

ASPECTS OF THE ECONOMICAL LIFE AND HOLY ARCHITECTURE IN S. MARIA LA FOSSA DURING THE MIDDLE AGES

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Abstract

Maria Santissima Assunta in Cielo Church, situated in S. Maria la Fossa (X-XI) is one of the most beautiful and important monuments of southern Italy. It is on the left of the Volturno River, near the *Porto delle Femmine*, in a marshy and hunting area. It was built little by little from the X century perhaps by Greek monks. It was completed only in the Angevin period in the second half of the XIII century, almost certainly by the St. Antonio of Vienne (*Antoniani*) rectory. The pictorial decoration has the most complex and important surviving cycle of the Campania region method between the XII and the XV centuries. Among the oldest frescos we can mention the one in St. Stefano (XII century), the one in St. Leonardo (XII century), whose devotion was imported during the Norman period by Saint-Leonard de Noblat, a small French town, and the *Opere di Carità* (XIII century). The representations of the *Madonna del Velo o del Rosario*, of the *Madonna del Cardellino*, of the *Madonna del Coniglio* and of the *Annunciazione* are extremely beautiful. Thanks to the nearby port, the church for a long time had been a place of worship for merchants coming from Amalfi, Naples, Genoa, Pisa and Florence. They would come from Castelvolturno selling their goods and then would continue on to Capua.

Keywords: urban, land use, planning, economy, farm, grain, olive, wine, apiculture, holy architecture.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is a commune situated on a plain about 30 kilometers from Naples in southern Italy. The small town, found on the left of the Volturno River, is known to have come about in the XI-XII centuries. It is remembered as locus S. Maria ad Fossam, located in terra Cancie already in 1126 and is cited as villa starting from 1196. We know, in particular, that S. Maria la Fossa was part of the barony of Cancia, granted by Marino Filomarino, archbishop of Capua to his brother Giacomo in 1256. In 1398, the town was given as a gift to Bernardo Arcamone, whose family was of Greek origin, from King Ladislao. After it was owned by Riccardo Filangieri, Guglielmo Stendardo, Giacomo Cantelmo, who received it as a dowry, and also by the Sanseverino (Bova, 2007).

Taking a leap in time, we must hypothesize that perhaps in the area there had been a gang of brigands which camped wherever they could. This is so because from monsignor Carlo Loffredo's (1698-1701) Pastoral Visit to the church S. Maria ad Foveam on 14 October 1698, we have the prelate «visitavit corpus ecclesiae, quam invenit non ut Domus Orationis et Porta Coeli, sed veluti spelunca latronum» (Bova, 2007).

Perhaps also the town of S Maria la Fossa had been subject to damages during the pillaging committed in the area in June 1799 by French troops. The same also happened in areas such as S. Tammaro, Casapulla and S. Maria Capua Vetere. Infact, during that period in Capua, there had been various important episodes of war with the French led by Macdonald who occupied the Neopolitan area. The city, besieged, after various events surrendered to the French on January 12, 1799. However, it was re-occupied by the French on February 12, 1806 and commanded by Massena. It became part of the Neopolitan kingdom and belonged first to Giuseppe Bonaparte and then to Gioacchino Murat. Looking through the S. Maria la Fossa parish's records, the Libro dei Morti, dating from 1797 to 1837, we can read about some people who were killed by execution: «cum ictu minimi tormenti bellici necatus sit» (Bova, 2007).

1806 was the year that the King of Naples, Giuseppe Bonaparte, passed the law on the abolition of feudal rights. The city united with that of the nearby Grazzanise. Only in the year 1907 did it gain independent administration.

With a resolution dated November 4, 1909, S. Maria la Fossa's city council gave the city the name S. Maria a Volturno. With another resolution dated February 21, 1911 the city got its former name back.

The city recorded numerous deaths during the First World War (1915-18) and listed them on a memorial tablet in Piazza Europa on April 26, 1964.

The city also recorded some deaths during the Second World War. In October 1943, many civilians were killed. We have information about some of these deaths in the S. Maria la Fossa church's Libro dei Morti (1906-1954). On October 7, 1943, 45 year old Anna Maria Pratillo and her son Salvatore died. They were stoned to death, «in eversione domus a militibus germanicis facta, a lapidibus oppressa una cum filio Russano Salvatore, mortua»; 45 year old Anna Giusti was also stoned to death, «in eversione domus a militibus germanicis facta, a lapidibus oppressa obiit». On October 9, 1943 Vincenzo Fierro died who «bellico proiectu oppressus, iacuit mortuus per multos dies in via, dein cadaver sepultum fuit in coemeterio extra pagum» (Bova, 2007).

