

Città di Torino

Torino Turistica

The city's history

The **Emperor Augustus** had Turin built two thousand years ago as a **camp for the troops** he sent to protect the Roman state's northern borders.

A classic Roman "castrum" with **square layout**, it remained almost unchanged, complete with its ancient walls, for centuries, both during the domination of the lombards and later the Franks, as well as during the early middle ages when complex institutional dynamics lead to a short period of domination by the Church followed by a period of fragile municipal autonomy prior to the rise and consolidation of control over the city by the Acaja.



It was not until the fifteenth century, when the **Savoy dukedom** achieved the political and administrative unification of Piedmont's various provinces that Turin, chosen as the Dukedom's official residence, began to consolidate its importance.

Involved in the **Franco-Austrian war** in the first half of the sixteenth century, the city strengthened its defensive system by constructing a series of angular bastions, a project that continued throughout the long period of occupation by the French (1536-1557).

It was Duke **Emanuele Filiberto** who won back his lands, defeating the French at the Battle of San Quintino.

In the subsequent peace treaty of **Cateau-Cambrésis** in 1559 Turin was chosen as the new capital of the Savoy state.

While it was Savoy government policy to relaunch Turin's economic, manufacturing and cultural life and to create a city to match the great capitals of Europe, the Dukedom's greatest expenditure was on defence and on the strategic reorganisation of the Savoy state. The arch. Francesco Paciotto was called in from Urbino to repair the medieval fort and start work on the construction of the Citadel, a bastion-supported structure with a star-shaped layout, of which the main gate, known as "Il Mastio" (the Keep), still stands.

While the Citadel prepared the city to withstand the new techniques of siege warfare, the rest of the modernisation plan remained no more than a prospect, although a few minor attempts were made to clean up the ancient city centre.

Indeed **Bishop Domenico Della Rovere** was unique in calling in an architect from central Italy to build the **Cathedral of San Giovanni** in 1498, one of Turin's very few examples of **Renaissance architecture**.

The Duke did not confine his attention to the city itself. Outside its walls he ordered (at the end of the 16th century) the creation of the Royal Park of Viboccone, north east of Turin, a project that involved the construction of buildings and ambitious landscaping. It seems likely, by the way, that the Park was a source of inspiration for the "Gerusalemme liberata" of Torquato Tasso who spent 1578-79 in Turin.

Emanuele Filiberto's town planning and architectural projects only began to be implemented when he was succeeded by **Carlo Emanuele I** (1580-1630) who appointed the arch. Carlo Castellamonte to create the first, southward extension of the city beyond its ancient walls.

We have that early expansion plan to thank, in fact, for Turin's orderly grid layout of straight streets and austere linear architecture. One of the most elegant examples of this architectural style is Piazza San Carlo, which was at the heart of Castellamonte's design.

The old city clustered around **Piazza Castello** began to assume its present appearance as the Savoy state began to erect its residences and offices.

The **Royal Palace** was built on the site of the old Bishop's Palace. Then the ancient Roman Praetorian Gate, which had been transformed into a castle under the Acaja family, gave way to **Palazzo Madama**, which was endowed with a facade and ornamental steps designed by **Juvarra** in 1718.



Still in the seventeenth century, it was **Guarino Guarini** who embellished Piazza Castello with some of its most important buildings: the Church of San Lorenzo and the Cappella della **SS. Sindone (the chapel of the Holy Shroud)** whose domes enliven the atmosphere of severe elegance conferred on the square by Vittozzi's design.

Architectural evidence of ducal power proliferated in the city. The **Town Hall**, built in 1659, bore witness to the civic pride that was a counterweight to the power of the State.

While these years saw huge changes in layout and architecture, from the social point of view the city had to deal with a number of grave events, like the 1630 outbreak of plague that decimated the population, a tragedy recorded by the survivors in the votive chapel and the commemorative plaques on the wall of via Cardinal Massaia.

