



Utrecht University

FROM FEUDAL TO MARKET ECONOMY:

Grain exchange in post-Plague Geneva (1350-1450).

History BA Thesis

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ABSTRACT

The Black Death reduced European populations drastically when it hit the continent in the 1350s. Historians believe that the pandemic triggered the transition from a feudal to a market economy. The laborer shortage that it caused has emancipated peasants from serfdom as farmers started to market their products independently from lords. Alongside this ‘Commercial Revolution’ the Late Middle-Ages are also the period of another emancipation process, the ‘Communal Movement’. Prosperous urban communities aspired to govern themselves through legal charters, granting them political freedom vis-à-vis large realms. But how have these newly born city-states coped with the socio-economic shift set off by the plague? Scholars have emphasized measures that these towns have introduced to deal with these changes. Indeed, since 'free' markets meant less control and more uncertainty, this would be problematic for the supply of vital commodities such as grains. This thesis looks at the city of Geneva during the 1350-1450 time period and studies the 1387 franchises, a compilation of rights promulgated by the bishop Adhémar Fabri which has asserted the town as an autonomous commune. It hence looks at how this legal document have affected the Genevan exchange of that most important staple. Overall, are discussed plans to introduce standards of exchange such as official measures and currencies, but also attempts at regulating the city’s supply in grain, and finally the actual prices of that commodity up until the 1450s. The main takeaway of this thesis is that the legislators of the franchises have indeed attempted to control that market, for the ‘common good’ as well as for their own, but the analysis of grain prices would suggest that they were not able to do so since the prices became extremely volatile soon after the introduction of those measures.

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INTRODUCTION

The rise of capitalism in history is a complex phenomenon. While the concept was coined in the nineteenth century with the Industrial Revolution, groups and individuals already engaged in capitalistic behaviors during the 'pre-modern' era. Indeed, capitalist production and thought appeared in the British Isles during the 18th century.¹ But one of the main facets of capitalism is a market economy, and such systems can even be traced back to the late-medieval era in some parts of continental Europe. Historians explain that the labourer scarcity inflicted by the Black Death decreased feudal authority and made way for 'free' market practices.² In feudal societies, lords would put pressure on serfs and their agricultural surplus. The 'Commercial Revolution' then oriented the medieval economy towards trade where peasants started to exchange their products on markets.

In his book *The Invisible Hand?* Bas van Bavel has pointed out case studies for the rise and decline in 'pre-modern' societies of market economies which he defines as: "...economies which use the market as their main coordination and allocation system..."³. He also mentions the central elements which promote them: the introduction of property rights and the removal of free-market barriers such as monopolies and information asymmetries.⁴ While Van Bavel mainly focuses on the three production factors essential to human activity (land, labour, capital) and their exchange, he also explains how commodities circulated more freely with the decline of feudal authorities in Italian city-states.⁵ For the Low Countries, he also stresses the role of communal organization.⁶

¹ James Fulcher, *Capitalism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 19.

² *Ibid.*, 24.

³ Bas van Bavel, *The Invisible Hand?: How Market Economies Have Emerged and Declined since AD 500* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 148.

Indeed, the emergence of market economies is intimately linked to the political and social transformation of cities. Martha Howell mentioned in her book *Commerce before Capitalism in Europe, 1300-1600* the importance of the communal movement in Europe at that time and especially the birth of the new socio-political status of Bürger/Bourgeois.⁷ She however reminds that this ‘new’ commercial economy was far from what can be imagined of a modern market economy.⁸ For example, prices did not vary according to demand and supply but were rather static because fixed by local political authorities.⁹ In his book *Freedom and Growth: The Rise of States and Markets in Europe, 1300-1750*, Stephan Epstein has also engaged with this particular phenomenon of urban ‘citizen’ political participation and its consequences for pre-modern markets, re-asserting that the ‘Late-Medieval Crisis’ (The Great Famine, the Black Death, and the Little Ice Age) was a turning point towards capitalism. He however also highlights several attempts of urban authorities to control the market. Such a measure is the application of the city’s weight and measures.¹⁰ Fraud on measurements was a major problem and hence efforts in the application of official standards are noticeable after the plague.¹¹ Another response to the growing markets is the introduction of rules to regulate supply, which according to him was intended to protect consumers against price volatility.¹² But while he mainly focuses on Italian city-states, he does mention the growing importance of trade across the Alps during that period.¹³

At the feet of one of the main trans-alpine roads lies Geneva. Despite being hit by the Black Death in 1348, the city experienced a socio-economic blossoming as its population doubled from 1400 to 1450, and its fairs transformed into the main European trading events up

⁷ Martha Howell, *Commerce before Capitalism in Europe, 1300–1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 7.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁰ Stephan R Epstein, *Freedom and Growth: The Rise of States and Markets in Europe, 1300-1750* (London: Routledge, 2007), 148.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹² *Ibid.*, 156.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 59.

until their pinnacle in the middle of the 15th century.¹⁴ Jean-François Bergier has emphasized in his dissertation *Les foires de Genève et l'économie internationale de la Renaissance* the particular position of Geneva in the Alpine region, which destined the city to be a major economic hub between Southern and Northern Europe.¹⁵

Politically, Geneva also saw defining changes around that time. Following the European communal movement as a latecomer, the city strove to be recognized as a self-governing body already in the 1400s. But it was near the end of the century that this emancipation process was fulfilled. Siding with the citizens against the political intentions of the house of Savoy, the bishop Adhémar Fabri has promulgated in 1387 an important series of urban franchises.¹⁶ This municipal charter is the confirmation of multiple prior urban rights whose exact dates are unknown.¹⁷ The original version is two sheets of parchment sewn together, marked with the bishop's seal.¹⁸ The franchises are a collection of sixty-nine articles that deal with political and judicial rules, but also commercial questions. Anthony Babel has in his article *La portée économique des Franchises d'Adhémar Fabri (1387)* highlighted these neglected economic aspects of the franchises. The first of such measure appears in article n°2 of the franchises which ensures property rights for the citizens, a key element for economic development.¹⁹ Among these economic articles, most deal with the regulation of first necessity commodities such as fish, meat, wine, and most importantly wheat. For the latter, Bergier reminds that while the Genevan fairs were important in volume exchanged and in the diversity of products, wheat was of course the main good traded throughout the year.²⁰ Indeed, grain is

¹⁴ Alfred Dufour, *Histoire de Genève*, 3210 (Paris: Que sais-je?, 2014), 26.

¹⁵ Jean-François Bergier, 'Les foires de Genève et l'économie internationale de la Renaissance' (Dissertation, University of Geneva, 1963), 33.

¹⁶ Dufour, *Histoire de Genève*, 23.

