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MONTE SAN GIORGIO

“What you can see underneath is Lake Lugano, over there, there is the San Primo Pass, the ones at the top are the flags at the frontier post, can you see the white cross blowing in the wind?”

Shadows on the lake, Cocco&Magella

The wooded pyramid of Monte San Giorgio straddles Italy and Switzerland, with its height of 1097 m dominating the southern shores of Lake Ceresio, commonly known as Lake Lugano. The Italian portion of the site has been added to the Swiss one, inscribed in the UNESCO list in 2003, comprising with the latter the whole fossil bearing rock outcrop dating back to the Middle Triassic period (245-230 million years ago). A certain effort of the imagination is necessary to go back down the course of time and find yourself catapulted into a world that could not seem further from the panoramas that can be admired today. This pre-Alpine and lake scenario was a warm tropical lagoon of calm, shallow water, dotted with small islands, volcanoes and banks of fine sand. Separating it from the open sea there was a coral barrier swarming with life: crustaceans, molluscs, echinoderms, a myriad of fish and above all reptiles that represent the most spectacular component of the site's fauna. A short distance away, the outcrops were carpeted with lush forests, dominated by ancient conifers and cyclically blown away by strong monsoon winds. After their death, the remains of the organisms underwent those processes of being deposited, covered and mineralised which allowed them to be preserved until today in the form of fossils. In the millions of years that followed, the impressive orogenetic forces gradually raised those ancient seabeds, which then formed the Alpine and Prealpine slopes.



TRANSNATIONAL NATURAL HERITAGE

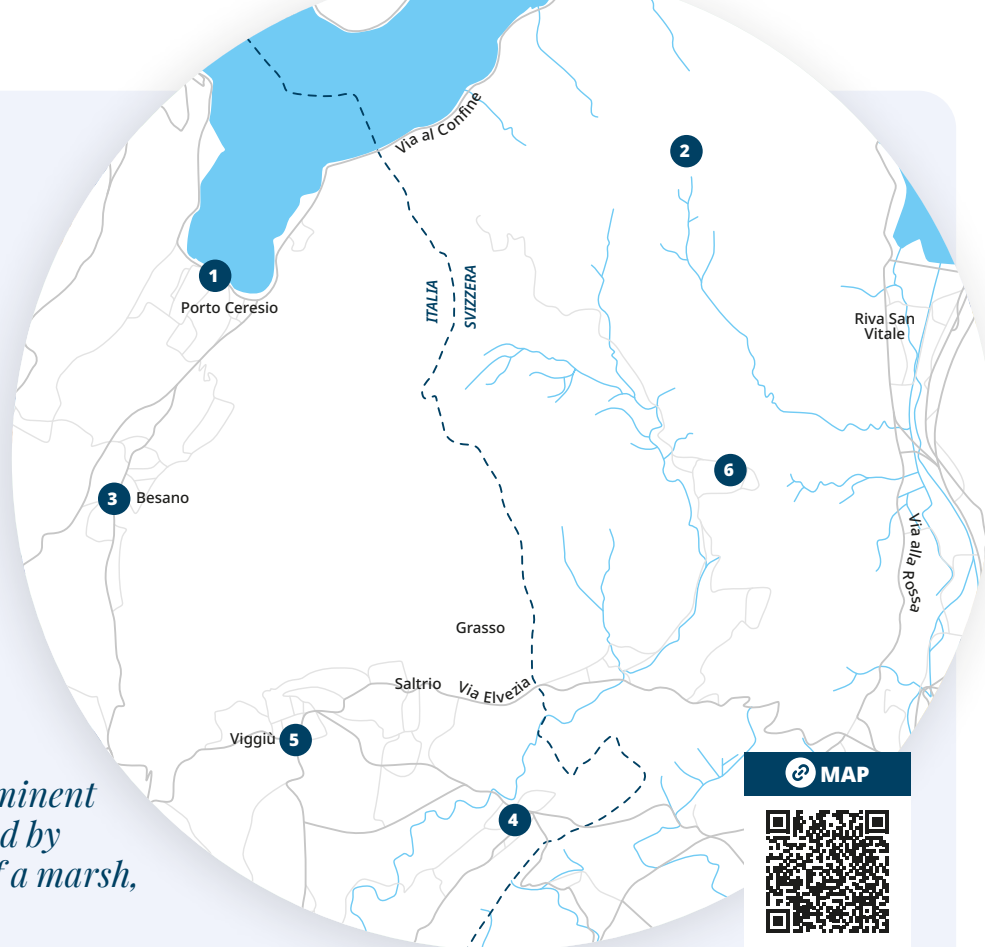
UNESCO DOSSIER: 1090

PLACE OF INSCRIPTION: BRASILIA, BRAZIL

DATE OF INSCRIPTION: 2003/2010



CRITERIA FOR SELECTION: Studied since the 19th century, the fossiliferous sequence of Monte San Giorgio is one of the best examples of the diversity of marine life during the Middle Triassic period (245-230 million years ago) when the area was part of a tropical lagoon near the outcrops and separated from the open sea.



