



Municipality of
VARESE

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Number 2



2. Mount San Francesco

Realized by:

Marconati Elena
Dr. Millefanti Sara
Miotto Matteo
Rosolen Giordano

Translation by:

Dr. Samuele Dalle Sasse





History of the place

In the past, this place used to be of outstanding importance, since there history, conflicts, religion and politics played a crucial role, but in the end they also caused its disappearance.

On Mount San Francesco alternated different people and cultures that characterized the history of Italy. In fact, on this slow mountain at the foot of Campo dei Fiori there were first a Roman

sighting tower, than a Lombard settlement and finally a Franciscan monastery. Unfortunately only the ruins of a past that few people know are remaining today.

✂ The Roman tower :

Between the Third and the Fifth Century, the tower was part of the wider defensive line called “*limes prealpino*” (subalpine border).

The construction of this additional defensive line was necessary in order to protect the Italian peninsula from the recurrent barbarian invasions of the imperial ages.

For that reason, on



Typical tower of the Roman limes(taken from the site www.storiaromana.blogspot.it)

Mount San Francesco this tower was built, so that it could be seen from the one known as “Arian tower”, located on the top of the present Santa Maria del Monte hill. Those watchtowers were fundamental to control the transition area to the Rasa valley, which leads to the subalpine border post of San Bernardino and Lucomagno.

To those borders, one could reach Switzerland, at that time known as *Rezia*, already a Roman territory. The fortification complex comprehending the one on Mount San Francesco later belonged to the Seprio territory, which headquarter was located in Castelseprio. This political feature deeply influenced the military events that took place on Mount San Francesco, at least until the Duke of Milan took control over the above-mentioned region, that meanwhile had become “the County of Seprio” (Thirteenth Century).



View of Mount San Francesco from the Sacro Monte. In the background you can also see Varese Lake.

✂ The Lombard settlement :

Between the Sixth and the Ninth Centuries, the **Lombards** gained control of the former Roman fortifications. It was common use for those people to build a place of worship close to their military bases; it seems likely that it happened on Mount San Francesco too: in fact, the complete name of Mount San Francesco is “San Francesco in Pertica” (lit: “Saint Francis in Pole”), and this place-name derives from the typical Lombard tradition to place poles in the ground over their warrior’s tombs. Over those poles were normally placed wooden or clay sculptures, in the shape of a dove.

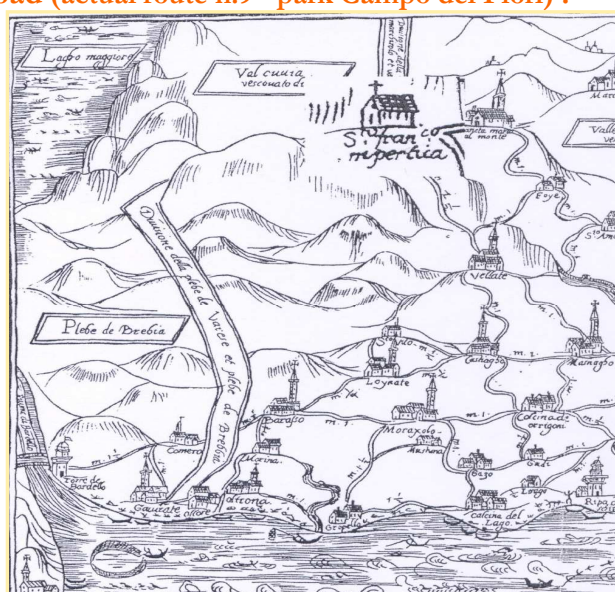
It was in the same period that the Sanctuary of Santa Maria del Monte on Sacro Monte was built.

Usually, the “dove” was looking to the place where the warrior lost his life. For that reason, it seems likely that somewhere nearby the ruins of the buildings should be also located an ancient Lombard graveyard. A few present inhabitants of the area also gave testimony of the discovery of archeological finds, but further researches have to be made.

✂ The pilgrimage road (actual route n.9 - park Campo dei Fiori) :

From the Tenth Century and until the Sixteenth Century the way connecting Velate to Santa Maria del Monte became a key one for the control of the territory. Since Mount San Francesco is on this very way between Velate and the Sanctuary, with the nearby settled military base, it is highly probable that Mount San Francesco (or Mount “*in perticis*”, as it is called in the documents of the time) was somewhat involved in the hot war between the Milan and the Seprio armies.

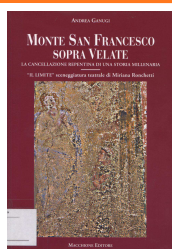
But there is also a completely different reason why this road was



Map of 16th century

very important.
Namely, it was walked
by pilgrims to reach the
Sanctuary, which had
already gained a wide

reputation also in the countries north of the Alps.



For more information about this argument you may also read “Monte San Francesco sopra Velate” by Andrea Ganugi, also available at Varese’s public library, in Italian only.

✂ The little Franciscan Convent :

Ruins of the church

The ruins on Mount San Francesco are the heritage of the presence of friars. Their settlement dates at least as back as 1289, when the first known documents refer



to that community. There are numerous signs of their hard work on this mount, which in fact took the name of the founder of their order. For example, looking

among the trees on the hillside, you can still admire the cultivation and farming terraces. Moreover, in the archeological area you can still recognize what remains of the well that collected the water needed by the community, and also the ruins of the small church and the churchyard.