¹⁷ Claude Lapaire et al., *Libertés, franchises, immunités, us et coutumes de la ville de Genève, 1387-1987* (Geneva: Archives d'Etat de Genève, 1987), 27.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁹ Anthony Babel, 'La portée économique des Franchises d'Adhémar Fabri (1387)', *Genava : revue d'histoire de l'art et d'archéologie* XI (1963): 321-349. 332.

²⁰ Bergier, 'Les foires de Genève', 100.

a staple food that is necessary for everyone's subsistence, and its crucial importance is unwavering across space and time.²¹ But while Babel strives to present the economic intentions of the franchises, he does not engage in the actual effects that this legislation may have had after coming into force. This is where this essay will stand. It aims to answer the question of how Adhémar Fabri's 1387 franchises have affected Geneva's grain exchange.

This thesis will look at this political document which has asserted Geneva as a commune after the 'Late Medieval Crisis' and will look at its parts concerning commodity exchange, and more precisely grain. While Babel has highlighted the economic articles of the franchises, this essay will focus more precisely on how these would have been indicators of market control measures as defined by Epstein, and to what extent these have affected Geneva's grain exchange in the subsequent decades. Hence, a first chapter will look at how the franchises have fixated standard units for trade such as weights and measures, but also coinage and currency, and how it could have influenced the grain market. A second chapter will then focus on measures aimed at regulating the city's grain supply and their influence on providers from the countryside as well as distributors within the city. A third and last chapter will look at the actual prices for wheat and oats and speculate about their development, but the volatility of wheat prices will also be calculated and compared to two other late-medieval communes: Strasburg and Bruges.

Bergier has already covered the theme of grain policy for the 1450-1550 time period in his article *Commerce et politique du blé à Genève aux XV^e et XVI^e siècle*, but this without an actual analysis of the prices. Hence this essay will analyze grain prices for the 1350-1450 time period. The original franchises were naturally written in Latin, but Babel has used a later version in old French for his analysis. In 1987 on the initiative of the Genevan municipal and

²¹ Jean-François Bergier, 'Commerce et politique du blé à Genève aux XV^e et XVI^e siècle', *Revue suisse d'Histoire* 14 (1964): 521-550. 522.

cantonal authorities, a group of scholars has released for the anniversary of the franchises a booklet entitled *Libertés, franchises, immunités, us et coutumes de la ville de Genève, 1387-1987* which contextualizes the document and features a translated version in modern French.²² This latest version will be used for this essay, and the studied articles are available at the end of this essay in the appendix.

CHAPTER 1: Standards of exchange

This first chapter will look for evidence of standardization in the franchises, and see how they may have affected Geneva's grain trade. The first attempt at controlling markets that Epstein has mentioned is the application of official weights and measures. In her book *Medieval Economic Thought*, Diana Wood expresses that the establishment of standards for exchange; namely weights and measures but also currency; was the confirmation of power over a community.²³ But before all, the formulation of such standards is a prerequisite for well-functioning commerce. Babel has highlighted principles for standardization in the 1387 franchises by Adhémar Fabri.²⁴ The historian however barely expands on their consequences. A first subchapter will look at elements of Adhémar Fabri's 1387 franchises that relate to weights and measures. Then, a second subchapter will look for articles that concern coinage and currencies.

Weights and measures

²² Lapaire et al., *franchises de la ville de Genève*, 7.

²³ Diana Wood, *Medieval Economic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 90.

²⁴ Babel, 'La portée économique des Franchises', 344.

Babel rightly points out that the introduction of trustworthy weights and measures was indeed necessary for both local and international trade.²⁵ When looking at the franchises, one can denote six articles that concern themselves with weights and/or measures. Articles n°73 and n°74 provide indications for weights used in commodity exchange and ask for a strong abidance to these. But grain itself is not weighed but measured in terms of volume/capacity, and the bishop and the Geneva commune had something to say about that too.

The first article concerning grain measure is article n°15 which informs on the standard for measuring grain, the quarteron. Indeed, the article arranges for its legal dimensions to be displayed on the church square, where it would have been available for anyone wishing to check their grain purchases.²⁶ The Saint-Peter cathedral being next to the ‘Bourg de Four’, the area where weekly markets were held, this official quarteron made of copper would then be useful for checking the wholesale transactions made over there. The fact that article n°15 arrives early in the list and as the first economic section of the franchises says a lot about the importance of grain trade, and a proper measuring for it.

Further down the franchises, article n°42 informs of another unit of volume, the émine. This much smaller quantity is in that situation, intended for millers when they are to collect their share of wheat from the grain owner. When those later wished to obtain flour, they would turn to millers who could grind their wheat in exchange of a share of the bag’s content. The relation between both units is specified as the article insists on the good usage of the customary émine. The fact that the article reminds that the latter is 1/32 of an octane (quarteron) suggests there must have been confusion or circumventions in such retail transactions.

Overall, those articles from the franchises aim at defining the official units of capacity for grain commerce. The legislator seems to insist on the strict observance of these measures

²⁵ Ibid., 343.

²⁶ Adhémar Fabri, *Franchises de Genève*, eds. Lapaire, Claude, Jean-Etienne Genequand, Catherine Santschi, Barbara Roth-Lochner, and Micheline Tripet. *Libertés, franchises, immunités, us et coutumes de la ville de Genève, 1387-1987*. Genève: Archives d’Etat de Genève, 1987. Article n°15.

as an eventual fine is systematically mentioned in these articles. Besides official measures, the franchises also introduce an official iron stamp that was to mark these official measures on the outward side of these recipients but also at their bottom.²⁷ The lord imposing his stamp on the official measures is also an important criterion mentioned by Wood.²⁸ So through its articles 15, 42, and 72, the legislators of the franchises specified in 1387 which units were to be used for the exchange of grain and made clear the right measures to use by displaying official recipients out for the public and by thoroughly marking them with the church's emblem. Alongside these indications, the bishop and the commune call for a strict observation of those by mentioning sanctions for fraudsters each time. These measures surely made commerce more transparent and predictable, hence benefitting both buyers and sellers. But were those measures aimed at the 'common good' only?

In her book *Shaping Medieval Markets*, Jessica Dijkman argues that commercial cities like the ones found in Holland also used weighing and measuring for fiscal purposes.²⁹ The 1387 franchises state in article n°17 that the sale of wine and wheat will be fixed and taxed in front of three church officials and four citizens.³⁰ It seems then that the combination of article n°15 and article n°17 would enable the bishop and the city government to collect dues through the application of official weights and measures as Dijkman has noted about Dutch towns.³¹ Moreover, the control of the official weights and measures seems important for the bishop as the franchises insist on thorough and transparent use of the legal units. For example, article n°70 insists on recipients being assessed by the church of Geneva and foresee a judicial sentence for those who disregarded the official units. Babel explains in his book *Histoire Économique de Genève* that the taxes collected from this weighting process represented an

²⁷ Adhémar Fabri, *Franchises de Genève*, article n°70.

