

# a brief history of an italian alpine community: villa di tirano by diego zoia translated & with notes by alan poletti

*The two lectures given by Dr Diego Zoia in Villa di Tirano on 28 November 1997 and 12 December 1997 were published by the Biblioteca Comunale, Villa di Tirano, entitled 'An outline of the political, social and economic history of Villa di Tirano and its surroundings'. Dr Zoia has published widely on many aspects of the history of the Valtellina. Two of his most recent books are La carga - contrabbando in Valtellina e Valchiavenna (with Massimo Mandelli) on smuggling and Vite e vino in Valtellina e Valchiavenna on the wine industry.*

## translator's introduction and apology

A surprising number of Australians and New Zealanders have, like myself, antecedents who came not just from a small alpine valley in Lombardy - the valley of the upper Adda (the Valtellina), but from a small region in that valley centred on the town of Tirano. Like many of us, I had only the haziest ideas concerning this 'homeland' and its history. Visits to Valtellina in 1998 and subsequently have allowed me to understand something of its present, but what of its history? In particular, what of the history of the community of Villa di Tirano where my grandfather was born? Fortunately, I did come across the key. As all tourists from the antipodes with antecedents from the valley must do, we visited the *Museo Etnografico* at Madonna di Tirano and there I came across the little book of Dr Zoia's two lectures. These lectures answered many of my questions, but they do have a wider appeal and for this reason, I have translated them. I have also added a map and several photographs to illustrate the environment that exists today.

Villa di Tirano lies a few kilometres to the south-west and downstream from the town and *comune* of Tirano. Both *comuni* lie near the confluence of the Poschiavino and Adda rivers a few kilometres south of the Swiss border. The part of the watershed of the Adda that lies in Sondrio Province is

referred to as the Valtellina while most of the course of the Poschiavino is in Switzerland, with its headwaters south of the Bernina Pass.

Although the lectures focused on one small *comune*, much of the material applies equally to most of the other small *comuni* in Sondrio and even to many others it is the alpine arc that lies at Italy's northern border.

Dr Zoia could assume that his audience were familiar with many things, the significance of which is quite unclear to those who live on the other side of the earth. I have therefore added some notes. Italian words are generally written as: *contrada*, Latin or dialect words as: *'rasega'*. The word **comune** is often used. It is the smallest unit of local government in Italy. The Lombardy Region of Italy, with a population of around 9 million people, consists of eleven Provinces, of which Sondrio is one. Sondrio in its turn is comprised of 78 *comuni*. The population of Sondrio Province is about 100,000, while the population of Villa di Tirano, one of the *comuni*, is about 3000.

As well as footnotes, I have added some comments in square brackets: [*Italics*]. With a different audience in mind, I have translated the first lecture quite freely. My translation of the second lecture follows Dr Zoia's lecture much more closely.



**Fig. 1 Map of Villa di Tirano.** The comune of Villa di Tirano lies between the comune of Bianzone to its west and Madonna di Tirano (part of the comune of Tirano) to its east. Switzerland lies on its northern border, while to the south it reaches almost to Aprica in the saddle of the pass of the same name. The main settlement, Villa di Tirano, is on the northern side of the Adda. Once it was entirely on the higher ground above the valley floor, but that is no longer the case. Stazzona, south of the Adda is the next largest settlement. Villa di Tirano lies at an altitude of 406 metres, while to its north, the peaks of the Retico Alps culminate in Pizzo Bernina (in Switzerland, 4050 metres) and to its south, the peaks of the Orobico Alps, with many peaks approaching or over 3000 metres. Image courtesy of Alan Poletti.

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### outline of the history of villa di tirano

#### roman times

The first mention of Villa di Tirano dates from Roman times, although the zone was certainly inhabited and travelled over well before that, as is attested by the discovery of Bronze Age daggers found at Piattamala<sup>1</sup> and a *stela*<sup>2</sup> of the same period found in Tirano during excavations for the construction of the new commercial centre. In 1872, a funeral *stela* was discovered on the river flats near Stazzona<sup>3</sup> dating most probably from the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD with an epigraph dedicated by Medusa to a sister Cussa, daughter of Greco and to Pontico, son of Germano Camuni.

#### stazzona

The inscription confirms the hypothesis that the word Stazzona derives, as in many other cases, from the Roman word *'statio'*

<sup>1</sup> Piattamala is a small settlement in the Poschiavo valley near Campocologno, just on the Swiss border.

<sup>2</sup> A block of stone with an inscription on it.

<sup>3</sup> Stazzona, on the south bank of the Adda is across the river from the main settlement of Villa di Tirano.

which indicates a stopping place along a road running between military posts.

Certainly Stazzona was positioned on a Roman road. The road most probably descended from Aprica, or at that time came from Piangembro, where inscriptions from Roman times have been found. This road led from Civate Comuna (the ancient *'Civitas Camunorum'*) to Coira across the Bernina pass.

Although the name is no longer used, Cosseto, an area within Stazzona, is possibly named after the Cussa of the epigraph. In the same locality the remains of a tower are still present above the built up area. This certainly preceded the fortifications which existed in the area after 1000AD and probably dates from the Roman period.

#### place-names: a further orientation

- In the vicinity of Villa di Tirano, the valley of the Adda river (the Valtellina) runs roughly north-east to south-west.
- Aprica (1140 m) is the mountain pass over the Orobico Alps from the Val di Corteno (and thence from Val Camonica) to the Valtellina.
- Piangembro is about 1km north of Aprica.
- Civate Comuna is a little to the north of Lago d'Iseo in Val Camonica.
- Coira is Chur in Switzerland, in earlier times called *'Curia Rhetorum'*.