In the late 17th-early 18th century Turin continued to expand along the lines imposed by dynastic urban planning, and realised by the court architects with the second and third expansion phases. During the same period, however, the city was faced with a lengthy war that culminated in the siege by the French in 1706.

It was rescued by the arrival of the allied Austrian army and by the heroic action of **Pietro Micca** in the tunnels under the Citadel.

Filippo Juvarra's **basilica at Superga** was erected in 1714-1717 as a mark of gratitude to God for granting the city victory. The Peace of Utrecht in 1713 made Vittorio Amedeo II king of Sicily and then king of Sardinia in 1720.

In order to rein force his authority has absolute monarch, the new king reorganised the army, the government and the civil service. He also admitted the middle classes to the corridors of power and took action to limit the influence of the aristocracy and clergy over the Kingdom's economic life.

This meant new administrative, political and military functions for which new institutions like a Secretariat of State, a War Office and a Council of State were created and detailed regulations were drafted on the organisation of the Court Archives. New barracks were built as well as new government offices in building that ran from courtyard of the Royal Palace to the Military Academy.

The period also brought profound economic changes, introducing new working and apprenticeship systems. Documents in the royal archives paint a clear picture of the regulations governing the city's trade at the time including instructions on trading standards and prices. As an example of the city's economic revival at the time, we might mention **Benedetto Carpano** the inventor of **vermouth**.

Throughout the eighteenth century Vittorio Amedeo II and his successors were involved in the reconstruction of every aspect of the city's life. One particularly important project was education and the reform of a university that dated back to the XVth century. In this century, a new university building was erected on via Po and it was Vittorio Amedeo II himself who engineered the university's change of status from independent body to organ of State. There are numerous plaques inside the building now occupied by the Faculty Secretariat which commemorate the great scholars who occupied the University's most prestigious chairs.

In both scientific and humanist university teaching and research Turin boasts many figures of eminence: a plaque at Number 29 via lagrange, for example, marks the former home of Giuseppe Luigi Lagrange, one of the 18th century's greatest mathematicians. Turin was in fact the cultural home of many of the century's most enlightened reformers and intellectuals: at the corner of Via Alfieri and Piazza San Carlo where Vittorio Alfieri lived for five years and wrote his first tragedies. In 1792 the Kingdom of Sardinia, with Vittorio Amedeo III, declared war on revolutionary France with annexed Piedmont a few years later. The fifteen year exile of the Savoy dynasty and the period of French domination generated a new political order in which the middle classes rose to political and administrative power. However, the union with France proved damaging for the Piedmontese economy. This was also a period of further expansion for the city, triggered by Napoleon's decision to knock down its ancient walls to make it more suitable for modern tactical warfare. It was a decision that was to free the city for further expansion in later years.

From that time on, while Turin retained its 18th century grid layout, rigidly programmed town planning became a thing of the past, as we see in the so-called Borgo Nuovo that was developed in 1822-29. Here, the Po enters the urban fabric as the link between the 19th century square dedicated to King Vittorio Emanuele I and the Gran Madre church which was erected as a mark of gratitude for the same King's restoration in 1814.

During the **restoration period** it became public policy to return the kingdom to its condition prior to the arrival of

the French. This involved a return to the constitution of 1770, the abolition of all Napoleonic legislation and the revival of earlier legislation discriminating against non-Catholics.

Yet again it was up to the intellectuals of the period to express, in a variety of ways, the discontents of Piedmontese society the political and cultural effects of the restoration. Scholars and scientists of the time like **Giovanni Plana**, **Amedeo Avogadro**, **Amedeo Peyron**, each in his own field, took a keen interest in contemporary politics and the social discontent that was to lead the unsuccessful uprising of 1821.

One victim of the repression was **Silvio Pellico** whose long years in Spielberg prison transformed him from the enthusiastically liberal contributor to the 'Conciliatore' news sheet to the introverted writer of Prison Diaries in his Via Barbaroux home.

The long hoped-for demand for the modernisation of Piedmont's political, judicial and economic system was supported by **Carlo Alberto**. Once a new constitution was granted in 1848 statesmen like Federico Sclopis, Luigi Des Ambrois and Ottavio Thaon di Revel helped to draft the new political and institutional arrangements.