²⁸ Wood, *Medieval Economic Thought*, 96.

²⁹ Jessica Dijkman, *Shaping Medieval Markets: The Organisation of Commodity Markets in Holland, c. 1200 - c. 1450* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 203.

³⁰ Adhémar Fabri, 'Franchises de Genève', article n°17.

³¹ Dijkman, *Shaping Medieval Markets*, 203.

important share of the bishop's revenue.³² So overall, it seems that the 1387 franchises insist on codifying the weights and measures that are to be used for the commerce of wheat to standardize exchange for buyers and sellers. But it surely warns that these would be overseen by the bishop and that fines would be distributed if one would fail to abide. Their insistence on control and sanctions would go in the sense that the bishop was benefiting from this system. This suggests that the franchises served the bishop or/and the commune as least as much as the 'common good'. But weights and measures are only half of the framework in which the economy of the market has been integrated. The next subchapter will study the other side of that coin.

Coinage and currency

Like weights and measures, Wood believes that the control of coinage and currency was of major importance for the authorities in power as it is directly linked to the ups and downs of any economy, but more particularly because of the amount and value of the coin in circulation could inflict market prices.³³ Contrary however to the abundance of articles concerning weights and measures, the franchises possess only one article which exclusively deals with currencies, article n°68. This one forbids anyone to use any other currencies apart from the one approved by the bishop and the commune.³⁴ The franchises wanted here to make sure that inhabitants of Geneva would only use the coins minted by the city. This would add protection to both buyers and sellers because they knew that they were trading on the same value and would hence improve transparency and reduce fraud. Alike weights and measures, the standardization of coinage and currency are a basic requisite for a fair conduct of exchanges.

³² Antony Babel, *Histoire économique de Genève. Des origines au début du XVIe siècle.*, vol. II (Geneva: Jullien, 1953), 591.

³³ Wood, *Medieval Economic Thought*, 101.

³⁴ Adhémar Fabri, *Franchises de Genève*, article n°68.

Nicolas Morard explains in his article *Florins, ducats et marc d'argent à Fribourg et à Genève au XVe siècle : cours des espèces et valeurs de la monnaie de compte (1420-1481)* that the florin Savoy had the role of account money and its value would hence not vary over time.³⁵ He then explains that the use of an unwavering currency was useful for everyday transactions in Savoy, but that this system was also used for Geneva's international trade during the fairs.³⁶ As a reminder, during the Middle Ages, European money would use the duodecimal system, which means that its units were multiples of the number twelve.³⁷

But again, similar to weights and measures, coinage and currency might as well have been a non-negligible source of revenue for the ruling powers. Indeed, minting coins was a business since foreign coins had to be melted into the local currency to make purchases. The authorities would earn a commission on each conversion, a levying process called seignorage. From the 1350s on, the counts of Geneva were granted the right of coinage by the Holy Roman Emperor, but this situation displeased the bishops as well as the house of Savoy.³⁸ The latter group then overtook this role in 1401 when they replaced the dying Genevan line.³⁹ But in Geneva itself, the bishops were minting their silver coins (deniers) from their fabric in front of the church.⁴⁰ So with this article, anyone in Geneva wishing to buy something with foreign coins had to first convert it into the local currency. This would increase drastically the activity of the bishop's mint and the revenues that he could squeeze out from these conversions. Moreover, while only article n°68 exclusively deals with currency, many other articles specify that the fines must be paid in the 'sou de Genève'. So, while the Savoy florin was used as money of account, the city's authorities wished to receive the money that was printed in

³⁵ Nicolas Morard, 'Florins, Ducats et Marc d'argent à Fribourg et à Genève Au XVe Siècle : Cours Des Espèces et Valeur de La Monnaie de Compte (1420-1481)', *Revue Suisse de Numismatique*, 58, 58 (1979): 223-286. 240.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 241.

³⁷ Wood, *Medieval Economic Thought*, 77.

³⁸ Babel, *Histoire économique de Genève.*, II:557.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, II:558.

⁴⁰ Lapaire et al., *franchises de la ville de Genève*, 55.

Geneva. This would mean that someone having to pay for a fine must have also had to melt its foreign coins into ones stamped by Geneva, hence another way to funnel coins into the bishop's mint.

In 1444 anti-pope Félix V, former Amédée VIII duke of Savoy promulgated a papal bull that overall confirmed the 1387 franchises but deleted article n°68 concerning the forbidding of foreign currencies.⁴¹ As Babel rightly points out, this act shows that the new pope has not forgotten that he has been a duke of Savoy, and hence used his authority to invade Geneva with Savoyan currencies.⁴² Another blow dealt to the episcopal money was when duke Louis of Savoy opened a mint in Cornavin, right next to the city in 1448.⁴³

As this first chapter has seen, the legislators of the franchises naturally saw good to fix standards of exchange, especially at that time of increasing trade. By ensuring the good use of the quarteron for bulk purchases of grain, and the use of the émine for smaller deals, the Genevan authorities have created a framework for a smooth and transparent exchange of grain within the city. They hence created reliability which is necessary to instill confidence in trade. Additionally, making all transactions be done with the 'sou de Genève', the franchises help consumers and merchants to trade on the same terms. And despite the possible financial benefits that the bishop could have enjoyed through these articles, the franchises surely made the exchange of grain in Geneva safer for people. But before these goods could be sold on markets, agricultural products had to reach the city from the countryside, something that remained greatly uncertain. Indeed, the availability of grain depended on the climate and the 'goodwill' of their agrarian neighbors.⁴⁴ The following chapter will look at how the supply of grain has been regulated, and how the franchises have attempted to curb this insecurity.

⁴¹ Babel, 'La portée économique des Franchises', 345.

⁴² Babel, *Histoire économique de Genève.*, II:560.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, II:559.

⁴⁴ Babel, 'La portée économique des Franchises', 339.

CHAPTER 2: Regulating supply

This second chapter will look for elements of supply management in the franchises. This is the second element of market control by medieval communes that Epstein has mentioned, the application of an array of anti-competition measures to protect consumers. For Geneva, Babel has also highlighted such articles in the legislation by Adhémar Fabri. He does not however explain precisely how the grain trade would have fared and be fairer with these measures. The first subchapter will look at how the franchises have cared about the movement of grains from the countryside to the city center. And then a second subchapter will look at how the urban authorities intended to take care of the distribution within the city.

From countryside to city-center

Grain availability is truly an urban problem and is intimately linked to the city-country relationship.⁴⁵ Geneva's grain supply naturally relied on climate conditions and its relationship with the suppliers.⁴⁶ A substantive share of the city's grain supply came from the Genevan diocese, but conflicts with its neighbors would still greatly impair it.⁴⁷ Indeed, the mainly urban community, lacking a proper hinterland, was often starved by the duchy of Savoy within which it was an enclave.⁴⁸ Grain supply represented the gravest problem for the city.⁴⁹ But at a time in history when dearth was frequent, producing regions were often inclined to retain their

⁴⁵ Bergier, 'Les foires de Genève', 101.

