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ARCHAEOLOGICAL AREA AND THE PATRIARCHAL BASILICA OF AQUILEIA

“As the columns of legionnaires passed through the city, the insignia could be seen. [...] I squeezed my father’s hand tightly; it was the rough hand of a veteran of the thirteenth Twin Legion.”

Aquileia defensoris urbis, Valerio Massimo Manfredi

Aquileia is the result of a planned conception in 181 B.C. when 3500 colonists and their families settled there. Unwelcoming, with wooden houses and public buildings set in a land which more often than not was water to bar the road to the barbarians attracted by the gold of Rome, it became a centre of military coordination visited by generals and emperors.

It was also the northernmost port of the Mediterranean: from the East it imported oil, wine, precious goods and glass. Precious drops of golden amber, which were crafted in the city and left again for other markets, their value multiplied by ten, filtered through the curtain of the blockade. Aquileia grew: with private investments, sumptuous public buildings were built and the wooden houses became town houses covered in mosaics. In the 2nd century A.D. it was one of the ten best cities in the Empire. It survived epidemics and sieges, and after the Edict of Constantine it became mother of all the dioceses of the Adriatic: Bishop Theodosius and the local elite financed a grandiose place of worship, decorated with a mosaic floor of 700 square metres with stories from the Old Testament. It was almost killed by Attila the Hun on 18 July 452 and became the emblem of a dying empire, destined to end 20 years later. The ecclesiastical authorities survived, and rebuilt on the ruins of the basilica a patriarchate which was to live on for another thousand years. In the meantime, though, the hubs of power had moved – the Longobards to the west, the Byzantines to Ravenna – its port had silted up and Aquileia slowly died.



CULTURAL HERITAGE
UNESCO DOSSIER: 825TER
PLACE OF INSCRIPTION: KYOTO, JAPAN
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CRITERIA FOR SELECTION: Most of ancient Aquileia still lies unexcavated beneath the fields and as such it is the greatest archaeological reserve of its kind. The patriarchal basilica, an extraordinary building with an exceptional mosaic floor, played a key role in the evangelisation of a large region of central Europe.



“I saw once again the mosaic floors, the finest in the world, the upper one complete with the miraculous catch and all the species of fish in the waters of the Adriatic, the lower and underground one, with the symbolic rams carrying the crozier, the lobster, the fight between the cockerel symbolising light and the turtle darkness. The museum of the excavations, today kept very well, with engraved quartz that shine against the light, the superb collection of glass from antiquity that reflects the sunlight. And the archaeological walk, in the middle of the cultivated fields, against the perpetual backdrop of clouds. This major archaeological centre is being extended and enriched.”

In his *Viaggio in Italia* in the 1950s, Guido Piovene also visited Aquileia, then, like today, an open-air museum.

Start from the **1** river port: in Roman times, an impressive river flowed through the city but its course was deviated in the 4th century. The area of the port in those times was the centre of trade and communication in the city. The old structure can partially be recognised and dates back to the 2nd century B.C.; the pier and its dock are today in the middle of greenery and the river which used to be up to 50 metres wide is only a small stream today, but the result is very pleasant. Go to the **2** **Mausoleum of Candia**: what you can see is a reconstruction of 1956, but the monumental tomb is truly evocative.

Made up of a central structure which contained the urns, it was designed for an important magistrate in Augustan times, and is watched over by two stone lions. A little further ahead, still on Via Giulia Augusta, you will also see the main east-west axis and of which today some parts of the paving still remain. The next stopping place is the **3** **burial ground**: the five funerary enclosures, arranged along a secondary road leaving the city, are of great historic and artistic importance and absolutely fascinating. This leads to the heart of the heritage of Aquileia: the **4** **National Archaeological**

Museum of Aquileia, which reflects the image of the city's glorious past. The artifacts on display include, in addition to the inevitable statues, coins, engraved gems, glassware and pieces in amber. The lapidarium is in the courtyard, with epigraphs, tombstones and several fragments of mosaic floor, some of which are truly impressive. There is also a naval section, with the remains of a Roman vessel found near Monfalcone. Lastly, there is the **5** **Basilica**, with its huge mosaic floor, the Crypt of the Frescoes, the Crypt of the Excavations and the baptistery, which evokes oriental atmospheres.



MAP



A THOUSAND YEARS OF AQUILEIA

“Once again the crypt of the basilica opened up wide before Massimo [...]. Elena squeezed his hand. ‘It’s amazing!’ She was shivering in the white cotton dress that brushed her ankles [...]. ‘Are you cold?’ ‘It’s not for the cold’ [...]. It was love, love for the past, for the people who had sung to their god there, for every single piece that skilful hands had placed next to one another [...]. Massimo encouraged her to move forward ‘It’s all yours.’”

La figlia della cenere, Iliaria Tuti

The first basilica in Aquileia, “Theodorian” because it was the Bishop Theodore who wanted it, was built shortly after the Edict of Milan (313 A.D.), which granted freedom of worship to Christians. The building designed by Theodore cannot even be called a “church” because in those early centuries of Christianity, an identifying architecture had not yet been developed. This was subsequently borrowed from Roman basilicas. The Theodorian basilica was enlarged in the middle of the 5th century: this time two parallel churches rose from the ground. The floor mosaic was covered and did not suffer excessive damage when the basilica was devoured by fires started by the army of Attila (452); even today, the stone at the base of the columns looks damaged by the heat, but the Basilica has survived. It was consecrated again in its present-day appearance in 1031, the year of the frescoes in the apse and the bell-tower.



