The multiplicity of environmental conditions in the Lombard region is unmatched elsewhere in the Italian peninsula. To the zone of foothills and mountains with wide valleys, and the plain crossed by numerous waterways, correspond cities with different characteristics. Despite their inclusion in the Visconti state, urban centres with a strong communal tradition continued to be the fulcrum of trade, of production, of financial dealings. The image of Visconti and Sforza Milan as a “factory-city” proposed by Carlo Maria Cipolla has been extended by Luciana Frangioni to the entire Lombard region, a “factory-region”; it has even been suggested that the structure of manufacturing resembled that of today.1 It is, therefore, the industrial rather than mercantile physiognomy of Visconti and Sforza Lombardy, and the diffusion of manufacturing in the territory, that have been stressed. Nevertheless, production outside the cities, although attested for the communal era, has been studied only from the 1990s because previously, as for later medieval Florence, only city workshops had been examined.2 Commerce, on the other hand, because of the predominance of Tuscan trade (in the historiography as well), has received more limited attention, except for research on the routes taken by trade goods and merchants to the Alps and to the Mediterranean.3
attitude of the Visconti and Sforza *signori* towards commerce and production in Milan (but not other cities), however, has been investigated several times, and has not yet been fully understood. Historians in the 1930s to the 1960s argued that there had been constant support from the *signori* for merchants and manufactures.\(^4\) In the last thirty years, partly through comparisons with other regional states in Italy, more attention has been paid to political factors and economic trends, putting into perspective the continuity of policies favourable to merchants. Besides, there is general agreement on the part of historians on the fact that the formation of the regional states of Milan, Florence, Venice and Naples boosted competitiveness and the draining of resources and manpower towards the capital cities. As regards the Lombardy of the Visconti and the Sforza, it is recognized that the enduring urban polycentrism limited the capacity of state intervention and that therefore the subject cities continued to maintain their own spaces of economic autonomy.\(^5\)

The formation of the dominion coincided with the troubled period of the end of independent civic governments, the second half of the fourteenth century with a succession of epidemics and of wars between the states. The polarization of trade in favour of Milan signified the contraction of the commerce of the other cities. At Pavia, Cremona, and above all at Piacenza, trade, that had been the pivotal economic activity in the communal epoch, suffered a marked contraction from the fourteenth century, because of the successes of Milanese merchants and the competition of Tuscan merchants on the routes of the Po valley.\(^6\) But this is not to say that entrepreneurial interests were abandoned; they gradually shifted towards agricultural production. At Bergamo, which still

