

Basel in the Sixteenth Century

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*Aspects of the City Republic before,
during, and after the Reformation*

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Preface

The purpose of this little book is to describe and discuss some aspects of the history of Basel in the sixteenth century. Although this history has never before been told in the English language, the reader should not expect a comprehensive narrative. What he will receive is no more than a first orientation—an orientation, however, which will hopefully entice him to turn to more voluminous secondary works and eventually to the sources themselves.

I shall confine myself to a selection of facts and problems, but I hope to succeed in showing that most of them are of more than only local relevance. In the first chapter I shall discuss the constitutional, political, and socio-economic situation of the Basel city republic at the end of the Middle Ages as well as the rise of humanism in the early decades of the sixteenth century. The second chapter will deal with the Reformation and quite particularly with the relationship between the religious renewal and the already existing political and social tensions. In the third chapter I shall try to draw a portrait of the “Basilea reformata” in the post-Reformation era, and in the fourth and concluding chapter I shall discuss the case of an opponent of the Reformed establishment whose intellectual achievement is considered to be of general consequence for the history of early modern Europe by 20th century historians: I shall deal with Sebastian Castellio and the origins of the debate on religious toleration.

One basic fact must be mentioned at the outset: Twice during the sixteenth century Basel was a cultural center of more than local or regional importance, first at the time of Erasmus of Rotterdam’s residence before 1529 and then again from about 1550 through the early 1580s. During both periods Basel attracted a great many visitors from all over Europe and also sent a considerable number of intellectual impulses to other cities and countries. It seems appropriate to describe Basel as a focal point of European culture in the late Renaissance period. But let us not exaggerate: the city republic on the upper Rhine was only one among many such focal points and perhaps not even one of very great importance. In saying this I am fol-

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lowing the judgment of the great Polish historian Stanisław Kot who, before and during World War II, wrote a number of substantial studies on the intellectual relations between Poland and Western Europe in the sixteenth century. In an article on Poles in Basel during the reign of Sigismund August (1548–1572), which he published in 1942, Kot emphasized the fact that Basel had provided considerable intellectual stimulation to Polish scholars and aristocrats. But in the introductory paragraph he very clearly stated: “Basel was neither Rome nor Wittenberg, neither Geneva nor Paris.”¹ With these words Kot did not minimize the importance of Basel, but he set it apart quite distinctly from that of the European capitals of the sixteenth century. His differentiation still seems fair and valid today. It will be kept in mind throughout our deliberations.

The following four chapters were originally devised and written as lectures. They were presented at Smith College in 1978 (chapter IV) and during the fall semester of 1980 (chapters I–III) when I served as Kennedy Guest Professor. Parts of chapter III were also read to the 1980 meeting of the Sixteenth Century Studies Conference in St. Louis. For publication all four lectures were revised, partly rewritten, and annotated.²

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Basel, April 1982

H.R.G.

The Late Medieval City and the Rise of Humanism

As the title indicates, this chapter will consist of two parts. In the first part, which is designed to provide a background to our general theme, I shall try to give an outline of the political and constitutional structure of the Basel city republic in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. It will be necessary to point to a few facts of its earlier history. Particular attention will be paid to its relationship with the Swiss Confederation at around 1500. A few remarks will be devoted to the ecclesiastical institutions and to the early history of the University of Basel. The second part will treat the first flowering of humanism. In this context I shall discuss the reasons why Basel could become a center of humanist learning; after this I shall try to describe some characteristic aspects of the Basel humanist movement and then conclude with a description of the role of Erasmus of Rotterdam within that movement.

Situated at the intersection of several trade routes, Basel at the beginning of the sixteenth century was a commercial center of more than only regional significance. It had a population of approximately 10,000. Together with Geneva it ranked first among the cities of the territory of modern Switzerland. Among the cities of the German Empire, however, Basel belonged to the medium category. It was only half as large as Strasbourg or Nuremberg.¹ As a free imperial city, Basel stood in the same category with other episcopal and archiepiscopal sees such as Regensburg, Strasbourg, Worms, Speyer, Mainz, and Cologne.² All through the medieval centuries the city council of Basel had conducted a continuous and often successful struggle to free the urban republic from the domination of the bishop. An important milestone on this road toward political independence had been reached in 1386. In that year King Wenceslas had issued the so-called Prague Charter which transferred the imperial stewardship to the city council. At the same time the city was able to purchase the rights over "Kleinbasel" (the section north of

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the Rhine) from the sons of Duke Leopold III of Austria who had lost his life in the battle of Sempach. Further steps toward political consolidation were taken before 1400 as well as in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Some of these steps will be mentioned later on.

The year 1501 brought a real turning point in the history of Basel. In that year Basel became a full member of the Swiss Confederation. Since then the city republic on the Rhine has been part of Switzerland, but within the Confederation Basel has often maintained a somewhat special position. More than once it was in danger of isolating itself and one such instance will be discussed later on,³ but its membership in the Confederation has never again been called into question. One of the crucial paragraphs of the treaty of 1501 stated that in case of conflict between other members of the League Basel should not take sides but act as a mediator.⁴ The city republic has always taken this obligation very seriously. It has fulfilled its duty on several occasions, although not always with success. The willingness to mediate and the tendency to find pragmatic solutions in a spirit of moderation have become characteristic elements of the interior political life of the city of Basel and also of its role in the political affairs of Switzerland.⁵

Looking back upon the political situation of Basel and the Swiss League in the late fifteenth century, we cannot overlook the fact that both sides were interested in establishing a union. The Swiss wanted the wealthy commercial town in their Confederation mainly for financial and economic reasons, Basel's political leaders saw that the city could not thrive as an independent republic between the Empire, France, and Switzerland. How dangerous the situation could become had been very obvious during the so-called "Swabian War" of 1499 in which Emperor Maximilian I had unsuccessfully tried to force the Swiss into a closer association with the Empire. By joining the Confederation, Basel obviously had to sacrifice some of its dignity as an imperial estate. From the new allies the council obtained formal assurance of perpetual protection against any possible aggressor.⁶ This did not mean very much, however. Basel remained an outpost on the northern periphery of the Confederation. Aggression from the North and Northeast would always hit it before it affected the other members of the League. Another point is even more important: The city republic had to re-orient itself not only politically but also economically. Up to 1501 its natural "Hinterland" had been the Alsace in the North and Northwest; now it was the territory