



# THE WALLS OF TREVISO

From Fra Giocondo to today  
a journey lasting 500 years

# THE WALLS OF TREVISO

From Fra Giocondo to today: a journey lasting 500 years

By  
Simone Piaser and Umberto Zandigiacomi

*President of the Province of Treviso*  
Stefano Marcon

*Mayor of Treviso*  
Giovanni Manildo

*Councillor for Cultural and Natural  
Heritage and Museums in Treviso*  
Luciano Franchin

© 2017 **CHARTESIA**

*Editor-in-chief*  
Christian Ronchin

*Editorial coordinator*  
Elettra Cocco Morsini

*Editor*  
Marco Gottardi

*Editorial secretary*  
Anastasia Barbieri

*Translation*  
Kosmos Traduzioni

*With the assistance of*  
Gianna Basili, Daniela Canale

*ISBN*  
978-88-99786-12-0

*With the support of*



The City of Treviso

*The cover photo was kindly supplied  
by Aurelio Valenti.*

*The fold-out etching was reproduced courtesy  
of Anna Zanini.*

*The photos from the Treviso Municipal  
Archives were published following permission  
granted on 22/02/2017, protocol no.  
0023827, catalogue 1.6, file no. 1/2015.  
The photographs from the Treviso State  
Archives were published following permission  
granted on 16/02/2017 by the Ministry for  
Cultural Activities, Heritage and Tourism,  
decision no. 1/2017, protocol no. 830,  
catalogue 28.13.07, file no. 12.  
The photographs from the Venice State  
Archives were developed by the Photo  
Reproduction Department of the Venice State  
Archives and were published following  
permission granted on 22/02/2017, decision  
no. 24/2017, protocol no. 1221 / 28.13.07.  
The photograph from the Biblioteca  
Nazionale Marciana in Venice was  
published following permission granted on  
17/02/2017, decision no. 31/2017, protocol  
no. 713, catalogue no. 28.13.15.01/11.  
The photograph from the Turin State  
Archives was published following permission  
granted by the Ministry for Cultural  
Activities, Heritage and Tourism on  
14/02/2017, protocol no. 592/28.28.00-15.  
The photomaps published on pp. 212 and  
215 are the copyright of Google™.*

MAIN SPONSOR



WITH THE SUPPORT OF

MILANI

CONAD

daPino

WITH THE CONTRIBUTION OF

LENZINI  
TREVISO

ALTO TREVIGIANO SERVIZI

astec  
ARCHITECTURAL BRONZE

PALLADIO  
SERVIZI

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

L'invito

CARPENÈ MALVOLTÌ  
FONDATA NEL 1868

*The publisher wishes to thank Luciano Franchin, the Councillor for Cultural and Natural Heritage and Museums in Treviso, for his encouragement and for having believed in this project from the very beginning. Thanks also to the President of the Province of Treviso, Stefano Marcon, for acknowledging that this book represents a work “of clear interest to the community”.*

*Heartfelt thanks go to Fortunato Vianello, founder and president of Forel, Luca Pavin, Sole Administrator of Debby Line Group, and Filippo Di Quattro, CEO of BASF Construction Chemicals Italia, for their sensitivity and vital support.*

*Special thanks also go to:  
The Ministry for Cultural Activities, Heritage and Tourism, Province of Treviso; the Treviso Historic Photo Archives; the Treviso Council; the Treviso State Archives; the Treviso Municipal Archives; the Treviso Municipal Library; Aurelio Valenti from the Treviso Municipal Police; Deborah Esposito; Michele Potocnik; Milo Stocco; the Treviso Sotterranea (Underground Treviso) Association, the Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche; the Feltrinelli bookshop in Treviso; the Ibs bookshop in Treviso; the Lovat bookshop in Villorba; the Venice State Archives; the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana in Venice; the Turin State Archives; the publisher, Editore e stampatore Fausto Sardini; the publisher, Elia Matteoni Editore; the publisher, Maria Pacini Fazzi editore; Minerva Edizioni.*

