

Architectural and constructive characteristics of vernacular settlements in southern Italy: the Esaro's valley and the popular identity of some exemplary cases

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Abstract

The paper proposes the analysis of a significant portion of the territory of southern Italy and, more precisely, that in Calabria within the Esaro river valley, characterized by a wide hilly area that hosts numerous small ancient centres. The analysed territory, which for centuries has had a strong agricultural and pastoral vocation, presents a varied range of case studies typical of popular identity and vernacular culture but different in morphologies, construction techniques, materials and types. Through a comparative reading of some examples, therefore, the paper aims to highlight the architectural and construction features typical of the local architecture, underlining their spontaneous and identity character. Not only sporadic and isolated episodes are taken into consideration, but also entire portions of the inhabited area, which in structure and building fabric reflect the traditional life of the past. The territory's variety allows us to analyse different types of architecture through which the vernacular culture is manifested. In addition to the most valuable examples such as farms, country houses, farmhouses, in fact, there are also examples of more modest architecture (ovens, stables, oil mills, mills, clay buildings) that express, even more, traditional and popular aspects. The study, therefore, through the analysis of the formal, functional and constructive characteristics, has made it possible to define variants and invariants of an architectural heritage with a strong identity value to protect and preserve.

Keywords: Knowledge, vernacular architecture, popular identity.

1. Introduction

This paper is an introduction to the knowledge of the landscape and the architecture of a beautiful natural and built environment placed in the northern-central part of Calabria, in the province of Cosenza. We are talking of the Esaro valley, crossed by the homonymous river and dotted with several villages. The essay's aim is to focus on the heritage of rural architecture through an overview of emblematic types of local vernacular culture. These buildings, of agricultural and pastoral tradition, are typical of this part of Calabria and can be considered expression of the specific peculiarities of local cultural identity. Therefore, this study wants to re-consider these assets as a cultural

and/or economic resource for contemporary society, combining the reasons of conservation with those of the re-usage of these existing values.

In order to achieve an architectural and urban knowledge of the area, various analytical protocols have been carried out, highlighting the specific features of local building culture. All these analysis (historical, architectural, material, technological, typological, social) have allowed to collect data on the settlements' structure, on the autochthonous architectural lexicon, on the recognisability of primitive systems, on the evolution of the base-type, on the building systems, and on the exploitation of resources. Therefore, it was possible to define the variant

and invariant features of base and outstanding architectures in this area. More than just focusing on popular identity and the spontaneous way of building of those who lived in these places, this cognitive process has led to foreshadowing scenarios of valorization for these potentialities. All this, in order to bring these places back in the circuit of social life, to promote the conservation of its specific features and encourage the repopulation of the area.

2. Esaro valley: invariant characters and examples

At present, Esaro valley renders the image of a unique landscape, albeit affected by marginalization and depopulation and waiting to enhance its architectural and economic resources. Esaro River crosses northern Calabria, originating from the eastern side of the coastal mountain chain, near the Passo dello Scalone, a mountain pass of the Southern Apennines that represents the border point between the Lucanian and Calabrian ranges. It furrows a territory of over 600 square kilometres and ends its course in Coscile River (in the proximities of the plateau of Torre Mordillo), a tributary of Crati River, a few kilometres before its delta in the Ionian Sea. Therefore, this water-course flows through an uncontaminated landscape characterized by mountains and hills with a strong environmental value, dotted of small waterfalls and speleo-archaeological sites, together with the fertile valley. This geographical area is marked by numerous medieval settlements placed within the drainage basin of Esaro River.

In a central position to the entire region (Fig. 1), the Esaro valley is limited to the North by the Pollino Massif, with the villages of Mottafollone, Acquafamosa, San Donato di Ninea, San Sosti, Sant'Agata d'Esaro; to the East by the Presila Mountain Range; to the south by the urban centre

of Cosenza and from San Marco Argentano, the main centre of the area; to the west by the coastal range with the centres of Fagnano Castello, Malvito and Santa Caterina Albanese. The latter is one the many small villages (together with Spezzano Albanese, Acquafamosa, Firmo, etc.) belonging to the *Arbëreshë*¹ ethnic group. These settlements preserve the urban structure², language, customs and traditions, and the Greek-Byzantine rite, typical of this ethnicity.

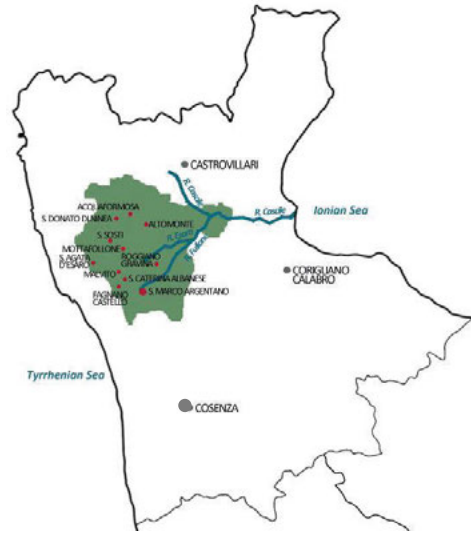


Fig. 1. The Esaro valley: in blu the Coscile, Esaro and Fullone Rivers, in red some of the named nuclei, in gray some important centres in northern Calabria.

