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A Cistercian Landscape to Safeguard: the Abbey of Santa Maria di Realvalle in Sarno Plain

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➡ ABSTRACT

Cistercian Order's architecture gives an important example of the human ability to adapt to the natural components of the landscape and to take advantage from their use. Designed on a model of completely self-sufficient monastic and agricultural "towns", the Cistercian abbeys were built in sites chosen for their topographic characteristics, because of wide flat areas, nearby forests and watercourses. According to the Benedictine Rule, the Cistercians cultivated lands and bred the cattle in order to ensure the livelihood of the monastery. The importance of these activities is testified by the spatial articulation of the abbeys which, in addition to the main complex, consisted of several rural parts – *grange* – used to manage the farm work. In order to provide for the need of water supply, both for the daily life as for the rural activities, the Cistercians were able to take advantage from the proximity of the rivers for water control and distribution. The hydraulic skill is testified by the engineering works built to regularize or divert the rivers' course and define alternative routes so as to bring water into the monastery or near the *grange*.

Santa Maria di Realvalle Abbey in Scafati was built starting from 1273 and is a rare example of a 13th century Cistercian architecture in the South of Italy. Despite the several transformations carried out over the centuries, it is still possible to identify both its spatial articulation and its environmental qualities. As in other cases, it was built in a fluvial landscape marked by the presence of a mostly flat alluvial territory, the nearby Scafati forest and the River Sarno, still navigable at that time.

Despite the high historical value and the high potential for a broader development of the Plain of Sarno, Realvalle Abbey is today in a widespread decay. Because of this, the paper aims at renovating the attention towards this monument so that its restoration could be, at the same time, a tool for the improvement of the fruition of the whole cultural landscape.

Cistercian Landscapes

The architecture of the Cistercian Order can be considered as an early but clear application of the model of a "sustainable" building because it testifies the human ability to adapt to the natural components of the landscape and to take advantage from their use. Built on the basis of the rules codified in the so-called *Plan bernardin* – defined in France starting from the first half of the 12th century – the Cistercian abbeys were designed as completely self-sufficient "towns". According to the Benedictine Rule, in fact, each monastic complex – with a strict modular plan, an extreme functionality of spaces and an accuracy in the orientation of the structures – had to be equipped with all the facilities required to ensure the monks' livelihood, each of whom had to provide for the work in the fields and the cattle breeding.

Basic characteristics of the medieval Cistercian topography and prerequisites for the choice of the place where building the monastic complex were the distance from other settlements, the presence of wide flat areas, nearby forests, quarries for the extraction of the building materials and, most of all, the abundance of water (Maduro et al., 2015). Moreover, the adoption of a form of direct exploitation of the lands imposed the need to define autonomous buildings distributed within the extended properties. These rural complexes – the so-called *grange* – were independent units and consisted of dwellings for the lay brothers and for the farmers, as well as of large warehouses for the storage of foodstuffs and work equipment (Bellerio, 1985). The architecture of the *grange*, built by the Cistercians or derived from the adaptation of rural settlements – so as, more generally, the abbatial structures – appeared, in the different geographical contexts, as variations of the same typological scheme modified, from time to time, according to local building techniques and to the use of vernacular materials.

In order to satisfy the water needs – both for the daily life in the monastery as for the rural activities – the Cistercians were able to take advantage from the proximity of springs and rivers by monitoring and managing the flows and by reaching, in this way, a high skill in hydraulic engineering. The complex works carried out by the monks derived from the need to manage a double system of water supply: in fact, they had to ensure the provision of drinking water and the distribution of fresh water for the agricultural and domestic works, the fish farming, the productive activities, the activation of hydraulic systems and the sanitation of the latrines (Jorge, 2012). Furthermore, the great skills and competences showed by the Cistercians were employed in the reclamation of marshy areas as well as in the recovery of uncultivated lands, as happened, for example, in Piemonte in the cases of the abbeys of Santa Maria di Lucedio (Bellerio, 1985) and of Santa Maria di Staffarda (Beltramo, 2010).

