

Places of trade: cities, fairs, markets in the Alps

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Short version

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This paper relates urban development in the Alps with an economic function that is usually attributed to cities: being a place of trade. The aim is to analyze the interaction between the evolution in trade relations and the development of urban centers by considering both common features and differences between various cities in the Alps. Critical revisions put forward by recent historiography are well taken into account.

The correlation between trade and urban development shows up in many different ways in the Alps. Also the types of trade involved are different: the alpine city may be only a catalyst for trade to its surrounding area, facilitating the interchange between the small cash crops available to the market in the primary sector and urban products and services. At a higher level, the urban trade organization may serve as an interface between some specific local productions, suitable for export outside the Alps (for example mining products, cattle, wood) and manufactured products or commodities (like corn) coming from the plains. In some cases, cities in the Alps are relevant places for long-distance trade between the mediterranean basin and central-northern Europe as they sit along the most important commercial pass routes, being sometimes at the heart of transportation facilities, infrastructures and management, and hosting significant events like fairs. Therefore, one cannot limit the analysis to the alpine area, as its commercial functions have long been based on the interaction with important centers in the plains.

Different variables help explaining the commercial role of the cities in the Alps in its various aspects. First of all, one shall consider the location with respect to the communication route. In an orographically complex context, like the Alps are, sitting nearby the confluence of relevant trade routes or being placed where significant discontinuities in the transportation infrastructures existed, lead to the establishment of specific trade services. With respect to this point, one shall also notice the institutional factors, which in many cases strongly influenced the cities' commercial role; for example when they enjoyed privileges or special franchises (duties, staple rights, free markets etc), by themselves or thanks to some political authority grants. The organization of production in the area, the availability of staples and commodities, or the presence of active and competent social forces are all important factors to be considered. As regards political and social implications of trading activities, the cities in the alpine and perialpine area show a varied outline, ranging from the

primary role that some tyrolean commercial groups had, at least in the XVIII sec, to marginal positions in some cases.

Some interesting remarks emerge from the analysis of the distribution of fairs and marketplaces in the principal regions of the late '700 southern Alps (Piemonte, Stato di Milano, Repubblica Veneta), through which we can compare type and frequency of marketplaces in the Alps and in the plains.

The analysis of localization, forms and modes of commercialization, involvement of the local populations, ties between trade, underlying economic relationships and institutional aspects allows us to gain interesting insights into the phenomenon of urban development in the alpine and perialpine area.