

# WHEN THE MOUNTAIN SERVES THE CITY: THE PRODUCTION OF CHEESE AND WOOL IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY BRESCIANO (ITALIAN ALPS)

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## Abstract

This article analyses the livestock holdings in the Alps, with a particular focus on the relationship between the city of Brescia and the neighbouring alpine valleys. Two economic activities are studied in more depth: cattle breeding for the production of cheese and sheep farming for the production of wool. In the first case, we observe that the cheese dealers of Brescia managed the production and marketed the final goods, since the cheese was largely exported. In the second case, the business was managed by local farmers who constituted a wealthy social class whose activities went beyond farming and include banking.

**Keywords:** eighteenth century, sheep-breeding, woollen industry, cheese production, Bresciano

The raising of livestock represents a very important activity in early modern Lombardy which played its part in reinforcing an already intense network of economic relationships between the mountain areas and the surrounding plain. Various studies have been dedicated to the raising of cattle and the production of milk and cheeses in the western part of the region, mainly because of the exceptional nature of the agriculture in the low Milanese plain (Romani 1977: 65–121, 207–24; Fumi 2003: 153–88). Indeed, the agriculture in this area had been amongst the most advanced in Europe since the Middle Ages and, at the end of the eighteenth century, had aroused the admiration of the great agronomist Arthur Young who, referring to the countryside between Milan and Lodi, wrote ‘to Lodi, through twenty miles of such amazing exertions in irrigation that we can have in England no idea of it’ (Young 1927: 233).

On the other hand, much less is known about the eastern part of Lombardy, at that time subject to Venice, despite the fact that cattle raising had a certain economic importance. The area around Brescia – the Bresciano – constitutes a case study which is significant not only because this is a province that consists, to a large extent, of pre-Alpine and Alpine villages (55 per cent of the surface of the province, that is, more than 2,500 km<sup>2</sup>, is in fact occupied by mountains, compared with 16 per cent of hillsides and only 29 per cent of plains), but also because the villages have provided a contribution of prime importance to the province’s economic success. Brescia’s own contribution to the commercial structure of its province, the consolidation of reserves for exchanges on a regional scale and the

development of local manufacturing activities seems to have been relatively small (Mocarelli 2002: 104–45).

In the study of the Brescian mountain areas, much attention has been paid to the manufacturing activities, in particular the production of iron and paper. Within the peninsula, the Bresciano occupied a prominent position in these activities, exploiting two factors to the full, which would ensure the success of many alpine economies: firstly, the ample supply of sources of energy, such as wood and waterfalls, and raw materials, such as iron ore – which gave them a distinct advantage over others in an age when communications were far from easy; secondly, the fact that they were able to count on the plentiful supply of highly skilled workers, from master foundry workers to master paper makers (Pfister 2002: 153–157).

However, much less attention has been paid to animal husbandry, despite the fact that it was, particularly in the Valcamonica, of notable importance. The reason for this lack depends without doubt on the difficulties of research and the fragmentary and debatable nature of available data (such as the Anagrafi promulgated by Venice, starting in 1766). In those statistics in fact, data relevant to dairy cattle are missing completely, while data relevant to working animals and sheep are of doubtful reliability.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, it is possible to deduce some considerations on farming in the Bresciano, in particular on two activities which depend on it, yet differ widely from each other in organization and economic horizons: cattle raising for the production of cheese and sheep farming for the production of wool. In fact, in the first case we will observe that the cheese dealers of Brescia managed the production and marketed the final goods. Indeed, the cheese was largely exported and the industry was thus shaped by the considerable financial outlay necessary for the establishment of a commercial network that requires substantial economies of scale. In the second case, the business was managed by local farmers who constituted a wealthy social class whose activities went beyond farming and included banking.

## **The Production of Wool**

The available data for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries indicate the presence in the Bresciano of considerable numbers of sheep, varying between 40,000 and 60,000, principally in the Valcamonica (according to a memorial dated 1662, there were as many as 100,000).<sup>2</sup> Sheep-breeding was firmly in the hands of breeders and shepherds in the high part of the Valcamonica, and was hardly oriented at all to cheese-making, but much more to the production of wool and meat. In addition, it was carried out by means of a double transhumance.

The sheep, which remained permanently in the high valley, passing the winters in the villages and the summers in pastures above 2,000 m (which are not used by cattle), numbered only a few thousand. The majority of the flocks were taken during the summer to alpine pastures in nearby areas, such as the Valtellina or the Trentino.