For the supply of drinking water – coming from springs quite near to the monastery, whose good quality was verified by the monks –, the routes of the adduction networks had to be planned in order to ensure linearity and constant slope and to be adapted, at the same time, to the orography of the territory. Therefore, the Cistercians built complex aerial structures to overcome differences of level, underground installations, trenches or tunnels in the cases of sudden variations of the altimetry as well as aqueducts in order to cross rivers or other natural barriers, as the well-conserved hydraulic “machines” of the Abbey of Alcobaça in Portugal still testify (Maduro et al., 2015). Moreover, the hydraulic pipes included filtering and purification systems and vertical inspection chambers equipped with air intakes used to reduce the hydrostatic pressure. Once reached the monastery through underground stone or clay conduits, the drinking water was distributed by the washbasin of the cloister or by little wells embedded in the wall of the refectory. The exceeding water was canalized towards others service rooms (Jorge, 2012) and disposed, then, through specific conduits or, sometimes, collected in artificial basins used to the fish breeding, as in the Abbey of Fontaine Jean in the Loire. In the complex of Royaumont in the Val-d’Oise – from which the Abbey of Santa Maria di Realvalle derived by filiation –, the building of the latrines, crossed in the middle by a collecting tube, is still visible.

The proximity of rivers or watercourses was indispensable, on the other hand, to supply the water resources useful for the rural activities and the activation of hydraulic structures like



mills, crushers or forges. In this case the dynamics of transformation and adaptation of the natural components had to be more complex. In most cases the monks had to proceed to considerable works of regularization of riverbeds, deviation of watercourses and building of artificial canals and ditches in order to direct the water towards productive and rural structures and cultivated fields. Furthermore, particular attention was paid to the regulation of the flow rate and of the pressure of the water through the construction of dams and mobile barrages so as to avoid dangerous floods. In addition, a large amount of systems, characterized by smaller barrages which favored a capillary distribution of water, was built to control the micro-irrigation of the fields (Bellero, 1985).

Therefore, the installation of a Cistercian abbey in a specific territory and the activity of “planning” and transformation of the natural environment, expertly carried out by the religious “artificers”, gave to places «an agricultural beauty and an own spatial identity» (Jorge, 2012). The Cistercian system appeared, thus, like a complex “network” which, at the landscape scale, involved architectures and works of natural and hydraulic engineering built in order to better manage the sources, ensuring, at the same time, their conservation.

The Abbey of Santa Maria di Realvalle: a Cistercian architecture in the Sarno landscape

The localization strategy of the Abbey of Santa Maria di Realvalle can be related to the identification of an area rich in water and near the River Sarno, intended as the preferential connecting way between Nocera and Sarno countryside and the sea. As widely recorded in archival sources, from 1273 (Francabandera, 1932; Pesce, 2002) Charles I commissioned to the abbots of Royaumont and Le Loroux the dispatch of two monks to the *Nemus Scaphati*, royal hunting reserve, with the task of directing the planning choices with conformity to the Cistercian Rule. Pierre de Chaules was in charge of the design of the Abbey to be built, according to the royal directions, in a site full of water, forests and in a land suitable for cultivation and vineyards’ planting. The Angevin building was located, therefore, in a flat area near the natural barrier formed by the River Sarno, in the village of San Pietro «in territorio terre Schifati» (*Il Regno di Carlo d’Angiò*, 1876). The site, in the fertile valley, appeared sufficiently far from the major communication routes and from urban centers; at the same time, it showed an abundance of timber within the royal forest as well as the long river well responded to communication aims between the inland and the sea.

