

**THE ROLE OF TOWNS AND THEIR INSTITUTIONS IN  
PROMOTING DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE IN THE RURAL  
AREAS: A CASE STUDY OF BOLOGNA'S FOUNDLINGS**

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## **Abstract**

*During the nineteenth century, the number of unwanted infants who were abandoned represented 3% of the Italian birth rate. A special role was played by hospices that managed the processing, care and integration of orphans into society. Just one hospital, S. Procolo in Bologna, received an average of 500 children per year, coming from both the town and from the rural areas of the countryside.*

*Details regarding the children accepted by the hospital were recorded in special registers; children were often subsequently put into the care of wet nurse outside the institution. These women often lived in rural areas and they usually received a small fee. If the children survived, they would then be put into the care of foster families until the age of majority, or until they could support themselves financially (at which time the institution stopped making support payments). In many cases, they would remain in their foster parents' town or in neighboring towns.*

*The author's previous study, *Endogamia, consanguinidad y matrimonios con expósitos en una parroquia dela montaña Boloñesa* (Tagliavini and Nicolini, 2011), revealed the presence in the marriage market of numerous people who were abandoned at birth. Subsequent investigation and study regarding the distribution and movement of abandoned children and the impact they had on local populations was carried out, with particular focus on the possible presence of geographical areas which had an increased rate of abandonment, as well as areas with a greater percentage of foster care.*

*Registers conserved in the Provincial Archives of Bologna containing data on children staying at the S. Procolo Hospital revealed that many orphans were from rural areas.*

## **Introduction**

During the 19th century, the phenomena of child abandonment reached very high levels, representing 3% of verifiable births in Italy (Kertzer, Koball and White 1997).

In the city of Bologna, the S. Procolo Hospital, or Foundling Hospital carried out a principal role in accommodating and caring for abandoned newborns and in their eventual introduction into society. Until 1862, children taken in by the hospital were given the surname Degli Esposti. From that year on, S. Procolo began to assign invented surnames derived from the names of flora, fauna and trade occupations. Originally, S. Procolo was a Benedictine monastery; in the 13<sup>th</sup> century the monastery gave assistance to the needy, the sick and abandoned children. In the surrounding countryside there were a series of hospital which carried out the same activities. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century there was the desire to centralise foundling accommodation in a single structure, and thus S. Procolo became a public entity and the other hospitals of the Diocese were closed (Fanti 1990).

In contrast to the practice of other Italian hospitals, when S. Procolo took custody of a newborn child, the mother was required to make a fixed cash donation. In order to monitor illegitimate births and acquire donations, midwives in the city and in the surrounding countryside were given the task of assisting and reporting unmarried pregnant women. In addition, midwives were responsible for the admission of the newborn child to the institution, thus making the midwife the central figure in the whole procedure. If the mother was unable to make the donation, she was obliged to live within the institution for at least one year, with the obligation to breastfeed the babies present until they were fed by an outside wet nurse. (Fanti 1990).

It is easy to explain the notable movement of people from the countryside into Bologna and given the high incidence of child abandonment, and that S. Procolo was the only institution for unwanted infants in the Diocese and the city of Bologna; however, a study noted that the majority of wet nurses resided in the mountains and hills (Fanti 1990). This fact created a contrary movement from the city into the country. A study of marriages in the hill areas near Bologna noted that the parish church registers listed many people with the name Degli Esposti who had formerly been taken in by S. Procolo in Bologna. Probably, children who were taken into families with wet nurses continued to live in the towns in which the wet nurses resided, and upon reaching majority they married with locals and permanently settled down in these towns (Tagliavini and Nicolini 2011).

The objective of the present study is to investigate the mobility between rural areas and the city that was created by the phenomenon of child abandonment.

The territory of the Diocese of Bologna was, and still is, divided into three areas: the plain, the hills and the mountains. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century very different types of crops and animals were grown and bred in each of these zones, which influenced the social and family organisation of the inhabitants.