The villages located in the Esaro valley have small historic nuclei in which rural buildings coexist with examples of outstanding architecture. Apart from San Marco Argentano, the largest centre in the valley, close to the urban area of Cosenza, none of these villages has urban territorial functions. While the settlements are remarkable for the landscape values, their urban and architectural structures have not been sufficiently examined. Their aspect is usually defined by spontaneous rules and influenced by

1 The *Arbëreshë* are the Italian Albanians, also called Italo-Albanians, the Albanian ethno-linguistic minority historically settled in southern and insular Italy.

2 The *Arbëreshë* centres show a concentric urban layout named *gjitonia* in which buildings are placed in a circle around a central square that is the hub of social life, just like the villages in Albania.

the rough orography and the need to spare land for agriculture and pastoralism. Most of these centres originated spontaneously, clinging to cliffs or hills for defensive reasons. These settlements show a pyramidal urban structure, with an intricate system of narrow streets that, from the ridge to the valley, follows the contour lines on which also the buildings stand. The built fabric is characterized by single-family rural types, often showing a *profferlo*³, attached to other terraced houses. The ancient centre revolves, for most part, around outstanding buildings such as a castle, a cathedral, defensive towers overlooking the valley, from which the core path often develops.

In the lowest parts of the valley, we find small productive activities: farmhouses, mills, sheds for agricultural tools, shelters for the sheep, frequently built with unbaked bricks, a construction technique widely used in Calabria and throughout the Mediterranean area. In the nearby Crati valley, this particular unbaked brick was known as “*mattunazzu*”. For the Calabrian populations, this technique was a way to build using local, versatile and low cost materials, employing natural elements such as earth, small river pebbles and mud as a binder. In the analysed area, for example, the mud was mixed with vegetable aggregates such as straw and wheat chaff, therefore assuring also thermal insulation for both winter and summer. At the present in Calabria, few examples of these constructions remain: houses made of unbaked clay bricks and straw can be found in the hamlet of Sartano, which represents the last centre built with this technique, in San Marco Argentano and in San Donato di Ninea, two centres in the Esaro valley.

In the studied area, the typical rural house is generally a single-storey building, made of one room, rarely of two, with flooring in beaten earth or bricks, slabs made of wood or woven reeds, and roofs covered with a mantle of irregular handmade tiles. The façade, developed

horizontally, is very simple, characterized only by an entrance door and a small opening from which daylight could enter. The masonry made of rough irregular red earth bricks is noteworthy. The kitchen represented the principal interior space and showed the typical *focagna* (fireplace), the real core of the house. Furnishing was sober; a fundamental role was held by the *cascia* (portmanteau) where the groceries were stored. Furthermore, each house had its own votive aedicule, a niche in the wall holding the statue of the Saint, to protect and bless the family.

Among the villages in which these characters still remain legible, there is San Donato di Ninea (Fig. 2) presumably founded by the Enotri with the name of Ninea. The original nucleo must have been located not distant from Mount Serra di Santa Croce. To escape from the frequent Saracen invasions, the inhabitants later decided to move to the Motta area, on the top of the mountain.



Fig. 2. San Donato di Ninea: view of the historic centre.

The settlement stands on a rocky spur with a terraced built fabric, founded on the contour lines. At the top, in the highest part, there is the Romanesque church of the Madonna dell'Assunta, welded to the rock and with its façade overlooking the Esaro valley and the

³ The *profferlo* is a type of medieval external staircase, ending with a gallery supported by an arch.

Ionian Sea in the extents. Behind the church, stands a maze made of attached houses.

The streets create a labyrinth, frequently interrupted by stepped alleys that connect different levels, and small urban spaces where the social life of the centre is set. The built fabric, made of base-types, is shaped in blocks of attached housing units that follow an oblique position. The most widespread building types are the single-family house with *profferlo* together with terraced houses and tower houses. However, there also are examples of more sophisticated architectures such as wealthier dwellings.

Buildings are usually made of stones of different sizes, sometimes mixed with river pebbles. Roofs are generally gable or hip, covered in roof tiles held down by stones, a spontaneous device used to assure greater stability in harsh and windy climate conditions during the winter.

Outside the centre, in the nearby rural areas, there is a widespread presence of *catuoi*, small single-storey buildings of modest size, used as shelters for the animals. These stables, whose name in dialect derives from the Greek *κατα' οἶκος*, were placed near the houses, at their service.

