

The Angevin Castle of Gaeta: from fortification to penal bath

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Abstract

The Angevin castle of Gaeta, an imposing monumental complex, has a high historical-artistic-landscape value and represents a powerful symbol of identity for the local community and beyond. Its origins probably date back to the sixth-seventh century, but the first specific information comes from the fortification interventions of the castle wanted by Frederick II of Swabia (1223-1227). The fortified structure of the Angevin period is part of the more extensive architectural system called the Angevin-Aragonese Castle, located on a rocky outcrop of Monte Orlando. The system is made up of two communicating buildings. The oldest, built by Charles of Anjou, has an irregular polygonal plan with mighty truncated-cylindrical towers located slightly further downstream. The other one, erected by Alfonso d'Aragona, conforms to a rectangular plan, surrounded by circular towers of different heights, among which stands an imposing keep. The Bourbon domination united the two castles intending to create one of the most majestic and well-equipped fortresses in Europe, located on the extreme offshoot of the Kingdom. The complex, which involves the two forts, thus becomes a model of extraordinary interest characterized by a modern fortification designed to enclose the entire peninsula of Gaeta. Over the centuries, this mighty fortification, created to protect the territory and the kingdom's population, has become increasingly important from a military point of view, as a seat and as a prison activity carried out until 1990, determining a break with the city. Foreclosed to the peninsula, the city has had a linear urban development along the coast. The entire fortification system is the guardian of the memory of events that made Gaeta a protagonist in the history of the peninsula and represents an immaterial heritage, as well as an identity of great importance to be preserved, enhanced, and returned to citizenship. Based on digital surveys and historical maps, this research investigates the transformations undergone by the fortified complex, focusing attention on the Angevin castle and its intended use as a penal bath.

Keywords: fortress, fortification system, survey, representation.

1. The stronghold of the Gaeta peninsula

Monte Orlando, at an altitude of 171 mt above sea level, dominates the gulf and the entire peninsula of Gaeta, considered, since its origins, a cornerstone for the defense of the Kingdom of Naples. “[...] Grande è l’interesse in cui l’ebbero sempre i Borboni, che riguardavano Gaeta come la chiave del Regno. Per mezzo di sole due porte si entra in Città, una è nel porto e si chiama mare, l’altra è nell’istmo e si appella terra. [...]” (1) (Pietro Rossetto, 1694).

Two fortified structures, known as the Angevin and Aragonese castles, were built on one of the foothills of the mountain in later times, occupying an area of over 14,000 square meters (Fig. 1). The mighty architectural structures, which characterize the two plants, are typical of the medieval fortifications, interspersed with towers that aimed to break the continuity of the wall and strengthen it. Following the architectural styles of the time, the set of towers presents a geometry articulated



Fig. 1- View from the sea of the monumental Aragonese Angevin complex (graphic elaboration by the authors)

by several superimposed solids, a truncated cone, and a double system of cylinders. The last is a bracket that generates molding with a decorative function. In the fifteenth century, the advent of new weapons of war produced significant transformations in the fortified structures of our territory. In agreement with military engineers and architects such as Francesco di Giorgio and Francesco de Marchi, the ‘modern fortifications’ included the insertion of bastions in the pre-existing architectural systems to improve defense against firearms.

Contrary to what happened in the rest of our territory, the Gaeta complex has not undergone such transformations. The reasons are to be found in the construction of a widespread defensive complex: a stronghold built between 1506 and 1538 along the entire peninsula of the Gaeta by the will of Ferdinand the Catholic first and then of Charles V. The stronghold, which enclosed the two castles, was equipped with a bastion wall that extended for about 3 kilometers along the coast, effectively separating the peninsular belt from the mainland (Figs. 2, 3 and 4). “[...] Tutta la città è fortezza, e trà l’altre cose, che la rendono fortissima, è il castello; ed oltre a questa Rocca v’è la torre, detta Orlando sita nella sommità del Monte. Il mentovato castello, fu fabbricato da Rè Alfonso d’Aragona circa gli anni 1440 e dal Rè Ferdinando fu cinto di fortissime mura. Poi l’Imperador Carlo V cinse la città tutta d’altissime mura. È racchiusa Gaeta da due sole porte, che si custodiscono con grande diligenza. [...]” (2) (Pietro Rossetto, 1694). In four centuries, it has grown and improved with the inclusion within military structures, which responded to the increasingly advanced war techniques, such as powder magazines, batteries, trenches, and tunnels, overcoming differences in height and