The mountains were characterised by tiny properties run by mono-nuclear families. Often the size of the property and available cultivatable land was not sufficient to provide adequately for the family, and many inhabitants were obliged to seek their livelihood elsewhere as field hands (mainly in the adjacent hill areas). In the plain, besides the large landed estates, there were plots of land used by sharecroppers. Often more than one family would live in the same small farmhouse, creating numerous multi-nuclear families. Lastly, the hill areas were divided into smaller plots occupied by owners or sharecroppers. In the hill districts there were both mono-nuclear and multi-nuclear families (CAI 1881).

Clearly, the nature of the three areas determined both the economy and the types of family composition in the different communities, and therefore in this study the analysed data has been subdivided accordingly.

It is probable that these territorial differences had an impact on child abandonment and the post-institutional redistribution of children in the Diocese.

## Sources

The aim of the present study is to investigate the origin of children taken to the S. Procolo Hospital in Bologna from 1845 to 1895. Particular attention has been given to children coming from the rural areas around Bologna, and the obtained data was subsequently divided and analysed on the basis of town and village distribution in the plain, hill and mountain areas.

The data was collected by studying outside hospital wet nurse record books and hospital registers of the period 1845-1895 held in Bologna's Provincial Archive.

The record books and registers were accurately kept by hospital staff and contain a great deal of information regarding the children and wet nurses.

In particular, the registers contained the infant's place of origin, the name of the midwife, and the name of the person who took the infant to the hospital, the name given to the child by the hospital and his or her date of birth, and the wet nurse record book reference number. This register contained information regarding outside wet nurses that took charge of foundlings and the payments they received.

## Results

Data collected in the registers in the fifty years period examined in this study revealed that a fair number of children came from the rural areas of Diocese. Indeed, out of a total of 27,448 infants taken in from 1845 to 1895, 6,333 came from the rural areas of Diocese; a percentage of 23.07%.

In Graph 1, there is the total number of children taken in by S. Procolo Hospital in Bologna from 1845 to 1895. The first spike in admissions takes place in 1863, with a total of 560, and then another in 1865, with 624 admissions. In 1876, the peak was reached with a total of 714 children; approximately double the 359 children admitted in 1845. From 1885 we see a steady decline down to 528 in 1895.

In contrast, in 1862 the rural areas of Diocese experienced double the number of admissions compared to 1845, reaching 22.50% of total admissions (Graph 2). After this, we see a fairly constant rate of admissions until 1877, when there is a jump, with 180 children admitted. In 1887, during a period of general decline in admissions, the rural

areas of Diocese saw its admissions peak, with 217 children taken in by the hospital. The peak is clearly visible in Graph 2 in the annual percentage of children coming from the rural areas of Diocese, which in 1887 reached 36.17%.

As mentioned before, the Diocese of Bologna's territory was, and still is, divided into 3 areas: the plain, the hills and the mountains<sup>1</sup>.

Figure 1 shows the territory of the Diocese of Bologna, with municipal subdivisions according to the three zone types.

The total number of children from the three rural zones are clearly observable in Graph 3. It should be noted that abandoned children chiefly come from towns located on the plain.

### **Child Abandonment Rate**

The data represented in Graph 3, by itself, does not explain the phenomenon of child abandonment and therefore it was decided to compare it with the resident population in 1871 (on the basis that the 1871 population represents approximately the average population for the time period studied), and in doing so a child abandonment rate for evaluating every municipality was produced. This rate was obtained by comparing the average annual number of foundlings in every municipality with the average population, using the 1871 census from every municipality.

In Table 1, the total number of abandoned children taken in by S. Procolo Hospital from 1845 to 1895 is indicated along with the relevant child abandonment rate.

Analysis of the data revealed substantial differences between the results obtained with absolute numbers and those using the child abandonment rate.

In the plain, the town that had the highest number of children sent to S. Procolo in the 50 years studied was Molinella, with 432 children; followed by Budrio, with 424; and then Medicina, with 387. However, when the child abandonment rate is used we see that Molinella remains in first position, with a rate of 0.79; followed by Medicina with a rate of 0.67; and then S. Giorgio di Piano, with a rate of 0.56. Therefore, Medicina, for example, passes from third to second place, but Budrio drops from second to fifth place.

