

Humanism, Italian evangelism and the first Protestants, 1525–1549

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The Reformation reached Locarno through books, teachers and officials. It did not arrive as a popular movement with preachers in the market square, as it had in some towns of the German-speaking Confederation, nor did it ever command a majority of the population. It began among educated laymen and a few clerics who read the new theology in Latin and Italian, who were in correspondence with Zurich and Basel, and who met in private houses. In that respect the Locarnese community belonged to the wider Italian movement that historians call *evangelismo*: a current of Scripture-based piety, of criticism of clerical abuses and of interest in justification by faith, which spread in the 1530s among humanists, preachers and noble households from Naples to Lucca, Ferrara and Venice.¹

1 Books from Basel and the Italian readers of Luther

The channels through which Reformed ideas reached northern Italy were commercial before they were missionary. On 14 February 1519 the Basel printer Johannes Froben wrote to Martin Luther that the Pavia bookseller Francesco Calvo had come to Basel to buy a large number of Luther's pamphlets for the Italian market.² In 1525 the Venetian printer Nicolò Zoppino published, without naming the author, an Italian version of Luther's explanation of the Ten Commandments, and in 1533 an anonymous *Libro dell'emendatione et correctione*, probably printed in Strasbourg, carried Reformed doctrine to Italian readers under a harmless title.³ Locarno lay on the roads by which such books travelled between Basel, the passes and the Lombard plain. Its merchants and physicians studied in Pavia and travelled to Basel and Zurich. After 1529 the *landfogti* included men from Reformed cantons who brought their own convictions and their own books with them.

The confessional allegiance of the governors mattered. Emidio Campi, the leading modern historian of the Italian Reformation in Switzerland, dates the first clear signs of Reformed sympathies in Locarno to the early 1530s and connects them with the appointment of the Zurich bailiff Jakob Werdmüller.⁴ A Reformed *landfogto* could not introduce the Reformation in a common lordship, since the Second Landfrieden of 1531 had excluded that possibility, as the next sections explain. He could, however, protect individuals, tolerate private meetings and decline to prosecute. The government of the bailiwick thus offered a narrow space in which a small minority could form, as long as the governor of the day was willing to look away.

2 Giovanni Beccaria and the Latin school

The central figure of the early movement was Giovanni Beccaria. Born around 1511 in Locarno into an affluent family of Milanese origin that had settled in the town, he took over the Latin school of Locarno in 1536.⁵ Campi places his appointment as head of the convent school a year earlier, in 1535, and records his friendship with the apostolic protonotary Pietro Carnesecchi, one of the leading figures of Italian evangelism, who was later executed in Rome in 1567.⁶ From around 1539 Beccaria engaged openly with Reformed ideas. He received material support from the *landfogto* Joachim Bäl di and theological guidance from Konrad Pellikan, the Hebrew scholar of the Zurich church.⁷

Beccaria's school was the seedbed of the community. Its pupils came from the leading families of the town, so that the teaching of Latin, rhetoric and Scripture brought the new theology into the households of the *Nobili* and *Borghesi*. Taddeo Duno, born in 1523 into an old noble family of Locarno, was influenced by Beccaria in his youth before he went to study medicine and the liberal arts at Basel from 1545 to 1547 and at Pavia, where he took his doctorate in 1547 or 1548.⁸ Martino Muralto, born around 1521, took a doctorate in law at Pavia and served as ducal *podestà* (chief magistrate) of Vigevano and probably of Luino. The historical dictionary describes him as one of Beccaria's first converted pupils and soon one of the most important members of the community.⁹ Lodovico Ronco, the third figure of the later leadership, belonged to the same milieu. The leaders of the community were thus a schoolmaster, a physician and a lawyer, all educated in the humanist curriculum and all connected by marriage or friendship with the old families of the town.

3 Notes

1. Daniel A. Crews and Luca Addante, "Valdés, Juan de", in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 97 (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 2020), online at Treccani, [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/juan-de-valdes_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/juan-de-valdes_(Dizionario-Biografico)/) (justification by faith as the starting point of the Valdesian circle, which attracted great aristocrats, cardinals such as Reginald Pole and Giovanni Morone, and preachers such as Ochino and Pietro Martire Vermigli); "evangelismo", *Enciclopedia Treccani online*, <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/evangelismo/> ("l'orientamento di riforma cattolica pretridentina caratterizzato dall'aspirazione a un ritorno al primitivo spirito del Vangelo"). For the wider movement see Massimo Firpo, *Riforma protestante ed eresie nell'Italia del Cinquecento* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1993), and Salvatore Caponetto, *La Riforma protestante nell'Italia del Cinquecento* (Turin: Claudiana, 1992). ↩
2. Emidio Campi, "Lutero e la Riforma a Sud delle Alpi", lecture text published by the Comune di Muralto, <https://muralto.ch/Lutero-e-la-riforma-al-sud-delle-alpi-5fc7b800?i=1> ("Il 14 febbraio 1519, il grande editore basilese Johannes Frobenius scriveva a Lutero che il libraio Francesco Calvo di Pavia era arrivato a Basilea per acquistare un consistente numero di libretti"). ↩
3. Campi, "Lutero e la Riforma a Sud delle Alpi" (above) ("Nel 1525 usciva a Venezia, stampato da Nicolò Zoppino, Uno libretto volgare con la dichiarazione de li Dieci Comandamenti"; the *Libro dell'emendatione et correctione* of 1533, "probabilmente Strasburgo"). ↩
4. Campi, "Lutero e la Riforma a Sud delle Alpi" (above) ("A Locarno, viceversa, si manifestarono segni evidenti di adesione alle idee della Riforma a partire dai primi anni Trenta in coincidenza con la nomina del balivo zurighese Jakob Werdmüller"). ↩
5. Emidio Campi, "Beccaria, Giovanni", DSS, version of 22 April 2002, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/010526/> (born about 1511 in Locarno of an affluent Milanese family established there; head of the Latin school from 1536). ↩
6. Campi, "Lutero e la Riforma a Sud delle Alpi" (above) (school from 1535; friendship with "il protonotaio apostolico Pietro Carnesecchi"). Antonio Rotondò, "Carnesecchi, Pietro", *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 20 (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1977), Treccani, <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/pietro->

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carnesecchi_(Dizionario-Biografico)/ (executed in Rome on 1 October 1567). ↩

7. Campi, "Beccaria, Giovanni" (above). Bäl di's canton of origin (Glarus). ↩
8. Crivelli, "Duno, Taddeo" (above). ↩
9. Pauli Falconi, "Muralto, Martino" (above) ("Fu tra i primi allievi convertiti del riformatore Giovanni Beccaria ... e divenne ben presto uno dei membri più significativi della comunità evangelica locarnese").
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