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## VENETIAN WORKS OF DEFENCE BETWEEN THE 16<sup>TH</sup> AND 17<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES: STATO DA TERRA-WESTERN STATO DA MAR

*“... and well spoke the illustrious Signor Sforza Pallavicini, Captain General of the Venetian armies, when he affirmed that there was no fabric to be found in Europe which merited to be in any manner compared with this. But it was the last marvel performed by Michele, for he had only just completed the first range of columns above-described when he finished the course of his life.”*

*The Lives, Giorgio Vasari*

The Michele who is mentioned here is Michele Sanmicheli, probably the man who more than any other in Europe left his mark on the field of military architecture. Sanmicheli was born in Verona between 1484 and 1488 and died there in 1559, but in his lifetime he travelled all round Europe and whole parts of the Mediterranean, designing and building fortresses and studying the ones he came across on his journey. The qualities that the Marquis Sforza Pallavicini recognised in him are essentially those that were identified by UNESCO as the criteria for the inclusion of the Venetian works of defence of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries as a World Heritage of Humanity site. Half of the fortresses (three out of six) in the UNESCO site were designed by the Verona-born architect. The transnational serial site is made up of six structures in Italy, Croatia and Montenegro. Of the Italian sites – the Venetian walls of Bergamo in Lombardy, the fortresses of Palmanova (Friuli) and of Peschiera (Veneto) –, Sanmicheli only designed the last one, but all of them show signs of the influence of one of the greatest geniuses of the Renaissance.



### CULTURAL, SERIAL AND TRANSNATIONAL HERITAGE

UNESCO DOSSIER: 1533  
PLACE OF INSCRIPTION: KRAKOW, POLAND  
YEAR OF INSCRIPTION: 2017

**CRITERIA FOR SELECTION:** During the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, Venice conceived and implemented an innovative system of defence which stood out for its advanced design and the peculiar characteristics of the “modern or bastion” fortifications. This system was not only devised to protect the city on the lagoon, but it also represented a model that was admired and employed throughout Europe.





*“Friuli, the ‘Marcha Orientalis’, fascinating and unknown to the majority, is captivating due to its archaic isolation (going there, you have the impression that you are crossing the Great Wall of China), it repeats the general feeling of the Veneto people, accentuating it: it dreams of being a world of its own, [...]”*

**There is an exact crossing point to enter that “Marcha Orientalis” which Guido Piovene speaks of in his *Viaggio in Italia*: Palmanova. You have this vivid impression, both when you approach it from afar, announced by the wedge walls built as reinforcement by Napoleon between 1806 and 1812, and when you are in its centre, the vanishing point of dozens of straight and perfectly “so well laid out” roads, as Carlo Goldoni says in his *Memoirs in 1787*, “that people come from afar especially to see them”.**

It is right in the heart of the city that our ring-shaped itinerary begins: from **1 Piazza Grande**, a metaphysical space which is at one and the same time protected and open towards the outside, a sort of vanishing point of the straight roads that, like spokes, spread out from the hub of a bicycle wheel. Seen from the inside, the square is the only element that allows guessing the geometric structure of this large military machine. The whole fort is actually very complex, and it is difficult to understand the design of the various defence works. It is effectively a sort of labyrinth full of traps and *cul de sacs*, hidden with brilliant perspective

stratagems. We can take one of the “spokes”, Borgo Cividale, to reach **2 Porta Cividale**, where there is the **3 Museum of the Great War and of the Fortress**. Its collection is worth the visit, but above all you should walk on the **Bastion** and the **Gate**, to admire the view and note how the whole city-fortress is in an artificial hollow compared to the natural ground level: another defensive intuition. Outside the gate, we can set off towards the left to go round the walls in an anti-clockwise direction. At first, you go down the bottom of the long trench, with the grandiose walls in Istria stone and bricks of the embankments looming

above. When you arrive in front of a maze of paths, walk until one of the **4 Napoleonic Lunettes**, defensive outposts constructed between 1806 and 1809. When you arrive at **5 Porta Udine**, you can admire the very beautiful **6 Venetian Aqueduct Bridge**; here you must not miss a visit to the military redoubt inside the gate, with the large wheels which allowed its functioning. Continue your walk as far as the **7 Porta Aquileia**, to the south, and from its embankment you can really put your camera to the test, until you return to Porta Cividale and from there, back to the starting point.



