



SEVEN CENTURIES OF HISTORY AND ART **AT SAN BENEDETTO PO, NEAR MANTOVA**

THE ABBEY OF SAN BENEDETTO IN POLIRONE

Thanks to the researches about its foundation (1007) and its expansion over the centuries as well as to the important historical and artistic evidence it houses, the Abbey of San Benedetto in Polirone, located in the Oltrepò of Mantova, offers an exhaustive example of the Benedictine civilization in this territory. In the twelfth century, the complex (about 700 square meters) was a center of power and culture, one of the richest and most powerful monasteries in north-central Italy. Here, just a few years ago, it was celebrated the Polironiano Millennial, arousing great interest. In the place where, only thanks to the work of reclamation of the monks, in the eleventh century it was given start to agriculture and livestock, still now we can see the typical agricultural aspect of the Po Valley.

THE ABBEY OF SAN BENEDETTO IN POLIRONE AND ITS HISTORY

Several finds of high artistic level give evidence that the abbey of San Benedetto in Polirone was an important Benedictine center in northern Italy, at the time of Matilde of Canossa (1046 -1115) - a powerful feudal and ardent supporter of the papacy in the struggle for investitures. Matilde particularly loved this complex, where we can still see her image represented in various pictures. From the spiritual point of view, the monastery was characterized by the cult of San Benedetto and by the rule of life adopted according to the customs of Cluny. Another tutelary

saint was the Armenian hermit San Simeone, who stayed in the monastery until 1016, the year of his death. From the artistic point of view, the complex is part of the Padanian Romanesque style of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, characterized by the influence of the sculptor Wiligelmo who operated with his school in the vicinity. The Abbey of Polirone, founded in 1007 by Countess Matilde's grandfather, owes its name to its location, as it stands on an island between the river Po, very important element for the monastery, and its tributary Lirone.

The island, donated by Tebaldo of Canossa in order to have a center of study and prayer built in the place, enjoyed a further period of artistic and cultural development in the fifteenth century and especially in the sixteenth century, one of the moments of its maximum splendour when, thanks to the considerable wealth of the land of the monastery, there was the flourishing of important works. Right then some new cloisters were built and in 1540 the architect Giulio Romano (1499-1546) rebuilt the abbey church. In 1781 the monks straightened the course of the River Po, so that the water of the great river - the major source for agricultural production and trade, but also a possible danger to crops and to the monastery life because of its flooding - was shifted two kilometres away from the village.

After the suppression of the monastic orders wanted by Napoleon in 1797, a devastation of the architectural complex was made, together with the dispersion of the most important works of art. Among them part of the Scriptorium Polironiano, dating back to the eleventh and twelfth centuries, used to write and copy codes of high quality and also the books of the Gospels, according to the annual liturgy, with various pages enriched with important miniatures. Over the time the activity of the Scriptorium was universally known; among other things it also produced "Matilde's Gospels", the most important manuscript of the Abbey, now housed at the Morgan Library of London. Also famous is the Psalterium Davidicum of the twelfth century.

In the second half of the last century, the Abbey of San Benedetto Po was subjected to careful restoration works, both architectural and artistic. The agricultural vocation of this area is still witnessed by superb agricultural structures located in the vicinity of the monastic complex, on which they depended in the past.

THE BASILICA REBUILT BY GIULIO ROMANO

The original nucleus of the Basilica was a small hall of worship, dating back to the eighth century, that recent archaeological excavations have brought to light. The old church, built in 1130, was divided into a central nave and two aisles by two rows of red-marble columns. In the fifteenth century the vault of the nave and the lantern were redone. The current Basilica, with its great display of wealth, highlights the talent of Giulio Romano, the important architect and painter of the Renaissance who, without demolishing the existing Gothic and Romanesque church, created an imposing and completely frescoed complex, opened in 1547. His spectacular taste is expressed through the decorations with grotesques as well as the solution adopted to incorporate the columns of the original structure along the central nave.

