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Winds of Change?: Consumer society and daily life in early modern Switzerland

As new products flooded European markets, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were an era of great change. Using this as a departure point, this project probes consumer culture, and the impact of these foreign goods on it, in the Swiss city of Bern from 1650 to 1800. Of these new goods, cotton textiles stand at the forefront, but other imported ‘exotic’ goods like porcelain, tobacco, coffee, and cocoa will also be considered.

Using a serial run of bankruptcy inventories (Geltstagsrödel), and supplemented by other sources such as sumptuary laws, church and city court records, and city council minutes, this project has four central themes. Economically, it examines how people chose to spend their money. Did they spend it on consumer goods such as cottons? Or invest it more concrete ventures like real estate? How did the consumption of these goods in Bern compare temporally to other contemporary polities? Sartorially, it probes how people dressed. What clothes did people wear? How many changes of clothes did they have? What materials or fabrics were most commonly worn, and by whom? What design patterns were fashionable? Socially and culturally, it assesses the role of the new goods in daily life. How and what were they used for? Were they status symbols? Were they possessed by all Bernese? Or only by elites and the rich? Legally, it analyses how access to and consumption of these new goods were regulated and controlled. Was their ownership restricted or prohibited by sumptuary legislation? And if so, were the laws actually enforced? Can changing consumption patterns be detected after the implementation of new laws?

While previous studies on consumption have tended to compare multiple cities, they have not sufficiently contextualised their results against other local, contemporary developments. By focusing solely on Bern, this study aims to avoid that fate, and instead consider consumer changes within the respective social, legal, cultural, and economic developments in a given city.