

HISTORY

The majestic turreted bulk of the *Castrum francum*, standing imposingly on a high embankment on the east side of the Muson torrent, has dominated the ancient south-western border of the Treviso territory for eight centuries. The Castelfranco Veneto fortress is an emblem, among the many new constructions promoted by the townships of central-northern Italy between the XII and the XIII century. A new edifice with characteristics of its own, though: a castle and, at the same time, a "borgo franco", that is to say a settlement of *feudarii*, who were the assignees of building plots of land both within and out of the walls, and were enfranchised (exempted) from taxes and duties in exchange for their armed defence services. Hence the denomination of "Castelfranco" given to that settlement (the adjective "Veneto" would be added, by royal decree, on 10th November 1867). Far from being casual, the choice of the end of the XII century, the medieval Township of Treviso set to build this impressive four-sided castle (about 230-232 linear Mt. of walls per each side), was, on the contrary, very accurately planned. For the people of Treviso, the question at issue was not the



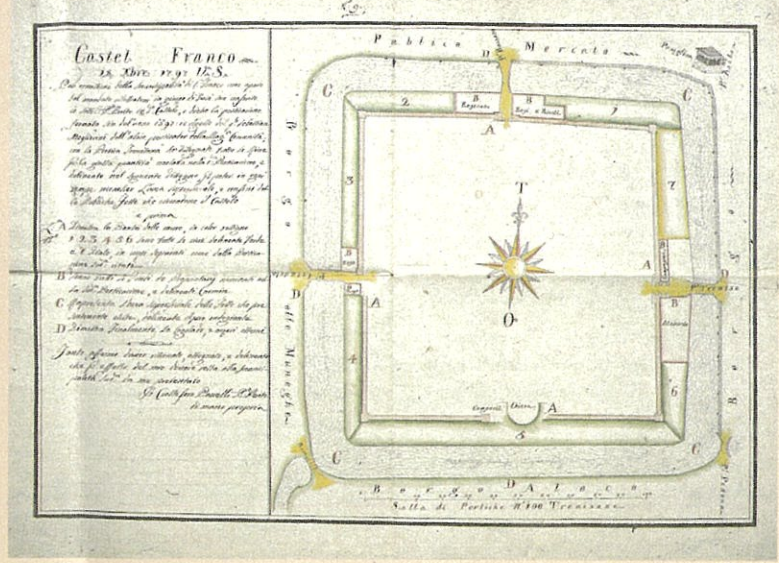
OLD COAT-OF-ARMS OF THE TOWN

colonisation of an area where they had been settled in at length already for a long time, and which had the structure of a thick net of villages, parish churches, rural chapels and castles. The aims were others and they were of mainly strategic nature: i.e. to guard the crossroads of important lines of communication, to contrast the expansionism of Padua and to control the local feudal families (the da Camposampiero, the da Romano, the Tempesta). The *Castrum francum* burst into a territory that had no "centre" before then, thus creating, in fact, the so-called "Castellana", which would acknowledge Castelfranco as its political, economic and ecclesiastic centre. The project of Treviso revealed as a "long-lasting" one, well beyond the military functions originally attributed to the stronghold. In fact, notwithstanding the inadequacy and structural obsolescence showed by the *castrum* at the beginning of the XVI century (war of the League of Cambrai), in respect of constantly upgraded siege techniques and of the massive and destructive use of artillery, the role of Castelfranco evolved, and stabilised especially under the political and economic aspect. After having escaped an almost complete demolition on two occasions (in the last years of the XVI and of the XVIII century), the bailey, although partly degraded and somehow "embedded" in the urban texture, has become a symbol of the town identity and, as such, it has been ideally turned, since the XIX century, into a romantic setting. Today, as in the past, for Italian and foreign writers, poets and travellers (Vincenzo Coronelli, Ippolito Nievo, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Gabriel Faure, Mario Luzi), it is impossible, even during a short visit to this town of Veneto, not to feel the strong visual impact and ancient charm of its "red" walled heart; a "heart" throbbing with history, and yet living in present-day life more than ever before; a "heart" that hides, almost like a casket, one of the most precious gems of art of all time: the *Altarpiece* by Giorgione, a painting of silent and intense expressions, immersed in the secluded half-light of the Costanzo chapel in the Duomo of San Liberale.

