

Chronicle of Rovigo* A city that deserves rehabilitation

Abstract

This article addresses some relevant features of the Italian city of Rovigo, located in the Northeastern Italy's Veneto region. Unable to compete with the nearby cities of Venice, Padua and Ferrara in terms of art and culture in general, Rovigo ended up victim of an unfair judgement expressed in a couplet unfairly attributed to Dante Alighieri. The main goal of the following is to contribute to restore Rovigo's reputation. The research was based not only in a reliable bibliography, but also in my personal explorations as traveller.

Keywords: Italy, Veneto, Rovigo, culture, literature

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Introduction

Capital of the eponymous province and located in the Veneto (one of the 20 Italy's regions, located in the Northeast part of the country), Rovigo is best known by travelers for being near Venice (c. 80km) and even nearer Padua (c. 50km), let alone Ferrara (c. 30km), three of Italy's most distinguished highlights. The majority of Rovigo's population (c. 52,000) is composed of *Polesani*, i.e., people born in the Polesine, a low strip of land about 100 km long and 18 km wide, limited to the north by the Adige river, to the south by the Po river, to the east by the Adriatic Sea, never ceasing to arouse doubts about where its western part—which, on the map, looks like an index finger stretched and pointing towards Mantua—ends. Uncertainty also prowls the origin and the meaning of the name “Rovigo”; all we know is that it derives from the Latin term *Rodigium* or *Rhodigium*, and that it appears to have been first mentioned in a document from the city of Ravenna, dating back to the first half of the 9th century, dawn of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation—the “thousand-year Reich” founded by Charlemagne and dissolved by Napoleon, which was a historical and geographical heir of the Empire of the Caesars (27 BC–476 AD). The international travel guide Lonely Planet makes reference to Italy as a country by which “rare is the traveller who isn't smitten”.ⁱ Reasons for that, says the book, are many: they range from “Italians' outspoken zest for life” to natural beauty, not forgetting cultural (especially in the field of art) richness. Indeed, “Teeming with ancient history, artistic splendour, divine food and wine, and a romantic olive-grove dappled landscape, Italy hits the heart and soul fast”ⁱⁱⁱ is a sentence that fits that country to a T. Compared to Rome, Florence and Co., Rovigo has little to offer in terms of the tangible pleasures that attract most of the travellers that head for Italy. Personal reasons led me to Rovigo: it all started when, in the late 1980s, I decided to find the birth certificates of my Italian ancestors (who were *Polesani*), in order to have my Italian citizenship recognized. Father Antonio Dona, then parish priest of Rovigo's Cathedral, was an important ally in that undertaking, which had a happy ending: after many years of searching and bureaucracy, since 2005, I have my Italian citizenship recognized.

Back to Rovigo: east, west, home's best

Last October (2019), I had the opportunity of returning to Rovigo. Among many other things, this allowed me to attend a beautiful organ concert held in the city's *Duomo* (“cathedral”), which is dedicated to Saint Stephan Pope and Martyr (254-257), by the Italian organist Ruggiero Liviero, who happens to be blind, and to see the exhibition entitled *Giapponismo. Venti d'Oriente nell'arte europea 1860-1915* (“Japanism. East Winds in European Art”), sponsored by the *Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Padova e Rovigo*, and staged at the Renaissance-style Palazzo Roverella (the Renaissance-style Palazzo Roverella [which include in its permanent collection Western art masterpieces spanning from the 1400s to the 1700s], one of Rovigo's architectural jewels – which are many). As for *Giapponismo*, it is duly definitely “a fascinating and elegant review of the works of great European artists such as Van Gogh, Gauguin, De Nittis, Degas and Bonnard, taking visitors on a voyage of the new art form inspired by the masterpieces, influences and innovations bestowed by Japan on Western culture”.ⁱⁱⁱ Another gift that Rovigo gave me was the very interesting *giallo* (i.e., a detective story) written by one of her citizens: the Sicilian Angelo Salvatore Amato's *Un brigadiere e mezzo* (“One and a Half Policeman”), which I have been enjoying a lot to read.

Conclusion

Unduly attributed to Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), the famous derogatory verses concerning Rovigo (“*Tra l'Adige ed il Po giace sepolta, / scheletro di città, Rovigo incolta*”: “Between the rivers Adige and Po, uncultured Rovigo, ghost town, lies buried”) do not correspond to the truth. Rovigo's situation is analogous to that of Michelangelo's poetry, which made him one of the greatest poets of Renaissance Italy^{iv}, but was overshadowed by his magnificent works in the fields of sculpture, painting and architecture, “*le tre arti eccellentissime*” (“the three most excellent arts”), according to Giorgio Vasari.^v Likewise, Rovigo, unable to compete with the nearby

ⁱⁱⁱSara Surico et alii. <http://www.palazzoroverella.com/en/exhibition/giapponismo/>.

^{iv}See Robert J. Clements. *The Poetry of Michelangelo*, New York, New York University Press, 1966, p. 3 et passim.

^vSee *Le vite dei più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architetti italiani da Cimabue insino a tempi nostri*, Rome, Grandi Tascabili Economici, 1997, p. 31 et passim; and João Vicente Ganzarolli de Oliveira. “Michelangelo, cidadão de quatro mundos: o moderno e o medieval, o terrestre e o divino”, in *Coletânea*, Rio de Janeiro, v. 16, n. 32, 2017, pp. 331-354.

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ⁱAlex Leviton et alii. *Europe on a Shoestring*, Victoria (Australia), Lonely Planet, 2005, p. 642.

ⁱⁱⁱIbid.

cities of Venice, Padua and Ferrara in terms of art and culture in general, ended up victim of that unfair judgement. As an admirer of both Rovigo and Dante Alighieri, I refuse to believe that the author of the *Commedia*, open-minded as he was, would have been the same author of the verses at stake. Much more plausible for me is that they were created “*da un ignoto poetastro di Adria verso il 1726*” (“by a bad and unknown poet from the neighbour city of Adria in 1726”), as the Florentine scholar Giuseppe Fumagalli (1863-1939) states.^{vi} In what regards the reasons—presumably political – which led that XVIII century anonymous character to attack Rovigo with words, they are outside the scope of this small chronicle of Rovigo. I just hope these few lines will contribute to restore Rovigo’s reputation; *e più non dico*.¹⁻⁶

Acknowledgments

None.

Conflicts of interest

Author declares there are no conflicts of interest.

^{vi}Giuseppe Fumagalli. *Chi l’ha detto?: tesoro di citazioni italiane e straniere, di origine letteraria e storica, ordinate e annotate*, Milan, Ulrico Hoepli, 1995, p. 289.

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