

The Longobards and Their Places of Power

568 – 774 A.D.

A SINGLE SITE FOR SEVEN PLACES

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PART I

The Longobards in Italy: Places of Power (568-774 A.D.) comprises seven historical sites in Lombardy, Umbria, Puglia, Campania, and Friuli Venezia Giulia. These sites commemorate the Lombard kingdom and its duchies, considered the "first Italian nation." They highlight the Lombards' significant role in Europe's cultural and spiritual development during the transition from the Classical to Medieval periods. Each site provides insights into Lombard history, architecture, and cultural influence, showcasing their contributions to European heritage. These sites include churches, fortresses, and other landmarks demonstrating the Longobards' cultural and political impact in Italy. In the 6th century A.D., the Longobards migrated to Italy and established the Kingdom of the Lombards, ruling from Friuli to Benevento and Apulia for 200 years. They created 35 Lombard duchies, blending their own culture with the regions they conquered, shaping Italy's medieval history. Their influence extended beyond military power and influenced art, architecture, and spiritual practices. The Lombards assimilated Roman traditions, Christian spirituality, and Byzantine influences,

resulting in a distinct culture in the late 7th and 8th centuries A.D.

The Lombards' unique architectural styles revitalized classical forms and inspired artistic expressions that profoundly impacted Italian architecture and art. Their structures and communities shaped religious and cultural customs throughout Europe. They played a pivotal role in the growth of Medieval European Christianity, particularly in advancing the monastic movement. The Lombard rule in Italy marked a significant shift from Antiquity to the Middle Ages, laying the groundwork for the birth of medieval Europe. This transformation influenced Western history for the next thousand years, with figures like Charlemagne continuing the cultural change.

The Lombards' rule ended in 774 when Charlemagne conquered Pavia and incorporated the Lombard kingdom into the Carolingian Empire. Despite their defeat, the Lombards left a lasting impact on Italy's history and culture, as evidenced by the seven Places of Power. Designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2011, their legacy continues to shape Italian culture and heritage.



CIVIDALE DEL FRIULI: THE LOMBARD TEMPLE AND THE EPISCOPAL COMPLEX

Cividale del Friuli is a town in northeastern Italy, located 16 kilometers east of Udine near the Slovenian border overlooking the Natisone River. Cividale del Friuli has been a continuously inhabited settlement since the Paleolithic and Neolithic eras. During the Iron Age, the Veneti and Celts inhabited the area. In 50 BC, Julius Caesar established a fortified camp named Forum Iulii. Over time, this camp developed into a municipality. After the fall of Aquileia and Iulium Carnicum in 452 AD, Forum Iulii became the principal town of Friuli and lent its name to the region. The name was later abbreviated to Friuli, and it is now included in the regional name of Friuli Venezia Giulia.

Cividale del Friuli's rich medieval heritage was highlighted in 568 AD when it was designated the Lombard kingdom's first capital. Under the Lombards' rule, the town flourished as a political, cultural, and religious center, shaping Italian history during the early Middle Ages. Cividale del Friuli's Gastaldaga and Episcopal Complex are included in the Longobard Places of Power list. These were the centers of power and religious activities during this time.

The town remained an essential part of the Lombard empire until 774 AD, when the Franks under Charlemagne took control and renamed it Civitas Austriae. Later, in 1420, Cividale was annexed to the Republic of Venice, and in 1866, it became part of the Kingdom of Italy.

The Gastaldaga area is home to the Tempietto Longobardo complex, one of the most significant historic Lombard sites. The complex is situated within the Monastery of Santa Maria in Valle and includes a Basilica, the baptistry of San Giovanni Battista, and the Patriarchal Palace. The Temple is one of the most magnificent and well-preserved examples of Longobard architecture. Its decorations combine Longobard designs with classic models, creating a unique and refined style that influenced later art movements.

The Episcopal Complex, situated within the National Archaeological Museum of the Cathedral, holds immense religious significance in Cividale del Friuli. Comprising a basilica, a baptistry, and the remains of the Patriarchal Palace beneath it, this complex is home to remarkable examples of Lombard sculpture.



Among them, the **Altar of Duke Ratchis** stands out as a masterpiece adorned with intricately carved biblical reliefs. It was commissioned by Duke Ratchis, the Duke of Friuli (739-744) and King of the Lombards (744-749).



The Altar of Duke Ratchis is a rectangular Carsic stone with polychrome decoration. The reliefs depict scenes from the Bible, showcasing the Lombards' exceptional craftsmanship and profound religious devotion.

Christ in Majesty is carved on the front, while two crosses on either side of an opening for relics are found on the back. The program is finished with carvings on the sides of the Visitation and the Adoration of the Magi. The Altar of Ratchis serves as a testament to the artistic excellence of the Lombard people and their significant impact on medieval European art.

The Baptismal Font of Patriarch Callisto (Tegurio of Callisto) is another marvel housed within the Baptistry. This octagonal marble canopy features columns, arches, and sculptural reliefs, creating a breathtaking architectural ensemble that shelters the baptismal font. Like the Altar of Ratchis, the Tegurio of Callisto exemplifies the Lombards' mastery of sculptural artistry and ability to blend classical motifs with Christian symbolism. Additionally,



the National Archaeological Museum is home to an exhibit titled "The Treasure of the Cathedral," which displays jewelry, liturgical objects, paintings, and works of art made of gold, silver, and ivory, as well as manuscripts that represent the Christian history of Cividale.