The Old Territory

At the end of the XII century, Castelfranco was literally grafted onto the fabric of an area characterised by various settlement layers, the oldest remnants of which date back to

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PLAN OF THE CASTLE AND THE MOAT IN A MAP OF 1797

disturbances around the Castelfranco stronghold. The consequences of the “new foundation” did not spare the ecclesiastic jurisdiction either. In 1199, the parish church of Santa Maria di Godevo was still the reference centre, and its archpriest participated in the election of the bishop of Treviso, Ambrogio. Already in 1245, though, the archpriesthood pertained to the Pieve Nuova, and the priest of this latter, in fact, appeared as an elector of Father Gualtiero to the bishop's chair of Treviso.

The Foundation of Castelfranco (about 1195-1199)

In the last decades of the XII century, the Municipality of Treviso faced, on the western border, the pressure of the Municipality of Padua, allied with Conegliano against the Trevisians in four close wars (1177, 1180, 1188, 1192). The considerable, and also disquieting, presence of the feudal powers just mentioned in the Castellana further complicated and unbalanced the scenario of endemic unrest that beset central Veneto at the time. This is the historical-geographic context that acted as setting for and justified the decision of the Treviso Municipality to start the construction, in the final part of the XII century (according to tradition, between 1195 and 1199), of a *castrum* (castle) on the eastern bank of the Muson torrent, the natural border line with the Padua and Vicenza jurisdictions. That way, Treviso aimed at ensuring the defence of a very fragile sector of its boundaries, as would be explicitly proved, two decades later (1220), by a similar initiative of the Municipality of Padua, in opposing, about ten kilometres to the west, near the Brenta, the walled village of Cittadella.

The most favourable and strategically effective site to found the castle was identified just to the north of the village of *Pieve Nova* (now a town sector of Castelfranco, named “Borgo della Pieve”), at a short distance from the crossing between two important roads (the Postumia and the Aurelia) and next to the Muson, a very good natural bastion on the western side. While it is still uncertain whether a pre-existing artificial structure was used to erect the walls, and even weaker is the assumption according to

escaped the general decay process that affected the whole castle system, thanks to the maintenance to which they were subjected and to their significance as symbols and elements of identity. In 1597, the castle even risked to be sold to private citizens, as was decided by the Republic of Venice to make good a considerable tax debt contracted by the Castelfranco community. This latter, inspired by a fit of identity pride, repurchased the walls. Collapses and restorations marked the castle history from the end of the XVI century until the early XX century. After the damages incurred in the collapse of its top in 1635 and in the earthquake of 1695, the civic

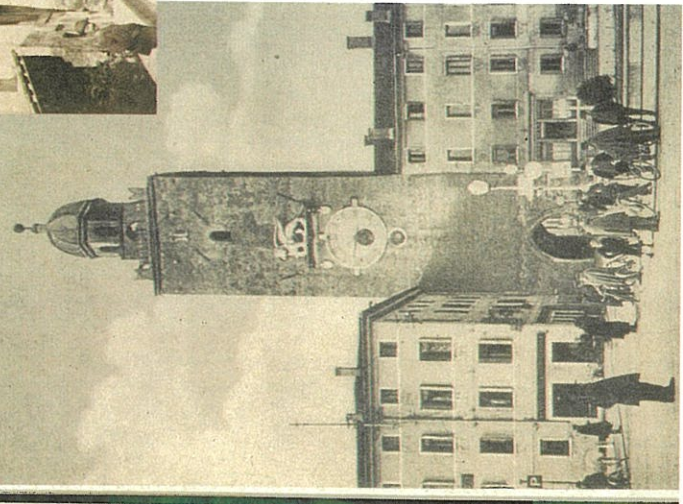
walls were registered at the end of the XVII century by the sides of the Salomona gate. In January 1847 a wall portion on the southern side of the civic tower collapsed, and in the same year, to prevent serious troubles for the residents, the unsafe walled precinct was lowered in the sector going between the tower "of the dead" and the South-Western tower. The Municipality tried to remedy the overall structural weakness and the

