

Three capitals for one canton, 1803–1881

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The rivalry between the towns of Ticino had prevented the union of the two Helvetic cantons in 1801 and 1802. The Act of Mediation had settled the question of the capital only provisionally by naming Bellinzona as the chief town. The constitution of 1814 found a solution that satisfied every town and no administrator. For more than six decades the government and the parliament of the canton moved every six years, with their archives, officials and furniture, among Bellinzona, Locarno and Lugano. The arrangement tells much about the politics of the young canton. Its end in 1878 was one of the conditions of a modern administration.

1 The rule of rotation

The constitution of 1814 provided: "Il Gran Consiglio ed il Consiglio di Stato risiedono alternativamente per anni sei nelle città di Bellinzona, Lugano e Locarno", the Grand Council and the Council of State reside alternately for six years in the towns of Bellinzona, Lugano and Locarno. Decided by lot, the order of rotation survived the reform of 1830 unchanged.¹ The rotation reflected the balance of power among three towns of comparable size, each the centre of a former bailiwick, each with its own notables and each unwilling to accept the permanent primacy of another. Bellinzona had the castles and the position at the junction of the valleys, Lugano had the largest population and the strongest commerce, and Locarno had the lake, the old noble families and a claim to the Sopraceneri west of the Ticino. None could prevail, and so all three governed in turn. Period Seat of government 1803–1815 Bellinzona 1815–1821 Bellinzona 1821–1827 Locarno 1827–1833 Lugano 1833–1839 Bellinzona 1839–1845 Locarno 1845–1851 Lugano 1851–1857 Bellinzona 1857–1863 Locarno 1863–1869 Lugano 1869–1875 Bellinzona 1875–1881 Locarno from 1881 Bellinzona (permanent)

The table follows the periods given in the cantonal school journal, which lists the sixyear terms of the three towns from 1815 and records that Bellinzona became the permanent seat from 1881 "per chiara volontà popolare espressa nel 1878", by the clear popular will expressed in 1878.²

2 Palaces, convents and rents

Each town had to house the government during its turn. The solutions show the material poverty of the young state. In Bellinzona the government first used a Benedictine convent opposite the collegiate church and then the convent of the Ursulines. From 1833 it rented the house of Bernardo Bonzanigo, a former Augustinian convent, for 3,000 lire a year. In 1848 the Ursuline convent became state property and served from then on as the seat of government. In Locarno the authorities used rooms in the convent of San Francesco until, from 1839, they leased a new palace built to designs by the architect Giuseppe Pioda. In Lugano the government first rented the villa *al Castello* belonging to Bishop Modesto Farina for 3,440 lire and then moved into the present Palazzo Civico, designed by the Milanese architect Giacomo Moraglia and completed in 1844.

The rotation was expensive. Every six years archives had to be moved over the Monte Ceneri and officials had to change their residence, at a cost to administrative continuity. Yet the arrangement distributed the economic benefits of the capital, such as rents, inns, lawyers' business and the presence of officials, among the three towns and forced the elites of all regions to meet on each other's ground. For a canton whose unity rested on a constitution, with little shared history behind it, these were real advantages.

3 Notes

1. Mondada, "Bellinzona da cent'anni capitale stabile del Cantone", Scuola ticinese, no. 61, https://m4.ti.ch/fileadmin/DECS/DS/Rivista_scuola_ticinese/ST_n.61/ST_61_Mondada_Bellinzona_da_cento_anni_capitale_stabile_del_Cantone.pdf. ↩

2. "Le residenze governative nelle tre capitali", Scuola ticinese, no. 65, plate 16, https://m4.ti.ch/fileadmin/DECS/DS/Rivista_scuola_ticinese/ST_n.65/ST_65_tavola_16_residenze_governative_nelle_tre_capitali.pdf. Two obvious misprints in the digital text (1933, 1921) are corrected from the sequence of terms. ↩

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