

THE ALTOPIANO: A Historical Outline

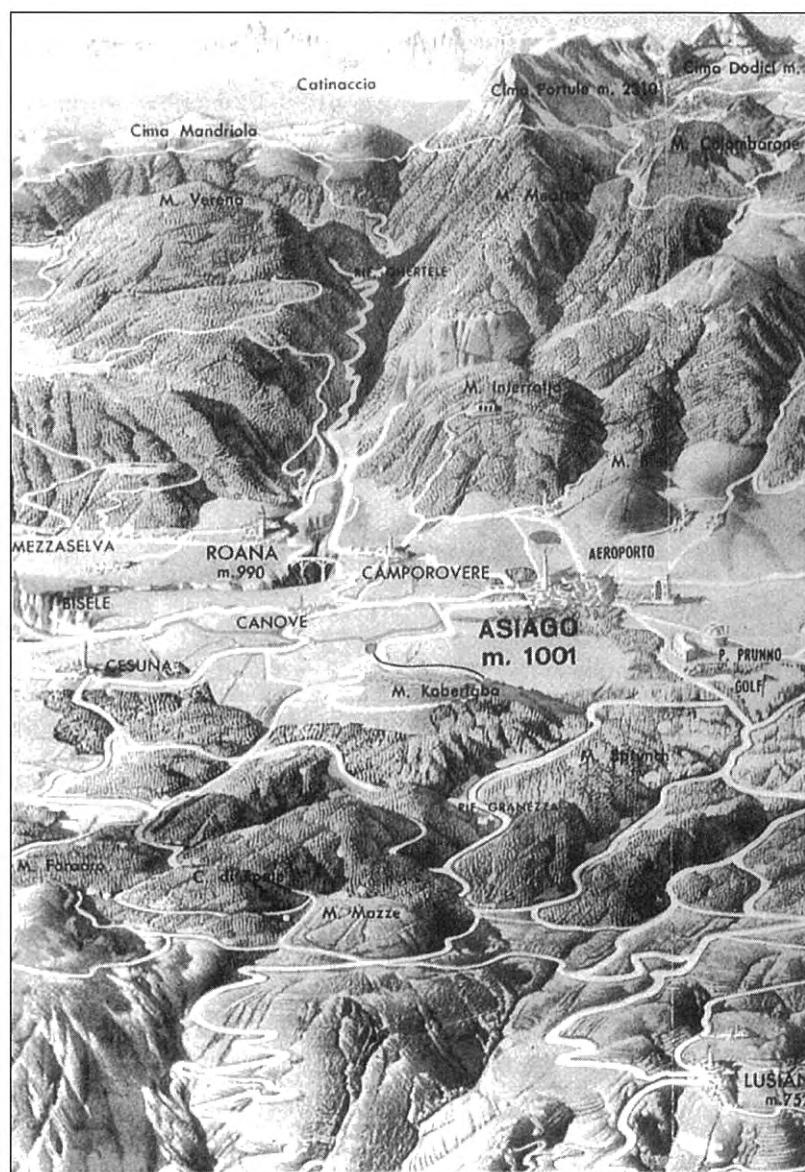
by Patrizio Rigoni

The following is an edited version of an article published in the Italian regional magazine Asiago: Ieri, Oggi, Domani, No 45/46 Dec. 1993. This article will be of interest to the many Cimbri descendants who now live in Australia. The Society wishes to thank the author for his permission to reprint it.

The Altopiano (plateau) of Asiago, also known as the 'Altopiano dei Sette Comuni', is located between the rivers Brenta and Astico, 55 km north of Vicenza and comprises seven municipalities (*comuni*): Asiago, Enego, Foza, Gallio, Lusiana, Roana and Rotzo. The most evident proof of the Germanic origins of the people of the Altopiano is their language - a mixture of Danish and German words - which is still spoken by many of the old people and which continues to be taught in some schools of the Altopiano. Today Asiago is the main commune and is a popular summer and winter holiday resort.

The stone flints and the graffiti found in the Valdassa region bear witness to a prehistoric human presence on the Altopiano. This presence was probably temporary and seasonal and related to both hunting and to the search for flints (found in large quantities here) useful for the production of tools. The finding of a pre-historic village at Bostel, near Rotzo, brought to light traces of a population, perhaps the first, which resided on these mountains. The small but significant finds were small mud huts, remnants of kitchenware, iron and bronze artifacts, silver coins and animal bones. Other pre-Christian settlement traces were found at Lusiana (Corgon) and at Enego.

