

GEOGRAPHICAL OUTLINE

The Via Marenca

Rezzo lies in the heart of the Valle Arroscia. This valley and the neighbouring valleys like Argentina, Impero, Maro and Prelà, are crossed by the Via Marenca, a mountain path that, following the ridges of the mountains, leads to the coast. These territories go through a great variety of climatic zones: the peaks have a mountain climate, whereas the coast is characterised by a Mediterranean climate. Thanks to the tempering action of the sea, though, the inland is characterised by the typical Mediterranean vegetation. Even on the highest peaks is not unusual to find holm-oaks and bushes of lavender and thyme as well as other typical plants of maquis that thrive even at altitudes of about 1000 metres. One of the most wonderful and charming sight opens before the eyes of the hiker who reaches the *Monte Saccarello* (2200 m.), the highest Ligurian peak. It is completely surrounded by alpine grazing lands and during the spring expanses of rhododendrons in bloom paint it blazing red. Descending from its peak in direction of the sea, mountain slopes covered with larches, Scotch firs and beeches (of which the beech wood of Rezzo is indeed one of the most fascinating epitomes), downy oaks, hornbeams, cluster pines, elms and chestnuts follow one another.

Owing to this variety of landscapes and climatic zones, the fauna is rich in species as well: chamois, wild boars, foxes, beech martens, weasels, badgers, hedgehogs, dormice, moles, eagle owls, great black woodpeckers, now little spread, salamanders and, especially close to streams, caves and anfractuositities, newts.

Drawing closer to the coast the landscape changes and the woods are substituted by cultivations of fruit trees, vineyards and in particular olive groves. The last stretch of the Via Marenca is characterised by olive groves and other typical plants of the maquis, among which stand out especially bushes of broom, mastic trees, myrtles, oleasters and Aleppo pines.

The Via Marenca winds through a territory that was dwelled in the prehistoric period. As a consequence, on the crests it goes through there are still today noteworthy prehistoric sites, whose remains date back even to the Mesolithic period.

Before the Roman Empire Age, these crests probably marked the border between the territories of two Ligurian tribes: that of the *Liguri Intemeli*, whose main centre was the ancient Ventimiglia (in Latin, *Albium Intemelium*), and that of the *Liguri Ingauni*, whose main centre was Albenga (in Latin, *Albium Ingaunum*).

The people who dwelled in these crests were very fond of their territory: in the Neolithic period already shepherds and farmers were used to live near the coasts in wintertime and to move to alpine

grazing for the summer. The crests became then places where different cultures met and interchanged, as still today the local art, the language, uses and customs state.

These populations also had a deep religious sense, as can be inferred by the noteworthy religious buildings spread all over the area, many of which were built in the late Middle Ages.

The Parco delle Alpi Liguri

The territory of Rezzo lies in the heart of the Parco delle Alpi Liguri. The project of creating such a park goes back to the Eighties, when this territory was on the wane, as more and more inhabitants abandoned their villages and moved to the towns, where they tried their fortune. As a consequence, there were lesser and lesser people who devoted themselves to farming and breeding. The Plan Department pointed out then the need to put an end to such a rural exodus. There was a common proposal to this problem and the only successful solution appeared to be the creation of a park that attended both the safeguard of this territory and the promotion of the local activities. As for its management, local inhabitants should have an active role in connection with its direction, whereas external interferences should be strictly controlled.

Time was though not ripe enough for such an innovative notion of park, so that the project was abandoned and only recently realised.

Today, however, the park is a reality with the same original aims. It has been conceived for both the safeguard of the varied landscape of this territory and the preservation of the delicate balance that progressively established between inhabitants of this area and nature and still exists today.

Over the centuries, the populations who lived there had indeed modified this territory, adapting it to their needs and making it suitable for breeding and farming: these modifications however were always made with the utmost respect for the territory, so that no radical alterations occurred; as a consequence, the park must safeguard not only the environment but also those activities that inhabitants practice still today, such as farming, breeding and forestry, and the culture that has progressively developed in this territory. This is the reason why the territory which the Parco delle Alpi Liguri comprises is defined “protected” landscape and why the park is ‘revolutionizing’ in some way.

A second, ambitious aim is make people discover this territory which comprises the seven municipalities Cosio d'Arroscia, Mendatica, Montegrosso Pian Latte, Pigna, Rezzo, Rocchetta Nervina and Triora, particularly through the promotion of tourism and of sports activities.

The Wood of Rezzo

The Passo della Mezzaluna

The wood of Rezzo is cut across by the *Via Marenca*: the path descends indeed from *Pian del Latte* up to the *Alpe Grande*, from which it reaches the *Passo della Mezzaluna*, a pass whose name is due to its peculiar form that resembles a half moon. From *Passo della Mezzaluna* and proceeding in direction of Molini di Triora it is possible to reach *Passo Teglia* and *Carmo dei Brocchi*, where traces of shepherds' settlements are still visible. From *Passo della Mezzaluna* it is possible to reach the village of Rezzo by going eastwards and cutting across its wonderful beech wood.

The Sotto di San Lorenzo

The *Sotto di San Lorenzo* is a tectonic depression that preserves a noteworthy site of historical remains. In the 3rd millennium BC already, this area was dwelled by shepherds and warriors, as revealed by the menhir from the Aeneolithic period which stands at the top of the little valley. The menhir is likely to mark either a transition site or the boundary of a special territory. Right on the verge of the *Sotto* lies a flat block of stone with a sort of bowl carved in it and a drain, probably an ancient altar for sacrifices which dates back to the Celtic period.

