

THE UNEARTHED CHURCH OF SAN MAURIZIO

Observation point: from the route south of Porlezza, close to the Galbiga slope.

You pass around Porlezza, an ancient harbour on lake Ceresio. During the Middle Ages, the free towns of Milan and Como fought over this place.

Well out of the town centre, a bell tower stands out against the trees and draws your attention to the small Romanesque church of San Maurizio.

It is a small, rather ordinary church, built in the local calcareous stone, but it has a really peculiar history.

Until the 60's of the last century, only the bell tower was visible, arising from the top of a sort of wood covered hill.

In the 17th century, a large landslide fell from the flank of Mount Galbiga and reached also the church, even if it was built quite far from the settlement. The church was buried under a cover of boulders and coarse debris, so that only its higher part - the bell tower - could be seen.

According to a local legend, the ancient dwellers of Porlezza were such selfish misers that God decided to punish them by burying the whole place and its people under a catastrophic landslide.

In the 17th century, all over the Alps this was a common explanation for such natural catastrophes. In fact, that was a time of disastrous landslides and floods, due to a particularly wet and rainy phase of the Little Ice Age.

In 1966, local volunteers, supported by the Superintendence for Historical and Artistic Heritage, started to dig out the ruins of the church, taking off the detritus cover. Only the gabled roof and the upper part of the walls appeared to be definitely destroyed, while the main body was safe, as well as a neighbouring square building with a baptismal font carved into a serizzo granite boulder.

A restoration process was started, in order to return the church to worshippers and art lovers. The renewed parts have been left clearly recognizable, using a plain plaster cover which highlights the original stone structure.

In this way, San Maurizio recovered the look it had in the 10th and 11th century, when it was built for the people living in the scattered hamlets and alpine huts of the area. It presents the classic hall shape of a basic Romanesque church, with neither transept nor aisles, but with a projecting semi-circular apse at the chancel end.

With its simple, archaic charm, it is now a warning about the hazard connected with mountain slopes, while its strange history compels visitors to look up to Mount Galbiga and its now seemingly harmless flanks.