

SAINT AUGUSTA LIFE



Patron of Serravalle
Vittorio Veneto

Inglese

Cover image:

Santa Augusta, Lit. Longo (detail.) 1841

Back cover image:

The shrine of Saint Augusta , chapel of the Saint.

Stone sarcophagus where Saint Augusta relics had been preserved for centuries (detail).

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Preface

I am pleased to present here the short life of St. Augusta, that Monsignor Rino Bechevolo wrote with a careful examination and thorough style, gathering news, traditions and legends that accompany for years the devotion and worship of the saint patron of Serravalle.

Saint Augusta, in her young life, lived in the light of faith, with purity of feelings and generous charity towards her neighbours. She continues to exert an extraordinary fascination for those who know her history or ascend to call upon her at the shrine that houses her venerable remains.

Her testimony of love and fidelity to Christ, even into martyrdom is an especially timely message in this moment in which the great Jubilee of 2000 invites us to renew ourselves spiritually and to live with more courage the radicalism of the evangelical beatitudes.

I thank Monsignor Rino Bechevolo for having so effectively presented the noble figure of St. Augusta and I hope that many people will want to know and imitate her.

Vittorio Veneto, 27th March 2000

Alfredo Magarotto
Bishop



Etched engraving from the work by G.Braun, F.Hogenberg: *Civitates Orbis Terrarum*. Coloniae Agrippinae, 1572, in fol (part.).

ON MOUNT MARCANTONE

People prefer to call it the mountain of St. Augusta because roughly half way up to the top, on a plain along the steep slope facing to the west, there is a church dedicated to the young virgin who was martyred up there about sixteen centuries ago. The Serravallesi are votary of St. Augusta and they have always relied upon and recognized her as a special patron in all the joyful and sad moments of their history.

The short earthly life of St. Augusta took place a long time ago on the mountain Marcantone. At that time the Roman Empire was in decline. The populations of northern Europe and the steppes of Asia began their migratory movement towards the more hospitable and more fertile Mediterranean regions.

In the year 402 AD the Visigoth king Alaric took to Italy with the intention of arriving at Rome; he actually managed to occupy Rome on the 24th of August 410 AD. But before this fact, which no one from that time would have ever thought of, Alaric invaded and seized the Veneto and also Ceneda. Tradition says that on that occasion he established one of his best captains named Matrucco in the fortress that garrisoned close to Serravalle. In this way Alaric sought to ensure, in case of withdrawal, the free passage through the Alps.

Historians assure us that the Romans - probably with Julius Caesar between 59 and 48 BC - had been engaged in building fortifications in this grasp for its obvious strategic importance. This grasp much later would be called Serravalle.

Over the centuries, some homes were built close to the defense and control barrier to accommodate a small number of residents. Historians rightly believe that here the

announcement of the Gospel by some itinerant herald or by the missionary activity carried out by a well-organized Christian community residing in Aquileia came soon enough.

Matrucco, after having arrived in Serravalle, settled in a fortress, perhaps built by himself, on a spur of Marcantone Mount. The rough soldier was involved deeply in those traditions of the people he belonged to and practiced the cult of the god Odin; therefore he persecuted the Christians.

Greedy for power and wealth, he soon extended his dominion over a vast area covering the foothills and also part of the area that leaned toward Friuli.

A territory that for Matrucco, used to the misty northern regions, left nothing to be desired. In the end, having realized his plans and having persuaded himself to have become a really powerful character with many followers, he even assumed the title of "king".

This is handed down from the ancient legend.

BIRTH OF AUGUSTA

From his stronghold on Marcantone Mount, Matrucco dominated as a despotic master. While his young wife who had followed him to Italy made his life happy. It was the year 410 AD. One day, from within the walls of the castle, good news leaked out: the wife of the king was pregnant.

Matrucco's happiness did not last long and it soon turned to trepidation. The young chatelaine was not feeling well and the delivery was assured to be difficult. The legend says that a friend came to help Matrucco, who was in desperation. We do not know the name of his loyal subordinate, who lived in a fort situated nearby on the heights of Piai, a town near Fregona.

