

VITORCHIANO

To the occasional visitor, Vitorchiano seems to be an intact village, imposing and austere, settled on big Peperino rocks, in a connection of houses and cliff, almost a symbol of the existing continuity between past and present. The village shapes its identity starting from the 13th and 14th centuries by the construction of an urban settlement.

History of the “Fidelato”

The term “fidelato” derives from “fidelitas” the Latin for loyalty. In the feudal times, this term stood for the duty of the vassals to assist their Prince both materially and by military assistance. The feudal system was an economic, social and political organization in a time when there was no State; a mutual loyalty was therefore necessary to create agreement and exchanges. The history of the treaty of mutual loyalty between Vitorchiano and Rome dates back to the beginning of the 13th century, when the people of Vitorchiano rebelled against the near town of Viterbo and asked for the help of the Roman Senate; in 1201 Rome recognized Vitorchiano as one of its own feuds. During the years Vitorchiano was destroyed for several times by the town of Viterbo and its boundary walls suffered great damage: in order to get money enough to rebuild the walls, the Roman Senate pledged the feud to Giovanni degli Annibaldi. In order to pay off the debt and confirm the link with the Roman Senate, the inhabitants of Vitorchiano made a collection. Rome returned this loyalty by a tax exemption and continuous help.

The most explicit display of loyalty was the foundation of the “Fedeli del Campidoglio”, a group of men in Vitorchiano assigned to the guard of the Senator; every year ten men from Vitorchiano were to be sent to the Campidoglio in Rome after being chosen by a regular drawing. This service was finally stopped with the annexation of the Papal State to the Kingdom of Italy. In 1926 the Roman council deliberated the symbolic revival of the “fidelato”. The part of public representation of the vassals in the formal ceremonies of the Roman Senate was very important: in these occasions the “fedeli” had to wear the “Roman People Livery”, a stylish uniform, whose predominant colours were red and yellow, symbols of the city of Rome.

The historical archives of Vitorchiano are kept in the Pawnshop, sole seat of the archival documentation, which was previously kept in three different premises. The most ancient proceedings, the parchments, the statutes, the notaries registers were kept in a little room in the Town Hall, seat of the archives from the 16th century. The statutes are of great importance when reconstructing the community’s institutional framework, as they include the basic rules of the local government. In the historical archives of Vitorchiano you can find two wordings of a statute; the first one dates back to the second half of the 15th century, while the second one dates back to 1613. They are divided into six books containing the rules for the election of a civic magistracy, the sentences given for the different crimes, taxes, building regulations, rural economy. The troubled political events of the Italian Kingdom and of the Italian Republic are also recorded in these archives.

The Territory

Vitorchiano was probably founded during the period of the agrarian nomadism, as it originally was a “pagus”, a village which stands on high ground at the confluence of two torrents. During the Etruscan period, the village was fortified and sturdy walls were built, having a sole access; the road network was developed because of an improving trade.

The historical centre, in spite of the apparent homogeneity given by the use of Peperino, is not presented as a whole, but as an aggregation of three areas. The three periods of the village development («castrum”, rural municipality and “middle-class” community) correspond almost perfectly to the three different phases of the urban growth. The northern area, the most ancient one, has an ellipsoidal plan closed outwards and having a defensive structure with just one access. The central area, structured on a little trident, has the same defensive walls, but opens towards the surrounding countryside with its lanes. In the outer area all the defensive elements disappear and the buildings look like country-houses.

The centre of the village originates from a “castrum”, carefully built according to defensive requirements to repel any attack. In this area of the village the streets are narrow and sloping so that they have a defensive function; the public spaces are not meeting-places, but they only act as passageways and connecting areas. The two main streets never have a straight outlet, the outside can be seen only at the end of the winding lanes. The northern area of the village has a nice peculiarity: a block of houses called tower-houses because of their vertical structure chosen both for defensive requirements and for building problems (the house’s width depends on the dimensions of the wooden beams used to build it).

The prevailing elements in the “castrum” refer to the most important authorities in the village: the Prince and the Church. In Vitorchiano they are the Bishop’s House and St. Mary’s Church.

