

## **THE TOWN WALLS OF PIZZIGHETTONE: A FORTIFIED SETTLEMENT CROSSED BY A RIVER, THROUGH SIX CENTURIES OF HISTORY**

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### **LA CINTA MURARIA DI PIZZIGHETTONE: UN INSEDIAMENTO FORTIFICATO ATTRAVERSATO DA UN FIUME E DA SEI SECOLI DI STORIA**

La cittadina di Pizzighettone, in provincia di Cremona, rappresenta un raro esempio di insediamento fortificato attraversato da un grande corso d'acqua. Le barriere naturali sono da sempre state determinanti per la forma e la struttura delle fortificazioni; trovandosi in un territorio pianeggiante, Pizzighettone ha sfruttato l'elemento naturale costituito dal fiume Adda che con la sua profondità e le sue forti correnti, ha rappresentato per gli assalitori un quasi insormontabile ostacolo. La cinta murata del borgo, risalente al XIV secolo, fu rafforzata prima dai Visconti e poi dagli Sforza sotto la direzione di Guiniforte Solari, in quanto caposaldo del confine orientale del Ducato di Milano. Nel 1585, sotto il dominio spagnolo ci fu un tentativo di aggiornare la fortezza con i nuovi principi fortificatori con la costruzione di baluardi, terrapieni e parapetti, ma le periodiche esondazioni dell'Adda, impedivano di costruire questo tipo di difese sulla sponda destra dell'Adda, nel borgo di Gera, per cui il progetto fu abbandonato. Fu solo a partire dal 1646, dopo aver rettificato il corso del fiume Adda, che Pizzighettone fu dotato di un complesso sistema bastionato, che si estendeva su entrambe le sponde del fiume. Nel 1706 Pizzighettone passò all'Impero d'Austria e poco dopo, per rinforzare la fortezza che veniva a trovarsi in un punto strategico perché posta a metà strada fra Milano e Mantova, furono costruite ben 94 casematte lungo l'intero perimetro murario, modificato l'assetto urbano e aggiornato il sistema bastionato. La struttura non è quindi semplicemente una cortina muraria, bensì un sistema di ambienti voltati a botte "a prova di bomba", tra loro comunicanti e perimetrali all'intero centro storico, posto sulle due sponde del fiume. Il nuovo sistema difensivo, conferì alla cittadina una connotazione militare propria di un caposaldo di frontiera, che la accompagnò fino all'unità d'Italia; risale a quest'epoca l'ulteriore potenziamento delle difese da attacchi dai limitrofi territori, ancora austriaci, voluto dal generale La Marmora, che predispose un forte trincerato ad Est, che facesse "sistema" con Piacenza, Pavia e Bologna e proteggesse le comunicazioni tra Emilia e Toscana. Con l'annessione al Regno d'Italia dei territori Austriaci, la fortezza di Pizzighettone venne completamente disarmata e le casematte del lato nord, già utilizzate dagli austriaci dal 1785 come ergastolo, furono utilizzate come carcere militare dal 1920 al 1945 e poi giudiziario sino al 1954. L'imponente struttura difensiva, alta 12 metri e larga 15, è tuttora considerata tra le più significative e meglio conservate del Nord Italia. È grazie agli importanti interventi di recupero iniziati a partire dalla fine degli anni '60 del ventesimo secolo, promossi da un gruppo di cittadini volontari e dalla più recente associazione Gruppo Volontari Mura, costituita nel 1993, che ancora oggi si conservano parti significative e consistenti dello storico sistema difensivo, unico nel suo genere in Lombardia. Tuttavia, date le dimensioni della cinta muraria, è necessario costantemente proseguire i lavori di conservazione, manutenzione e di valorizzazione del bene, al fine di garantire un processo sostenibile di procacciamento risorse. La promozione della conoscenza storica ed artistica del luogo, atta a promuoverne la tutela, prevede anche il coinvolgimento delle numerose chiese presenti, a partire dall'antica chiesa parrocchiale di San Bassiano (ricca di stratificazioni storico-architettoniche come le mura), luoghi che esercitano un indubbio fascino e suggestione, che consentono anche di entrare in contatto con le realtà locali ed etnoantropologiche. All'interno di quattro casematte comunicanti è stato infatti allestito un ricco museo civico degli antichi mestieri.

