



The hill-climbing city: urban explorations between the sacred and the profane on the 'Hill of Trento'

Ciao!

Let me guess ... you live in Trento or you come in every day to go to school or university. You know it like the back of your hand and you think it holds no further surprises for you. Or you're on vacation in Trento with your family or on a school trip to visit the City of the Council. Or you're bored and can't think of anything interesting to do. If you recognise yourself in even one of these situations, well, then, this podcast is for you!

Today we will lead you on a discovery tour of a different, unusual and adventurous Trento. We will 'take to the hills' to view the city from high up. We will travel back in time to the Council of Trento. We will tell you how the nobles of that century spent their summer holidays. And we will explain how some of the older religious traditions were born, with stories of flying houses and of plague-curing saints.

Our destination is the 'Collina di Trento', Trento's Hill, namely the hill that from the South-Eastern area of the city gently rises towards Mount Marzola and the hamlets of Povo and Villazzano - surely you have heard about the science faculties located there. Peaceful, neat and warmly welcoming, they hide places abounding in history, art treasures and curious anecdotes. For sure, at the end of this journey, you will see them through different eyes and you will think twice before calling them 'suburbia' or 'the outskirts'!

Oh right, because if you haven't realized it yet, this is an itinerant and versatile podcast. You can decide to follow it on foot, or on a bike, or to use public transport. Most interestingly, though, it combines business with pleasure because while exploring the attractions of the Hill you will also burn calories! So, order a second serving of *Canederli* dumplings without feeling a shred of guilt, because it's off to the hills! And don't forget to call your friends ... beautiful discoveries should always be shared!

Our itinerary wanders through the ancient hamlets of Villazzano and Gabbio, a 'small ancient world' where everyone knows each other, today like in the past. A 'little town', like in the song of Belle's Disney cartoon, although, to be fair, this side of the Hill has seen considerable urban expansion since the arrival of the university faculties and research centers. Year after year, the city has grown up along the sides of the mountain, mingling with the Hill's smaller villages. The reason for this is obvious: feel the peacefulness, enjoy the green landscape extending as far as the eye can see, take in the magnificent view over Trento and savour the light breeze coming in from the Marzola forests as it refreshes those summer evenings.

These qualities were already famous and highly appreciated in the 16th century too. That's when the most prominent families started to establish their summer residency here. The mountain farmhouses and the country homes were soon joined by the nobles' mansions and by churches and sanctuaries as well. Indeed, the latter stand as silent witnesses of their time and will now guide us in the discovery of an unusual facet of Trento.





So, off we go! Starting at the main square of Villazzano – Piazza Nicolini – we climb, on foot, on a bike or on a bus up towards the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Loreto at Grotta di Villazzano. Once there, we drink in the panoramic view. It's one of the most beautiful (and least known) views of the city of Trento, of Mount Bondone and of the Paganella range. After taking all of the photos and ritual selfies you can, listen to the tale of this very special and sacred place.

Actually, this sanctuary started out as a 'family' church. As you can read on one of the plaques on its façade, the building was commissioned by Giovanni Paolo Ciurletti di Belfonte. He was a sort of VIP in those times, as the bombastic name suggests. Ciurletti was indeed a member of one of 17th century Trento's most prominent families, that owned a large number of properties both in the city and in Villazzano. His CV was equally impressive: bishop of Byblus in Lebanon, auxiliary bishop of Salzburg and canon of the Cathedral of Trent.

Ciurletti was especially devoted to the veneration of Mary, mother of Jesus. This is not a secondary detail but rather a piece of information that allows us to comprehend the delicate religious balances of that time. At the dawn of the 17th century, in fact, the echoes of the Council and its dictates still strongly reverberated in Trento and throughout the Christian world. One of the cornerstones of the Catholic Reformation was precisely the veneration of Mary that boomed in that period of opposition to the Protestant Reformation. Places of Marian worship sprung up everywhere, Trentino included, and the sanctuary at Villazzano was one of these.