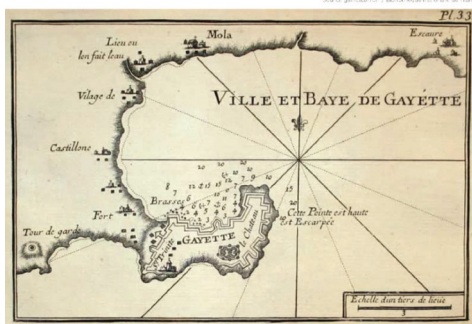


Fig. 2- a) Planta de Gaeta (Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 1710); b) Joseph Roux, Ville et Baye de Gaète, Marseille, 1764; c) Plan of the Piazza di Gaeta (Neapolitan Genius, 1860)

drilling hills that characterize the articulated orography of this territorial area. Three powder cases, called Carolina, Ferdinando, and Trabacco, are still preserved in good condition and clearly visible today.

The battery, called annular due to its geometric plan configuration that surrounds the mausoleum of Lucio Mugnazio Planco, Roman military and republican politician, was built to replace the

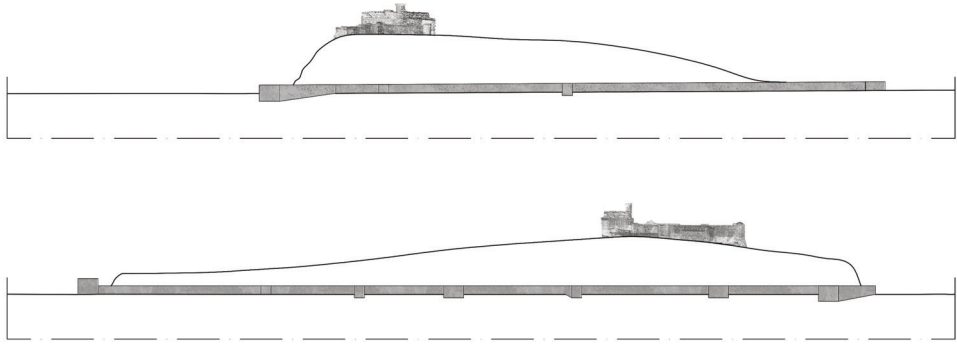


Fig. 3- Schematic sections that relate the altimetric relationships between the Angevin-Aragonese monumental complex with the ‘modern’ fortification (graphic elaboration by the authors)

cannons, now obsolete. The plant is still visible even if the architectural remains are small. Its construction dates back between the last siege of the fortress (1860/1861), which represents the disappearance of the Kingdom of the two Sicilies, and the unification of Italy. The formation of the kingdom of Italy did not change the role and characteristics of the city of Gaeta until the end of the Second World War, whose bombings contributed to the cancellation of historical testimony, its stronghold a unicum on our territory. The few traces that survived the bombings were then definitively erased by the construction of the Caboto seafont.