Every year on 1 October, they made their way towards the state of Milan, via the valley of the Po, a journey which took about 10 days, staying there until May.

During this winter to spring period, the shepherds were present at the birth of lambs, castrated the rams, produced, with milk which was not needed for feeding the lambs, cheeses which they used to pay the rent of the fields where they were staying and, above all, sheared the sheep and sold the wool. We are talking about a calendar and a centuries-old practice which began to go into crisis only about halfway through the nineteenth century with the transformation (in the capitalist sense) of agriculture in the Cremonese.

This area had been the destination of shepherds principally from the Valcamonica, but their flocks became progressively less welcome. Significantly, in an article on this subject, the *Corriere di Cremona* of 13 February 1900 wrote 'each year there are complaints and people protest against this veritable scourge which periodically descends on our plains'. The countryside was undergoing a rapid transformation to intensive farming, with heavy investment of capital in livestock, the large scale introduction of dairy farms and the establishment of efficient cheese factories (Berruti and Tognali 2001: 160–61).

The very endurance of organizational practices such as transhumance is certainly worthy of note and would suggest certain considerations. The first is that the need to organize a route for the transhumance towards the plain – which obliged shepherds to cover hundreds of kilometres, cross international borders and deal with the great landowners of the plain – required a nucleus of operators with both considerable managerial skills and ample financial resources. Is that the reason why sheep-breeding in the neighbouring high Valtellina was not developed in this way? Still more relevant is the question of when it all began – if it is indeed so important.

Our sources attest to a relatively late beginning of the practice, and that it was mainly due to external factors. It seems that the decision taken by the local council of Bormio at the end of the fifteenth century to rent out their abundant communal pastures to shepherds from other areas was fundamental in the development of sheep farming in the Valcamonica. In the period between 1491 and 1521 alone, at least 17 alpine pastures were rented out in Valfurva, a territory controlled by Bormio, but easily reached from the Valcamonica through the Gavia Pass. The availability of so much extra pasture land allowed the Valcamonica shepherds to increase their number of sheep. In 1476, in the areas of Dalegno, Vione and Sonico, roughly 9,000 sheep were counted. In 1573, the number had risen to 52,000 (Della Misericordia 2009: 214–18).

Obviously, this consistent growth raised the problem of caring for the animals during the winter, and this was solved by the transhumance towards the plain in the state of Milan. It is also clear that the availability of so much more pasture land than was already to be found in the Valcamonica is not the only explanation for this steady development. As pointed out by Massimo Della Misericordia (Della Misericordia 2009: 220–221), it was also due to the regular demand for wool, resulting from the growth and economic development of the cities in the Padana plain (the valley of the River Po), especially when the wars in Italy ended.

In fact, the production of woollen cloth in the Alpine area of the Bresciano has always been limited to articles of inferior quality and experienced a steady decline throughout the Modern Age. In the mid-eighteenth century, there were only about 40 looms, producing around 450 pieces per year, in the Valtrompia and the Valsabbia, while in the Valcamonica, just a couple of dozen hatmakers were eking out a living (Mocarelli 1995: 38). This limited presence was also accounted for by the fact that most of the wool produced in the Bresciano was destined for the neighbouring area around Bergamo – the Bergamasco. This area had established itself as a centre for the production of woollen cloth of a much better quality in the early Modern Age. In the mid-sixteenth century in the Gandino area alone, over 90 producers of cloth were flourishing, employing hundreds of spinners and weavers and producing tens of thousands of pieces, which were sold mainly on the international market (Pizzorni 2005: 99).

This was an industry which, although running into difficulties during the eighteenth century, was still able to produce over 8,000 pieces in 1770.<sup>3</sup> The superior quality of the cloth produced in the Valseriana called for wool imported from the East, from Spain and from the south of Italy, meaning that there was little demand for locally produced wool. This was so much the case that most of the approximately 50,000 sheep present in the Bergamasco in the mid-sixteenth century preferred the cheaper pastures of Switzerland, the Tyrol and Piedmont in the summer, also wintering away from home, thus reducing the quantity of wool available for local manufacture. Although their results in terms of production were so different, what the valleys of the Bergamasco and the Bresciano have in common is that, for all of them, the golden age for sheep farming were the decades between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when there were as many as 300,000 sheep in the Bergamasco.

