

# HISTORY OF MILAN



Strategically placed at the gateway to the Italian peninsula, Milan and the surrounding region of Lombardy have been the subject of constant disputes over the centuries. Celts, Romans, Goths, Lombards, Spaniards and Austrians have all ruled the city at some stage of its history and for the most part, the city has capitalised on its position and has emerged today as the undisputed economic and cultural powerhouse of a united Italy, not without occasionally fighting back against foreign dominators.

**Milan's origin goes back to 400 B.C., when Gauls settled and defeated the Etruscans against Celts who were about to overrun the city.**

## **CAPITAL OF THE WESTERN ROMAN EMPIRE**

In 222 B.C. the city was conquered by Romans and it was annexed to the Roman Empire, getting the name of Mediolanum. It became a permanent Latin colony in 89 B.C. after few attempts to rebellions. By 42 B.C. Rome had exerted its hold over Cisalpine Gaul (that means 'Gaul this side of the Alps') sufficiently to make the city officially part of its Italian territories. In his reorganisation of Italy in 15 B.C., emperor Augustus made Milan the capital of Transpadania region, including the towns of Como, Bergamo, Pavia and Lodi and extending as far west as Turin. Due to its strategic position (it was placed between the Italian peninsula and those areas beyond the Alps where Roman interests were widespread) the name changed into Roma Secunda. From 292 A.D. Mediolanum became the effective capital of the western emperor. It was a very important center for the consolidation of the new Christian religion. Some Milanese churches (like San Lorenzo, Sant'Ambrogio and Sant'Eustorgio) have early Christian origins.

After 313 A.D., the year of the Edict of Tolerance towards Christianity issued by Constantine the Great, many churches were built and the first bishop, St Ambrose, was appointed: Ambrogio was such an influential person that the church became the Ambrosian Church (7 December is a holiday to honour Sant'Ambrogio, the Milan's patron). Although Milan became less important as the Roman Empire declined. The city suffered the invasion of Lombards who first sacked (539 A.D.) and then conquered it in 569 A.D. . The capital of the Roman-Barbaric

kingdom of the Longobards (569-774 - from whom the region Lombardy takes its name) was instead Pavia. Milan's rebirth just began with Carolingian rule in the 8th century.

The bishops used the Lombard influence to built an alliance with the emperor Ottone of Saxony (who was the crowned king of Italy in the church of Sant'Ambrogio) and got even more powerful. The Church was given precedence over the landed nobility, whose power was consequently reduced and, allied with the 'cives' (city-dwelling merchants or tradesmen), the clergy became the effective rulers of Lombardy's increasingly wealthy cities from around the start of the new millennium. At the beginning of the year 1000 the archbishop of Milan became the most powerful person in Northern Italy. In 1117 Milan became a municipality after a series of political difficulties and it acquitted itself of the archbishop. Milan also expanded by declaring war to other cities of the area. During this period the city was governed by democratic laws and built the Palazzo della Ragione as a seat for its political self-rule.

After that Frederick I of Swabia (named Frederick Barbarossa) tried many times to conquer the city, in 1167 the 'Comuni' (towns run by the people) banded together in the Societas Lombardiae (Lombard League) and in 1176 Barbarossa was defeated definitively during the famous Battle of Legnano (Battle royale) which is also the subject of the eponymous opera by Giuseppe Verdi.

Beginning in 1200 Milan's importance increased intensively and finally became a "Seigneurie" (feudalism). The city considerably changed mainly in its appearance; some examples were the extension of the city walls, the construction of new buildings and the development of new paved streets.