#### **Introduction**

Nowadays the visitors to the town of Pizzighettone, located in the province of Cremona on the banks of the river Adda, can instantly perceive its intimate

atmosphere full of history (Coghlan 1845). To enter the historic centre, it is still necessary to cross the walls, which have surrounded it for centuries and which represent a rare example of a fortified settlement

crossed by a large waterway. Natural barriers have always been decisive for the shape and structure of the fortifications; sited in a territory in the middle of the Po Valley, in the Adda floodplain valley, over time the urban and territorial history of Pizzighettone has been denoted by the coexistence and exploitation of the natural fluvial element, which with its depth and its strong currents, has represented an almost insurmountable obstacle to assaulters over the centuries. From the 14th century up to the unification of Italy, it played an essential role due to its position as a strategic border point for the crossing of a river, which was navigable at the time, and of a Roman road. Over the centuries, it had to be transformed from a simple single wall to cope with the ever-increasing power of the enemy's artillery, creating "bomb-proof" vaulted environments, communicating with each other, which have allowed it to survive even after being disposed of, transformed as it was for a long period into a prison and depot of the Corps of Engineers.

The town of Pizzighettone, in the province of Cremona, is thus a rare example of a fortified settlement, which calls for an ever-increasing effort to preserve it and certainly an action capable of enhancing it and making it attractive, not only thanks to the incessant action of local volunteers (Gambarelli 2017).

### Territorial and historical location

The origins of Pizzighettone have always been linked to the river Adda, which still today clearly divides the old town, into two distinct parts, Pizzighettone, on the left bank and Gera, on the opposite bank (Fig. 1 and 2). Thanks to its centuries-old and favourable location on the river Adda, enhanced by the existence of a port that favoured commercial exchanges and allowed it, in later periods, to enjoy the condition of a "carriage free village" (Borgo franco), Pizzighettone became, in the Middle Ages, a place of contention between the Town of Milan and Cremona for its prosperity and strategic position (Perogalli and Bescapè 1960, Bernocchi 1973). The control of river navigation on the Adda and of the ford (passage of the ancient Roman road) are the main reasons that led the Cremonese first, the Visconti family in 1333, the Sforza family in 1448 and the various foreign rulers thereafter, to equip Pizzighettone with a powerful defensive system, giving it the military

connotation, typical of a border stronghold. The military reputation of the city was made in 1133 with the construction of the first castle on the banks of the river, by the Cremonese and was to accompany it until the time of the unification of Italy (Conti et al. 1992).



a)



b)

Fig.1 - Town of Pizzighettone:

- a) Military map of 1736 during the Franco-Hispanic war. Gera to the West and Pizzighettone to the East of the river Adda;
- b) aerial view of the historic centre, with Gera upwards on the west bank of the Adda, in the direction of Milan

After being conquered by the Visconti family and entering fully into the Duchy of Milan, the village, under Francesco Sforza, was declared a "Separate Land", i.e.

directly dependent on the Chancellery of the Duke of Milan. The current façade of Saint Bassiano church and the Town Hall palace, with a plant dating back to the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, are evidence of the prosperous economic conditions achieved by Pizzighettone in that period.



*Fig. 2 Historic centre of Pizzighettone to the East of the river Adda: in the foreground the square of arms, the casemates and the bastion of Becco. At the back of St. Bassiano church, the two gates of Cremona Vecchia and Nuova.*

With the arrival in Italy of Charles VIII, the walled village passed in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, under French control, remaining there until the conflict between France and Spain for European domination decidedly turned in favour of the latter; Pizzighettone along with the entire Duchy of Milan then passed under Habsburg-Spanish rule and was to remain there for over a century.

