



# Chesterton

Associazione culturale di volontariato



## VERCELLI:

A JEWEL FROM THE MIDDLE AGES



# THE ORIGINS OF VERCELLI ARE LOST IN THE MISTS OF TIME

**T**his territory was inhabited first by a Ligurian tribe, and then by the Celts in the 4th century B.C. Probably, the name “Vercelli” comes from Wehr Celt, that is to say “Celtic Stronghold”, but then the Romans , who conquered the city in 89 B.C., transformed the name into VERCELLAE; during the Roman Age, Vercelli became an important road junction along the main lines of communication between the North and the South of the Empire. In the 4th century the city housed the main Christian diocese of Piedmont, thanks to Eusebio, who became bishop of Vercelli on 15th December 345. St. Eusebio is the patron saint of the city and the cathedral is dedicated to him.



**D**uring the period of the city-states, Vercelli took part in the battle of Legnano in 1176. In the 13th century the town experienced a magic moment: it was the time of Guala Bicchieri, of the building of Sant'Andrea, of the foundation of the homonymous hospital (1224) and of the University (1228).



**N**owadays Vercelli is a city of about 50,000 inhabitants, with a lovely old town embellished with baroque churches and palaces, medieval towers and fashionable boulevards. The dome of the

Cathedral and the bell towers of Sant'Andrea stand out against all the other buildings and they show the traveller the right way to the jewels of the city. The city museums house precious finds and the vestiges of a glorious past. At night every square and tower in the city is lit: people walk and meet in the quiet streets of the city centre and sit down in the open for a drink. The city centre is like a big living room where everybody knows each other and visitors are given a warm welcome.





The seat of one of the first Italian universities – founded by the Comune in 1228 following the model of Cambridge University, Vercelli is now experiencing an enviable cultural revival and it houses very important events and exhibitions thanks to the relations that it has recently established with Turin, Venice and the Guggenheim Foundation.



# THE BASILICA AND ENGLISH HISTORY



The structure of the Basilica is reminiscent of the Benedictine-Cistercian structure: we can notice a cloister and around it are the Chapter House, the pantry, the refectory and the dormitory. Unfortunately the identity of the architect in charge of the complex building works is still unknown, but maybe the aura of mystery around him makes the Basilica more and more fascinating. The complex style shows an incredible fusion between Gothic and Romanesque trends and is considered one of the best monastic complexes in Italy. The basilica was founded in 1219 by Cardinal Guala Bicchieri, a papal legate born in Vercelli in the second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. He was the third papal legate appointed to England under King John Lackland and the first of four papal legates appointed during the reign of Henry III, John's son and successor. In England he acted as a Regent, supporting King Henry III when he inherited the crown, on his father's death. Guala signed two editions of Magna Carta (1216 and 1217) and the Forest Charter (1217), supported Henry III's soldiers against the French invaders and restored peace and order in Britain. In exchange for all this, Henry III gave Guala the church and livings of St. Andrew's Chesterton (Cambridge), which Guala used to found the basilica on his return from England.

Nowadays, the relationships between Vercelli and the English places familiar with Cardinal Guala Bicchieri have been revived: a large number of English people visit the basilica every year and some important choirs have sung under the vaults built by Guala: Ely Cathedral Choir, Pembroke College Chapel Choir (Cambridge) and Ely Choral Society among them.