## **THE VISCONTI AND SFORZA FAMILIES**

The period of democratic government came to an end when power was seized by the old Milanese Visconti family who were to be 'lords' of Milan from 1277 to 1447 ; the commune system was over and Milan, like so many other northern Italian cities, was going the way of one-family rule. From 1300 the Visconti brought a period of glory and wealth to the city and, within the space of a generation, the surrounding cities all acknowledged their rule, Bergamo and Novara in 1332, Cremona in 1334, Como and Lodi in 1335, Piacenza in 1336 and Brescia in 1337. It was under their rule that began the construction of the Duomo in 1386 (that then became the symbol of the city) and of the Castle Porta Giovia (then destroyed and rebuilt by Francesco Sforza and still nowadays known as [Sforza Castle](#)). When the last Visconti duke Filippo Maria died in 1447 there were three brief years of republican rule then, in 1450 Francesco Sforza, his son-in-law, assumed the Castle and the power of the Visconti family and Milan finally got peace after many years of war against Venice and Florence. The Sforza family's rule coincided with the Renaissance period in Italy and especially Francesco's rule was magnificent; he transformed the city into a powerful metropolis, building among other things the Castello Sforzesco and the Ospedale Maggiore (now Ca' Granda). It was during these years that the Castle and the Duomo were being built along with the church of Santa Maria delle Grazie. Under the Sforza duchy the city began its development. Ludovico il Moro (Ludovico Sforza) was the dominant figure; he proved a good ruler encouraging agricultural development and the silk industry, he called architects like Donato Bramante and Leonardo da Vinci to his court, making the city one of Italy's great centres of art and culture.

## **SPANISH AND AUSTRIAN DOMINATION**

In the early 16th century (the last years of Sforza rule) northern Italy was one of the territories contested by the Spanish and the French monarchies. Lombardy enjoyed a 14-year semblance of autonomy after France's King Francis I was defeated at Pavia in 1525. Francesco Sforza ruled under the tutelage of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (a Habsburg and King Charles I of Spain), but when Francesco died in 1535, Charles assumed direct power so began 170 years of Spanish domination which transformed the once-proud independent Duchy of Milan in the neglected capital of a province administered, guarded and taxed by foreigners. This is the humiliated Milan described in the Manzoni's novel "I promessi sposi". It was a time of no development and the city was also oppressed by the scourge of plague in 1630. Fortunately in the second half of the 17th century Milan's religious and cultural life was given fresh vigour thanks to the initiatives of Borromeo family, especially Carlo and Federico. Then, the great European wars of the early 18th century assured the Austrian domination of the city,

which completely changed in all society fields (economic, public, cultural, artistic, administrative, scientific) thanks to the improvement given by the Habsburg dynasty. The Accademia di Brera was founded in this period; the theatre La Scala (where Giuseppe Verdi had his debut) was built in 1778, together with other neoclassical buildings and the Arco della Pace (1807).

## **THE NAPOLEONIC ERA**

It was thanks to this climate of enlightenment that Napoleon was received so enthusiastically by the Milanese when he marched into the city in May 1796, many optimist at that time saw him as the symbol of the democratic reform spirit. After Napoleon fall in 1814, the Congress of Vienna restored Lombardy to Austria, but Austrians were no longer enlightened reformers and the Milanese remained largely hostile to Austrian rule; hostility that found a musical outlet in some of Verdi's early operas and that finally exploded in the heroic Cinque Giornate of 1848 (five days of street fighting). However, owing to the military incompetence of Carlo Emanuele of Piedmont, the uprising failed and the Austrian forces re-entered the city which was placed under their commander-in-chief Count Joseph Radetzky's control.

## **THE KINGDOM OF ITALY**

It was just in 1859 that the Austrians were run out of the city and Milan was annexed to the Kingdom of Piedmont which became the Kingdom of Italy two years later. The liberation passed through the pressure of combined military intervention by the French and the Piedmontese and the decisive action of Risorgimento hero Giuseppe Garibaldi and his guerrilla troops. Since the seat of government had to be Rome, from this time on Milan was chosen as the economical and cultural capital of Italy. To celebrate its new free status a great number of grandiose building projects were undertaken, for example the construction of the great Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II, the San Vittore prison, the Cimitero Monumentale and the San Gottardo tunnel.

## **FASCISM & POST-WAR PERIOD**

The fascist party was founded in Milan in 1919 encouraged by the tumultuous climate created by numerous strikes supporting socialism grew. The population did not try to resist the dictatorship, except some industrial workers and intellectuals. But it was in this period that pompous works and examples of innovative architecture were built; the Central Station and the Triennale are two of them.

During the war Milan was destroyed. At the end of World War II Lombardy was instrumental in the boom that transformed Italy from a relatively backward, agricultural country to an industrial world leader. The city became a major financial centre and the region's new-found wealth attracted myriad workers from the south of Italy in a wave of immigration. It is nowadays the major center for commerce, finance, publishing and recently media, design and fashion.