

San Giorgio Ingannapoltron and its Longobard ciborium

The pearl of San Giorgio Ingannapoltron is the ancient *pieve* of Longobard origin perched on the summit of a hill on the ruins of a Roman sanctuary when the Arusnati inhabited central west Valpolicella. The remains of those buildings were recycled in the construction of the Christian edifice, in both the Longobard era, most probably the time of its founding, and in the epoch of Romanesque construction, i.e. when the church was partly rebuilt after the earthquake of 1117.

This monument was thus built at San Giorgio in the years between 712 and 744, during the reign of Liutprando, as it could not have been built elsewhere and then brought here. The ciborium or *civorium* is a tabernacle that normally stands on the church's main altar, usually consisting of four columns supporting a baldachin, but it could, as has been stated previously, be built around a baptistery, in which case it would be built with a series of columns, often eight in number, located at the edges of a polygonal basin also with a baldachin above, sometimes of masonry work, but also found in cloth in the form of a pyramid or sail. Certainly the stone from which the columns and archivolts of the ciborium were carved was a local stone.

The baptistery and altar are focal points, often counterpoised in the same church, and the place of celebration of the principal sacraments of Christian "rebirth": namely the baptism, that admits the creature born in original sin to the state of grace, and the Holy communion, aimed at conserving and increasing that state.

The small arches of the ciborium, now restored in the twenties of the last century, are all here carved in bass-relief with cornices and geometric motifs, such as braiding that encloses plumes with symbolic motifs including fish, peacocks, bread (suns or wheels of fire), vine shoots, doves and crosses. Such symbols do not help us a great deal in our attempts to attribute the sculptures one way or the other to a baptistery or an altar, due to their ambivalence, as they push us first towards one hypothesis and then to the other.

The fish could be baptised Christians but could also be a reference, as they are here accompanied by loaves of bread, to the miracle of the loaves and fishes and thus prefiguring the Holy Communion. Christ Himself is represented as a fish, while the Christians are then small fishes, according to Tertulliano. The symbol of the fish and the water thus decorated many baptisteries as places dedicated to the rite of Holy Communion. So too the peacock, as symbol of the resurrection fits in both with the one and the other of the two sacraments.

More specific to the celebration of Holy Communion could be the vine shoots and, the round loaves provided that they are not suns or wheels of fire. In any case the sun and the wheel of fire are themselves symbols of Christ (the indomitable Sun) or the Holy Spirit, just as the dove symbol could refer to the

Holy Spirit, sometimes however used to represent Christians drinking at the fount of life, that takes us back to the image of water. The cross would seem to be more associated with Christ's sacrifice than to a font.

The church, like the houses around it, is built wholly from local stone. Like many of the churches of central Europe it has two apses and conserves walling devices that suggest their dating from Longobard times, like the ciborium. Some historians agree on ascribing the whole western portion of the building to this period, while dating the whole eastern side to the Romanesque period, including the cloister and the bell tower, rebuilt together after the earthquake of 1117 that it seems seriously damaged the walls of the Longobard church.