2. The Angevin castle from fortification to penal bath

The military function of the entire fortress was also evident by the custodial use of the two fortresses, particularly the Angevin castle, which has been used as a penal bath since the Middle Ages (Fig. 5). The idea of an autonomous prison architecture was slow to develop. From ancient times it was necessary to use the most disparate places, such as wells, cisterns, caves, and natural ravines used for detention. In the Middle Ages, the undergrounds of palaces and castles were used for the first time, particularly the keeps, giving rise to the ‘penal bath’ by applying the motto of Ulpiano “carcer enim ad continendos homines, not punendo a berri debet.” The custodial use of the Angevin castle follows, as for the fortifications surrounding it, the evolution of the concept of imprisonment and punishment. Initially, the prison was supposed to be the place to enclose the prisoner pending trial, death penalty, or hard labor. Later it becomes a place to atone for one’s sentence. The penal bath of Gaeta became, in fact,

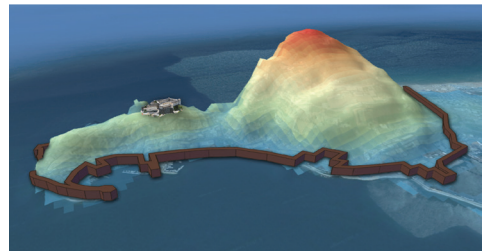


Fig. 4- Digital reproduction of the fortification system of the Gaeta peninsula (graphic elaboration by the authors)

over the centuries of the second class, or the place where the inmates, condemned to forced labor, carried out the demanding tasks wearing an iron circle on their feet. These places, now known as Bourbon cells, are located on the northwest side of the castle, overlooking the sea. The fortress was subsequently enlarged as a detention facility by modifying some rooms above the Chapel of San Teodoro on the north side. This arm is now known as the Piedmontese Cells because it was intended for former officers after the Savoy’s advent. Over time, additional rooms have been used as military penitentiaries. Some dormitories were defined, A-B-C-D, conceived as open environments but intended to accommodate those who had not complied with military obligations, such as Jehovah’s Witnesses (Fig. 6).

The entire Angevin fortress is known for having detained two leading figures in Nazi history in Italy, Herbert Kappler, guilty of the massacre of the Fosse Ardeatine in Rome, and Walter Reder, one of the instigators of the Marzabotto and Sant’Anna massacres. by Stazzema. Their



Fig. 5- Photogrammetric survey from a drone of the Angevin castle that highlights its mammoth architectural structure (graphic elaboration by the authors)

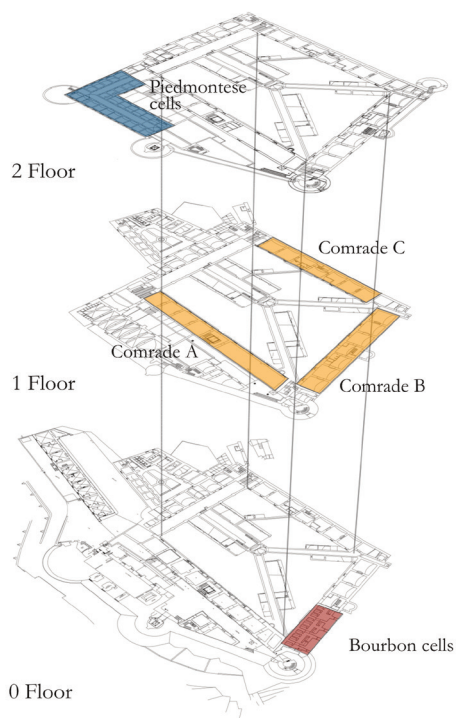


Fig. 6- The graphic elaboration of the Angevin castle layout shows the rooms' location intended for prisoners. The Bourbon cells, represented in red, are located on the mezzanine floor. The Piedmontese cells, represented in blue, are located on the second floor; the dormitories A-B-C, represented in yellow, occupy the various levels of the complex and are located along the sides of the main quadrilateral (graphic elaboration by the authors)

stay in the facility lasted about thirty years, but both led a privileged life compared to the other inmates. Their cells, in correspondence with the B dormitories, were huge and equipped with every comfort. Now the Angevin castle is home to the University of Cassino and Southern Lazio, which holds it on perpetual loan. From an architectural point of view, it has an interesting internal elevation development that follows the land's orography and responds to the typical organization of medieval fortifications.