✂ The “end” of Mount San Francesco :

In the second half of the Sixteenth Century the convent was left by its residents following a mysterious crime that took place there. In the convent one person was murdered, probably for a matter of money, but the details are unknown. A few time after this event, even the Archbishop of Milan, Saint Carlo Borromeo, visited the convent. He judged it not suitable for liturgical practices since the structures were highly deteriorated. Moreover, after such an act of violence the place could no more be considered sacred. As a consequence, the friars were soon forced to leave the Mount.



The remains of the Roman tower

Curiosity

✂ Saint Ambrose and the Arians :

According to tradition, Saint Ambrose defeated the Arians during a violent battle that he leaded from the tower erected on the top of the mount over Velate. Arianism was a theological teaching that took the name of its founder, Arius. His concept of Christ stated that Jesus of Nazareth was subordinated to God the Father; therefore he denied the doctrine of the Trinity. Being in contrast with the official doctrine professed in Rome, Arians were deemed heretics, and that fact caused harsh conflicts. After the above-mentioned legendary battle leaded by Saint Ambrose, the tower actually standing within the Monastery of Sacro Monte was named “Arian’s tower”. This could be misleading, however, since it seems likely that the battle did not take place on Sacro Monte, but on Mount San Francesco in Pertica, that in fact is located over Velate.

✂ A wonderful statue of Mother Mary :

In the church of San already abandoned by Cassiano, south of the friars. According to Velate, is now preserved the official report on the a statue representing visit, in the convent lived a Madonna and Child, but a hermit alone, this beautiful piece of art constantly guarding “a has not always been wonderful statue of the there. On August 19th, Blessed Mother”. Maybe 1574 the Archbishop of that statue was just the Milan Saint Carlo one that you can see in Borromeo, visited the the Church of San former little convent on Cassiano. Mount San Francesco,



For hiking lovers

Route number 9 of the Park “Campo dei Fiori”: Velate – Mount San Francesco:

- ⇒ Starting point: Velate, Santo Stefano Church. You can reach it by line P of the public bus service (TUV) from Varese.
- ⇒ Arrival: Mount San Francesco
- ⇒ Travelling time: two hours
- ⇒ Length: four kilometres



Naturalistic features

Mount San Francesco is included in the SIC “*grotte del Campo dei fiori*” (“Campo dei Fiori grottos”). SIC is the acronym for *Siti di Importanza Comunitaria* (“Sites of Community

Importance”); the Regional Park of Campo dei Fiori is divided in five of such typologies of sites. Also to be noted: the area comprehending the ruins of the little Franciscan

convent is categorized as archaeological area, and in 2002 it was part of the wider project named “*Giardini di Frate Sole*” (literally: “Gardens of Friar Sun”).



Ruins of the convent

Photos on the right: above: *Euonymus europaeus*, also known in Italy as “priest’s hat”; below: *Cyclamen repandum*.

The convent of Campo dei Fiori had been the first site to be introduced in the “Giardini di Frate Sole” project, which aim is to locate relevant natural areas in the whole world that can keep the memory of Saint Francis alive.



From a geological perspective, the ground is formed by so-called Moltrasio limestone, made up in limestone

and flint, this one being rich in nodules and containing several trapped fossilised marine flora. The fossils prove

that millions years ago the territory around Varese was entirely submerged by the sea.



Mount San Francesco is characterized by broad-leaved woods; the most common timber trees are the beech, the false acacia, the oak and the chestnut. Among shrubs, you can easily recognize hazels, field maples, wild roses and the shrub commonly known as butcher's broom or knee holly.

The name Campo dei Fiori was given when the area was used mainly as a wide grazing land. But with the introduction of tall trees it steadily became a wooded territory.

Talking about animal life, the most interesting species are birds of prey like the Black Kite and the European Honey Buzzard. Bats are also present and they play an important role in regulating the population of annoying or dangerous insects such as mosquitoes. It is curious to note some small invertebrates, for example the endemic Ground beetle specie known as *duvalius ghidinii*. Some groups of ungulate mammals are also common, for example the wild boar, the deer and the roe deer; as well you can see rodents such as the beloved red squirrel. If you are lucky enough, you can also admire beautiful foxes.



Photo on the left: *Primula vulgaris* - Primula
Above photo: *Pteridium aquilinum* - common bracken

We're on the Internet!

www.comune.varese.it
www.parcocampodeifiori.it
www.varesecittagiardino.it/infopoint.html
www.lemeravigliedivarese.wordpress.com

From Varese: follow the brown saying “Santa Maria del Monte” or “Campo dei Fiori”.

- At the end of Via Prima Cappella, turn left into Via Campo dei Fiori.
- At the crossroad, turn left and continue on via Campo dei Fiori.
- After 600 meters you will see the beginning of route number 9 (see photo number 1).
- Follow the sign (photo number 2) and walk 200 meters. Then, follow the uphill route on the right. It will lead you to the ruins of the San Francesco Convent.



If you want to know more and contact us please visit our website:
www.lemeravigliedivarese.wordpress.com.

You will find photos, news, stories and much more. And you can leave
your comments and suggestions.



Parco Campo dei Fiori