⁴⁶ Babel, *Histoire économique de Genève.*, II:123.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, II:310.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, II:65.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, II:315.

agricultural products for themselves.⁵⁰ The city's main supplier was the Pays de Vaud.⁵¹ Bergier remarks that beyond its population, Geneva had to feed the visitors of the fairs which were held four times a year.⁵² But the franchises are silent about this aspect of grain supply. It is most likely because this type of communal bill concerns civil matters and applies to its inhabitants only. But since most grains did not come from Geneva's non-existent hinterland, the franchises did not apply to the foreign producers. For the 'city-state' grain supply is a matter of 'importation' and hence related to the international relations of the Genevan council. The commune can legislate within its jurisdiction, and their agrarian suppliers were not part of it. However, one article is still worth mentioning here. Article n°29 forbids foreigners to sell their products at any other time than during market days.⁵³ This seems odd for a city whose main issue was grain supply to prevent inflows of that precious staple. While the article is vague, it may be aimed at non-edible products, and thus Geneva wishes to block foreign competition. But eventually, when the climate and the suppliers were benevolent, grains would reach the city. But within the city walls, problems regarding distribution would arise.

Speculation and monopolies

On market days, groceries would be proposed to urban consumers by farmers themselves or through middlemen.⁵⁴ Chapter 1 has gone over the application of standards of exchange, an absolute requisite for market control. But beyond setting those units for commerce, each of these articles contains a warning for the non-observance of the official measures and currency. These recurrent reminders of sanctions lead to believe that frauds on

⁵⁰ Ibid., II:64.

⁵¹ Bergier, 'Commerce et politique du blé', 530.

⁵² Bergier, 'Les foires de Genève', 103.

⁵³ Adhémar Fabri, Franchises de Genève, article n°29.

⁵⁴ Babel, *Histoire économique de Genève.*, II:314.

measures were common and even problematic for the exchange of grain during 14th century Geneva. James Davis has in his book *Medieval Market Morality: Life, Law and Ethics in the English Marketplace, 1200-1500* explained that the main fraudulences in which trade middlemen were engaging were forestalling and engrossing.⁵⁵ For him, forestallers and engrossers were the most likely fraudster to create situations of monopoly.⁵⁶ Davis defines forestalling as: “the interception of goods before they reached an open market”.⁵⁷ For engrossing, he gives the definition of: "cornering (or monopolizing) a market by buying up large quantities of certain merchandise".⁵⁸ Both are intentions of buying up products to sell them at a higher price for profit. These practices are of course harmful for consumers because of the price consequences they pose, but also for regular sellers as they hurt fair competition. Indeed, both are forms of hoarding with the goal of speculation. The difference lies in the fact that forestallers seize the goods before they are on the market, whereas engrossers do it after.

In the case of Geneva, Babel informs in his book that once grains have entered the urban center, the concern of the authorities would turn towards storage logistics and its related problems.⁵⁹ For example, the city forbade grain hoarding.⁶⁰ Bergier notes that while in the 15th century the importation of wheat was free and conducted by privates, its distribution inside the city was regulated to fight hogging.⁶¹ The franchises themselves seem eager to fight these speculations and monopolies through three successive articles. First, article n°51 authorizes any citizen to partake in any deal he witnesses in the city that concerns a staple.⁶² This is the 'Droit de partage' which gives citizens the opportunity to acquire products at the ‘just price’.⁶³

⁵⁵ James Davis, *Medieval Market Morality: Life, Law and Ethics in the English Marketplace, 1200–1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 253.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 260.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 254.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 257.

⁵⁹ Babel, *Histoire économique de Genève.*, II:123.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, II:65.

⁶¹ Bergier, ‘Les foires de Genève’, 104.

⁶² Adhémar Fabri, *Franchises de Genève*, article n°51.

⁶³ Howell, *Commerce before Capitalism*, 282.

Then, article n°52 forbids anyone to buy a product outside of the city walls during market days.⁶⁴ This one is a straightforward anti-forestalling measure. Finally, article n°53 prevents merchants from buying up foodstuff for re-selling later.⁶⁵ That one is this time a clear anti-engrossing measure. So, articles n°52 and n°53 are meant to condemn the practices of forestalling and engrossing, and article n°51 adds another layer of protection as citizens can automatically access the ‘true’ market prices.

Overall, access to food for Genevans was a priority for the ruling authorities. Since the 14th century, Geneva built halls in the low parts of the city for the international fairs, but also for local necessities like storing wheat.⁶⁶ Moreover, the urban council made logistical preparations when famine was looming as in the 15th century, they would sometimes forbid the exit of the city’s stored wheat, and/or would order officials to buy up grain in anticipation.⁶⁷

This second chapter has investigated how the franchises tried to regulate the supply of grain for Geneva. First, the franchises are almost mute about the arrival of grain from their agrarian neighbors. Since the city’s suppliers were other political entities that were often prone to protectionism, the franchises could do little to impose unto them. They are however much less shy when grain would enter their judicial reach as they clearly try to tackle the tricks that could enable speculation and monopolies. Forestalling and engrossing seem to be the legislator's main targets and the consumers' biggest enemy. All these measures are in the end an effort to allow Genevans to get these vital products at the right price. Babel explains in his article that for grains, the franchises’ first aim is to prevent the dishonest commerce of that staple commodity by fighting fraud on weights, but he also claims that the bishop wished to

⁶⁴ Adhémar Fabri, *Franchises de Genève*, article n°52.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁶⁶ Babel, *Histoire économique de Genève.*, II:311.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, II:64.

conduct a fair price fixation.⁶⁸ It is hence crucial to see how price control through the application of the franchises has affected grain prices at that time, and this is what the third and last chapter will try to do.

CHAPTER 3: Grain price-analysis

Overall, Epstein argues that all these attempts in controlling the grain market from being too 'free' in late-medieval communes, was aimed at protecting consumers against price volatility. This third and final chapter will look at how the price of grain has evolved after the coming into force of the franchises. The first subchapter will look at the prices for wheat and oats and hypothesize about their variations. Then another subchapter will compare the price-volatility of wheat in Geneva with ratios for Strasburg and Bruges. For the price analysis, Babel has included tables for the price of wheat and oats per octane.⁶⁹ While he does not delve into them, he states that figures are displayed there for further studies.⁷⁰

Wheat and oats

In medieval economic thought, historians have uncovered economic measures aimed at the 'common good'. Diana Wood has explained in her book *Medieval Economic Thought* that prices and wages became intimately linked to the domain of Justice in the Middle Ages.⁷¹ She mentions the three overlapping types of price formation: The natural price, which is determined by the market; the legal price that is set by the public authorities; and an actual price of

⁶⁸ Babel, 'La portée économique des Franchises', 339.

