



THE “PIEVI” OR PARISH CHURCHES OF VALPOLICELLA

If the first centuries of the high medieval period saw Christianity reach even the pagi or rural districts spread throughout the area of Verona, the centuries which followed, from the end of the Longobard dominion to the beginning of that of Charlemagne, saw the Veronese churches steadily organise the dioceses into rural and urban parishes for the better government of the plebs sancta Dei, the holy people of God.

The term Pieve, or Parish church, comes from the latin plebs (the people) and strictly speaking means a church with its own property and its own clergyman under the guidance of an archpriest with a number of villages under its jurisdiction, possibly, though not necessarily, with individual subordinate chapels, as well as its own font for christenings.

The term became widespread in seventh century northern Italy and from the ninth century also in the Verona area itself when, after the Frankish conquest, the pievi became entitled to substantial incomes, often shared by the several clergy that distributed them, making the payment of a tithe by the inhabitants of the parish compulsory. There were four pievi that shared the territory and the curia of medieval Valpolicella. These were San Pietro of Arbizzano, San Floriano, San Martino of Negrar and San Giorgio Ingannapoltron. Under these there could be, and there were in fact, numerous already existing chapels within the area, as well as others that came into being, including private churches that were part of the private estates of individual citizens or bodies and also churches desired by local communities, i.e. those people dwelling in the individual settlements of the castra or vici – officiated on an occasional basis for the convenience of the inhabitants, who were bound to recognise the spiritual authority and sacraments of their pieve.

If San Pietro of Arbizzano enjoyed a rather modestly sized parish, those of the other three pievi were much larger. Towards the end of the fifteenth century, when the pieve was steadily and rapidly losing its importance as the modern parish organisation began to establish itself, Sant'Ambrogio, by now the seat of the archpriest, San Pietro of Ponton, San Martino of Volargne, Santa Lucia of Dolcè, San Zeno of Cavalo, San Nicolò of Monte, Santa Maria of Gargagnago and San Bartolomeo of Mazzurega, were all under the authority of San Giorgio.

Also in that period, on the other hand, San Pietro of Marano, Santa Maria of Valverde, San Giorgio of Purano, Sant'Eustachio of Prognol, San Fermo e Rustico as well as Santo Stefano al Pozzo (later San Marco) of Valgatara, San Zeno of Fumane, San Micheletto of Bure, San Lorenzo of Pescantina, Sant'Ulderico of Castelrotto, San Pietro in Cariano, Santa Maria alla Vallena and Santa Valeria of Castelrotto, San Martino of Corrubio di Negarine, Santa Sofia of Pedemonte, San Marziale of Breonio and San Giovanni in Monte Loffa, all came under the authority of the pieve of San Floriano.

Finally Santa Maria of Moron, San Vito of Negrar, Santa Maria in Progno, San Paolo of Prun, San Fermo e Rustico of Mazzaro, Sant'Antonino of Fane, San Giovanni of Cerna, San Pietro of Torbe and probably even the church of Arbizzano, came under the pieve of San Martino of Negrar.

It is well known that the pievi began to lose importance for two main reasons. As the population grew, it became increasingly necessary to organise the curia in accordance with the physical location of the people and their spiritual needs. Secondly the benefits accruing to the pievi had gradually found themselves in the hands of a clergy that was no longer resident there. The pieve however, even subsequent to this, conserved a symbolic supremacy over the parishes that were coming into being, in the form of privileges associated with certain exclusive rights, above all through the christening font, though these privileges were steadily being eroded until they finally disappeared altogether.

The pievi also, however, wrote another important chapter in the history of local religious life and also our artistic heritage, by promoting the building of those splendid ecclesiastical edifices that can still, to a large extent, be admired in the Valpolicella, symbols also of the authority these institutions exerted over the populations of each of the villages. Even if only the rectory remains of the Romanesque complex of Arbizzano or only the bell tower of that of Negrar, also Romanesque, at San Giorgio and at San Floriano there survive to this day more substantial architectural remains in the form of the two churches and their ornaments.

Il plesso romanico di Arbizzano sopravvive soltanto la chiesa canonica, o di quello, pure romanico, di Negrar soltanto il campanile, a San Giorgio e a San Floriano sussistono invece più ampie testimonianze architettoniche, comprese proprio quelle riferibili alle due chiese e al loro arredo.