



## SASSO DI MUSSO (The Musso Rock)

You can find this point of interest in Dongo - Path 1 - Stage 2

### DESCRIPTION

(Silvia Fasana)

The territory of Dongo and Musso is dominated by an imposing rocky limestone spur, called Sasso di Musso, which seems to be diving straight into the lake. The well known hard and compact white-greyish local marble, which has been extracted since the time of the Romans, was widely used in the construction of monuments and churches, including the Cathedral of Como. Due to the close proximity of the quarries to the waters of the lake, the marble blocks were lowered with ropes and then with metal cables along a paved lane which ended in the port. Waste blocks, on the other hand, were carried by mule or by cable cars up to the mill by the lake, where they were crushed.

At the very top of the first buttress of the Sasso di Musso stands the small church of S. Eufemia (*St. Euphemia*), which was part of a fortified system, probably in existence since the Early Middle Ages, but documented only in 1335 as fortress of the Malacrida family, and, from 1522, of Gian Giacomo de' Medici, also known as the Medeghino. Defined by Cesare Cantù as a "pirate, king, rogue, traitor, rebel, murderer, hero", he had his strategic headquarters here, from which he directed the raids on the lake and the surrounding territory. In 1532 he was defeated by the allied armies of the Three Leagues and Francesco II Sforza, who destroyed much of the impressive system of defence, of which only a few remains are still visible.

In the lower part of the Sasso, between 1858 and 1883, the nobleman Giovanni Manzi created the "Giardino del Merlo" (*Blackbird's Garden*), where, in addition to autochthonous species, he introduced plants from all over the world, which grew luxuriantly thanks to the mild climate of the lake. The result was a garden where ingenious architectural flights of fancy (stairways, galleries, grottos, arcades, bridges, balustrades, and an entire apartment built into the rock and hidden from visitors) blended harmoniously with the natural environment, creating a most fascinating composition, to the point of being mentioned in European tourist guides of the time as a destination of high artistic-monumental and landscape value.

Saint Luigi Guanella, who was parish administrator in Pianello del Lario from 1881 to 1890, and a friend of Giovanni Manzi, visited the garden and wrote a short essay entitled "*Memorie passate e presenti intorno alla Rocca di Musso (Past and recent memories on the Musso Rock)*", published in segments on the Como newspaper *L'Ordine* in 1884, pointing out the importance of paying a visit to this location «*in the guise of wayfarers [...] in order to deepen one's knowledge of the best examples of Christian art and of nature created by God*». «*From this perspective the eye spontaneously turns to those prospects of green knolls and groves, paths, bridges, and fountains.. Houses, caves, and galleries form such a rare complex of beauty of work, nature, and art that the visitor is left in astonishment. And when the eye needs a rest, one finds here a horizon made of the clearest sky covering hills and valleys, plains and plentiful waters*» (L. Guanella, *Memorie passate e presenti intorno alla Rocca di Musso. Impressioni del visitatore*, 1884, 1913).

While showing a very thorough knowledge of botany, don Guanella describes the different parts of the Garden with the various plants present, drawing from each one, and from the surrounding landscape, a symbolic meaning and moral teaching. Poetic wonder seeps from these pages: don Guanella was able to see the greatness and goodness of God in the beauty of nature.

At Giovanni Manzi's death, in 1883, his granddaughter Giuseppina continued to care for and embellish the Garden until she died, in 1945. The heirs of the noblewoman transferred the area to the "Società Scalini", a company which opened three marble quarries, and built a furnace for the production of lime, too. After the company went bankrupt, in 1967 the Colturri family purchased the defaced and damaged Garden at the bankruptcy auction, in order to try and save it and bring it back to life.

At present the Garden is owned by the "Giardino del Merlo" non-profit organization of social utility, founded by the Colturri family, the Lake Como and Lake Lugano Mountain Community, and the Municipalities of Musso and Dongo.