

CASTEL MONTE







CASTEL
del
MONTE

Photographs

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Introduction

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PERSPECTIVES ON CASTEL DEL MONTE

The point of view and the view



The horizon curves imperceptibly and the open landscape stretches as far as the eye can see. Sometimes the sky looks as if it's going to crush it, even if in our imaginary it should be the castle to loom over and dominate us.

Rock among rocks, bright crystal embedded in a thin blanket of snow, dazzling prism among the flowers caressed by the spring breezes, wreck scorched by the summer heat that up on the hills is only partly less merciless than at the seaside below. Castel del Monte's time seems frozen and yet it experiences the passing seasons, shaped by ever new events, looks, patiently enduring misunderstandings, distortions and manipulations.

Wrapped in its apparent solitude it slips out of the landscape and history it is closely tied to, instead, being a castle with multiple functions and meanings, both rational and symbolic ones (sort of recalling Calvino's "crossed destinies"), part of a system aimed at controlling a territory marked, in turn, by a still perfectly recognizable main and secondary road system.

The castle's role, functions and identity can all be traced back to the political and cultural outlook of Frederick II – the monarch it cannot help but identify with – attested by history and its relationship with other fortifications belonging to the same network and yet continuously marred by alternative interpretations that verge on myth or become dangerously close to metahistory.

As if – paradoxically – the castle's charm lied in the possibility that it wasn't necessarily such but something entirely different, as if the fact of being part of a network lessened its alleged “uniqueness”, as if the evocative power of seeing it appearing and disappearing on the horizon – while drawing closer to it – wasn't enough, but rather a glittering golden dome was necessary to turn it definitively into a mirage and vision, as if it needed nameless monks, shamans and knights, as well as the contribution and movement of celestial bodies, to convince us to be actually there, to become the evidence of unlikely balances sought for in remote times and places, from Chartres to Jerusalem, from the Alps to the pyramids, from Noah's ark to Atlantis.

Castel del Monte – landscape and history



A castle emerging from the landscape, appearing in history or popping up in our mind as a “perfect” form with the help of geometry; as the *summa* of architectural concepts in which the adherence to the rules and symmetry most likely coincide with the ambition of representing the State and its looming presence. A drone’s eye view is relentlessly revealing: an edifice with an octagonal shape, with eight towers set at its eight corners, looking like a sort of mechanism, a cogwheel that seems to emanate – through its solidity – an inclination for movement, which forces us to walk around it forgetful of any coordinate. A kingly echo created by this sort of crown that dominates the austere landscape only partially altered by recent human intervention.

It is simply a castle, beset by other unfitting roles imposed on it, and yet built exactly as the military architecture of the time required. With all the features – whether residential, defensive or practical – intended for a building meant to be used, be seen and from which to overlook the land all around. Literally. That it is a *castrum* was already stated by Frederick II himself, the monarch with whose “myth” Castel del Monte has ended up identifying. And his words, filtered from contemporary documents, are definitely more worth than our present-day ravings for pseudo-tourist or neo-Templar use. No Templars, Hospitallers, Teutonic Knights or other alien crowd-pullers. Things that the collective bewitchment lets bounce back carelessly, dragged by fads, strengthened by their iteration which increasingly echoes the legend and ever less the historical truth. The Knights Templar, for instance. In those days there was certainly no love lost between them and Frederick who had punished

them by requisitioning most of their properties for their having attempted to kill him in the Holy Land. How could he have entrusted them with the project or the concept of a building meant to be the symbol of his royalty and sovereignty?

Today people like to think of this castle as if it wasn't a castle but rather a supernatural, or alien, entity "built" by the sun, a mysterious heap of shadows, lights, golden numbers, unimaginable latitudes and divine proportions, projection on the ground of mysterious celestial alignments designed with non-existent units of measurement.

A storytelling cliché that clouds history and records by putting together a dangerous plot of assumptions based on other assumptions, up to making it difficult to disentangle the intricate muddle of misrepresentations and contradictions. Since the eyes are not sufficient (whatever esoterics and neo-Templars of any kind may allege), for the most eager ones there is still a whole literature sector of serious and trustworthy works, a sort of survival kit against parahistory contributing to deconstruct those bizarre theses and recover the proper historical accuracy as well as its primary documents certifying not only its existence as a defence of a well-defined territory but also documenting its facilities, functions and people living in it. And this without diminishing Castel del Monte's undeniable charm. A charm that can well do without those undeserved special effects which even certain tourism policies tend to force upon it: the "Imperial Apulia", for instance, is mere fiction. A non-place. Puglia in the days of Frederick II was a place, instead, for the control of which an efficient system was set up – made of political but also symbolical functions, as well as functions regarding representative, propaganda and communication aspects – and visible through a network of peculiar buildings, the *castra* and the *domus*: the former are typically military buildings which often also include some residential spaces; the latter (still performing their task in defending the territory and directly conveying the idea of the "presence" of the sovereign) are residences meant for relaxation, entertainment and often places where to go hunting. The "uniqueness" of Castel del Monte, if we really wish to confirm this feature, lies in the privilege of including them all, those functions. All the rest is fiction, once more.

