

Basel



Places

Town Hall

The Town Hall was and is Basel's political center. The town hall clock is located on the main façade, adorned with a standard-bearer, a Lady Justice and the city patrons, Emperor Heinrich II. and Empress Kunigunde. The Lady Justice figure is a reference to the court of law situated within the Town Hall. Originally a Madonna, she was given a pair of scales and a sword in place of the child in the course of a renovation around 1600. In the Renaissance Age, tracing one's roots back to antiquity was quite popular. Thus, in 1528, Munatius Plancus, the founder of Augusta Raurica, was named founder of Basel as well. His statue is located in the Town Hall's inner courtyard.

On market square in front of the Town Hall, dramatic scenes were playing out on February 8 and 9, 1529. Protestant-minded citizens put up an armed demonstration. Their aim was to banish the old faith from town. The Council hesitated, which incited the agitated crowd to a violent iconoclastic riot. Catholic Councilors were dismissed; the cathedral chapter fled the town. The bishop stayed at Pruntrut, where he had spent most of his time even before the Reformation.

Freie Strasse, Zunfthaus zum Schlüssel (“Free Street,” “Key Guild House”)

The driving force behind the Reformation efforts in Basel were the guilds, which had formed in the

course of the 13th century. All artisans were obliged to join one of the 15 guilds. Piece by piece, they whittled away the bishop's political power as town lord and supplanted both nobility and clergy. A majority of the guilds welcomed the Reformation movement as an opportunity to get rid of the bishop completely. However, their political demands, such as the general right for guild members to vote, either were not fulfilled by the Reformation at all or were revoked again later on.

In 1407, the Guild of the Key acquired the house on *Freie Strasse*. It is one of the few guild houses of Basel owned by its guild to this day. The cloth merchants of the Key Guild, however, were not particularly keen on reforms; some of them kept the old faith and left Basel in 1529. The weavers' guild, on the other hand, was more open to the Reformation. It justified the removal of the altar lamp from the Holy Cross Altar arguing that salvation cannot be achieved through this or any object, but "rather through true, righteous worship service."

St Martin's Church/ Oecolampadius's Parsonage

St. Martin's (*Martinskirche*) is Basel's oldest church, older than the nearby Minster. Evidence of its existence dates back to the 6th century; it is first mentioned in official records around 1100. The church received its current form in the mid-19th century. Johannes Oecolampadius was a vicar from 1523 and the pastor of St. Martin's from 1525 on, which was also the year he moved into the adjacent parsonage.

Old University at Rheinsprung

Established in 1460, the university predominantly tended to side with the Catholics during the Reformation. It was closed in February 1529, restructured according to Reformation ideas and reopened in 1532 as a Reformed University. The professors were obliged to swear an oath on the newly penned Confession of Basel. The Faculty of Theology only accepted Reformed theologians, not Lutherans. It was funded with the confiscated wealth of dissolved churches and monasteries. It was overseen by the state government, but its Chancellor was the Bishop of Basel in Pruntrut until 1798.

Rheinbrücke and Schiff lände (Rhine Bridge and Docks)

For centuries, the *Rheinbrücke*, built in 1225, was the only fixed connection between the two parts of Basel. At the docks – the so-called *Schiff lände* – Erasmus boarded a ship in 1529 to leave Basel after the Reformation's breakthrough. He wrote, "Before the Lutherans came I was welcome there. But as soon as they realized that I would never participate in their troublemaking, let alone become their leader, some wicked and insolent people began to defame me..."

The religious conflicts shook all of society to its core. The idea that Reformed and Catholics could be loyal subjects to the same government seemed preposterous at the time. Incidentally, the people of Basel's countryside were never asked for their opinion on denominational matters; they were expected to simply follow the city's lead.

Augustinergasse

The house at *Augustinergasse* No. 1 is the birthplace of one of the most famous books of that time: *Ship of Fools* by the Strasbourg humanist, publicist and law scholar Sebastian Brant (1457/58-1521), who lived here. Reason itself appears in the guise of the Fool, decrying social wrongs and calling for reforms. *Ship of Fools*, including woodcuts by Albrecht Dürer, was published in 1494. Several years later, a similar work was published: "In Praise of Folly" by Erasmus of Rotterdam. A copy illustrated with hand drawings by Hans Holbein is one of the Art Museum's biggest treasures.

Minster

Built between 1019 and 1500 in the Romanesque and Gothic style, the Basel Minster (*Basler Münster*) is one of the city's main landmarks. With its red sandstone and colorful roof tiles, its two slim towers and the cross-shaped intersection of the main roofs, the building is a distinctive feature of the cityscape. Before the Reformation, the Minster was the bishop's cathedral with a cathedral chapter and many chaplains. Forty altars were located inside the Minster and another ten in the cloister.

The Minster did not undergo any structural changes during the Reformation; the rood screen and choir stalls remained in place. One important feature was the sermon room, which was also where the Eucharist was celebrated. Towards the end of the 16th century, the stone Eucharist table, which is now located in the crossing, was positioned in front of the rood screen. The swallow's nest organ across from the pulpit was at first covered up with cloth, but put back into use later on. At that time, the pulpit of 1486 stood halfway between the western wall and the rood screen.

