

Zurich before 1336: a council of knights and merchants

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By the early fourteenth century Zurich was a self-governing imperial town. The imperial advocacy that the Zähringer dukes had held since 1098 was not granted again as a hereditary fief after their extinction in 1218. Thereafter the city's immediate subjection to the Empire, confirmed repeatedly until 1512, allowed the gradual development of urban self-government.¹ A council is documented from about 1220, which in 1252 comprised twelve knights and citizens who served in rotation. By the early fourteenth century three councils of twelve members each, named after the season in which they took office, the Fastenrat, the Sommerrat and the Herbstrat, succeeded each other in the course of the year, although there was as yet no mayor.²

The composition of these councils reflected the social structure of a prosperous market town. About one third of the seats were held by knights, members of the lesser nobility who lived in the city, and about two thirds by leading burghers, the families that had grown rich through trade, in particular through the long-distance trade in silk and cloth that flourished in Zurich in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.³ The city's silk industry is documented from the thirteenth century and supported an extensive trade from which wool and linen weavers, leather workers and merchants benefited. Jewish, Lombard and southern French money-lenders provided the financial services on which long-distance commerce depended.⁴ The legal framework of city life was set out in the Richtebrief, a codification of some 350 articles arranged in six books, which made the keeping of the peace the organising principle of the urban community and which, significantly for what followed, prohibited guilds as political bodies, although craft associations existed for professional purposes.⁵

Within this council oligarchy a narrow circle of merchant families had come to dominate. The Brun family belonged to the old noble council

families, and Rudolf Brun himself had sat on the Fastenrat between 1332 and 1336, but even such families found themselves excluded from the real decisions, which were taken by a handful of dominant patrician houses such as the Bilgeri.⁶ The older German biographical literature describes the situation as one in which the merchants had pushed the nobility aside from the beginning of the fourteenth century.⁷ The craftsmen, for their part, had no political voice at all. Their grievances, as later reported, concerned the council's administration of justice and of the city's finances: the rule of a closed group of families had caused resentment and bitterness among those excluded from political participation.⁸ A dissatisfied faction of the nobility and an excluded but numerous body of artisans thus had a common adversary in the merchant oligarchy. That combination made the events of 1336 possible.

1 Notes

1. Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz (HLS), "Zürich (Gemeinde)", section on the city's emancipation and communal constitution, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/000171/2015-01-25/>. ↩
2. Staatsarchiv des Kantons Zürich (ed.), *Kleine Zürcher Verfassungsgeschichte 1218–2000* (Zurich 2000), chapter on the medieval city, https://www.zh.ch/content/dam/zhweb/bilder-dokumente/themen/politik-staat/recherche-im-staatsarchiv/z%C3%BCrcher-geschichte/zh_verfassungsgeschichte.pdf. ↩
3. HLS, "Brun'sche Zunftrevolution" (Martin Illi), <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/textes/d/D30735.php>, on the division of the council into one third knights and two thirds notable burghers. ↩
4. HLS, "Zürich (Gemeinde)", section "Wirtschaft", <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/000171/2015-01-25/>. The role of these lenders is discussed further in Chapter A.IV. ↩
5. Staatsarchiv des Kantons Zürich (ed.), *Kleine Zürcher Verfassungsgeschichte 1218–2000* (2000), section on the Richtebrief, https://www.zh.ch/content/dam/zhweb/bilder-dokumente/themen/politik-staat/recherche-im-staatsarchiv/z%C3%BCrcher-geschichte/zh_verfassungsgeschichte.pdf. The Richtebrief itself is treated in Chapter A.I. ↩
6. HLS, "Brun, Rudolf" (Martin Lassner), <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/018053/>. ↩
7. Hans Nabholz, "Brun, Rudolf", in *Neue Deutsche Biographie* 2 (1955), pp. 675–676, and Karl Dändliker, "Brun, Rudolf", in *Allgemeine*

Deutsche Biographie 3 (1876), pp. 438–439, both at Deutsche Biographie, <https://www.deutsche-biographie.de/sfz6107.html>. ↩

8. Zunft zur Letzi, “Geschichte der Zünfte”, <https://zunft-zur-letzi.ch/geschichte-der-zuenfte/>, quoting the characterisation that “die Geschlechterherrschaft, die sich im Laufe der Zeit im Rat herausgebildet hatte, erregte besonders bei den vom politischen Mitspracherecht ausgeschlossenen Handwerkern Missmut und Verbitterung”. ↩

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