

Merchants, carriers and fellow villagers

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Between the extremes of carrying coins and buying bills there was a range of intermediate arrangements. Merchants from Lugano, Como and the lake villages who traded in Milan, Genoa or Venice acted as bankers for their fellow villagers. They accepted money abroad and paid the equivalent at home, or they bought goods abroad with the emigrant's money and sold them at home.¹ The carriers and forwarding agents of the Gotthard and Lake Maggiore routes, discussed in Chapter A.IV, also carried money and letters. A master returning home would take money and letters from his fellow workers and deliver them to their families. The notarial registers of the Sottoceneri contain many receipts in which a wife or father acknowledges having received a sum "per mano di" (by the hand of) a named fellow villager.

The letters that accompanied these transfers are among the most valuable sources for the history of the emigration. They contain instructions on the purchase of land, the payment of debts, the marriage of daughters, the education of sons and the construction of houses. For the nineteenth century the historian Giorgio Cheda alone recovered and catalogued thousands of letters sent by emigrants to their families in Ticino, and Piero Bianconi's *Albero genealogico* (1969) turned the letters of a few emigrants into a family chronicle.² They also show the tensions of a dispersed family. Husbands abroad complained about the management of their property, wives at home complained about delays in remittances, and relatives disputed the division of inheritances. In a very direct sense these letters are the correspondence between a principal abroad and his agents at home, and they reveal the practical difficulties of controlling assets from a distance.

1 Houses, palaces and the display of success

The most visible use of emigrant money was the house. The villages of the Luganese and the Mendrisiotto are full of houses and small palaces built or

enlarged with money earned abroad. They are often decorated with stucco and frescoes by the owners themselves or their relatives, and some bear inscriptions recording the builder's career.³ In Bissone the Casa Tencalla, which stands on the site of a medieval castle, bears the name of a family whose architects, sculptors, painters and stucco-workers found employment in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Vienna, Moravia, Poland, Bavaria, Rome, Venice and as far as Vilnius.⁴ In the Collina d'Oro the families who had worked in Moscow and St Petersburg in the nineteenth century spent part of their earnings at home, as the chapel of S. Pietro at Gentilino, built by Domenico Gilardi after his return in 1832, still shows.

The house had several functions. It was a dwelling for the family at home and a place of retirement for the returning master. It was also a store of value, a security for loans and an investment that could be divided among heirs. Above all, it was a statement of the family's success and creditworthiness in the village. A master who built a fine house signalled to potential partners, clients and in-laws that he was successful abroad. In a society in which reputation was capital, the house was a form of advertising as well as an asset.

2 Notes

1. See Chapter A.IV; Ceschi (cited above). ↩
2. Repubblica e Cantone Ticino, OltreconfiniTI, "Testi di riferimento" (cited above). ↩
3. Inventario delle cose d'arte e di antichità and the art guides of the Società di storia dell'arte in Svizzera (SSAS/GSK) for the Canton of Ticino. ↩
4. Dizionario storico della Svizzera, "Tencalla", <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/fr/articles/047924/> (family of Bissone with many builders and artists active in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Vienna, Moravia, Poland, Bavaria, Lombardy, Rome, Venice and Vilnius); for the medieval castle on the site of the Casa Tencalla, Wikipedia (used as a last resort), "Bissone", <https://en.wikipedia.com/wiki/Bissone>. ↩

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