The imaginary castle



A castle that pops up in myths and collective obsessions losing a bit of itself each time its name is uttered, an icon against its will, weighed beyond any limit with metahistorical burdens that are often extraneous to its story, mythomoteur – reluctant but inexorable – responsible for the dangerous connection established between the fabled and the actual Middle Ages (and continuously nourished by parahistory and widely employed special effects). Fairy tales, novels and screenplays have a big responsibility: the castle of the collective imaginary has a moat, a drawbridge, tall and menacing towers, rattling chains and room for ghosts, few lamps, many shadows, embedded mysteries, outstepping any possible reality. This is why Castel del Monte simply doesn't add up ...

The most improbable stories circulate about the castle: a temple, an astronomical observatory, a den for sapiential and esoteric lucubrations, even a hammam, as if setting up a Turkish bath provided with every comfort up there could be an easy task – even nowadays. The tales about an octagonal basin in the courtyard are too often certified as substantiated evidence, despite the opposing opinion of whoever has had something to do with the building during restoration works, from Sarlo in the late 1800s up to De Tommasi in the Eighties of the past century. Those which claim the presence of the Grail are jostling for primacy. In fair retaliation, the wraths of all the deities, elements, zombies and oceans ought to be unleashed against it.

And especially the wrath of exact sciences, considering that the geometrical shape of the octagon – moreover, imperfect – is systematically dealt with as if it were a mystery, instead

of being the most tangible and effective reference to the crown of the empire, way before Frederick. With records at hand, obviously, not just as mere fantasies or suggestions. As if there were no other octagonal fortifications in Europe, which are even older and part of a well-established building tradition.

The irregularities of the octagon of Castel del Monte – detectable, legitimate and understandable – become a threat to the alter ego-castle of our *castrum*: this is why there is less and less talking about them, favouring the fascinating theories that might possibly not stand up to reality. It's a profusion of golden numbers, gnomons and solstices which Castel del Monte – the way it is – can submit itself to with patience. Hare-brained calculations, skilfully performed so that the result should always be 8, multiples and cubes included; circles subjected to squaring at will; malicious tricks that do not take into account the authentic force of the castle: the one that makes it be there where it is, solidly clinging to the rock of its hill, designed and built to be inhabited, to “see” and be seen, with all its symbolical background of which we have lost the meaning. Not for nothing people began searching for the purpose, sense and significance of Castel del Monte at a time when mysteries were in great demand. Before, there had been no problem, and the explanations provided had been clear enough, apparently.

Why should the absence of a drawbridge and a moat impair its role or function as a defence? Why should a fireplace be used to burn essential oils instead of – more simply – to heat the rooms or for cooking? Why should the effects of light and shade produced by the sun shining through windows and loopholes – in the unfortunate event that they might cross each other – be necessarily interpreted as an occult, or at least Templar mark? Why should an edifice built to defend a territory and bearing the features of (besides being officially defined as) a castle pretend to be a lay temple (but also – lately – specifically a “sanctuary”) at the disposal of a limited and mysterious circle of initiates busy with the purification of their souls? And why ever should some inscriptions visible in the courtyard and in a few rooms on the first floor, inaccurately defined as “cryptograms”, adumbrate “mysterious” meanings instead of being read according to the usual epigraphic and palaeographic rules, once more turning the castle into something that goes against any logic, any philological principle and historical reason?

The emperor's eye



Contrary to the widespread belief, Frederick II did not like being called *puer Apuliae*, nor did any chronicler of the Kingdom of Sicily ever dare calling him by this name. Just as none of his subjects ever thought of him as *stupor mundi*. Like always it's a matter of how we want to look at things, and our point of view is strongly influenced by baseless suggestions and unjustified bewitchment. It's in our eyes that the phrase “stupor mundi” loses the originally negative significance it was attributed in the 13th century, and that sense of immense human conceitedness allegedly aiming at overpowering the order of the Universe.

Another matter is the unbiased statement of fact which can be easily shared: Castel del Monte, as already mentioned, was designed to “see” and “be seen”. As a symbol of royalty and sovereignty, it could be sighted from very far away, evoking through its mere presence the presence of the sovereign himself and a sort of warning for whoever might nourish subversive thoughts. As a *castrum*, it was the unmistakable “eye of the emperor” and the evidence of a merciless logic of power, which scattered such marks across the territory with excess and ostentation. In brief, a medieval castle built by a medieval emperor according to the construction methods of those days, integral part of a strategic territorial system used as a governing means at a time when the emperor had to cope on a daily basis with such huge problems as pope Gregory X himself, the Lombard communes, Venice and other scattered and assorted enemies. Exactly what all those studies based on historical research firmly reassert and what all those hallucinated supporters of Fata Morganas, of alembics and visions – which are definitely not part of the history – don't like.





VIEWS AND HORIZONS

Like the iris diaphragm of a camera, light penetrates into the octagon and crystallizes into Castel del Monte. Like light-sensitive paper, on the ground the sun draws shadows and contours within the concentric boundaries, in the mathematical harmonies, and in the castle's relationship with nature. Along the roads around it, the castle appears like a lighthouse amidst a sea of wild olives, Spanish broom and giant fennel plants, it hides behind trulli rising like altars, and reappears with its profile above stretches of wheat speckled with passing clouds.