



# Indispensable Immigrants: The Wine Porters of Northern Italy and Their Saint, 1200-1800

*Lester K. Little*

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A long-forgotten trade and an unheard-of saint are brought to life in this tale of survival by hard work in the thriving cities of late medieval and early modern northern Italy. *Indispensable Immigrants* recreates the world of peasants from the Alps and the Apennines who in order to survive came down to the cities of the Po Valley to work as wine porters. They joined the stream of labourers from the countryside whose willingness to do the heavy lifting that city dwellers preferred to avoid helped oil the wheels of the urban economy. Their counterparts of today have travelled greater distances to reach their new social and psychological environments, but the challenges they encounter are strikingly similar to those the porters faced long ago. Confronted with unrelenting mockery and disdain as well as low wages, the wine porters gained a measure of esteem - self-esteem at least - by making one of their own, Alberto of Villa d'Ogna, their patron saint, and keeping his cult alive for five centuries. During that half millennium, the wine porters and the cult of St Alberto sustained one another with what they both needed most, namely respect. Even though Alberto met the traditional, community-based expectations of a saint in the thirteenth century and then the profoundly different criteria for papal canonization five centuries later, once the wine porters became obsolete, both their work and his cult faded from memory.

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