

Cloth, silk, metalwork and the long-distance trade

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

The long-distance trade was dominated by textiles. From the north came linen from Constance and St Gallen, woollen cloth from Flanders, England and southern Germany, and fustians and later cottons. From the south came silk and silk fabrics from Milan, Como and Genoa, Milanese fustians, velvets and brocades, arms and armour from the Milanese workshops, paper and glass, together with the spices and dyestuffs that Venice and Genoa imported from the Levant.¹ The balance of this trade changed over time. In the sixteenth century Milan was an exporter of luxury textiles and metalwork. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the silk industry of Zurich and Basel, which Chapter B.II describes in connection with the Locarnese refugees, imported raw silk from Italy and Spain, so that raw silk became one of the principal northbound goods of the transalpine trade.²

The table below summarizes the principal goods flows. It simplifies a trade that varied from decade to decade, but it shows the basic pattern: the south sent food staples, luxury goods and raw silk north, while the north sent livestock, dairy products and cloth south, with the balance settled in coin and bills of exchange.

Good	Direction	Main origin and markets	Legal regime
Grain	North	Lombard markets (Varese, Milanese <i>tratte</i> , Como, Luino)	treaty quotas
Salt	North	Milanese monopoly (sea)	Treaty quotas, resale
Rice	North	Lombard plain	Ordinary tariffs
Cattle	South	Central Switzerland, Alpine Fairs, tolls, treaty horses	valleys exemptions
Cheese	South	Central Switzerland	Tolls (sbrinz)
Wine	North	Mendrisiotto, Luganese, Local duties (regional)	Locarnese Silk, textiles
Both	Milan, Como; Zurich, St	Transit tolls	Gallen Metalwork, South to Milan
Transit tolls, export arms	North	controls	

1 Settlement and the balance of payments

The regional trade was not balanced by goods alone. The pastoral cantons bought more grain, salt and wine from Lombardy than they could pay for with cattle and cheese in some years, and in others the cattle trade brought in a surplus. Two further flows closed the gap. The first was the mercenary service of the Confederates in the armies of France, Spain and other powers, which brought pay and pensions into the cantons. Until the early eighteenth century the pensions came from France and above all from Spain, Venice, Savoy and Milan. In the Catholic cantons they at times made up more than half of the regular public revenue (Chapter B.III). The second was the emigration of builders, artists and artisans from the southern valleys, whose remittances financed village capital and consumption (Chapter A.III).³ The Gotthard trade therefore sat within a wider system of payments in which goods, soldiers' pay, pensions and emigrants' savings were set against each other, largely through bills of exchange drawn on Milan, Lyon, Genoa and the Italian fairs. The eighth section returns to these instruments.

Common misconception. It is often assumed that the Gotthard was above all a road for luxury goods between Germany and Italy, and that the Swiss valleys merely collected tolls on it. The records show a different picture. The longdistance trade in textiles and spices produced the tolls, but the regional trade in grain, salt, cattle and cheese determined the livelihood of the population and the policy of the cantons. The dependence of the inner cantons on Lombard grain and salt and of the Lombard markets on Swiss cattle made the relationship with Milan a matter of survival. For this reason it was governed by treaty.

2 Notes

1. Schulte (as above), vols 1–2; Glauser (as above). ↩
2. HLS, art. "Seide" (Liliane Mottu-Weber, German translation Alice Holenstein-Beereuter), <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/013965/>, on the Locarnese refugees in Zurich from 1555 and on Zurich as a distribution centre for raw silk imported from Spain and Italy. See Chapter B.II. ↩

3. HLS, art. "Pensioni" (Valentin Groebner, version of 03.11.2011), <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/010241/2011-11-03/>: "Fino all'inizio del XVIII sec., oltre che dalla Francia, le pensioni venivano versate soprattutto dalla Spagna, da Venezia, dalla Savoia e da Milano", and in the Catholic cantons they "costituirono oltre la metà delle entrate pubbliche regolari"; HLS, art. "Servizio mercenario" (Philippe Henry, Philipp Krauer, version of 31.10.2023), <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/008608/2023-10-31/>, on the pensions granted to the recruiting cantons, which in the small Landsgemeinde cantons formed "una parte rilevante del bilancio statale". See Chapters A.III and B.III. Further literature: Martin Körner, *Solidarités financières suisses au seizième siècle* (Lausanne 1980). ↩

For general information only. This article does not constitute legal or tax advice, does not replace advice on an individual case and creates no lawyer-client relationship. It reflects the legal position as of September 2026.

Online version: helveticaregister.com/lugano-cloth-silk-metalwork-and-the-long-distance-trade