

117 km
193 C2
B5

Koper

Capris, Justinopolis, Caput Histriae, Capodistria

The island on which the town of Koper was built lies on the north-western coast of Istria, protected by the Bay of Koper, near the mouth of the river Badaševica and more distanced river Rižana. The shape of the former island is elliptical, reminiscent of a convex lens; the terrain reaches its highest level

at the juncture of the two symmetric axes (cf. Bernik, *Organizem slovenskih obmorskih mest*, etc.). The origins of the town were located on the highest point because that was the most convenient and secure position. The natural form of the island played a decisive role in the development of the town



throughout its history. The island was suitable for settlement, primarily during the period between late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, when life was becoming more and more perilous on the mainland.

The area was relatively densely populated in Antiquity, particularly its coastal part. The Roman population that lived off their estates in the wealthy agrarian hinterland had to flee to more secure places in times of danger, and therefore the first serried settlements developed. It is highly probable that the first ones were already fortified.

The beginnings of the settlement on the former island of Koper and of its historical development can be traced during the period when the region of Istria was part of the Roman Empire. Numerous building sites in the area of the historic centre of the town have lately been included in more systematic archaeological research and protection. Individual finds of various cases of echo-sounding research have revealed the early mediaeval period and Antiquity. The results confirm the possibility of the existence of an even older settlement on Sermino (Horvat, Sermin) in the vicinity, by the mouth of the river Rižana. Yet there is no material evidence whatsoever to confirm the conjecture of an older settlement in the area of the island of

Koper or the legend of the Greek Aegida.

Throughout its rich history the city of Koper has been known under various names (cf. Šašel, *Arheološki vestnik* 25). The settlement of *Capris* with town walls was mentioned in written sources (cf. Smole, *Kronika* 5). During Byzantine rule the name of the city was *Justinopolis* (cf. Bernik, *Organizem slovenskih obmorskih mest*). When the city devolved to the Patriarchs of Aquileia (cf. Smole, *Kronika* 5) it was named *Caput Histriae* as the capital and most important town of Istria. During that period the buildings of the town occupied most of the island. By the end of the thirteenth century the city had already been formed with all the squares and streets with their urban characteristics that have remained preserved until the present time. During that period Koper fell under the rule of Venice and was called *Capo d'Istria*. The Republic of Venice marked the formation and development of the city with its presence most obviously. It had influenced the material, spiritual and political development of the city for centuries.

Bernik (cf. *Organizem slovenskih obmorskih mest*) proved the assumption that the urban structure of Koper was finally created in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, therefore revealing a mediaeval basis that can be connected with the





late classical tradition. The buildings that were preserved in the historic centre of the city can be identified according to their stylistic elements as Romanesque, Gothic and Renaissance architecture. The oldest buildings are located in the area of the whole historic centre of the city that was enclosed by former city walls along the edge of the island. The walls on the outline of the island were an important element in the creation of the interior of the city. The formation of the city was further influenced by the social structure of the population; in the centre of the island stood the most important palaces and buildings of a profane or sacred nature. The outskirts, along the outline of the island, there was the area of the lower classes, petty tradesmen, artisans, fishermen and peasants. In the eastern part of the city objects of various church orders were erected, and they had settled in since the middle of the thirteenth century (cf. Naldini, *Corografia*, etc.).

The oldest preserved plan of the city of Koper, commissioned by Bernardo Malipiero Podesta and the Captain of Koper, was executed by engineer Giacomo Fino on 1 August 1619. It as an important source for the study of the historic and town-planning development of the city (cf. Žitko, *Kronika* 37). The drawing discernibly presents the elliptical form of the island with the central urban area, main streets and squares and the prominent buildings clearly marked.

