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THE SMALL CENTRE OF PIEGARO
AND ITS ANCIENT LINKS WITH GLASS PRODUCTION

The small village of Piegario, of medieval origins, rises among the green hills of Umbria in the western part of the region and a little south of the Lake Trasimeno basin.

The location is marked by extensive wooded areas, which cover most of the surrounding hills, alternating with cultivated land and limited but significant industrial areas. Among the latter, the Vetreteria Cooperativa Piegarese, two kilometres from the town centre, is of particular importance with regard to the subject considered here. The presence in this area of a large glass industry, one of the biggest in Italy, is the result of a centuries old tradition that saw glass already being made in Piegario in the 14th century¹. It is furthermore the landscape itself that provides initial testimony of this peculiarity: the fact that most of the land is still covered in forests is actually the inevitable result of the high demand for wood over the course of the centuries. The constant and voracious consumption that the Piegario glass furnaces made of it must often have led to the local wood resources being exploited to the limit, given that in 1565 Cipriano Piccolpasso notes, regarding Piegario, that «pate di legne per il gran logro che ne fanno le fornace da vetro» (shortage of wood due to its massive use by the glass works)², in his work *Le piante et i ritratti delle città e terre dell'Umbria sottoposte al governo di Perugia*.

¹ As printed in Fumi 1891b: 118.

² For the references see Munaretto and Batinti 2007: 59.

Unfortunately there is no systematic study collecting all the documentary references to Piegaro, but an attempt to make a summary analysis of the sources was made by the local scholar Gabriella Munaretto, who some years ago published a collection of fragments, providing an excellent starting point for any future (necessary) studies³. Piegaro's link with glass had already been pointed out in previous publications by local scholars⁴ and the name of the locality had already appeared in some notes by Zecchin⁵, who had not failed to note the interest of this isolated locality.

The most immediate testimonies of Piegaro's historic production are, however, the physical ones, represented mainly by the remains of the buildings in the old town centre: various structures that were originally used for glass production. The main one was the premises of the already mentioned *Vetzeria Cooperativa Piegarese* until 1968, when it was decided to definitively move the production of glass out of the town centre. After a systematic and accurate restoration⁶, it became the Piegaro Glass Museum, opened in 2009. The old building retains signs in its various parts of the complex history of the glassworks, which reached its greatest extension in the 19th century under the ownership of the family of the Misciattelli marquises. Munaretto claims, on the basis of land register data she has analysed, that a glassworks already stood in the same place in the town in the 17th century⁷. That which can be directly noted is that the building certainly developed from a smaller initial nucleus, to then expand taking in part of a street and eventually including a considerable section of the medieval wall in its structure, including a tower whose rooms were reused as service areas for the factory itself. The building that can now be visited is obviously the final result of this long process of change, and is of particular interest

³ Munaretto and Batinti 2007.

⁴ Corgna 1941; Pistelli 1976.

⁵ Zecchin 1987-1990: vol 2, 312.

⁶ The events relating to the recovery and restoration of the building, carried out by the Piegaro municipal council, were the object of an operation made by the undersigned in association with Paolo Bracciali, presented at the XVII Giornate Nazionali di Studio dell'AIHV (Massa Martana - Perugia, 11 and 12 May 2013).

⁷ Munaretto and Batinti 2007: 71-72.

for the study of fairly recent periods, but it is probable that the lower level of the building, consisting of a basement floor where the heating plant for the big basin furnace was located, holds some surprises. A summary analysis of the structures seems to show the existence of another level below this, with vaulted rooms full of rubble, which would be interesting to explore.

In addition to the glassworks described there was another glass workshop in Piegara until the 1950s, also in the town centre, of which some structures are conserved, including part of the smelting furnace. The monumental testimonies related to glass are completed by the church of the Madonna della Crocetta, located near one of the access roads to the town, on whose choir there is a painting portraying the crest of the Confraternita di Signoria dei Vetrai, which was based here. The existence of this brotherhood is documented by 15th-century papers⁸ and is another clue to the importance of glass making in the town at that time.

The few clues collected so far allow us to state that glassmaking in Piegara existed at least from the 14th century, and that it continued uninterrupted through the subsequent centuries to the present.

The few known archive documents, which must be reviewed and carefully analysed, will certainly be joined by others. Piegara was repeatedly cited during the recent AIHV Massa Martana meeting, for example, particularly in the context of the archive documents presented by Paolo and Sandro Zecchin⁹.

The characteristics of the museum building and the limited urbanisation of the areas immediately outside the medieval centre of Piegara offer a further possibility for making closer studies of the archive research. Indeed, it would be good to have the chance to undertake recognition and excavation campaigns, both inside the building and in the surrounding area, to identify any remains of ancient furnaces.

