



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

## 5. True and false certificates for a true privilege

It was not easy for the small town, and for the family that ruled its fortunes, to defend themselves against the pressures of their neighbours, including Milan, Switzerland and the various rulers that governed Italy until Napoleon.

To resist such pressures, the Mandelli did not hesitate to appeal to false privileges and to date the origin of the imperial feud as far back in time as possible and, above all, to link it to the most powerful and important emperors of the Holy Roman Empire. Indeed, in the early 17th century, the family started to divulge a legend so cleverly constructed that the harmless 'lie' managed to subsist for centuries. According to the tale, the distant ancestors Tazio and Robaconte obtained the investiture of the feud; not around 1210, but directly from Otto I of Saxony, in 962. The legend has it that, returning from a military campaign against the rebellious Berengar II, King of Italy, Otto was shipwrecked with his escort in front of the harbour of Maccagno Inferiore and rescued by its inhabitants. As a sign of gratitude, Maccagno was elevated to a feud in a solemn ceremony. In order to make the story more authentic, the Mandelli did not hesitate to hire some falsifiers who produced false imperial documents (one of which was attributed to Frederick II of Swabia), in which the origin of the *mere and mixed Empire* over Maccagno was backdated to the time of the legend. Incredibly, those false certificates survived until 1970, when they were uncovered thanks to accurate historical analyses; but the legend, by then, had fuelled other narrations. And so in Maccagno Inferiore, the 'landing of the emperor' Otto I has been celebrated since 1962 (on the occasion of the supposed thousand-year anniversary), with a historical parade. Instead of bloody battles, it was paper war that had protected the feud of Maccagno over the centuries from the ambitions of Milan and the envy of the surrounding rulers.

### *True certificates for the Mint privilege*

16 July 1622. This is the date printed on the first certificate issued by Ferdinand II of Habsburg to Giacomo III Mandelli containing the concession to mint coins. At the same time, the descendant of the ancient dynasty was



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

awarded the title of Count of the Holy Roman Empire. This was the result of tenacious efforts that the family had been making to certify its privileges in the area, even at the cost of resorting to any possible means.

The problem had already become evident in 1536, when Charles V, while issuing the permission to hold a market, had also renewed the concession of the feud, even though the family was not able to present any valid documents, which supposedly had been lost '*ob calamitates et ex longo temporum tractu*', i.e. due to calamities and the long time gone by.

The question of the 'pieces of evidence' was far from secondary, as shown by the precious document here exhibited (from the diocesan historical archives of Como). In fact, rights were not acquired forever, but expired and had to be renewed on the death of either the Emperor or the beneficiary. In this document, we will find the renewal of the *jus monetandi* (right to mint coins) by Ferdinand III on 22 June 1637 (his father, Ferdinand II, had died in February of that year). The beneficiary, Giacomo Mandelli, remained unchanged.

With Charles V, the matter had been resolved; but uncertainty was still prevailing. In order to obtain even more important privileges that were emerging for the Mandelli family in the beginning of the 17th century, it was necessary to reorganise the papers and rewrite ancient certificates.

It is no coincidence that the first person to divulge the legend of Otto I and to backdate to 962 the Mandelli's dominion over Maccagno Inferiore was a famous and perhaps self-important Milanese historian, Fra' Paolo Morigia, in his book dedicated to the *Historia della nobiltà, et degne qualità del Lago Maggiore*. This was in 1603; and in 1622 the minting of coins would start.

© Federico Crimi

*The Treasure of Imperial Maccagno*

© Civico Museo Parisi Valle, 2022 | 12 | 10 – 2023 | 04 | 10

Thanks to: MIC - Ministero della Cultura: Soprintendenza Archeologia Belle Arti e Paesaggio per le province di Como, Lecco, Monza-Brianza, Pavia, Sondrio e Varese; Diocesi di Milano, Ufficio Beni Culturali; Galleria Aversa, Torino; Numismatica Varesina, Varese; Parrocchia di S. Stefano, Maccagno Inferiore.