

## Romanico English Version

Loading...

? a white mantle of churches...

### [Versione Italiana](#)

Central Piedmont is an area particularly rich in historical and architectural treasures that have survived a thousand years: the Romanesque churches of Monferrato. Characterised by their small size, by their brick and sandstone surfaces and by their typical single naves, they were built as village churches between the 11th and 13th centuries and have almost all completely disappeared today.

The remaining churches are located in an area bordered to the north by the Po, to the south by the Tanaro, to the east by the Lomellina (Pavia) and to the west by the hills of Turin. For centuries this area was a borderland between major, dynamic political divisions such as the Marquis of Monferrato, the County of Cocconato, the church of Asti and the state of Savoy. This rich history is reflected in the architectural heritage of castles, palaces, manor houses and episcopal churches. In particular the rectory of Vezzolano

remains as a beautiful document of the 11th to the 14th century. Other examples can be found in the numerous Romanesque churches whose locations document roads and settlements that, in part, no longer exist today.

The arrival of the year 1000 overcame man's pre-existing fear of the end of the world and brought about a widely diffused emphasis on religion in Europe, with the first Crusade beginning in 1095. Religious reform was initiated by Cluny, who wanted to curb the interference of nobles in the practices and government of the Church. This, combined with a sharp increase in population due to improved farming practices encouraged the medieval man to work towards rendering his faith tangible through the construction of churches across the Alps and Piedmont.

What sets the corpus of Monferrato churches apart from the rest of the region is that they were built in a dense branch network. This can be attributed to the larger population in the northern Asti region compared with that of the area bordering Liguria ? described as ?deserti loci' (deserted place) in the Alemaro imperial diploma of 967, due to the scarcity of settlements there.

These churches were also built in a limited time frame, between the 11th and 12th centuries, with consistent architectural and stylistic features influenced by both Roman-Byzantine echoes (the small area was surrounded by Roman sites such as Hasta Pompeia-Asti, Vardacate-Casale, Industria-Monteu da Po, of which many remains were probably still visible at that time) and by the skilled knowledge of the workers: stonemasons, wall masters and painters from across the Alps who brought with them a rich repertoire of models for the representation of Christian symbols. These models can be found in the sculptures and frescoes in San Lorenzo Montiglio, San Secondo di Cortazzone, Montechiaro San Nazario and in other countryside chapels, castrensian churches, rectories and oratories.

These buildings, often located on hillsides and close to primitive Roman settlements (such as the Coconato parish or the Medigliano-Casale parish) were subject to ?symbolic conventions?concerning the organization of the consecrated space. The church was almost always oriented on the east-west axis, so that the congregation were facing Jerusalem and the ascension of Christ with the sunrise; the altar was for the sole use of the clergy and was separated from the congregation by steps and a railing.

Among the environmental factors that most definitely affect the appearance of these buildings are the types of materials that were available locally at the time, to which are owed the beautiful colour contrasts created by the use of alternate rows of bright red bricks and blocks of white-yellow sandstone. These materials were also very malleable and therefore an ideal starting point from which to build capitals, cornices and arches rich with the most imaginative, albeit encoded, decorative motifs. Precisely the latter helped to make the "Monferrato school" unique, particularly with regard to figurative sculptures: the Agnus Dei in all its forms, tempting sirens, snakes, mystical mills, monsters promising undesirable fates to those who did not obey God and the Church. The sculptures can also be set apart by their geometric decorations: such as damier, dogstooth (made from either sandstone or brick), saw-tooth or schematic imitations of wicker and ribbon. The influence of Burgundian or southern French models here often offers a less threatening reading of the scriptures and the Old Testament often gives way to the New Testament, as in the case of the capital depicting the Visitation, the Nativity and the Deposition in the cloister at Vezzolano.

From the beginning of the 13th century, the birth of new settlements, new estates and the coming together of these settlements around hilltop castles, led to the decline of the hillside villages and, with them, the beginning of the abandonment of bichrome churches. They were still used, however, in the 15th and 16th centuries as cemetery offices, due to their locations on consecrated ground. Perhaps it was exactly this abandonment that aided the preservation of their original Romanesque character. The churches that were reused, were also repeatedly reshaped ? but this can be taken as a given when 800 years have passed by. In this way, however, they have lost that indisputably archaic and mysterious form typical of the Middle Ages which makes the few surviving Romanesque churches truly unique, and steeped in the charm of history.

Marina Cappellino

Marina Cappellino - Architect, active in the field of restoration and requalification of the following historic buildings in Piedmont: Moncucco castle (AT), the town hall of Piovà Massaia (AT), the castle of Monale (AT), the Mutual Aid Society offices, churches and parish houses north of Asti. She has also been active in Libya on the following projects: the seat of the Italian military command and mosque in Port Bardia (Tobruk), the fort of Bir Duvan (Misurata), the headquarters of turkish oasis of Ghat, Murzuq castle (Libyan Sahara). From 2002 to 2009 she was the Director of the Museum of Plaster in Moncucco Castle (AT). She has contributed to the following volumes: CROCE V., Tra gotico e neogotico. Le chiesa parrocchiali astigiane, CR Asti, 2012; LIBYA ANTIQUA, Annual of Departement of Archaeology of Libya, vol. V, 2010; OSSERVATORIO DEL PAESAGGIO, ?Il paesaggio dipinto dell'Astigiano?, CRAsti, 2007; O. d. P., Il Paesaggio del Romanico Astigiano, CRAsti, 2006; CAPPELLINO M., FIANDRA E., BORASI V., I soffitti di gesso del Basso Monferrato, Asti, 2000.