The Minster alone employed nearly 100 clergymen with their benefices – and this for a city population of about 7000. Mass was read at many altars every day; there was an abundance of cultic rituals.

Minster Main Portal

Before the Reformation, the Minster had been dedicated to St. Mary. The main portal is flanked by statues of Heinrich and Kunigunde on one side and the couple of the "Prince of this World" and the figure of the seduced virgin on the other: The earthly rule that subordinates itself to God versus the self-aggrandizing rule of the apostate. On the pedestal in the center of the portal, the statue of St. Mary is missing. It probably fell victim to the iconoclasm of 1529. The Madonna at the western pediment, however, remains in place for the simple reason that the iconoclasts were unable to reach it.

The knights Martin and George to the left and right of the main portal remained in place, but were no longer considered saints after the Reformation. The beggar at Martin's feet was removed because the Reformation fought against begging and established official poor relief institutions instead.

The cycle of St. Mary in the nave vault was scraped off and painted over, but the work was not done very thoroughly, so that parts of it are still visible. Otherwise, the iconoclasm of 1529 and the renovations of the 16th and 17th century removed most of the ornaments from the Minster. In a distraction-free environment, believers were supposed to focus on the essential: the Word of God. Before the Reformation, the Minster, like all churches, was home to relics that were stored and worshipped here. They were considered to have helping and healing powers. On feast days and during processions, these relics were put on display.

Minster Gallus Portal

The Gallus Portal was built in the style of a triumphal arch and is the Minster's second representative portal. Its iconographic program includes scenes from Matthew 25 describing the Last Judgment with the Works of Mercy. The Gallus Portal is considered the oldest figure portal in the German-speaking area.

Minster Erasmus Epitaph

Made from red marble, this epitaph is dedicated to Erasmus of Rotterdam. In 1928, it was believed that the tomb of the great humanist had been found in the course of excavations in the Minster. However, the skeleton turned out to bear marks of syphilis, which did not seem a likely disease for

Erasmus. In 1974, a second skeleton with a large medal displaying Erasmus's portrait on its chest was found in close proximity to the first grave. In all likelihood, this second skeleton represents the mortal remains of Erasmus.

Minster Reformers Epitaph in the Cloistered Courtyard

The epitaph for Oecolampadius, Mayor Jacob Meier and University Rector Simon Grynaeus is inscribed with a Latin motto in classic Antiqua in the spirit of humanism. A Reformation saying is placed below it in German script: "So ehr/quot/kunst, hülfend in noth, wer keiner von den dreien todt." "(If honor, good deeds and skills were any help, none of these three would be dead.)"

Minster Oecolampadius Memorial at the Cloister

The statue of Basel Reformer Oecolampadius was completed in 1876 by Zurich artist Ludwig Keiser. Oecolampadius is shown holding a Bible. The statue is one of a series of sculptures depicting Reformers in Switzerland. Basel was followed by Neuchâtel with Farel in 1876, Zurich with Zwingli in 1885, St. Gallen with Vadian in 1905 and Geneva 1909/1917 with a group monument.

Erasmus House

During his time in Basel, Erasmus of Rotterdam worked in the house at *Bäumleingasse* 18 ("Little Tree Lane"). He also died there in 1536. Today, it is called "Erasmus House" or "House of Books." After the Reformation, Erasmus left Basel; in 1535, he left Freiburg/Breisgau to return to Basel one last time for a printing commission, fell ill and died here in 1536. He is buried in the Minster. Parts of his estate are on display at the Historical Museum.

Weisse Gasse No. 28

Weisse Gasse ("White Lane") was once a bustling street. Behind it, in what today is Falknerstrasse, the Birsig River flowed openly. In the 16th century, the house at No. 28 was home to the printing shop of Adam Petri, the city's most famous printer of Reformation writings. He began to print Luther's writings early on; in 1517, he printed his Theses on Indulgences. In 1522/23, he reprinted Luther's translation of the New Testament. The Hebraist Konrad Pelikan was Petri's sometime co-worker. Well-known artists illustrated for Petri, including Urs Graf and Hans Holbein the Younger.

Barfüsserkirche (Franciscans' Church)

The *Barfüsserkloster* ("Barefoot Monastery") of the Order of St. Francis was a popular gathering spot for the Protestants while those of the old faith congregated at *Predigerkloster* ("Preacher's Monastery"). After the dissolution of the monasteries, the Franciscans' nave was turned into a simple Reformed house of prayer while the choir became a warehouse. At the end of the 18th century, this function was abandoned as well. During the Helvetic Republic, the church became a salt storage, in the mid-19th century, the warehouse of a department store. In the second half of the 19th century, there were plans to tear the church down. In 1849, the Basel Historical Museum was established at *Barfüsserkirche*. The museum displays parts of the famous Basel Minster treasure and the estate of Erasmus.

