

ACHILLE CHILLÀ

**MONOPOLI**  
*Tourist Guide*

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## INTRODUCTION TO MONOPOLI

A Byzantine icon crouching beneath the arches and fitted into carefully prepared niches, side by side with both locals and passersby: this must have been one of the most important gifts ever bestowed by the sea on the most populous city southeast of Bari, at a time when Byzantium exported a lot in matters of worship to Puglia.

Most likely, having been chosen as the site of the miraculous landing reinforces the *ad usum delphini* interpretation which holds Monopoli as a “unique city”: an interpretation that is also useful in moderating and homogenizing several “ambiguities” determined by its long history and its special geography.

On one hand, there is the Levantine spirit of Peucetia, and on the other the thoughtful disposition of Messapia; a stubbornly rustic substrate that keeps traditional ritualism alive and the ambition to acquire the *status symbols* of a city; the culture of the sea on one side and the one of the land on the other, not to mention the sea gates that are always open to the sunrise.

Across these two contradictory dimensions, the ancient walls are still able to square the circle, blending the whole thanks to the colour and the memory of the primitive tufa stone, busy with its daily resistance against the waters of the Adriatic in order to continue telling its own stories.

What matters – at the end of the day – is the chance offered by these stones to both the Orient and the West to live together, mixing their tongues under the banner of the sky and of the sea.

L.A.

(Lino Angiuli – Angelo Saponara, *Le strade dell'occhio*, Gelsorosso, Bari 2008)



## Identity card

**Name:** according to the most widely accepted etymology, the name Monopoli derives from the Greek *mone polis*, most likely meaning the “only city” with a port between Siponto and Brindisi.

**Population:** 49,246 (latest census)

**Density:** 311.9 inhabitants per square kilometre

**Contrade** (hamlets belonging to its municipal district): 99

**Coordinates:** 40° 59' 17" N; 17° 10' 24" E

**Altitude:** minimum 0 metres above sea level; maximum 408 metres above sea level

**Area:** 157.89 square kilometres

**Patron saints:** Madonna della Madia  
san Francesco da Paola

**Name of the inhabitants:** “monopolitani”.

**Neighbouring towns:** Alberobello, Conversano, Castellana, Fasano, Polignano a Mare.

**Emblem:** shield bearing three silver roses against a red field, supposedly granted by emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen for the loyalty displayed by the people of Monopoli against Walter IV of Brienne (1202).

**City Title:** awarded with a Silver Medal for civil merits, by presidential decree on the 19<sup>th</sup> of April, 1972.

**Most common first names:** Madia, because of the population’s devotion to the Madonna della Madia; Damiano, Cosimo.

**Special family names:** AFFATATI – maybe derived from the past participle of the Latin verb *fatare*, meaning a person with magical powers; CALEFATI (from the Latin *calefactus* = heated up) – the “*calafati*” who worked in the shipyards were tasked with insulating the ships, stuffing the cracks between the wooden planks with tarred oakum, using a scalpel and a mallet; FRUGIS – maybe derived from the Latin word *frux*, *frugis*, meaning harvest, produce, fodder; MUOLO – the most common; ISPLUES and RAMIREZ – obviously of Spanish origin.





## Historical introduction



### ■ *From prehistory to the age of Rome*

The prehistoric settlement of the territory of Monopoli is widely documented by finds in the Grotta delle Mura, Grotta di Cala Camicia and Cala Corvino.

In regard to this coastal town, archaeology contradicts the well-established

historiographic tradition that credits its establishment to the people of the older city of Egnatia, who were fleeing from the king of the Goths Totila in the year 545 AD, during the Gothic War. The discovery, in the nineties of the past century, of unmistakable evidence of human settle-

ment since **the Bronze Age** has allowed us to ascertain the parallel development of these two urban centres until the Early Middle Ages, when Egnatia was gradually abandoned.

A prehistoric village, dating back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century BC, sheltered a community of cereal growers, hunters, cattle breeders and fishermen. Holes from the stilts used for huts and remains of pottery have been found in the area incorporated by the castle of Monopoli and in exploratory digs in the old city district.

The earliest inhabitants of the site had frequent contacts with the peoples of the Eastern Mediterranean, as witnessed by the fragments of Aegean ceramics found at the digs.

The territory of Monopoli is part of the cultural and ethnic sphere of Messapia, a sub-region of Puglia that stretches all the way to the cape of Santa Maria di Leuca.

The presence of stretches of defensive walls dat-



*Bronze nestoris, 5<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century BC (Museum of the Cathedral)*

ing back to classic times and built with the isodomonic technique proves the existence of a fortified city, equipped with a necropolis made up of semi-chamber tombs. The excavated area beneath the cathedral of the Madonna della Madia has brought to light a classical-period semi-chamber grave: upon the removal of the covering stones, amid the black-painted vases and the fragments of figure-painted ceramics appeared a nestoris, a typical vase of Messapian culture and the only one made with bronze found to this

day. The **age of Rome** has its eloquent trace in a mysterious stone gate assimilated into the architecture of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century castle. The structure is made up of an arch crossed by a slit opening most likely used to move some form of closing device. On the two sides, two guard posts hold the upper section. It is a city gate made with large stone ashlar of hard limestone. Furthermore, the remains of a Roman villa have been found in the countryside, presumably alongside a stretch of the Via Traiana.

### ■ From the Middle Ages to Spanish rule

In the **Early Middle Ages** the history of the site remains nebulous until the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century. The earliest documents bearing the name of Monopoli date back to this time, as before it was referred to as *Portus Pevie*, situated between *Dertum*, today's Torre d'Orta, and *Gnatia*, as we can infer from the *Tabula Peutingeriana*. The gradual decline of nearby

*Tabula Peutingeriana (detail)*

