

THE BESANO FOSSILIFEROUS DEPOSIT

The areas on the slopes of Monte Pravello, Monte Orsa and Monte San Giorgio were exploited by the inhabitants of the area to obtain fuel oil. From a geological point of view, oil shales prevail here. In 1930 this area was involved in studies to extract gas for the lighting of Milan. The project was not completed but preliminary research revealed a high fossil content in the local rocks!

In the mid-19th century the fossil of an ancient reptile was described for the first time in this area and in 1863 Antonio Stoppani, the abbot famous for having written the well-known volume "Il Bel Paese" where he describes all the naturalistic and landscape wonders of Italy, promoted an excavation to search for fossils in the Besano schists! The excavation led to exciting results and new research followed which made it possible to set up an important collection of fossils in the Natural History Museum of Milan. However, almost all the specimens collected were destroyed during the bombing of the Second World War. In the 1980s and then in the 1990s and also currently numerous new excavations were opened in the Besano-Sasso Caldo locality and led to the discovery of very interesting fossils including the famous Besanosaurus, a marine reptile that lived more than 240 million years ago in the sea where Besano is located today. The discovery of the Besanosaurus and its study made it possible to better reconstruct the environmental conditions of the ancient past in this area of Lombardy.

The fossiliferous rocks of Besano belong to the Triassic, the first period of the Mesozoic Era. Dinosaurs, flying reptiles and marine reptiles such as the Besanosaurus lived in this period, and the first mammals also appeared. The Besano oil shales are characterized precisely by bituminous levels, consisting of a considerable quantity of hydrocarbons coming from the decomposition of ancient animal and vegetable organisms. This explains why inside them it is possible to find fossils, often well preserved like those found in Besano!

To admire the fossils extracted in Besano it is possible to visit the Civic Museum of Fossils of Besano. The museum's specialization is in fact paleontology and here are housed many fossils collected in Besano and in the area of Monte San Giorgio, an area designated "World Heritage Site" by UNESCO.