The good wife of the king was carried into this hospitable house where she had everything that she could have desired for, in those dark and disastrous times. She could even experience the loving and intelligent attention of Cita, the housekeeper. Indeed, a bond of true friendship wove between the two women and this bond was so strong that when the young mother foreboded her imminent end, gave the child that was about to be born into the lovely hands of her friend Cita.

These are the circumstances in which Augusta came to life. Her mother had just the time to contemplate the face of her child and then, with a last flicker of love and unspeakable suffering, her eyes extinguished forever. This is the legend.

Even today the good people of Piai look at the hill overlooking the village and at the ruin of the castle at the top of it and are seized by a spirit of tenderness while thinking of the death of St. Augusta's mother.

Matrucco, to alleviate the pain that the loss of the wife had given him, poured on her baby all the love he could muster. He called the baby Augusta as a prophecy of a wonderful future and entrusted her to Cita.

The good woman from Piai moved to Serravalle, to the castle of her master and became a second mother to the small Augusta who grew like an angel beside her. Matrucco tried to educate her child according to the customs and traditions of the people he belonged to.

But she was also taught by the good nurse and she soon felt the falsity of the worship that her father and his courtiers payed to Odin and the other pagan gods. Therefore, while she was growing up, her interest turned increasingly to the new religion that Cita was telling her about. She knew that it was practiced in secret by many Serravallesi, challenging the persecution of her father, the king.

AUGUSTA RECEIVES BAPTISM

The legend also says that in those days, behind the Marcantone mount in a deep cave dug into the rock, lived an old hermit, wholly dedicated to prayer and penance. Cita knew him, as well as Christians in Serravallesi, who looked to him in secret to hear him speak of the Lord, to pray together and to ask his advice. One day Cita secretly led Augusta to visit the holy old man. He, of course, urged the girl to love the Lord and to practice the Christian virtues with courage.

Other visits followed to the hermit who instructed and prepared Augusta to receive the baptism and to become a Christian forever. Nobody noticed it, nobody would have ever suspected it, not even her father, but Augusta secretly reflected on the decision that would have marked her life forever. For this reason she mortified herself and prayed intensely, relying in God.

The big day came when the holy hermit poured on her front the water of regenerating grace. Cita watched by her side in great joy; she had reached the main purpose of the mission entrusted by the Lord.

After becoming a Christian, Augusta alternated prayer with exercise of charity; in fact she often descended from her castle and entered secretly in the houses of Christians persecuted by her father, to console them and to help them in their need, just as Jesus teaches in the Gospel (Matthew 25, 34-46).

Augusta came not only in the houses but also in the hearts of the poor people. She participated in those prayer meetings that Christians Serravallesi used to have in some secret and secluded places.

BREAD TURNS INTO FLOWERS

The legend, at this point, gives us an episode that we really must tell you. Augusta was used to collect the bread left on her father's table - especially during festivals and banquets - and to give it to the poor. One day, thoughtful and careful, she stopped her occupations to fill her apron with bread because the poor hungry people wouldn't have had to wait. Then she started down the steep path that leads to the plane towards the Serravalle. But here, halfway down the mount, suddenly she was found facing her father who, gruff and grumpy as usual, was going up toward the castle on horseback, with his guard escort.

The attitude of his daughter made him suspicious. "What are you carrying, Augusta, in your apron?" She, not at all disturbed, replied: "Wildflowers, sir." After all is it not a flower, in the eyes of God, charity to the poor? Matrullo, who did not believe her answer, wanted to be sure and opened her apron with the sword from the top of his horse.

And he really saw the wildflowers. The humble princess was astounded: those pieces of bread which she hid with so much love in her apron had really turned into wildflowers.

Even now, after so many centuries, half way up the hill leading to the shrine, we can still see a big and shiny stone partly worn away on the cobbled paving. This would be the place where, according to the legend, the incident we just told you happened. That is why the passing pilgrims briefly pause here and touch the stone.

A small shrine had been built beside the path, where a fresco painting evokes the scene of the meeting of Augusta with her father.



*Panoramic view:
in the background, Col Visentin (1763 m);
in the middle, Monte Marcantone (432 m);
below, Saint Augusta's sanctuary and chapels.*

SUSPECTS OF KING MATRUCCO

This brings us to the tragic ending of the life of Augusta, or rather to the triumph of her faith and purity over the dangers and brutality of this poor world.

