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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK**

Band (Jahr): - **(1978)**

Heft 1738

PDF erstellt am: **15.08.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-686228>

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GOTTHARD'S ROMANESQUE CHURCHES

BY KATHLEEN WATTS

Every day trains go thundering through the Gotthard tunnel carrying passengers from the northern plains of Switzerland to the south. Motorists taking one of the big passes such as the Grimsel, Furka or from Chur by the Oberalp arrive at Andermatt and take the magnificent road over the Pass. Sometimes in summer cars queue as far down as Wassen on the north side. In Locarno and Lugano there is hardly room to breathe let alone park the car; such is the popularity of the Ticino.

In earlier times, however, people did not feel quite as we do about rushing through or over the Pass to the south, and the valleys of the North Ticino were thriving communities with castles, monasteries and churches.

These mountain chapels built during the 11th and 12th centuries, generally on the site of very ancient oratories, go back to the Lombardian period, sometimes calling to mind Frankish and Byzantine civilisations. Their primitive foundations show horseshoe-shaped apses and little porches attached to the façades. It would seem that no real study has ever been made of these buildings and there exists little else than tourist literature.

From Airolo where the train comes out of the tunnel the road from the Pass follows the river Ticino down the valley of the Leventina to Biasca, the ancient ecclesiastical site of Prebano of the Ambrosian valleys. In the 9th century an archpriest and seven canons resided here and administered in the name of St. Ambrose of Milan.

The name Leventina brings to mind the ancient population of Leopontiens who were in all probability Celtic; they lived in the Upper Ticino and on the banks of Lake Maggiore. The terminations "ago", "aga" also "igo", from which comes the old name for Giornico — Zornigo, seem to be of Leopontine origin. It could easily be that the first populations to settle in this area lived at Cavagnano above Giornico. Arriving here the visitor certainly feels he is in the midst of a very old civilisation.

Of the four romanesque churches in Giornico, San Nicolo remains unique amongst the churches of the Ticino. It is impossible to give a date to its original construction but references are made to it as early as the 10th century though at the time it may only have been a wayside oratory. In 1298 the Abbot of San Benigno of Fruttaria nominated Alberto of Bruxasco to administer the monastery of San Nicolo and gave him a symbolic ring. In this document the monastery is declared to be "nostra monasterio subiecte".

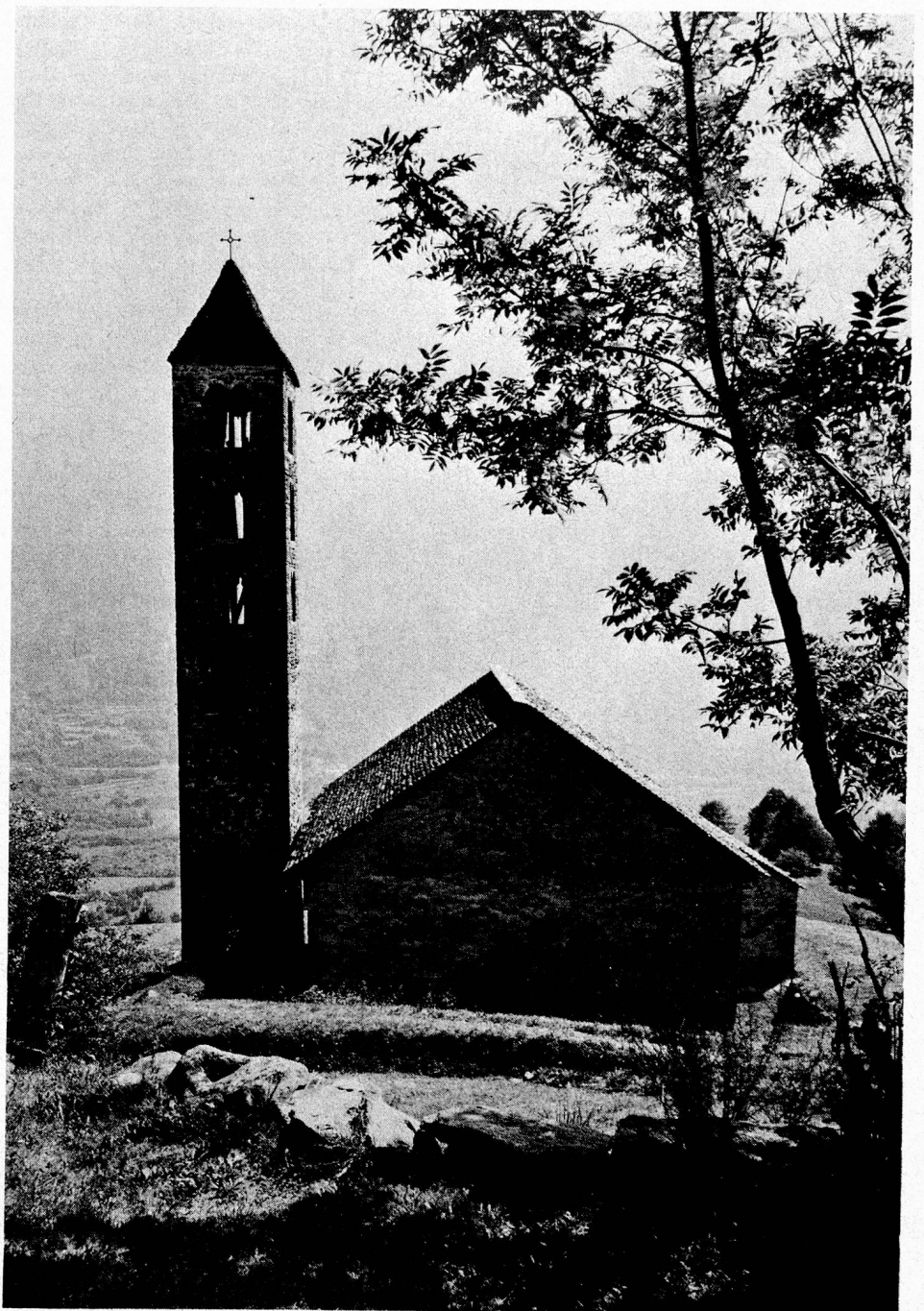
Built in perfect geometrical proportions, large granite blocks are

