

THE ROCKY BLOCK (OR HILL) OF CASTEL GRANDE CASTLE

The oldest and most important Neolithic settlement in Switzerland, origin of the City of Bellinzona

The Castel Grande hill, a mighty rocky block and the natural centre of the Bellinzona lock, **has seen the structures built on it remodelled over and over again since ancient times**. In the course of its thousand-year life, there have been numerous changes.

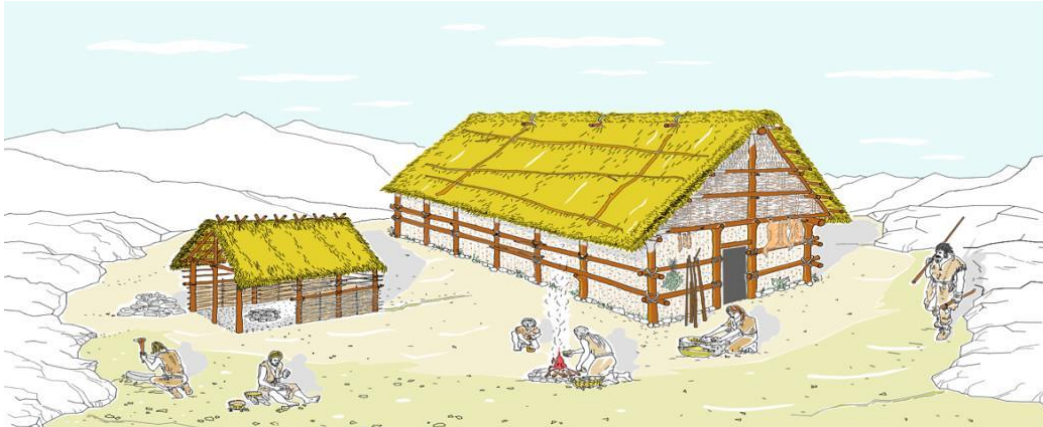
La Corsa più Medievale della Terra!



The rocky block of Castel Grande Castle, © Massimo Pedrazzini

The first traces of settlement date back to the Early Neolithic, when the first village of farmers settled here (5250 B.C.), thanks to the possibility of being able to cultivate the land, to have unlimited water reserves and to be able to observe the entire surrounding territory from a strategic elevated position (thus also being able to defend themselves from enemy attacks from below). The inhabitants of the hill - who were thus also sheltered from the insalubriousness caused by the presence of a vast marshy area at the bottom of the valley - practised the lithic industry linked to flint and rock crystal, together with the production of pottery.

At an early stage, they built a settlement consisting of rectangular structures around which they organised the domestic space; later, a group of bearers of the square-mouthed vase culture installed living structures designed in circular and oval modules (Middle Neolithic).



Hypothetical reconstructions of parts of the Neolithic village on the rocky block of the Castel Grande Castle

In the wind-protected hollow, huts were systematically rebuilt or repaired and the village continued to exist during the Bronze Age - a period when a kiln was installed for firing pottery - and the Iron Age.

The Roman presence is attested by a small castrum (4th century A.D.) placed to guard a route travelled by people from north of the Alps for raids within the territories of the Roman Empire.

Within the fortified enclosure, the castle settlement later developed, occupied first by the Lombards and then by the Franks. At that time, the Bellinzona lock took on the role of the “key to the gates of Italy”.

The great masonry works of Castel Grande Castle can be ascribed to the late 13th-early 14th century, when an important building moment was marked by the construction of the Torre Bianca (White Tower - 1250-1350) and the Torre Nera (Black Tower - 1310-1315) and a crenellated wall, from which the Murata was detached, later reinforced by the Sforza family (1486-1489).

Once Bellinzona came under the political control of the Confederates, representatives of the three original cantons settled in the three castles (thus including Montebello Castle and Sasso Corbaro Castle): Castel Grande Castle thus became the seat of the Commissariat of Uri.

With the Act of Mediation and the birth of Canton Ticino, the castles became the property of the new state in 1803.

Castel Grande Castle housed the state's first arsenal in its inner courtyard (1813) and the cantonal penitentiary in the Black Tower (c. 1820). The greatest expansion of these spaces for warehouses and war facilities took place in the period before the Second World War.

However, it was at this time that a restoration proposal was formulated to restore the image of the medieval castle.

After many years of discussion and thanks to a substantial donation from architect Mario Della Valle, the situation was unblocked in 1981 and the design mandate was given to architect Aurelio Galfetti, who set the restoration in an innovative direction, responding to the need to revitalise the complex by adding a restaurant and representation rooms.

In 1983, the construction site was opened, which involved not only the structures on the hill, but also the Sforza Murata.

In this context, in 1984-85, the Cantonal Office for Historical Monuments carried out archaeological research that uncovered the first settlement on the Castel Grande rock. On the basis of these important findings, the museological contents of the south wing were redefined in 1988-'89, and the possibility of a permanent exhibition in it was considered. With the official opening on 23th March 1992, the restoration project was completed.

The site on which Bellinzona is located has therefore always been particularly favourable to settlement since ancient times: this is why it has been inhabited continuously by so many different peoples since the Neolithic age.

In November 2000, the three castles, the Wall of Castel Grande and the medieval city wall of Bellinzona were included in the UNESCO World Heritage list.

(sources: [The Historical Archaeological and Artistic Museum of Castel Grande in Bellinzona](#) by Moira Morinini Pè, [Historical Dictionary of Switzerland 1. From Prehistory to Late Antiquity 1.1. From the Palaeolithic to the Iron Age 1.1.1. The Stone Age](#) by Rossana Cardani Vergani, [The many inhabitants of Bellinzona and Ticino through the centuries](#), [Historical notes on Romagnano Sesia \(NO\) and Bellinzona \(Switzerland\)](#))

In the context of the first edition of BELLINZONA CASTLES & GO (Sunday 29th May 2022), a **cultural banner** dedicated to the Castelgrande hill was placed at approx. KM 10 of the **RUNNING RACE** route - which is also part of the **WALKING/NORDIC WALKING RACE** route - at a point next to the Castel Grande pond. Purpose: to inform and make race participants aware of the importance of the fortress for the history of Bellinzona, as the site of the discovery of the oldest and most important Neolithic village in Switzerland and thus of the origin, in 5250 B.C. (thanks also to the presence of water which, as a result of the rain, was naturally preserved in the concave rocks on the ground which still exist there today), of what later became the City of Bellinzona.



The pond located on the Castel Grande rocky block is a reminder of the presence of water on the site as early as 5250 B.C., which was naturally stored in the concave rocks on the ground as a result of rainfall, © Angela Alfieri



Cultural banner dedicated to the rocky block of Castel Grande Castle placed at approx. KM 10 of the running race route («Water, life... We have been here for 7000 years!»)

INSIGHTS:

- [Jungsteinzeit = Néolithique = Neolitico, Bellinzona, distr. di Bellinzona, TI Castel Grande, Yearbook of the Swiss Society of Prehistory and Archaeology, Pierangelo Donati, 1985, CN1313, 116900/722220, pp. 210-215](#)
- *The History of the Hill; Castel Grande Museum, Historical Archaeological Section, Bellinzona, 1992*
- *The castles of Bellinzona, Swiss Monuments Guide, Werner Meyer, 1994 (2° ed. 1999)*