*Umberto Zandigiacomi wishes in particular to thank Gianni Anselmi, Paolo Pietrobon and Steno Zanan Andrea for their help and precious academic and archiving support.*

*Sandro Meneghel wishes in particular to thank the employees and councillors at the Treviso Council, first and foremost Andrea Saccone from the Water Protection and Management Office, for their expertise, kindness and cooperation and all their useful suggestions.*

*In a region of many walled towns and cities, it is an incredibly noble cultural pursuit for the capital city of the province to set such store by what might be considered the calling card for locals, tourists or even passers-by who come here.*

*There is profound educational and moral meaning to the act of promoting, safeguarding and building a legacy, and leaving historical proof of the walls and their restoration in every town and city. The bastions, rivers and bridges have thus been granted a new lease of life; they are no longer emblematic of locking oneself in and military defence, but rather have come to symbolise a sheltering, loving and protective embrace.*

*The amount of effort that has gone into this project, as well as into other projects of a similar scale, sends out a message that must be heeded by any public official tasked with showcasing local identity, restoring artefacts and promoting heritage, a task that will then serve to promote the local area and culture in question.*

*The Walls of Treviso. From Fra Giocondo to today: a journey lasting 500 years sets an example for every town in the delightful Treviso area, with its numerous walled fortresses that do so much to drive tourism in this region.*

Stefano Marcon  
President of the Province of Treviso

*Between 1500 and 1530, extraordinary perimeter walls were built around the city of Treviso.*

*Today, 500 years later, a series of initiatives promoted by Treviso’s Department of Culture now offers locals, visitors and enthusiasts the chance to rediscover the city’s most imposing monument, an ever-present in the life of our community, inspiring affection, culture and enjoyment. The walls have certainly become an integral part of the urban landscape, but perhaps we sometimes overlook their artistic and architectural importance.*

*Putting these walls back in the spotlight thus calls for a strong physical identification with them. More than anything else, this means understanding their history, why they are here, how they are used today and also the role they have played and will continue to play in the city’s urban development.*

*This is a significant cultural operation that encompasses the collective work of so many scholars who have re-established the complexity and beauty of our prestigious monument: a perfectly-timed publication that harnesses a huge range of knowledge and studies, while adding new revelations, such as those recently unearthed beneath the streets of our city.*

*Therefore, this less a time for celebration, but rather a fantastic opportunity to understand, study and encourage the restoration of the walls, a much-needed initiative which will require the support of both public institutions and private sponsors.*

Luciano Franchin  
Councillor for Cultural and Natural Heritage  
and Museums in Treviso

*This book is the fruit of a dream born some years ago, reflecting the desire to leave a mark on the city's cultural panorama. It gives deserved recognition to Treviso's most majestic monument, despite the crushing new urban landscape that is nevertheless vital for the survival of the city and, even more so, its 'mother' Venice. This monument is often ignored or given scant attention, and yet it offers a magnificent introduction to the historic city centre, guiding visitors through an extraordinary structure that has miraculously maintained a harmonious balance between its ancient legacy, open green spaces and sources of clear running water. The aim of this work is to begin to unravel this complex system. It is intentionally based on an interdisciplinary approach, in order to gain a better understanding of some overarching themes.*

*In addition, this book seeks to pay respectful homage to those who have contributed to studying and preserving this monument throughout history: Luigi Bailo, a passionate opponent of demolition plans at the turn of the century; Giovanni Netto, who discovered numerous documents in the archives and oversaw the only archaeological dig undertaken; and Attilio Giomo, the fiery founder of the Mura Committee, established to safeguard the bastions that were under threat from potentially disastrous car park developments.*

*In conclusion, it is our wish that this work be considered an act of love, dedicated to our Treviso.*

Simone Piaser  
Umberto Zandigiacomi  
*Editors*



From Fra Giocondo to today  
a journey lasting 500 years





# INTRODUCTION

URBS IPSA MOENIA SUNT  
(ISIDORE OF SEVILLE, *ETYMOLOGIAE*, XV, 2)

