



The towers of Trento, history's guards

A bird's eye view is indispensable if you want to see things clearly. And not just metaphorically speaking. Our ancestors knew perfectly well that keeping a close eye on the situation helped to keep it under control and avoid nasty surprises. For this, they built **towers**. If things went south, they would lock themselves inside and start defending themselves by throwing stones or boiling liquids on their attackers through the slim openings called 'machicolations'.

This millennia old architectural solution became a **veritable trend in medieval Europe**. The reason was simple. What with pillaging, plagues, revolts, famines, strife between the Empire and the Papacy and rampant political instability, everyday life was definitely a turmoil and medieval men and women were ... let's say diffident. At the same time, however, the towers also represented the prestige of the families that had them built and it was understood that they had to be taller than those built by rival families.

In the Middle Ages, the towers started rising high in Trento too. Seeing the importance of the city as a link between Central Europe and the Mediterranean basin, their initial function was that of both political and military control as well as of economic showcasing. Especially two were famous, namely those that guarded the city's two main ports.

Wait a minute! A port in Trento? Actually, *two* ports?

Yes, you heard right. **Ages ago, Trento had ports** along the Adige river. This dates back to before 1858, however, the year in which the river's course was deviated.

And the towers were left behind. Indeed, over the centuries new ones were erected and the old ones were adapted to host a variety of functions such as city halls, uptown dwellings and even jails.

In this podcast we will tell you about the more famous towers, the ones that today stand in representation of Trento.

Our tour starts with **Torre Verde** that stands on the street by the same name, just like a traffic policeman surveying one of Trento's busiest intersections. It is beautiful with its irregular shape and the slightly off-centre roof painted a brilliant emerald green. In the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance period it was famous for its function - as the cornerstone of the boundary walls of Castello del Buonconsiglio, Torre Verde **played various roles: that of a guard controlling the northern border, a jail and the customs office of the San Martino inland port.** This is because in those times the Adige river ran through here. We can imagine its course by looking at the layout of the streets. With a curvy bend towards the east, the river bordered Piazza di Centa, flowed along Via del Brennero and then ... down westwards along Via Torre Verde, skirting the gardens of Piazza Dante.

Next to Torre Verde, where today we see the intersection with the lights, there was a beach. It was called Piazza Dogana. No sunbeds and umbrellas, obviously, but rather rafts and barges that berthed there to pay taxes. This is where the tolls for haulage by road were paid too. This was mandatory for those arriving from the north through the "Germana" gate. One florin!





The San Martino port and district were an open-air market center with workshops and storage depots, inns, hostels that attracted merchants, boatmen and famous figures. Are the names Goethe and Cagliostro familiar? There was even a sailing school!

All this disappeared in 1858. In that year, the Austro-Hungarian engineers completed the works required to 'straighten' the Adige, so as to protect the city from floods and to make room for the railway lines. Witnesses to the bond between Trento and its river today remain two of its most beautiful towers, Torre Verde and Torre Vanga, which we are walking towards now.

Let's walk along Via Torre Verde, where in bygone times the Adige river flowed, replaced today by a river of cars! Here we are at **Torre Vanga**, Trento's other strategic tower. The tower **owes its name to the Prince Bishop Federico Vanga** who ordered it built in around 1210 at the most north-westerly point of the city's walls. Up to 37 metres high, it was a veritable **outlook post for military and customs purposes**, from where to survey the goods and persons arriving into the city from the river and from the San Lorenzo gate as well as to monitor the Doss Trento area. Navigation of the river was blocked at night using a sturdy chain that was strung from one bank to the other. This practice is still reminisced in the tower's popular name, "**casa de la cadena**". The chain house, in other words. Torre Vanga too was used as a city jail. One of its first inmates was actually a very famous figure, the Prince Bishop George of Liechtenstein. The rebel Rodolfo Belenzani locked him up there during the revolt in 1407. In the 19th century, due to the river's deviation and consequentially the lack of need to control anything anymore, **the tower was used as a jail for criminals and then as the headquarters for the Carabinieri**. In the course of eight centuries it can be said that Torre Vanga has seen it all. The worst occurred on 2 September 1943 when the allied forces bombed the area and today Trento still remembers the event as the **Strage della Portèla** (i.e. the 'gate massacre').

