between merchants and the state were double-edged. On the one hand, the Zurich merchant elite did not need a separate political organisation to defend its interests: it was the government. The city's tolls, its road and bridge policy, its coinage and its

diplomacy were decided by men who were themselves merchants and rentiers or were closely allied with them. When the merchants did create a separate body in 1662, the Kaufmännisches Direktorium, it was a semi-official organisation that took over public tasks such as roads, bridges and the postal service.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, the merchants governed within a corporate framework that obliged them to share office with guild masters, to seek the consensus of their guilds, to rotate office every half year and to renew their oath to the civic community. The merchant elite of Zurich was powerful, but it exercised its power collegially and could never entirely forget that its authority rested on the guilds. That combination of commercial dominance and corporate restraint shaped the political culture in which the modern financial centre would later grow.

#### 4 Notes

1. HLS, “Kaufleute” (Martin Illi), <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/articles/016380/2016-03-23/>, on the organisation of regional merchants “in Zürich hauptsächlich in den Zünften zur Safran und zur Meisen”. ↩
2. Otto Sigg, “Zunft Herrlichkeit” (1986), <https://www.zuerich-geschichte.info/pdfs/Zunft Herrlichkeit.pdf>; Monica Seidler-Hux, “Die Zürcher Zünfte”, Zentralbibliothek Zürich, April 2024, <https://www.zb.uzh.ch/en/fokus/beitrag/die-zuercher-zunfte>. ↩
3. Historical marker at the Zunfthaus zur Safran, <https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=259179>. ↩
4. Zunft zur Meisen, “Zunfthaus”, <https://www.meisen.ch/zunfthaus>; Zunfthaus zur Meisen, “History”, <https://www.zunfthaus-zur-meisen.ch/en/zunfthaus-zur-meisen/history/>; for the wine trades see Wikipedia, “Brunsche Zunftverfassung”, [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brunsche\\_Zunftverfassung](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brunsche_Zunftverfassung), cited for orientation. ↩
5. HLS, “Ungeld” (Anne-Marie Dubler), version of 23 July 2015, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/026199/>: the Ungeld was “eine Verbrauchs- und Umsatzsteuer auf Wein und anderen geistigen Getränken”, and town law listed tolls and Ungeld together as “diese beiden wichtigsten Einnahmen des spätmittelalterlichen Stadthaushalts”. HLS, “Zürich (Gemeinde)”, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/000171/2015-01-25/>, names wine among the goods of the regional market. ↩
6. Otto Sigg, “Zunft Herrlichkeit” (1986), <https://www.zuerich-geschichte.info/pdfs/Zunft Herrlichkeit.pdf>. ↩

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7. HLS, “Brun’sche Zunftrevolution” (Martin Illi), <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/textes/d/D30735.php>; HLS, “Zürich (Gemeinde)”, section “Wirtschaft”, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/000171/2015-01-25/>. ↩
8. HLS, “Villes corporatives” (Anne-Marie Dubler), <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/textes/f/F9917.php>. ↩
9. Otto Sigg, “Zunft Herrlichkeit” (1986), <https://www.zuerich-geschichte.info/pdfs/Zunft Herrlichkeit.pdf>. ↩
10. HLS, “Kaufleute” (Martin Illi), <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/articles/016380/2016-03-23/>. ↩

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