

Churches, chapels and altars

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A large part of emigrant money went into the church. The parish churches and sanctuaries of the lake villages were rebuilt, enlarged and decorated from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, often by the emigrants themselves, who returned in winter to work on their home churches. Families founded altars and chapels, endowed masses for the souls of their dead, gave bells, organs and liturgical objects, and paid for stucco decoration and altarpieces. Emigrants abroad also pooled their money. Piero Bianconi recorded that they joined together to buy silver, a painting or vestments for the village church in Rome or Flanders, and in the Locarnese valleys the letters B.D.L., for *Benefattori di Livorno*, on balustrades and confessionals still mark the gifts of the emigrant group in Livorno.¹ The sanctuary of Santa Maria d'Ongero at Carona, the parish churches of Rovio and Arogno and many other buildings in the region carry the work and the money of the emigrant families.

These gifts had religious, social and economic dimensions. Religiously they secured prayers for the donor's soul and demonstrated piety in an age of Counter-Reformation zeal, discussed in Chapter B.III. Socially they established the family's rank in the village, since the right to a family chapel or a place of honour in the church was a visible privilege. Economically they transferred capital into an institution that was permanent, protected by canon law and hard to seize by creditors. An endowed chaplaincy (*cappellania*) could also provide an income for a son who entered the priesthood, which made it a family investment as much as a pious gift.²

1 Dowries and marriage

The third major use of emigrant money was the dowry. Under the *ius commune*, as received in the statutes of the towns and valleys of northern Italy and the southern Alps, a daughter received her share of the family wealth on marriage as a dowry (*dote*). She remained its owner, her husband

had to administer and preserve it, and it was to be returned to her or her heirs at the end of the marriage. With the dowry, as the records of eighteenth-century Trento put it, the daughter was "tacitata" of her claims to the paternal and maternal estate.³ Dowries were recorded in notarial marriage contracts and receipts, and they often consisted of cash, household goods and sometimes land. In the emigrant villages dowries were frequently paid, at least in part, from money earned abroad by the bride's father or brothers.

The dowry system served several purposes in an emigrant economy. It established marriages between families of the same trade and status, which strengthened the workshop networks. It provided a protected fund for the wife, who often managed the household alone for long periods. It also served as a form of insurance, since the dowry was to be restored to the widow if her husband died abroad. The confraternities that paid dowries for poor girls were therefore extending to the poor an instrument that was central to the property arrangements of every emigrant family.

2 Notes

1. Piero Bianconi, "La nostra emigrazione", Scuola ticinese no. 7, https://www4.ti.ch/fileadmin/DECS/DS/Rivista_scuola_ticinese/ST_n.7/ST_7_10_Bianconi_nostra_emigrazione.pdf; University of Warwick, My-Parish project, "Ticino migration", https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/myparish/posts/ticinomigration (collections by migrants in Livorno for their parishes and brotherhoods; "B.D.L." inscriptions; Annunciation at Palagnedra commissioned by Ticinese resident in Florence). ↩
2. See Chapter B.III and DSS, "Cappellania". ↩
3. Marina Garbellotti, "Doti contese, doti restituite nella Trento del Settecento", *Geschichte und Region/Storia e regione* 19 (2010), no. 1, https://geschichteundregion.eu/attachment/get/up_15_16520956112197.pdf (dowered daughters "tacitate" of their claims to the paternal and maternal estate; the wife remained owner of the dowry, which the husband had to administer and preserve; restitution at the end of the marriage); see also Manlio Bellomo, *Ricerche sui rapporti patrimoniali tra coniugi* (Milan 1961) and Chapter A.II. ↩

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