This event guides us towards our next stop in via Cavour to see **Torre della Tromba**. As the name suggests (Trumpet Tower), every day at 11:57 a.m. on the dot **a siren at its top sounds out in remembrance of the bombings** of the city in WWII. What for many is simply the 'midday siren' in actual fact is an invitation to meditate on the tragedy of all wars.

But let's get back to Torre della Tromba. More than 30 meters high, it originally was a private structure, a **tower-house**. This captivating type of architectural artefact magically transports us back in time to medieval Trento. Torre della Tromba and the adjacent mansion belonged to the noble Buonmartino family that in 1481 sold them to the city's magistrate. Since then the palazzo has been host to the **Old City Hall and since 1873 has been the headquarters of the Municipality**. Over time, the tower was made taller, then lower again, and at the end of the 18th century it was used as a jail. Indeed, one can still see the many graffiti, drawings and inmates' names on the walls of the cells. Although the writings are crude and elementary, they are proof of the dissemination of literacy in Trento among even the lower social classes. This is thanks to the Hapsburg's educational system.





Just a few steps separate us from the city's most Instagrammable tower and square: Piazza Duomo and **Torre Civica**. Get ready for an overload of beauty: the cathedral, the fountain of Neptune, the painted houses, the porticoes and – the cherry on the cake – Torre Civica featuring the sombre and pondered charm of a true lady. The same department seen throughout Trento, we might add. Its origins are ancient. It was built **in various stages starting in the Middle Ages over the remains of the “porta veronensis” gate and of the ancient Roman walls**. It is an ancient example of circular economy as well as of the pragmatism of those times. Indeed, in order to expand, the city literally needed to grow on top of itself. Torre Civica, Torre di Piazza or Torre di Città: these different names reveal the ‘civic’ importance of this building that was the **symbol of municipal power and the point of reference for the whole of Trento’s social life**. The bells pealed to announce events and calamities: the **Renga** bell summoned the public to assemble; the **Guardia** bell, instead, marked the various phases of daily life in the city. Like its ‘colleagues’, Torre Civica too was used for some time as a jail. It temporarily held defendants awaiting a verdict, to be announced in the nearby Palazzo Pretorio that today hosts the Museo Diocesano Tridentino. Tall and slim, with its 43 meters in height, Torre Civica in ancient times would become the superstar when celebrities passed through the city, because on those occasions, just like during the celebrations for the Council of Trento, the tower would be lit up and **fireworks** would be fired from its top. After surviving the fire that broke out in 2015 and irreversibly damaged one of the bells, today Torre Civica is still standing there to guard over Piazza Duomo and its passersby that look up at it in awe and wonder.

Let us now walk along the picturesque Via Belenzani, once known as Via Larga (Wide Street), towards our last tower, **Torre Mirana**. In this case it is a **private tower**, also known as Torre Marcolina or “delli Mirani”. It belonged to the Mirana, a family of notaries and physicians that died out at the end of the 16th century. In 1549 the tower was purchased by Sigismondo Thun the Orator, of the **noble Thun family from Val di Non** that at that time was economically expanding and intended to acquire lustre by owning a house in the large city. Torre Mirana, with its severe façade, somehow expresses the ideal perfection of plain beauty admired by these mountain aristocrats. Today, the tower and the adjacent Palazzo Thun **belong to the City of Trento** and host the City Hall.

Our short tour ends here, but there are many other towers dotted around the city! Look up and try to count them. And if possible, try visiting them from inside, so you can discover history from a different perspective and – as professor Keating said in ‘The Poets Society’ – remind ourselves that we must constantly look at things in a different way!

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