⁸ Ibid.: 65-67.

⁹ The talks by the two scholars will soon be published in the proceedings of the XVII Giornate Nazionali di Studio dell'AIHV (Massa Martana - Perugia, 11 and 12 May 2013).

This is obviously a proposal for the future, but it was certainly a good starting point to have been able to present the Piegaro situation in such a stimulating context as the Study Days of Venetian Glass 2013 and to have aroused at least the curiosity (if not the interest) of the many scholars present¹⁰.

(Translation by David Graham)

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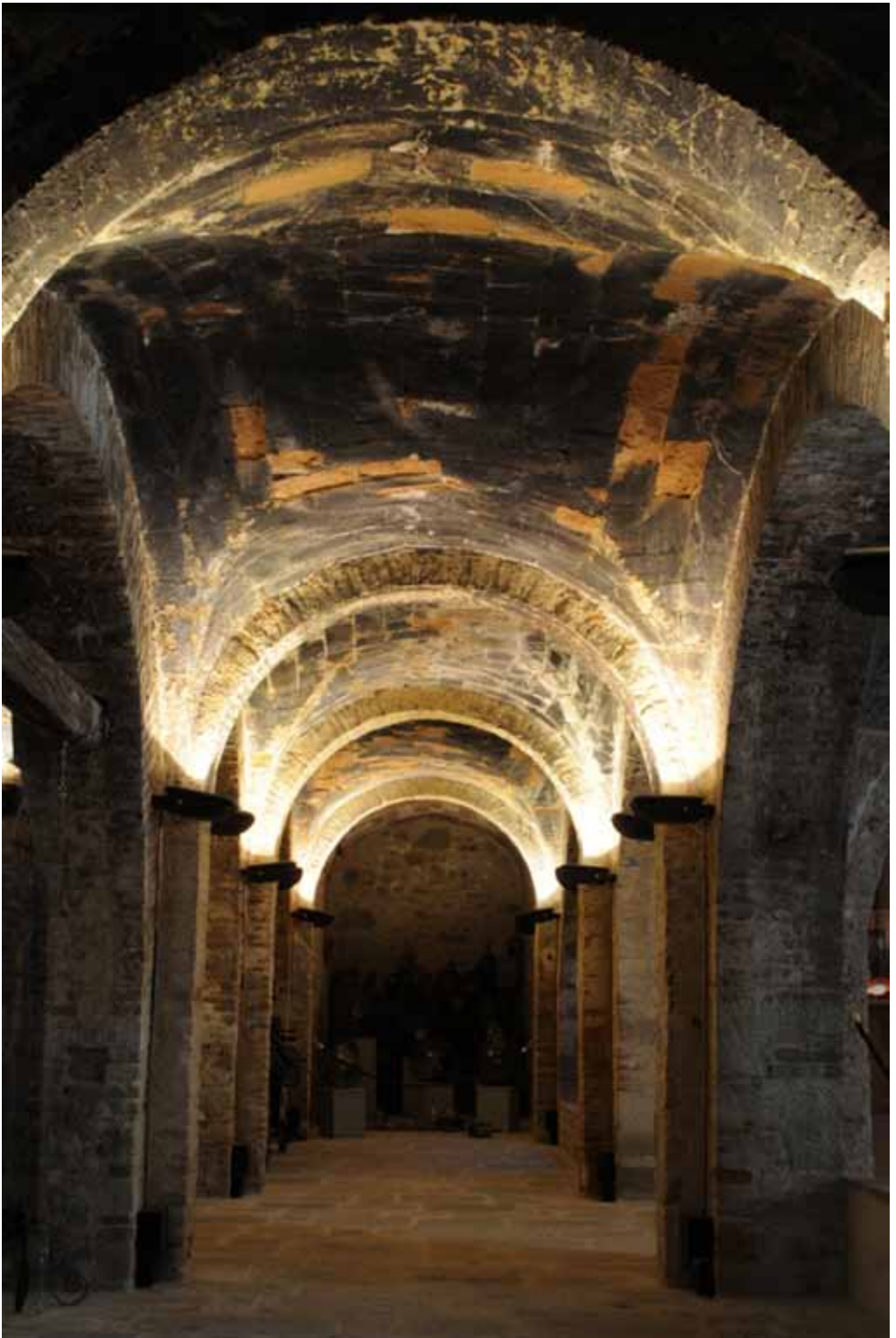


Fig. 1 - One of the rooms in the Piegara Glass Museum (photo: Nicola Biancucci).



Fig. 2 - The big cast of glass conserved on the basement floor of the museum (photo: Nicola Biancucci).



Fig. 3 - The big cast of glass conserved on the basement floor of the museum, detail (photo: Nicola Biancucci).