#### villa di tirano

A clue as to the origin of the name of Villa di Tirano comes from an epigraph near the church of San Giovanni in Borno (in Brescia) dedicated to a certain *'Tyro'*. Perhaps from this name comes the name the *'locus et fundus'* of Tyrano, thence Tirano. A *'villa'* was, at that time, the site of the main residence of a Roman citizen giving its name to the place. The origin of the name is therefore derived from the residence of a wealthy Roman citizen. Villa di Tirano spreads along the slopes of the Retico Alps. The church of San Lorenzo<sup>4</sup> was probably built near the early centre.

#### the 'roman' bridge

This 'Roman' bridge sits forlornly<sup>5</sup> near the station: the Adda ran beneath it until the first decade of the 1800s and it would have been on the old Roman road, which ran from the village of Stazzona to Villa<sup>6</sup>. Although the present bridge is probably of

<sup>4</sup> San Lorenzo, an early Christian martyr was roasted alive on a metal grid. In paintings of him, he is generally depicted with this device.

<sup>5</sup> At the time of the lectures this was indeed so, however in 2001, it was 'restored'. We rather prefer it as it was. It is tempting to associate the time when the Adda changed its course to the other side of the valley to that of the great landslide from the slopes of Monte Masuccio in 1807. However, it is more likely that this course change took place at the time of a subsequent flood in 1817.

<sup>6</sup> Locally, the name is often shortened to this, but with over 400 towns in Italy with names beginning with Villa, it can be confusing. Correspondingly, a person (or people) from Villa di Tirano is a *villasco* (or *villaschi*) while for Tirano the corresponding terms are *tiranese* (or *tiranesi*).

medieval construction, it is possible that it replaced one from Roman times.



**Fig. 2** The medieval bridge at Villa di Tirano photographed in 1998 before its 'restoration' in 2001. Image courtesy of Alan Poletti.

### medieval period

In the early medieval period, around the 8<sup>th</sup> century, the first structure dedicated to San Lorenzo formed the nucleus of the parish church. San Lorenzo was certainly in existence in the 9<sup>th</sup> century when Valtellina was assigned by the Carolingians to the French monastery of Saint Denis and, for the first time, the parish of Villa appears expressly mentioned in a document. The church of San Martino, between Villa and Bianzone, can also be attributed to the same period. San Martino was in fact a saint dear to the French and dedications to him of churches in Valtellina are generally before 1000AD. The church is indeed quite old and one finds mention of it in deeds of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Ruins, amongst the oldest existing in the area, near the hill of San Fedele, about 1km north-east of Stazzona, are probably those of a small monastery that dates to well before 1000AD. It was, perhaps, a dependency of a monastery of the same name in Como.

The church of SS. Giacomo and Filippo on the hill overlooking Stazzona dates from the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century or the last decades of the preceding one. This was the church within the encircling walls of the new castle (*castello nuovo*) built by the feudal lords of the bishop of Como, the *Capitanei di Stazzona*. Their oldest castle, of which there are almost no traces, was almost certainly built near Motta<sup>7</sup>. Another early castle was built by the bishop of Como in the locality of Lughina<sup>8</sup>, probably where the tumbledown barracks of the Customs Officers (*Guardia di Finanza*) is today. It is mentioned in parchment documents over many centuries but has now faded from oral memory.

<sup>7</sup> Motta is a small settlement on the main road from Aprica, about 3 km before it meets the Adda.

<sup>8</sup> Lughina (altitude 1460 metres) is about 2km directly north of Villa di Tirano and right on the Swiss border.



**Fig. 3** The campanile (dating to the 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> century) of the church of San Lorenzo, Villa di Tirano, with some of the terraced vineyards on the south facing slopes of the Retico Alps in the background. Image courtesy of Alan Poletti.

### the settlements

Early settlements are documented in the first centuries after 1000AD but they certainly existed before then. They were situated near the Adda River but on the lowest slopes of the Orobico and Retico Alps, above the marshy valley bottom. As well as Stazzona itself, the first intensively inhabited places were on the Orobico slopes nearby. They would be intensively inhabited until at least the end of the 1600s, but even as late as the end of the 1800s. Although not permanently settled, there were also the alpine pastures on the Orobico slopes above Stazzona and those at Trivigno further to the east.



**Fig. 4** The valley of the Adda with part of Villa di Tirano and the Orobico Alps taken from near the contrada of Novaglia. The group have just descended from a visit to the ruined barracks of the *Guardia di Finanza* at Lughina. Image courtesy of Alan Poletti.

On the Retico slopes, as well as the built-up area of San Lorenzo with its parish church, there was the *contrada*<sup>9</sup> Ragno (which means spider). Its name does not derive from the way in which it is laid out, as some imagine, but from the Latin place name '*in Araneo*' (the place of frogs), for it was low lying land near the Poschiavino River. The *contrada* of Val Pilasca was in existence from at least the beginning of the 1200s. From this, perhaps, comes '*valle delle Pile*'. The machines for separating barley grains from the chaff and for separating the husks from the chestnuts were usually set up together in the same mill. Sonvico and the present *contrada* of Derada are probably even older. Also present were Pioda and Campagna. [In this paragraph, Zoia is moving down the Adda valley from the confluence of the Poschiavino River and following the old 'main road' which kept to the slopes above the valley floor. In Villa, as in all other Italian towns, the name of a street can change several times in a few hundred metres. The names of many of the streets in Villa remind us of the different *contrade* and their locality.]

On the slopes above Villa di Tirano were the *contrade* of Novaglia (which was cultivated by the monks of San Remigio<sup>10</sup> and Santa Perpetua<sup>11</sup>), Santa Perpetua and the hamlet (*frazione*) of Canova, which is today abandoned. The alpine pastures on the slopes of the Retico Alps were Lughina and Frantelone. [These now mostly lie across the border in Switzerland.]