Very interesting is the empty marble tomb of Matilde di Canossa, resting on four red-marble lions: the countess wanted her tomb built here, but in 1632 her corpse was moved to the Basilica of San Pietro, in Rome. In addition to the Choir (1551) and the beautiful sacristy with carvings in relief, you can admire various statues of saints in earthenware by Antonio Begarelli from Modena (1499-1565) dedicated to the Benedictine worship. These large artifacts were sprayed with white clay and baked in special ovens fueled by poplar wood. From the left aisle of the basilica you can gain access to the Oratory of Santa Maria, dating from the late eleventh century and the mid-twelfth century, then adapted to the main church at the time of its rebuilding, according to the Cluniac architectural tradition. Of particular interest are the remains of a rich mosaic floor (1151-1154), especially preserved in the transept; on the altar, you can admire a painting of the sixteenth century by Fermo Ghisoni ("Madonna and Child with the Saints Ambrogio and Bernardo).

THE CLOISTERS

Chiostro degli Abati o dei Secolari

At the entrance of the Monastery, you find the Cloister "degli Abati o dei Secolari", restored in the Baroque time, and, crossing the spectacular staircase, you can visit the Museo Civico Polironiano, that houses one of the richest Italian collections of the folk Padanian culture. It preserves materials related to employment, daily life and religion in rural areas, strongly linked to the monastic context.

Chiostro di San Benedetto and Chiostro di San Simeone

The Cloister of San Benedetto, the oldest one of the monastery, is decorated with important Renaissance frescoes by Rivelli and Parenzano. Through the Sala del Capitolo you can gain access to the late Gothic Cloister of San Simeone, characterized by large mullioned windows with ogival arches, which preserves interesting frescoes featuring the hermit saint's life.

Refettorio Grande

Beside the new infirmary (1584) you can find the Large Refectory, a structure with four spans, which houses a large fresco recently attributed to Correggio. The large room of the old Refectory now houses the Archaeological Museum of the Monastery, which displays many artifacts related to the history of the monastery, discovered during the excavations in the complex Polironiano.

VISITING THE SURROUNDINGS

A walk around the monastery

A walk around the monastery helps you to better understand the cultural reality of the complex Polirone, a large land property whose production covered the food needs of the monastery, with large surpluses sold in Mantova and Verona. The Villa Gonzaga of Portiolo, ancient possession of the Gonzaga family, is now in decay. The modern Astronomical Observatory in Stradello Golgo is open to the public by appointment, both at day and night (tel. 0376 615156). Of particular interest, just two kilometers from the city center, is the church of Santa Maria in Valverde (1151), a small complex that used to house the senior monks, now privately owned. Founded in the second half of the twelfth century and restored in the fifteenth century, once it depended on the monastery Polironiano.

It is also interesting to visit, in the hamlet of San Siro, the drainage system of the Consorzio of the Agro Mantovano-Reggiano, at the mouth of the river Secchia, one of the major drainage systems of the Po Valley and a witness to the importance of water in the history of this territory. In Foce Secchia also to be visited is the Parco della Golena, a significant green area. For those who want to experience the typical environment of the flood plain valley, there could be an attractive option to reach Polirone by water. In fact, just two kilometers from the town center, there is a river harbour for the tourist boats sailing from Mantova and Venezia.

(Information: tel. 0376 322 875).

Cuisine

Among the specialties of the gastronomic tradition of the Oltrepo of Mantova, we would like to mention, in addition to the agnoli, maccheroni and tagliatelle all'anatra, the famous tortelli di zucca and spicy pork dishes, accompanied by the local Lambrusco DOC, the red wine with the characteristic aroma of raspberry. The tasty pumpkins, watermelons and asparagus have been recently rediscovered by the farmers of San Benedetto. But most of all, we must not forget that this is the area where famous sausages and the excellent Parmesan cheese are produced.

Getting to San Benedetto Po

By car: highway A22 Modena-Brennero, from the south exit Pegognaga, from the north exit Mantova sud.

By train: Suzzara-Ferrara, San Benedetto Po station.

By plane: Verona, Valerio Catullo airport.

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