This block of stone lies – probably not by chance – where the last sunbeams shine before sun setting, near a shepherds' settlement consisting of several ancient huts with pseudo-vaulted roof known as *caselle*. These huts are very similar to the *gias* of the *Valle delle Meraviglie* and of the *Bacino dei Laghi Lunghi*. This kind of remains gets to assume that permanent settlements existed at the foot of the mountains, where the inhabitants lived during the winter months.

It is not surprising that these remains were found there, if we consider both the strategic importance of this place as well as its relative nearness to *Monte Bego* and to the *Valle delle Meraviglie*, where numerous epitomes of the western Ligurian populations' culture are situated. The *Sotto* was indeed a transition place and a kind of 'fixed' stop for the populations who travelled along these crests, as it was a comfortable accommodation protected from the wind for both herds and shepherds, who sheltered in the already mentioned *caselle*.

On the 11th August 1688, a little church devoted to St. Lawrence was built there, of which now only few ruins are left, where the travellers also found spiritual comfort. Even in more recent times, the *Sotto* remained an important place of encounter for shepherds, who every 10th of August, that is on St. Lawrence's Day, organised a cattle fair there.

The green heart of the valley

The wood of Rezzo, also due to its dimensions (about 2023 acres of copse and compound copse), has always been a notable source of income for the inhabitants of this area. Even nowadays the wood provides people with firewood, building timber, soft fruits, mushrooms, chestnuts, herbs and a sort of hazel splines, the so-called *scuje*, which are used to plait the *cavagni*, the typical baskets of Rezzo.

In the wood are still visible the flat clearings where still in the first half of the 20th century the inhabitants were used to build lime-kilns and charcoal piles, for the production of lime and coal respectively.

While beeches prevail, also many different species of trees thrive in the wood of Rezzo, such as hornbeams, durmast oaks, chestnuts, yews, cherry trees and, especially close to the village, poplars, linden trees, elms, willows and walnuts.

The local fauna is varied too; among the species that inhabit this area also animals threatened with extinction are count, such as wolves and wildcats. The spread of predatory birds, such as kestrels, buzzards, owls and some eagles, is due to the presence of grass snakes and adders. Partridges, grouses, thrushes and woodcocks, together with wild boars, are, in the end, still today prey to many hunters.

Thank to its charm, the wood of Rezzo is one of the privileged destinations of hikers and people keen on orienteering, especially due to the great variety of patterns, many of which are suited for both on-foot and horseback walking, and to mountain bike rides. Moreover, the many clearings close to springs with equipped areas are the ideal places for free camping.

Routes and rambles

From Passo Teglià to Passo della Mezzaluna

As already mentioned above, one of the most charming paths to follow is that of *Passo della Mezzaluna*. This mountain pass is reached by a mule track that from *Passo Teglià* winds along the old '*Via del Sale*' (the 'Salt Road') that linked Liguria and Piedmont. This mule track goes north-westwards and also crosses the already mentioned tectonic depression known as *Sotto di San Lorenzo*.

The *Passo della Mezzaluna* offers beautiful and charming scenery of the Alpine peaks of the mountains Pietravecchia, Grai, Collardente and in the distance that of Mercantour. From *Passo della Mezzaluna* to the peak of the *Monte Monega* stretches a pasture area, called *Alpe*, where still today it is possible to find natural cheese and other typical products. The path continues north-westwards up to reaching the cappella San Salvatore (St. Salvatore's Chapel).

From Passo Teglia to Monte Grande

From *Passo Teglia* it is possible to reach the scenic peak of *Monte Grande*, from which the eye gets a breathtaking sight of the valleys of Albenga and Imperia up to the coast. In a few minutes the path reaches a place called *Fenaira*, where several breeders still dwell during the summer. From this place another mule track leads up to the peak of the mountain.

Fenaira is a vernacular word that comes from *fen*, that is ‘hay’, and underlines the importance this area had in the past regarding the supplying of forage.

From Rezzo to Ponte Calcinaro

This trip is suitable also for people who are not very conversant with hiking. A level mule track leads first to the so called *Ponte Napoleonico* and then to *Ponte Calcinaro*, when some remains of an old chapel and several old lime-kilns are still visible. The name of this bridge comes indeed from “*calce*”, that is to say ‘lime’.

From Rezzo to the Sanctuary devoted to the Nativity of the Virgin Mary

The Sanctuary devoted to the Nativity of the Virgin Mary can be reached either following the carriageable road, the way the night procession does on the Eve of the day of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary, which is celebrated on the 8th of September, or by following a mule track that from the neighbourhood *Case Soprane* cuts across the open countryside. The road is lined by tall chestnuts which offer an enjoyable cool.

THE HAMLETS OF REZZO: LAVINA AND CENOVA

Lavina

Lavina was first mentioned in 1320 in some statutes of the hamlet concerning the parish church of Sant’Antonio Abate (St. Anthony’s church), which probably dates from the early 14th century. In 1725 works of rebuilding of the church started according to the design by Giò Antonio Ricca, a local architect. The present building is indeed an example of late baroque architecture, as revealed by the typical centre plan.

The village developed starting from three main centres, *Borghetto*, *Piano* and *Costa* respectively, which are linked by paved alleys. An anonymous picture of the ancient village that dates back to 1764 is today preserved in the beautiful Sanctuary devoted to the Madonna della Neve, which was built in the late 18th century.

Many other religious buildings can be found in the surroundings of Lavina: not far from the parish church stands the oratorio San Giovanni Battista (St. John the Baptist's oratory), which dates back to 16th century, with its beautiful local stone portal and its altarpiece by Bernardino Rebaudo. In the village it is also possible to visit the cappella San Pantaleo (St. Pantaleo's Chapel), which preserves a valuable late 16th century wooden triptych.