As far as the hill area is concerned, the municipality with the highest number of abandoned children was Castel S. Pietro Terme, with 255 children; followed by Sasso Marconi with 187; and then Savigno with 171. A comparison made employing the child abandonment

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<sup>1</sup> (ISTAT: National Statistic Institute)

rate puts Savigno in first place, with a rate of 0.93; next is Bazzano, with a rate of 0.88; followed by Loiano, with 0.54.

Last of all, in the mountains we see the municipality with the most foundlings was Vergato, with 247 children; followed by Castel d'Aiano, with 192; and then by Grizzana Morandi, with 166. However, using the child abandonment rate we discover that Castel d'Aiano is in first position, with a rate of 0.98; followed by Vergato, with a rate of 0.97; and then Castel di Casio, with 0.85.

If the child abandonment rate of 0.50 is used for assessing the scale of the child abandonment phenomenon, it emerges that in contrast with the information contained in Graph 3, the area with the highest child abandonment rate was actually the mountains. Indeed, out of 13 municipality in the mountains, 9 had a value above 0.50. On the plain, only 6 out of 26 municipality, and in the hill areas only 4 out of 15.

The same result can be observed in Graph 4, which shows the child abandonment rate for the three zones.

### **Child Abandonment Rate Trends**

In the analysing the period examined, the child abandonment rate trend was calculated, using a comparison of the total annual number of abandoned infants from every municipality from 1857 to 1866 with the population in 1861. This procedure was repeated for the decades that followed until 1895<sup>2</sup>.

When the rate is obtained as set out above, it demonstrates a progressive increase in child abandonment until the decade 1877-1886, with a rate of 0.56, only to decrease in the subsequent decade down to a rate of 0.46.

The same trend can be generally seen in all three different areas (plane, hills and mountains). Indeed, as can be noted in Graph 5, the abandonment trend is constant and we see the decade 1877-1886 as the period with the highest child abandonment value.

This fact is also confirmed in Graph 1, which shows the general trends for the annual totals of infants taken in by the hospital.

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<sup>2</sup> 1861 was the year unification of Italy took place, and the first demographic census for the resident population occurred in this year.

## Conclusions

The majority of foundlings came from the city and the rural areas of Diocese of Bologna's contribution to child abandonment was only 23.07%.

The analysis of absolute numbers for foundlings who came from the rural areas of Diocese demonstrates that the plain was the area with the highest occurrence of child abandonment cases. This is explained by the high population of the area. When child abandonment rate is used, the general trend changes, and the mountains emerge as the area with the highest child abandonment value.

Given the hardships and difficulties of this period of history, the poverty that hit rural areas in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the difficulty in travelling between mountain areas and the city centre, the results obtained using the child abandonment values are unexpected and interesting.

Child abandonment rates, and their use in the calculations for the three areas, show a constant trend in the three zones, and show a peak in child abandonment in the decade 1877-1886.

If the results of this study are compared with the current distribution of the surname Degli Esposti in the province's territory shown in Figure 2, we see a higher occurrence of the descendants of abandoned children living in hill communities and in the areas west of Bologna. The explanation for this is that the majority of wet nurses caring for foundlings came from these rural areas. It is worth noting that Castel d'Aiano, the town that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century had the highest child abandonment rate in the Diocese (a rate of 0.98), is today the town with the most people with the surname Degli Esposti.



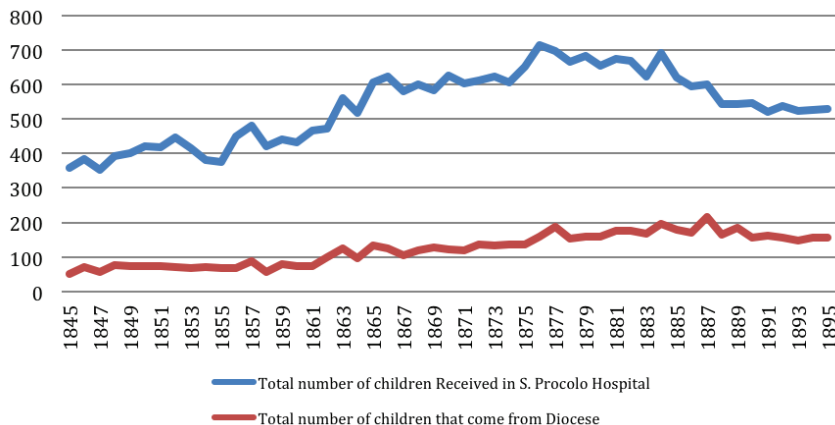
**Table 1. Absolute numbers and rate values of each municipality of Bologna Diocese (1845-1895)**