“Contini went out on to the pier and sat down with his legs crossed in front of the lake which, in the imminent darkness of the afternoon, enveloped by the mist, seemed the extreme edge of a marsh, in the heart of a wildland.”

The image evoked by Andrea Fazioli in *L’arte del fallimento* appears vividly in Monte San Giorgio as it plunges into the waters of Lake Ceresio. This naturalistic and cultural landscape of a rare appeal is triggered off by a temporal short circuit, which makes the most remote past coexist with the history of the 20th century and invites exploration.

The ideal itinerary starts from the village of **1 Porto Ceresio**, where you can walk along the picturesque lake front between a relaxing pause and an incursion into the shadows of the old alleys. The wooded paths which in a couple of hours go up to **2 Monte San Giorgio**, in Swiss territory, start not far from the centre. Splendid all-round views over the lake and the nearby Monte Generoso open up from the top. Back in Italy, there is **3 Besano**, immediately south of Ceresio. Its fossil museum is the best place to understand the scientific importance of the UNESCO site. It displays different original specimens, casts, virtual reconstructions and models of the fossil fauna, including the largest vertebrate

found on the site, the ichthyosaurus named after the village: *Besanosaurus leptorinchus*. In nearby **4 Clivio**, in the Museum of Natural History of Clivio and Induno Olona, it is possible to admire the whole naturalistic complexity of the area, admiring various other fossil finds of *Lariosaurus valceresii*. One of the most moving traces that modernity has left on the area are the remains of what was called the “Cadorna Line”, the system of fortifications guarding the border between Italy and Switzerland during the First World War. Particularly impressive are the massive forts in the caves of Monte Orsa and Monte Pravello, which can be explored walking along the path that

leads from **5 Viggiù**. The small town houses the Butti Plaster Cast Museum, dedicated to the work of the maestro Enrico Butti, and the Picasass Museum, named after the centuries-old tradition of quarrying and working stone, a mark of how deep and inextricable the relationship between man and the geological history of the area has always been. Lastly, you can go back to speaking the language of the remote past by entering the green wooded valley where the village of **6 Meride**, in the Canton Ticino is. In addition to the well-preserved historic centre, visit the rich Fossil Museum, which will allow you, almost literally, to dive into the countless forms of life which populated the warm seas of the Triassic.



ANTONIO FOGAZZARO AND THE PATRIOT

“On the lake a cold breva was blowing, striving to drive away the grey clouds which clung heavily about the dark mountain-tops. ... The waves beat and thundered on the shore, jostling the boats at their moorings, while flashing tongues of white foam showed, here and there, as far as the frowning banks of the Doi over yonder. But down in the west, at the end of the lake, a line of light could be seen, a sign of approaching calm, of the diminishing breva, and behind the gloomy Caprino hill appeared the first misty rain.”

The Patriot, Antonio Fogazzaro

It is this image of imminent meteorological drama that opens what is considered Antonio Fogazzaro's masterpiece, set in the village of Valsolda, at the northernmost tip of Lake Lugano. The storm bursting out on the calm shores of Lake Ceresio is almost an echo by the landscape of the historic time, that between the uprisings of 1848 and the eve of the Second War of Independence, and is the backdrop to the human story of the young Franco Maironi, a young patriot with liberal ideas who is the hero of the novel. The author spent several years in the village of Oria, living in Villa Fogazzaro Roi.



‘VERY FEW PEOPLE, AT THAT TIME, KNEW THAT THEY WERE FOSSILS AND AMONG THOSE VERY FEW, THERE WERE EVEN FEWER OF THEM WHO ACCEPTED AS POSSIBLE THE IDEA THAT PARTS OF UNKNOWN ANIMALS HAD COME DOWN TO US, PETRIFIED.’