2. S. MARIA ALLA FOSSA OR S. MARIA MINORE: ETYMOLOGY

Taking into consideration the meaning of the word fossa (1184) or fossatum (1102, 1327) rarely used was also in the plural de fosse (1247) or de fossis (1314-1323), I would like to state that it is generally understood as a synonym of fovea (1247), that is canalis. Afterwards we have the variant Santa Maria ad Foxam (1367, 1368) while in the carta concessions of 1303, together with the form Sancta Maria as Fossam we have the variant Santa Maria ad Costam. This phrase refers to the banks of the Volturno River (1303).

It is important to clarify for the first time that fossa is the canal (canalis) of the waters of the marshy land as indicated in our documents which often mention some varche (holes) in the land: «varca per quam aqua decurrit» (1259).

The name S. Maria Minore, to distinguish it from S. Maria Maggiore (today S. Maria Capua Vetere), was used for the first time by Francesco Granata in his work *Storia Sacra* (Granata, 1766). Later this name was reported by Fracescantonio Natale in his work *Lettera intorno ad una sacra Colonna* (Natale, 1776). Then, it was used again by Lorenzo Giustiniani in his *Dizionario geografico* (Giustiniani, 1804).

The population is of 2,617 inhabitants (2002). The municipal seal given by the President of the Republic has a light blue background in which there is an ox walking on green grass. Above the animal, we can see two golden ears of wheat on a cross belonging to Saint Andrea with an overlapping gold star with six rays.

3. THE MEDIEVAL LANDSCAPE

Generally the medieval landscape is characterized by the presence of walnut trees, olive trees, vineyards, vegetable gardens along with cultivation of hemp, linen and hay.

An interesting group of place-names, recorded in Capua's parchment paper, refers to forests, land belonging to noble families, churches and monasteries: «terra domine Regine» (1323), «nemus quod fuit Iohannoni de Cantelmis» (1361), «nemus Cubelli Extantardi» (1377), «terra domini principis Acchaye» (1327), «masseria domine ducisse Duracii» (1384), «terra comitisse de Sancto Severino» (1426), «terre de li Monachi» (1411), «terra monasterii S.Iohannis monialium in Capua» (1214), ecc.

The first productive establishment called massaria, of which we have information, was on S. Maria la Fossa territory and is dated 1384. It was a company specialized above all in cereal growing. It came about so as to be placed within the structure system which provided Mediterranean agricultural mercantilism. The farm was positioned on the site mostly occupied by the once Roman villa rustica, but also on old farm houses, settlements and abandoned churches. Yet, while the villa was concerned mainly with vineyards and olive plantations, the farm was occupied with the production of wheat, along with that of hemp and linen, but also with cattle, sheep and especially buffalo breeding (Bova, 2011).

This return to agriculture in the late medieval was facilitated because of the vast land available, probably as a consequence from the Black Death plague in 1363 and 1383. The plague is documented to have been present in the Capua area. From a social point of view, the affirmation of the farming system coincides with the consolidation of the hegemony of the people, sometimes from noble extraction.

4. BREEDING, FISHING, HUNTING AND APICULTURE

It seems probable that the breeding of yard animals, and especially that of pigs, was very common. This is so because of a fresco in the town's church which shows St. Antonio Abate (celebrated on January 17), the patron saint of domestic animals. Surely buffalos were bred as cited in a 1418 document referring to Castelvolturno (le bufare), cows (via Vaccara, 1289) and donkeys (via Asinara, 1259).

Obviously there was fishing due to the presence of the nearby Volturno and Agnena. The patron saint of fishing is the apostle St. Andrea (celebrated on November 30). Also stated in documents are various types of boats: barche, sandal, lontri, scafe. Another source of food was surely that of hunting due to the various woodland around the area. The patron saint of hunters is St. Eustachio (celebrated on September 20). There was a church named after him near S. Maria la Fossa (1259). Finally, apiculture should not be overlooked. This was important, not only for the honey the bees produced, an excellent and nutritious food, but also for the wax. It was essential for the lighting needed for religious ceremonies in S. Maria la Fossa. It is not rare to read in documents that some concessionaries in S. Maria la Fossa had to deliver, every year, various pounds de bona cera at Easter or on Palm Sunday to the S. Giovanni delle Monache monastery (Bova, 2011).

5. THE PARISH

On the left of Europa Square in S. Maria la Fossa, a town whose patron saint was St. Restituto, there is the splendid Maria Santissima Assunta in Cielo Church with a Longobard foundation (979 ca). It was amplified during the XII century (1284 ca) and rebuilt around the end of the XVIII century (about 1798).

The church, seen today, is a construction based upon a Romanic style as was used in the Campania area, with influence from Cassino architecture. The church was linked to the flourishing rural community's town history and was built in the immediate area of via Campana. It rose close to the banks of the Volturno River in the immediate area of the important Porto delle Femmine. Many boats coming from Castelvolturno used this port. Castelvolturno is a small city located 24 kilometers away from S. Maria la Fossa on the Tirreno Sea.