The strategic importance of the castle in this convulsive period is underlined by the fact that, within its walls, considered insurmountable, the king of France, Francis I of Valois, was imprisoned from 27 February to 18 May 1525, after the defeat inflicted at Mirabello di Pavia by the army of the king of Spain, Charles V of Habsburg. The interest of Pizzighettone as a military citadel remained constant during the Spanish domination and was reiterated when, in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the country suffered the alternating occupations of the Austrians and Napoleonic troops (Cuccia 1967), remaining unchanged until the Unity of Italy. The further strengthening of the defences against attacks from the

neighbouring territories, still Austrian, dates back to this period and was designed by General La Marmora. He set up a strong entrenched fortress to the East, which would make a "network" with Piacenza, Pavia and Bologna and protect the communications between the Emilia and Tuscany regions.

### **History of the military structures**

As written above, the history of Pizzighettone as a military stronghold actually began in 1133, with the construction of the first nucleus of the Castle. It was a rustic structure, consisting of a fort surrounded by a moat, reinforced by the construction around the village of a double wooden palisade, alternated inside by an embankment. The construction of the masonry wall only took place at the time of the dominion of Bernabò Visconti, Lord of the most eastern domains of the Duchy of Milan, who in 1370 had the first circle of brick masonry built, designed by Raffaele Trabucco, an illustrious military architect of the time, and was surrounded by a deep moat fed by the nearby river Serio morto.

This structure, to which was added in 1404 the "Rivellino" (independent fortification generally placed to protect a gate of a greater fortification) wanted by Cabrino Fondulo, remained substantially unchanged for almost a century, undergoing reinforcement in the Sforza period, to counteract a Venetian advance. This work was completed under the direction of Guiniforte Solari (1460), who in addition to strengthening the structures, built special buildings for the accommodation of the military.

With the Venetian (1499-1509) and French (1509-1512 and 1515-1522) domination, military architecture was revolutionized: high walls characteristic of the medieval fortresses were abandoned, to become low and wide, resting on embankments and with a broken line-shape perimeter, with angles, in order to break the linear attack. Superstructures and battlements were removed, as too thin to withstand the impact of large projectiles. The loopholes were replaced by thrones and openings for arquebus and the "Rivellino", thanks to the French, took on a semi-circular, horseshoe shape.

The first attempts to extend the defences beyond the ancient city walls were made during the Spanish

domination, starting from 1585. The Bolognese architect Pellegrino Pellegrini, known as il Tibaldi, was called upon to design a new defensive wall of broken shape developed around the first circle of walls completed by ramparts, terraces and demilunes, so as to constitute a system of interrelated defensive elements, designed to protect the town walls by means of the crossfire of the gunboats. The project was later abandoned because the periodic flooding of the river Adda, prevented the construction of this type of defence on the right bank of the river, in the village of Gera. From 1648, at the wish of the governor of Milan, the entire structure of Pizzighettone was strengthened and transformed into a bastioned complex formed by six large ramparts, in turn protected by a second fortress moat and by an outer circle of demilunes and terraces. Thanks to the rectification of the course of the river Adda, carried out two years earlier (Roncai 1992), it was possible to provide Gera area with a crown-shaped work formed by three bastions covered by three demilunes, protected by a fort, and a large moat fed by the waters of the river. In 1706 Pizzighettone passed to the Austrian Empire and shortly afterwards, in 1720, the strategic location (halfway between Milan and Mantua) required changes in the bastion system to make it a military base, strengthening of the ramparts and banks of the river, erecting barracks and new "the gun powder magazines". The need to have "bomb-proof" rooms, capable of accommodating three thousand soldiers in case of war, led the Austrians to build in Pizzighettone along the ancient circle of walls 63 barrel vaulted rooms, called casemates (Fig. 3), equipped with fireplaces and vents, changing the urban layout (Gambarelli 2017). Gera was equipped with 27 casemates with a different structure from that of Pizzighettone, because they were positioned in the front line, on either sides of the gorge of the central bastion (Fig. 4). In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, after the considerable reinforcement interventions decided on by Charles VI of Hapsburg, in the penultimate decade of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Joseph II began a partial dismantling of the fortress of Pizzighettone, interrupted only by the short Napoleonic occupation. During the Restoration, in fact, at the same time as the demilitarization of the fortress, the demolition of the castle continued, already partially destroyed by a fire