Matrucco was not at all happy with his daughter's behaviour. She did not worship the gods he held in high honor; she shunned sophisticated celebrations which were held at the palace and especially she stubbornly refused all the proposals of marriage that could assure her wealth and even the pomp of a royal throne.

How could the retirement and the discharged behaviour, so inappropriate to her rank, and above all the attention she showed to those vulgar and the marginalized people that her father abhorred and cast out away from him with contempt be explained? And then, where did she go when she went out secretly from the castle? This last question gave Matrucco no peace: did perhaps the new Christian religion win the heart of his daughter? He didn't want to believe it but it was necessary to investigate.

Matrucco, impatient, sent for one of his astute servants and ordered him to secretly monitor Augusta and to report back to him everything. The servant, flattered for the office he received and eager to acquire merit with his master, from that moment on did not lose sight of the good princess, who suspected nothing.

A few days later, leaving the castle, Augusta began to descend safely towards Serravalle. And the servant came down to pursue her, without being seen, as fast as a spy. When Augusta reached the village at the bottom of the valley she went into a secluded house, where Christians used to

meet to pray and attend religious services. Here she knelt before the altar of the true God, freely expressing her feelings of faith and love. The servant of Matrucco stealthily entered in the same place and witnessed the scene, from a safe distance, and had no doubt: Augusta was Christian. Without waiting any longer, he finished his job and hurried back to the castle eager to refer everything to his master.

The report of the servant marked the beginning of the martyrdom of Augusta. It is impossible to say the anger, or rather, the psychological disorder that Matrucco faced with a reality so feared and so bitter. His beloved daughter shown Christian; we can only glimpse and somehow imagine what he felt.

The immense pride that, due to his nature and education had imbued his character, prevailed over his paternal instinct and therefore everything became possible, even the most cruel and unthinkable determinations. The boundless love turned into implacable hatred. Augusta, as soon as she returned to the palace, was soon brought to the presence of her father. He - the trick was not lacking and could still fake it - tried to get her to see sense with sweet and flattering words - so he thought - so that she backed out of her choices.

Augusta was similar to her father in her strength of character and clarity of ideas. She was resolute. She unequivocally declared herself a Christian and willing to die rather than deny her faith. Matrucco had to swallow the first defeat. After giving vent to anger with a string of invective and threats, he ordered the guards to shut Augusta in jail.



Saint Augusta's sanctuary. Loggia opposite the old entrance of the sanctuary, erected on the occasion of the expansion works (1450 – 1452).

MARTYRDOM

Tradition says that Cita, the faithful housekeeper, desperate about what was happening, tried to be as close as possible to Augusta to comfort and encourage her. The next day, Matrucco asked again his daughter who, despite the fact she was so young, was not at all intimidated and put up again the clearest rejection to the claim of her father. He then decided to torture her. The story of the martyrdom inflicted on Augusta by her father would seem incredible if the chronicles of evil didn't speak of many similar incidents of inhuman cruelty.

Only a man, victim of ancestral superstitions and, it seems, of a satanic infestation could get to the point of torturing and killing his daughter with such sadism. Matrucco gave the order to the executioner to pull two teeth out from the mouth of Augusta, perhaps with the intention of not only torturing her but also polluting her fresh white smile. After several days of hard jail, humiliated in her no longer princely dress, poorly fed and forced to rest on a cold stone, Augusta was dragged back to her father's presence. Surprised by the calm, almost cheerful, demeanour of his daughter, Matrucco tried again to flatter her in all the ways he knew to make her withdraw from her plan. But all in vain.

Taken by a new excess of fury the king ordered the second act of martyrdom - that he hoped would be the last: the burning. Augusta, who despised and renounced the religion of her ancestors, perhaps did not deserve the death reserved for traitors?

The soldiers took the girl and placed her, hands and feet bound, on a pile of wood and underbrush that was next to the castle walls. The fire was set but, to the surprise and astonishment of those present, not the slightest harm came to Augusta because the Lord wanted a miracle to confirm the truth of the religion she embraced.