Several other chapels lie amidst olive groves or in the deep of the wood: of the Cappella Santa Maria Maddalena (St. Mary Magdalene's Chapel) only ruins are left, the cappella San Bernardo (St. Bernard's Chapel), instead, still preserves some frescoes. Besides, other chapels such as the cappella San Sebastiano (St. Sebastian's Chapel), the cappella San Giuseppe (St. Joseph's Chapel) as well as the Benedictine oratorio di San Colombano (St. Columbo's Oratory), the famous Irish monk who founded a monastery in Bobbio during the Lombard rule, must be mentioned.

Cenova

The first impression we have about Cenova dates back to 1380, when the village was mentioned in several documents concerning the blessing of the baptismal fonts and of the churchyard near the church of Santa Maria (St. Mary's Church). The village developed to the present nucleus only in the 16th century, when the parish church was restored. This church underwent actually many renovations over the centuries, till becoming an exquisite example of neoclassical architecture. The polyptyc representing the Virgin Mary (tempera on wood), the splendid wooden carved and gilded ciborium, and the canvas by Francesco Carrega, which represents the Assumption of Blessed Virgin Mary, are worth seeing.

In Cenova there are also other places of worship, such as the oratorio San Giovanni Battista e San Giovanni Evangelista (St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist's Oratory), completed in 1604. This building shows an octagonal dome cladding and preserves an anonymous altarpiece. There are also three chapels, the Cappella San Bernardo (St. Bernard's Chapel), the Cappella San Bartolomeo (St. Bartholomew's Chapel) and the Cappella San Sebastiano (St. Sebastian's Chapel). This third chapel has a beautiful cross vault in the 16th century style and preserves a fresco from the early 16th century.

In Cenova it is possible to visit also a Benedictine cemetery chapel from the late 15th century, the cappella San Benedetto (St. Benedict's Chapel), where a splendid stoup in black stone is preserved. This stoup, a masterpiece by the skilled local lapicides, consists of a basin held up by a statue representing a woman's figure. A further chapel is the Cappella Santa Lucia del Colletto (St. Lucy's Chapel), which stands near a spring that, according to the local custom, has faith cure powers.

HISTORICAL OUTLINE

The enthralling past of Rezzo: history

The history of the village gets lost in time: its origins go back indeed to the Barbarian period, as the cultural inheritance of the valley still reveals. Because of its strategic position concerning the links of the Ligurian coasts with south Piedmont, Rezzo was often the scene of violent territorial contests between the Savoy and Genoa, that wanted to extend its dominance to the whole Ligurian coast.

Since Rezzo had practically always been feud of the Marquises Clavesana, in the 14th century it was the scene of a contest between the Marquises Clavesana and the Marquises Del Carretto, who ruled Ceva and had invaded part of its territory. In 1385, in order to bring the contest to an end, the Marquises Clavesana with Emanuele II conceded part of their territory to Genoa. This part of land was then inherited by the Marquises Del Carretto.

At the beginning of the 15th century the Marquises Del Carretto, the Marquises Clavesana and the Marquises of Ventimiglia sided with the Viscontis in the war against Genoa. A new contest concerning once again the control of the territory of Rezzo arose between the Marquises Clavesana and the Marquises Del Carretto. In 1471 the Marquis Pallavicino, who had become governor of Genoa on behalf of the Duke of Milan, gave the investiture to Gaspare Clavesana, Emanuele's son. Gaspare bought the half of the feud which had been inherited by the Marquises del Carretto, thus reunifying the territory of Rezzo.

In the meantime, France had definitively become master of Genoa and of the territories of Milan. The Clavesanas, who had consolidated their power over Rezzo again, promoted the architectural development of the village. Over time they had their palace built, which was surrounded by many buildings where their court lived, they fostered also the project for the construction of a new chapel and had the parish church restored.

In the late 17th century, though, Rezzo was once more scene of a contest between the Republic of Genoa and the Savoy. The latter entertained indeed the ambitious project of constructing a road that linked Ormea and the Seigniorship of Oneglia – which they had just conquered – in order to transport salt and oil from the Ligurian coasts to Piedmont completely under their control. Genoa interfered, though, with this project, as it had still a stronghold left in this area, that is the village of Pornassio. On 16th July 1672 the Savoy's army conquered Pornassio, whereas the Regiment *Savoy* and three troops of Swiss attacked Rezzo. Several inhabitants, who were barricaded in the castle, put up proud and sharp resistance. The invaders had nevertheless the upper hand on them and plundered relentlessly the whole village, dismantling the castle itself which dated back to the 12th century. In consequence of this episode the Clavesanas, at this point subjected to Carlo Emanuele II of Savoy, had their fortified castle built, which stands near the parish church.

In 1736 the Treaty of Vienna definitively awarded the territories of Rezzo to the Duchy of Savoy, in the figure of Carlo Emanuele III of Savoy; Rezzo remained under their control till 1784, when it was awarded to Paolo Girolamo Pallavicino, a Genoese nobleman, who had married a descendant of the Clavesanas: Rezzo came then under the control of its earlier marquisate again. The last Marquis of Rezzo was indeed Alessandro, son of Paolo Girolamo Pallavicino, who sold his estates in Rezzo to a family from Pieve di Teco, the Truccos, in 1835.

Rezzo was also directly involved in the war in which France and Spain were opposed to Austria between 1740 and 1748. As Rezzo was part of the Kingdom of Sardinia, which sided with Austria, it was invaded by the French-Spanish troops: the valley was again the scene of a violent contest and the inhabitants of Rezzo were obliged to collaborate with the invaders' troops. In 1748 the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle (also known as Treaty of Aachen) awarded Rezzo back to the King of Sardinia.

