

The Milanese economy as hinterland

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The duchy that governed the Ticinese territories was one of the most productive economies of fifteenth-century Europe. Milan itself probably reached about 100,000 inhabitants at the beginning of the fourteenth century and counted more than 120,000 at the end of the fifteenth, which placed it among the largest cities of the continent.¹ Its workshops produced arms and armour that were sold across Europe, woollen cloth, fustians of cotton and linen, and from the fifteenth century silk. Galeazzo Maria Sforza promoted silk manufacture and from 1468 the planting of mulberry trees in the Lombard countryside, measures that helped to lay the foundation for the Lombard silk economy of the following centuries.² The plain south of Milan was transformed by irrigation canals, meadows and new crops, among them rice, which was cultivated in Lombardy from the second half of the fifteenth century.

For the Ticinese districts this economy was a market and an employer. It bought their timber, charcoal, stone, cattle and cheese. It employed their builders, stonemasons and carters, and it supplied the grain that the mountain valleys could not produce. It also set the standards of commercial practice: double-entry bookkeeping, bills of exchange, partnerships and insurance contracts were in daily use among Milanese merchants, and the more ambitious traders of Lugano, Locarno and Bellinzona learnt them in Milan.³ The Milanese hinterland thus shaped the economic horizon of the territory in the same way that the metropolitan economy of Lombardy shapes the business of Lugano's banks and trading houses today (see Chapter H.I).

1 The Sforza and the end of the duchy's independence

Filippo Maria died without a legitimate son in 1447. After three years of the short-lived Ambrosian Republic, the condottiere Francesco Sforza, who had married Filippo Maria's natural daughter Bianca Maria, took

Milan in 1450 and founded a new ducal dynasty.⁴ The Sforza period brought a generation of relative peace, the growth of Milanese banking and industry and an intense diplomatic activity in which the Confederates played an increasing role. Francesco's son Galeazzo Maria was murdered in 1476, and power passed to Ludovico Sforza, called *il Moro*, first as regent for his nephew and from 1494 as duke. Ludovico's alliance with the Confederates and his conflict with France shaped the last decade of the fifteenth century.⁵

In 1499 the armies of Louis XII of France conquered the duchy. Ludovico recovered Milan briefly in early 1500 with the help of Swiss mercenaries, but in April 1500 he was betrayed and captured at Novara. The duchy then passed under French control.⁶ The fall of the Sforza opened the way for the final Confederate advance into the Ticinese territories. Bellinzona placed itself under the protection of Uri, Schwyz and Nidwalden in 1500, and in the following years the Confederates took Lugano, Locarno, Mendrisio and the Vallemaggia. This is where Chapter A.II takes up the story.

2 Notes

1. Treccani, *Enciclopedia Italiana*, art. "Milano", [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/milano_\(Enciclopedia-Italiana\)/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/milano_(Enciclopedia-Italiana)/) ("toccando probabilmente i 100 mila abitanti ai primi del Trecento, e contandone oltre 120 mila alla fine del secolo XV"). Estimates for medieval Milan vary considerably in the literature. ↩
2. Treccani, *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, art. "Galeazzo Maria Sforza, duca di Milano", [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/galeazzo-maria-sforza-duca-di-milano_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/galeazzo-maria-sforza-duca-di-milano_(Dizionario-Biografico)/), on the promotion of silk and mulberry cultivation in 1468–1469. ↩
3. Raymond de Roover, *The Rise and Decline of the Medici Bank, 1397–1494* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963). ↩
4. Treccani, *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, art. "Francesco I Sforza, duca di Milano", [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/francesco-i-sforza-duca-di-milano_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/francesco-i-sforza-duca-di-milano_(Dizionario-Biografico)/) (death of Filippo Maria on 13 August 1447, marriage to Bianca Maria on 24 October 1441, entry into Milan in February–March 1450); DSS, art. "Sforza", <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/025583/>. ↩
5. Treccani, *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, art. "Galeazzo Maria Sforza" (above): murdered in the church of Santo Stefano in Milan on 26 December 1476; DSS, art. "Sforza" (above). ↩

6. DSS, art. "Italia, guerre d'",
<https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/008893/2024-02-05/>, on the French
conquest of Milan in September 1499 and the events to 1516. ↩

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