

The Roman Bridge of Saint Lawrence

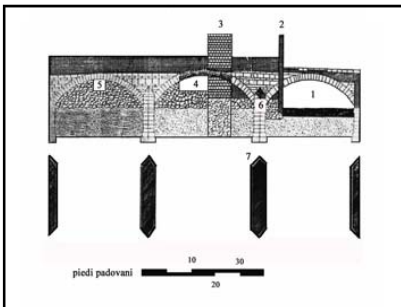
It is the best preserved and most famous Paduan bridge remaining from Roman times. It is mentioned in mediaeval documents from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries as Saint Stephen's bridge, owing to the proximity of the homonymous convent of Benedictine nuns. But in the sixteenth century the nearby church of Saint Lawrence assumed particular importance and the bridge took the name by which it is still known today.

In the Middle Ages this bridge does not seem to have been considered exceptionally imposing, because Giovanni da Nono in his chronicle of the first half of the fourteenth century does not specify the number of its arches or praise its elegance, as he does in the case of Ponte Molino and Ponte Altinate. At that time, in fact, only the right hand arch and part of the first pier were visible, on the one hand because the city walls of the Commune of Padova followed the line of the middle arch, on the other because the river Bacchiglione had a volume of water notably inferior to that of the ancient river *Medoacus* whose bed it occupied, as it still does today. The bridge has been restored several times, but it was only in 1773, when work was undertaken to lower the street level, that it was again revealed in all its grandeur. On this occasion, Giandomenico Polcastro and Stratico were able to attempt a somewhat idealized reconstruction.

It was only in 1938 that a proper archaeological excavation was undertaken, in consequence of the laying of the foundations for the new wing of the University (the Bò), and on that occasion it was

possible to study the bridge from upstream, according to the reconstruction proposed by Polcastro and Stratico.

This extensive excavation made it possible to appreciate in its



Reconstruction of the bridge in 1773

entirety the structural unity and harmony of the bridge, which had been perfectly preserved through the centuries. It also yielded elements of decoration and a marble slab with a damaged inscription.

Notwithstanding the importance of this monument for the history of Padua, in 1959 the first arch of the bridge was partially buried as a result of the filling of the Canal and the construction of the street now known as Riviera Tito Livio.

The bridge was linked to an extensive network of roads uniting Padua with all the most important urban centres of Venetia, and the fact that it was felt important to cross a river 40 -50 yards wide makes it seem likely that the town was surrounded by a large number of bridges, of which traces may be seen in the mediaeval Ponte Tadi and Ponte S.Giovanni delle Navi and the modern Pontecorvo and Ponte Molino.

Only Ponte San Lorenzo and Ponte Altinate, buried beneath the Riviera dei Ponti Romani, have come down to us with their ancient structure intact.



The bridge during the enclosure of the waterway



The bridge before the waterway was enclosed underground

The Ponte S. Lorenzo, in particular, was built in correspondence with what is now via San Francesco, which perhaps follows the line of a Roman road or Decuman of great importance for the urban network. It was immediately to the south of the city's fluvial harbour

and not only near the landing place for the barges but also in the vicinity of all those structures used for loading and unloading, as well as for storage, which were essential to the functioning of the port.

The need to facilitate the passage of the boats in the vicinity of the harbour, and to enable them to pass under the arches, help to explain the exceptional structure of the bridge, including the high, narrow piers and unusually flat arches. These were probably built with the aid of fixed keystones on intermediate supports, their voussoirs being laid without cement and joined by iron cramps soldered with lead.

The bridge has three arches using blocks of *trachite* from the Euganean Hills for the piles and the outer *armille* and limestone from Costozza in the Colli Berici both in the *intradossi*, on the top of the rostra and in the walls above the arches. Bricks were also present in the superstructure, but this may be owing to late antique or mediaeval restoration. The bridge has no stone foundations and is supported on robust rafts set at the foot of each pier. Given the unstable character of the terrain in this part of the city, these supports probably rest in their turn on compact stone piles, designed to consolidate the terrain.