## FROM FORTRESS TO CITY

*“In that period the Venetian general of Palmanova, who was a nobleman of the Rota family came to Trieste [...], [...] he introduced me to Venetian noblewomen, who appeared sincerely surprised to see me in Trieste.”*

*The Story of My Life*, Giacomo Casanova

Since it was built, in 1593, for over a century, the fortress of Palmanova was treated by Venice as the best guard dog in its pack, viewed with suspicion by the Hapsburg Empire, with fear by the Friuli landowners and with interest by architects and engineers from all over the world. It was a war machine, indeed, a one-off, which had been completely subservient,

since its construction, to the needs of soldiers, but in those years of military management, in the solid fortress, Palmanova also became a community. The Venetian *provveditori*, who had the task of overseeing strategic questions, therefore had to reckon with the resident population’s mood, who indeed existed. However, it was only later that Palmanova as a city-community saw the light of day, with the establishment of the Monte di Pietà (1666) and the Hospital of the Poor (1772; today the Ospedale Civile, one of the best in the Friuli-Venezia Giulia region). In 1775, the year of the meeting between Casanova and the *provveditore* Francesco Rota, that the former described in his autobiography, the Senate agreed to recognise extensive autonomy to the community, although it was short-lived. Years of civil and military decline followed, yet today’s city was born out of this.



*“Being in Upper Bergamo is like being in those miniaturised cities which patron saints hold as though on a fine tray, and on either side there is a void. All around Bergamo there is a ring of emptiness, which is air, sky, and maybe clouds and wind [...].”*

This is how Cesare Brandi, in his *Terre d'Italia*, describes Upper Bergamo. The “tray” of the metaphor is the impressive system of bastions, sentry-boxes, guns, armories and bulwarks that mark the approximately 6 kilometres of walls, built from 1561 onwards by Venice to lock Bergamo in a safe embrace and discourage any assailant. To build the walls, more than 250 buildings were knocked down, including the greatly venerated cathedral but no attack or siege dared to challenge the Venetian genius, and when the French entered the city in 1797, they did so through the gates, without any bloodshed. The walls of Bergamo, a UNESCO Heritage site since 2017, open in four gates standing at the cardinal points, surmounted by the Lion of St Mark. Often neglected to immediately reach the magic of the Upper City, a walk along their perimeter, enjoying the sky views over the Lower City and the valleys that wind their way north, is not to be missed.

Start from **1** **Porta Sant'Agostino**, proceeding towards the left along Viale delle Mura until the **2** **Bastion of San Michele**, which gives access to the **Cannoniera di San Michele**. Then continue towards a splendid panoramic point over the Lower City, until you get to **3** **Porta San Giacomo**, which is monumental and spectacular and the object of thousands of photos. Then go

past Palazzo Medolago Albani to reach **4** **Platform of Santa Grata**, looking towards the west, and you come to the **5** **Bastion of San Giovanni**, with its **Cannoniera**. The itinerary continues towards **6** **Porta Sant'Alessandro**, renamed Porta Garibaldi in 1907 to commemorate the entrance into the city of the “Hunter of the Alps” in the second war of independence, then

pass over the **7** **Fort of San Marco**, the result of grandiose work, aimed at facing a possible attack from the hill of San Vigilio. The portion of wall that looks towards the hill was the most tormented and vulnerable of the group. The fort appears before the next and picturesque **8** **Porta San Lorenzo**, the memory of which accompanies you until your return to Porta Sant'Agostino.



## THE SEA OF THE PO

*“In the centre there is a place where the shepherds of Trento and Brescia, and of the Veronese, could all give blessing, if they made the journey. Peschiera sits there, a handsome, strong fortress, to hold the front against the Brescians and the Bergamasques where the shore around it is lowest. There must fall whatever cannot stay in Benaco, becoming a river through green fields. As soon as the water begins to flow, it is no longer called Benaco but Mincio, as far as Governolo, where it falls into the Po.”*

*Inferno, XX, The Divine Comedy, Dante Alighieri*

The strategic position of Peschiera del Garda, between Venice and the western territories beyond the river Mincio, and its role as a fundamental link was not discovered by the Venetians: it had already been clear for some time, as shown by Dante's words, which had been written more than 200 years earlier. Turning to poetry again, the place is also strategic for nature and its cycles: in his *Carmina*, Catullus considers the eels that every year gather in Peschiera, recalled by their innate sense of the sea (which they find by looking for the Mincio, an emissary of the lake, and therefore the Po), as the gifts that Benacus made to his beloved Ichtya. Returning to the Venetians, the fortress they built in Peschiera was characterised by a pentagonal design, unique in lakeside settings, and by a fortified structure that originally embraced the whole residential nucleus and was both on land and water, including elements such as the Canale di Mezzo, a ramification of the Mincio that had been navigable since Roman times.



"YOU WILL GO UP THE ADIGE TO VALPOLICELLA! FROM HERE, BY LAND, YOU WILL REACH LAKE GARDA." [...] AND THIS WAY, CAPTAIN PAPERIN DE LA VENTURA AND HIS BRAVE WARRIORS TACKLE THE EXHAUSTING FEAT OF GOING UP THE ADIGE WITH A WAR GALLEON WEIGHED DOWN BY HEAVY CANNONS!"