⁶⁹ Babel, *Histoire économique de Genève.*, II:509.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, II:505.

⁷¹ Wood, *Medieval Economic Thought*, 132.

transaction resulting from negotiations between parties.⁷² This third element was created by the guilds, but as Bergier explained in his thesis, there is no significant evidence for the existence of guilds in Geneva at that time, hence any influence from such groups can be disregarded here.⁷³ This essay will therefore only look into the ‘natural’ and ‘legal’ prices. For both, Wood explains that lords or/and parliaments would take recourse to the fixation of weights and measures.⁷⁴ While Babel offers, considering the time-period, quite generous datasets for grain prices, he does not however mention whether these were ‘legal’ or ‘natural’ prices. In his article about the franchises, Babel writes that article n°17 is aimed to prevent the rise of prices by fixing them: « Le prix des blés et des vins ... doivent être fixés par l’évêque ou son représentant».⁷⁵ Oddly enough, the latest version of the franchises used in this essay do not quite say so. Indeed, article n°17 in the 1987 version states that: « La vente des blés et du vin sera fixée et taxée par devant nous...»⁷⁶ It is important to remind that Babel has used for his analysis a version of the franchises that is written in old French. But in the modern French version, it does not stipulate that the price of wheat is fixed by the bishop and his team, as it rather says that the selling of wheat will be fixed and taxed in front of these people. Whatever this may mean, nothing is said clearly about some price fixation. Hence, it would be safe to say that there were no such things as legal prices for grain in Geneva at that time, leaving only the natural prices as the object of study.

The historian has collided in his table values that were collected from two distinct sources. An article from Jean-Jacques Chaponnière and Louis Sordet for the wheat prices up until 1406, and a book by Frédéric Borel for wheat and oats for the rest of the 15th century. The latter historian has in his book *Les foires de Genève au quinzième siècle* presented ‘revisited’

⁷² Ibid., 133.

⁷³ Bergier, ‘Les foires de Genève’, 249.

⁷⁴ Wood, *Medieval Economic Thought*, 143.

⁷⁵ Babel, ‘La portée économique des Franchises’, 349.

⁷⁶ Adhémar Fabri, *Franchises de Genève*, article n°17.

price series of multiple commodities.⁷⁷ ‘Revisited’ because he does not agree with the data gathering process conducted by Chaponnière and Sordet 50 years earlier. These two, however, contrary to Borel, explain in their article *Des hôpitaux de Genève avant la Réformation*, how they have come up with the wheat prices.⁷⁸ The two scholars have investigated seven Genevan hospitals for plague-stricken individuals. By collecting documents containing the several establishment’s monetary transactions, they were able to conceive a good idea of their financial accounts. Since Babel has used both sources for his price table, he must have wisely chosen which figures were the most trustworthy. The following analysis will hence use Babel's compilation as it is a well-thought compilation of Borel as well as Sordet and Chaponnière's prices. As it has been said, it will be safely assumed that those are market prices, so determined by supply and demand.

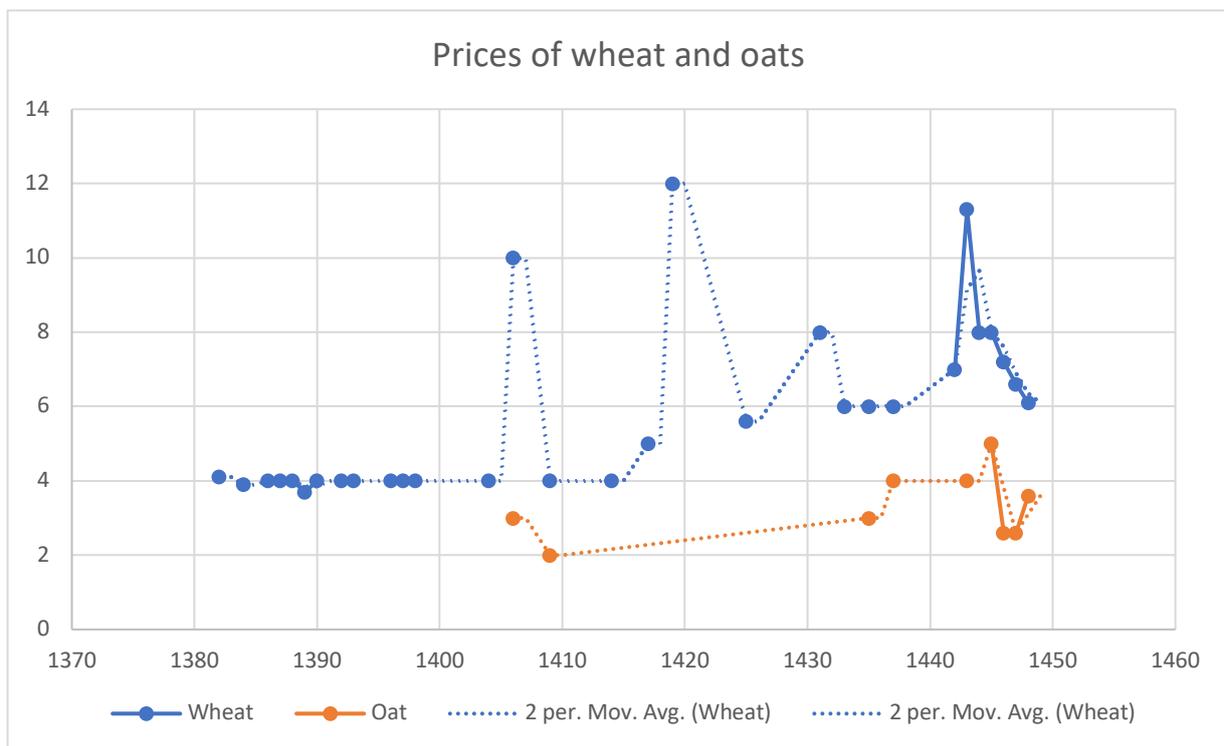


Figure 1: Prices (in Savoy sol) of wheat and oats (per octane) in Geneva (1380-1450)

⁷⁷ Frédéric Antoine Borel, *Les foires de Genève au quinzième siècle* (Geneva: H. Georg, 1892), 249.

⁷⁸ Jean-Jacques Chaponnière and Louis Sordet, ‘Des hôpitaux de Genève avant la Réformation’, *Mémoires et documents publiés par la Société d’histoire et d’archéologie de Genève* III (1844): 165-471. 175.