The fortified city, which for centuries was the prevailing urban model in the West, was viewed then and now as a structure that was simultaneously material, urban, social, political and, in terms of what it represented, an image. The shared identity between a city and its walls, the fact urban conscience has always tended to identify itself in those symbols giving rise to a collective imagination, ensure that the image of walls and towers are often used as a kind of city ‘logo’, one such fitting example is the 13th-century seal from the Municipality of Treviso. The city fills the space within the walls and, in turn, they give shape to the city, constituting its symbolic and material frame. However, the presence of walls is also what differentiates cities and towns from villages: Malimpensa was right when at the end of his 1546 manuscript *La origine di Trevigi diviso in tre trattati...* (“The origins of Treviso in three treaties...”) he sketched out the fortifications on the mainland near Venice, depicting in separate markings a scale showing the importance of various fortifications – for that matter completely stylised and not corresponding to reality at all. Dealing with the issues surrounding the building of defensive structures, one can also identify cases in which, alongside military, engineering, economic and urban requests, the importance of presentation and therefore aesthetics comes equally to the fore. In these cases, architecture blends in with the technical nature of these types of construction.

The case of Treviso is particularly representative as well, not only because of the history behind the walls but also the fact it was the construction of this 16th-century perimeter that determined the city’s appearance for centuries to come. The Roman city (the legendary *Tarvisium*), built around the point at which the *cardo maximus* and *decumanus maximus* met, was surrounded

by a wall, as the plaque on the side of the Duomo bell-tower appears to show. The barrier provided by this wall neither prevented Barbarian raids nor stopped the outside area from urbanising: over the centuries, hospitals and convents began to pop up, along with small industries like mills and lumber camps that were built next to the waterways.

A 1164 charter from the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick I, which also provides confirmation that Treviso had already reached the level of a municipality, conceded wide-ranging dispensations and exemptions to the city, above all the opportunity “to fortify your city making it strong on every side” (A. A. Michieli, *Storia di Treviso*, third edition, Treviso, 1988, pp. 30-31). Thus, over a span of roughly 70 years, the new walls were raised, which ended up including the most-recently built villages within the city’s perimeter. The subsequent period of prosperity that characterised the city’s existence led to further urban expansion beyond the city walls, as more villages began to appear. Nevertheless, these were rural settlements completely different from what you found inside the walls. A revealing anecdote comes from 1316, when two inhabitants of the village San Zeno were rewarded for their heroic efforts in capturing some wolves that were overrunning the area! (A. Marchesan, *Treviso medioevale*, Treviso, 1923, vol. I, p. 376).

Until the end of the 1400s, this was the image that the city presented: the centre within a more-or-less circular perimeter comprising a dense and rich urban fabric, which was characterised architecturally by walled houses built by the more well-to-do citizens, in compliance with the local statutes. These buildings occasionally assumed the shape of towers, but more often were embellished by superficial regalzier walls and decorated with marvellous frescoes featuring geometric, historical or mythological themes. Immediately outside the centre was a less built-up area occupied mainly by hospitals and

convents and finally a series of villages outside the walls. There were at least nine extremely thriving settlements that grew up along the roads, which came out of the city and passed through the numerous gates in the city walls. These were places of commercial exchange and craftsmanship. The situation was settled until the attacks by the League of Cambrai armies overturned everything irrevocably, a bolt out of the blue. The medieval walls, tall and thin, were perfect for quick-fire defences, but were not equipped to repel or resist firearms and so, they were gradually replaced by the current walls. This construction went through various phases that were marked by approaching military attacks and, last but not least, the establishment of the empty plain (see Bellieni § I).

The construction of the walls therefore offered a chance to experiment with innovative building techniques strictly connected the new art of war, such as the discovery of gunpowder for military aims that was a huge leap forward in offensive terms. Ballistics, the use of new weapons, siege warfare and hydraulics all came together, as architecture gave way to military reasoning. Furthermore, building a defensive system could not have gone ahead without taking into consideration the topography and hydrogeological features of the land in Treviso.