The bridge must have been about 53.30 metres (180 Roman feet) in length, 44 metres without the access road, and 8.35 metres in width, while the roadway must have been 7.40 metres (about 25 Roman feet) in width.



View of one of the arches as it is today

The parapets were probably made of stone or faced with slabs of marble, as in the case of the marble slab with an inscription recording the construction of a Pluteus, found in the river bed of the ancient river Medoacus during the excavations of 1938.

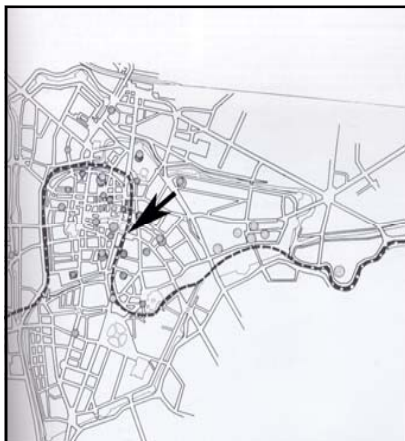
Under the pier of the left-hand arch there used to be passageway, no longer visible, which linked the left bank upstream from the bridge with the harbour downstream. From this landing place it used to be possible to reach the road level of the bridge thanks to a brick staircase, perhaps with stone steps, and with a parapet of marble slabs like the one mentioned above.

Above the central arch on the southern side of the bridge there is an inscription known since 1773, which must have been easily visible to those ascending the river in the direction of the harbour. It commemorates the order of the *Decurioni* who had commissioned the bridge and the three *adlegati* (delegates) who formed the technical commission which contracted out the building of the bridge and who performed the final inspection, in their status as supervisors of the works.

Text of the damaged inscription discovered in 1773

[..]L.CLO.C.ALBARENIVS.C[..]POMPONIVS Q.. IDANDER
[..]NIVS L.F.T. VLLA , C. POMPON[.] SCAPVLA . ADLEGATEI
PONTEM.FACIENDUM.D.D.S.LOCARV[.]IDEMQUE PROBARVNT

Rosa Fondacaro



The course of the river Bacchiglione through Padova before it was enclosed in an underground waterway during the nineteenth-sixties.

Information

Legambiente is Italy's most widespread association in favour of the environment, counting about 1,000 local clubs and 10,000 members and supporters. For years Legambiente has waged a strenuous campaign on behalf of sustainable economic development and of the defence and enhancement of the environment and the artistic resources with which Italy is so richly endowed.

Salvalarte is a project organized on a voluntary basis by the Paduan branch of Legambiente, which aims at the rediscovery and enhancement of little known Paduan monuments. The idea is to focus attention on the artistic wealth of our town, which is often neglected and forgotten.

You can join our association through Internet (www.legambientepadova.it) or by sending a "conto corrente postale 36037091" (specifying "iscrizione anno 2006" for example).

If you are enthusiastic about art and culture and have two hours a week to spare, you can volunteer to work on behalf of Salvalarte. At present our volunteers are helping to keep the following monuments open for visitors:

The Bridge of S.Lorenzo, Via S.Francesco

The Scuola della Carità, Via S.Francesco, 61

The Oratory of S.Margherita, Via S.Francesco, 51

For further information and for illustrations see our website (above)

Opening Times (Only working days)

Ponte San Lorenzo (via S. Francesco)

Tuesday to Saturday (no Wednesday)	10.00 - 12.00
Monday, Wednesday and Saturday	16.00 - 18.00

Scuola della Carità (via S. Francesco 63)

is at present closed for restoration

Oratorio di S. Margherita (via S.Francesco, 51)

Tuesday to Friday	10.00 - 12.00
Tuesday and Friday	15.00 - 17.00
Thursday	17.10 - 18.30

The Volunteers wish to specify that these times are subject to sudden variations.

For further information, and in order to arrange visits, you should contact Legambiente (tel. 049 8561212)



LEGAMBIENTE

Salvalarte

English

The Roman Bridge Of **SAN LORENZO**

- PADOVA -

**The pedestrian subway
in Via San Francesco**



The bridge of Saint Lawrence during the excavations for the University - TheBò - (1938)



Comune
di Padova



LEGAMBIENTE