### land ownership

Most of the land at that time was the property of religious institutions: the Bishop of Como (and his lords of the manor in the parish, '*i Capitanei*'); the parish church of San Lorenzo and the monasteries of San Remigio and Santa Perpetua. These latter were not entirely of a religious nature, having lodgings mainly for lay people [making a pilgrimage to the church of Santa Perpetua].

The properties of the Bishop were administered by officials (the chamberlains) chosen from among the most illustrious personages of the most influential families living in the area: the Boconge (and the Capitanei), the Beccaria, the Torelli and finally the Lambertenghi families who we will discuss below.

The Capitanei of Stazzona. were invested as almost feudal lords for the defence of the parish (the surname comes from their feudatory status - '*in capite plebis*' or *Capitanei*). It is still possible to observe the ruins of their main castle (*castello nuovo*) above Stazzona, although it was largely dismantled in 1527 by the new lords: the Grigioni. The *Capitanei* were owners

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<sup>9</sup> A *contrada* is a district (or quarter) of a town or city. The famous *Palio* of Siena is a race between horses which represent the different *contrade* of that city

<sup>10</sup> Now in Switzerland, at an altitude of 1800 m, it has a commanding view over Lake Poschiavo. The church still exists.

<sup>11</sup> A pleasant 20 minute walk from *Contrada*, Ragno brings you to the delightful little church dating from the 11<sup>th</sup> century which once formed part of this monastery. From it is a wonderful view over the Basilica of Madonna di Tirano and Tirano itself.

of extensive properties in Bianzone as well as Villa and Tirano until the 1300s but with the decline of the temporal power of the Bishop of Como, they were superseded by the *comune* of the citizens of Como and after 1335, all of Valtellina (excluding, at least formally, the castle of Teglio) passed to the Duchy of Milan<sup>12</sup>.

### the lambertenghi

In the 1200s and 1300s, the first members of the Lambertenghi family arrived on horseback at Stazzona. For centuries they were to be the most important family of the region. Safely backed by their kinsman, Leone Lambertenghi, a noted horseman, who remained for many years through the 1200s and 1300s at the seat of the bishopric at Como, some members of the family relocated to Stazzona as administrators of the property and concerns of the church at Como. Definite news of them again appears at the beginning of the 1400s when they gradually increased their influence and their holdings.

The Lambertenghis belonged to one of the most illustrious families of Como. Their relocation into the city's surrounding countryside allowed the members of the family to become the '*domini loci*' (rulers of the place) of Villa di Tirano. At that time in the rural communities belonging to Como, there existed two fundamental social classes: the 'nobles (*nobili* or *cittadini*) and the farmers (*vicini* or *contadini*). These had equal rights in the management of community affairs. When, as in the case of Villa di Tirano, there was only one noble family, the members of it were called the rulers of the place ('*domini loci*'). This was confirmed in 1495 in the deed which was accepted by Ascanio Sforza<sup>13</sup>, at that time Ruler of Valtellina, in which the three original *comuni* of Villa, Stazzona and Coseto were merged into one *comune* consisting of five cantons.

The deed is of particular interest because of problems caused by the merging of ownership. To put an end to these and other controversies concerning the subject of taxes, the representatives of the three *comuni* and of the Lambertenghis asked that a single *comune*, to be known as Stazzona, be granted. Thus was established the relationship on equal terms between the Lambertenghis and the farmers, even in such matters as the appointment of chaplains of churches in the merged *comune*.

Meanwhile, in the second half of the 1300s, there was an administrative reorganisation in the Valtellina, under which it was subdivided into 3 '*Terzieri*': the capital of the upper third being Tirano. Inevitably, this increased its importance at the expense of Villa di Tirano, which was the centre of the parish. It also had the advantage of being less dispersed. The construction of the town walls in the last decades of the 1400s

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<sup>12</sup> First to the Visconti family until 1447 and then to the Sforza family, of whom the most prominent was Ludovico il Moro (1452 - 1508), responsible for the fortification of Tirano in 1498.

<sup>13</sup> A Cardinal, the brother of Ludovico il Moro.

and the building of the church of the Blessed Virgin Mary<sup>14</sup> were to complete the work. Tirano became undeniably more important and its detachment from religion and from the foundation church [San Lorenzo] was little more than a formality which ratified the supremacy of Tirano.

### grigioni, 1512-1797

From 1512, the Valtellina passed under the dominion of the Grigioni<sup>15</sup>, who would preserve the remarkable autonomy that the community enjoyed. Villa with its five cantons was naturally included and around 1560 it was given its own statute (alas now lost). This was superseded in 1659 by a new one that regulated the life of the community in detail.

This defined the method of election to public office: all males between 25 and 60 years of age were eligible with a prohibition on re-election for 10 years. The most important official was the Dean ('*Decano*'), equivalent to a Mayor. He was elected by the Council through a mixed system (a drawing of lots by those who had obtained the most votes). The Council was, in turn, constituted of three representatives from each Canton. Various other officials, of which perhaps the most important was the Notary ('*Notaio*') or Actuary, assured the functioning of the communal institutions. The guardianship of the territory was very thorough, with rigid restrictions for all the harmful activities and a careful system of checks.

