

cient forests that once covered the land. Already by the seventeenth century, the advance of farmland, and constant cutting for timber and fuel (mainly in the form of charcoal), had depleted the forests around Turin to such an extent that the city fathers were compelled to bring in supplies of firewood from the Alps, a considerable distance away, where thick forests still flourished. The work of draining the marshes began later than the clearance of the forests; it started in earnest in the middle ages, and has continued down to modern times, as the need for agricultural land increased with the rise in population. The flocks and herds that once grazed much of the plain gradually disappeared. Pastoral farming was relegated to the Alpine foothills and uplands, where it had always been the dominant form of agriculture; a kind of symbiosis was created between the farmers of the mountains and the plains, exchanging animal products – wool, milk and cheese – for grain. In this way, centuries of unremitting human toil gradually transformed the landscape around Turin and created the agrarian economy on which it depended until very recent times.

However, Turin's history was not determined by its geographical position alone. Political factors have also shaped its destiny, from the moment the Romans chose to found a town on the site. From Roman times and until the later middle ages the city was a small provincial town, overshadowed by richer, more vigorous neighbors like Asti or Vercelli, which expanded their territories, their political influence and their commerce across the region, while Turin languished in relative obscurity. Turin took on a new significance in the thirteenth century, when the counts of Savoy established their lordship over the city, initiating a new phase in its history. The counts of Savoy chose to establish themselves at Turin because it commanded the eastern outlet of the passes that linked their domains on the opposite sides of the Alps, and provided a springboard for territorial expansion into Piedmont and northern Italy. But we should not overestimate the importance of this development. After the Savoyard dynasty took control, Turin functioned only as an outpost of their authority, and still played only a secondary role in the economic and political life of the region. The Savoyard counts' capital and court remained at Chambéry, on the western side of the Alps, where the bulk of their lands were located. Through the later middle ages Turin remained a small city, growing and gradually eclipsing the other urban centers scattered across the Piedmontese plain by reason of its newfound political role as center of the expanding Savoyard domains east of the Alps.

In the later sixteenth century its destiny changed radically, when the