

BRESCIA

Introduction

On a site already occupied in the Bronze and Iron Age, Brescia was founded at the beginning of the 4th century BC as the capital of the Cenomani Gauls, who gave it its ancient name, Brixia, which means "the high ground", in reference to the Cidneo hill that dominates the city. Defeated in 197 BC, the Cenomani became allies of the Romans, but they kept part of their autonomy and traditions. Municipality by Latin law in 89 B.C., the city was integrated into the Roman territory in 49 BC. In 27 BC, the *Civic Colony Augusta Brixia* was included in the *Regio X augustea, Venetia et Histria*, thus becoming an important religious and commercial centre. Ransacked by Attila in 452, the city was conquered by the Byzantines in 561, and a few years later by the Lombards, a people of Germanic origin who invaded Byzantine Italy in 568. Under their rule, and until 774, Brescia experienced a long period of prosperity.

History

The Forum of Brixia, at the corner of the *cardo* and *decumanus maximus*, occupied the present place of the Piazza del Foro and the buildings surrounding it, about 4.50 m below the present ground level. The forum, 120 m long and 40 m wide, was dominated by the grandiose Capitolium dedicated to the cult of Jupiter, Juno and Minerva, to whom three different *cellae* were dedicated, preceded by a pronaos. Built on the site of an earlier sanctuary, whose splendid wall paintings are preserved, it was built in the year 73 by Emperor Vespasian, as the inscription on its pediment indicates, to celebrate his victory over his rival Vitellius. Connected to the square by two or three flights of stairs, embellished by fountains, it still preserves traces of its marble flooring, with polychrome geometric decoration. The bronze winged Victory found during the excavations, and which is today the symbol of the city, was maybe part of its decoration. The temple was destroyed by fire during the barbarian invasions in the 4th-5th centuries, and never rebuilt again. On the southern side of the forum, opposite the temple, the basilica of the Augustan age, where justice was administered, and where commercial affairs were dealt with, was rebuilt in the Flavian age in imposing forms (19 x 47 m), and connected to the Capitolium by two majestic porticoes, which hosted trading activity. To the north-east of the forum, the theatre built on the hillside during the 1st century was restored by Septimius Severus; it could hold up to 15,000 spectators. To the west, a large thermal baths built in the Flavian age, on the ruins of a previous *domus*, remained in use until the late antique period. To the east of the forum area, in 753, Desiderio, the Lombard Duke of Brescia, founded the prestigious Benedictine women's monastery of San Salvatore-Santa Giulia.

Rediscovery and restoration

The Capitolium was rediscovered in 1823 by the University of Science, Literature and Arts of Brescia, beginning with the excavation of a small public garden, where a Corinthian column of white marble stood, and the demolition of council houses. The ambitious project then conceived to bring it to light, with the destruction of other buildings, was limited to important restoration work carried out from 1935 to 1939, completing the original missing parts, made of white marble, with additions made of bricks. Only the lower tiers in the theatre have been preserved. The rediscovery of the republican sanctuary, located under the Capitolium pronaos, dates back only to 1956. Brescia has been included in the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2011 with a number of other sites marked by the Lombard presence in Italy, grouped under the heading *The Lombards in Italy. The places of power 568-774 A.D.*, which includes seven groups of monuments - fortresses, churches, monasteries - scattered from north to south of Italy. The inscription on the list, which concerns more specifically the area of the forum and the monastic complex of San Salvatore-Santa Giulia, for a total extension of 14 hectares, was decided on the basis of the interest of the cultural synthesis carried out by the Lombards, between the 6th and 8th centuries, of Roman heritage, Christian spirituality, Byzantine influences and values typical of the Germanic world, thus anticipating the Carolingian flourishing; for the original cultural message conveyed by the places of power conceived by the Lombard elites; for their influential role in the spiritual and cultural development of the European Christian world in the Middle Ages, with the development of the monastic movement and the spread of the cult of St. Michael. The Lombards have ensured the transmission from antiquity to our world of numerous technical, architectural, scientific, historical and legal knowledge.