that broke out in 1801. With the armistice of Villafranca in 1859, Pizzighettone was fortified following a project by general La Marmora, as an extreme entrenched field towards the Austrian border. The ancient Austrian defences of Pizzighettone were then modified according to the new criteria of defense: large ramparts, trenches and an advanced fort about two kilometers away. With the definitive fall of the Austrians and the annexation of the Veneto region to the Kingdom of Italy in 1867, the fortress of Pizzighettone was completely disarmed and transformed, first into a military prison, then into a prison for common prisoners (Gambarelli 2012): the wall along the Adda was demolished and the land thus freed was transformed into a public garden. In the bastion area of Gera and in the southern area of Pizzighettone from 1932 the warehouses of the Engineers Corps (now state property) were built.



Fig. 3 Casemates in Pizzighettone



Fig. 4 Internal view of casemates: a) casemate of Pizzighettone used as a big cell of a prison; b) casemate of Gera

#### Current configuration of the military structures

The configuration of the defence structures then assumed the almost current configuration. On the right bank of the river Adda, the village of Gera preserves almost entirely the crown-shaped walls formed by two

ramparts and two demilunes, the town wall, consisting of 27 houses, topped by a green embankment and the powder magazine in the gorge of the north-west rampart, called Sant'Antonio. On the left bank of the river, Pizzighettone part preserves the circle of walls with the casemates, the "Rivellino" with the ancient gate Porta Cremona, the moat, the terraces, the pentagonal bastion of Becco, a gun powder magazine in the gorge of the bastion of Bissone, near the gate Porta Soccorso, in a beautiful position on the bank of the river Adda. Moreover in the historic centre, there is the tower named "Torre del Guado" (Fig. 5a), the last remaining part of the castle, which was the site of the imprisonment of the King of France, Francis I in 1525 and today considered a symbolic monument of Pizzighettone. The tower stands at close range to the bridge over the river Adda and, in the two rooms on the ground floor and first floor, preserves fragments of frescoes dating back to the early age of the castle, which also testify to its residential function. The base of a tower called "Mozza" (Mozza) in the current Piazza Cavour also shows remains of the destroyed castle. Another remnant of the destroyed castle is the base of a gate tower called "Torre Mozza", located in the current Piazza Cavour. The casemates, on the other hand, have been subjected to a different treatment over time, used mainly as a place of detention since 1785 especially for life imprisonment. The Austrian regime, however, used only the northern casemates as prisons, separating this portion of the defensive structure from the village with a wall to counteract attempts to escape, and a courtyard for the hour of air. The detention function was also confirmed in the mid-nineteenth century. After the unification of Italy, the large cells became stables, then returned to prison environments at the end of the First World War and maintain this function as a military reclusion until 1945. They then became a judicial prison from 1946 to 1954, the year in which the prison was definitively abolished. The large cells obtained from the ancient casemates of the fortress (Fig. 4a) of what can be defined as the first judicial prison (at the time called life imprisonment) founded in Lombardy region, are well preserved and can still be visited. Here the rough planks and the wooden decks are proof of the possible simultaneous detention of dozens of people, which earned this

structure to be considered as among the toughest military prisons in Lombardy, giving rise to the threat "I'll send you to Pizzighettone". The prison chapel, the patrol walkway with the guards' garages and the Museum of Prisons, built in the three casemates used as isolation cells can be visited. On the western side, the casemates are all communicating and equipped with drains, vents and fireplaces. Above the casemates