History

The first settlement at the Rhine's Knee dates back to 500 BC. The Romans had a fort on the hill where the Basel Minster stands today; in the early Middle Ages, this fort first turned Alemannic, then

Franconian. After 600, Basel became a bishop's see; in the 9th century, the first cathedral was built on Minster Hill. In 1225, the first bridge over the Rhine was constructed; "Little Basel" was built to secure the bridgehead. In the middle of the 14th century, the Plague cut the population in half; several years later, an earthquake devastated the city.

In the Late Middle Ages, the guilds gained more and more influence, a fact that also would prove to be significant for the Reformation. Over the years, the guilds whittled away the bishop's power, gaining more autonomy for the city; many of them were open to the ideas of the Reformation. In 1501, Basel joined the Confederacy of its own accord. In 1521, the city severed its constitutional ties with the episcopal domain, thus paving the way for the Reformation.

In 1522, Johannes Oecolampadius, who would go on to become the major Reformer of Basel, obtained a chair at the university; in the following year, he also became the vicar of St. Martin's. Gradually, the first Protestant elements were introduced, e.g. congregational singing in 1526, which the old faith adherents mocked as "peasant noise." In 1527, the Council decided that no one should be forced to read Mass anymore, thereby retroactively legalizing what had become fact some time back. However, the Council did not fully commit to the Reformation just yet.

In February 1529, Protestant citizens demonstrated on Market Square. Their main demands to the government were to install Protestant preachers in the churches, dismiss twelve "old faith" councilors, and have the Small Council be elected by the Large Council. The Council hesitated, and the incensed masses stormed the churches, destroying icons and altars. The next day, the Council relented: Catholic councilors were dismissed; many Catholics left Basel. Professors, among them Erasmus of Rotterdam, moved away. The cathedral chapter fled the city; the bishop already had been residing at Pruntrut for some time.

This iconoclasm brought about the breakthrough of the Reformation; Oecolampadius became the leader of the Reformed church in Basel. The clergy as a separate estate was dissolved; the number of churches was reduced. In Greater Basel, three new congregations were established: the Minster, *Leonhardskirche* and *Peterskirche*, as well as the *Theodorskirche* in Little Basel. All churches had only one pastor and one helper. The Reformation was the biggest watershed event in Basel's history, bringing about profound changes in the city's social life and defining the city for centuries to this day.

At this point, it must be noted that John Calvin sojourned in Basel after his escape from Paris (he lived in the suburb of St. Alban). Here, he wrote and had printed the first edition of "Institutio religionis Christianae," his teachings on Christian faith, in 1536.

John Oecolampadius

Johannes Husschyn (1482 – 1531) from Weinsberg near Heilbronn, called Oecolampadius, was a priest and one of the humanists of the Upper Rhine region. In 1515, the printer Johann Froben called him to Basel, where he was to collaborate on the first edition of the Greek original text of the New Testament published by Erasmus of Rotterdam in 1516. Upon his return to Germany, Oecolampadius joined a monastery. There, he first encountered Luther's writings and published his own treatise on Mass and confession. In 1521, he fled the monastery; in 1522, he returned to Basel.

In 1523, he became a professor of theology; at the University, he read a Latin interpretation of the prophet Isaiah, which he repeated in German for the interested public despite the objections of the ordinary professors. Oecolampadius was highly educated, but not a born leader; he preferred to work behind the scenes. In 1529, he joined Zwingli at the Marburg Colloquy, which was an attempt to solve the conflicts between Luther and the Swiss Reformers. Instead, the Lutherans and the Reformed (Swiss) parted ways at Marburg over the concept of the Eucharist.

In 1528, he married Wibrandis Rosenblatt, a widow already at 24. Clerical marriage was important because it was considered the most significant sign of the break with the Catholic church. By the time Oecolampadius died in 1531, his wife had already given him three children. In 1529, Oecolampadius became the main pastor (Antistes) of the church of Basel.

Erasmus of Rotterdam

Desiderius Erasmus was born before the year 1470, probably in Rotterdam. He was the son of a priest and his housekeeper. Later, he was an Augustinian canon in Steyn near Gouda in today's Netherlands, was ordained as a priest and studied at the Sorbonne in Paris from 1495. He traveled across all of Europe and made the acquaintance of many important scholars and high-ranking persons. He also came to Basel several times; from 1514 to 1529, he lived in the city and had important writings printed at the printing shop of Johann Froben.

Erasmus and his followers were the first to explore and edit old texts according to the historical-critical method. Among the most important works of the "Prince of the Humanists" is the New Testament in the Greek original text, published in 1516. This edition is the basis of many Protestant translations of the New Testament. Thus, Erasmus was a trailblazer for the Reformation, but not a Reformer himself. While he criticized the shortcomings of the Catholic Church at the time, often with biting derision, he abhorred extreme positions and exaggerations as much as violent protest.

Naturally, this brought him into conflict with the Reformers. Martin Luther, for example, considered him a traitor for refusing to side with the Reformation. What is more, Erasmus was convinced that humans had free will to decide between good and evil while Luther saw human will wholly enslaved by sin. Oecolampadius, too, often quarreled with Erasmus over the latter's indecision. Huldrych Zwingli, on the other hand – himself a humanist – held Erasmus in high regard.

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