

Locarno around 1530: a subject town on Lake Maggiore

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The Reformed community of Locarno grew in a town that had been under Confederate rule for less than a generation. After the battle of Novara in 1513 King Louis XII ordered the French garrison of the castle to surrender. The Peace of Fribourg of 1516 then confirmed the Confederates in the possession of Locarno, which became a common lordship of the twelve cantons.¹ Chapter A.II has described the constitution of these lordships: a *landfogto* (bailiff, German *Landvogt*) appointed in rotation by the ruling cantons for two years, assisted by a chancellor, a lieutenant, a fiscal officer and a court clerk, and supervised by the annual *sindacato* of the cantons' delegates. This section recalls only those features of the town that explain why the Reformation found adherents there, and why their fate became a matter for twelve governments at once.

1 Corporations, families and the capitanei

Locarno was governed internally by three corporations. The *Nobili* were the descendants of the medieval *capitanei*, the families that had held the episcopal and later the Milanese rights in the *pieve* (the ecclesiastical and administrative district) of Locarno. The *Borghesi* were the established burghers of the town, who held the rights of market, of the public weighing house and of the mills. The *Terrieri* represented the inhabitants of the surrounding countryside. Each of the three bodies was represented in the council of the *borgo*.² Among the noble families the Orelli were the most powerful. In the Middle Ages and the early modern period they played a political role in the upper Verbano and in the three valleys north of Bellinzona, they held castles or parts of castles at Locarno, Gordola and Ascona and owned land in the Onsernone, the Centovalli, the Vallemaggia and the Gambarogno.³ The Muralto, the Magoria and the Duno belonged to the same circle of old families. The Duno, the Trevani and the Nessi also held seats in the council of the district.

These families are the core of the story that follows. The leaders of the Reformed community and a large part of its membership came from the noble and burgher families of the town. Their wealth lay in land, tithes and feudal rights, in houses in the *borgo*, in trade along the lake and in the professions. Several of them had studied law or medicine at Pavia, the university of the Duchy of Milan. Some had also held offices in the Milanese state before or alongside their life in Locarno.⁴ When they converted, the conversion was therefore a matter of property, office and family alliance as well as of conscience. It touched the social order of a town in which three corporations shared power and in which the *landfogto* depended on local notables for information and for the collection of revenue.

2 Notes

1. Rodolfo Huber, "Locarno (Pieve, Vogtei, Bezirk)", HLS, version of 18 November 2014, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/008544/2014-11-18/> (surrender ordered by Louis XII after Novara in 1513; Peace of Fribourg 1516; common lordship of the twelve cantons; the bailiff assisted by chancellor, lieutenant, fiscal officer and court clerk). ↩
2. Janke and Huber, "Locarno (comune)" (above) (the corporations of the Nobili, Borghesi and Terrieri; the Borghesi held "diritti di mercato, di pesa, di gestione di mulini"; the Capitanei, Orelli, Muralto and Magoria); Huber, "Locarno (Pieve, Vogtei, Bezirk)" (above) (Duno, Trevani and Nessi); Crivelli, "Duno, Taddeo" (above) (the Duno as an old Locarnese noble family). ↩
3. Rodolfo Huber and Martin Illi, "Orelli", DSS, version of 3 May 2017, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/020179/> ("Gli O. erano la principale fam. dei Capitanei di Locarno"; castles of SS. Abbondio e Biagio, Gordola and the castelletto of Ascona; lands in the Onsernone, Centovalli, Vallemaggia and Gambarogno). ↩
4. Daniela Pauli Falconi, "Muralto, Martino", DSS, version of 5 February 2009, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/015382/> (doctorate in law at Pavia, ducal podestà of Vigevano and probably of Luino); Crivelli, "Duno, Taddeo" (above) (doctorate in medicine at Pavia 1547–1548).
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