The graph above was made with the wheat and oat price tables that Babel has included in his book.⁷⁹ The values on the vertical axis are the price in *sols* for an octane of wheat (in blue) or oat (in orange). The horizontal axis is a chronology of the studied years. There are gaps in the figures as some years are missing the data. The dotted lines are moving averages, they are there for the visual sake of having a continuous graph. As a reminder, grains such as wheat and oats were measured at the time in units of volume/capacity (1 *octane/coupe* = 4 *quarterons*; 1 *quarteron* = 8 *émines*).⁸⁰ The currency of account used in Geneva was the Savoy florin (1 *florin* = 12 *sols*; 1 *sol* = 12 *deniers*; 1 *obole* = ½ *denier*).⁸¹ Oats were beside wheat, one of the most important cereals in the diocese.⁸² A main pattern emerging in this graph is the sudden drop of steady and continuous records for both wheat and oats from the 1400s to the 1430s. Are the hospital records missing for those years, or did they not manage to purchase wheat nor oats? Despite major value gaps in both lines, some observations can still be made.

When looking at the recorded prices, it seems that the market control measures introduced by the 1387 franchises, may they be the standard of exchange or the supply rules, did not influence the price of wheat since those appear particularly stable from the early 1380s to the early 1400s. For about 20 years, 1 octane of wheat used to cost 4 sols, except for a minor drop in 1389. This price could have been the arrangement that these hospitals had with their serfs. In 1401, the house of Savoy gained the area surrounding the city of Geneva, and this could be seen as the start of Geneva's grain supply problems. Indeed, in 1406 a major spike reaches 10 sols for a cup of wheat but seems to quickly drop back to the previous average of 4 sols in 1409. If the franchises did fix the prices as Babel said, such surges would have not happened. In 1411 a drought hit the region, which retracted the water levels of the Rhône River

⁷⁹ Babel, *Histoire économique de Genève.*, II:508.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, II:584.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, II:576.

⁸² *Ibid.*, II:65.

and consequently halted the watermill's functioning.⁸³ But this should not have impacted the price of wheat, but the price of flour. The year 1414 marks the last recorded appearance of that relatively stable and lasting average. It is also the beginning of multiple reported operations to fill the city's granary. For example, the Genevan council prohibited in 1415 the sale of wheat outside of the city because of a shortage.⁸⁴ Then in 1417, citizens went on an errand to buy grain from the Pays de Vaud on behalf of the city.⁸⁵ This would have been sensible anticipation since the price rose to 5 sols that same year and abruptly to 12 sols in 1419. The price came down again to 5.6 sols in 1425, but the absence of data makes it difficult to gauge the abruptness of this fall. In 1428 a grain shortage strikes once more.⁸⁶ The commune, therefore, planned and conducted yet another bulk purchase of Vaudese grain that year.⁸⁷ Another peak appears in 1431 with 8 sols for a cup of wheat. This surge is again also short-lived as the value comes down to 6 sols in 1433. One explanation for this shift from stable to rickety prices could be this specific decline in feudal arrangements to market behaviors. It is possible that the hospital's providers started to decide the price of their products, as they started to emancipate from their serf condition. Prices would have therefore responded to supply and demand at the beginning of the 15th century. The figures have then huge variations that can be explained by bad harvest years due to poor weather or political bickering from the house of Savoy which increased its pressure in Geneva at the turn of the century. The line for oats points out something interesting, especially in the graphs last decade. Wheat and oat prices are each recorded a year from each other, exchanging places every time. This could mean that oats were a replacement cereal for the years when wheat could not be purchased.

⁸³ Bergier, 'Commerce et politique du blé', 525.

⁸⁴ Babel, *Histoire économique de Genève.*, II:123.

⁸⁵ Bergier, 'Commerce et politique du blé', 531.

⁸⁶ Babel, *Histoire économique de Genève.*, II:123.

⁸⁷ Bergier, 'Commerce et politique du blé', 532.

Overall, the franchises did not explicitly try to fix grain prices as Babel claimed in his article. Moreover, their indirect attempts explored in Chapters 1 and 2 to grant Genevans the acquisitions of grain at a reasonable price, obviously failed as the dramatic price fluctuation in figure 1 would corroborate. The measures of market control emitted by late medieval communes, either for the standardization of exchange or the regulation of supply, were enacted according to Epstein to curb price volatility for the consumer.

Strasburg and Bruges

In her article *The evolution of markets in early modern Europe, 1350-1800: A study of wheat prices* Victoria Bateman promotes the study of wheat prices as an indicator of market integration.⁸⁸ Epstein believes that the more integrated markets became, the lower their price volatility would become.⁸⁹ He talks about a long-term decline in wheat price volatility after the Black Death and stresses institutional and social causes rather than demographic ones.⁹⁰ He claims that jurisdictional integration led to market integration for three reasons: it divided political and economic powers, prevented market failures, and solved information asymmetries.⁹¹ He highlights this long-term decline in wheat price volatility in a graph showing the coefficient of variation between the years 1310 and 1620 of several European cities (Milan, Douai, Utrecht, Saragossa, and Exeter).⁹² Below, figure 2 is a similar graph but for a shorter

⁸⁸ Victoria N. Bateman, 'The Evolution of Markets in Early Modern Europe, 1350–1800: A Study of Wheat Prices', *The Economic History Review* 64, no. 2 (2011): 447-471. 450.

⁸⁹ Epstein, *Freedom and Growth*, 72.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 160.

period, done with the values for Geneva, but also Strasburg and Bruges, cities of major economic significance which Epstein did not feature in his study.

