

Bellinzona and Mendrisio

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Bellinzona combined its military and fiscal role with a substantial market. The garrison, the ducal officials, the toll collectors and the merchants who waited for the clearance of their goods created a demand for food, lodging, fodder and services that sustained a population of innkeepers, craftsmen and traders. The fairs of Bellinzona, which later became important cattle markets for the trade between the Confederacy and Lombardy, are discussed in Chapter A.IV. The town's accounts, preserved in part for the Sforza period, show the ducal treasury, the commune and private creditors bound together in a network of advances, repayments and assignments of revenue.

Mendrisio, the centre of the southernmost district, was an agricultural *borgo* surrounded by vineyards, fields and villages that depended more directly on Como and Milan than any other part of the territory. Its markets traded in wine, grain, livestock and the stone of the local quarries, among them the marble of Arzo, a village known for its quarries since the Middle Ages whose economy centred on the extraction of marble.¹ Mendrisio's position close to Como and to the Lombard plain made it the natural point of contact with the markets of the south, a role that the neighbouring village of Chiasso would take over as a border and customs station in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

1 Como merchants and the northern trade

Como was the commercial capital of the region until the fourteenth century and remained an important centre thereafter. Its merchants produced and traded woollen cloth, the leading industry of medieval Como, from which more than fourteen thousand people of the Comasque territory are said to have lived. The raw wool came from the Veneto and from as far away as England, Provence and Spain. Trade also ran northwards over the Alpine passes: around 1300 at least twenty-one trading companies of

Lucerne did business with firms of Como and Milan.² The merchants of Como were organized in a corporation whose statutes regulated membership, weights and measures together with the settlement of commercial disputes. They acted as buyers of the produce of the Ticinese valleys and as suppliers of textiles, iron and salt. They also acted as creditors of the valley communities and of individual peasants, who paid for goods in advance or on credit and settled their debts at the next market or fair.

The Como merchants were only one element of a larger system. Milanese merchants, whose city was one of the great manufacturing centres of Europe in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, used the Ticinese routes for the export of fustians, arms, armour and luxury textiles to Germany and the Low Countries, and for the import of wool, linen, metals and horses.³ Merchants from the Ticino valleys and towns took part in this trade as carriers, innkeepers, agents and small traders. A few rose to become merchants in their own right, with correspondents in Milan, Como, Lucerne and Basel. The commercial networks of the late Middle Ages thus drew the region into a European system of exchange in which Lombard merchants and Lombard methods of accounting and credit set the standard. Essentials. The market towns of the medieval Ticino (Lugano, Locarno, Bellinzona and Mendrisio) had the legal status of *borghi*. Each had its own profile: Lugano as the lakeside market of the Sottoceneri and transhipment point towards Como, Locarno as the port of the Lake Maggiore corridor towards Milan, Bellinzona as the fortress and customs station of the valleys, Mendrisio as the agricultural centre closest to the Lombard plain. All four depended on Lombard markets for grain, salt and textiles and on Lombard merchants for credit.

2 Notes

1. Stefania Bianchi, "Arzo", DSS, version of 26 June 2017, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/002221/> ("noto per le sue cave fin dal ME"). ↩
2. Treccani, *Enciclopedia Italiana*, art. "Como" (1931), [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/como_\(Enciclopedia-Italiana\)/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/como_(Enciclopedia-Italiana)/) ("Nel Medioevo l'industria preferita dai Comaschi era stata quella dei pannilani"; more than fourteen thousand people of the Comasco lived from it; raw wool imported from the Veneto, England, Provence and Spain); Sandro Guzzi-Heeb, "Lombardia", DSS, version of 7 May 2015, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/007079/2015-05-07/> ("attorno al 1300, perlomeno 21 soc. commerciali lucernesi intrattenevano rapporti d'affari con imprese comasche e milanesi"). ↩

3. DSS, art. "Milano (ducato)" (above). On Milanese exports over the Gotthard see Chapter A.IV. ↩

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