In 1794 was again France that invaded Rezzo. During the Italian Campaign, Napoleon levied the so-called *Armée d'Italie* with the aim of invading Liguria from several sides and to reach then Piedmont. The *Armée* was composed by two columns, one of which was led by General Jean André Masséna and had the task to occupy, among other territories, also Rezzo. At first the French Army did not find much collaboration from local inhabitants, as many of them were still attached to the Savoy. Nevertheless, the population was obliged to cooperate with the invaders and also to put up for auction several town territories to support the Army and avoid negative consequences. On the one hand the French occupation was beyond all doubt irksome, but on the other hand it also had positive effects on the village: the organization of the administration was indeed streamlined and improved, the economy was regenerated and new infrastructures were built, especially link roads between the coast and the inland.

In 1928 the process of political aggregation of the valley that had started from 1797 with the Ligurian Republic was completed by uniting Rezzo, Lavina and Cenova in a sole municipality.

The enthralling past of Rezzo between history and myth

Aleramo and Adelasia

The story is that Adelasia, Otto I of Saxony's daughter, and Aleramo, a young orphan of Germanic descent who had become her squire, fled to Liguria after they had married counter to the emperor's wishes. According to the story, the two adolescents had at first taken refuge around Montenotte and then they had allegedly founded the settlement of *Alaxia* in the Princess's honour, which later on was called Alassio.

Far from the pageantry of the court, they lived a temperate life adapting themselves to do menial works, such as charcoal burners. As they supplied coal to the cook of the Bishop of Albenga, Aleramo became his scullion.

In the meantime, the inhabitants of Brescia had revolted against Otto I and the emperor had sent out an official announcement to levy an army. The bishop of Albenga, who was one of the emperor's liege men, joined the army with his attendants. In his ranks there were also his cook, Aleramo, and Otto, Aleramo and Adelasia's son, who was the bishop's squire.

Aleramo and his son stood out for their bravery in battle and the stories about their courage came to Otto I himself, who expressed the wish to meet them. When he learnt that the two brave soldiers were nobody but his son-in-law and his grandson, Otto made his peace with them and with his daughter and conceded to his son-in-law a title of nobility praising him for his bravery. The noble dynasty of the Aleramos was then founded, from which also came the Marquises Clavesana.

This story is connected with a red thread to that of Rezzo: not only it narrates the origins of the family that ruled over it for a long time, but it also provides a fascinating explanation about the marble plaque with Latin engravings that is still preserved in the parish church. The plaque was engraved in honour of the two young people following the wish of one of the marquis Clavesana. The story has indeed that Aleramo and Adelasia wanted to be laid to rest in Rezzo, feud of their relatives, in this very church, maybe to pay a tribute to St. Martin, to whom the parish church is devoted and who, like them, had lived in exile on the Gallinara isle.

The jus primae noctis

The story has it that the feudatories who ruled upon Rezzo arrogated themselves the right, whenever a marriage was celebrated, to have the bride 'kidnapped' and to spend the first night after the wedding with her (in Latin *jus primae noctis* means indeed "the right of the first night"). This custom was obviously contested by all inhabitants, but the Marquises stroke so much terror into the people that they were prevented from rebelling.

One day, however, the weddings of two brothers were celebrated who got the other inhabitants to drive the Marquis out of Rezzo. As he was overtaken at dead of the night, the Marquis was obliged to flee through a secret passageway accessible from the dungeons of his castle, thus leaving the village. Not long after, however, the Marquis tried to regain control of his feud and sent a maniple of soldiers to Rezzo. When they reached the Marquises' manorhouse in the middle of the night, they saw the cultivated fields which surrounded the village lit by hundreds of little flames and, assuming they were as many men ready to fight, they fled away. Those flames were probably summer will-o'-the-wisps (*ignes fatui*), but among the inhabitants took hold the belief that the souls

of their dead had come back to defend them from the soldiers and from then on a feast was introduced in remembrance of the episode, the *Festa delle Anime* (the 'Feast of Souls') that was celebrated every year with a mass at dawn on the second Tuesday in Lent.

THE CASTLE OF THE CLAVESANAS: THE CHARM OF EARLIER TIMES

The present castle, which still stands near the parish church, a place from where it looks over the entire valley, was built in the late 17th century after the Savoy had destroyed the precedent building which dated back to the 12th century and which towered over the village. Of this precedent castle only ruins of the walls and of the four keeps, two of which now partly sunken, remain.

The building has a quadrangular plant and on the first floor at each corner four watchtowers are visible, where sentries mounted guard. The castle is still moated, but the original drawbridge was at some time replaced by stone steps. Over the portal there is a niche where a statuette of the Virgin Mary is placed. The niche bears the Latin inscription "*Nec silentio transeunda*", that reminded the need to know a password to be allowed to gain access to the castle.

On the left of the entrance traces of a secondary entrance are still visible, a stone portal embellished by an acorn with oak leaves which are the crest of the village. The main door leads to an entrance which is decorated with medallions, portraits and coat of arms of the Aleramos, who were among the first lords of the castle. The entrance is also embellished with trophies and antique weapons.

On the left, there is another room full of antique valuables that leads to the old kitchen, provided with a wood-fired oven, utensils and period furniture.

On the right a large room opens, with a stone fireplace, tables and chairs, sand-glasses, sundials and halberds, as well as other antiques and also some pictures among which a picture in particular catches the eye, a representation of the Virgin Mary with the Infant Jesus surrounded by many cherubim. From there access is gained to many other rooms, in one of which St. Leonardo of Porto Maurizio was once lodged.