The central urban area was shaped by two squares, called Piazza and

Brolo in the above-mentioned drawing; a water tank was marked in the latter. The centre was complemented by eight external squares located on the edge of the island on the internal side of the city walls, and six of them contained a port. The most important was the present Prešeren Square (Piazzal or Porta Muda), the only one connected with the mainland. Entrance into the city was possible only along the road toward Lion Castle and further along the dike and bridge through the main gate Porta Muda to the present Prešeren Square. Because of that the square had an important role in the urban organism; its function was emphasized because it assumed the role of Brolo, the main square where supplies were obtained (cf. Žitko, 1989, 40). Other squares along the edge of the city have been preserved under new names: Kosovel Square (*Piazzal di Porta Ogni Santi*), the former Square of St. Thomas (*Piazzal di S. Tomaso*), Gramasci Square (*Piazza di Porta S. Pietro*), Fishermen's Square (*Piazzal di Porta Bossedraga*), Square by Izola Gate (*Porta Isolana*), Carpaccio Square (*Piazzal del Porto*) and Stanič-Gortan Square (*Piazzal de Porta Maggiore*). Only the former Square by Izola Gate is left out of the present city plan because of the encroachment of the port, Luka Koper, while the former Square of St. Thomas is partly preserved. The only two squares without their own ports were the present Prešeren Square and the former Square of St. Thomas. All exter-

nal squares had similar designs: a rectangular ground plan, enclosed on three sides by serried buildings, and the fourth side was formed by the city walls with a gate. Regularly there was a church among the buildings opposite the gate. There was additionally an obligatory fountain in each square. Individual quarters were created inside the squares and were named after them.

The historic heart of the city protected by the walls can be divided into two parts: the central part and the outskirts. The border between them was created by a natural fault of the terrain running parallel to the edge of the island and it is still visible, in spite of the dense buildings.¹ The northern edge of the island of Koper slopes rather steeply to the sea, therefore no substantial changes have taken place in that part of the city. The slope of the outskirts of the island (the southern, eastern and western parts) is only gentle, the area is silted and therefore not very suitable for construction. The poorest classes of population resided there among fishermen, peasants, artisans and petty tradesmen.

The central part of the city consisted of a densely built urban structure with the most important municipal buildings. The importance and prestigiousness of the buildings located around the central square and toward the outskirts of the city declined gradually. The serried part of the city was located on geologically firmer terrain allowing the construction of larger houses like mansions and houses of the wealthy with several

storeys. On the other hand, there were no mansions on the periphery and along the fault, but only more modest dwellings with preserved Romanesque or Gothic elements indicating their origins.

The outstanding architectural monuments and the course of the city walls were discernible from the preserved cadastral register of Koper dated 1819,² although some parts of the walls had disappeared under the structure of the buildings. Only fragments between individual houses can be traced, while all the gates are gone, with the exception of the most important one, Porta Muda.

The appearance of mediaeval Koper, an important administrative, secular and ecclesiastic centre in Istria, can be deduced from preserved depictions. The oldest one is the painting by Venetian master Vittore Carpaccio from 1516 with the image of St. Nazarius holding a model of Koper among other saints (cf. Brejc 1983, 132-133). At the end of the sixteenth century Koper with its surroundings was depicted during a storm. The fine structure of buildings was clearly visible, the city was surrounded by walls, and there was a prominent tower in the middle.³ Several vedutas of Koper from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are kept in the Provincial Museum of Koper. A votive picture of the Servite order presented a view of the city with Lion Castle and Porta Muda from the mainland. Another view, from the harbour with the dominant Gregorian and Dominican monas-





teries, was depicted by Joseph Scholz in his drawing from the middle of the nineteenth century. The first photographs documented the existing state of affairs and presented various transformations, more intense in the outskirts of the city after the surrounding area had been drained. The former island of Koper was joined to the mainland. The most important and picturesque parts of the city are two squares, Tito Square and Brolo. They are divided by the sacred complex of Koper (the cathedral, tower and baptistery).