Cita's agony, being present to the torture against the creature who, for various reasons, was also hers, seemed to slow down the cruel torture. But it was not for long. Now the mind of Matrucco, completely darkened, was no longer able to reason and his heart was petrified. Even the miracle he had witnessed was to no avail, which he probably attributed to some magical power. Tradition tells us that, stiffening in his cruelty, the heartless father immediately thought to inflict a new and frightening ordeal. He ordered a spiked wheel with curved iron toe nails to be prepared.

Then he ordered it to be tightly bound over the body of Augusta so that, turning the wheel, her limbs would be torn. But God intervened with another miracle. When the executioners of Matrucco orders tried to turn the wheel, a blazingly lit angel descended from heaven on to the mountain, with a threatening face and armed with a powerful sword: with a single shot he broke the infamous machine, to the wonder and terror of all present. In fact, hearing of what was going on above Marcantone mountain, many people had come to see, to realize. We will not be so far from the truth in thinking that, after having seen the wonders and the heroic behaviour of Augusta, many would have converted to Christianity.

Perhaps Matrucco thought about this and for this reason, brought the tragedy to an end. Augusta, wholly absorbed in God, was now no longer living for this world and was eager to transplant her tent in heaven. As Odin - the reference is open to interpretation - sacrificed his daughter to the Valkyrie Brunnhilde, to punish a minor disobedience, so Matrucco, clinging to the monstrous superstitions of his race, in his boundless and wounded pride, ordered the headsman to behead Augusta.

Between the emotion and terror of those present, soon the sword fell on the girl's neck, while the blood began to flow down. After so glorious a testimony, the soul of Augusta entered into heaven to receive the double crown of virginity and martyrdom. These words we use to describe something so great, are not adequate, perhaps even coarse. In fact, they fail to express the many things that we think and also have a mild and reasonable character and substantial content. The life of Augusta reflects the words of Sirach: ". His memory will not fade and his name will live on from generation to generation " (Sirach 39, 9).

In fact, over the centuries, countless devotees exalt her martyrdom and proclaim her praises.

THE TRAGEDY OF A FATHER

Tradition says that after his crime Matrullo would change his fury into bitter repentance and desperate pain. After having beaten the pride which, by clouding his mind, drove him to make an unprecedented atrocity, he went everywhere proclaiming the innocence of his daughter and never ceased to call and invoke her by name.

Hoping to somehow ease the remorse that gnawed at his heart, he ordered that the body of Augusta be buried in a splendid tomb and he engraved the story of her martyrdom in the stone.

Thus he condemned himself to execration for posterity and perpetuated the memory of his daughter's constancy throughout the following centuries. Matrullo vainly went looking for peace and rest.

Until one day Serravalle's inhabitants saw him leave his splendid palace and, together with a procession of his faithful, head back to their native countries in Northern Europe.

He could no longer bear the sight of those places - as beautiful as they were- which had witnessed his horrible crime.

There is no doubt that Augusta went to heaven- thanks to fervent prayers and that the infinite mercy of God would have taken the unfortunate Matrullo under his mantle, giving him the efficient grace which, while fully respecting human freedom, knows how to triumph above even the more reluctant will.



Luigi Cillo. Saint Augusta between Serravalle and Concordia – State of Santa Caterina, Brazil. Oil painting on canvas (1999)

THE GLORY OF AUGUSTA

The tradition is uncertain about Cita's fate. No one knows how such a virtuous woman, who remained faithful to the promise made to Augusta's mother, concluded her existence. It is likely that the last years of her life were a continuous growth in the exercise of charity and religious practices: until the Lord's calling.

She was buried next to Augusta and shares with her the title of Saint as well as the altar.

In fact, Augusta has always been called and invoked as Saint by the inhabitants of Serravalle, as well as by pilgrims, whom for centuries have devoutly climb Mount Marcantone, especially on its feast day commemoration, celebrated on 22nd August.

This is St. Augusta story, protector and glory of the illustrious town of Serravalle.

Its brevity does not damage it, perhaps even increases its charm, just as an exciting dream or a bright mirage stirs wonder and excitement in one's soul.

The martyr's life was never forgotten. It has been handed-down through the centuries, particularly among the Venetian populations, who spread the cult even overseas.

