



Civico Museo Parisi Valle
Maccagno con Pino e Veddasca – Lago Maggiore (Varese)
The Treasure of Imperial Maccagno

4. Imperial Maccagno

'Maccagno Imperiale, royal court, land of its own'. This is the pompous but correct title to describe a town with a somehow exceptional history, which has marked Maccagno Inferiore for almost 600 years.

It is the only town on the eastern shore of Lake Maggiore that is divided into two villages by the course of a river, the Giona: Maccagno Superiore, in the north, and Maccagno Inferiore in the south, overlooking a sheltered bay.

This geographical separation has favoured different fates over the centuries. Maccagno Superiore, in fact, has followed the history of Milan and, therefore, of the various rulers that have succeeded one another: the French, the Spanish, the Austrians, etc. Perhaps because of its secluded position, Maccagno Inferiore, on the other hand, aroused the interest of the powerful Milanese family of de Mandello, or Mandelli, who in the beginning of the 13th century, obtained the very small feud of Maccagno Inferiore from Otto IV, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, who still claimed certain territories (so-called 'royal courts') around Lake Maggiore, a heritage from the disintegration of the Carolingian empire. Among these was Cannobio on the opposite shore of the lake, on which Maccagno Inferiore depended. This fact explains, why the Mandelli family, who had failed to extend their power over Cannobio, was so interested in the small town of Maccagno.

The small village of Maccagno Inferiore was thus elevated to 'imperial feud', i.e. a feud directly dependent on the emperor, a bond that was mediated exclusively by the feudal lord and the imperial vicar in Italy.

In this way, Maccagno Inferiore became a 'land of its own', a true autonomous state within the surrounding domains, independent of the flow of history and firm as long as the empire of reference remained solid in its constantly changing forms. In addition to relative peace, the feud also obtained special conditions of fiscal, jurisdictional and administrative autonomy, the concession to hold a market (granted by Charles V in 1536) and, finally, in 1622, the right to produce coins in a mint of its own.

It was not easy to defend such a privileged status. Milan, for example, tried several times to claim the rights, at least the fiscal ones, over the tiny



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independent territory (since 1279). In 1679, the Viennese Baron Walderode won the auction for the dissolution of the feud after the last Mandelli had died without heirs; but a cadet branch of the family managed to keep the small piece of land in its hands, which, on the basis of agreements and writings from almost five hundred years before, still obeyed the Emperor. Only in 1692, the feud passed to the Borromeo family; however, after little more than a century, none of the noble dynasty was able to resist the rising Napoleonic star, which, sweeping away centuries-old institutions, did not hesitate in front of the small yet glorious imperial territory of Maccagno Inferiore. "There is no doubt about it," General Bonaparte judged in 1796: Maccagno had to be reunited with the Cisalpine Republic.

Practices for the 'perpetual' confiscation of the feud were initiated and sealed with a great ceremony: the raising of the Liberty Tree and the display of the republican banner on the piazza by the lake, the same piazza where the mint building stood and stands to the present day. This was on 22 December 1797. After almost six hundred years, Imperial Maccagno had re-entered the geographical boundaries of Italy and its historical destiny. After the unification of Italy, it was merged with the administration of its 'twin-town' Maccagno Superiore, chosen as the municipal seat also because of its geographically larger territory.

Today, the village still preserves its clearly recognisable medieval structure. In the centre we will find the 'palazzo' (or rather castle) of the Mandelli family: a fortress well protected by four towers and two gates. Once, there must have been at least one wall erected to protect the houses and the inhabitants and guarded from above by the mighty 'Torre Imperiale' (Imperial Tower), which is still today an unaltered symbol of a long and glorious history.

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