6. THE OLDEST FOUNDATION DATE

The parson, Francescantonio Natale, in 1776 said, «it is a beautiful Longobard structured church» (Natale, 1776). Such statement is absolutely before the time when the S. Maria la Fossa Church had to undergo such manipulation to reach the present aspect of the Romanic complex. Infact, it is known that the church was «remade in the XVIII century» (Bova, 2007).

However, observing the archs of the left aisle where one acute pointed arch alternates with a pointed arch, it is understood that they are very similar to the pronaos found in the Longobard S. Lorenzo ad Crucem Church in Capua (second half of the X century).

The oldest foundation of the S. Maria la Fossa Church, considered mostly a Greek l'habitat of the area, is linked most probably to the presence of sixty Calabro-Greek monks in Capua in 979. They were led by St. Nilo and surely officiated Byzantine rites.

7. THE FOUNDATION'S TRADITIONAL DATE

A tradition, which is documented only from the XVIII century on, states that the S. Maria la Fossa Church was built in the year 1084 by some people from Capua and donated. This date is not insignificant since it refers to the year in which the highly ruined St. Benedetto Church in Capua had been restored by Abbot Desiderio (1058-87) and not to the year in which S. Maria la Fossa Church was built.

8. THE CHURCH'S INTERIOR

On the outside, the church still conserves its original portal with the Romanic archivolt decorated with a leaf festoon and two supporting structures. The inside shows a longitudinal establishment (28 x 20 meters). It is divided in 3 apses. The original aisles are separated by two series of three alternating pillars and columns, which support two series of six archs completely pointed arch (a seventh was added at the entrance after 1943 following an enlargement of the church after the falling of the northex). The Corinthian Capitel, mostly one different from the other, are of engaged columns. Above the archs, in the main aisle, there is a cornice which goes round the apse. Above this frame there are five single holes with a Lanceolate arch to the right and left of the central aisle.

The original chapels of the left aisle are dated back to the Longobard period (second half of the X century) and are four. The last, positioned towards the presbytery was used in the past as the sacristy while today it is the way to the new sacristy built in a new place behind the old one. One can get to these chapels through four archs, which are crosswise and lean on three engaged columns. Only the first two chapels, beginning from the end part, are connected by a pointed arch.

The two chapels in the right aisle, instead, have been widened in modern times. The side wall of this aisle was originally made up of four single holes which now are actually only the first and fourth. The other two have been partially walled up to allow for the expansion of the first chapel (once dedicated to St. Nicola) towards the presbytery. Following the expansion of the church, after the already mentioned collapse of the northex in 1943, other two chapels were added. One in the right aisle and one in the left which occupied the place where the northex had once been.

The presbytery area is located above two stairs. The old altar, now transferred into the first chapel on the right of the entrance, is dated after the foundation of the church. It was a gift from the priest Graziano Grasso (1798) as is remembered on an inscription. In the apse, supplied with two small holes, there are frescos from different epochs mostly from the XIII and XV centuries.

On the side walls of the building there are only a few frescos, also from different periods, while others are found on the back wall which then collapsed in 1943. From various clues it is evident that the frescos represented a very complex era the church was going through and their disappearance shows a very grave gap of Capua's art History. The present roof is in truss while before the collapse there was a cloth roof below the actual roof showing the Assumption (Bova, 2007).

9. THE EASTER CANDLE

Nowadays, the historical candle is located in the apse of the right aisle but once it was located in the presbytery. From an ancient report we understand that «slightly hidden by the major altar, there is a small, decorated column used for the Easter Candle» (1776). It is particularly famous in the diocese due to its notorious size weighing about 133 pounds. For its maintenance, it had been assigned a fund deriving from land measuring 12,000 meters.

10. THE BELL-TOWER, THE NORTHEX AND THE FACADE

The antique bell-tower was situated on the left of the church. The northex was closed on the left to those who entered from the bell-tower wall while it was open on the right. In 1943 German troops, while moving away from the S. Maria la Fossa area, decided to mine the bell-tower to avoid it being used as an observation point. Therefore, it fell partly on the church's northex destroying it. The bell-tower, which now can be seen in a forward and lateral position rather than it was originally, is a later work.

The only news we have about the northex, today non-existent, goes back to a report by Don Nicolò Stasio (1776) and from a report by professor Ernesto Sosso (1911).

Regarding the façade, the original doors were three, as can be seen clearly by observing the three still visible monolithic tablets on the inside of the church and also from what we understand from a reading of the Visite Pastorali (Parish Visits). The present façade, re-done after the war events of 1943, is highly different from the original.

11. THE MIDDLE AISLE FRESCOS

Because of some details, which we have indicated for the first time, we believe that most probably the paintings known as Opere di misericordia represented in two horizontal strips with seven scenes on each in the central apse, were painted in the Angevin period and not in the Norman period as stated by Parente.