Piedmont also enjoyed economic growth thanks to the policies of **Cavour**: the expanding manufacturing system increasingly turned to factory-based industry and capitalist organisation. The promotion of private enterprise also led landowners to engage in an orgy of speculative building works that was only controlled by the imposition of customs boundaries in 1853.

As the previous centuries, care for the needs of the poor and the sick was left to the charitable initiative of individuals or the Church. The Piccola Casa della Divina Provvidenza, established by Giuseppe Cottolengo in 1813, still retains today its original philanthropic aims and still offers disinterested help to the disadvantaged in accordance with the inspiration of its founder. In terms of culture the first half of the 19th century was notable for its interest in the arts. Today we remember the Torinese sculptor Carlo Rocchetti as creator of the equestrian statue known as the "Caval 'd Brons", has beloved a symbol of the city has the **Mole Antonelliana**. Then there was Antonio Fontanesi, one of Piedmont's greatest 19th century painters, who created an outstanding course in landscape painting at the Accademia Albertina.

The first war of Independence in 1848 brought these cultural and artistic ferment to a temporary halt and his echoed in the anthem by Mameli which was memorably set to music by Novaro who is commemorated on the plaque to be seen in via XX Settembre.

Another famous name from this period of war is that of **General Alessandro la Marmora**, creator of the Bersaglieri Regiment. After the defeat at Novara and the peace treaty with Austria in 1850, Turin began to play a leading role in Italy's cultural and political life, an eminence that culminated in 1861 when Turin became the capital of the newly proclaimed United Italy. The new nation's industrial and commercial requirements made it essential to update the distribution network for raw materials and finished goods.

The solution was the railway system, which accelerated both economic growth and the move to the cities. In Turin the main railway station is at Porta Nuova in the heart of the city, a classic example of modern architecture that successfully blends form and function. The architecture of the period was oriented towards experimentation with new materials like glass and iron that allowed for the boldest structural innovations. Alessandro Antonelli, who combined an engineer's technical expertise with an architect's imagination, took up the challenge of the new tendencies and proved, with his Mole Antonelliana, that it was possible to use a traditional masonry structure to create buildings of a highly original nature.

During this period there were scientific discoveries and developments, especially in the pharmaceutical field, which also contributed significantly to industrial development. Together with Nobel, **Ascagno Sobrero** invented nitro-glycerine, never dreaming that it would ever be used in war. Indeed the plaque records his achievements in medicine.

During this particular phase in Piedmont's history, in which Turin's brief period as the new nation's capital is documented by a flourish of plaques commemorating the leading lights of Italy's Risorgimento, the birth of Vittorio Emanuele II is marked by the tablet on the facade of Palazzo Carignano, as are the homes of Court Camillo Benso di Cavour and Massimo D'Azeglio and the foundation of the Carabinieri Regiment. The transfer of the capital to Florence caused a temporary halt in the city's socio-economic, political and cultural development. It was not until the 1880s that the opening of its first great foundries, textile and steel factories triggered a revival and an upsurge in new building. This, in fact, was Turin's first real industrial boom in variety of fields. The plaques record figures as diverse as Galileo Ferraris, the quintessential industrial scientist, and the 'Preserve King' Francesco Cirio who is commemorated by a bizarre liberty style tablet and who introduced the farmers of Italy to 'new trades, new directions, new markets'.

Among educators and especially writers for children we find people who epitomise the Turin tradition such as **Edmondo De Amicis** and **Emilio Salgari**. The plaque on the house where the latter lived in 'heart-rending poverty' depicts one of the sailing ships that populate his innumerable tales of adventure.

