

Bellinzona as customs station

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The toll of Bellinzona was one of the richest revenues of the Milanese north. It was levied on goods in both directions: textiles, metal wares and horses coming south, grain, rice, wine, salt, silk and other luxury goods going north. The rates varied by product and by the origin of the merchant. The dukes used exemptions and reductions as instruments of diplomacy. The Confederates regularly demanded free or reduced passage for their own merchants and their own imports of grain and salt, and several of the treaties between Milan and the Confederate cantons in the fifteenth century contain toll clauses of this kind.¹ The fortress thus had a double function. It kept armies out and it kept revenue in. The Confederate campaigns of the fifteenth century can be understood in part as attempts to break through a customs barrier.

Common misconception. The castles of Bellinzona are often described as a purely military installation built to keep the Swiss out of Italy. They were equally a customs and market infrastructure. The *Murata* forced all traffic through a controlled gate, where tolls were collected and goods inspected. The fortress protected a revenue stream as much as a frontier, which is why both Milan and the Confederates were willing to spend so much money and blood on it.

1 The Confederates in the Leventina

The Confederate advance began in the valleys that the Gotthard route had opened to central Switzerland. Uri, the canton on the northern side of the pass, had an obvious interest in controlling the southern approach because its cattle farmers depended on the markets of Lombardy for grain, wine and salt. In 1403, in the crisis that followed Gian Galeazzo's death, Uri and Obwalden took the Leventina under their protection.² In 1419 they bought Bellinzona from the lords of Sax-Misox, who had seized it during the

Milanese crisis. For three years the Confederates held the key to the Ticino valley.

Filippo Maria Visconti refused to accept the loss. In 1422 a Milanese army under Francesco Bussone, called il Carmagnola, and Angelo della Pergola retook Bellinzona and on 30 June 1422 defeated a Confederate force at Arbedo, a few kilometres north of the town.³ The battle, which cost hundreds of lives on both sides, stopped the Confederate advance for more than half a century.⁴ The Leventina, however, remained contested. After renewed conflict Uri recovered it in the years 1439 to 1441.⁵

2 Giornico and the peace of 1480

The decisive confrontation came at the end of 1478. In a conflict over the Leventina, which Milan had promised to cede to Uri but had not handed over, a Confederate force crossed the Gotthard in November 1478 and besieged Bellinzona without success. When the Milanese army pursued the retreating Swiss up the Leventina, it was defeated at Giornico on 28 December 1478 by a much smaller force of men from Uri and the Leventina, who used the snow and the frozen ground of the narrow valley to their advantage.⁶ The peace of 1480 confirmed Uri's sovereignty over the Leventina and ended Milanese claims in the valley.⁷

3 Bellinzona 1500 and the road to 1516

The final stage followed the fall of Ludovico il Moro. In April 1500, as French troops took over the duchy, the people of Bellinzona placed themselves under the protection of Uri, Schwyz and Nidwalden. By the treaty of Arona of 1503 France recognized the rule of the three cantons over Bellinzona, the Riviera and Blenio, which they governed jointly as bailiwicks until 1798.⁸ Between 1512 and 1513, when the Confederates were for a short time the masters of Lombardy, they occupied Lugano, Locarno, Mendrisio and the Vallemaggia. The Perpetual Peace with France of 29 November 1516 confirmed their possession of these territories, although France recognized the Confederate claim to Mendrisio only in 1521. The four districts were governed thereafter by twelve cantons as common bailiwicks.⁹ The internal organization of these bailiwicks, their courts and their finances are the subject of Chapter A.II.

Year Event 1340 Visconti take Bellinzona from the Rusca 1395 Gian Galeazzo Visconti becomes duke of Milan 1403 Uri and Obwalden take the Leventina under protection 1419 Uri and Obwalden buy Bellinzona from Sax-Misox 1422 Milanese recover Bellinzona; battle of Arbedo 1478 Battle

of Giornico (28 December) 1480 Peace confirms Uri's rule over the Leventina 1500 Bellinzona submits to Uri, Schwyz and Nidwalden 1503 Treaty of Arona cedes Bellinzona, Riviera, Blenio 1512–1513 Confederates occupy Lugano, Locarno, Mendrisio, Vallemaggia 1516 Perpetual Peace with France confirms the conquests

4 Notes

1. DSS, art. "Sforza" (above), on the capitulations of 1450, 1467 and 1477; DSS, art. "Milano (ducato)" (above), on grain, salt and toll privileges. See Chapter A.IV. ↩
2. DSS, art. "Leventina" (above); DSS, art. "Uri" (above). ↩
3. DSS, art. "Arbedo, battaglia di", <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/008899/> (Carmagnola's recapture of Bellinzona in April 1422, battle of 30 June 1422, purchase of 1419 from the lords of Sax-Misox). ↩
4. DSS, art. "Arbedo, battaglia di" (above); <https://www.tvsvizzera.it/tvs/qui-svizzera/quando-i-milanesi-fermarono-l-avanzata-dei-confederati/47873892> (title only consulted, 27 September 2026). ↩
5. DSS, art. "Leventina" (above); DSS, art. "Uri" (above). ↩
6. DSS, art. "Giornico, Schlacht bei", <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/008900/> (crossing of the Gotthard in November 1478, siege of Bellinzona, battle of 28 December 1478 fought by about 175 Confederates and 400 men of the Leventina). ↩
7. DSS, art. "Leventina" (above); DSS, art. "Uri" (above). ↩
8. DSS, art. "Bellinzona (comune)" (above), on the submission of 14 April 1500 and the treaty of Arona; DSS, art. "Riviera (baliaggio, distretto)", <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/008547/2017-04-05/>; DSS, art. "Italia, guerre d'" (above). ↩
9. DSS, art. "Italia, guerre d'" (above), on the Perpetual Peace and on Mendrisio (1521); DSS, art. "Baliaggi italiani" (above). See Chapter A.II. ↩

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