placed on finer and smaller ones to form the walls. These same granite blocks support the vines which surround the church.

The southern door is of particular interest; the lintel is held by large keystones carved in grotesque shapes; the supporting columns which are strange in shape are flanked by two narrower columns which are decorated, one with an angel and the other with a monkey that climbs the shaft of the column. One of the two heads bears a striking affinity

with the stone heads of the first romanesque art which can be seen in the town museum of Poitiers in France. The west door is built in the same way but here the two narrow columns are supported by two stone blocks, sculptured with two lions who chase two rabbits carved on the other face of the base; a lioness, a bull and a dragon also decorate the façade. This troop of animals at ground level make a strange impression.

The interior of the church is



A beautiful example of the kind of church referred to in Mrs. Watts' article. It is at Negrentino.

actually a single nave but examination of the walls shows that formerly there were probably other interior walls and arches. The crypt which is in three aisles is vaulted and the romanesque capitals are sculptured with heads of animals. What is most striking is the fact that it is visible and open to the nave. Generally in the Lombardian region the crypt is closed. It recalls certain Benedictine examples, amongst others San Godenzio in Tuscany and ones in Poitiers and also in Spain. In these churches however there is no communication between the nave and the choir. Here an ugly arched staircase, put up in 1945, replaced an 18th century one, but we are left wondering what was there before. Was there always access to the choir from the nave or was it at one time completely separate?

The valley of Blenio opens north-east of Biasca and the road follows the river Brenno as far as Olivone, then forks left crossing the Alps at the Lukamanier Pass (Lucas Magnas). Shortly before arriving at the Pass is the village of Cassacia. Already in 1136 the Hospice was mentioned with its church of the Holy Sepulchre; these were dependencies of the Hospice of Milan. After Biasca comes Semione; palm trees planted before the church are deceptive, the high mountains are very close. In the shadow of the campanile is a charming vaulted chapel decorated with 15th-century paintings. A little higher than Semione a path leads through the chestnut woods to the ruins of the castle of Serravalle. Built

in the 12th century by a powerful feudal family it later became the residence of the religious administration from Milan. In 1402 the peasants rebelled against the Italian domination and Serravalle was destroyed. The people asked the Swiss for protection but it was not until 1496 that it became established Swiss territory.

But the gem of the valley is the church of Sant'Ambrogio Vecchio di Negrentino, more commonly known as San Carlo. This little church which today is almost isolated is half an hour's walk up a mountain path above Prugiasco which is the next village. The name of Prugiasco comes from "prosa", "prusask" meaning alp in the local dialect. At one time the village was situated on the hill around San Carlo which was originally the parish church visited by Charles Boromé, Archbishop of Milan, in 1567.

Arriving at the hamlet of Negrentino a mule track to the left leads to the old church and then over the hills to the Leventina valley. This explains why the men of Chiggiogna obtained possession of Prugiasco in order that their village should not be attacked from the Valley of Blenio. In the 17th century the people of Prugiasco moved down to the present-day village.