From the entrance a slate staircase leads to the upper floors, to the rooms where the servants lived and to the Marquises' private chapel. In the entrance a door also gives access to another staircase which leads downstairs to the dungeons, where often the prisoners were locked up for life. In one dungeon that had been bricked up were found even human bones. Later on, the dungeons were turned into granaries and cellars, but the prisoners' drafts are still visible on the walls. Deeper in the

vaults there are a water tank for the castle water supply and a trapdoor that hides the secret passageway through which the Marquis was said to have fled after the rebellion of the inhabitants, due to the custom of the above cited *jus primae noctis*. Unfortunately the castle, that was still visitable some years ago, is now closed to the public.

THE SANTUARIO DELLA NATIVITÀ DI MARIA (SANCTUARY DEVOTED TO THE NATIVITY OF THE VIRGIN MARY): PRAYERS AND DEVOTION UNDER THE CHESTNUTS

History

The Sanctuary devoted to the Nativity of the Virgin Mary or to Our Lady of the Holy Sepulchre was consecrated in 1492, even if its history goes far back in time and it is strongly tied, as that of Rezzo itself, to the power contests between the Savoy and Genoa. Perhaps in the 12th-13th centuries already a chapel devoted to the Virgin Mary existed, where people received miracles, as stated by an official document issued by the then town assembly. Of this ancient chapel only some rests of the rude stone apsis remain, which are still visible at the back of the Santuario.

In 1444 Brother Benedetto Lunellis di Cherasco, member of the Monastery of St. Teofredo of Cervere, started negotiating with the inhabitants of the village with the view to building a monastery on the hillock the monks had been given by one inhabitant of Rezzo, which should house a new group of monks.

In 1448 the town assembly decreed to start the building of the monastery, since it had indeed received both the Bishop's blessing and the approval of the two lords of the village, the Clavesanas and the Marquises Del Carretto, who also ruled Finale Ligure. The monastery was, however, never built, probably because of the political tensions between the Savoy and Genoa. Apart from the religious reasons, indeed, the erection of a Piedmontese monastery on the road that linked Liguria and Piedmont was particularly alluring for the Savoy, who still aimed at obtaining an outlet to the coast. Rezzo was however under the sway of Genoa and probably this was the reason why the Clavesanas, who were stalwarts of Genoa, refused to give permission to start the construction of the monastery.

The feudatories and the population were nevertheless not discouraged from erecting a religious building that looked over the valley: the local authorities, together with Manuele of Clavesana, Marquis of Crevario and Rezzo, and the Marquis of Finale, Giovanni del Carretto, sent an entreat to

the Pope, so that he could take cognizance of the fact that the church had already been given to Brother George of Albany, member of the order of the Minorite Observants, and asking for the permission to build a monastery close to it. Pope Pius II gave his permission, but once again no steps could be taken to put this idea in concrete form, so that it was only thanks to the significant contribution and to the generosity of the inhabitants that the church was at last built and integrated in the religious route that included also the churches of Montegrazie and Lucinasco.

The church was consecrated on the 1st of June 1492 by the Bishop Leonardo Marchese.

The church was administered by two public officials with administrative duties, known as *massari*. They had also the task to elect a Chaplain who celebrated mass and managed the Santuario independently of the parish church. The Chaplain was later on replaced by a hermit.

Over the centuries the Santuario has indeed remained a municipal property, thus maintaining its independence from the curia. The formal assignation of the so-called *giuspatronato* to the consuls of Rezzo, that is to say a legal institution of the canon law consisting in the attribution, by instruction of the ecclesiastic authority, of privileges and duties to the founders of churches, was made official through a document signed on the 8th of September 1519 by the Vicar-general of the Bishop of Albenga, a certain archdeacon Verano Ricio.

Even though the devotion of the inhabitants has lasted undiminished over time, the Santuario has only recently regained its original splendour. For many years it was just the location of most weddings, and only the celebration of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary kept on drawing in Rezzo even those inhabitants who had moved away.

In 1992 the five-hundredth anniversary of its consecration would have occurred and many inhabitants begun entertaining the idea of actually doing something in order to confirm anew their intense devotion to and fondness of the Santuario. The Parish priest, the mayor and the board of the Pro Loco shared a common goal: the “Comitato pro Santuario”, a committee backing the recovery of the Sanctuary, was eventually created.

The idea the Committee launched was heartily welcomed: the inhabitants of Rezzo and those who had moved away and lived around Italy or abroad, as well as several institutions and governing bodies, received a letter that invited them to collaborate on the project of building fifteen pillars housing the Mysteries of the Rosary along the road that from Rezzo reaches the Santuario. If the project was very ambitious, the response of the population was definitely touching: apart from the pillars, the path that from the road reaches the parvis was rearranged as well as the parapet that rims the hillock.

The inhabitants were enthusiastic about the initiative and cooperated eagerly to the works supervised by the promoters of the project. In spite of some hitches, the works were finished on

time. On the 30th of August 1992 a procession led by the diocesan Bishop Monsignor Mario Oliveri inaugurated the work. Few days after this procession, the Cardinal Silvio Oddi as well as the most prominent local authorities took part to the celebrations of the Nativity of Mary. The mass was concelebrated by Monsignor Alessandro Sappa and by the diocesan secretary Don Antonio Bonfante.