Economic activities from agriculture to commerce were also strictly regulated. In particular, the prices of products widely consumed (bread, wine, meat) were fixed annually by the Council. The same Council resolved the numerous infringements based on the verbal or declaratory evidence of the watchmen. Public works were completed by means of work, usually voluntary, contributed by those who would benefit (usually too, the landowners had to maintain the roads). All these regulations remained in force up to the end of the 1700s and, in some cases, until the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### wine industry

During the Grigione period (1512-1797) there was remarkable development in the wine industry throughout the *Tre Leghe* (the Grigione Canton). The development was particularly important on the slopes of the Retico Alps where the wine produced was of superior quality, whereas that cultivated on the slopes above Stazzona produced a wine more suitable for local consumption. That, perhaps, connected with other things, led to a shift from Stazzona to Villa, mostly in the 1500s, of the houses of the most important families, in particular the Lambertenghi.

<sup>14</sup> The Basilica of Madonna di Tirano on the western outskirts of Tirano. This was constructed where a certain Mario Omodei saw a vision of the Blessed Virgin Mary on 29 September 1504. It has ever since been a place of pilgrimage.

<sup>15</sup> The Italian word for the inhabitants of the Graubünden Canton of Switzerland with its capital, Chur. Since the Grigioni were Protestant while the Valtellinesi were Catholic, Valtellina could have been said to be on the front line in the wars of religion, with a doleful result.

### taxes

In this period, taxes were levied almost exclusively on the value of real estate and every year values were assessed. The word '*taglia*' (cut) has remained in the dialect to mean meeting the cost of community taxes. There were no significant social or economic developments in this period except for the collapse of the population as a result of the 1630 plague, which caused some of the alpine pastures to be abandoned. During the 1700s the population increased again.



*Fig. 5 Chiesa San Lorenzo, in Piazza Torelli, Villa di Tirano, Sondrio Province. Image courtesy of Alan Poletti.*

### churches

By the end of the 1700s, the ecclesiastical heritage was complete. [Here, Dr Zoia listed 13 churches and gave possible construction dates. Four of these whose dates of construction range from the earliest times to the 18<sup>th</sup> century are:]

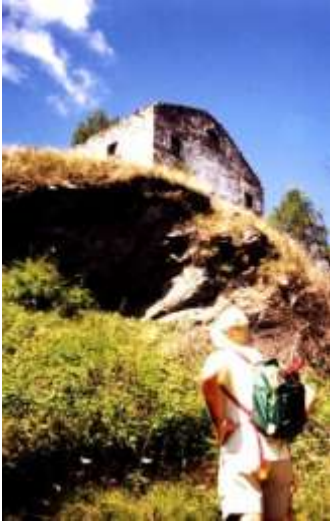
1. **The Parish Church of San Lorenzo:** [Villa di Tirano] probably first begun in the 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> centuries. The bell tower is 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> century, the church was reconstructed in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (with successive rebuilding in the 1800s)
2. **Church of San Antonio of Padova:** [Villa di Tirano] 18<sup>th</sup> century
3. **Church of S. Abbondio:** [Stazzona] before the 1500s, rebuilt in the 1600s.
4. **Church of the Madonna of the Snow:** [on the hill above Stazzona] 18<sup>th</sup> century on top of an earlier smaller structure (at least 16<sup>th</sup> century)

### cisalpine republic

In 1797, Valtellina became part of the Cisalpine Republic. The existing social and economic balance was disrupted. Population growth also played a role. Heavily increased taxes dragged many farming families into poverty. The traditional wine trade was also radically changed. The new borders reduced the trade with Switzerland and increased the demand for cheaper wine of an inferior quality to sell to the towns of Lombardy. This caused quality to decrease. Unsuitable areas were brought into cultivation and the agricultural classes were impoverished. Valtellina was becoming part of a centralised state, with compulsory conscription that took many of the fit young men from agricultural work.

## rebellion

The social situation became notably worse and there were big protests and even open rebellion. The most significant episode was in 1809 when there was a revolt against the French that was centred on the zone between Sondrio and Tirano. This culminated in a battle on the plain below Villa di Tirano on 14 May between bands of disorganised and poorly armed rebels and the troops of general Polfranceschi, who were disciplined and armed with canon. After the battle, 17 rebels lay dead on the field, 10 of whom were from Villa. [From an analysis of the church records, Dr Zoia concluded that most were mature people and that] they certainly did not participate in the rising through youthful ardour or high spirits but were driven by desperate need.



**Fig. 6** The ruined barracks of the Guardia di Finanza at Lughina. Note its commanding position, high above the path to the border. Image courtesy of Alan Poletti.

## smugglers [contrabbandieri]

Driven by the same need, in this period there began the social phenomenon that has characterised the *tiranesi* and *villaschi*, particularly into our own times – that of smuggling. Already in 1806 the first death is verified:

“Giovanni Resta, 42 years old, married, a peasant farmer and not a landowner, having left behind four young children ... I put in evidence that the aforesaid Resta was wounded yesterday towards the hour of 10 pm on the mountain of Novaglia situated in this *Comune* by a shot from a fire-arm fired by a customs officer in the course of his duty ... And that he came from abroad with some saddle bags of foreign salt...”

Even the bureaucratic prose of the State official in Villa cannot hide the sad story. In this case, as with the rebels, we are certainly not dealing with a wild young man in search of glory. The phenomenon then spread so much that two years afterwards there came down the footpath from Santa Perpetua (the *sentè di malvivent* as it is still called today) more than 100 armed smugglers of salt. [Salt was heavily taxed and was needed by both the *contadini* and their animals.] It is easy to understand how it was that the people rose up in open rebellion the following year.



**Fig. 7** In some places above Villa di Tirano, the old paths can still be found. This one was climbing towards Novaglia and would have witnessed many *contrabbandieri* with their *carga al spallone* (a pack of up to 40 kg on their back). Image courtesy of Alan Poletti.

