

Carolingian counties and the power of the bishops

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After Charlemagne's conquest of the Lombard kingdom in 774 the territory was organized in Carolingian counties. The Sottoceneri belonged largely to the county of Seprio, a district named after the fortress of Castelseprio in the hills between Varese and Como, while other parts were attached to the county of Stazzona, centred on the western shore of Lake Como. The counts were royal officials, but their position soon became hereditary and their rights were fragmented by grants to churches and to local lords. In the tenth and eleventh centuries the emperors increasingly conferred comital and fiscal rights on bishops, whom they regarded as more reliable than lay magnates because a bishop could not found a dynasty.

The bishops of Como were among the main beneficiaries of this policy. From the late tenth or early eleventh century they exercised comital rights over Bellinzona and over parts of the Sopraceneri, collected tolls and market dues, and appointed local officials.¹ The bishop's temporal power also extended to the Locarnese and to parts of the Lugano region. In practice the bishops delegated much of it to vassal families, among them the families later known as the *capitanei* of Locarno, who held tithes, fishing rights, tolls and landed estates in fief from the bishop and, later, from the emperor.²

1 The Ambrosian valleys

The northern valleys followed a different course. The Leventina, the Blenio valley and the Riviera belonged to the archdiocese of Milan, whose Ambrosian liturgy they used in place of the Roman rite. Tradition traces their dependence on Milan to a bequest of Bishop Atto of Vercelli in 948, through which the valleys came to the cathedral chapter of Milan, the canons known as *ordinari*.³ The chapter exercised temporal lordship over the three valleys, known collectively as the *Tre Valli ambrosiane*, and

appointed their officials, although the valley communities acquired substantial self-government from the twelfth century onwards.

The division between the Comasque south and the Ambrosian north had long consequences. It meant that the territory had no ecclesiastical centre of its own until the nineteenth century, when the Ticinese parishes were separated from Como and Milan and placed under an apostolic administrator. The diocese of Lugano in its present form dates only from 1971.⁴ It also meant that the Tre Valli looked to Milan in matters of church discipline, tithes and ecclesiastical courts, while the southern districts looked to Como. The Ambrosian rite survives in the Tre Valli and in a few other parishes to this day, and Carlo Borromeo's visitations of the sixteenth century, discussed in Chapter B.III, followed the same ecclesiastical boundaries.

Essentials. Between the sixth and the eleventh centuries the territory of today's Ticino was divided between two ecclesiastical systems. The south and west (Lugano, Mendrisio, Locarno, Bellinzona) belonged to the diocese of Como, whose bishops also held comital rights. The northern valleys (Leventina, Blenio, Riviera) belonged to the church of Milan and followed the Ambrosian rite. Both systems tied the region to Lombard cities, and neither gave it a centre of its own.

2 Notes

1. DSS, art. "Ticino (cantone)" (above); DSS, art. "Bellinzona (comune)" (above), both dating the transfer to the bishop of Como under Henry II to 1002/1004. ↩
2. DSS, art. "Capitanei di Locarno" (above), on their regalia, their probable investiture by Bishop Landolfo of Como around 1000 and the imperial diploma of 1164. ↩
3. DSS, art. "Tre Valli Ambrosiane" (above); DSS, art. "Leventina", <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/008543/2017-03-14/>, both attributing the origin of Milanese lordship to the bequest of Bishop Atto of Vercelli in 948. ↩

4. DSS, art. "Lugano (diocesi)",
<https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/011405/>: federal decree of 22 July
1859 against foreign episcopal jurisdiction, apostolic administration
from 1884, convention of 1888, canonical erection of the diocese by the
bull Paroecialis et collegialis of 8 March 1971. ↩

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