Don Antonio Bonfante himself had championed the revival of the Santuario. A true-borne “rezzasco” (this is how the inhabitants of Rezzo like defining themselves), he galvanised the residents and the Committee, urging them to prevent the past and the Santuario being neglected. In 1999 a young man came and settled himself by the Santuario, in the little house behind the apsis with his flock of goats: he took care of the Santuario by keeping it tidy and by opening it every morning, so that the people could visit it and admire its fabulous beauty. The same task is now entrusted to a young woman who has settled in her turn by the church with her herd. In 2000 the Santuario was listed among the churches of the Jubilee Route and several modifications to the carriageable road had to be carried out in order to enable the coaches to reach the Santuario more easily. A new stretch of road was fixed and the toilets were built. Hundreds of people came and visited the Santuario and left their names and their thoughts on a visitors’ book that had been placed at its entrance.

Other renovations had still to be carried out, though. Don Antonio Bonfante, indeed, continued encouraging the residents in keeping up these praiseworthy works, so that a new round of renovations begun.

As the roof was so tatty that the rain seeped through the cracks of the slates damaging the pictures, the project was, this time, to re-roof the Santuario. Just then Don Antonio Bonfante passed away and everybody felt that after his eager efforts and his precious advice, he deserved that his desires be realised: even if the sum initially allocated for these works was really scant, the cooperation between the Parish and the municipal authorities was nevertheless as strong as before. Numerous funds were applied for; the help of many institutions, corporations and banks was called upon.

The first request was addressed to the Banca Carige on the 22nd of November 2002. On the 23rd of May 2003, the sum of 50,000 euro was appropriated. Requests for further contributions were made to the Compagnia San Paolo in Turin, on the 21st of June 2004, and to the Ligurian Region Government in accordance with law no. 30/2003 that regulates the “Interventions for the Improvement and the Tourist and Cultural Enjoyment of the Ligurian Historical Buildings”, on the 12th of October 2004.

After a few time positive as much as really unexpected replies were received: on the 17th of December 2004 the Regional Government allocated 100,000 euro within the public funds set aside

for the religious buildings damaged by the flood of 2002. On the 29th of December 2004 the Regional Council appropriated to the works the further sum of 34,650 euro in accordance with law no. 30/2003. On the 30th of December 2004 the Compagnia San Paolo in Turin allocated 70,000 euro.

With these funds and without any further charges for the municipality the works concerning the re-roofing of the Santuario, as well as the eaves and the drainpipes fixing, the repair of the electric installation, and a partial plastering of the outside walls were planned and carried out. Furthermore, the wooden main doors and the porch stone floor were restored and the bells were electrified. The project was approved of on the 24th of February 2005 and the certificate for the formal execution of the works was passed on the 3rd of August 2006.

Thanks to the 15,000 euro contribution allocated in October 2003 by the company Carini S.p.A in Milan, the valuable pieces of furniture of the sacristy were also restored.

This is why the inhabitants, irrespective of whether they are religious or not, share the belief that Don Bonfante interceded to carry out these renovations on the Santuario he was so fond of. On the occasion of a solemn ceremony, the square in front of the Santuario was dedicated to him in everlasting memory.

The attention was then drawn onto the paintings, which were undergoing a progressive and irreparable decay. New contributions were applied for and a short time later the Monuments and Fine Arts Office received two funds, which had to be expressly spent on the restoration works of the paintings of the Santuario of Rezzo: again, the benign glance of Don Bonfante had not abandoned his fellow villagers. The funds appropriated for the project allowed not only to restore the two series of paintings to their original splendour, but also to restore the stuccoes and frescoes which embellish the presbytery and the two side altars. During a solemn ceremony on the 31st of August 2008, the blessing of these restorations by the Vicar-apostolic Monsignor Giorgio Brancalone took place. At these celebrations took part the major and other local authorities, as well as the senator Gabriele Boschetto.

The art

The Santuario of Rezzo is an epitome of the late Italian Quattrocento, of which it shows all the most typical features: the ‘sloping’ façade which underlines the nave and aisles outlines (known as *facciata a salienti*), the single lancets, the octagonal cusp bell tower with four pinnacles and the wonderful rose-window carved into a single block of stone.

On the left side of the Santuario, a stone staircase leads to a side entrance. This entrance is protected by a suspended sculpted stone prothyrum. The *Agnus Dei* is sculptured on its architrave. The façade

is almost entirely hidden by a rustic stone porch with angular pillars and three columns in Renaissance style connected by round arches. Both the portal-frame and the architrave, which bears the *Chrismon* in Gothic lettering, are finely carved and are probably a work masterly carried out by the lapicides of Cenova.

The internal basilican structure has a wooden span-roof. The three aisles are divided by two rows of columns, some of which sculpted in a sole block of stone, with fine bossed capitals connected by lancet arches. In the past, these arches were decorated with a black and white striped and checked pattern.

The nave is divided in the middle by two finely worked seats. As for the function they served, there are several hypotheses: they could either be the stalls reserved to the monks' choir, or the stalls set aside for the notability or even the 'boundary' that marked off the sector assigned to women from that assigned to men.

The presbytery and the two side altars have in common the bundles of columns with which the nave ends. From here originate indeed their arch vaults. From the right side altar access is gained to the bell tower, which holds three bells different in size dedicated to the Nativity of the Virgin Mary, to the Annunciation and to the Immaculate Conception respectively.

On one of the external sides of the bell tower a fresco is painted, which depicts St. Christopher who carries the Infant Jesus astride his shoulders.