Town	Total of Children	Child Abandonment Rate	Area
Anzola dell'Emilia	19	0.09	Plains
Argelato	48	0.24	Plains
Baricella	122	0.48	Plains
Bentivoglio	25	0.11	Plains
Budrio	424	0.51	Plains
Calderara di Reno	23	0.11	Plains
Castel Guelfo	42	0.26	Plains
Castel Maggiore	29	0.13	Plains
Castello d'Argile	34	0.19	Plains
Castenaso	25	0.12	Plains
Crespellano	51	0.21	Plains
Crevalcore	155	0.29	Plains
Galliera	106	0.54	Plains
Granarolo Dell'Emilia	42	0.19	Plains
Malalbergo	83	0.36	Plains
Medicina	387	0.67	Plains
Minerbio	103	0.28	Plains
Molinella	432	0.79	Plains
S. Agata Bolognese	119	0.58	Plains
S. Giorgio di Piano	122	0.56	Plains
S. Giovanni in Persiceto	266	0.34	Plains
S. Pietro in Casale	93	0.22	Plains
Sala Bolognese	29	0.15	Plains
Castelfranco Emilia - MO	243	0.38	Plains
S. Agostino – FE	16	0.06	Plains
Poggio Renatico – FE	15	0.05	Plains
Bazzano	133	0.88	Hills
Casalecchio di Reno	57	0.42	Hills
Castel S. Pietro Terme	255	0.40	Hills
Castello di Serravalle	66	0.48	Hills
Fontanelice	13	0.13	Hills
Loiano	122	0.54	Hills
Marzabotto	102	0.48	Hills
Monte S. Pietro	79	0.34	Hills
Monterenzio	73	0.41	Hills

<b>Monteveglia</b>	<b>55</b>	0.44	Hills
<b>Ozzano dell'Emilia</b>	<b>38</b>	0.19	Hills
<b>Pianoro</b>	<b>102</b>	0.36	Hills
<b>S. Lazzaro di Savena</b>	<b>31</b>	0.12	Hills
<b>Sasso Marconi</b>	<b>187</b>	0.51	Hills
<b>Savigno</b>	<b>171</b>	0.93	Hills
<b>Zola Predosa</b>	<b>54</b>	0.22	Hills
<b>Camugnano</b>	<b>141</b>	0.57	Mountains
<b>Castel d'Aiano</b>	<b>192</b>	0.98	Mountains
<b>Castel di Casio</b>	<b>139</b>	0.85	Mountains
<b>Castiglione dei Pepoli</b>	<b>136</b>	0.55	Mountains
<b>Gaggio Montano</b>	<b>160</b>	0.75	Mountains
<b>Granaglione</b>	<b>59</b>	0.27	Mountains
<b>Grizzana Morandi</b>	<b>166</b>	0.77	Mountains
<b>Lizzano in Belvedere</b>	<b>110</b>	0.50	Mountains
<b>Monghidoro</b>	<b>82</b>	0.33	Mountains
<b>Monzuno</b>	<b>69</b>	0.31	Mountains
<b>Porretta Terme</b>	<b>139</b>	0.76	Mountains
<b>S. Benedetto Val di Sambro</b>	<b>101</b>	0.49	Mountains
<b>Vergato</b>	<b>247</b>	0.97	Mountains