But worse was still to come. Between 1815 and 1820, famine reduced all of Valtellina to the limits of despair. The new Austrian government took belated account of the population's tragic situation and sought to intervene by undertaking a number of public works. In the second decade of the 1800s a new road over the Stelvio pass (2758 m) was constructed, partly for strategic means, and stop banks were constructed along the Adda. Later, around 1850, the road for Aprica that passed through Motta was remade. Even later, in the second half of the century, the work of reconstructing the existing irrigation canals began.

## terrible effect of grapevine diseases

In the 1840s a series of diseases struck. These would almost destroy viticulture in the Valtellina, the only source of income for many peasant farming families. These were powdery mildew (*l'oidio*), downy mildew (*la peronospora*) and later phylloxera. The 1800s were pretty brutal years for the poor.

## the kingdom of italy

The situation did not even improve with the entry into the Kingdom of Sardinia in 1859 and into the Kingdom of Italy in 1861. For many, smuggling became the only way to survive. This continued even after 1880 when the disposition of the customs posts and the intervention of the customs officers (*guardia di finanza*) became ever more onerous with new deaths, new convictions and forced residence in a distant town. (*invii al confino*).

## emigration

Emigration became the only safety valve with the odyssey of departures for America, for Australia and, in more fortunate

cases, to Switzerland and Germany. The situation improved slowly in the course of the first decades of the 1900s.

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## the economy and the society of the valtellinian in the past centuries

### introduction

We have much evidence available on the social and economic aspects of our history. The economy and the society of Valtellina did not change for long periods of time and from 1200 until the end of the 1800s, there was a substantial stability in the way of life. Society was based on the small autonomous community and the economy remained tied mainly to agricultural activity. Crafts and commerce remained marginal.

Population decreased on occasions as the plague took its toll, first at the end of the 1500s and then in 1629/1630 when the population fell by a half, to be followed by a slow increase. By the first half of the 1800s, the resulting population's pressure on resources was to reduce the peasant farmers to a mere subsistence. This was exacerbated by the destruction of a good part of the vineyards by powdery mildew (*l'oidio*) and downy mildew (*la peronospera*) and thus to a drastic fall in the availability of work, as well as a huge reduction in earnings.

### economic aspects

For centuries, the economy of Valtellina was based on agriculture. The only places giving employment to townspeople were Bormio, Tirano, Sondrio, Morbegno and especially Chiavenna where development of commercial activity was favoured by its position on the road from Milan to Chur and Austria.

### agriculture

Climate – in order to understand agricultural practices in the past, it is necessary to clearly understand the climate of the valley. In 1200, the average temperatures were clearly higher than they are today and allowed the cultivation of grains at higher elevations. For example, at that time there was a flourmill at San Romerio at an altitude of 1800 metres. In 1600, there was a small glaciation that caused a cooling of our climate. This led to a reduction in the number of settlements and to changes in the types of crops which were grown.

Form of tenancy of the farm lands – in the past there was a different way of managing the real estate. In the community there was a clear division between communal property (*'beni indivisi'*) and private property (*'beni divisi'*). The communal property was enjoyed by all of the community according to fixed rules, while private land was the property of an individual or a family.

Communal property. Communal property was essentially the woods and the pastures. These only passed into private

ownership in 1843 when a sovereign resolution of the Austrian Emperor allowed its sale. Following that, there was the formation of a land registry in 1857. Before that there had been a Napoleonic version created in 1813-1817. The Austrian land registry was revised in the period from 1930 to 1940. This revision is still in use today.

Private property. Private property consisted of fields, vineyards, chestnut woods, gardens, orchards and, to a limited extent, woodland (though this was usually degraded). It could be cultivated directly by the proprietor or ceded to others. There were two forms of cession: *'l'affitto'* (renting) and *'il livello'* (renewable leasing) (with absolute right of renewal by the cultivator).

Renting, as it is today, was the concession to another of cultivable land in exchange for a payment of kind or of money. The rental period was of limited duration: one, three or nine years. In every case, it was always less than 29 years.

Leasing consisted instead of the cession of land to a nuclear family, but never to a single person, with the possibility of improving it and for a fixed rent. Land that could be leased might be owned by the community, well-off families or religious institutions. The duration of the contract was indeterminate (29 years with the right of renewal without limitation) and the contract could be reconfirmed from generation to generation. It could only be voluntarily annulled on the part of the cultivator. This sort of contract gave a great incentive to improve agricultural land. The rent remained the same, regardless of the productivity of the plot and if the cultivator relinquished the contract he was paid for the improvements. This encouraged the people of our valley to maximise the exploitation of the territory with the object of improving their own way of life and greatly encouraged the maximum increase of the terracing of the vineyards on our slopes. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, renewable leases have been disappearing. Many have been purchased and in other cases, the rent has been too difficult to collect.

### utilisation of community property

The woods. People could enter the woods to harvest fodder and fallen branches, but more significantly, to cut firewood and to obtain building timber. Accordingly, one meets many different regulations in the Statutes, depending upon the particular community. In some cases, the amount of firewood and building timber due to every family was fixed, in other cases construction timber could be used only by the community, in still others timber necessary to replace a roof damaged by fire was granted free.

The wood was dragged to the valley down a suitable small valley or on various transports along the roads or mule tracks. In the Statutes there were very precise rules concerning access and use of the woods and special guards made sure that all obeyed them.

The pastures. There were many more alpine pastures in the previous centuries than there are today. Normally every community possessed different areas of pasture, some more productive than others. In order to provide equal treatment for all, the alpine pastures were rented in rotation to the different *contrade* or the different family or social groups. Normally, all cattle were taken to the alpine pastures in summer except for a house cow and the draught animals.

