

The Italian Reformation and its Swiss network

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The Locarnese community was one node in a network of Italian Protestants that stretched, in the middle decades of the sixteenth century, from Naples, Lucca and Venice to Geneva, Basel, Zurich, Strasbourg, Heidelberg, Poland and Transylvania. The network was held together by a shared language, by correspondence, by printing and by the movement of persons. It was also shaped by the law of the jurisdictions in which its members found refuge. Seen from the perspective of this book, it was also an early example of a phenomenon that recurs throughout the history of Swiss financial centres: the arrival from Italy of educated and mobile people who brought with them skills, contacts and capital, and who chose their place of settlement according to the legal protection it offered.

1 1542: the turning point

The decisive date was 1542. In that year Pope Paul III reorganized the Roman Inquisition as a central congregation of cardinals with jurisdiction over heresy throughout Italy. The Italian reform movement of the 1530s became, almost overnight, a movement of fugitives.¹ Bernardino Ochino, summoned to Rome, fled to Geneva. Pietro Martire Vermigli left Lucca, where he had been prior of San Frediano for fifteen months, and went to Strasbourg by way of Zurich and Basel.² Celio Secondo Curione, a Piedmontese humanist who had taught in several Italian towns under the shadow of the Inquisition, left Italy in the same year.³ The historical dictionary notes that numerous Italians from Lucca, Genoa, Cremona and Milan fled to Switzerland after the reintroduction of the Inquisition in 1542.

The Locarnese community had formed before 1542 and was not itself a refugee community until 1555. It nevertheless benefited from the flight of others. Exiles from Milan and Piedmont joined it, while its leaders were in contact with the most prominent fugitives. Beccaria's friendship with

Pietro Carnesecchi, who remained in Italy and was eventually executed, linked Locarno to the circle of Italian evangelism that had gathered around Juan de Valdés in Naples and around Cardinal Reginald Pole in Viterbo.⁴ When the Locarnese themselves had to leave, the network that had passed through their town received them.

2 Geneva and the merchant families of Lucca

Geneva was the largest Swiss destination of the Italian refugees. Ochino served for three years as pastor of its Italian-speaking congregation after 1542.⁵ Between 1549 and 1587 the city admitted about 8,000 Protestant refugees of all origins, of whom about 3,000 settled permanently, at a time when the city's population was of the order of 10,000.⁶ Among the Italians the families from Lucca were the most important for the city's later economy. The Burlamaqui, Diodati, Micheli and Calandrini established themselves among Geneva's leading families and, together with the Turretini who arrived later, contributed to the silk industry, international trade and the banking networks that the Geneva volume describes.⁷ The Lucchese refugees resemble the Locarnese in their social profile: urban, educated, commercial and mobile, with connections that extended to Lyon, Antwerp and the Italian trading centres.

The comparison also shows the difference between the two cities. Geneva was an independent republic whose council could admit refugees as it wished, subject only to the resistance of its own citizens. Zurich was a member of a confederation whose federal institutions had just ordered the expulsion of the Locarnese. Both cities faced guild opposition to the newcomers and admitted refugees selectively to citizenship. Geneva's refuge was larger by an order of magnitude, partly because of the city's proximity to France and partly because of Calvin's deliberate policy of attracting educated co-religionists.

3 Notes

1. Tosato-Rigo, "Protestantische Glaubensflüchtlinge" (above) (reintroduction of the Inquisition in 1542; "Zahlreiche Italiener aus Lucca, Genua, Cremona und Mailand"). Bull Licet ab initio of 21 July 1542. ↩
2. Castaldo, "Peter Martyr Vermigli" (above). Route by way of Zurich and Basel. ↩

3. Peter Hughes, "Celio Secondo Curione", Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography, <https://uudb.org/?p=1928> (flight to Switzerland in 1542). ↩
4. Campi, "Lutero e la Riforma a Sud delle Alpi" (above) (friendship with Carnesecchi). Rotondò, "Carnesecchi, Pietro" (above) (member of Valdés's circle in Naples in 1540; at Viterbo with Pole in 1541–1542). ↩
5. Campi, "Ochino, Bernardino" (above). ↩
6. Tosato-Rigo, "Protestantische Glaubensflüchtlinge" (above) (about 8,000 admitted 1549–1587, about 3,000 settled, some 30 per cent of the population). ↩
7. "Protestant refugees in Switzerland", Wikipedia (English), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protestant_refugees_in_Switzerland (Burlamaqui, Diodati, Micheli and Calandrini from Lucca). See the Geneva volume. Arrival of the Turretini (1592). ↩

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