degradation of the surfaces of the wall face, during the three years 1897-99, by financing a general intervention of restoration and reinforcement. More recently, after a conservative *maquillage* on the western walls in the '60s of last century, in the early '90s a project was made for a total restoration and tourist enhancement of the walls. The works, however, were limited to the recovery of the tower named "of Giorgione" and of a section of

the vestibule (never built) and the façade, which was added in 1892-1893. The church was the first work of the architect Francesco Maria Preti, but also the highest moment, the work that represents at best his rich design production, in which all his architectural theories are expressed, which would be later reproduced in other churches of the area (Vallà, Salvatrandia, Caselle d'Altivole, Tombolo), in the Academic Theatre and in Villa Pisani of Stra, as well as in Villa Corner in Cavasagra di Veduggio. Preti took as his reference model the church of the Redeptor, designed by Palladio in Venice, and also, perhaps, the Venetian church of the Gesuati. Inside the new temple, the architect applied the mathematical rule of proportional harmonic mean,

according to which the height of the luminous single nave is the harmonic mean of its length and its width. Three chapels open on the central room, intercommunicating and elevated by three steps. The whole internal perimeter is enclosed by a ionic architectural order, interspersed with twin columns on pedestals. The cross vault (with Preti's tombstone in its centre), is closed by semi-circular apses and interrupted in correspondence of the drum, without the

especially for that purpose upon an order of the Venetian Senate. The construction of the Duomo entailed the abatement of the ancient Romanesque church *di dentro*, a memorial of the town early history, which was irredeemably lost together with the original Costanzo chapel. Besides the *Altarpiece* by Giorgione, the Duomo keeps many artworks. In the choir: the altarpiece representing the *Descent of Christ to the Limbo* by Giovanni Battista Ponchini (about 1500-1570), an assistant of Veronese; on the sides: the *Martyrdom of St. Sebastian* by Jacopo Palma "il Giovane" (1544-1628), and *The death of St. Severus* by Domenico Pellegrini, dated 1796. In the apse on the right of the cross vault: altar of the Assumption and marble group with *Maria Assunta lifted by clouds*



PORTA CITTADELLA, 1892



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VAULT OF THE CIVIC TOWER,
THE WAGONS OF THE CARRARESI

subsequent times, received as fee one or more "sedim" [lots] of land (each having a surface of about sq. Mt. 1300), either with or without a house, inside the walls and out of the castle (the "borgo", or village), plus some fields with relevant tithe right. In 1270 the "sedim" located outside the gate towards Treviso (*porta franca*) were 49, 20 of which with a house and 26 without; on the other hand, there were 97 lots, either built or not, situated within the castle and granted to the inhabitants of the villages surrounding Castelfranco.

The fee (hereditary and inalienable), was an effective instrument to populate the castle and its surroundings, and it bound the feudatories to give loyalty to the Municipality of Treviso, to reside there and, first of all, to lend armed defence services. This latter duty was

proportioned to the size of the same fee, so that, until 1315, from bigger fees it was required to keep at disposal one or more horses and all arms, whilst smaller fees implied an obligation to maintain an armed infantryman or to perform guard service.

To govern the new fortified settlement, the Municipality of Treviso sent, already from the first years of the XIII century, two consuls, who remained in office six months and carried out their duties in the *domus comunis* (or town hall). Obligated to reside in the castle, the "governors" of Castelfranco administered the civil justice and were assisted by a group of public officers, belonging to the local lower middle class, made of notaries and craftsmen. The consuls' power extended beyond the walls and included the territory encircling the castle. Already from the beginning of the XII century, an all-round district originated which, in the subsequent centuries, would develop in such a coherent and homogenous manner as to keep its overall identity to our days. Although the villages maintained a relative self-government autonomy, through well-established figures and organs (the meeting of homeowners, or *vicinia*, the head of the village, or *meriga*, and the *huomini di comun*, collaborators of the *meriga*), the exercise of administrative, judicial, fiscal, military and ecclesiastic functions for the whole district would gradually concentrate in the Castelfranco castle.

