

Trade on the lake and the road to the passes

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The economic position of Locarno rested on the lake. Since the twelfth century the town had held market privileges: Frederick Barbarossa granted a market in 1164, and in 1186 the inhabitants received the status of imperial immediacy, which placed them directly under the emperor.¹ Locarno lay on the routes that connected Lombardy with the Swiss and German towns by way of the Lake Maggiore, Bellinzona and the passes. It imported grain and salt and exported timber and livestock down the Verbano towards Italy, while its merchants dealt with Milan, Como and the towns of the lake shore. Chapter A.IV has followed this transit economy along the Gotthard route. For the purpose of this chapter it matters that the Locarnese elite was used to commercial relations with both sides of the Alps, to bills of exchange and to agents in distant towns. These habits made emigration conceivable. They also explain why the exiles of 1555 were able to sell, transfer and reinvest part of their property within a few years.

The town was not large. In 1591, more than three decades after the exile, the parish counted 3,725 inhabitants. The historical dictionary records a marked fall of population in the sixteenth century that it attributes to the religious emigration and to the plague of 1576 and 1577.² A community of one or two hundred persons was therefore a significant share of the urban elite, even if it was a small share of the population of the district. Its departure altered the composition of the town's leading families for generations.

1 The church in Locarno before the Reformation

Ecclesiastically Locarno belonged to the diocese of Como, while the three valleys of Leventina, Blenio and Riviera further to the north-east, the *Tre Valli ambrosiane*, belonged to the Church of Milan and followed the Ambrosian rite.³ The principal church of the *pieve* was the old *plebana* of San Vittore at Muralto, outside the town, while the Franciscans

maintained the church and convent of San Francesco, founded in the early thirteenth century, in the town itself.⁴ The bishops of Como resided far away and visited rarely, so that the pastoral care of the district depended on canons, friars and chaplains whose education and conduct varied. The ruling cantons, for their part, had no common church policy for the bailiwicks until the confessional division of the Confederation forced them to adopt one. In the 1530s, when the first traces of Reformed preaching appear, the town therefore had an ecclesiastical structure that was distant and weak at the top together with a lay elite that was educated, mobile and in contact with the Italian and Swiss centres of learning.

2 Twelve rulers and two faiths

The twelve cantons that shared the sovereignty over Locarno were the original thirteen cantons of the Confederation without Appenzell. After the Reformation they were divided. Zurich, Bern, Basel and Schaffhausen had adopted the Reformed faith, Glarus was confessionally mixed, and Lucerne, Uri, Schwyz, Unterwalden, Zug, Fribourg and Solothurn remained Catholic.⁵ A *landfogto* from Zurich or Basel could therefore govern a Catholic town for two years and be succeeded by one from Uri or Lucerne. Every decision that touched religion in the bailiwick had to be taken jointly, and every joint decision required a compromise between a Catholic majority and a Reformed minority that included the two most powerful cantons of the Confederation. This constitutional arrangement made the fate of a few dozen Locarnese families a federal question.

3 Notes

1. Janke and Huber, "Locarno (comune)" (above) (market privilege of 1164 and imperial immediacy of 1186; "L. divenne un fiorentino centro di traffici mercantili"; imports of cereals and salt, exports of timber and livestock via the Verbano). ↩
2. Janke and Huber, "Locarno (comune)" (above) (3,725 inhabitants of the parish in 1591; "La pop. di L. conobbe una forte diminuzione nel XVI sec."). ↩
3. Giuseppe Chiesi and Paolo Ostinelli, "Ticino (cantone)", section on the Middle Ages, DSS, version of 14 March 2017, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/007394/> (the emperor Henry II assigned the ecclesiastical districts of Bellinzona and Locarno to the diocese of Como in 1002/1004; in 948 Atto of Vercelli gave his possessions in Blenio and the Leventina to the Church of Milan, "dando così origine alla signoria capitolare sulle Tre Valli Ambrosiane"). For the sixteenth century see

also Raffaello Ceschi (ed.), *Storia della Svizzera italiana dal Cinquecento al Settecento* (Bellinzona: Casagrande, 2000), and Chapter A.I. ↩

4. Janke and Huber, "Locarno (comune)" (above) (the church of San Francesco "fondata, insieme all'annesso convento, all'inizio del XIII sec."; in 1816 Sant'Antonio received "le prerogative e i titoli dell'antica plebana di S. Vittore di Muralto"). See also Ceschi (ed.), *Storia della Svizzera italiana dal Cinquecento al Settecento* (above). ↩
5. Chapter A.II, section on the confession and balance of the ruling cantons; Hans Conrad Peyer, *Verfassungsgeschichte der alten Schweiz* (Zurich: Schulthess, 1978). ↩

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