

Gold & Glory – Gifts for Eternity

Thematic overview by rooms, 2nd floor, Kunstmuseum I Neubau.



2.1 Europe 1000 Years ago

Around 1000 CE, Europe was not a political entity. Yet the East Frankish Kingdom had become a central power stretching from the North Sea to Italy.

In Eastern and South-eastern Europe, the Christian-Byzantine Empire was flourishing, while on Sicily and the Iberian Peninsula the Muslim world was unfolding. In Central Europe, the East Frankish kings Henry I and three emperors called Otto, who ruled one after the other from 919 to 1002, owed their power and authority to the bishops and the Roman Church. They were succeeded by King Henry II, who became emperor in 1014. He was a great benefactor of the church and he endowed them with magnificent furnishing and decorations.

Life in Central Europe was shaped by the Christian faith. The language of the educated was Latin, whereas most of the population were illiterate. Only the clergy was able to read and write, along with a few noblemen and merchants.

2.2 Basel around 1019

Very little is known about people's living conditions in the Basel region around 1019. In the absence of written documents, archaeological findings enable us to draw conclusions about daily existence in the early 11th century. In contrast to the precious items that have survived in churches and monasteries over the centuries, archaeological findings largely consist of debris found in and around settlements. These afford us insight into people's nutrition, as well as into the way they lived and worked. The remains of wooden dwellings, wooden vessels, leather as well as bone remnants and tools, naturally preserved by the damp ground in one district of Basel, set into relief the everyday life of 11th century craftsmen. In contrast, finds from the soil at Burg Altenburg near Füllinsdorf in the canton Baseland shed light on the life in a castle of the nobility.

2.3 Basel from Burgundy to Henry II

Around 900, Basel gained in strategic importance due to its geographical location between the Burgundian and East Frankish Kingdoms. Initially belonging to Burgundy, the city was incorporated into the realm of the East Frankish King Henry II (r. 1002–1024) in 1006. From at least 926 onwards, Basel belonged to the newly created Kingdom of Burgundy, extending from Provence past Lake Geneva to the banks of the Rhine. Due to the kingdom's geographical fragmentation, however, their kings were only able to fully exercise their rule over the area corresponding to modern-day Western Switzerland. In 1006, the East Frankish-German King Henry II, with the support of Bishop Adalbero II (r. 999–1025), appropriated the border town of Basel. This shift would have a significant and lasting impact on the fate of the city.

2.4 Empire on the move

Around the year 1000 CE, Europe was in a constant state of upheaval and full of movement: People travelled great distances, as did values, knowledge and goods. Mobility in medieval Europe was considerably more difficult than it is today. Unsurfaced roads that were muddy when it rained, no bridges and poor footwear made travelling an arduous and hazardous undertaking. At best, only horses, mules, carts or ships were available. People used the routes carved out by nature such as rivers, valleys and mountain passes, or roads built in Roman times. Despite the harsh conditions, an extraordinary number of people travelled throughout the kingdom: the king with his royal household, merchants, envoys and pilgrims. Besides goods, they also carried with them experiences, ideas and ideals. This led to a rich and vibrant exchange between people of different religions and cultures.

2.6 Church and King

The relationship between church and king in the Ottonian period was complex and multi-layered. Henry II (r. 1002–1024) was as much dependent on the support of his bishops as they were on his sovereign favour. As the highest religious and political authority in the bishoprics, the bishops were crucial to the reign of Henry II. Their political and economic power was comparable to that of secular princes. Without their support Henry would not have been elected king. Having enjoyed the education of a high-ranking clergyman, Henry surrounded himself with church advisors whom he strategically deployed as bishops and imperial abbots. The intertwining of ecclesiastical and secular power is similarly reflected in Henry's self-conception: he understood his power as God-given and regarded himself as Christ's representative on earth.

2.7 Gifts for Eternity

Among the ruler's obligations were the promotion and dissemination of the Christian faith. This was manifest to all in the solemn masses: church services were celebrated with precious books, robes and ecclesiastical paraphernalia.

A large number of early medieval artworks were intended for religious activities. Many of these were either commissioned or endowed by secular and church dignitaries. As Christ's representative on earth, Henry II (r. 1002–1024) wanted the divine light of heaven to shine in the churches, and to this end he was lavish in his donations. These were meant to ensure his salvation, as well as the support of the clergy.

Faith, politics and symbolism all flowed into the treasures donated by Henry. Their purely material value fused with their religious meaning and in the interplay of secular and divine, the splendour of gold and precious stones pointed to the glory of God.

2.8 1019 – A great Moment for Basel

In 1019, on October 11th, 1019 Bishop Adalbero II (r. 999–1025) consecrated Basel Cathedral. Emperor Henry II (r. 1002–1024) had strengthened the bishop through the giving of privileges and estates, and endowed the cathedral with precious gifts. Emperor Henry II personally took part in the celebrations for the consecration of the cathedral.

On high feast days the Golden Altarpiece adorned the high altar, its lustre radiant in the candlelight. On feast days, the relic cross donated by Henry presumably stood on the altar table. The altarpiece and cross are the only preserved gifts from Henry to Basel. His other imperial presents – a candlestick, an incense burner, a splendid missal cover, a chasuble, and other precious items – have not survived.

The imperial promotion of the bishop and the „golden gifts“ for the cathedral can be seen as Basel's greatest moment: without them, the history of the city would have taken a very different course.

2.9 Basel and the Cult of the Imperial Couple

The gifts made by Emperor Henry (r. 1002–1024) to the Basel church and his promotion of the bishop played a significant role in the city's economic rise. This prosperity also contributed to the growing cult that formed around the imperial couple in late medieval Basel.

The favour of Emperor Henry II strengthened the position of the Basel bishop as ruler, enabling him to become the most powerful prince in the region. The corresponding rise in the city's importance is shown in the consecration of the cathedral in 1019, as well as in the church's treasures.

In Bamberg, where Henry had founded a bishopric and is laid to rest in the cathedral with his wife Kunigunde, the bishops orchestrated his canonisation in 1146 and that of Kunigunde in 1200. Intense veneration of the imperial couple grew in the centuries that followed.

In 1347, Basel received relics of the holy couple from Bamberg. Bishop John II Senn of Münsingen (r. 1335–1365) declared July 13th, the day of Henry's death, a religious holiday: homage was rendered to the emperor as a supporter of the city, and he was later named the second Patron of Basel.