This period of demographic, urban and industrial expansion is touched upon in one of the masterpieces of agronomist literature, the work of Agostino Gallo from Brescia, and was dealt with more fully in subsequent publications between 1550 and 1572. In his *Vinti Giornate dell'Agricoltura* (Twenty Days of Farming), the Brescian nobleman makes it clear that population density is a prerequisite for the intensive working of the land, which in turn creates the necessary conditions for population growth. As we shall see, the complex organization which the production of cheese eventually entailed (Gallo 1572) is an important indication of the transformation of agriculture into a commercial venture.

A second point worth noting is that the flock represented the only real earning power for an economy such as that of the high Valcamonica, which had been determined by the limitations of its environment, because it required so little manpower to manage thousands of sheep. This was even more true if, as in the case of the Valcamonica, there was no production of cheese, since this further reduced the workforce, together with the need for the amount of equipment – however rudimentary – which is necessary in cheese factories.

Finally, transhumance was a necessity, not only because the pastures in the high valley could only support a limited number of sheep, but also because it meant

that the local economy became part of a wider market circuit, allowing for the accumulation of small fortunes. One example of this is the case of Omobono Zuelli from Pezzo, near Ponte di Legno, the owner of hundreds of sheep and organizer of transhumance, also on behalf of other important local proprietors. Some of his diaries with details of his pastoral activity in the period 1786–1827 have fortunately been conserved. From these we can verify that in 1796, he earned 1,352 lire from pastoral activity and 1,402 lire from the sale of wool; in addition, that it was he, on behalf of the shepherds of Pezzo, who negotiated the rent for summer pastures in Valtellina, an operation which involved the expenditure of several thousand lire.<sup>4</sup>

Thanks to his business acumen, Omobono, who also owned a public house, soon controlled the local credit market. Between 1775 and 1825, he distributed 20 per cent of all the capital lent in Ponte di Legno (Bettoni 1992). The shepherds from the high valley were, at the same time, the main sources of credit and the most indebted. This was because they had to ask for loans to organize the transhumance, which incurred expenses such as provisions, excise duties, renting farmhouses, etc., but once they reached the plain, they had access to the capital earned from the sale of wool and meat. In 1795, for example, in a petition sent by the community of Vione, the new system of taxes introduced by Venice was criticized precisely because, by making transhumance more difficult, it deprived the residents of the foreign currency brought in by the shepherds (Tognali 2001: 67).

## The Production of Cheese

The case of cattle raising is very different, not only because its purpose was the production of cheese, but also because the citizens involved in it (and in particular those from Brescia) were in control of the entire process from production to sale. This was a position of strength deriving from the fact that maintaining a consistent quota of production for export required both expert knowledge and the ability to set up and handle well-articulated commercial networks. The economic importance of this activity is shown in a report from 1726, which defined cheese as ‘one of the principal, and perhaps the most important product of Venetian Lombardy, which by spreading to other states, both near and far, brings wealth’.<sup>5</sup>

Cheese production in the Bresciano has left traces which are indistinct and largely indirect, but which nevertheless show its importance. One significant indicator is without doubt the high level of salt consumption in the province, on account of the great use made of it by ‘*li formigiari nel salare i formaggi*’ (the cheese-makers in salting the cheese). In 1701, for example, there is evidence that the salt merchants in the Bresciano were having problems. ‘As a result of the damage done during recent wars, hay was scarce, which affected the breeding and consequently the consumption of salt for the animals and in the production of cheese.’<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the salt they used was mainly of south Italian origin, which had to be imported. Experiments in using salt from Istria, another province under the control of Venice, proved to be a failure.

It was not only the importance of cheese-making which accounted for such a huge consumption of salt, but also the fact that local products were '*oleosi e pingui*' (oily and fat) and they required complex elaboration and heavy use of salt.<sup>7</sup> The result was the production, after months of processing, of cheeses which were greatly appreciated because, being up to four fingers high, they absorbed the salt very thoroughly. These prestigious products were highly prized throughout the early modern period. Indeed, in the mid-fifteenth century, Pantaleone da Confienza, author of *Summa Lacticiniorum* and connoisseur of Savoy, Swiss, French, Dutch and German cheeses, considered it important enough to venture to the Bresciano in order to smell and taste the local dairy products (Camporesi 1990: 104). Three hundred years later, Jerome de Lalande, author of one of the best known and most widely read accounts of a journey in Italy, dedicated several pages in his work to the complexity of making the high quality Brescian cheeses (Lalande 1790: 420–27).

It is not surprising that, consistent with the capital necessary for carrying out the activity, and the availability of adequate commercial networks, the merchants of Brescia should assume a central role. It is also natural that the organization should be based on three poles: the Swiss Alps, the high pastures of the Brescian valleys and the farmlands of the Lombard plain.