The First Centuries after the Foundation

In 1215, while the walls were still under construction, the castle was besieged by the Paduan army, intervened to dissuade the Trevisians from the attack against the lands of the Patriarch of Aquileia. After this first conflict, Castelfranco was again protagonist on various occasions in the turbulent first half of the XIII century. In his *Cronica*, written between 1260 and 1262, the Paduan Rolandino, in telling about the invasion of Italy by Frederick II, testified about an extraordinary event, which had the same emperor as protagonist, on 3rd June 1329, just as he was setting to besiege Castelfranco: «the sun

so", the Corner made a palace, the twin of the pre-existing one, and designed a large and sophisticated Italian garden completed, to the north, by a fish-pond and a few *cedrare* [cedar groves].

Two collapses of the top segment of the civic tower represented a metaphor of the crisis that engulfed the town society. The first occurred, without any warning sign, at 11 p.m. of 3rd January 1637, causing the destruction of some nearby houses and the death of a few inhabitants. The restoration and reinforcement of the building were made useless by the earthquake named "of St. Constance" which, at twelve noon on 25th February 1695, with the epicentre in the Grappa piedmont, caused the destruction of the cupola and of the underlying wall supports. The restoration works returned to Castelfranco its symbol-building in its original integrity. The signs of a revival of some sort, demographic in the first place, were felt in the two last decades of the century; they occurred, once again, thanks to merchants and craftsmen rather than to the aristocratic class, whose components, indeed, were protagonists of several episodes of relinquishment of offices and absenteeism in councils. At the end of the XVII century, Castelfranco was an "almost-town" at last, with its five thousand inhabitants and a favourable geographic positions that made of it – as Vincenzo Coronelli noted – «a trafficked gate of communication between mountains and the sea». The origin of the town development was confirmed to be the «public market of foddors, draperies, animals of any kind, and all sorts of food», which registered «the presence of numerous people ... from local places and lands and from neighbouring lands», and «the manufacture of wool socks which, for their quality and fine workmanship, are precious even in far towns».

The Eighteenth Century: a Key Century

The energy spent to reconstruct the town tower after the 1695 earthquake spread during all the first half of the XVIII century, bringing to a cultural, even more than material "renaissance". The autonomy pursued by Castelfranco in respect of Treviso, and a greater frequentation of the Paduan cultural environment (the young descendants of aristocratic families studied at the Padua University, and they did not neglect the prestigious Jesuit and Somascan colleges of Brescia and Bologna) favoured, at the beginning of the Age of Enlightenment, the establishment in the Castelfranco lands of a group of mathematicians, physicians, architecture and music theorists and architects *tout court*, who were, more or less directly, the authors of a prodigious drive to renewal and to a true "new view" on the town.

Jacopo Riccati (1676-1754), an exponent of one of the richest families of the town, was the most important character in the first half of the century, also due to his political weight in the *Community* government, where he was vested more than once with the office of *provveditore* [local superintendent]. Jacopo's sons, Vincenzo (1707-1775), Giordano (1709-1790) and Francesco (1718-1791), Giovanni Rizzetti (1675-1751) and, most of all, the architect Francesco Maria Preti (1701-1774), were some of the greatest exponents of a circle of intellectuals characterised by a lively and varied scientific debate and by speculative and project approaches that were sometimes entirely original. In this atmosphere of cultural fervour, inspired by "enlightenment" in moderate version, an exigency emerged to build a collective historical memory, unifying the town identity in a few learned essays. Nadal Melchiori devoted almost all his life to this onerous work; he was the author, in the first thirty years of the century, of a