

Masters Abroad: Emigrant Builders, Artists and the Economy of Remittances — overview and summary

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Among the regions that supplied early modern Europe with its builders, the shores of the lakes of Lugano and Como occupy a place out of all proportion to their size. From the villages of the Sottoceneri (the part of Ticino south of the Monte Ceneri pass), from the Val d'Intelvi and from the Mendrisiotto came the architects who raised the obelisk in front of St Peter's, completed the nave and façade of the basilica and designed the most daring churches of Baroque Rome. The same villages sent stucco-workers to Salzburg and Passau and stonemasons to Genoa and Venice. One of their sons became the founding architect of the new city of St Petersburg. The upper valleys of the Sopraceneri, meanwhile, sent thousands of anonymous men and boys who swept chimneys in Milan, roasted chestnuts in the streets of Lombard cities or carried loads in the ports. This chapter asks how these two emigrations, the celebrated and the humble, were organized, how the money they earned came back across the Alps and the lakes, and what that return flow did to the villages that sent them.

The argument of the chapter is that the territory of today's Canton of Ticino learnt to live from exported skill long before it lived from imported capital. Its principal product in the early modern period was trained labour. Its most valuable asset was the reputation of its masters in distant courts and cities. The income from that asset had to be secured by contracts concluded far from home, transferred by bills of exchange and couriers, and converted by notaries into houses, land, dowries, chapels and legacies. In the process the emigrant families developed practices that a modern private banker, trustee or family office would recognize: the management of a dispersed family, the control of assets across jurisdictions, the separation of the family's name and credit from any single place as well as the careful use of documents to protect absent owners.

The chapter builds on Chapter A.I, which describes the territory up to 1500, and Chapter A.II, which covers the Confederate bailiwicks and their public finance. It leaves the Gotthard transit trade, the carriers and the forwarding agents to Chapter A.IV and the nineteenth-century emigration to the Americas and Australia, with its deposits in the first Ticinese banks, largely to Chapter C.IV. The final section draws the line from the emigrant economy of the lakes to the legal instruments with which Swiss practitioners today serve families whose members and assets are spread across several countries.

1 Conclusion

For several centuries the territory of today's Ticino earned a large part of its income abroad. The builders of the lake villages, from the Campionesi of the twelfth century to the architects of St Petersburg and Moscow in the nineteenth, sold their skill to popes, emperors, kings and abbots across Europe. The men and boys of the upper valleys sold their labour as chimney-sweeps, chestnut-roasters, porters and waiters in the cities of the plain. Both emigrations were organized through family workshops and village networks, supported by confraternities abroad and secured by contracts and notarial acts at home.

The money they earned came home as coin, as bills of exchange and through merchants, carriers and fellow villagers. It was converted into houses, land, churches, chapels, dowries and loans, which shaped the villages of the Sottoceneri and the valleys of the Sopraceneri to this day. It also created a legal culture of powers of attorney, undivided family communities, wills and entails, through which families managed property across distance and time. Most of this capital stayed in land and in the church, and its transformation into financial capital came only with the banks of the nineteenth century.

The line from this economy to the modern financial centre runs through legal functions and a professional culture, since few of the old institutions survived intact. Swiss law still ties citizens to their place of origin, recognizes undivided family communities and family foundations for the endowment of children, and gives Swiss citizens abroad access to Swiss jurisdiction over their estates. Modern families with members and assets in several countries face the problems that the emigrant families of the lakes addressed with the instruments of their time. The next chapter turns from the export of skill to the other economic foundation of the territory, the transit trade across the Gotthard and the credit it required.

2 In five sentences

From the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century, the villages around the lakes of Lugano and Como exported builders, sculptors, stucco-workers and painters, while the upper valleys of the Sopraceneri sent chimney-sweeps, chestnut-roasters and other workers to the cities of Italy and Europe. Masters such as Domenico Fontana, Carlo Maderno, Francesco Borromini and Domenico Trezzini built some of the most important monuments of Rome and St Petersburg, working through family workshops and the confraternities of the Lombard nation. Their earnings came home as coin, as bills of exchange and through merchants and fellow villagers, and they were invested in houses, land, churches, dowries and village credit. Notaries, powers of attorney, undivided family communities and entails allowed the emigrant families to manage property across distance and generations. These practices anticipate the functions of the instruments with which Swiss practitioners today serve families whose members and assets are spread across several countries.

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