It was precisely the considerable value of cheese products and the rising price of hay, in relation to the importance of breeding stock, which made it uneconomical to breed calves locally, and to induce farmers, from as early as the sixteenth century, to slaughter newborn calves, both male and female, within 25–30 days of birth, and to buy cattle of three or four years old, mainly from Switzerland. This was so much so that in 1770, the herdsmen in Brescia complained of the difficulty they were having as a result of the rising price of Swiss cattle.<sup>8</sup>

These links with Switzerland were not, however, a prerogative only of Brescia, and in fact they assumed an even more important role in the nearby Austrian Lombardy. According to a reliable report of 1783, of the more than 21,000 head of cattle bought abroad, almost half were from Switzerland, and were mainly milking cows.<sup>9</sup> It is obvious that choices of this nature were the fruit of the economic development of cattle raising in Lombardy, which had been rapidly transformed into the production of milk for cheese. The economic rewards of this activity far exceeded all other production, including that of calves. The price fetched by calves for butchering did not cover the loss of cheese production for the two months necessary to fatten the animals to the required weight. Switzerland was also a logical place to purchase cattle, since the cheese industry there was not developed for a long time and the end product of cattle raising was live animals.<sup>10</sup>

The production of cheese was the prerogative of the herdsmen who, having rented the alpine pastures from the local communities, took their herds, together with the livestock entrusted to them by other proprietors, to the pasture from the end of May to the end of August. There they produced butter and cheese, and it is in these Alpine areas that, during the summer months, the milk from the cows is particularly rich, as a result of the nutritious pasture. They then journeyed to the

farms on the plain, where they spent the months from winter to spring, renting the cowsheds and buying the hay from the farmers, selling the cheeses produced in the mountains to the wholesale merchants of Brescia.

Precisely because the main production of milk was limited to the period of the *alpeggio* (summer in the high alpine pastures), the industrial cycle of cheese-making in early modern Lombardy reserved a complementary role, albeit necessary, to the farms on the plain. There, the owners of livestock had no interest in taking on the risk of a herd which was far away from their own territory during the most economically important time of year. It was therefore profitable to offer shelter and forage in the period when the Alps had nothing to offer for the upkeep of the animals. Thus, the farmers of the plain fulfilled the role of suppliers of food and shelter. If forage was such a large feature of a farm's economy, this was because the high value of cheese enabled the cattlemen to pay a good price for these services and due to the fact that the plains of the state of Milan were reached by herds from regions other than the Bresciano during the winter. Thousands of animals also came from the Bergamasco, where a steady increase from 30,951 to 54,546 cattle was registered between 1776 and 1814. The same area produced a considerable quantity of cheese – known as 'mountain cheese' – during the summer months, which was much sought after, and some of which was exported (Trezzi 1994: 307–08).

As such, the cattlemen and the farmers of the plain were bound together in a relationship of complementary competition that was not devoid of tension and conflict. Alongside the proprietors and the cattlemen, the wholesale merchants of Brescia had a fundamental role, since the most important process for the success of the cheese, the salting, required continuous checks to be carried out over several months, in premises especially built for the purpose. This was therefore done in Brescia. Thanks to this overseeing, the final product was of a much higher quality than the cheese made in the local *casere* (farm dairies), which could only be sold to less selective downmarket customers.<sup>11</sup>

Conversely, the cheeses produced in this way in Brescia had a much wider market, and for their commercialization they could also count on an important fair held in the month of August. There they would pay an export toll of only five *soldi* (small currency) per cheese, that is, less than a fifth of the normal toll. Suffice it to say that in the three year period 1792–94 alone, they exported 53,000 forms of cheese in these favourable 'fair-time' conditions.<sup>12</sup>

The importance of these cheese-merchants in the mercantile world of the Bresciano is attested to by the estimates of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in particular that of 1723, which shows no fewer than eight cheese-merchants with a business estimated for sums in excess of 5,000 lire, and the three most important with respectively 24,000, 15,000 and 15,000 lire. Yet again, in 1780, in the division of tax levied by Venice on the merchants and cheese-makers of Brescia, the latter were in second place, yielding almost 15 per cent of the total sum generated by the tax.<sup>13</sup>

These figures bear witness to the great importance of the production of cheese with respect to the trading of wool, which was controlled by the mountain

shepherds. The production of cheese was in fact an activity carried out in such a way as to offer the inhabitants of the mountain areas only the role of the *malghese* (seasonal shepherd), since they were cut out from the more profitable business opportunities, for which they lacked the necessary economic strength.