In fact, as we recently found out, two shrines dedicated to her had been built by emigrants from Veneto, around the late nineteenth century: one in Brazil (Braco do Norte, State of Santa Catarina) and another in Argentina (Cuchilla Redenda, province Entre Rios). The younger generations also show an interest in the martyr of Serravalle.

How could it be otherwise? The sacrifice of Augusta represents the victory of the perennial values of the Gospel above the passions and tragedies of this world.

Beside the glorious tomb of Matrucco's daughter, the words of the ancient prophet seem to echo: "What incense spread a nice smell and sings a song of praise, bless the Lord for all his works" (Sirach 39,14). From the top of the cliff the ancient church of St. Augusta will always be a symbol of fidelity as strong as a rock.

Many sad hearts will come to this holy place to draw light of truth and fire of charity.

To Serravalle and its diocese, St. Augusta is a gift from God and a prophetic sign.

VALUE OF A LEGEND

We told you, following the old traditional episodic version, what is known about the life of St. Augusta, from tradition and legend.

If our elders have given to the medieval habit of touching stories built with poetic images, it does not mean they did not intend to pass on the memory of Saint Augusta as a real historical figure, in her features and characteristics.

The legend, if it is not an historical source, is an illustration of historical truth: it is a heritage of culture.

The cult of St. Augusta is based on a thousand-year tradition which has never failed. It is furthermore confirmed by the existence of the sanctuary, where many pilgrims flock together, especially on August 22th, the traditional feast of the martyr.

Unfortunately the archival evidence has been lost, mostly as a result of the destruction and looting suffered in the past from Serravalle.

We recall some basic data:

In a 1234 document "mons S.te Auguste idest Roncha Bigoncii" has been named.

The Statutes of Serravalle of 1360 speak of Santa Augusta.

On March 27th, 1450, while works were carried out in the sanctuary, the relics of St. Augusta had been actually found.

In 1581 the first essential biography of the martyr had been published, written by the celebrated and learned Serravallese Minuccio Minucci (1551-1604) who was Archbishop of Zadar.

In 1630 Serravalle inhabitants vowed to St. Augusta to get - and they did it - the grace to be preserved from the plague.

You can reach the Sanctuary, situated in an idyllic location, through a steep lane partially paved and crossed at intervals by several steps.

Six chapels, whose building works ended in 1642, are located along the path and, together with the church of Santa Maria Nova, evoke, even in the name, the seven major basilicas of Rome.

In 1643, the Holy See granted the indulgences attached to the seven major Roman Basilicas to those who had piously visited those chapels along the ascent of Mount Marcantone. The rare privilege remains since the "Sacra Paenitentiarum Apostolica" confirmed them "in perpetuum", the last time by its decree dated May 6th, 1968 at the request of the Bishop of Vittorio Veneto, Albino Luciani.

On May 22th, 1754, at the request of the Bishop of Ceneda, Lorenzo Da Ponte, Pope Benedict XIV, with a special "decree" of the Congregation of Rites, solemnly approved the cult of St. Augusta.

The long-awaited and much longed-for "recognition" was celebrated by Serravallesi with memorable religious and civic celebrations.¹

¹For further details and a more comprehensive knowledge about the origins and the evolution of the worship of our Saint, the reader can refer to: Rino Bechevolo, *Santa Augusta Vergine e Martire di Serravalle*, Vittorio Veneto (1991)



Saint Augusta's sanctuary. Chapel of the Martyr: Saint Augusta listening to a group of faithful who are praying. Fresco dated XV century (detail).

PRAYER TO SAINT AUGUSTA

To you, St. Augusta, who shine in the sky with the double glory of virginity and martyrdom, we turn our confident prayer.

You, who lived your short earthly life devoted entirely to God and charity, grant that we may be, following your example, strong in faith, consistent with the witness of Christian life, generous in opening our hearts to welcome and love our brothers.

We trust in your help to overcome all trials and sufferings; bless our families, parishes, diocesan seminary and interceded for new vocations to the priesthood, diaconate and consecrated life.

Let us, one day, contemplate with you the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, with all our family in Heaven.

Amen.

Vittorio Veneto, 27th March 2000
+ Bishop Alfredo

La traduzione è stata curata
dalla Sig.ra Rita Bernardi e amici
(Luglio 2010)

