

What crossed the pass: grain, salt, rice, livestock, cheese, wine and cloth

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

The goods that moved between Lombardy and the Confederacy fall into two groups. Long-distance transit goods travelled the whole route between the Rhine and Milan or beyond: textiles, silk, spices, dyes, metalwork and arms. Regional goods moved over shorter distances between the Lombard plain, the southern valleys and the pastoral cantons of central Switzerland: grain, salt, rice, wine, livestock, cheese, butter and hides. The long-distance trade produced the tolls and made the Gotthard a European route. The regional trade fed the population of the Alps and determined the political relationship between the Confederates and Milan, because the mountain cantons could not live without Lombard grain and salt.¹

1 Grain

The inner cantons and the valleys south of the Alps did not produce enough grain to feed themselves. From the late Middle Ages the pastoral economy of central Switzerland specialized in cattle and dairy products and bought grain from Alsace and southern Germany in the north and from Lombardy in the south.² For Uri and the southern valleys, Lombardy was the nearer source. Grain was bought at the markets of Varese, Como, Luino and Arona and carried north over the Ceneri and up the Leventina. The Duchy of Milan, like other Italian states, regulated the export of grain through licences (*tratte*) and banned exports altogether in years of dearth. Access to Lombard grain was therefore a political question, and the capitulations between the Confederates and Milan obliged the Duchy to provide for the Confederates' supply of food, above all grain from the Po valley.³

Milan used this dependence as a lever. When relations with the Confederates were tense, the governors closed the *tratta* and the price of bread rose in Altdorf and Lucerne within weeks. The Confederates answered with threats to close the passes, to stop the export of cattle or to

withhold their mercenaries. The grain question explains why the inner cantons, which furnished troops to the Spanish crown, attached so much importance to the Spanish alliance of 1587 and its renewals: the alliance brought pensions and the assurance of grain.⁴ In the bailiwicks, grain supply was the responsibility of the communes and the *landfogto*, who could prohibit exports from the bailiwick in times of scarcity. Such prohibitions created a price gap between the bailiwick and Lombardy that invited smuggling in both directions, depending on which side was short.

2 Salt

Salt was the second strategic commodity. It was indispensable for the preservation of meat and cheese and for the feeding of cattle. The pastoral economy of the Alps consumed large quantities. None of the territories on the Gotthard route produced salt. Central Switzerland obtained salt from the salt works of Hall in Tyrol and of Reichenhall in Bavaria. The salt that reached the southern valleys was Mediterranean sea salt, much of it traded by Venice from its lagoon, Istria, Apulia, Sicily and Ibiza, and in the Duchy of Milan its sale was a state monopoly (*gabella del sale*).⁵ The monopoly price in the Duchy of Milan was high, because salt was one of the principal sources of state revenue. The treaties with Milan therefore provided that the Confederates and the bailiwicks could buy fixed quantities of salt at a fixed price for their own consumption while prohibiting the resale of that salt in Milanese territory.

The salt clauses produced a permanent source of friction. Salt bought cheaply under the treaty in Lugano or Mendrisio could be sold at the monopoly price a few kilometres away in Lombardy. The Milanese salt farmers complained constantly about the smuggling of treaty salt back into the Duchy.⁶ The pattern reappeared with every state monopoly that Milan introduced or tightened, most prominently tobacco in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

3 Notes

1. HLS, art. "Agrarmarkt" (Martin Illi, Alfred Zangger, Peter Moser, version of 09.04.2009), <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/013926/2009-04-09/>; "Rinder, Pferde, Milchprodukte, Trockenfleisch und Häute wurden vor allem in norditalienische Städte exportiert" and "Die Südschweiz bezog Reis und Getreide aus Oberitalien"; HLS, art. "Gotthardpass" (as above), on the exchange of cattle and cheese for grain, wine and rice. The list of long-distance transit goods: Schulte (as above), vol. 1. ↩

2. HLS, art. "Agrarmarkt" (as above): "Kornimporte ins Gebiet der heutigen Schweiz erfolgten hauptsächlich aus dem Elsass und aus Süddeutschland über Basel, Schaffhausen, Konstanz, Zürich und Luzern", and on the market-oriented cattle economy that developed in the Alpine and pre-Alpine regions, "früh vor allem in der Innerschweiz", from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries; HLS, art. "Gotthardpass" (as above), for the exchange of cattle and cheese for grain, wine and rice from the late Middle Ages. ↩
3. HLS, art. "Mailänder Kapitulat" (as above): Milan was to provide "für deren ausreichende Versorgung mit Lebensmitteln, vor allem Getreide aus der Poebene, [...] ebenso für die Zufuhr von Salz". The Milanese export licences (tratte). ↩
4. HLS, art. "Spagna" (Rudolf Bolzern, Italian translation Livia Taddei), <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/003372/>, on the alliance of 1587 with Uri, Schwyz, Unterwalden, Lucerne, Zug and Fribourg, its pensions and the supply of the Italian bailiwicks with salt and grain. See Chapter B.III. ↩
5. HLS, art. "Sale" (Jean-François Bergier, Italian translation Chiara Orelli Vassere, version of 12.03.2020), <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/014041/2020-03-12/>. The article states that salt from Tyrol (Hall) and Bavaria (Reichenhall) supplied eastern and central Switzerland and the Grisons, while salt obtained by Venice "dalla sua laguna, dall'Istria, dalla Puglia, dalla Sicilia" reached Ticino. The Milanese salt monopoly (gabella del sale). ↩
6. Ceschi (ed.), *Storia della Svizzera italiana dal Cinquecento al Settecento* (as above). ↩

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