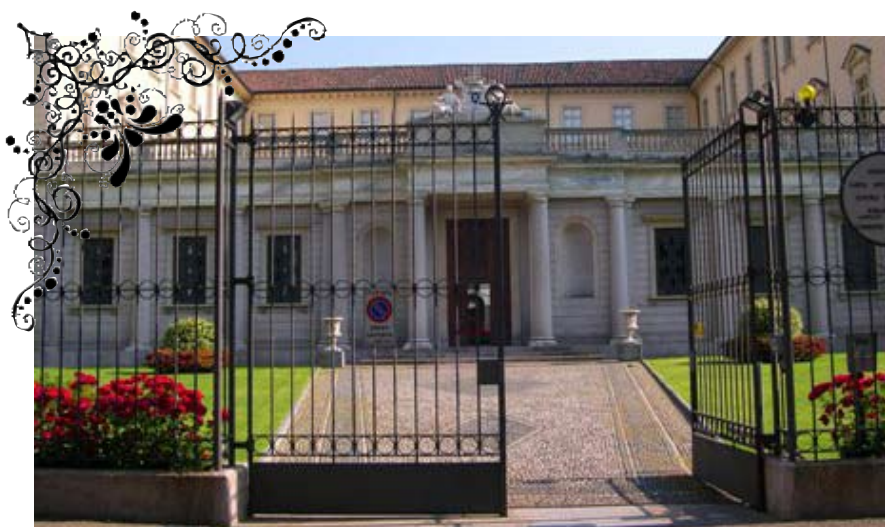
VERCELLI:  
A HUB  
FOR COMMUNICATION  
SINCE ANCIENT TIMES





Since ancient times Vercelli has been an important hub for communication and cultural exchange between Italy and the rest of Europe. Already in the Roman era the city was a significant reference point for travellers and in the Middle Ages it became an essential stopover on the Via Francigena.

In the Middle Ages hundreds of visitors- pilgrims, merchants, clerics, craftsmen, artists, but also beggars – used to arrive in the city everyday and stop here for a couple of nights in one of the many hospitalia that had been founded to receive them. There were at least 14 of these hospitalia in or around Vercelli in the XII century. A considerable proportion of the pilgrims stopping in the city were from the British Isles. As a result of this a hospital called Santa Brigida degli Scoti was founded in the city centre. It was an important reference point for English-speaking pilgrims, who could have a rest in a place where local people could speak their language (Old English) and knew their traditions and prayers. It seems that it was one of those pilgrims coming from the British Isles that left in the city the Vercelli Book. He must have had it in his bag, probably because he was a preacher or because he wished to present some important member of the clergy with it. But unfortunately he must have fallen ill while he was on his journey to Vercelli and so he died here, leaving his most valuable gift to the city.





# THE VERCELLI BOOK

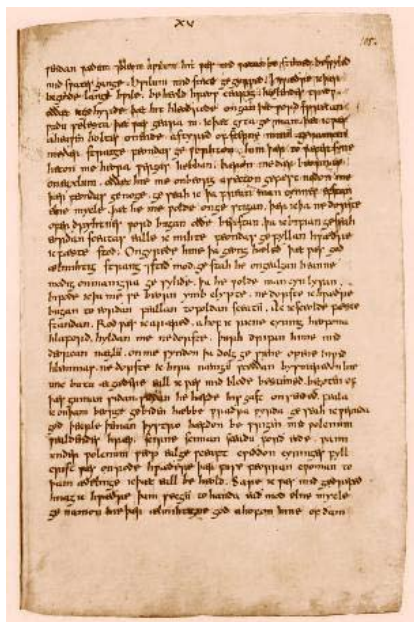
**T**he Vercelli Book is a late tenth century manuscript also known as “Codex Vercellensis”. or “Codex CXVII”. Compiled in a scriptorium of southern England, it is one of a group of four major anthologies in Old English (700 / 1100), the language of the Anglo-Saxons. More precisely, the language of the manuscript is generally West Saxon. The codex is made up of 136 folios of thin parchment, (of about 31 x 21 cm), which are well preserved and contain between 23 and 32 lines each. The manuscript contains miscellaneous religious works in prose and poetry. It consists of 23 homilies, a prose life of St. Guthlac and 6 poems. The texts have an ascetic character and a didactic aim.

## **Why is the Vercelli Book so important?**

- Because it provides important information about the development of the English language
- because it is a unique collection of Old English religious texts offering a fascinating glimpse of Anglo-Saxon spirituality
- because it offers clear evidence of the importance the town used to have in the Middle Ages.
- because it dates back to the late 10th century, but more than that because the poems it contains are much older than the manuscript: it seems that Cynewulf lived in the second half of the VIII century and that the texts contained in the Vercelli Book were composed between 700 and 850. Owing to the lack of information on the subject, however, it is not possible to be dogmatic about the date of compilation of the code and the year in which the poems were composed
- because it is one of the few surviving manuscripts containing Anglo-Saxon literature: it is certain that only a small portion of A-S poetry- about 30,000 lines - has survived.

