

From Milanese valleys to Confederate bailiwicks, 1403–1516

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The Confederate conquest of the south was neither planned nor linear. It advanced in three waves, each triggered by a crisis of Milanese power and each exposed to reversal. The first wave belonged almost entirely to Uri, whose people controlled the northern approach to the Gotthard and wanted to secure the valley on the other side. The second wave, around 1500, brought Bellinzona and the two valleys north of it under the three cantons of Uri, Schwyz and Nidwalden. The third, in 1512 and 1513, carried twelve cantons into Lugano, Locarno, Mendrisio and the Vallemaggia, in the course of the Italian Wars. The Perpetual Peace with France of 1516 turned military occupation into a recognized title.¹

1 Uri and the Leventina, 1403–1480

The Leventina, the upper valley of the Ticino river between the Gotthard and Biasca, had belonged to the cathedral chapter of Milan and then to the Visconti. When Gian Galeazzo Visconti died in 1402 and his state fell into crisis, the valley concluded a treaty of protection with Uri and Obwalden in 1403, which gave the two cantons their first foothold south of the Gotthard.² The two cantons pushed further south and in 1419 acquired Bellinzona from the lords of Sax-Misox, whose claim derived from the disintegrating Visconti order. The purchase gave the Confederates the most important fortress on the southern side of the passes, controlling the roads from the Gotthard, the Lukmanier and the San Bernardino to Lake Maggiore and Lake Lugano.³

Filippo Maria Visconti, who restored ducal authority in Milan, did not accept the loss. His troops retook Bellinzona in 1422 and, under the condottiere Francesco Bussone, known as Carmagnola, defeated a Confederate army at Arbedo on 30 June 1422.⁴ Uri and Obwalden had to give up their conquests south of the Monte Piottino, the gorge that

separates the upper from the middle Leventina. In the settlement of 1426, the first Milanese capitulation, they renounced Bellinzona and the southern valleys and obtained in return freedom from tolls on the road to Milan, which became the first of a long series of commercial concessions that Chapter A.IV follows under the heading of the Milanese capitulations.⁵ The pattern of that settlement is significant for the history of public finance: from the beginning, the Confederates treated territorial claims in the south as assets that could be exchanged for commercial privileges.

Uri returned in 1439, when it reoccupied the Leventina during a new conflict with Milan. In 1441 the duke pledged the valley to Uri, a legal form that left the ultimate title to Milan while handing actual government to Altdorf.⁶ The ambiguity was resolved by force. On 28 December 1478 a small force of men from Uri and the Leventina, supported by contingents from other cantons, routed a much larger Milanese army at Giornico, below the Biaschina gorge.⁷ In the peace of 1480 the Sforza definitively recognized the rule of Uri over the valley. The cathedral chapter of Milan followed in 1487 by giving up its own claims. From then until 1798 the Leventina was a bailiwick of Uri alone, governed by a *landfogto* whom Uri appointed for three years (four years from 1660) and who resided at Faido.⁸

2 Notes

1. Hans Stadler, "Ennetbirgische Feldzüge", in HLS, version of 21 April 2016, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/024649/2016-04-21/> (Italian: "Campagne transalpina"). On the three phases see also Raffaello Ceschi (ed.), *Storia della Svizzera italiana dal Cinquecento al Settecento* (Bellinzona: Casagrande, 2000). ↩
2. Mario Fransioli and Tiziano Locarnini, "Leventina", in HLS, version of 14 March 2017, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/008543/2017-03-14/>; Stadler, "Ennetbirgische Feldzüge" (above). ↩
3. Stadler, "Ennetbirgische Feldzüge" (above), on the cession of Bellinzona by the Sax-Misox lords to Uri and Obwalden in 1419. See also Eligio Pometta, *Come il Ticino venne in potere degli Svizzeri*, 3 vols (Bellinzona 1912–1915). ↩
4. Alain François Berlincourt, "Arbedo, bataille d'", in DHS, version of 16 June 2015, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/fr/articles/008899/> (date, Carmagnola's command and the renunciation by Uri and Obwalden of their conquests beyond the Monte Piottino). ↩
5. Stadler, "Ennetbirgische Feldzüge" (above), according to which the first Milanese capitulation of 1426 secured only toll-free passage to Milan; HLS/DSS, "Milano (ducato)", version of 18 July 2013,

<https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/006632/2013-07-18/>, on the capitulations as an instrument of Confederate policy towards Milan. ↩

6. Stadler, "Ennetbirgische Feldzüge" (above), which describes the grant of 1441 as a pledge; Fransioli and Locarnini, "Leventina" (above). ↩
7. Thomas Schibler, "Giornico, battaglia di", in DSS, version of 16 November 2005, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/008900/2005-11-16/>, which gives the date of 28 December 1478 and puts the Confederate force at 175 men reinforced by about 400 men of the Leventina, against some 10,000 Milanese. ↩
8. Fransioli and Locarnini, "Leventina" (above), on the peace of 1480, the renunciation of the cathedral chapter in 1487, the term of the landfogto and his residence at Faido. ↩

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