The two side altars, the only two left after the numerous changes the church underwent over time, are devoted to the Virgin Mary and to St. Bernardino. These altars are the results of the restoration works carried out during the 17th and 18th century. To the 17th century also date back the beautiful high altar, which was built by eliminating the former choir and the big lunette over it. The architecture is indeed typically Baroque, as revealed by the spiral columns, the precious decorations of the gable, where the statue of the benedictory God the Father stands, as well as the anthropomorphic and phytomorphic reliefs and the friezes representing angelic figures. This is the work of a sole artist, Gio. Paolo Marvaldi from Borgomaro. With subsequent interventions a third step was added, and probably also the tabernacle. The stupendous statue representing Our Lady with the Infant Jesus is almost certainly the work of Filippo Parodi (1630-1696), a famous Genoese sculptor and Bernini's apprentice. This hypothesis is borne out also by the striking affinities this work has with the statue of Our Lady of the Carmine situated in church devoted to San Carlo in Genoa, which is for sure ascribed to this sculptor.

On the right side of the presbytery, the stucco representing the Virgin Mary visiting St. Elizabeth and the fresco of Jesus Christ's christening are to be seen. On the left side there are still some part of a fresco representing the Assumption of Mary, a work of the Genoese painter Giovanni

Cambiaso, and the Three Kings' worship. The triumphal arch is decorated with the magnificent stucco of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary by the Lombard artist Gio. Andrea Casella.

In 1610, the crypt to which the flight of stairs in the right aisle leads was dedicated, according to the will of the Marquis Federico Clavesana, to the Holy Sepulchre. Its black slate altar in late-Renaissance style bears a relief with the symbols of the Passion. The niche above it preserves the statue in white marble of Carrara representing the lying Christ Crucified ascribed to Battista Orsolino.

The paintings

The wonderful paintings on the right wall of the Santuario, traditionally called frescoes, were brought to light only in the Thirties, when Don Antonio Boschetto noted a part of a one of them re-emerging from under the coat of plaster, since during the Counter-Reformation the entire wall had been completely whitewashed. The restoration of the paintings begun only at that time, but the works were then stopped during the Second World War and started again only in the post-war period. From 1957 on the works were carried on under the guidance of Professor Tullio Brizi from Assisi. The two series of wonderful paintings, the work of two different painters, were finally brought to light again.

The first series is more ancient and includes the paintings representing the Hell, the Purgatory and the Paradise as well as the representation of the twelve months of the year. The second series, which dates back to 1515, is Pietro Guido from Ranzo's work, a painter who came from the Arroscia Valley. This set of paintings includes the Mystery of the Redemption from sin with the representation of Adam and Eve, some episodes of Jesus Christ's life and His Passion, Death and Resurrection.

The first series of paintings

The first series of paintings dates back still to the 15th century and is divided into two sections. The depiction is not very precise, but it is nevertheless effective. Quite interesting are the colours the author used. Unfortunately little remains of the first section, which represents the Paradise and the Purgatory. The representation of St. Peter with the Keys as well as a group of souls in bliss and another group of souls wrapped in the purifying blazes of the Purgatory, who stretch out towards the Paradise, are nevertheless still visible.

The second section, which represents the damned in the hell, is better preserved. The depiction is appalling: a number of devils persecute the damned with forks and cogwheels, while some other devils tear them to pieces. Everywhere there are vivid depictions of the chaos and the dreadful

atmosphere that reign in the realm of damnation, with burning cauldrons and flames that lick the damned. Very interesting is also the so-called “ride of the vices”: the seven Deadly Vices are personified and chained up one after another, and ride seven animals which lead them into the jaws of a frightful monster.

The second series of paintings

The second series of paintings was painted a bit later by Pietro Guido da Ranzo. The depiction has the goal to render the liturgical conceits in images for the benefit of the numerous illiterate of that time. The series mainly aims to make clear how only the coming of Jesus Christ could save the mankind from their wretched fate. The depiction is much more precise than that of the preceding series, even though still distinctly medieval. The traditional expressive means are preferred and the depictions are often very dramatic and rough. The colours are vivid and the pictures very evocative, so that they are perfectly suitable to their edifying function.

The events are divided into two sets with the big representation of the Crucifixion interposed between them. The upper strip goes from the left to the right and includes the depictions of the original sin, of Lazarus’ resurrection and of the life of Jesus from His entry in Jerusalem to His appearance in the Sanhedrim.

The second strip goes the opposite way and continues the representation of Jesus Christ’s Passion with His Ascent to the Calvary, His Crucifixion and Death, up to His Deposition from the Cross, the Virgin Mary’s weeping and His Burial. This strip continues on the main entrance wall with the depictions of the Resurrection, the descent into the hell, the Apparition in Emmaus and that of Mary Magdalene who wipes Jesus’ feet with her hair. Other paintings depict Peter and John who find the sepulchre empty and Jesus Christ’s Apparition in the Supper Room. Going from the left to the right Jesus Who resuscitates Giairo’s daughter, Jesus dining with His Disciples after His Resurrection and the Ascension are to be seen.

The representations of several Saints and of the Virgin Mary with the Infant Jesus, which are painted under the second strip of paintings, belong to a later period.

THE FAITH IN REZZO: PLACES OF WORSHIP

The Parish Church of San Martino (St. Martin’s Church)

Unfortunately little is known about the first parish church that had been built before the year one thousand AD. The present church existed in 1392 already; the population of Rezzo chose St. Martin

the Bishop as patron saint of the village and in 1440 a certain Giovanni Bonfante founded a *cappellania* of the population of Rezzo on the altar devoted to Santa Caterina. The altar that pays honour to the Saint Rosary, which was the *cappellania* of the Marquises Clavesana, was built in 1446. Just in front of it there was their family vault. The church underwent much deterioration over time, so that two restorations through the agencies of Gaspare and Nicolò Clavesana were necessary. The latter intervention also modified the entrance of the church, which was then faced east, towards the castle. These works lasted for twelve years and were nurtured both by a deep religious feeling and the wish to give prestige to the lineage of Clavesana.