Furthermore, in the area of San Donato di Ninea there are remains of ancient mineral mines⁴ in which, in addition to the more common iron, gold, silver and copper, also cinnabar was extracted, probably used as a dye (Arthur, Imperiale, 2015). This tradition is still alive in the locality of Bocca della Cava where there is the Casino dell'Oro, a modest building made of a single room and an elementary pitched roof, placed near the mine and used as storage and shelter for the miners.

On the slopes of Mount Pellegrino, not far from the historic centre, there are the rock caves of Sant'Angelo, testament of the Basilian tradition in Calabria, used as an underground place of cult (Roma, 2010). The locals continue to value the caves, holding religious events, processions, folk

festivals in them, to honor the memory of the typical events of local vernacular tradition.

The historic centre of Altomonte also shows similar features in the shape of the built centre and the presence and diffusion of base-type buildings. This village of ancient foundation adapts its layout to the ridge, tracing with its streets, with its defensive buildings (the Pallotta Tower and the Castle) and its base-building fabric, the typical medieval fortified structure.

The diffusion of tower houses is more evident than in San Donato di Ninea. These buildings, with their single-cell system, developed on several levels and placed in a continuous attached sequence, almost resemble a defense "wall" in the lowest part of the centre (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Altomonte: view of tower houses.

The case of Altomonte is also interesting because of the combination of productive and residential areas. In this village there is the emblematic case of the castle that has an underground oil mill, an element that becomes recurring in many historic centres of Calabria. In the countryside, next to the modestly built houses there often was an oven for making bread. Water mills were often used to ground the wheat from the croplands: on the Grondi river there were at least four mills of which only few unrecognizable ruins can be seen today. The Mill of Frati Minimi, instead, preserves notable remains and also the two underpasses for the water can be recognized.

⁴ The village is surrounded by an extensive mountain area rich of metals, as attested in a document dated 1195 which

recalls an iron mine granted to the Cistercians in a farmhouse called *Sanctus Donatus*.

3. The case of San Marco Argentano

The centre of San Marco Argentano is the most remarkable instance of local vernacular culture, because of its size and because of its deep connection to the aptitude of the area. In fact, better than any other settlement in the Esaro Valley, this town presents both modest and outstanding features that highlight how the culture of spontaneous building does not necessarily have to be “poor”.

The existence of the centre is documented since the Sybaris dominion under the name of *Argyros*. Later it became *Argyrano* under the Lucanians and *Argentanum* under the Romans, because of the presence of a small mine for the extraction of silver. Placed on the isthmian route that connects the Ionian and the Tyrrhenian seas, this village detained great importance throughout numerous dominations and hegemonies, including those of Lombards, Saracens and Swabians. The Normans enriched the centre, increasing its economic and artistic importance and ensuring the highest period of prosperity of its history. The village still shows the vestiges of past times: the urban structure composed of narrow, twisted and labyrinth-like alleys that wind from a long transversal road, several outstanding brick buildings, decorated and crowned by noble coats of arms.

Even though noble examples of architecture can be found in the dense urban nucleus, it is in the countryside that the local vernacular features appear more strongly. The practice of living in rural areas, even when isolated, spreads the landscape of numerous scattered houses and small or medium-sized cultivated plots of land. In fact, by moving away from the urban centre and down towards the plains, more than sixty districts can be counted, once populated mostly by farmers, shepherds and woodcutters.

Among these, Iotta is significant for unbaked clay brick buildings, one-storey huts constructed in simple clayey earth, with a bright red color, mixed with water and vegetable elements, mostly straw (Fig. 4). Some of these buildings show an outer layer of lime to protect the masonry from rainwater. Similarly, others are protected by *incannucciate*⁵ (Fig. 5) and shrubs. The wooden roof is simply interlocked in the brick walls.



Fig. 4. District Iotta: house with raw clay bricks.

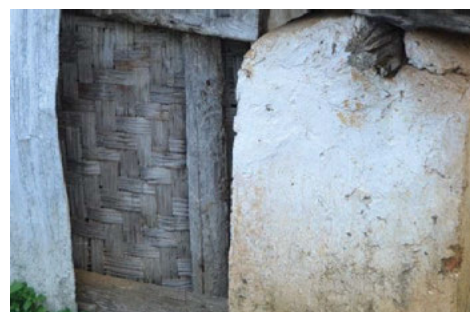


Fig. 5. District Iotta: example of *incannucciata*.

Noticeable are also elements that underline the self-sufficient character of these houses. The district is rich of small family ovens (Fig. 6), simple constructions with a dome shape and a single opening. This emphasizes the importance, in the past, of producing everything that was needed for daily sustenance.