## Notes

1. Very significant here are the figures relative to the sheep, which show the following values: 1766: 39,936, 1771: 47,168, 1780: 59,361, 1785: 36,518, 1790: 38,104. The Registers of 1766, 1780 and 1785 are in the State Archives of Venice (hereafter SAVE), A 5 II and VII; that of 1771 is in the Marciana Library of Venice, 166 D 2; that of 1790 is in SAVE. *Deputati e aggiunti alla provvisione del denaro pubblico* (Deputies and assistants in the arrangement of public funds), c. 210 bis.
2. See *Memorie notabili di Valcamonica* ('Notable Memories of the Valcamonica'), edited by Paolo Bona, priest of Serina, in the Biblioteca Queriniana di Brescia (Queriniana Library of Brescia, hereafter QLBs), C1 10m. 1.
3. See *Relazione sul lanificio di Gabriele Marcello* ('Report on the Woollen Manufactures of Gabriele Marcello'), in SAVE Senato Rettori, c. 320.
4. To these figures should be added the 1,403 lire taken by his shop and his guesthouse. The diaries of Omobono, kept in the archive of lawyer Remigo Maculotti of Pezzo, are rich in details of both the winter transhumance towards the state of Milan and the summer transhumance towards the area of Fraele, in the commune of Valdidentro in the Valtellina. In 1786, for example, Omobono took more than 1,200 sheep to the Valtellina, which belonged to six families in Pezzo, paying a rent of 1,688 lire for the Fraele pastures.
5. See the lengthy report sent from Brescia in 1726 to the Provveditori al sale di Venezia (Department of Salt in Venice), in the Archivio Storico Civico di Brescia (Historical Civic Archives, hereafter HCABs), c. 180.
6. This is made quite clear in *Registro di lettere pubbliche nel reggimento dell'illustrissimo sig. Bernardo Donà* – 'Register of public letters of the regiment of the illustrious Mr. Bernardo Donà' (QLBs, K VII 7). Of the same tenor was the speech given by the Brescian Count Vincenzo Calini to illustrate the damage currently being done by war: 'there will be no more money, for it can only come from four sources: cheese, silk, iron goods and linen. Without hay, there can be no cheese, and so the cowmen forced to abandon their trade, will strip the Brescia plain of its most precious source of income' (QLBs, Di Rosa 105).
7. See the abovementioned report of 1726.
8. As shown in a letter of 21 June 1770, sent to the Magistrati e provveditori di giustizia vecchia (Magistrates and officials of ancient justice) by the captain of Venice, Girolamo Priuli (HCABs, c. 1547).
9. In 1783, 21,419 cows were brought into the state of Milan. 10,556 were of Swiss origin and the majority (6,165) were milking cows (see the table in Fumi 2003: 188).
10. In fact, the production of cheese in Switzerland would only see significant progress from the seventeenth century onwards, as Grass (1988) has shown.

11. According to a note made by the mayors of the Bresciano, on 20 July 1795, in the local dairies of Rovato, Ghedi, S. Eufemia, Rezzato and other privileged communes in the area, 30,000 forms of cheese were seasoned and later sold in the valleys of Trento and Valtellina (SAVE, Deputies on the regulation of mercantile tariffs, c. 56).
12. Notice of the favourable local tax is given by the Director of the Brescia tax office, Bortolo Renzoni, on 6 August 1795. For sales at the fair, see the note of the same date, made by Francesco Bertelli, using the 'paginoni di fiera' – report on the fair (SAVE, Deputies on the regulation of mercantile tariffs, c. 56). The problems raised for the exportation of cheese by the application of too high a 'dazio' (local tax) were denounced by the merchants of Brescia in a document of 20 April 1795, which stated that the province produced 'a considerable quantity of cheese, which could be further increased if the taxes were lower' (HCABs, c. 1448).
13. In 1723, Bartolomeo Morano, the Baruzzio brothers and the Busi brothers were estimated respectively for 24,000, 15,000 and 15,000 lire (State Archives of Brescia, *Estimi e catasti napoleonici* (Estimates and property registers in the Napoleonic era), reg. 123 and 125). In 1780, the industry tax imposed on the province of Brescia was 4,240 ducats, of which 2,155 fell to the city itself. The merchants of the city contributed 779 ducats, followed by the cheese producers with 320, and the innkeepers with 140 (HCABs, c. 1549).

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