Until a short while ago, we did not know what the frescos', located in the apse, subjects were. A recent analysis done by Don Battista Marellò, the present priest of San Leucio, has enabled us to recognize in the frescos the Opere di misericordia corporali. The Book of Mathew mentions this work and it is represented positively (25, 35ss) in the first strip above and negatively (25, 42s) in the lower strip.

The Assumption, dating back to about the mid XV century, is also found in the central apse on the right of the two strips of the paintings as described. The fresco was added in a second moment perhaps to substitute other ruined paintings, such as that of, for example, the representation of the seven Opere di misericordia spirituali (Bova, 2007).

In the center of the middle apse there was once the Vergine Maria seduta in trono with baby Jesus on her lap.

In a clipeus in the center of the apse is a representation of a bust of St. Stefano. Such a work is older compared to that of the Opere di misericordia and could very well be of the XII century.

On the last pillar on the right at the end of the central aisle and before the presbytery, there is a painting of Madonna con Bambino from the 400s. From the fresco, only the top part is visible which shows the bust of the Virgin Mary and baby Jesus' head.

12. THE RIGHT AISLE FRESCOS

The fresco of St. Domenico, which we identified for the first time and visible in the right apse, is in bad condition. We can clearly recognize the figure of the Saint (1170-1221), now without a head because of the enlargement of the superior single hole, from the little remains of his white and black robe, his book and the lily.

Not too far away there is a representation of the Crocifissione also badly damaged. At the foot of the cross there are two people who, according to the Sacred Scripture, we recognize as Mary and John.

On the last pillar, on the right, in the direction towards the apse, there is a painting of Madonna del Coniglio. The Virgin Mary is sitting on a throne and is holding Jesus in her right arm on her lap while with her left arm she is caressing his small feet. Baby Jesus is playing with, his right index finger, a rabbit. He is holding it with his left hand.

13. THE LEFT AISLE FRESCOS

In the Longobard wing of the church there is a very ruined fresco which represents St. Antonio Abate. He has a long beard and is dressed in a linen robe. He is holding a rosary in his right hand while he is leaning on a cane in the shape of a Tau with his left hand.

Towards the presbytery we come to the last chapel. Here in its pointed arch we can see a rather ruined fresco which represents the Madonna allattante. This dates back to the end of the XIII century.

At the end of the wall of the left aisle, in an erect position, we can see a young saint which up to now had not been identified. After observing that he is dressed in a canvas like material while holding some chains with his right hand and the prayer book in his left, we have no doubt that it is the French St. Leonardo of Noblac. He gave his name to the small town of Saint-Leonard de Noblat 20 kilometers east of Limoges. The Saint, whose devotion is known to have been first introduced by the Normans, was the patron saint of prisoners and was extremely popular at the time of the Crusades (Bova, 2007).

In the left apse we can see the Madonna del Cardellino seated on a throne and holding baby Jesus on her right leg (XII-XIII century). Today this fresco has been moved to the right apse.

14. THE MADONNA DEL VELO

On Saturday, March 3, 2007, the fresco of the Madonna del Cardellino fell. Under it an antique fresco of the Madonna del Velo o del Rosario, between two unknown Saints for whom I suggested the names of St. James and St. Philip for the first time. It is between two unknown saints (XIII century). Under the original fresco there are the old names of the donars: Martino Sassi and his wife Maria (Bova, 2011).

15. S. MARIA CHURCH WAS NEVER A BENEDICTINE DEPENDENCE

It is a local traditional thought, not documented, that in the S. Maria la Fossa Church there had once been some Benedictine monks. Instead, as we have seen, if we need to speak about monks, we should only refer to Greek monks. If the church had been a Benedictine dependence, for instance a cell, a priorate, a canony, we would have found in documents, at least once, the words monasterium S. Marie ad Fossam instead of the words ecclesia S. Marie ad Fossam.

We can strongly say, therefore, that S.Maria la Fossa Church had never been a monastery depending on Montecassino. Nothing was ever found from reading the Capua parchment nor did anything result from the magisterial work of Herbert Bloch, Monte Cassino in the Middle Ages, of which in the third volume there are some dependencies of the great cenobite (Bloch, 1986).

ANNOUNCEMENT

I would like to take the opportunity to announce that the Center for Epigraphical and Palaeographical Studies of the State University of Ohio, directed by the illustrious Frank T. Coulson, has funded a scholarship in the memory of the world famous palaeographer Virginia Brown (1940-2009) to use at the University.

I am especially delighted to give this news since I was a correspondent with the distinguished scholar, who 20 years ago foretold that I would have given justice to the Capua parchment. I have so far published 10 volumes with Edizione Scientifiche Italiane (Napoli) beginning with the Longobards, Normans, Sveve, Angevin, Aragonese, up to the vicereines.

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