As told in the form of a playful parody, in an old story published in *Topolino* whose hero is the short-tempered

Paperin de la Ventura, who for the occasion plays the role of a soldier of fortune of the late Middle Ages, the Venetians, even before building the fortress we can admire today, had understood the importance of controlling Lake Garda. Having lost the dominion of the southern sector, conquered by the Viscontis of Milan, the Venetians embarked on a legendary feat to win it back again: in 1438, they sailed their warships up the rivers to reach Rovereto and from there, using ropes, they had them reach north of the lake and again sail until they controlled the whole body of water. Retracing the exploits of Donald Duck and the Venetians,

we will "conquer" Peschiera by boat. Unless you are ready to face the lake in a sailing boat or a motor boat in the company of an adult, there are boats that connect many places on the shores of the lake.

To follow the journey of the Venetian ships, however, we will start from **1 Nago-Torbole** and sail between two uninterrupted rows of mountains, just as in a fjord until we reach **2 Gardone Riviera**, where there is the amazing complex of the Vittoriale, home of the poet Gabriele d'Annunzio until his death, and **3 Salò**, which the Venetians reconquered on that very occasion.

Our final destination, however, are the Visconti bridgeheads of **4 Desenzano**, where we can visit a castle and a Roman villa and, above all, **5 Peschiera del Garda**, with its fortress completely surrounded by water and crossed by canals. Thanks to this conquest, the Venetians were able to renovate and reinforce the fortress we admire today as part of the UNESCO site. Having come this far south, it is also worth stopping at **6 Sirmione**, a city founded in ancient times with a rich Roman history, shown by the villa called Grotte di Catullo, and medieval history, as can be appreciated when admiring the Rocca Scaligera with its extraordinary walled-up harbour.



## THE VENETIAN WORKS OF DEFENCE BETWEEN THE 16<sup>TH</sup> AND 17<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES in books

*Reading suggestions to travel between Bergamo, Peschiera and Palmanova.*

- **The Divine Comedy**, Dante Alighieri (1314-21). Dante dwells on the almost extra-territorial character of Lake Garda in Canto XX of *Inferno*, where he describes the punishments of fortune-tellers and diviners in the eighth circle of Hell.

- **The lives of the most excellent painters, sculptors and architects**, Giorgio Vasari (1550). A collection of biographies of the Italian artists of the Renaissance, including Giotto and Cimabue, considered pioneers. It is a book on art history, but also an account of the intellectual culture of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

- **The Story of My Life**, Giacomo Casanova (1825). The story of the life of Casanova is not only the one that

we can expect from his fame, but is mainly the account of the existence of a tireless traveller who went far and wide across Europe.

- **The Betrothed**, Alessandro Manzoni (1827). Bergamo and the Bergamo region under Venetian rule are one of the recurring scenes in *The Betrothed*. The Bergamo region becomes the direct setting of the novel from Chapter 17 onwards, when Renzo, hunted by the law, seeks sanctuary in the Venetian state welcomed by Bortolo, who will explain to him some mechanisms of the economic policy of the city of Bergamo and of the Republic of Venice.

- **Memories of Carlo Goldoni, written by himself, for the story of his life and his theatre**, Carlo Goldoni (1787). Written in French in 1787 and translated into Italian in 1888, the life of Carlo Goldoni, the important 18<sup>th</sup> century Venetian playwright, was adventurous and full of intrigue. The memoirs collected in the first part of the book, as well as telling the life of the artist, trace an almost complete profile of the 18<sup>th</sup> century from the way of life to the means of transport, whereas the second part is a collection of prefaces to his plays.

- **Viaggio in Italia**, Guido Piovene (1957). Piovene travelled in Italy for three years to write this unique and highly detailed reportage, considered a classic of Italian travel literature. From the Alps to Sicily, including the Po Valley the author's gaze is an invitation to discover the marvels of Italy.

- **Terre d'Italia**, Cesare Brandi (1991). A journey through the peninsula with a particularly sensitive eye for the artistic and architectonic value of the places described. The art historian dedicates a short chapter to Bergamo, which restores the unique grace of the two cities: Upper and Lower Bergamo.

### Children's books:

- **Paperin de la Ventura** (Topolino No. 1429, 17 April 1983). In 1439, against the backdrop of Lake Garda, Donald Duck interprets the feat of the Republic of Venice as "Paperin de la Ventura", leading a brave group of warriors up the Adige river on board a war galleon. The mission is to take the ship into the lake, to help the ally Brescia against the expansionist ambitions of the Viscontis.