

Two cantons of the Helvetic Republic, 1798–1803

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The Helvetic Republic was the first state in which the inhabitants of the former bailiwicks were citizens with equal rights. It was also a state that most of them came to dislike. Its constitution, drafted by the Basel politician Peter Ochs on the model of the French Directorial constitution of 1795, rested on equality before the law, popular sovereignty and the separation of powers. It treated the cantons as administrative districts of a single, indivisible republic.¹ For the south of the Alps this meant a complete institutional break. The new order abolished the offices of the bailiffs, the syndicate of the ruling cantons and the appeal to the Diet, all of which Chapter A.II has described, and replaced them with prefects, administrative chambers and national legislative councils. It also introduced direct taxes and compulsory military service, which turned the gratitude of 1798 into resentment within a year.

1 A unitary state in the south: prefects and chambers

The French generals and the Helvetic authorities first planned to unite the former Italian bailiwicks into one canton. They failed, and two cantons were created on 14 April 1798.² The Canton of Bellinzona comprised the former bailiwicks of Bellinzona, the Leventina, the Riviera and Blenio, roughly the upper part of the later canton (the Sopraceneri without the Locarnese). The Canton of Lugano comprised the four former common lordships of the twelve cantons: Lugano, Mendrisio, Locarno and the Vallemaggia.³ The boundary thus followed the old division between the bailiwicks of the three original cantons and those of the twelve, which Chapter A.II has traced back to the conquests of 1500 and 1512–1513. It did not follow the natural division at the Monte Ceneri between the Sopraceneri and the Sottoceneri.

Each canton had little autonomy. Power lay with a five-member administrative chamber (*camera amministrativa*, German

Verwaltungskammer) and a government prefect (*prefetto nazionale*, German *Regierungsstatthalter*) appointed by the Helvetic Directory. In Lugano the first prefect was Giacomo Buonvicini, followed in 1799 by Francesco Capra, then by Giuseppe Franzoni and Pietro Frasca. In Bellinzona Giuseppe Antonio Rusconi held the office with extended powers until he was replaced by Giacomo Antonio Sacchi in October 1801.⁴ The Helvetic constitution gave each canton seats in the two national chambers, the Senate and the Grand Council. The DSS records that the Canton of Bellinzona sent two members to the Senate and eight deputies to the Helvetic Grand Council.⁵ For the first time the former subjects sat in a legislature with the representatives of Zurich, Bern and Uri on equal terms. The seat of that legislature moved from Aarau to Lucerne in September 1798 and to Bern in May 1799, so that the deputies from the south travelled further than any others.⁶

2 Notes

1. Fankhauser, "Helvetische Republik" (above). ↩
2. Businger (above). ↩
3. Negro, "Lugano (Kanton)" (above); Daniela Pauli Falconi, "Bellinzone (canton)", DHS, version of 25 November 2009, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/fr/articles/008636/>. ↩
4. Negro (above); Pauli Falconi (above); "Periodo della Repubblica elvetica" (above). ↩
5. Pauli Falconi (above). Fankhauser, "Helvetische Republik" (above), gives four senators and eight members of the Grand Council per canton as the general rule. ↩
6. Fankhauser, "Helvetische Republik" (above). ↩

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