One notable who spent a short but intense period in Turin in 1888/89 was Friedrich Nietzsche in one of whose letters we find 'aristocratic calm' and 'a standardised taste that even governs colour' the scribed as the characteristic features of our city. With the arrival of the twentieth century it becomes increasingly difficult to read story of the changing city through its commemorative plaques. This reflects a transformation in mentality as events come to be seen as mere steps towards future growth. Such memorials, moreover, likely to represent a warning not to repeat history, evoking as they do to World Wars, Fascism and the martyrs of Italy's liberation.

The outbreak of World War I was actually a great boon for Turin's industry, especially its motor manufacturers. Fiat expanded so dramatically that its workforce numbers rose from 4.00 in 1914 to 40.000 in 1918. This indeed were the years in which Fiat built its Lingotto factory complex, one of the greatest achievements of early twentieth century industrial architecture.

The war years produced a fierce disagreement between interventionists and anti-interventionists. One of the many engaged in the struggle to defend (as the plaque in the street named after him puts it) national values against foreign domination was **Cesare Battisti**. Another plaque in the Palazzo Civico preserve in marble the Victory Announcement signed by **Armando Diaz**, commander of the Italian armed forces.

In the early decades of this century Turin nourished a genuine coterie of thinkers and intellectuals. These were the people who laid the theoretical foundation for the nascent trade unions and workers 'movements'. There was **Antonio Gramsci**, the founder of the newspapers "Ordine Nuovo" and "l'Unità" whose plaque in Piazza Carlina describes him as 'leader for liberty and socialism, who forged the Italian Communist Party'. Plaque commemorates **Piero Gobetti**, a name of ten linked with Gramsci's, and a man whose short life and literary career was dedicated to opposition to the emerging Fascist movement.

The Turin of the period was also, however, the crepuscular city of lyric poets like **Guido Gozzano** who 'sang the city of Turin in the loving sweetness of his verse'. Turin was also the home of musicians who made a significant mark. Alfredo Casella, for example, was one of the first in Italy to recognise the need for a revival in instrumental music.

An often contradictory symbol of political commitment and existential despair was provided by **Cesare Pavese**, a man who has come to epitomise Turin in the post-Gobetti period but his also recognise as one of the 20th century's most important Italian writers.

Once the **Fascist dictatorship** came to power it took action against its opponents, including 'la Stampa', the newspaper created by Alfredo Frassati, which was silenced for many years. This were not easy years and there were many victims. Plaque appears in the square that itself commemorates a murderous attack by a band of Fascist thugs on December 18, 1922. And at Porta Nuova Station we find a plaque that reminds whose of those who were the ported in sealed trains to the Nazi concentration and extermination camps.

Turin was one of the most anti-fascist cities in Italy but it was not until war actually broke out that the Resistance movement became properly organised, continuing the struggle up to the moment of liberation. On the first anniversary of that liberation the civic authorities reminded the people of Turin why the city had been given Italy's most honoured medal: 'for 19 months it held out against oppression, indifferent to blandishments and threats alike.

The Second World War left our city in desperate straits, struggling against hunger, poverty, unemployment and the devastating effects of bombing. In the arduous task of reconstruction it was **Fiat** that directed the economy of the city and transformed it into the working capital of the nation.

From the Fifties on, Turin's engineering industry went from strength to strength, both in the national and the international market. The centenary of Italy's unification in 1961 offered an opportunity to celebrate the economic boom in the complex now known as Italia 61, which was constructed on the left bank of the River Po and includes such architectural masterpieces as Pier luigi Nervi's Palazzo del lavoro and the **Palazzo a Vela** created by Annibale and Giorgio Rigotti. Industrial expansion brought massive immigration from the South and city spread like an oil slick in an utterly unplanned fashion. Wall districts emerged like the Falchera, lucento and le Vallette quarters which might have been self sufficient new towns but remained no more than dormitories for many years.

The Seventies were Italy's Dark Ages of extreme left and right wing subversion and terrorism. After a long period of silence in which nothing of note appeared to have happened a new series of plaques emerged to commemorate the victims of the so-called 'bullet years'. One of them is dedicated to the State Procurator, Bruno Caccia, ambushed and killed in 1983, a reminder of Turin's experience of violence at the hands of organised crime.