

THE BASILICA OF SAINT LANFRANCO OF PAVIA

The church of Saint Lanfranco and its monastery were erected on the north bank of the river Ticino, in an isolated place among the woods of Val Vernasca. In ancient documents this was the name used to indicate that wide valley which, out of Porta Marica, the west door of Pavia, degraded to the river Ticino. Val Vernasca was limited by the course of the Navigliaccio in the east, and by Costa Fragonaria, a high slope which, beyond our church, went on parallel with the river to the place named S. Sofia.

At the beginning of the XII century, some monks of Vallombrosa (belonging to the Order founded by Saint Giovanni Gualberto, within the first half of the XI century) arrived at these places where they built a church with its monastery, which they dedicated to the *Santo Sepolcro*. The Order of Vallombrosa had many convents in central Italy, but only one in the north of Italy in Piacenza. It was probably due to the initiative of the near Vallombrosian monastery of S. Marco of Piacenza that a new monastery in Pavia was founded.

The first *cenobium* was not erected in the place where we can still admire the ancient complex of Saint Lanfranco, but a little further to west near S. Sofia, under the high slope of the Ticino river. Around the second decade of the XII century the Vallombrosian monks began to erect the new church of *Santo Sepolcro* (the one which is mentioned in the writings of Bernardo of Pavia). In this *basilica* (this is the name for this kind of church in Italian) there was buried the bishop of Pavia Lanfranco Beccaria (who died in 1198 in this convent).

Lanfranco was the bishop of Pavia from 1180 to 1198. During this period he had to fight with the civil authority in order to defend the rights of the Church, and because of these political problems he had a period of exile. Bishop Lanfranco found an ideal shelter in the Vallombrosian monastery, as a suitable place for meditation and spiritual relax. The news of the miracles made during his life and after his death too, made him a famous saint, even if he was never canonized.

In the following years, the church was gradually rebuilt in order to celebrate the memory of bishop Lanfranco. In 1257 the works ended with the construction of the façade. The structure (a single nave and projecting transepts) presents the iconography of the Latin cross which is typical for the Vallombrosian Order. But, the imposing aspect of the church of Saint Lanfranco with the groin vaults over the nave, the Lombard dome which rises over the crossing and the wide proportion of the whole architecture distinguishes this church from the Vallombrosian smaller and more modest ones of Central Italy.

This church presents expressions belonging to the Late Romanesque style with the typical characters of Pavese production. An important Lombard element is the *tiburium*, with its blind gallery, which stands on the crossing of the nave and the transept.

The bell-tower dates back to 1237 and represents the later expressions of Lombard style: its structure is fitted into angular pilaster-strips which emphasize the tower's vertical elevation. It is marked by five registers on each side, by a sequence of six simple little arches. In the middle of every register, a thin central rib goes up to the window with the three lights of the belfry. A vivacious effect is made by the contrast between the white plaster under the sequence of little arches and the red brick. This particular vivacity is increased by the presence of glaze table-ware: these objects give evidence to the medieval contacts with the Near East (on the occasion of the Crusades, probably).

The double skew façade is divided into three vertical bays, closed between two lateral vigorous buttresses. In the central part, between two thin shafts, there is set a sandstone portal the architecture of which is made like a false *protiro*. Above three circular windows (of which the central and big one is later) there is the usual motive of the blind gallery and a sequence of double arched corbel-tables running parallel to the skews. The whole scheme of this façade comes from the scheme of the façade of north transept of Saint Michele which is the prototype of several Romanesque façades in Pavia.

The interior of the church develops the characteristic Later Romanesque system of "churches with room" (in Germany "Hallen kircke") which is obtained by placing at the same level the barrel of the transepts and the groin vaults of the nave in order to have a new unity of space. In this open space there is enhanced the wall to which semi pillars and its rectangular ribs lean. On the cubic capitals of the semi pillars there are placed transverse arches in two orders much depressed on the nave and rectangular wall ribs semicircular in elevation. This system of arches supply the groin vaults of the four bays of the nave.

During the refurbishment in 1932 some traces of ancient frescoes were discovered on the east wall of the south transept and on the south wall of the third bay, where Saint Lanfranco's grave had been probably placed. The latter, actually, are votive frescoes by an anonymous author and are dated to the second half of the XIII century. There are represented: The Redeemer on a throne begged by the Virgin and by bishop Lanfranco; The murder of Saint Thomas Becket and the figure of Saint Thomas blessing. The author probably wished to make a parallel between the life of Saint Lanfranco and Saint Thomas, murdered owing to a political intrigue. There are also The

Redeemer with a cross and a jeweled *aureola* and a big figure which probably represents Saint Cristoforo,.