The documents of the Angevin Registry that enable us to understand the evolution of the building, the economical issues, the succession of the various *protomagistri*, the materials, the royal solicitations until the closure of the yard are particularly rich (Francabandera, 1932; Amarotta, 1973; Raspi Serra, Bignardi, 1984; Bruzelius, 1991; De Sanctis, 1993; Fiengo, Guerriero 1996, Pesce, 2002; Cigni, 2003; Forgione, 2004). Supervisor of the latter was Pierre de Chaules himself flanked by Guathier d’Asson and, from 1278, Thibaud de Saumur. Once taken the stone materials from the quarries of Sarno, of *Mulini* and *Nocera dei Cristiani*, these were transported by horse-drawn boats that, because of their dimensions, even demanded the

cutting of a small island, located at the confluence of the *Alveo Comune* (Solofrana-Cavaiola) with the River Sarno (Pesce, 2002).

Founded with a diploma by Charles I dated 1277 (Pesce, 2002), the construction of the Abbey proceeded until May 1284 (Francabandera, 1932). We can reasonably assume that the building had to be configured, for the customer, architectural program and for the religious community, as a real French outpost in the southern countryside: if the name recalled, in fact, explicitly the mother-abbey Royaumont of Beauvais, only monks and lay brothers coming from the Kingdom of France and the counties of Provence and Forcalquier could live there. Religious members had also large properties with the consequent possibility of plowing and cultivating the land together with the *ius piscandi* in River Sarno, with extension to its estuary. These favorable conditions fully remained during the 14th century and until the Abbey was given *in commendam* in 1393 (Pesce, 2002). The catastrophic earthquake of 1456, therefore, damaged the complex for most of its extension, with effects on the church, the cloister and the wing of the monks, with probable large damages and collapses of the Medieval parts and causing important restoration works. This event can be considered as an accelerator of the deep decline of the Cistercian complex, no more suitable to the expectations of the 15th century society because of the relationship between the contemplative religious community and the external world.

After about a decade from the earthquake (1464), the feudal domain of Scafati where the Abbey insisted was donated to Antonio Piccolomini, nephew of Pope Pio II «with its territory, lands, possessions, meadows, pastures, woods, forests, mills, aqueducts, right of fishing and hunting» (*Serie di privilegio*, 1840?).

The modifications of the river course, culminating during the 17th century in derivations and barrages to bring water into tanks or to increase the hydraulic power necessary for the functioning of mills and proto-industries, caused the consequent deterioration of the environmental conditions and, with them, of the quality of living in Realvalle: this is evidenced in a description of 1597 where the Abbey is «maximis ruinis affecta ut vix quantae molis extiterit, et ruinarum ipsarum vestigio dignosci possit; est ibidem aer intemperatissimus» (Di Leo, 1993; Pesca, 2002).

In 1807 the Abbey of Santa Maria di Realvalle is suppressed and its property are confiscated by the State Property. Sold by auction, it is acquired in the following year by Andrea Dino, landowner who proceeds to adapt it to the needs of agriculture (ASSA, Mon. Soppr., f. 2465; ASNA, f. 2098). In this condition of abandonment, in the second half of the century, the big Abbey is visited by Alphonse Dantier, Benedictine monk who was given the task of conducting an investigation about the Order's abbeys in Italy by the French Ministry of Education at the request of Ludovic Vitet, then published in Paris in 1866: «Close by it [the River Sarno], behind a curtain of poplars, on a small éminence, – he notes – there are the ruins of an Abbey founded by Charles of Anjou in remembrance of the victories of Manfredi and Corradino. (...) Moreover, full of indifference to the ruins near which [the farmers] live, these simple and ignorant people neither know the old use of the site nor the name that the monastery had over time. I walked through the ancient colonnade of the cloister where there are, on one side, five still standing columns and, on the other, seven pillars of arches crowned with

brackets and capitals. Some fragments of gravestones scattered on the ground and of small mounds, today covered by high grass, suggest that the inner courtyard of this cloister was used by the religious as a burial place. (...) Farther away, in the area before occupied by the Church, there is nothing more than one of its lateral walls on which stand out five wide windows with trilobated ogives, three of which conserved their crosses and their elegant semi-columns» (Dantier, 1866).

