

The landfogto: office, income and the purchase of power

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The central figure of Confederate government in the south was the *landfogto* (in German *Landvogt*, in the Italian documents also *balivo*, *commissario* or *capitano*), the governor appointed by one of the ruling cantons for a fixed term. He was the representative of the sovereigns, the head of the administration, the commander of the militia, the guardian of public order and, above all, the chief judge of the bailiwick. His personal economics shaped the whole system. A number of *landfogti*, especially those from the rural cantons, regarded the office as an investment and tried to recover the capital they had spent on obtaining it from the revenue of the bailiwick within their two years.¹

1 Appointment, rotation and term

In the bailiwicks of the twelve cantons the office rotated in a fixed order among the coowners. When a canton's turn came, its own authorities chose the *landfogto*: in the city cantons (Zurich, Bern, Lucerne, Basel, Fribourg, Solothurn, Schaffhausen) usually the Small or the Great Council, in the rural cantons with a *Landsgemeinde* (Uri, Schwyz, Unterwalden, Glarus, Zug) often the assembly itself.² The term was two years. At the end of his term the *landfogto* rendered account and handed over to his successor. In the Leventina Uri appointed the governor for three years, and from 1660 for four, while in Bellinzona, the Riviera and Blenio the three cantons rotated the office among themselves on a two-year cycle.³

The short term was intended to prevent any governor from building a personal power base among the subjects and to distribute the benefits of office among the ruling cantons and their families. Its effect on the quality of government was less happy. A *landfogto* sent from north of the Alps could hardly be expected to know the local statutes and had little incentive to invest in lasting improvements. Continuity was provided by local

officials who served for long periods, some of them for life, and whose knowledge of the law and of the people gave them considerable informal power.⁴

2 The local apparatus: luogotenente, cancelliere and fiscale

The *landfogto* governed through a small staff recruited on the spot. In Lugano he was assisted by a lieutenant whom he appointed himself, a *landscriba* (in German *Landschreiber*, the clerk of the bailiwick), two *fiscali* and two *cancellieri*, all of them natives of the bailiwick.⁵ The *landscriba* and the *cancellieri* kept the registers, drafted judgments and ordinances and advised a governor who rarely knew the local law. The men who held these offices for long periods knew the bailiwick and its statutes far better than any governor sent from the north. The *luogotenente* (lieutenant) was a local notable who deputized for the *landfogto*, sat with him in court and represented him in his absence. The *fiscale* (fiscal procurator) prosecuted offences on behalf of the sovereigns and supervised the collection of fines. Constables, messengers and gaolers completed the staff.

The distribution of offices between outsiders and locals created a structure of mutual dependence. The *landfogto* needed the local officials to govern, while they needed his favour to keep their posts and fees. Leading families of Lugano, Locarno and Mendrisio built their position on these intermediary functions, as notaries, lieutenants, procurators and lessees of revenue, and on the connections with the ruling cantons that such functions brought. Joint commercial ventures and military careers cemented these ties with the leading families of the ruling cantons, ties that complex marriage strategies often sealed. Several of these families reappear in the nineteenth century among the lawyers, politicians and bankers of the new canton (Chapters C.I and C.IV).⁶

3 Notes

1. Holenstein, "Baliaggi comuni" (above): "Apprezzamenti negativi suscita invece il comportamento di alcuni balivi dei cant. rurali, che durante il periodo in carica cercavano di ammortizzare il capitale speso per farsi nominare con gli introiti del baliaggio"; Hörsch, "Balivo" (above), on the functions of the office. ↩
2. Holenstein, "Baliaggi comuni" (above), according to which the *landfogto* was "eletto ogni due anni dal Consiglio o dalla Landsgemeinde del cant. cui spettava, secondo un'alternanza prestabilita, questo diritto"; Hörsch, "Balivo" (above); Peyer,

Verfassungsgeschichte (above). The method of election differed from canton to canton and changed over time. ↩

3. Fransioli and Locarnini, "Leventina" (above); Chiesi and Crivelli, "Bellinzona (pieve, baliaggio, distretto)" (above); Holenstein, "Gemeine Herrschaften" (above), on the two-year rotation in a fixed order among the ruling cantons. ↩
4. Paolo Ostinelli, section "Sotto il dominio confederato", in Carlo Agliati et al., "Ticino (cantone)", in DSS, version of 24 October 2022, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/007394/> ("la lunga durata in carica degli ufficiali del Magnifico ufficio (spesso a vita) permise di controllare le situazioni locali"). See also Ceschi (ed.), *Storia della Svizzera italiana dal Cinquecento al Settecento* (above). ↩
5. Negro, "Lugano (pieve, baliaggio, distretto)" (above): "In carica per due anni, il balivo era assistito da un luogotenente, da lui stesso nominato, un landscriba, due fiscali e due cancellieri, tutti autoctoni." ↩
6. Ostinelli, "Sotto il dominio confederato" (above), according to which the long tenure of the officials of the Magnifico ufficio allowed them "di allacciare solide relazioni con le famiglie confederate" and the relations between the wealthiest local families and these Confederate houses "furono cementati da comuni imprese economiche (soprattutto attività commerciali) e dalla carriera militare, e si manifestarono non di rado in complesse strategie matrimoniali". See also Marco Schnyder, *Famiglie e potere. Il ceto dirigente di Lugano e Mendrisio tra Sei e Settecento* (Bellinzona: Casagrande, 2011). ↩

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