Bellinzona's turbulent history

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Bellinzona's topography – a rocky hilltop leaving just a narrow passage on one side, and on the other, marshy areas alongside the River Ticino that in those days were impassable – made it possible to survey the valley and made it easier to build fortifications.

The site was inhabited from Neolithic times; most of the traces of this are to be found on the cliffs of Castelgrande. In the Roman period, shortly before the Christian era, a castle was built on this hill. In the 4th century AD, in a bid to consolidate the northern frontiers of the Empire, a major defence system was built at Castelgrande, archæological remains of which survive today.

With the fall of the Western Roman Empire, Bellinzona passed first to the Ostrogoths, then came under the influence of the Byzantine Empire, before falling into the hands of the Lombards.

Around 800 AD, a substantial part of the fortifications was burnt down. In the 10th century, the interior of Castelgrande was built up again. From that time, it resembled a small fortified town. In the 11th and 12th centuries, under the ægis of the Bishops of Como, various official buildings were erected. Later, from the 12th century, the town grew around the citadel and constantly expanded, leading to the extension of the fortifications.

Castello Montebello was built in the 13th century and soon became a key element of the defence system. The construction of Castello di Sasso Corbaro dates from 1480, but does not form part of the main ensemble in terms of architecture. In the early 15th century, the Dukes of Milan were facing attack from the Swiss Confederates from the North. Castelgrande was converted and the houses inside demolished. By erecting the great 'murata' (walls) that started from Castelgrande, the Viscontis intended to close off the valley completely.

Originally a simple citadel, Bellinzona gradually became the centre of a complex system designed to defend the borders. This military function has given the fortifications their present appearance, as well as their remarkable character – the Bellinzona site combines a defensive function, an architectural development project and a bombastic demonstration of strength.

Despite of this, Bellinzona fell into the hands of the Swiss Confederates in the 16th century. The fortifications lost their importance, but were not systematically destroyed. Around 1515, a large part of the 'murata' collapsed as the result of a flood.

Extract from: www.bak.admin.ch/ kulturerbe/04307/04308/04312/index.html?lang=en

The painting below shows the strategic position of Bellinzona and the Castelgrande in the swampy Magadino Plain, with Murata (walls) extending across to the Ticino River.

Magadino Plain

The Magadino Plain (Piano di Magadino) once covered the entire area between Bellinzona and the Lago (Lake) Maggiore. It was an extended swamp on top of sediments deposited by the meandering Ticino River. Until the re-alignment of the Ticino River around 1900, the area presented a major flood and disease hazard - including malaria. Villages were built along the edge of the valley and on elevated sediment deposits formed by side streams. In this way, they were out of the way of these hazards.

The "Bolle di Magadino" on the shore of Lake Maggiore is the only remaining area of this swamp. It is now one of Switzerland's most important wetland areas. It provides innumerable migratory birds with a resting place as they cross the Alps. The term "bolle" means bog or mire in Italian and refers to the gas "bubbles" that climb to the surface in marshy areas.

The "Bolle di Magadino" is included in the Ramsar List of Wetlands of International Importance. It provides a resting place for over 200 migratory bird species before they cross the Alps and provides a permanent habitat for a further 60 bird species. Amphibians, dragonflies and butterflies also find shelter there.

Sources: www.wanderland.myswitzerland.com, www.de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magadinoebene

"Reminiscenze di splendore": a visualisation of historical Bellinzona, with views from the North (painting by Silvano Gilardi)
http://www.bellinzonaturismo.ch