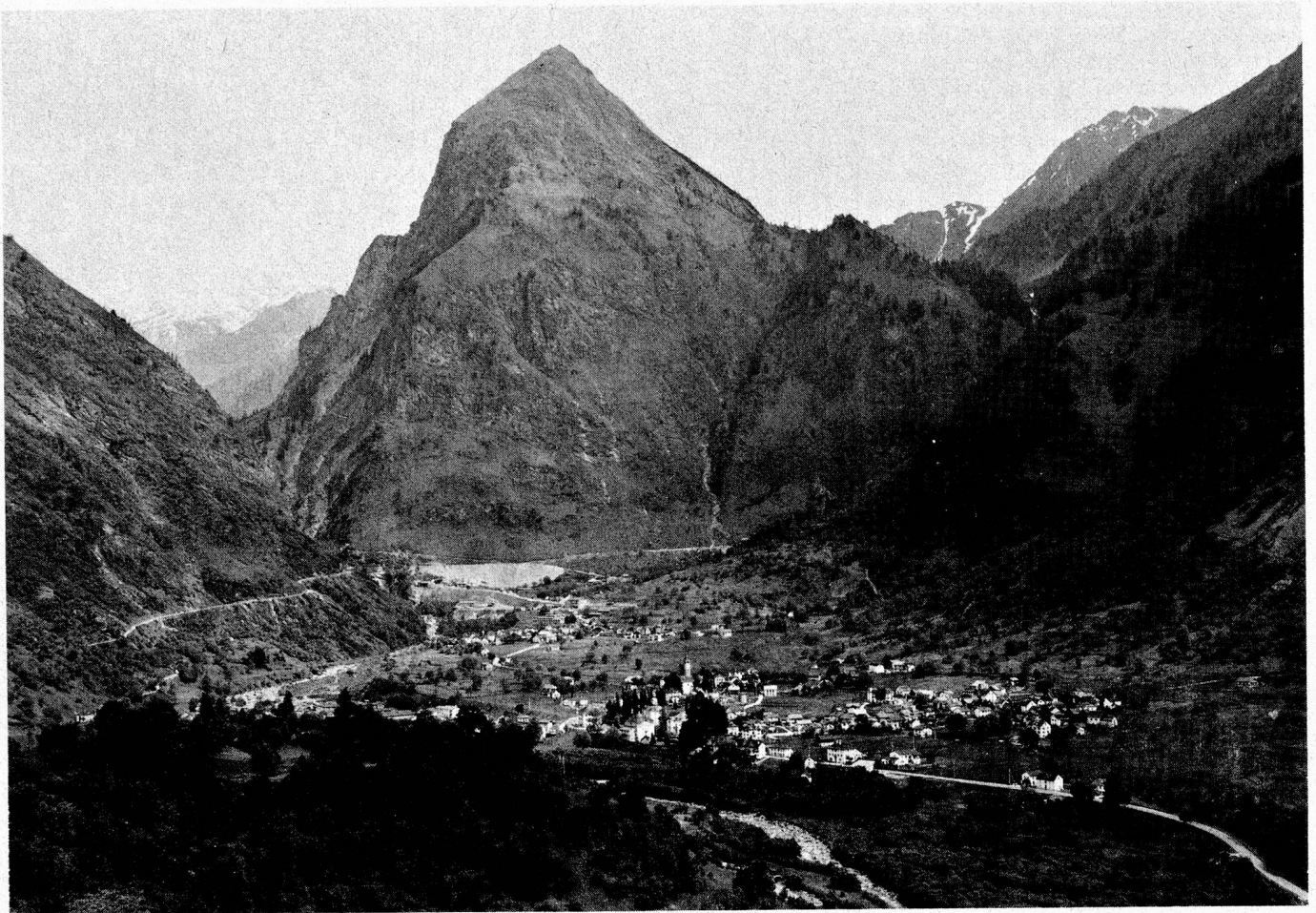
Wandering through the fields of flowers, occasionally hidden by thickets, the church tower is the only guide. When San Carlo eventually comes into view one can only marvel at what must have been its original beauty when it was a simple nave with a rounded apse. In the 15th

century a second nave and apse were added. The campanile stands apart.

Completely unexpected is the surprise that awaits the visitor on entering the church. About the middle of the 11th century an unknown painter who was in all probability Lombardian decorated the western wall with a frescoe which certainly deserves to be counted amongst the first in quality of the Romanesque period. This remarkable painting shows the Ascension of Christ amid his apostles. The whole conception is Byzantine; the marvellous colours, the rose-red of Christ's robes, the blue-green background, the yellow ochre aureole all seem to have retained their original freshness. On either side are the apostles in two groups, their names inscribed in fine 11th-century characters. The frescoe is framed above by a border frieze of Greek design, each end terminating in a lamb. It is by this frieze which has appeared at Poitiers (France), at Civate in the Brianza (Italy) and even in other churches in the Ticino that it has been possible to determine the date of the paintings.

Corzonesco has a 12th-century church, so has Prato, Leventina; the latter with a six-storey bell tower. This together with Mavaglia is one of the most beautiful in the Ticino.

There is a record of the first church of Biasca which existed possibly in the 4th or 5th century. This fascinating old town with its long ecclesiastical history makes a good centre for visiting the two valleys.



This panoramic view of Valle Blenio beautifully illustrates the proud position occupied by many churches in Swiss villages.