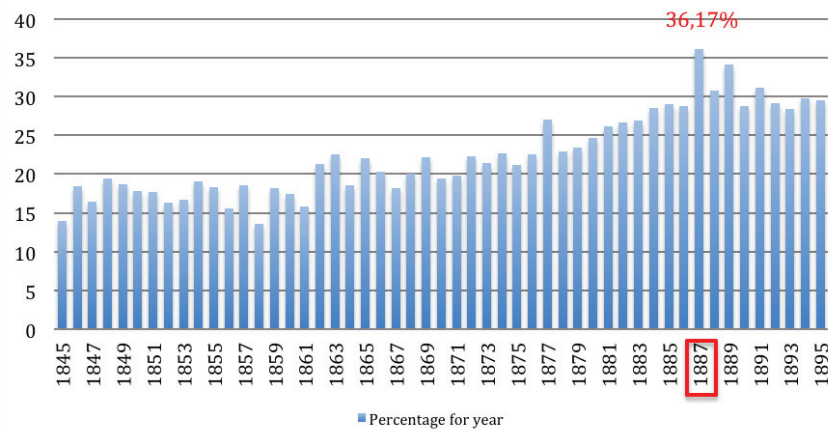
Source: data collected from Bologna's Provincial Archive registers

**Graph 1. Annual Totals for abandoned children received by S. Procolo Hospital & Annual Totals for abandoned children that came from Diocese rural areas**



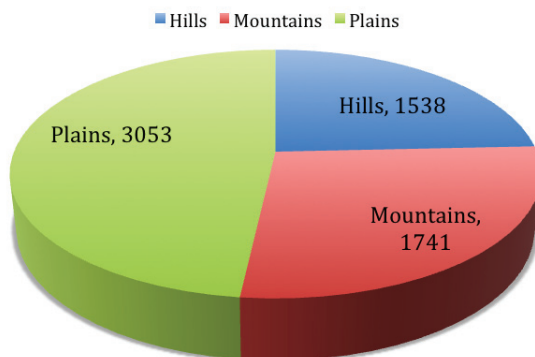
Source: data collected from Bologna's Provincial Archive registers

**Graph 2. Annual Percentages for abandoned children that came from rural areas of Diocese**



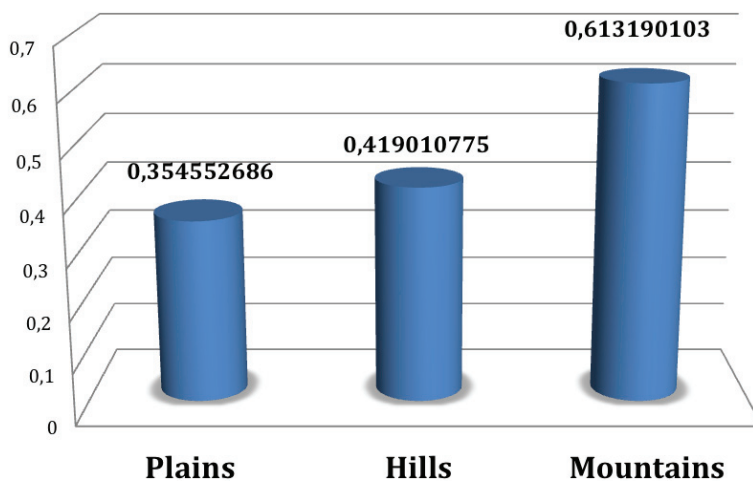
Source: data collected from Bologna's Provincial Archive registers

**Graph 3. Abandoned children total for the period 1845-1895**



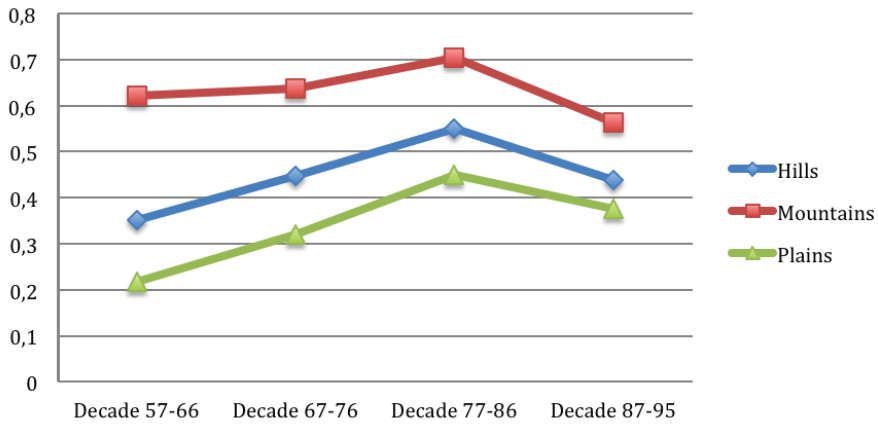
Source: data collected from Bologna's Provincial Archive registers

