

march to attack Rome; Charlemagne's knights rode through the same passes on their way to conquer Italy in 773; today it is still the main arterial road and rail link over the Alps. In the middle ages, control of this route would form a vital element in the rise of the dynasty that in the thirteenth century would come to rule Turin, and ultimately the whole of Italy: the House of Savoy. The counts of Savoy first appear in the eleventh century as minor feudatories in the French Alpine region from which they take their name. Over time they gradually extended their rule into Piedmont, piecing together a multi-lingual principality that straddled the mountains and dominated the passes over them. The rulers of the House of Savoy became "the gatekeepers of Italy", their strategic location astride the Alpine passes conferring on them a political and military significance far out of proportion to the power they could summon from the meager economic and demographic resources of their upland domains. From the thirteenth to the twentieth centuries this Alpine dynasty would play a decisive part in the city's history.

The Alps are a constant, inescapable presence in Turin; they form a wall close at hand to the west, rising abruptly out of the plain, their peaks looming over the city. This face of the mountain chain is very steep, in contrast to the gentler slope on the western face in France, where the Alpine range descends gradually towards the Rhône valley. The mountains form an inseparable part of Turin's history, for from the earliest times they have served both as an avenue of communication and as a protective barrier. Besides the passes west of the city accessible through the valley of Susa, other, more distant passes link the two sides of the mountain chain: the Great and Little St Bernard in the Val d'Aosta to the north, and the narrow defiles of the Maddalena and Tenda communicating between southern Piedmont and Provence. But the passes leading to Turin through the Susa valley are easier of access than these others, and so have constituted the principal thoroughfare for Alpine communication at least since Roman times. Turin in consequence has always been the main gateway into Italy for armies, pilgrims, and more recently tourists coming from the west, commanding the route of choice for merchants and travelers heading from northern Italy to France. Even today the Alps remain a formidable barrier. The highest peaks in the region, like the Monviso, from which the Po springs, tower well over 3,000 meters (10,000 feet). Negotiating the Alpine passes was until recent times often a risky adventure, as many travelers' accounts bear witness, and once the snows fell in winter they became virtually impassable.

To the east, Turin is hemmed in by the hills of Monferrato, which slope down to the banks of the river Po opposite the city. Their sum-