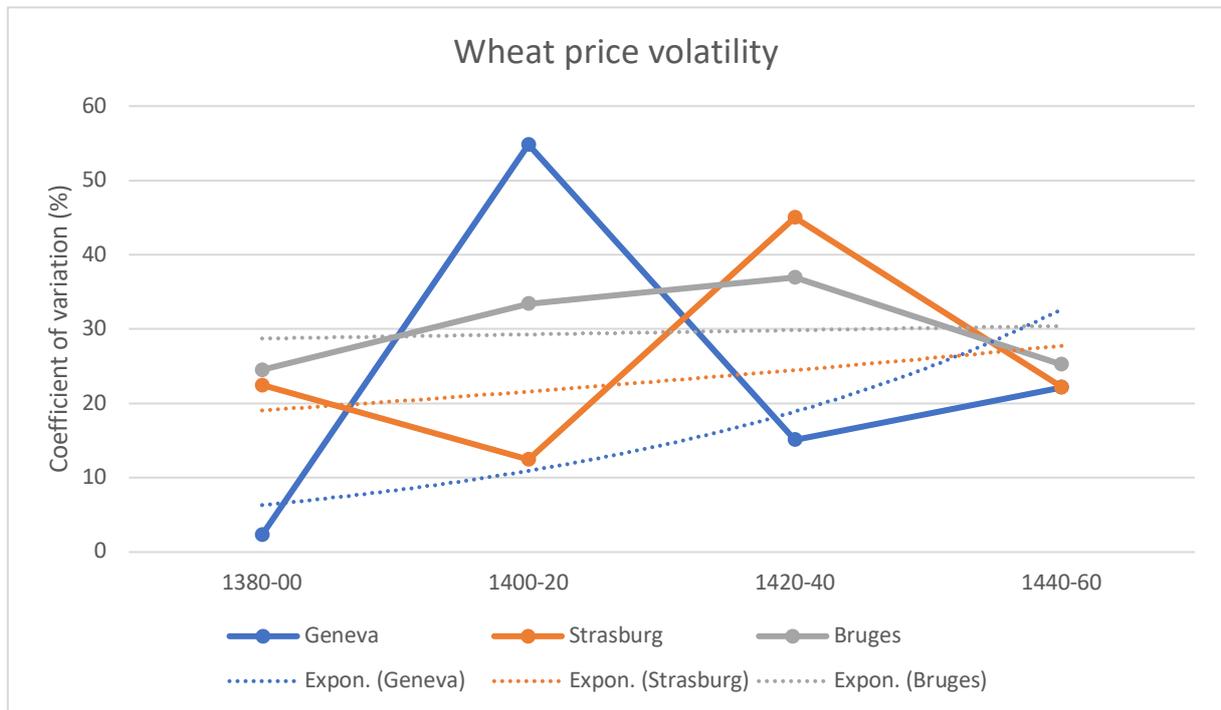


Figure 2: Wheat price volatility for Geneva, Strasburg, and Bruges for periods of 20 years. 1380-1460.

The graph above was made by combining three datasets of wheat prices. For Geneva, the same prices available in Babel’s book were once again used here.⁹³ For Strasburg, the data was retrieved from the 'Allan-Unger Global Commodity Prices Database'.⁹⁴ And for Bruges, a dataset was obtained through the website of the ‘International Institute of Social History’.⁹⁵ Despite gaps in each dataset, some calculations were still doable. The price volatility for those decades was obtained through the coefficient of variation (expressed in percentages), which is calculated by the following formula: $(\text{Standard deviation}/\text{Mean average}) * 100$. What this graph makes obvious is the immense surge in wheat price volatility for Geneva in the decades following the 1387 franchises. The coefficient becomes small again in the 1420s. The

⁹³ Babel, *Histoire économique de Genève.*, II:508.

⁹⁴ Robert C Allen and Richard W Unger, ‘Allen - Unger Database Global Commodity Prices 964-1983’, accessed 28 June 2021, <http://www.gcpdb.info/data.html>.

⁹⁵ Adriaan E Verhulst, ‘Historical Prices and Wages (HPW): Datafiles - Blog | IISG’, accessed 28 June 2021, <https://iisg.amsterdam/en/blog/research/projects/hpw/datafiles>.

exponential trendlines show that contrary to the other European studied by Epstein, Geneva's wheat price volatility increased drastically after the franchises, and continued to grow into the 15th century. And while Bruges and Strasburg's volatility is not as steep as Geneva's, they are nonetheless on a slight upward trajectory. Interestingly enough, the three cities' paths converge to very close values in the middle of the 15th century. Did these cities' markets become more integrated within the wider Rhenish economic axis? They are surely not correlated to the general European decline presented by Epstein. The historian chose cities that are very separated geographically, and grain trade would not extend to such distances.

All in all, this third and last chapter has looked at Geneva's grain prices. Contrary to the statements of Wood and Babel about prices being fixed by the ruling elites in Europe and Geneva, the Franchises do not point to any specific price-fixation from the church or the city. Moreover, figure 1 and the fluctuations it emphasizes add to the argument that the prices of wheat and oats were market prices, and not legal ones. Then, the second subchapter has calculated and compared the price volatility wheat of three different important urban centers. And contrary to Epstein's argument that European cities saw a decline in wheat price volatility after the Black Death, such a trend cannot be observed in Geneva, and neither in Bruges nor Strasburg. The franchises did not curb the price volatility of grain for consumers, nor did they increase market integration. While the decline of feudalism might have divided economic and political powers in Geneva, the city saw rather a jurisdictional fragmentation than integration with its wider area. By becoming a free commune through the franchises, the city has put itself at risk by cutting direct political ties with its fertile neighbors.

CONCLUSION

All in all, this essay has investigated the transition from feudal to market economy of the late Middle Ages. It has used the Genevan commune to see how such European towns have tried to regulate the development of markets. The pivotal 1387 franchises from Adhémar Fabri have served as a repository of relevant measures. The commodity considered has been grain because of its vital nature. The historian Stephan Epstein has noted attempts at controlling the grain market by late-medieval communes to curb price volatility and, ultimately protect consumers from 'unfair' prices.

The first chapter has looked at the first element mentioned by Epstein, the application of weights and measures, but has added the important dimension of coinage and currency. For grain, the franchises have specified the use of the quarteron for wholesale and the émine for retail exchange. This must have reduced fraud on quantities. For currency, the urban authorities used the franchises to communicate that only the local money could be used for such transactions, but also vis-à-vis the authorities when paying for fines. Besides these standards of exchange partially benefitting the urban rulers, they are most likely the sign of a growing market economy that needed to be structured to protect buyers and sellers.

The second chapter has looked at the second element mentioned by Epstein, measures to regulate supply. Being an urban community, Geneva was heavily reliant on their agricultural neighbors for their supply of grain. The franchises being an urban legal act, it had no legal influence on Geneva's grain suppliers like the Pays de Vaud. They were, however, relevant when the grains would reach the city markets. For that, the franchises possess multiple sections that intend to repress the different frauds on distribution such as forestalling and engrossing.

The third and last chapter has looked at the main intention of such measures, guaranteeing fair prices for consumers. It has looked at the price evolution of wheat and oats for the 1380-1450 period. The unstable character of these figures has led to the conclusion that the franchises had no direct influence on these prices as they probably went from fixed by

feudal relations during the 14th century, to following the market economy in the 15th. At the turn of the century, the price volatility of grain has gone up drastically contrary to Epstein's theory of declining European trend. Compared to Strasburg, and Bruges, Geneva's volatility points to the fact that the city was not well integrated within the wider continental economies. This is probably due to its jurisdictional fragmentation after establishing itself as an independent, self-governing commune.