The present Tito Square, formerly *Platea Communis*, was located in the centre of the historic heart of the city. It had an almost rectangular ground plan and a dominant position in its preserved mediaeval structure. The original municipal plan of the square had been preserved throughout history, and it was an expression of typical Mediterranean disposition of an urban area after Venetian authority had been established. The central urban area, characterized by its closed hall-like nature, was the place where the main streets converged. The external border of the square was formed by the promi-

nent buildings of former ecclesiastic and secular authorities, which were also the most important architectural monuments: the Praetor Palace, Loggia, Foresteria, Armeria and the cathedral with the tower. The heights of the buildings were harmonized in their form and layers. The only dominating vertical feature was the fortification tower, later turned into the city tower, and even later a church tower. At the end of the fifteenth century two older palaces were joined into the Praetor Palace, which was dedicated to the political, military and judicial functions of the podestas. It also served the municipal autonomy after the establishment of the Grand Council and other offices. In the fifteenth century the decoration of the facade with memorial plaques, arms and busts of important podestas and captains began; during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries their number increased. During the period of Podesta Vincenzo Bemba the palace was raised and renovated in the Baroque style with an illusionary symmetric disposition of merlons and a statue of Justice. Further *ghibellino* merlons were added above the towers and two distaff belfries.

Between 1458 and 1460 the Foresteria or Albergo Nuovo was built perpendicularly to the Praetor Palace, and was substantially rebuilt in 1472; it was one storey high, the top being intended for podesta's guests, and the ground floor for toll and salt offices. In 1532 the first floor was completely refurbished for aristocratic guests visiting Koper and for the temporary residence of the podesta. Next to the Foresteria stood the Armeria or *Magazzino delle Munizioni*. Originally it was a low, massive building that was later raised by one floor; the second one was added at the beginning of the sixteenth century. The openings in the facade date from the beginning of the seventeenth century. In 1788 the buildings of the Foresteria and the Armeria were joined with a common facade that has remained until the present.

The new Loggia was built by Nicholas the architect from Piran and Tomaso the stonecutter from Venice between 1462 and 1464. Originally it was a single-storey

building and had a different floor plan to the present one; the exterior was richly decorated. Marco Michele Salomon Podesta of Koper raised the Loggia in the seventeenth century. Thus the floor plan and the structural strength were altered, and a staircase was added. It has been preserved in that form ever since.

In the fifteenth century the cathedral was substantially rebuilt as well; a new facade was made. The lower part of it from 1460 was made in Gothic style as the exterior of the restored atrium. The upper part was executed at the end of the fifteenth century. The Baroque refurbishing of the cathedral was the work of Venetian architect Giorgio Massari. Only the facade and the southern side of the nave were left over from the previous Romanesque-Gothic church. The former free-standing tower that used to be a part of the fortification of the city was united with the cathedral later.

The harmonious architecture of the square was interrupted in its eastern part by a building designed by architect Edo Mihevc in 1964. It was erected in place of some smaller mansions that had concluded the eastern side of the square. The new building levelled the line of the sides of the square, interfered with the Diocesan gardens and interrupted the connection between the Diocesan and the Praetor Palace.

The present Tito Square flows into another important and picturesque place called Brolo that is open and airy. Its ground plan in the form of a trapezoid has not been substantially changed in the last few centuries. Because of its important role and function in the city (featuring the Fontico, Diocesan Palace, two fountains in the middle, and a water cistern) Brolo consisted of important aristocratic dwellings that were levelled in height. In spite of its early mediaeval origins, the present state of the square is primarily the result of the Baroque restorations that were more substantial in the external part of Brolo.

The historic heart of Koper, comprising the entire area of the former island, is an exceptional monument reflecting the important continuity of the settlement.

The urban development and the rich history of the city require further study. There are important mansions built in clearly discernible styles, yet the anonymous architecture of numerous dwellings that have been preserved is of equal importance.

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¹ The fault in the terrain can be traced along Resselj Street where it rises gradually over Kidrič Street, along Kolarič and Santori Streets over to Župančič, Shoe-makers', Chimney-sweepers' and Sabini Streets, next to *Coleggia dei Nobili* (the present Italian grammar school) and from Marušič to Wall, Peasant and Firemen' Street.

² The original is kept in the National Archive in Trieste, and a copy in the archive of the Medobčinski zavod za varstvo naravne in kulturne dediščine Piran.

³ 'View of Koper' INTER VTRVMQ TVTA, dated 1589, Provincial Archive of Koper.