

Valleys and passes

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North of the Ceneri the land rises quickly. The Leventina, the valley of the Ticino river, leads up to the Gotthard pass at 2,106 metres. The Blenio valley leads to the Lucomagno (Lukmanier) pass at about 1,915 metres and into the Rhine valley of Graubünden. The Riviera, the short stretch of the Ticino valley between Biasca and Bellinzona, collects the traffic of both. West of Bellinzona the Maggia valley and its side valleys reach into high mountains, while the Mesolcina, which carries the road to the San Bernardino pass, belongs to Graubünden and never formed part of Ticino.¹ The highest summit of the canton, the Adula or Rheinwaldhorn, reaches 3,402 metres, so that the canton spans more than 3,200 metres of altitude within a distance of less than one hundred kilometres.²

The passes are the reason why a region so small and so poor in arable land acquired an importance out of proportion to its population. The Lucomagno and the San Bernardino were already in use in the early Middle Ages. The Gotthard became a through route only in the thirteenth century, after the gorge of the Schöllenen on the northern side had been made passable. From then on the Leventina, the Riviera and Bellinzona lay on the shortest line between the upper Rhine and Milan. The valley communities thereby acquired an income from portage, tolls and the provisioning of travellers that they could not have earned from agriculture alone.³

1 A territory without a centre

The territory of today's canton had no natural capital. Lugano looked south to Como, Locarno looked down Lake Maggiore towards Milan, Bellinzona guarded the valleys, while the upper valleys dealt directly with the passes and, from the fourteenth century, with Uri. Until 1798 there was no institution that gathered these places into one polity, and even after 1803 the canton rotated its seat of government among Bellinzona, Locarno and

Lugano until Bellinzona became the permanent capital in 1878 (see Chapter C.I).⁴ The absence of a single centre explains why the medieval history of the region must be written as the history of several districts that happened to share a language, a church culture and a dependence on Lombard markets.

In figures. The Canton of Ticino covers about 2,812 km² and spans more than 3,200 metres of altitude. Lake Maggiore lies at about 193 m, the lowest point of Switzerland, while Lake Lugano lies at about 271 m. The Monte Ceneri saddle is about 554 m high, the Gotthard pass 2,106 m and the Lucomagno about 1,915 m. Until 1878 the canton had three capitals in rotation.⁵

2 Notes

1. DSS, art. "Lucomagno, passo del", <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/008812/> (altitude 1,915 m; in use from the early Middle Ages). The Mesolcina (Misox) belonged to the lords of Sax-Misox and passed to the Grey League; it is part of the Canton of Graubünden. ↩
2. DSS, art. "Sopraceneri" (above), giving the range from 193 m at Lake Maggiore to 3,402 m at the Adula. The summit lies on the border between Ticino and Graubünden. ↩
3. DSS, art. "Gotthard", <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/007466/>, on the opening of the Schöllenen around 1200 and the role of the pass from the thirteenth century. ↩
4. DSS, art. "Bellinzona (comune)" (above), on the six-yearly rotation of the seat of government among Bellinzona, Locarno and Lugano until 1878; see Chapter C.I. ↩
5. DSS, art. "Ticino (cantone)" and art. "Sopraceneri"; DSS, art. "Lucomagno, passo del"; Wikipedia, "Monte Ceneri Pass", "Lake Maggiore", "Lake Lugano" and "Gotthard Pass" (all above or below); DSS, art. "Bellinzona (comune)" (above). ↩

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