Almost all A-S poetry is preserved in four manuscripts, which are unique and late in date:

1. the Vercelli Book, or Codex CXVII;
2. the Cotton Vitellius Manuscript, which is preserved in the British Museum. This manuscript is extremely important because it contains Beowulf, the earliest Old English epic poem
3. the Junius Manuscript, which is preserved in the Bodleian Library, Oxford; its name comes from the name of its owner, Junius, who was a librarian to Lord Arundel. It was first printed in 1655 and contains the so-called Caedmonian poems;
4. the Exeter Book, which was given to Exeter Cathedral by Bishop Leofric. It contains some pagan elegies, among which the most remarkable are The Ruined Burgh, The Wanderer, Widsith, Deor, The Seafarer, The Lover's Message and The Maiden's Complaint.



Courtesy Museo del Tesoro del Duomo

It has been estimated that these four manuscripts contain almost 90 % of the whole Anglo Saxon poetic output. The reason why so few manuscripts remain and why they were so strangely scattered is still unclear. It has been suggested that when, in the 16th century, King Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries, their libraries were burnt or plundered and most of the books they contained were destroyed. What we know for certain is that poetry made its appearance long before monks and scribes began to compile their manuscripts. Cynewulf's poems, for example, were probably composed in the late 8th century, but the manuscript in which they are contained –the Vercelli Book- was compiled two centuries later.

### **When and how was the Vercelli Book decoded?**

The Vercelli Book was not decoded until 1822, when the German jurist Friedrich Blume found it (while he was looking for legal manuscripts) and realised that the codex was written in Old English. Before 1822 the code had always been virtually ignored owing to the obscure language of its texts. Paradoxically enough, however, the mysterious origin of the manuscript and the unknown language in which it had been compiled were what preserved the Vercelli Book. After 1822, the manuscript has become the main source for the study of the development of the English language and still helps us understand some important features of Old English literature.



.....  
*Courtesy Museo Leone*  
.....



VERCELLI  
AND ITS MUSIC



*Courtesy Massimo Fonsatti*



One of the best known musicians in the world, Giovan Battista Viotti, was born here in 1755 (Fontanetto Po is the name of his native village). He was a pupil of Pugnani's, with whom he toured Europe. In France he served at Versailles before founding the Théâtre de Monsieur in 1788. In 1792 he moved to London to avoid the dangers of the French Revolution. In England he became a star and made friends with important people such as the Prince of Wales and the Duke of Cambridge. He was among the founders of the Philharmonic Society of London.

Viotti is still much loved in Vercelli, who considers him as one of his most talented sons. The musician is commemorated every year in the Viotti International Music Competition and also in the Viotti Festival, both held in Vercelli. Concerts and recitals are held in the local theatre and in our most beautiful churches, such as San Cristoforo, which is famous for its frescos by Gaudenzio Ferrari (c.1480-1546). In recent years the Orchestra Camerata Ducale, with his founders Guido Rimonda and Cristina Canziani, have promoted a rediscovery of Viotti's genius and career, organising important concerts and musical events in the local theatre and the magnificent basilica. In this way they have been able to combine – if only ideally - the talents and merits of Vercelli's two most important sons: Guala Bicchieri and Giovan Battista Viotti.



# VERCELLI: A CITY OF ARTS



“Arts and culture are under our skin” is what we say in Vercelli. Not only are we a medieval city, where every street shows remnants of a glorious and heroic past when we were amongst the most important cities in Italy, but today we are amongst the first Cities of Arts in Italy. In the centre of the city, close to our main square (which recalls the typical medieval squares and which even today is the meeting place of the local people) you can see ARCA, our art gallery and museum, where Guggenheim exhibitions are mounted. Come and see the most famous paintings in the world, in a setting which is worth a visit.





# VERCELLI:

## A CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY OF WORSHIP AND WELCOME

**W**alking along the streets of our city, you will be astonished to see how many churches and places of worship we have. Vercelli has been defined “the city of 100 bell towers” . Most of our churches contains real treasures: freascos (San Cristoforo) , paintings (San Giuliano), crosses (the Cathedral, San Cristoforo and Sant’Andrea). Do not miss the silver cross hanging on the central altar in our Cathedral: it dates back to the 12th century.

