



## **Invitation to visit MONASTERO DI TORBA Gornate Olona (Varese)**

### **History of the Torba complex**

The first nucleus of the complex (known as the “*castrum*”) was built by the Romans in the third century A.D., one of a string of military outposts along the north-western perimeter of the Alps, intended as defence against the barbarians.

In fact, in Roman times, the area along the Olona River known as the “Sibrium”, where Torba lies, was of considerable strategic importance, both because it was a source of water and because it was part of a much-frequented route used to cross over the mountains.

The *castrum* was used in the following centuries by a succession of others, among them Goths, Byzantines and Longobards. It was during the long *Pax Longobarda* that the Torba complex was divested of its military function and became a religious retreat, thanks to the arrival, in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, of a group of Benedictine nuns who commissioned the construction of the monastery. In the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the church was added. During this period (epoca franca) the Seprio became a country seat, thus acquiring an agricultural-productive use as well.

In the following centuries, the Sibrium was hotly contested by some of the most powerful Milanese families, particularly in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, by the Della Torre and the Visconti. In 1287, in an attempt to erase any trace of his predecessors, Ottone Visconti ordered the destruction of the entire *castrum*, with the exception of the religious structures (which had, by that time, enveloped the original Roman tower).

From the surviving documents (the first written references date back to 1049) we can reconstruct the history of the Monastery, which is particularly intricate, especially during the Renaissance period.

Once order was re-established, many noble families vied to appoint one of their own as Abbess, until the Posterla family finally transferred the nuns to Tradate in 1482, leaving the land in the hands of their stewards. Thus began the so-called “agricultural period” of the complex.

In Napoleonic times (1799), with the suppression of religious orders, Torba permanently lost its status as a monastery.

Over the subsequent centuries, the complex changed hands numerous times, until in 1971 the last remaining family of farmers abandoned the site.

After years of neglect and decay, in 1977 the complex was purchased by Giulia Maria Mozzoni Crespi, who donated it to the FAI. In 1986, the long restoration project was finished and the complex was opened to the public.

It should be kept in mind that from an historical standpoint, the Torba complex is closely tied to the one at Castelseprio, an important Roman site that contains a rare and precious example of religious painting in the classical style, dating back to the 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> century.

## **Tour of the Monastery**

### *The church*

The church, with a single hall with apse and roofed over with wooden beams, was built between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. The variety of stonework that composes the exterior walls testifies to the tortuous history of the church over the centuries.

For example, the arch to the right of the entrance: the passage was opened during the agricultural period, when the church was used as a storeroom for farming equipment. The exterior stonework of the apse, in large cobblestones, is divided by four pilasters that define five fields, each of which contains a splay window. The upper perimeter is decorated with hanging arches in terracotta, which create an interesting chromatic pattern that was much admired during the Lombardo-roman period.

Numerous tombs and an 8<sup>th</sup> century crypt have been found inside the church. The crypt can be accessed via two stone staircases, one on each side of the church.

In order to restore the original area of the interior, a removable platform in natural wood which is used during cultural events, has been placed atop the crypt.

### *The Monastery*

FAI's restoration has also uncovered the great arches of the portico of the Monastery's main building (which now houses the restaurant), based on the Roman herringbone pattern used for the stonework of Castelseprio, which can still be admired in all its splendour in the interior of the refectory, which also contains the great hearth. The portals also testify to the hospitality that the monastic order extended to travellers and pilgrims. They were given a roof to sleep under and could benefit from the heat generated by the marvellous oven, around which winds the staircase that leads to the upper floor and the tower.

### *The tower and the frescoes*

The tower, one of the few examples left in Northern Italy of the Roman defences erected during the 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries, is marked by a powerful yet slender structure. In fact, the exterior walls became progressively slimmer from the base (where they are nearly 2 metres thick) to the top (where the thickness is only 85 centimetres), through the use of a series of steps (called "*riseghe*"), visible from the outside as well as the inside of the tower which is over 18 metres high. The corners of the walls on the downhill side are reinforced by buttresses.

The interiors of the tower reveal more plainly the complex history of the structure: in fact, on the second floor we note the presence of slit windows, which date to the military period, and a gothic window that was added in the 1400s. The fragments of frescoes that remain on the walls and in the niches show that, during the Longobard period, the room was used to bury the nuns. One of the frescoes that is still visible depicts a nun and also carries an inscription: "*casta Aliberga*", a typically Longobard name.

Between the 8<sup>th</sup> and the 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, the third floor was used as an oratory by the nuns, as shown by the presence of an altar and the religious themes of the frescoes on the walls (unfortunately missing some important sections).

We note a rare surviving curtain on the eastern wall, above which there is a figure of Christ, next to whom there must have been depicted the Virgin and the Apostles, while the western wall contains a procession of Saints and Martyrs, below which there are eight nuns, also in procession (note the expressive positions of the hands).