Inspired by the words that Annalisa Strada puts into the mouth of Mary Anning, the greatest fossil hunter of the 19th century, this journey into

prehistory is an overview of the most curious species of fossils that can be admired in the museums of the UNESCO site. First of all, some adaptation to the environment will be necessary. Instead of Monte San Giorgio, 240 million years ago, there was a tropical sea dotted with lush islands and sand banks, similar to the Maldives. A huge array of forms of life swam in the turquoise waters: fish, molluscs, crustaceans and many species of strange reptiles, but perfectly adapted to this environment. The first, the largest and most famous, was the **1 Besanosaurus**, a member of the group of ichthyosaurs that

lived by catching the fish and the ammonites that the sea was full of. Do not be tricked by its shape: despite its resemblance to today's dolphins, it was a descendant of the ancient terrestrial reptiles that evolved by adapting to the marine environment. About three metres long and with paddle-like limbs, the **2 Ceresiosaurus** was another very common reptile in this fauna; its name comes from the present-day name of Lake Lugano.

With its small mouth full of sharp teeth and a rigid neck, which was longer than the rest of its body, the **3 Tanystropheus** was the strangest inhabitant of this underwater world. Similar to a huge marine iguana, on the other hand, there was the

4 Paraplagodus, which with the sinuous movements of its long tail, moved in search of crustaceans and molluscs, of which it could crush the shells thanks to its flat and sturdy back teeth. An inhabitant of the outcrops dominated by impressive prehistoric coniferous forests was also the **5 Ticinosuchus**, the largest land predator of these areas. More than 2 metres long, this cousin of crocodiles and dinosaurs had formidable carnivore's teeth and long legs which allowed it to run quickly; it was also protected by a double row of bone plaques that ran along its back and gave it an even more threatening appearance. About 50 species of fish have emerged from the excavations; one of the most interesting was the **6 Saurichthys**, which for its appearance and its predatory habits could be compared to present-day barracudas.

Among the invertebrates, cephalopod molluscs of the groups of **7 ammonites** were very common, and easily recognisable for the spiral shell from which a head bristling with tentacles, similar to that of the present-day nautilus, emerged.



MONTE SAN GIORGIO in books

Reading suggestions to get to know Lake Lugano.

• **The Patriot**, Antonio Fogazzaro (1895). Considered the masterpiece of Antonio Fogazzaro, the novel follows the difficult love story between Franco Maironi and Luisa Rigey, two young people separated by their great social differences, against the backdrop of the fight for Italian independence from Austrian domination.

• **Chi muore si rivede**, Andrea Fazioli (2005). The extraordinary investigations of an ordinary detective on his first case, in that small world precariously balanced between Switzerland and Lombardy which is Lake Ceresio. There are all the ingredients to keep the reader glued to the pages: a mysterious piece of jewellery, well-guarded family secrets and a ruthless killer who does not seem to leave anything to chance, before many twists and turns derail the plot towards an incredible solution.

• **Shadows on the lake**, Cocco & Magella (2013). The remains of a mysterious man come to the surface between Lake Como and Lake Lugano, in the mountains of the Val d'Intelvi. What do they hide? A cross between a classic thriller, a family saga and an international intrigue, Inspector Stefania Valenti will confront the past of these mountains, which have become the dark crossroads of countries when the war is over.

• **L'arte del fallimento**, Andrea Fazioli (2014). The private investigator sharpens his weapons of deduction, between an acute disappointment and a deep understanding of the human soul. In this case he will be faced by the limits and errors of a man ready to follow his dream, before the shadow of failure and that of the hand of a mad murderer, stretch over his life.

• **I casi del maresciallo Ernesto Maccadò**, Andrea Vitali (2018-2024). Vitali is the poet of the atmosphere of Lake Ceresio's twin, Lake Lario. Its mists imbue the characters who live on its shores. With all the scent of Italy as it was in the past, the successful series dedicated to Inspector Maccadò, who

from Calabria has been relocated to Bellano, starts with the novel *Nome d'arte Doris Brilli*.

• **Che cosa resta**, Antonello Breggia (2022). The Varese Prealps, the gloomy climate of November, the excursion to a mountain refuge by a group of teenagers: none of the characters imagines that their life is about to be upset forever. The author sniffs out the track of the coming-of-age novel, to follow the lives of the youngsters until they are adults, in a village which, like their lives, seems to be moving towards an inexorable sunset.

Children's books:

• **La cacciatrice di fossili. Mary Anning si racconta**, Annalisa Strada (2019). The extraordinary story of a young woman wanting to conquer a place in science in 19th-century England: her fight against social conventions, her adventures on the rocks and, above all, her passion for palaeontology which will result in her becoming the first to discover the fossil remains that have entered our collective imagination.