5 The technique, already known by the Etruscans and widely used in Southern Italy certainly up to the mid-nineteenth century, originates from the *Opus craticium*, that is, a self-supporting wooden frame whose squares are padded with

materials of different nature according to the available resources. It is defined as *incannucciato* when the infill is made up of a mixture of raw clay degreased from straw, spread on a micro frame made up of woven reeds.



Fig. 6. District Iotta: domed family oven.

However, the rural landscape surrounding of San Marco Argentano is diverse: beside small country houses and agricultural building utilities, bigger farmsteads can be widely found. They embody a more erudite example of countryside architecture, presenting two or three storeys and outstanding decorative elements (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7. District Mancino: example of country house.

Some examples of farmsteads can be found even in the Iotta district. In one case, within a large garden, there is a trilitic structure with niches placed before a long colonnade, of which few remains can still be admired.

Another case (Fig. 8) shows small circular windows placed just below the eaves, revealing the presence of well-ventilated rooms planned for the storage and drying of food goods, commonly called *cannizzi*⁶ in local dialect.



Fig 8. District Iotta: example of country house.

More examples of farmhouses can be also found in the Scarniglia district, some of which date back to the sixteenth century (Fig. 9).



Fig 9. District Scarniglia: examples of farmhouse.

The most important seems to be composed of two buildings: while one shows noble features, the other has a more humble structure. The first one, a three-storey building with basement warehouses, in the façade shows all the features of the Calabrian stately home: large windows, balconies and two arched portals surmounted by the noble coat of arms. The entire building is painted in a faded coral red and mouldings, string

⁶ The dialectical name refers to the tradition of drying food on frames made with reed.

courses and corners highlighted in white. Next to the stately home stands the building for of the service personelle, visibly poorer in materials and structure. The façade, in fact, appears to be a simple sequence of square windows, without evoking any particular architectural lexicon.

An even more important instance of rural house in San Marco Argentano, ascribable to the farm type, is the building that currently incorporates the ancient Cistercian Abbey of Matina, of which only the windows and the pointed arch portal remain visible from the outside (Fig. 10).



Fig 10. The rural farmhouse Matina and the remains of the Abbey.

The farmhouse in composed by many different buildings: the noble palace, the church, the stables and the houses for the peasants. The farm shows the characters of vernacular architecture

not only in the plan layout but also in the decorative elements: large geometric motifs made of red rectangles and triangles (Fig. 11), in fact, embellish the buildings, underlining the prominence of the family even if in a rural context.



Fig 11. The rural farmhouse Matina: decorations' particular.

Lastly, also the numerous water mills that mark the medieval faded mule tracks are significant evidence of popular identity. In the area there are seven, perhaps eight, mills of which today just simple disfigured ruins can be seen.

Three ancient watermills built along the course of the Santa Venere stream used to be connected by an ingenious system of Cistercian epoch: the Mill of Santa Venere, which still preserves the ancient stone *sajitta* to make the water fall from above, the Mill of Calcara in the locality of Acquafredda and the Mill of Galera.

In the valley of the Fullone river, instead, we find the Mill of Fazzullo, the Mill of Fra Cicco and the Mill of Frati, probably built in the Norman period and directly connected to the Abbey of Matina.

Near the confluence of the Santa Venere and Fullone rivers, there is the only mill that is still undamaged: the mill named *Molino di Mezzo*, dating back to 1771. The three attached structures (Fig. 12), of which the mill was composed, are still visible. Two are taller because built on different levels. It is interesting to notice that one of the tallest buildings shows dovecotes, breaches in the masonry used to shelter and for the breeding of pigeons: animals closely connected to agriculture but also widely used in traditional cuisine of the locals. In the remains of this mill, it is possible to admire some faded ornamental angular bands, colored in white, with

geometric motifs in shades of red (Fig. 12). Hence, it can be affirmed that these decorative elements represent a distinctive feature of popular culture in the considered area.



Fig. 12. The mill named Mulino di Mezzo as appears today: decorations' particular.

4. Conclusions

The proposed essay, through the comparative analysis of the features of some ancient centres placed in the Esaro valley, wanted to highlight the vernacular culture of a large area of northern Calabria.

The conducted process of knowledge, undelined the variant and invariant characters of this territory, highlighting how the popular and spontaneous tradition has defined, over time, the development of unique urban centres and buildings, not only for their aspect but also for their technological, material, typological and functional characteristics.

The review of the proposed cases, at times unknown to most people, at times left in their deterioration and decay, highlighted how the historical landscape is the result of an

inseparable connection between natural forms, human needs and architecture, a palimpsest of traces of culture, tradition and memory. This heritage needs to be rediscovered and enhanced with conservation and restoration actions and, above all, re-connected to the contemporary world, that would surely receive a future social, cultural and economic benefit.

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