During the XV century the Abbey had a period of economic and moral decay which culminated in 1480 with the murder of abbot Luca Zanachi. After that, the care of the monastery was entrusted to Marquis Pietro Pallavicini De Scipioni. He renewed the convent and rebuilt the presbytery: a wide rectangular choir ends with a semi hexagonal apse and is covered by a barrel-vault which is penetrated by three little groin-vaults. On each long side of the barrel-vault, in two of the three groin-vaults, two wide windows open.

In the bowl of the apse there are three circular windows; one with a Cardinal and one with a martyr (XV century). To the XV century too dates the historiated window (which is closed now) above the big arch of the presbytery: there are represented the Lady on the throne with the Infant, Saint Lanfranco and the client whose coat of arms it is.

In 1498 in the apse Marquis Pallavicini had the famous marble ark built, in order to celebrate bishop Lanfranco. The work was made by sculptor and architect Giovanni Antonio Amadeo. The marble coffin, which is based upon small heads of "putto", is supported by elegant candelabra columns the bases of which are decorated by profiles of men in small medallions. The coffin ends with a dome-shaped gable with a small chapel on the top.

Reliefs tell some miracles and events from Saint Lanfranco's life (on the left side): Saint Lanfranco heals a dumb young man; The Saint receives the Consuls in the square of the Cathedral; On his return from exile Lanfranco is received by the new Consuls (the last figure on the right is Amadeo's self-portrait); Lanfranco is praying the Virgin during his retreat in the convent. Miracles after Lanfranco's death follow there: Gelasia a young girl who had been condemned with the false charge of having poisoned her brother, comes safely out of the stake; Saint Lanfranco heals Pietro Negri, a jurist of Pavia; Giovanni Brunelli, who had been assailed and tied up into the scrub, succeeds in getting free with the help of Saint Lanfranco; Alberto da Novara a repenting evildoer is saved from hanging.

In the higher part, above the inscriptions, there are lowreliefs describing events from Jesus Christ's life: the Annunciation and Visitation on the back; the Nativity on the right; the Presentation of Jesus to the Synagogue and Jesus who heals some invalids on the front; the Crucifixion on the left. The dome shaped gable is adorned by four dolphins and by two horse-shaped heads shields with heraldic incisions on the front and on the back: in the former there is a cardinal's hat with four open chits; in the latter a square drawing with an eagle with unfolded wings. It must be noted the

Pallavicini's coat of arms with a cardinal's hat in various places: on the south pillar of the triumphal arch, in the XV century window of the apse, on the font which is now in the *sacristia* and on the vault of the corner-hall of the big cloister and in some other places in the convent.

Carved wood choir-stalls lean against the walls of the presbytery. In one of the stalls there is the carved coat of arms and the name Luca of the abbot Zanachi. In the south transept there is a fine fresco from the Late Gothic style with the Lady in the throne, S. Benedetto, S. Giovanni Gualberto and some monks. It was painted in the second half of XV century by workers from the school of Siena probably.

From the west door of the transept we enter the "small cloister" which originally stretched on four sides while now there remains the only north one. It was erected by Amadeo (who also worked the cloisters of Certosa of Pavia), by order of abbot Luca Zanachi, whose name and the date 1467 are written on the brick-corbels (which are stamped with a matrix).

The arched lintels are molded by a brick frieze with garlands of leaves and fruits and with cupids. Under the arches there are lacunars with small roses. On the front, between the arches, there are pod-cup shaped medallions. The top of the prospect ends with a large molding supported by small corbels.

The rich ornament of the "small cloister" is in contrast with the essentiality of the brick molding of the "big cloister" which is ascribed to Amadeo too. But this work belongs to a late period of the artist's activity who wanted here to show the airy elegance of the architecture of Bramante's mark. The "big cloister" was built by order of Pietro Pallavicini after 1480. It is articulated on three sides of several arches held up by thin granite pillars (with capitals decorated by leaves) which lean on a small wall.

The profiles of the arches and the molding over the arches and under the windows are brick-made in order to enhance the wide whitewashed surface. On these ones we can find some traces of frescoes in the west side prospect. Some figures are painted in clypeus among arches: in the central one of the west side there is represented the Virgin painted in a *mandorla*; in the tondo (circle) on her left there is Christ with a cross on the background; in the right one there is a unidentified saint; then there is another saint with a cross and with the inscription GUA-S. Giovanni Gualberto probably-; in the tondo at the corner there are two female figures who wear Rinascimento dresses. On the north side of the cloister there is painted a saint with a grating and the bishop who is represented in the tondo after that might be bishop Lanfranco.