

A society of absent men

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The social consequences at home were considerable. Contemporary observers and later historians describe villages in which, for much of the year, the adult male population was largely absent. The imbalance can still be measured in the nineteenth century: in 1870 the Vallemaggia counted 288 women aged 20 to 24 for every 100 men of the same age.¹ In such villages the fields were worked largely by women, who also managed households and, where they held powers of attorney, bought and sold land, paid taxes and acted for absent husbands. The *vicinanza*, the assembly of the old-established households discussed in Chapters A.I and A.II, had to accommodate the absence of many of its members, a question taken up in the section on village capital below.

Estimates of the scale of this absence vary, and systematic figures begin only with the statistical work of Stefano Franscini in the 1820s and 1830s, discussed in Chapter C.I. Franscini treated emigration as one of the central facts of the canton's economy and tried to count it by district and trade.² For the early modern period historians rely on parish *status animarum* lists, passports, notarial records and occasional statements by officials, which suggest that in the building villages of the Sottoceneri a large share of the adult men, in some villages the majority, worked abroad for part of their lives. As early as 1477 a Milanese official in Lugano asserted that most of the men there worked in Tuscany.³ These orders of magnitude matter for the argument of this chapter: an economy in which a large part of the income of the working population was earned outside the territory had to develop instruments for moving that income home. It also depended on the trust placed in those instruments.

1 Notes

1. Anne-Lise Head-König, "Émigration", Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), version of 15 October 2007, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/fr/articles/007988/>. ↩
2. Marco Marcacci, "Franscini, Stefano", DSS, version of 21 April 2022, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/003508/>; Stefano Franscini, *La Svizzera italiana* (3 vols, 1837–1840). ↩
3. Chiesi and Ostinelli, "Tessin (Kanton)" (cited above), for the statement of 1477; on the scale of emigration from the canton see also *Repubblica e Cantone Ticino, OltreconfiniTI, "Questione di numeri"*, <https://www4.ti.ch/can/oltreconfiniti/dalle-origini-al-1900/storia-dellemigrazione-ticinese/questione-di-numeri>. ↩

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