The decline of the fairs matches with the house of Savoy finally gaining a hold of the city as Amédée gained the episcopal see in 1449.⁹⁶ Bergier has commented in his article on the Genevan grain policy through the Savoyan lords from 1450 to 1550, but an interesting ulterior study would be an analysis of the wheat prices of that time. Figure n°2 hints at a new increase in volatility in the second half of the 15th century. In reality, the figures in Babel's tables are impressive in terms of the unprecedented amounts they reach as well as their year-to-year wheat price discrepancy. With another comparison with other European towns, such further study could shed light on Geneva's grain market integration with the rest of Europe and probably stress its distinct position within the continental economy. But for the 1350-1450 period, it is clear that overall, the grain exchange in Geneva followed the transition from feudal to a proto-market economy. The grains were marketed on city squares by peasants or middlemen, and the prices were dictated by supply and demand. Conscious about their dependent situation vis-à-vis their agrarian neighbors for food, the legislators of the franchises did what they could to ensure or at least, mitigate the possibilities of famine. They did so by regulating the distribution of grain when it reached Geneva's vicinity, conducted errands to buy stocks, and prevented grains to leave the city in times of imminent dearth. For prices themselves, they have sought to tackle monopolies and speculation by cracking down on hoarding and its unhealthy repercussions on purchasing costs. All in all, while the 1387

⁹⁶ Dufour, *Histoire de Genève*, 30.

franchises by Adhémar Fabri might have tried to temper the inconveniences of the shift kickstarted by the pandemic exogenous shock, it failed to guarantee reasonably priced grain for the citizens of Geneva.

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APPENDIX:

Relevant articles from Adhémar Fabri's 1387 franchises (1987 version) :

Article n°15 : « Un quarteron de cuivre pour mesurer le blé devra être fait par nos soins ; il sera placé, si on le juge bon, devant l'église de Saint-Pierre, et attaché avec une chaîne, ou déposé en tout autre lieu où nous puissions l'utiliser, nous et les citoyens, chaque fois qu'il en sera besoin, pour mesurer les autres quarterons. Si nous le voulons, nous pourrons faire essayer, par nos gens et officiers, les mesures de la ville au quarteron-étalon, lors des sept foires de l'année ou en d'autre temps, s'il s'élève quelque plainte à ce sujet. Si alors quelqu'un est trouvé dans une mesure fautive, il nous paiera une amende de dix sous de Genève, chaque fois ; ce seront les citoyens et nuls autres, qui fugeront la mesure défectueuse, laquelle sera pendue au lieu accoutumé. Celui qui aura faussé la mesure sera tenu à une amende envers la ville. On agira de même à l'égard de toutes autres mesures. »

Article n°17 : « La vente des blés et du vin sera fixée et taxée par devant nous, notre vicaire ou notre official, assisté de deux chanoines et de quatre citoyens. »

Article n°29 : « Aucun étranger, drapier ou autre marchand, ne pourra vendre ses marchandises à Genève, si ce n'est les jours de marché et aux foires pendant trois jours. Chaque fois qu'il aura été convaincu d'avoir vendu en d'autres temps, il nous paiera une amende de soixante sous de Genève, la marchandise sera confisquée au profit de la fabrique de l'église de Genève et des bâtiments de la ville par parts égales, si toutefois plainte a été portée par les syndics. »

Article n°42 : « Les meuniers ne pourront mettre le blé ou la farine en sacs, sans la permission du propriétaire dudit blé ou de celui qui l'aura donné à moudre ; ils ne lèveront leur émine qu'en présence du porteur ou du propriétaire, s'il veut y assister. Ils auront une certaine mesure pour lever ladite émine, selon leur coutume : l'émine doit être telle que trente-deux émines fassent une octane. Toutes les fois qu'on pourra constater qu'on a agi différemment, et si plainte est portée, l'auteur paiera trois sous de Genève d'amende, et réparera convenablement le préjudice causé ; lesdits trois sous seront appliqués, comme ci-dessus, aux besoins de la fabrique et des bâtiments de la ville. »

Article n°51 : « Si quelque clerc, citoyen ou bourgeois rencontre quelqu'un dans la ville ou dans la banlieue, achetant quelque bête ou quelque denrée, il pourra, avant que le prix en ait été payé, avoir sa part avec l'acheteur, en payant le prix au prorata de la portion qu'il prendra ; les étrangers ne pourront agir de même. »

Article n°52 : « Personne ne pourra acheter aucune denrée, le jour du marché, hors des portes de la ville, sous peine de trois sous, applicables à la fabrique et aux bâtiments de la ville ; les denrées pourront être saisies impunément par les citoyens et donnée aux pauvres. »

Article n°53 : « Si des marchands d'animaux ou de denrées quelles qu'elles soient, des bouchers ou tous autres, achètent pour revendre, les citoyens ou bourgeois pourront, tant que le prix n'aura pas été payé publiquement au vendeur, acquérir au même prix la chose vendue, pour leur usage et provision et ce, malgré l'acheteur et le vendeur, mais en satisfaisant ce dernier pour sa peine et son travail. »

Article n°68 : « Les citoyens, bourgeois et habitants ne seront tenus de recevoir, dans la ville et la banlieue, aucune monnaie nouvelle d'un prince ou d'un seigneur quelconque, ni d'en user

en quelque manière dans leur négoce, si ce n'est lorsque cette monnaie est égale à celle qui a été approuvée par nous, le Chapitre et la communauté. »

Article n°70 : « Nous voulons et ordonnons, comme nous l'avons voulu et ordonné, sur le conseil du Chapitre et de nos citoyens, qu'il soit fait un fer aux armes de notre Église de Genève, avec lequel on poinçonnera les mesures des blés et du sel, au fond et sur le rebord ; on fera de même pour les aunes des draps et des toiles et les mesures du vin. Quiconque sera trouvé ayant une mesure, une aune ou un poids faux poinçonné, paiera et sera tenu de payer dix sous de Genève d'amende au profit de la fabrique et des bâtiments susdits. Si quelqu'un a mesuré du blé et du vin, du sel ou d'autres marchandises sans mesure poinçonnée, ou a auné du drap sans aune poinçonnée, il nous paiera soixante sous d'amende pour chaque fois, et le blé, le vin, le sel, le drap ou la toile seront confisqués à notre discrétion et à celle de la ville et des citoyens. »

Article n°73 : « Toutes choses qui se vendront ou s'achèteront en ville au lyvrau, soit romaine, devront l'être conformément au grand poids de notre halle, lequel contient au quintal cent livres grosses ; la livre pèse dix-huit onces. »

Article n°74 : « Toutes et chaque chose qui se vendront ou s'achèteront aux balances, le seront au poids de quinze onces grosses ; tous autres poids seront évacués hors de la ville, sous peine de soixante sous de Genève d'amende à notre profit. De plus, si plainte est portée par les citoyens ou leurs procureurs, une amende sera exigée en faveur de la ville ; de même pendant les sept foires de l'année – au cours desquelles inspection sera faite par nos soins des poids et mesures – même s'il n'est pas porté plainte, parce que le seul fait de trouver de faux poids et mesures, équivaldrait à une plainte portée. Un fer sera fait pour poinçonner les poids. »