

Vito Bianchi

Apulia

The Masserie

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History



With their impressive silhouettes and grand architecture, often isolated on a hill's top or along its side, or standing in the middle of an endless plain, the *masserie* tell the many tales of Apulian history. They can be found

everywhere, paradigms of a society devoted to agriculture since the dawn of time, lone symbols of hard lives lived in symbiosis with seasonal cycles. The rearranged, enlarged and transformed architecture of present-day *masserie* mostly

dates back to the period between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, the large farmhouses towering above the Tavoliere

Opposite: *surroundings of San Severo, Masseria Mollica*

PARTLY FARMS, PARTLY CASTLES

The term “*masseria*” stems from *massae* or *massaricius*, which denoted plots of land provided with buildings – such as the mansion, the tenant's quarters, sheepfolds, oil mills, cellars and storerooms for tools and much more – which were used in the cycles of rural production and for all those works related to sheep-farming and cattle-breeding. Especially from the sixteenth century onwards, Apulian *masserie* were basically prosperous self-sufficient farms frequently equipped with architectural details meant for repelling any kind of attack and predatory purposes. Thus, to fortify the *masserie* several structural elements necessary for the defence against external offences were added, such as enclosure walls interrupted only by one portal, watchtowers, a *chemin-de-ronde* along the bulwarks, staircases carved into the large walls, bartizans, loopholes and machicolations above windows and doors. These building features were mostly copied from castles and strongholds, and served the purpose of protecting a composite unit in which the daily routine of rural life also included residential, communal and religious aspects. Most of the *masserie* that are still preserved also comprise the traditional chapel where owners and peasants could celebrate, and partially still do, Christian rites. From an architectural point of view, the *masserie* often display later additions to the original structure, built in order to respond to new needs in the different activities of farming and animal rearing. In many cases the new defensive elements, beside helping to ward off bandit attacks, enabled the *masserie* to become part of and strengthen that larger defensive system already made up of castles, coastal watchtowers and garrisons which had developed in Southern Italy between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Since south Italy actually was the most extreme outpost of the Spanish kingdom against the threatening Ottoman Empire, it had to be ready to react to the fortunately fewer and fewer attacks by Ottoman ships as well as Turkish and Barbary pirates.

plain, surrounded by the dazzling Mediterranean light, the ones majestically rising amid the gentle hills of the Murgia plateau and those marking the sunny and flat Salento peninsula, are all the outcome of a tradition with very remote origins. For millennia, the Apulian countryside has continuously welcomed new settlers eager to dedicate themselves to agriculture and animal-farming. In this east-pointing corner of

southern Italy, the soil is impregnated with human sweat and the air filled with centuries-old prayers and curses. Here, the hands of farmers have revived, supported and organized nature while the long- and short-range transhumance was leaving an indelible mark in form of the trails used twice a year by nomadic flocks and shepherds. Since ancient times, human beings have lived in a close and respectful relationship with this landscape made of clods,

grass, woods, olive trees, vineyards, rocky terraced ridges with a miraculous soil, herbs, low scrub, oaks, medicinal plants and wide expanses of wheat.

Surroundings of San Giovanni Rotondo, Masseria Signoritti



The Masserie in Ancient Times

As early as in the 2nd millennium B.C., during the Bronze Age, the Apulian soil was already planted with wheat and barley, and was rich in wild olives and acorns. In the Iron Age, from the 9th to the 7th century B.C., the Iapigian civilization

spread, from north to south, across the regions of Daunia, Peucetia and Messapia according to a pagus-vicus system (small settlements scattered across a district). These villages were organized as rural communities which drew from the land and livestock the resources for self-consumption as well as for trade. In the surroundings of Taranto, the famous and wealthy *polis* of Magna Graecia founded by settlers from Sparta in 706 B.C., the so-called colonial

chora was beginning to take shape around the same time. This was the portion of land meant to serve agricultural purposes under the control of Taranto's population, namely the Greek colonizers who, since their settling, continuously tried to expand landwards at the expense of the local Messapians. In the Archaic and Classical

Surroundings of Manfredonia, Masseria Macerone