It was generally forbidden to pasture cattle that did not belong to the community. Thus, it was only possible to take to the alpine pastures those cattle that could be kept during the winter. The poorest families, in order to make sure that they had some cattle, would drive them to pasture in every place possible, even in winter, while in summer they harvested the wild hay (*fieno selvatico*). This consisted of herbs that grew above the height of 1800/2000 metres. Until the mid 1800s they had the right to free pasturage (*il pensionatico*) on the fields and in the forests after the last hay had been gathered in autumn and before work began in spring.

### cultivation

The fields. The fields were usually on the lower mountain slopes or on the alluvial fans of tributary streams because the valley bottom was generally swampy. With regard to the slopes, the work was mostly done by hand with the use of a hoe and only sometimes with the use of draught animals, for instance, for ploughing.

Cereals were grown in the most remote times and in the beginning it was rye. In the first documents dating from around 1000AD, rye is the queen of cultivation in the Valtellina, accounting for at least 50% of cereal production. Its cultivation extended up to 1000 metres in altitude and often beyond. Other cultivated cereals were wheat, but it was a product for the rich; barley (used especially in the soup called *'dumega'*); millet (from the end of the 1700s and used for soups, polenta and bread) and Italian millet (which is no longer grown).

Buckwheat (*'grano saraceno – or furmentun'*) came to be widely cultivated from the end of the 1600s. This was often substituted by *'ziberia'* which was more bitter, but higher yielding.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Buckwheat is not actually a cereal but is the common name for a number of species of annual herbs. *Grano Saraceno (fagopyrum esculentum)* produces a grayish flour usually mixed with other flour to make pasta. *Ziberia* is *fagopyrum tataricum*, from Siberia, cultivated primarily for animal fodder. *'Pizzocheri'*, a speciality of the Valtellina is made with buckwheat pasta and much butter and cheese. However, nowadays, almost all buckwheat is imported into the valley and it is hard to find any growing crops.



**Fig. 8** Early September - a small field of grano saraceno above Baruffini. The seed would have been sown in early July and the crop would be harvested in late October. Image courtesy of Alan Poletti.

Two products, potato and maize, arrived from the American continent relatively recently. Maize (*in Italian – 'grano turco', in Tiranese – 'formenturco'*) was introduced towards the mid-1700s. Enough was grown to produce the yellow flour that was used to make *polenta*. The potato was cultivated from the beginning of the 1800s.

The meadows. The care of the meadows has not changed significantly, however the only fertiliser used in the past was dung. Each year, there were three to four mowings on the valley floor, two at medium altitude and a single cut on the alpine pastures. [*Remember that the animals did not graze the meadows as they did in the alpine pastures.*]

The vineyards. Great attention was paid to the cultivation of the vineyards as wine represented the true riches of the family, as well as their daily beverage. In fact, it was the only product that was commercialised and that could be produced in excess of need. The vineyards on the south facing slopes were terraced and the vines were grown in low rows (*'bassa'*) that produced the best wine. Other vineyards were established on the alluvial fans, nowadays used for apples. Here the vines were trained on higher supports (*'tirampoli'* – as they were called in the past) and between the rows, rye, and more recently potatoes, were grown. The wine was of medium quality. Finally, they had the *'opoli'*, that is the flat land where the vines were trained over high pergolas and produced a wine of lower quality but in greater quantities.

The chestnut woods. The chestnut wood (*la 'selva'*) was, for a long time, a very important source of food for the people. This was particularly so over winter. In Valtellina, the chestnut woods were always privately owned and were carefully

tended. In other areas as in Val Camonica, for example, they were, however, collectively owned. The trees could be grown at the edges of the fields near the homes or in woods. The woods were possibly irrigated and scythed. The chestnuts were harvested with much care, even to the extent that branches were placed to stop the precious fruit from rolling onto other lower land. As for the vineyards and fields, after a certain date it was possible for anyone to come and glean.

The vegetable plots. Only a small area of land was used to grow vegetables. Those that were cultivated were few in number. They were essentially vegetables that could be conserved for a long time, such as savoy cabbage, turnips, swedes and '*radici d'insalata*'. We do not know what green vegetables they had. Surprisingly, legumes were not particularly common. Among those that were grown was the fava bean [*the broad bean*], which has now disappeared, and only later, beans as we now know them (which come from America).

The fruit orchards. In the past, only the well to do families had orchards. The trees were planted near the home rather than at the edges of fields. The main fruit trees were walnuts and cherries, both prized for their wood. From the walnuts they obtained the only oil available in the area and which was used for lamps. They would have grown two types of cherry, one with a tall trunk and sweet fruit, grown mostly for its wood, and a lower growing variety that yielded a bitter fruit that was eaten. Other fruit grown were pears and figs. Apples, plums, peaches and apricots were uncommon. The hazelnut was present in the wild.

Animal husbandry. The presence of farm animals varied greatly but mostly their numbers corresponded only to the minimum needs of the family and were strongly related to the availability of forage. The products were only sold in the high mountain communities. Cows (smaller than the brown alpine breed of today) were mostly owned by the families who were already reasonably well off. They gave milk and meat, but were also used as draught animals.

Sheep and goats were widely raised. However, the grazing of the latter caused considerable damage to the woodland. They had hens and (less often) rabbits, while the better-off raised pigeons. There was normally a cat in the house to control the mice that were often a scourge of their grain reserves.

The most popular animal was the pig. Moreover, in many documents they are often referred to simply as '*animale*'. They were an important food resource, especially during winter. They were fed on the residual vegetable scraps of the household, but when possible, were driven to pasture: in summer, to the alpine pastures and in the colder periods, to the fields and forests. At such times, the animal had to be 'married': a ring had to be put in its nose to stop it rooting in the ground and thus ruining the pasture.