Even more curious is the fact that quite often the churches of that period dedicated to Our Lady of Loreto were built as replicas of the Basilica of the Holy House of Loreto, located in the province of Ancona, Italy. The building was famous throughout the Christian kingdom because it cherishes what is believed to be Mary's house, that flew in from Nazareth.

This is why Ciurletti, when he decided to commission the church in Villazzano, already had a clear idea of what the church should look like. Later on, the bishop had the model replicated in Salzburg, Austria, and in fact it this another church dedicated to Our Lady of Loreto and quite similar to that of Villazzano.

On we go. From the Sanctuary of the Grotta we head North, remaining high up and travelling along country roads practically free of traffic, through a section of forest and then down towards Gabbio. There we arrive at the small church of San Rocco. Although miniscule and bare, it too has much to tell. It was built at a precise moment in Trento's history, when the community was struggling to recover from the effects of the last plague that had exploded in 1575 and was remembered in history as the 'Plague of Saint Charles'. No, it's not the one described by the famous Italian writer Manzoni in his novel "The Betrothed". It's a different one. Unfortunately, in those times epidemics occurred quite frequently. In this case, the pestilence in question was the terrible plague that hit Milan under the diocese of Carlo Borromeo, who actively engaged in helping the victims of the disease. The plague, in fact, had arrived in Milan after transiting through Trento, supposedly brought by a foreign merchant or by a Trento citizen who had gone to the fair in Bolzano and had returned with





the infection. Nothing is certain, and at the time it was impossible to track down the ‘patient zero’, also because medicine as a whole was still fumbling in the dark. The population could only turn to prayer, and a figure that was specifically invoked was Saint Roch (Rocco in Italian), the patron saint of plague victims. This explains the widespread construction in those years of churches, chapels and wayside shrines dedicated to Saint Roch, built to invoke his protection or to thank him for survival. The small church in Gabbiole is one of these. Today, after experiencing a pandemic, as we pass this church and listen to its history, we can certainly feel more empathy and identify better with the people who worshipped there.

The last leg of our itinerary is just a little way off, towards Villa Salvadori, in front of the church of Saint Francis. What story does this church have to tell? It will answer with many curious facts about the social and cultural dynamics of centuries past and about the customs of the wealthy who spent their summer vacations here on the Hill, where the climate was cooler. Being aristocrats, they certainly couldn’t tolerate simple abodes but rather commissioned monumental buildings that soon became veritable status symbols. The most famous architects were summoned to build them and their designs turned into splendid, stately palazzos usually flanked by a private chapel and enveloped in elegant gardens that were the perfect venues for leisure and meditation, just like the villas of Imperial Rome. This kind of noble summer mansion is found all over the Hill of Trento, and not just in Gabbiole and Villazano but also in the hamlets of Oltrecastello, Spré, Panté, Salé and Negrano.

In the early 18th century, Salvadori was one of the most important families of merchants and entrepreneurs of Trento with an empire founded on trade. They had absolutely everything, except for ... a noble title. In order to achieve one and therefore further increase their social status, they had to follow a specific procedure. They not only had to own a mansion in the city but also a villa on the Hill. Sooner done than said! A little before the mid-century they purchased Villa Salvadori and had the church of Saint Francis built. For the latter they called in Francesco Oradini who at the time was a sort of ‘starchitect’ in Trentino. The cost was no small thing for the Salvadoris, but in this way they achieved their purpose and acquired the pompous title of ‘Barons of the Holy Roman Empire’.

Our travel back in time and through the environs of Trento ends here today. If you liked it, if your curiosity was peaked and you felt enriched with new information ... then share it far and wide! Places rich in history and remembrance such as these need your help in order to continue living and telling their tale. And also because, as you can see, history is not a boring subject. It’s not just an infinite list of dates and names to be memorized. On the contrary, it can be incredibly interesting! And even useful. Consider it a kind of compass for the Present.

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