Who do the people descend from who still today use words like *rach* (musk), *rasette* (swallow), *loch* (hole), *tanna* (pine tree),



slenca (slingshot), *tal* (valley), *pach* (small stream), *zaur* (acidic), etc.? The Altopiano, once isolated, was a refuge to small tribes which crossed the Alps after the decline of the Roman Empire. This immigration was chiefly Germanic and later around the year 1000 AD, families of Bavarian settlers in search of land to deforest and to cultivate began to populate the region. On the plateau they felt secure and thus were able

to make a living and keep up their language and traditions. The Cimbro language of this region is therefore related to a Bavarian dialect.¹

The first immigrants settled at the two opposite points of the plateau, west and east, thus forming the two oldest villages, Rotzo and Enego, and in this way began the colonisation of the Altopiano inwards from its borders. The settlers moved eventually towards the centre of the plateau giving origin to Gallio, Foza, Roana, Lusiana and Asiago.

The 7 villages soon became *comuni* (small administrative districts) protected first by the Ezzelini and then by the Scaligeri and since 1400 by the Visconti, from whom they obtained special economic privileges necessary to survive in a mountain zone. During this period the union of the 7 villages grew stronger until the *Reggenza* (Federation) Pact of 1310 which allowed them administrative and political autonomy, and the possibility of constituting their own military force.

In 1404 the Federation of the 7 *Comuni* allied themselves voluntarily with the Republic of Venice. The loyalty of the *Comuni* to the Serenissima lasted four centuries until 1807. Venice granted the *Reggenza* many privileges and in exchange requested from them the defence of the northern borders, which were strategically important. This endeavour cost the *Comuni* plundering and devastation in 1487 and in 1508 at the hands of the Germans and in 1805 at the hands of the French. Nonetheless the inhabitants of the Altopiano defended their land tenaciously and were often victorious.

In 1613 the plague which contaminated northern Italy arrived at Asiago, causing the death of 1500 people. With the French revolution and Napoleon, Venice lost its power and was thus unable to protect the Federation any longer. Then in 1815, with the fall of Napoleon, the whole region was annexed by the Austrian Empire; as a consequence all the benefits which had been granted the *Reggenza* were revoked and substituted by a rigid taxation system which reduced the Altopiano to a purely

subsistence economy. All this compelled many inhabitants of the Altopiano to migrate towards other more prosperous European and overseas nations.

Notwithstanding many difficulties, modernisation stimulated economic recovery: public works, the first hotels, banks and new roads were built. The Cimbrica Region, which was 800 soldiers strong and was constituted in 1848, helped to restrain the Austrian advance, thus demonstrating the participation of the Altopiano in the unification of Italy in the Risorgimento. Moreover many volunteers took part in the Second War of Independence in 1859 and in Garibaldi's famous *Spedizione dei Mille* in 1860 to free Sicily from Bourbon domination. Then in 1866, during the Third War of Independence, the Altopiano was annexed by the Kingdom of Italy.

The construction of the Valdassa bridge in 1906 and of the railroad in 1909 contributed to faster communication between the 7 *Comuni* of the plateau and with the plain. Emigration still continued even though new industries such as mining and the distillation of liquors began. World War I was the most tragic event in the history of the Altopiano. The war caused the destruction of the towns and forests of the plateau and a further exodus of its people. This dispersal of the various families caused a cultural and emotional estrangement with almost irreversible consequences.

In the post-war years, reconstruction created new towns, even if they were less characteristic of the region. Unemployment and emigration continued even after World War II because the traditional occupations were insufficient to secure growth corresponding to the new needs. In the 1960s the rapid growth of tourism created new jobs: it was necessary to build new houses, hotels and sporting facilities, infrastructure that the tourism industry required. This has produced a profound economic, social and cultural transformation of the region which requires a commitment in matching the expectations of modern standards of living with the need to protect the natural environment and preserve the cultural identity inherited from past generations.

Endnotes:

¹ Some anthropologists claim that the connection of the Altopiano with the Cimbri people goes back to 101 BC, when the Roman Consul Caius Mario defeated the Cimbri at the Campi Raudii battle near Verona in 101 B.C. More than 140,000 Cimbri perished and 60,000 were taken prisoners. Some of those who managed to survive the slaughter sought refuge in the mountainous region of Vicenza, thus forming the first Cimbro settlement in the Altopiano. (Source: Consiglio 'Terra Cimbria', Mario De Nale, C.S.E.P. Tambre, 1984.)

Some family names of Cimbro origin:

Azzolini	Loser	Rech
Benetti	Maltauro	Rigoni
Bonato/Bonatto	Martello	Sartori
Fabris	Mecenero	Sbabo
Fraccaro	Mosele	Slaviero
Frigo	Pojer	Soster
Gandin	Pertelli	Stefani
Graser	Pretto	Sterchele
	Rebeschini	Vellar

Town seals and family crests from the Cimbro district