BRESCIA CASTLE MONUMENTAL AREA AND MONASTIC COMPLEX OF SAN SALVATORE-SANTA GIULIA AT BRESCIA



Lombardy's second-largest city, Brescia, with nearly 200,000 residents, is an industrial hub between Lake Garda and Lake Iseo. It was named the 2017 European Center of Gastronomy and is renowned for its caviar and Franciacorta sparkling wine. With a history dating back to 1200 BC, Brescia is celebrated for its Longobard heritage and was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2011.

Monastic Complex of San Salvatore-Santa Giulia

The monastic complex was established in 753 by Duke Desiderius and his wife, Ansa, and serves as a prime example of Early Medieval religious architecture. Their daughter, Anselperga, became its first abbess. The complex has undergone various reconstructions and restorations over the centuries, evolving to incorporate Roman, pre-Romanesque, Romanesque, and Renaissance elements. Now known as the Museo di Santa Giulia, it is renowned for its architectural diversity and houses around 11,000 artworks and archaeological finds, showcasing Brescia's rich history.

The Monastic Complex of San Salvatore-Santa Giulia in Brescia is made up of several structures:

1. Basilica of San Salvatore: Founded in 753 by Duke Desiderius and his wife Ansa, this basilica is a prime example of High Middle Ages architecture. It incorporates Lombard stylistic elements with classical and Byzantine motifs. In 761, a crypt was added to house the relics of Saint Julia. The basilica features artworks such as the "Stories of St. Obizio" by Romanino and "Stories of the Virgin and the Infancy of Christ" by Paolo Caylina il Giovane.

2. Church of Santa Maria in Solario: Built in the mid-12th century, this chapel has a unique square base with an octagonal lantern and two internal levels. It houses significant artifacts, including the Brescia Casket (a 4th-century ivory box) and the Cross of Desiderius (a gold and silver artifact adorned with 212 precious gems). The interior is decorated with frescoes by Floriano Ferramola.

3. Nuns' Choir: Constructed between the late 15th and early 16th centuries, it features extensive frescoes by Ferramola and Caylina and notable funerary monuments, including the Martinengo Mausoleum, a Renaissance sculpture masterpiece. The choir has a lower-level old churchyard and an upper-level choir room with a barrel vault.

4. Church of Santa Giulia: Completed between 1593 and 1599, this church is known for its Botticino marble façade with Corinthian pilasters and a rich frieze. The interior is a spacious nave with a barrel vault featuring minimal sacred furnishings and only remnants of its original frescoes.

CASTRUM WITH TORBA TOWER AND CHURCH OUTSIDE THE WALLS, SANTA MARIA FORIS PORTAS, AT CASTELSEPRIO

The Archaeological Park of Castelseprio in the Province of Varese is a significant historical site and an essential part of the UNESCO Lombard circuit. Castelseprio-Torba and its surrounding area were vital for controlling and defending the path to Pavia, the capital of the Longobard Kingdom, from the northern alpine passes leading to the territories of the Franks and their allies.



San Salvatore interior



Nuns' choir frescoes



Martinengo cenotaph



Cross of Desiderius



Nuns' choir frescoes

The Ministry of Culture oversees the 130,000 square-meter park, which blends preserved and accessible areas that showcase its extensive past. The site's history dates back to prehistoric times, becoming a Roman settlement by the fourth century A.D. and a fortified area in the early Middle Ages. In the fifth century A.D., the medieval Castelseprio fortress, a castrum, was created. The castrum, originally a late Roman fortress, was repurposed by the Lombards and later destroyed by the Visconti of Milan. Despite this, fundamental structures such as the walls, residential buildings, and the complex of San Giovanni Evangelista remain. This site exemplifies the Lombards' role in transforming and repurposing existing Roman and Ostrogothic structures. Upon their arrival in the sixth century, the Lombards fortified and expanded the site into a key administrative and religious hub. It served as the seat of a gastaldo, an officer managing the king's estates. The castrum is an excellent example of how urban power centers could develop in historical contexts.



KEY STRUCTURES AND FEATURES

Torba Tower and Monastery: Initially a Roman military outpost and later an Ostrogoth defensive bastion, the site was transformed by the Lombards in the 8th century into a commercial center and then into a monastic complex. The tower, dating back to the fifth and sixth centuries, is a rare surviving example of late imperial military architecture later adapted for religious use. As part of a female monastery, the tower represented the integration of spirituality and community within fortified structures.



This conversion showcased the Lombards' influence on early medieval Europe's cultural and spiritual landscape, symbolizing their shift towards Christianity. The tower and its surrounding complex also contribute to the Lombard artistic legacy with their frescoes, reflecting a blend of classical, Byzantine, and local influences that

inform our understanding of Lombard aesthetics and cultural values.

San Giovanni Complex: At the heart of the castrum lies the Basilica of San Giovanni Evangelista, accompanied by an octagonal baptistery and a monumental cistern. The basilica, dating back to the



fifth and sixth centuries, continued as a religious site until its abandonment in the nineteenth century. Its walls bear traces of frescoes, and the floor features opus sectile marble work, highlighting the site's artistic and religious significance.

Santa Maria Foris Portas: This church, located outside the main castrum walls, is renowned for its well-preserved and enigmatic cycle of medieval frescoes depicting the "Stories of the Infancy of Christ." The apsidal frescoes are among the largest mural paintings from this period, showcasing the artists' skill and creativity. These artworks offer valuable insights into early medieval religious art and the cultural milieu in which it was produced.



Antiquarium: In 2009, the Antiquarium was established within the park, housed in the recovered former Franciscan convent of San Giovanni. This museum presents significant archaeological finds from ongoing excavations, offering visitors a chronological narrative of the site's history from prehistoric times through the medieval period.

THIS ARTICLE WILL CONTINUE IN OUR NEXT ISSUE