As for the community lands, the guardianship of private property was detailed in the Statutes, with provision for fines and many sanctions for those who disobeyed them.

### crafts and trades

The industrial structure was largely tied to agriculture. We find:

Mills [*mulini*] for grinding the grain. Often these were combined with the '*pile*', the mechanism used to husk the barley and the chestnuts. The mills that provided the motive force were placed on the banks of water courses, generally artificial canals.

Wine presses [*torchi*]. Because of their considerable cost, these were generally owned only by the well-off families and there was generally one in each *contrada*. The other farmers could use these for a fee, often levied in wine.



*Fig. 9* A wine press in the Museo Etnografico, Madonna di Tirano. Image courtesy of Alan Poletti.

Bread ovens [*forni*]. Bread, prepared separately by each family was cooked in a communal oven of which there would be one in each *contrada*.

Stills for the production of grappa [*alambicchi*]. The use of acquavite (*grappa*) was considerable and the stills required significant quantities of wood. Because of this, in the period of domination by the Grigione, there was a prohibition on distillation to avoid excessive deforestation (together with other related limitations).

The most common trades were woodworking or blacksmithing. However, even in quite recent times there were few specialists. More often they were carried out by the farmer when he was not involved in his agricultural work.

With respect to the blacksmithing, remember that for centuries the Valtellina was an area of the alpine arc that was rich in the mineral. The main mines were in the valleys of the Orobian Alps (Val Belviso, Val Bondone, Val Venina) and near Bormio. The

iron mined in these regions was exported in significant quantities.

There were sawmills (*'rasega'*) for producing planks. These, perforce, were positioned in the valleys to obtain their motive force. Where this was not so, they used manual saws which operated vertically [*pit-saws*]. From the wood, they constructed barrels, yokes and various agricultural tools and utensils for the house, as well as furniture.

Using forges they made agricultural tools such as hoes and axes from the iron. They did not produce scythes in the region. These came from Austria, then from the Engadine and, more recently, from Bergamo. The larger forges had power hammers, while everything was done by hand in the smaller ones.

Other installations were:

- **Charcoal burners** used to produce charcoal and
- **Lime kilns** where limestone was burnt to produce lime that was used in construction. A lime kiln was located at 'Calcarola' – hence its name. This was close to the valley floor, a kilometre west of Motta.

### commerce

The Valtellina was not a region with much trade. Important aspects were:

- Exportation of cattle and dairy products from the Bormio area to the lower valley, normally in exchange for wine;
- The movement of cattle across the valley from the Grigione canton to the Venetian region; and
- The export of wine beyond the Alps.

For a long time wine has been of strategic importance for our valley and the only true source of riches for our people, in particular, in the centuries of domination by the Grigioni, from 1512 to 1797. The Grigioni esteemed the excellent wine of the Valtellina and were great buyers. They set customs duties in such a way as to encourage the supply of their needs before satisfying external demand.

The wine was even exported to Austria where it was exchanged for salt, needed for food preservation, especially bacon. From 1400 until 1800, a good part of the salt used in the valley came from Hall (*'Ala'*) in Tyrol.

Within a single community or between neighbouring ones, there was a form of commerce based mostly on exchanges. The small exchanges within a community were free, while those that were external and just a little more substantial were subject to a tax.

An interesting exchange took place between the communities on the slopes of the Orobico Alps and those on the slopes of the Retico Alps. The people on the Orobico slopes owned many chestnut woods and head of cattle. They provided the poles for

the vineyards (it is the tradition in Valtellina to use chestnut poles) and dairy products in exchange for wine that could only be produced on the sunny slopes of the Retico Alps.

There were very few shops in the country except for the *'osteria'*. Here there would be a wine and food shop. The Statutes fixed the products (and their prices) that could be sold. These were essentially wine, bread and cheese. As well as providing food, the *osteria* was obliged to take in stray animals, but could claim damages from the owner or, if these were not forthcoming, could kill the beast.

### social aspects

Important structures of the society in earlier times were:

- the family;
- the religious observances (more so than today); and
- the life of the community.

The family. The head of the family (*capofamiglia*) was the father. Every person in the family, whatever their age, had to respect the authority of the father. Not only was his authority exercised within the house but it extended into the economic field so that an unmarried adult male could not sell or acquire land or even be paid. Instead, the father would receive the money.

The women were subject to strong limitations in public life and were subject to the authority of their father and then of their husband. They were not permitted to make any contracts except those for modest amounts. Their role was restricted entirely to within the walls of the house.

At the time of marriage, a small part of the family property was ceded to the husband for daily needs. The major part would be obtained as a successional right on the death of his parents. On the other hand, a dowry was due to the wife.

In all of the Valtellina, the dowry system provided for two payments: one by the wife's family and the other, about half of that, by the husband's family. This second payment in money was called *'antifatto'* and derives from the German *'morgen gabe'*, which means morning gift. In the past, in German, Saxon or Longobard societies, having assured himself of his wife's virginity, the following morning the husband would offer her a nuptial gift. Among us, beginning about 1200, this changed and the payment of part of the dowry was expected of the husband's family instead. The dowry was closely tied to the survival of the family. At the dissolution of the marriage, in the past only through death, the property passed to the children and in part to the surviving spouse. If there were no children, the property was usually divided in such a way that the wife's family returned the value of the dowry and the husband's the value of the *antifatto*.

Religious life. The religion in the Valtellina has always been Christian Catholic. There were, however, some small groups of Protestants who lived in the valley in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Most people took part in religious functions. The Statutes even covered some religious aspects. Obligations were defined and punishments prescribed for defaulters. Of particular interest is the prescription that punished blasphemers. Numerous churches have been built in our community through voluntary work by all of the villagers. Almost everywhere in Valtellina, the community had the right to choose the parish priest, usually by an election on the part of the heads of family.

