



ROMAN COMO

You can find this point of interest in Como – Path 7 - Stage 1

DESCRIPTION

The first Roman presence in the Como area cited by sources dates back to 196 BC, when the consul Marco Claudio Marcello defeated a coalition of Gallic tribes in the area, some of whom lived on the hills to the west of Como, where the ancient *Comum oppidum* was sited.

At the end of the conflict, the Romans formed a “*foedus*” with the defeated tribes, being a type of “pact” that did not imply an occupation, but probably imposed tributes, such as the obligation to provide military aid in case of need.

Comum oppidum suffered an incursion in 91 BC by the Rhaetians coming from Valtellina and in 89 BC. it became a “pseudo-Latin colony” thanks to Pompey Strabo; the law, in fact, did not establish the sending of new colonists, but those who had held administrative positions were allowed to become Roman citizens. In this way Rome closely associated with the local elites, who consequently became protagonists of the Romanization process, that is, the acquisition of Roman laws, culture and customs.

It was not until 59 BC. when Gaius Julius Caesar had the intuition to found a new city on the shores of the lake, to exploit the great opportunities that the Lario (the Roman name for Lake Como) provided for connections between the plains and the Alpine passes. At that time, the central part of the valley was crossed by the Cosia, Fiume Aperto and Valduce streams, which effectively made it a swamp, not suitable for habitation. It was therefore necessary to carry out a massive drainage project, with the diversion of the Cosia towards the west and the Valduce towards the east.

By Caesar's will, five thousand colonists were sent here, including five hundred Greeks; in 49 BC the city became a *municipium* and its inhabitants consequently acquired Roman citizenship.

In memory of the foundation of Como, the former students of the “Alessandro Volta” Classical High School placed a high relief panel made of precious Apuan *cipollino* marble on the exposed stone southern wall of Palazzo Cernezzi (via Perti – corner of via Vittorio Emanuele). Dated 1991 and the work of Francesco Somaini, the panel is engraved with the passage in which the geographer Strabo recounts the events of the 1st century. B.C. (*Geografia*, V, 1, 6).

The new city, founded on solid pilings, with buildings constructed of stone and brick, and paved streets probably connected to a sewage system, was called *Common Novum* (“New Como”), so as to distinguish it from the older town, *Comum Oppidum*, that had a very different appearance, being located on the hills to the west of the valley. The urban planning envisaged the construction of important buildings for urban life right from the foundation of the city, with the erection, a few decades later, of the amphitheatre and the port.

We can consider that by the 1st century Como was equipped with all the characteristic structures of a Roman city.

The layout of the city is typically Roman, with a square plan crossed by two main streets, the *Cardo Maximus* from north to south and the *Decumanus Maximus* from east to west. In the central part there was the main square, the *Forum*, the heart of the administrative, social and commercial life of the city. The secondary streets, the *Cardini* and the *Decumani* minors, were traced parallel to the two main streets, which gave the city the appearance of a chessboard: each square corresponded to a block (*insula*) occupied by both public and private buildings.

Right from the foundation of the city, the erection of a solid city wall was planned (about 450 metres long on the southern side), with openings at the ends of the main streets and strengthened by rectangular towers. It is likely that the city walls surrounded only three sides of the city, excluding the north side protected by the lake. This Roman defensive wall was razed to the ground by the Milanese at the end of the bloody “Ten Years” war, which ended, after a siege, with a terrible defeat inflicted on the Como people (1127). The walls we currently see, called “Federiciane”, were built from 1158-1159 thanks to the support of Emperor Frederick Barbarossa.

The presence of the lake has always been crucial for the city of Como which had a port from the very beginning, which, over time, became increasingly important, to the point of even hosting, in the late imperial age, a *classis* (a fleet of warships). The fleet was commanded by a *praefectus* (officer) with the rank of governor of the city. There were four military fleets in Italy: Como, Aquileia, Ravenna, Miseno. Pliny the Elder was the *praefectus* of the *classis* (fleet) based in Miseno.

Outside the Roman city, the land route (later called “Via Regina”), winding along the western coast of the Lario, gave continuity to the connection with Milan to the south and with the Alpine and Rhaetian beyond the Alps to the north, towards Chur.