**Graph 4. Child Abandonment Rate for the three areas: plains, hills and mountains**



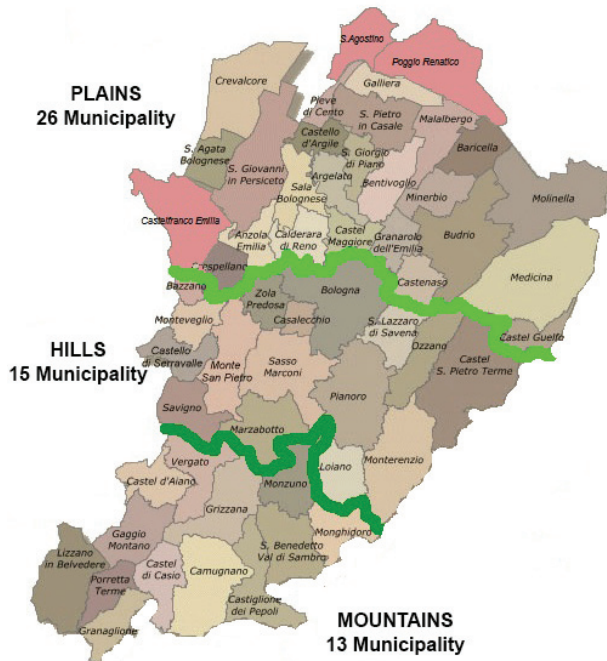
Source: data collected from Bologna's Provincial Archive registers

**Graph 5. Child Abandonment Rate Trends for the three areas: plains, hills and mountains**



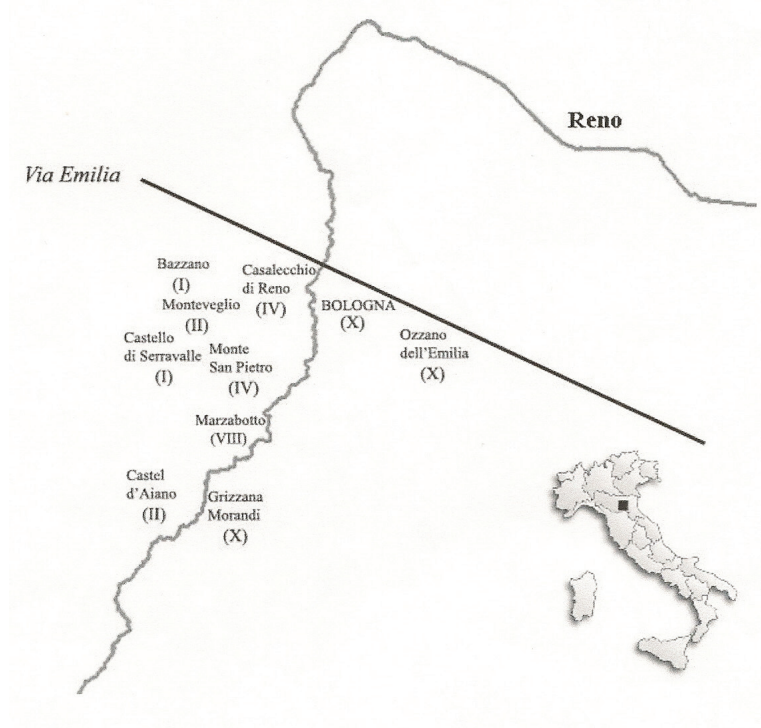
Source: data collected from Bologna’s Provincial Archive registers

**Figure 1. Map of the Diocese of Bologna divided into plains, hills and mountains**



Source: Bologna Province Web Site

**Figure 2. Municipality where the surname “Degli Esposti” is more frequent**



Bazzano and Castello di Serravalle are the municipalities with the highest incidence of the surname “Degli Esposti”.

Castel d'Aiano and Monteveglia are the municipalities with the second highest incidence of the surname “Degli Esposti”.

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