The civil community. In Valtellina this was organised following democratic principles where the wish of the majority prevailed without any people being particularly privileged. Usually, the community had a first level of management by a Council that consisted of representatives of the different hamlets (*frazioni*). The representatives were normally elected for one year from the heads of family. The elections usually took place in winter when the heads of family were free from their agricultural work.

The Council nominated a deacon (*decano*) or consul [*console*] whose role was essentially that of a mayor today. The Council was expected to meet the cost of managing the collective patrimony. It nominated the officials and auctioned the different jobs of a public nature.

Administrative officials were the notary [*notaio*] or registrar [*cancelliere*] whose job was to receive deeds or acts, to write the minutes and letters and to maintain contact with the other local bodies. There was also the messenger [*corsore*] whose job was to send out notices of meetings and all the other things that today are entrusted to the town-hall usher.

Among the jobs that were auctioned was that of night watchman. Those who were appointed to such jobs were expected to pay a certain amount but had the right to a percentage of all fines that were collected. The various commercial activities were also auctioned. Among these were the *osteria* and butcher (*macello*). It was up to the community to control these activities and to set the standards concerning the quality and quantity of goods to be sold, the price and the hygiene and sanitation standards.

In the past there were also higher levels of administration. Valtellina was divided into three *Terzieri* (upper, middle and lower). Tirano was the capital of the upper third. Furthermore, there was a Valley Council with its seat at Sondrio and with jurisdiction over the whole province. In the capitals of the *terzieri*, the Grigioni Magistrates administered civil and penal justice, applying the provisions of the Statutes of Valtellina.

Management of the territory. This was mostly of a direct form. Everyone who owned land with a road or canal frontage was expected to maintain it and the boundary fences. In the case of the maintenance of the main roads (*strade 'regali'*) or the construction of new public works (bridges, stop banks, canals and roads), they resorted to the 'obligation of those who lived

nearby' (*'obbligo delle vicinanza'*). That is, work had to be done *gratis* by everyone in proportion to the value of their property. Such a system was also used whenever there was a community need, such as fire fighting.

Private buildings. Despite substantial differences between the houses of the gentry and those of the commoners, there were two fundamental parts of a dwelling: that for the people and that for the animals, even if at times these coincided. This was the case for the hens that scratched around happily in the kitchen or of the capons raised in the *'capunere'*. These were specially constructed cupboards (still in the kitchen!) with the bottoms open in such a way as to let the droppings escape. Often, too, the stables were the only warm place and here they spent the evenings. In every house there was a room (*'da fuoco'*) where there was a hearth for cooking food. This did not always have a chimney and often the smoke left by the door or holes in the walls. Furniture, at least for the poor was just that which was essential: a chain for the pot over the fire and benches, often without even a table. The utensils were just the minimum: the pot, the wooden bowls (*'ciapei'*) and some cutlery. The door of the room had a hole in the bottom (*'punarola'*) to let out the small animals. There was also a room where the family spent the night. In the houses of the more well-off this was the *'stua'*, that is a room which was heated and lined with wood.

The animals had their places. The cows, sheep and goats were shut in their stalls. The pig had its own small stall that could be in the main stall or separate. The hens found shelter in the hen house, often under the flights of stairs.

As well as a dwelling for the people and animals, the houses needed to offer all of the space needed for the agricultural work and for the storage of provisions. In the higher parts of the houses there were balconies (*'lobie'*) and under the roof, space to store the grain, while underground, there was the cellar (*'involt'*) for storing the barrels of wine (the barrels in Valtellina until 1500/1600 were of larch, then of chestnut wood). Near the stalls was the hayloft for the storage of forage for the winter.

A little apart from the house was the *'graa'*, that is a small house of two levels, for the smoking and conservation of the chestnuts. The lower level was used for a fire that produced the smoke, while the chestnuts were placed above it on a lattice. Here they were dried and smoked so that they kept well.

Public buildings. These were of two categories: the churches for religious functions and the *'osterie'* for community entertainments. Community halls (*'palazzi comunali'*) were quite rare. Public meetings were held in the churchyards that, until the beginning of the 1800s, were also the cemeteries, or alternatively in the church itself.



**Fig. 10** Houses in Via Dessedo. Although re-roofed and in the process of reconstruction, the basic fabric probably dates from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Note particularly the balconies. Image courtesy of Alan

Diet. From what we have said above about agriculture, we can deduce that the diet in the past was based on a modest assortment of food: bread (of rye, millet and rarely of wheat), polenta, soups, chestnuts, milk, cheese, a little green vegetables, meat (especially from pigs) and wine. For centuries, wine has been an important source of calories.

Education. Until 1700 there was no public education. The rich families hired lay or ecclesiastical teachers, while in different localities, bequests allowed the founding of private schools. The teachers were usually ecclesiastical people because the priests were among the few who could read and write and there were many of them. Remember that in the second half of the 1700s in the upper *terziere* (between Bianzone and Sondalo), there were around 130 priests.

[Sondalo is about midway between Tirano and Bormio.]

The first state schools were established by the Austrians (1815-

1859). Children of different ages were taught in large classes of over 50. The pay of the teachers was modest, more so if they were women.

Health. The first notices concerning municipal doctors [*medici condotti*] are found only at the beginning of the 1800s. Tied up with the provision of medical services is the change of the *frazione* of San Rocco in 1860 from being part of the *comune* of Tirano to that of Villa di Tirano. The doctor at Tirano had refused to assist the residents of San Rocco because they were too poor.

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#### an article and three books of interest

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