'I WOULD LOVE A BRACELET OF AMBER BEADS THAT GIVE OFF A LIGHT PERFUME WHEN THE HEAT OF THE BRAZIER WARMS THEM UP. AND TWO IVORY PINS TO KEEP MY HAIR UP [...], AND MAYBE A STOLE MADE FROM BYSSUS OR ONE OF THE COLOURED JARS FOR UNGUENTS THAT ARE MADE IN THE CITY.'

In this answer that Domitilla (one of the main characters of *Bambini*

di Aquileia by Anna Maria Breccia Cipolat) gives her father, who has asked her what gift she would like from their journey to Aquileia, there is a list of objects which were made in the workshops of Aquileia in the 1st century A.D. and which have come down to us, preserved in the **National Archaeological Museum of Aquileia**. Begin your visit from the **1 museum**: at the ticket-office, collect the backpack with the map and exploration diary which, through the game, will help you discover the different rooms. The museum also organises workshops and guided tours for children. Of all the finds in the beautiful rooms, don't

miss the brilliant **dirty floor**: fish leftovers, vine leaves, nuts, bones, egg shells thrown on to the floor by diners at a banquet and transformed into a mosaic. Then go on to the **2 Basilica of Aquileia**. Visit it with respect, because it is a consecrated place, and discover its history: what you see is the fourth building constructed over about seven centuries, but the mosaic which now occupies the central nave was laid when the first basilica was being built, immediately after Emperor Constantine put an end to the persecutions against Christians. This 760 square metre mosaic is the oldest in Christianity and the largest in the Western world. Walk slowly towards the apse: first of all you will come across some **portraits of local private citizens**, benefactors who have contributed to the construction of the church. Next up is the **family of Constantine's portrait**. The emperor was a friend of the bishop who founded the basilica, Theodor, and he may also have contributed to building the church by making a donation. Continuing, we come across **Jesus** depicted as a shepherd, carrying a sheep on his shoulder and a flute in his hand; all around him there are fish, a stag, a gazelle, birds and storks. Then there is a sea full of fish, telling the story of **Jonas**: the prophet has his arms raised to save his ship from the storm, but he ends up in the jaws of a sea monster; at last, when the monster spits him out, he rests under a pergola of pumpkin tendrils. All around, the waves are inhabited by fish, octopus and ducks: the same animals that today, like yesterday, live in the sea which is not very far from Aquileia.



KIDS



AQUILEIA in books

Reading suggestions to get to know the fascinating history of the ancient city.

• **Viaggio in Italia**, Guido Piovene (1957). Piovene travelled for three years in Italy to write this unique and meticulously detailed reportage, considered a classic of Italian travel literature. From the Alps to Sicily, stopping at Aquileia, the author's gaze is an invitation to discover our wonders.

• **Aquileia defensoris urbis**, Valerio Massimo Manfredi (2020). In a short story, the winner of the "Friuli-Venezia Giulia Region - The stories of places over time" prize, Manfredi recounts the parabola of the city of Aquileia, from the first years of the colony, gateway to the East, until 452 A.D., when it was destroyed by Attila, in the crucial years of the fall of the Western Roman Empire. The story is set in 168 B.C., when the emperors Mark Aurelius and Lucius Verus entered the city: the Romans, rulers of the world, have to fight an enemy that is as unbeatable as it is invisible: the plague.

• **La figlia della cenere**, Ilaria Tuti (2021). A novel in the series *I casi di Teresa Battaglia*, which was made into a television drama by the RAI starring Elena Sofia Ricci, *La figlia della cenere* develops on three time levels which interact with one another: the present which starts when Teresa visits a serial killer in prison who has asked to speak to her; a recent past, 27 years earlier, when the legal case which the profiler has to solve started; and a remote past, the 4th century A.D., the period of creation of the mosaics of Aquileia, full of symbols and which were hidden for thousands of years underneath a marble floor.

• **Una ciotola di noci**, Sergio Faleschini (2021). In the village of Poltabia, part of the abbatial feud of Moggio and the extremity of the Patriarchate of Aquileia, which is the backdrop in the books by Faleschini, Martino da Fior investigates three murders, which all took place in a short period in the year 1337. The event, through the involvement of friars, merchants, heretics, traders, innkeepers and woodcutters, contributes to outlining

14th century society in the Patriarchate of Aquileia.

• **La casa del Graben**, Sergio Faleschini (2022). In the village of Poltabia, the violent deaths of a woman and of a money-lending butcher involve a young woman, accused of witchcraft. Martino da Fior defends the woman, accompanied by a group of characters, Pietro, Ester and Gemma.

• **Un grappolo d'uva**, Sergio Faleschini (2023). In March 1338, in the village of Poltabia, a young woman and her friar confessor are accused of murdering a man. Martino da Fior investigates this and other cases of murder with the same *modus operandi*, along with minor characters who enrich the story.

Children's books:

• **Bambini di Aquileia**, Anna Maria Breccia Cipolat (1995). This is the story of the adventure of three children from Aquileia, in the time of the emperor Octavian Augustus.