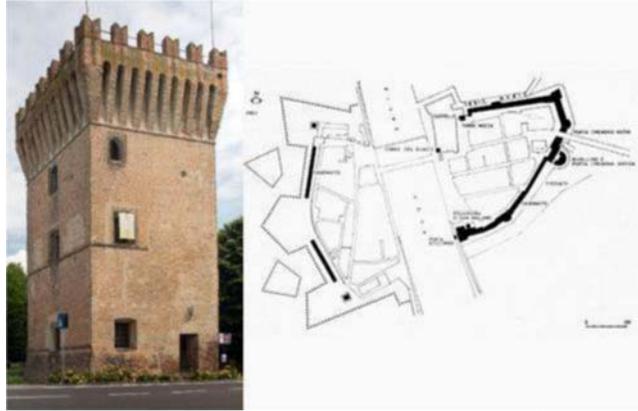


Fig. 5 a) The remaining tower of the castle named Torre del Guado; b) map of Pizzighettone and Gera, with the current state of the existing fortifications indicated in full black.

there is a green embankment, which can be reached by special staircases with ramps to drag the cannons into the stands (Fig. 3).

Unfortunately, in 1920 two casemates were demolished, after the closure of the gate Porta Cremona Nuova, to widen the main road Pavia-Cremona (Fig. 5b and Fig. 6). In defence of the gate Porta Cremona vecchia, the semi-circular "Rivellino" of the 15<sup>th</sup> century is still visible, between two moats and two drawbridges. It consists of 7 gunboats and 3.6 m high casemates under a unique curved barrel vault (Fig. 6).

### Valorisation projects

Today Pizzighettone has the only town wall with ramparts almost intact in the province of Cremona and is one of the most important among those which have survived in Lombardy region. The historical events that have made up the history of Pizzighettone, have obviously influenced also the urban development. Today the town is characterised by the sober elegance

of the buildings, fortunately little compromised by recent alterations, and still today the course of the river Adda divides the old town into two parts, connected by a bridge, each of which has its own urban connotation.



Fig. 6 The independent fortification named "il rivellino" in Pizzighettone with the internal gate Porta Cremona Vecchia and, externally on the right, the gate Porta Cremona nuova

Today that cumbersome military past, that for centuries had conditioned the town development and had strongly affected the architectural aspect, gives us a real opportunity that exists and must be encouraged, as a means to promote the territories economy through this strong identity. The massive defensive structure, 12 metres high and 15 metres wide, is still considered one of the most significant and best preserved in Northern Italy. It is thanks to the important restoration work begun at the end of the 1960s, promoted by a group of voluntary citizens and the more recent association "Gruppo Volontari Mura", established in 1993, that significant and consistent parts of the historical defensive system are still preserved today. Other cities characterized by town walls, such as Soncino and Crema (Bertinelli Spotti e Roncai 1992), similarly to Pizzighettone, lapped respectively by the rivers Oglio and Serio, do not share the characteristic of having a large stream of water specifically rectified to improve the strategic importance of the stronghold. This has given rise to the idea of creating an ambitious cultural project - the "Three walled cities" that aims to promote the protection and historical and artistic

knowledge of these ancient fortified villages in the province of Cremona. Today, thanks to the commitment of the "Gruppo Volontari Mura" (Gambarelli 2017), and thanks to a passionate knowledge of the history of their city and its territory, the town walls can be considered to represent a significant tourist attraction, which, alongside places that exert an undoubted charm and fascination, also allow an interest in local and ethno-anthropological realities. In fact, there is a large museum of ancient crafts, organized in four sections, relating to work (man and everyday life, man and the transformation of the material) and the relationship with the territory (man and the countryside, man and the river), expertly organized in four casemates, already intercommunicating. If, however, the income derived from visitors to the walls and the museum may not be sufficient to cover the costs of maintenance and restoration of these ancient structures, which are laudably managed by a group of volunteers, it should also be remembered the additional income from the enhancement of tourism, for trade and local accommodation facilities, which could be greatly augmented if a network of walled cities were to be created.

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