This is where the defensive system derives its primary features: basing the city's defence on the distribution of water around it was certainly not unique to that time, but nevertheless the technical care with which the water was organised and especially the dominance of certain hydraulic techniques make Treviso unique and extraordinary. The systems installed allowed the water levels of the Sile and Botteniga rivers to increase or decrease on command and, if necessary, flood the surrounding countryside (see Meneghel § II).

The peculiarities of the terrain and its potential were fully understood by someone who would

later be hailed as the inspiration behind a defensive set-up perfectly calibrated to the geographical possibilities of the land where the city is situated. This man was Fra Giovanni Giocondo da Verona, architect and expert in hydraulic engineering (see Barbon § III).

Fra Giocondo is far from the only illustrious figure involved: other names such as Leonardo da Vinci and Michele Sanmicheli, to mention the most famous, also appear alongside the friar (see Piaser § IV). As already stated, the wall-and-water system provided to be a winning duo, but what had been hidden for a long time was the existence of an underground system of networks and structures, built at the same time as the walls and constituting part of the same whole (see Piaser § V). After decades of research, it now appears in its full complexity.

When the danger of war appeared to have receded, it was time to add new meaning to the reason for building the walls and city gates were built. Truly significant and emblematic places, they were depositories for the countless messages sent to those outside the city looking in, as well as those coming and going. The presence of the plain, which isolated the fortress from the surrounding terrain, highlighted its defensive strength and impregnability. The architecture of the city gates featured classic Renaissance characteristics and celebrated the victory and revival of the new city. The exceptional nature of Treviso was abundantly clear to the people of the time. In 1553, due to the need to repair the Bastion of the Madonna, the chief magistrate at the time, Giovanni Zorri, wrote to the Doge and the Council of Ten: “[when] everything will be perfect and completed, then will one be able to say that Your Excellence will have the most beautiful fortified city in the Venetian State and perhaps the whole of Italy” (see Costi § VI).

The ban on building on the plain outside the walls lasted for almost three centuries, but the plain-water-wall system was never truly tested;

the real enemy turned out to be time. As they worked to completely encircle the city in walls, it was already becoming apparent that renovation was needed in previous sections. The archives show numerous documents, such as reports presided over by the podestà (local administrators) and evidence of maintenance work, that nevertheless were unable to arrest the decline of the mighty walls and their bastions.

In Napoleonic times, with the strategic and military question no longer relevant, the Treviso fortress – at this point in desperately bad shape – was partially dismantled. However, the section between the Santi Quaranta and the San Tomaso gates was re-adapted, following the creation of a walkway, construction of a partition separating the moat from the wall and repair to some points on the outer surface of the wall (see Zandigiacomi § VII).

The 19<sup>th</sup> century signalled the arrival of railway, so increasingly large openings began to appear in the walls to allow a flow between the city and its peripheries. Villages began to appear on what was the plain, which gradually became more and more populated, while the historic centre turned into a haven for the destitute.

Subsequently there was a need to find suitable spots for new functions that previously had not existed, for example the gas office was placed in the Bastion of San Marco, where it still is today, and the city slaughterhouse was set up in the Bastion of Santa Sofia. Thus, the transformation of the walls, into places where one could run the industries a modern city needed, was complete. Unfortunately, the attitude towards the walls in the following century did not change: parts of the defensive line and the embankments continued to be demolished and the moats continued to be filled in (see Zanandrea § VIII). Certainly, behind all the decisions taken by the city's government, aside from obvious reasons of economy, safety, public order and hygiene, there seemed to be a will to prevent the walls

from being what they actually are: a barrier. All efforts were made to camouflage them, make them more impermeable and less imposing, and reduce their visual impact as well as their essence: the moats were filled in and the waters curbed. Nowadays, it is our job to restore dignity to a great work of human genius.

But how can we do this? Taking the stand-point that Treviso and its walls are an emblematic example of urban transformation, it is therefore interesting and appropriate to compare with other similar cases like Lucca and Ferrara, which have only partially shared Treviso's fate (see Zandigiacomi § IX).

The hope is that an awareness of other realities can serve as a source of useful, if not necessary, reflection, if we want to try to solve the issue of the next 500 years of the walls of Treviso.

*PhD. Manuela Zorzi*  
Architect