The church is a perfect epitome of the style of that time with its linear façade at the top of a stone flight of steps. The interior of the church shows a sole nave with a large presbytery and six side altars, four of which were recently restored. One of those side altars holds the beautiful picture, which recently underwent a restoration, too, that represents St. Martin in the act of cutting his military cloak in half to share it with a beggar. Another noteworthy work of art is the baptismal font sculpted in a block of black stone, a work of the skilful lapicides of Cenova, that bears the Clavesana coats of arms.

[The Chapels of Rezzo: between protection and devotion](#)

The veneration of the Saints was deep-rooted in Rezzo, as the numerous chapels that soar to its 'defence' reveal. The village is indeed encircled by a lot of chapels devoted to several saints: at the boundary between the territory of Rezzo and that of Lavina stands the cappella dei Doria (the Dorias' Chapel). Probably it was Francesco Maria Clavesana who had it built, as he was Benedettina Doria's husband. Near the so-called *Ponte Napoleonico* stands the cappella dell' Angelo Custode (Guardian Angel's chapel). Going in direction of the village the cappella Santa Margherita (St. Margaret's Chapel) is met, which is already mentioned in some documents of the 16th century. In the thick of chestnuts stands the cappella Santa Croce (Chapel of Santa Croce), the so-called *Crocetta*, again built before the 16th century, which even in more recent times was the destination of the Good Friday procession.

Not far from the quarter called *Castello* stands the oratorio San Mauro e Santa Consolata Monaca (Oratory of St. Mauro e St. Consolata Monaca) and on the path that leads to the graveyard stands the cappella San Michele (St. Michael's Chapel), the angelic warrior, of which we have news since 1493. Not far from the graveyard once stood the cappella Santa Lucia (St. Lucy's Chapel), which was built in the bed of a small brook, just on the mule track that linked Rezzo to Cenova. Of this chapel remain unfortunately only rubbles.

At the mouth of the valley stand the Romanesque oratorio di San Rocco e San Sebastiano (St. Rocco and St. Sebastian's Oratory), which in earlier times was the destination of numerous processions, especially during the periods of drought, to beg for the blessing of the rain.

Besides, in the village stand many other chapels. Going through its streets starting from the quarter called *Case Soprane* the cappella San Bernardo (St. Bernard's Chapel) is met, which is decorated by valuable frescoes by Guido da Ranzo, who painted also the frescoes that adorn the so-called cappella dell'Ospedale. Not far from it stands the fine cappella San Giuseppe (St. Joseph's Chapel), also named the 'Chapel of the Crib', after the painting that depicts the Nativity of Jesus placed above its high altar. Going down the stairs that run along the Town Hall, the cappella Santa Croce dell'Ospedale or cappella Santa Maria Maddalena (Chapel of Santa Croce or St. Mary Magdalene's Chapel) is reached, which was masterfully frescoed by the already above mentioned Guido da Ranzo. The name of this chapel and that of the quarter in which it stands derive from the building that stood near it, the so-called *Hospitium Pauperum* (a Latin expression meaning "the place of the poor"), or just *Ospedale*, where the poor and the pilgrims were indeed offered board and lodging.

In the quarter known as *Poggio* stood finally the oratorio Santa Maria di Loreto (St. Maria of Loreto's Oratory), of which only a few ruins remain.

To point out the faith of the population of Rezzo even further, the chapels that stand right in the wood must be mentioned. These are: the cappella San Pietro in Vincoli (St. Peter in Chains' Chapel) which stood on the paths that lead to the so-called *Alpe di Rezzo*, the oratorio San Salvatore (St. Salvatore's oratory), which was built amid of the highest pasture-lands and whose high altar was demolished by the French troops in 1749 and finally the cappella San Lorenzo (St. Lawrence's Chapel), of which only a few ruins remain. This chapel, which was built on the 11th June 1688, stood in the tectonic depression known as *Sotto di San Lorenzo*, the crossroad of the paths travelled by shepherds as well as location of a yearly cattle market. All around the chapel stood little shelters where the shepherds dwelled.

THE CAVAGNI: A DEMONSTRATION OF THE CRAFT DEXTERITY OF THE INHABITANTS OF REZZO

The production of the *cavagni* was in the past one of the chief activities to which the inhabitants of Rezzo devoted themselves and still today, in spite of the more frenzied life everyone carries, some of them do not give up this ancient occupation.

The *cavagni* are typical baskets plaited with hazel splines originally used to carry fruits and garden products, and which today represent a rustic and prized decoration item. Their production requires great skill, as much accuracy and a good deal of patience.

The first thing to do is a pleasant walk in the wood searching for a suitable hazel tree to supply the wood. Once the tree has been identified, some very long boughs (2-2,5 m.) are cut. Then a fire is lighted up, in order to make the blazes lick the branches. This process is necessary to soften the wood, so that the bark can be easily removed and the wood easily cut in splines.

Using a particular tool known as *prana*, the splines are then made thinner and are cut into different sizes: some, called *scuje*, are longer and roundish and are used for the proper plaiting of the baskets, whereas some other splines, which are thinner and broader, are used to obtain the frame of the baskets and are known as *fundi* and *coste*.

Once these operations have been carried out, the splines are dipped in baths full of water. This kind of settling has the aim to soften the fibres of the splines and to make them more flexible, so that they can be easily plaited preventing them from breaking. The last finish touch is given using the billhook. As soon as these operations are carried out completely, the plaiting begins.

Fundi and the *coste* are intertwined to interweave the bottom: these splines are longer than what is needed, so that they can be bent and used to form the side structure that is plaited by using two *scuje* at a time. When the basket is finished, a further trimming edge is added, which is obtained by intertwining three *scuje* at a time and resembles a braid.