The Bishop’s House

This building dates back to the Middle Ages; its main feature is the “profferlo”, an outdoor staircase with pyramid-shaped decorations on the frame and on the doorjamb.

St. Mary’s Church

This church is opposite St. Agnes Nunnery and was dedicated in 1533. Between 1458 and 1474 it needed repairs and the works were done by Lombard craftsmen. The simple original plan was not altered and nowadays it maintains the side chapels. It is an aisle less church with a lateral bell tower and two decorated entrances. The style and the kind of decorations belong to the area of southern Latium and were made by local craftsmen. The quadrangular bell tower is detached from the church and has three kinds of windows: with one light, two lights and three lights. Inside the church there is a beautiful baptistery in Peperino.

St. Agnes Nunnery

The nunnery was built in 1466. The church was not yet completed in 1587 even if it was already used; the works went on for a long time. The whole area is composed of two blocks of buildings: St. Agnes church, built around the inner courtyard and the nunnery, built in the outer garden. The main portal of St. Agnes church was built in 1490; the high altar dates back to the 17th-18th centuries.

Snow Gate

Its name is taken from a legend which reports of a snowfall on the gate, in the month of August. It is the sole access to the original “castrum” and is crowned by a coat of arms with the inscription SPQR, to testify to the treaty of “Fidelato” with Rome.

St. Peter's Church

This church was built in the 11th century, is rectangular and aisle less. At present it is desecrated and in very bad conditions: it still has only the beautiful jambs of the entrance door.

The transformation of Vitorchiano from “castrum” to a rural village caused some town planning and architectural changes. This passage is attested by the name of the main street, Arringa: “arreglo” was the meeting-place for the free medieval municipality. The two side streets form a little trident open on Piazza Roma where all the most important buildings are.

Town Hall

The building is situated beside the ancient fortress, beyond the entrance gate and was built in the 16th century. The Town Hall has a very severe façade and its only decoration is composed of two large windows. Inside the Town Hall, the main room has a series of frescoes by the school of Viterbo. The cylindrical pulpit has a channelled base and three relief coats of arms; several are the references to the treaty of loyalty with Rome.

St. Anthony's Church

This church was founded in 1406 and nowadays it is desecrated. It is an aisle less church whose façade has few decorative elements such as the round window, the moulding of the door and the frieze with the inscription.

Spindle-shaped Fountain

It is a characteristic spindle-shaped fountain, like the most famous fountains in Viterbo, entirely made of Peperino; it was built between the end of the 13th and the beginning of the 14th century. It is composed of a round basin with three-lobed arches inside rectangles. In the middle there is a column with four figures representing the symbols of the four evangelists.

The typology of the houses in this area is different from the previous one because by then the defence of the village was no longer a priority: there was a manufacturing economy, in favour of trade and exchanges. Mansions and the characteristic houses with a “profferlo” were built, while some Lombard craftsmen helped to embellish the village.

St. Amanzio's Church

This church was finished in 1479 and dedicated in 1533. It absorbed into its left side the church of St. Charles, which became a side aisle. St. Amanzio's church had five altars. On the right wall there is a fresco representing the Annunciation and dating back to 1514.

The third area of urban development, Borgo Cavour, is situated outside the village walls.

Boundary Walls

They were built in the 13th century and made of Peperino. These walls defended the village from the enemy attacks and had only one gate (Porta Romana) with a drawbridge on the moat below. Along the walls there are some towers and two round ramparts built in 1497.

Church of St. John the Baptist

The construction of this aisle less church began in 1566. Inside it you can find four altars; its façade has on the same axis the entrance door, an upper window and a niche with the statue of the saint.

Church of Our Lady of St. Nicholas

It was built during the first half of 1500. This aisle less church has its main attraction in the frescoes of the sidewalls, painted by five different artists during the first half of the 16th century. The third chapel on the right is noteworthy: the Virgin Mary protects a crowd of women with her mantle.

Church of St. Michael the Archangel

This church is situated in the country and was built in 1358. It has a double weathered roof; its façade has an entrance door with a flat lintel, two windows with a round arch and a central rose window. On the right the church has a little bell tower. In the month of May the inhabitants of Vitorchiano go in procession to St. Michael's church and afterwards they take part in the "Poggiata", a picnic in the country which involves the whole community.