Contrary to the Aragonese castle, which preserves the royal residence rooms, it lacks decorations or valuable architectural elements. Only the internal garden of Maria Sofia of Bavaria is preserved, representing the filter between the two structures of the complex and the royal chapel of Francis II of Bourbon. The chapel, located in the westernmost tower and recognizable by the presence of a lowered dome that closes the tower itself, presents a worrying crack pattern and the presence of colored plaster that suggests a decorative apparatus that is now completely lost. The structure has undergone numerous transformations, all aimed at adapting to the new needs required by the military penitentiary. The construction, for example, of the connecting corridors between the dormitories, in the courtyard of the main quadrilateral, was made in more recent times and had a mixed construction system in reinforced concrete and iron. The rest of the structure, except for a few rooms, is heavily degraded, although the wall system of elevation of the towers and the wall system is in a good state of conservation, except for the chapel. The military penitentiary activity was definitively abandoned in 1990.

3. The Bourbon cells

The oldest cells are the so-called Bourbon Criminal Bath, which remained in use until the 1950s: 12 cells of a few square meters, without windows, branch out along a corridor. Equipped with stone beds and pillows, a ring or chain embedded in the floor to keep the prisoner tied up, and a slit under the bed to place the bucket, reminiscent of medieval galleys. Each cell was also closed with wooden doors and was utterly devoid of light to exacerbate the punishment further.

Fragments of colored plaster provide essential information on the original colors of the environment that go towards Pompeian gray-red tones. This duotone that does not go beyond one meter from the floor is typical of government buildings (Ancora, 2021). At the bottom was the environment of the 'beating' practice, also of an ancient medieval heritage.



Fig. 7- Bourbon cells. Pictures of the narrow hallway and the stone beds and pillows (photos by the authors)

4. The Piedmontese cells

In the other wing of the fortress, located on the second level above ground, there is the so-called ex-officers' arm with the Piedmontese cells, in use from 1901 until 1990, after the advent of the Savoy and until the closure of the prison: about ten square meters, with wolf-mouth windows, which precluded the view of the sea, valid only for the entry of air, with a table and a wooden bed. The doors retain the Savoy blue paint, a color very dear to the Piedmontese family since the fourteenth century. After a ladder, the inmates reached a small circular terrace intended for air time under the close surveillance of the armed guards (Ancora, 2021). The molding of the circular tower served as a parapet, so high as to preclude the view of the sea (Fig. 8).

5. Conclusions

With the help of historical and critical iconographic apparatuses, this work aims to organically reconstruct the vicissitudes of the Angevin castle of Gaeta, which is part of a larger fortification complex. A unique system of its kind for several reasons: a) due to the close presence of two fortresses built in later periods but then used as an architectural unit; b) for the construction of a stronghold with modern bastion systems and numerous other increasingly modern military structures; c) due to its particular intended use, a penal service, which remained active until 1990. This structured analysis of the history of the castle represents the first step for a more complex and detailed analysis necessary to activate a process of enhancing a highly identifying asset for the local community and beyond.

Notes

- (1) "Great is the interest the Bourbons always had, who regarded Gaeta as the key to the Kingdom. One can enter the city through only two doors; one is in the port and is called the sea, and the other is in the isthmus and calls itself land".
- (2) "The whole city is a fortress, and among the other things that make it very strong is the castle; in addition to this fortress, there is the Orlando tower located on the top of the mountain. The castle mentioned above was built by King Alfonso of Aragon around the 1440s, and solid walls surrounded it by King Ferdinando. Then Emperor Charles V surrounded the whole city with very high walls. Gaeta is enclosed by only two doors guarded with great diligence"



Fig. 8- Piedmontese cells. The wooden doors in the original color, some furnishings and numerous writings that identify the intended use of the rooms are still preserved. (photos by the authors)

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