

CHAPTER FOUR

‘SELLING PRINTS FOR THE REMONDINI’: ITALIAN PEDLARS TRAVELLING THROUGH EUROPE DURING THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Alberto Milano

From the beginning of the 18th century and for more than 150 years the Remondini, Italian publishers and printers in Bassano del Grappa, a small city to the north of Padova, flooded Europe with millions of devotional, decorative and historical prints. Their success was founded primarily on a modern market-oriented approach and a well-oiled organisation that controlled all stages of production, from paper manufacture to sales catalogues. A key element in this well-articulated strategy was widespread distribution carried out by thousands of pedlars who originated from two Alpine regions: Tesino, an upland plain of the Valsugana valley joining Trento and Bassano and approximately 50 kilometres from Bassano itself, and the Natisone valleys, from Cividale del Friuli to the Slovenian border, 150 kilometres from Bassano.

During the 17th and 18th centuries the Tesino was part of the ‘Contea del Tirolo’ (Tyrol) and after the short Napoleonic age again became part of the Austrian Empire until conquered by the Italian army in 1915. The Natisone valley belonged to the Venetian Republic until 1797, was then part of the Austrian Empire, and in 1866 became part of the Kingdom of Italy. As was often the case in Alpine regions, agricultural production in these valleys was limited and their inhabitants had in common a need to supplement their income, which they did through seasonal and complementary work.¹ More distinctive was their geographical location, at the border of the Austrian Empire and Venice. Inhabitants of both the Tesino and Natisone valleys had experience going back several centuries in trading in diverse goods in other European countries and were able to use

¹ On the history of pedlars, see R. Chartier & H.-J. Lüsebrink, *Colportage et lecture populaire: imprimés de large circulation en Europe XVIe-XIXe siècles: actes du colloque des 21–24 Avril 1991, Wolfenbüttel* (Paris, 1996); L. Fontaine, *History of Pedlars in Europe* (Durham, 1996).

languages other than their native tongue, a vital component of their ability to trade further afield.²

This article will show that these pedlars were not isolated figures with their travels individually orchestrated but were part of a well-organised network for the distribution of popular prints. This argument supports the position outlined in the introduction of this volume, which also questions the reputedly marginal position of itinerant booksellers. The commerce of these Italian pedlars was far from casual; it was based on experience accumulated by many generations of families who formed a large proportion of the inhabitants of these valleys. For very many years they regarded all of Europe, and even other continents, as a potential market, irrespective of the distances they needed to cover to reach their point of sale. The approximate distances from the valleys to the main cities where Tesini and Natisone pedlars developed their commerce were Augsburg, 400 km, Vienna, 500 km, Budapest, 600 km, Paris, 1,000 km, Amsterdam, 1,300 km, Warsaw, 1,400 km, and Moscow, 2,600 km.

Furthermore, this chapter will throw light on the gradual transition from pedlars who wandered from town to town to pedlars who established shops and publishing companies in many European cities. Publishers born in Tesino established an organised network that reached from Paris to London, from Augsburg to Amsterdam, and from Vienna to Moscow. The influence that this network had on the print market has been under-recognised and underestimated in histories of printing. Both the Remondini trade and the Tesini market became, however, increasingly peripheral after the 1820s, as the public that had eagerly bought their prints a century earlier decreased in size and as tastes changed.

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On 21 December 1790 the administrator of the parish of Grosskarol in present-day Romania noted the death on 5 January that year of Mattia Scignaro, an Italian born in Azzida, a village in the vicinity of S. Pietro al Natisone. Scignaro was a print trader or, according to the Latin formula used in the document, 'cum sociis imagines circumferentem ac vendentem' (persons going around selling with companions).³ On 13 October 1792

² On itinerant commerce in the Trentino country, see C. Malerba, *Commercio ambulante: una formula distributiva sempre moderna, una storia di cultura, di umanità, di economia* (Trento, 1997). The reference to the Tesino valley is at 194–216.

³ See D. Ruttar & A. Zanini, eds., *Guziranje: dalla Schiavonia veneta all'Ongheria con le stampe dei Remondini* (Comune di Stregna, 2009), 345.