The first signals of a recognition of the historical value of the Abbey can be dated back to the late 19th century and shortly before the arrival of the Alcantarin nuns in the building, in 1889. If Schulz had searched for the Cistercian complex near Boscoreale (Aubert, 1937) and Dantier had directly examined it, a slow and renewed approaching to the monument comes out during the first decade of the 20th century thanks to Émile Bertaux who provides the first images of it in 1905, and to the publication of Egidi in 1909. However, only during the Thirties of the century, a more systematic comprehension of the building is carried out through the surveys of Francabandera and the research on field by De Bouard (Aubert 1937; Campana 1937; De Bouard 1937).



Fig. 1 - Scafati, Abbey of Santa Maria di Realvalle. The strong relationship with the River Sarno is evident from the aerial photo.



Fig. 2 - Scafati, Abbey of Santa Maria di Realvalle. The West elevation (photo S. Baldussi, 2014).

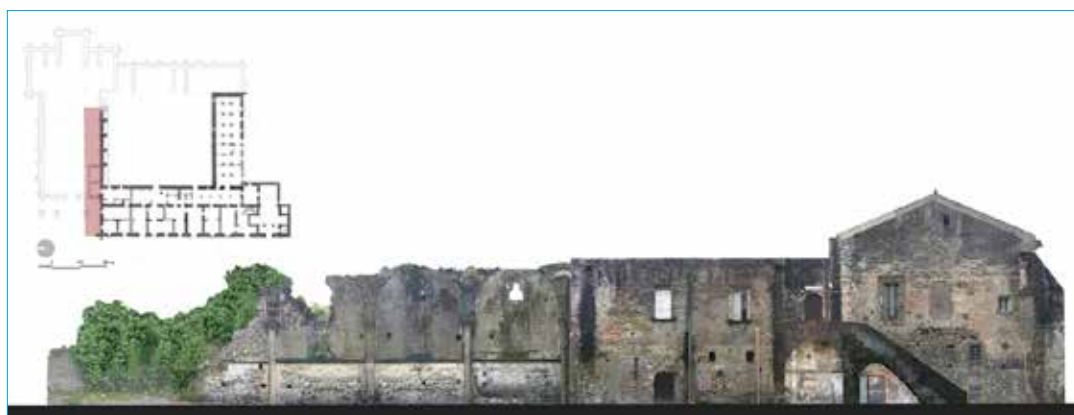


Fig. 3 - Scafati, Abbey of Santa Maria di Realvalle. The survey of the northern parts shows part of the inner right elevation of the church (elab. from S. Baldussi's Ms Thesis in Architecture, Univ. degli Studi di Napoli Federico II, Dept. of Architecture, supervisors prof.arch. Valentina Russo, arch. Stefania Pollone, 2015).

From the current conditions to the perspectives of knowledge and safeguard of the Sarno fluvial landscape

Despite the several transformations carried out during centuries which have partly compromised a good comprehension of the monastic complex, it is still possible to identify both its spatial articulation as its environmental qualities. Many issues nevertheless could be widely clarified through the activation of a specific program of investigations on field both in the site corresponding to the church and in residential and agricultural parts. It is highly desirable, in fact, the comprehension, thanks to archaeological and geophysical surveys, of the plan of the entire church as well as the complex hydraulic systems which, through canals,



linked the river and the Abbey, ensuring the livelihood of this latter. The great relevance – both historically and in relation to the architectural and artistic values – of the Cistercian complex of French filiation does not correspond today, unfortunately, to a culturally and scientifically defined program to protect and enhance this heritage. Consisting of ruined and of better preserved parts, the medieval building has undergone during the second half of the 20th century to restructuring operations which, insensitive to the constructive significance, have led to wide replacements of the ancient parts. Furthermore, the presence of the Alcantarine nuns has determined the construction of a building corresponding to the front portion of the Angevin church from 1967, as well as, several tamperings of inner spaces.

Largely abandoned, Santa Maria di Realvalle requires today the urgent activation of an accurate program of knowledge, conservation and protection of the surviving buildings through which it could be possible to identify strategies for a careful reuse – compatible with the permanence of the old parts – and for a sensitive enhancement of its old relationships with the natural components of the Sarno fluvial landscape.

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