

AQUILEIA

Introduction

South of the province of Udine, Aquileia, connected to the Adriatic Sea by a dense network of canals, was founded as a Latin colony in 181 B.C. Thanks to its strategic position and to the amber and glass trade, the city underwent rapid development and became the capital of the 10th Region, *Venetia et Histria*, during the Augustan period. In the first centuries of the Empire, Aquileia played a fundamental role in the Roman military operations conducted towards the Danube. After the promulgation of the Edict of Milan by Constantine in 313, the city was the seat of an episcopate which promoted the spread of Christianity towards the centre of Europe. Destroyed by Attila in 452, Aquileia, once rebuilt, was raised to the rank of Patriarchate in 554, and visited by Charlemagne after his coronation in Rome, in 800. The Patriarchate, which controlled a huge territory, was abolished only in 1751.

History

The city was defended by the river Natissa and by a circle of walls, built in the 4th century, which included the port, renovated at the beginning of the Empire. The main monument of the city preserved today is its early Christian basilica, founded on a previous place of worship by the first Bishop of the city, Theodore; in 381, the building was the seat of the Council that condemned Arianism. The plan of the first basilica consisted of two large rectangular rooms connected by a third one, to which a baptistery was attached, which originally had an octagonal basin. To this first phase, which reused earlier Roman structures, perhaps belonging to granaries, dates back an exceptional set of polychrome mosaics, preserved in the two rooms south and north, which were used for various functions, such as the celebration of Mass and the teaching of Scripture. The mosaic carpet in the south room (discovered only in 1919), which preserves a dedication by Bishop Theodore, is partly consecrated to the history of Jonah, as handed down in the Old Testament: with its 760 m² it is the largest mosaic in the Western world. That of the north room, of 645 m², evokes a paradise populated by all kinds of animals and plants. The two rooms have also preserved remains of their wall decoration, made up of panels painted with geometric, animal and plant motifs. The basilica owes its present appearance to reconstruction work begun in the 11th century by Patriarch Poppone, interrupted by several earthquakes, and continued until the 14th century. The building, mainly Romanesque in style, with some Gothic additions, now has a cruciform plan, divided into three naves and including a transept, with an imposing bell tower dating back to the 11th century, 73 m high.

Rediscovery and restoration

The excavations of Aquileia, which was one of the main cities of the Roman Empire during the Imperial Age, began at the end of the 19th century, while the city was part of the Austrian Empire, and are still continuing today. This long tradition of work has made it possible to identify numerous ancient structures covering an area of about 155 hectares, of which only a small part has been excavated so far. The Roman city had a rigorous orthogonal plan, organized around a *cardo* and a *decumanus maximi*. In addition to the early Christian basilica, the remains of which are partially visible under the present church and at the level of the foundations of its bell tower, the port, the city walls, the forum with the Roman basilica, an amphitheatre, a circus, thermal buildings, warehouses, several splendid late-imperial *domus* and an extensive necropolis have been partially brought to light. Under the basilica, the 6th-7th century crypt preserves an imposing cycle of frescoes from the second half of the 12th century, in Byzantine-Venetian style, inspired by the Gospel of Mark, which was the subject of a restoration completed in 2019. Aquileia, whose basilica served as a model for numerous churches in Northern Italy and beyond, was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1998, due to the importance of the ancient city, being an exceptionally well-preserved testimony of Roman town planning, and for the fundamental role played by its Patriarchate in the spread of Christianity towards Northern Europe during the early Middle Ages.