

Taranto Saint Angelo Castle: a new approach to the cultural stratification of the landscape

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ABSTRACT

The archaeological work carried out inside the Aragonese Castle of Taranto since 2007, continuing previous studies of various scholars, has gathered a wealth of information propedeutic to the full comprehension of the architectural structures brought to light by the archaeological excavations, to their reconstruction and dating. Beside the excavations, this search is based on the studies of the archaeological finds that include cataloguing digital surveying and graphic rendering. The aim of all these activities is to produce an hypothesis of the historical evolution of the castle site, free of the tampering produced by the recent building programs. On this basis it has been possible to produce the first tridimensional reconstruction of the castle, from the morphology of the primitive rock bed that now constitutes the castle inner core, to the successive architectonic structures always shaped in accordance with the orografy of the site whose prevailing function, after the quarrying of the military defense of Taranto, from the Hellenistic bastion to the tower and walls of the Byzantine kastron. To the Swabian-Angevin castle and finally to the Aragonese fortress.

KEYWORDS: castle, Taranto, kastron, poliorcetica, federico II, aragonese, fortifications

1 INTRODUCTION

Before considering the merits of interpretative reconstruction for historical phases of the site of the Castel Sant'Angelo di Taranto, more commonly known as the Castello Aragonese, and survey of the structural remains in the area occupied by the ancient acropolis. It is considered a duty to first introduce a brief overview of the structure of the monument.

As it exists now, the Aragonese castle stands essentially as the same reconstruction project commissioned by the King of Naples, Ferdinand of Aragon undertaken between 1487 and 1492. The Aragonese influence included, in addition to the construction of the fort, also the extension of the ditch to the north, the isthmus to the east and the construction of a fortification wall extending along almost the entire perimeter of what now looks like an island, that is, the current Old City of Taranto.

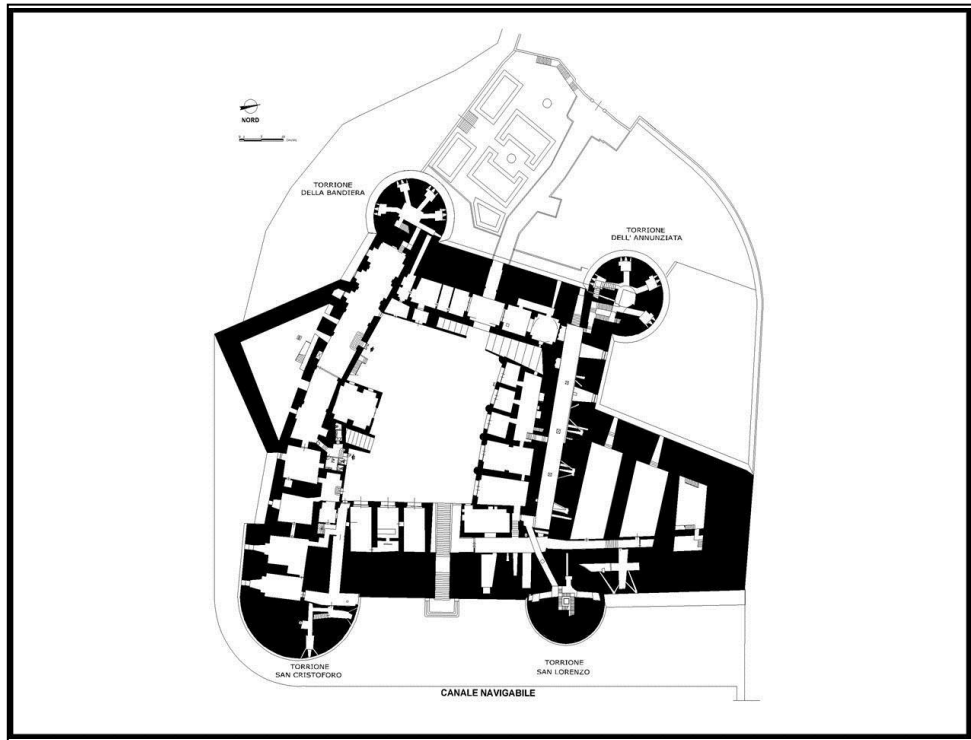


Figure 1: Floor plan of the Saint Angelo Castle.

The area affected by the construction of the Aragonese Castle and the fortifications that preceded it has been since antiquity a place of undoubted strategic value as an extreme offshoot of the city; with an extension towards the south-east from which it was possible to have control of both the Mar Grande and the isthmus, which subsequently became a ditch and access road to the bays of the Mar Piccolo, a sort of antecedent of today's Waterway. On going studies on the eastern front of the hill of the Old City are designed to verify the proposed interpretation already elaborated on the historical sequence recognized in the neighbouring complex which was the first typical religious acropolis of the Greek-Roman cities, then the seat of the Byzantine fortified city founded in 967 .



Figure 2: Floor plan of the ancient city.

The irregular plan of the castle is made up of a large quadrangular structure, built around a central courtyard and bounded at the top by four towers and two lateral appendages. One of them is facing the Great Sea, commonly known as the lunette, the other extends to the north and is characterized by the shape of an elongated triangle but which originally stretched by connecting the tower of St. Angelo to the main body of the fort¹. In the urban sector, research suggests that the building is of a military nature, with a historic footprint that is being progressively transformed over the course of time due to the changes in purpose and function.

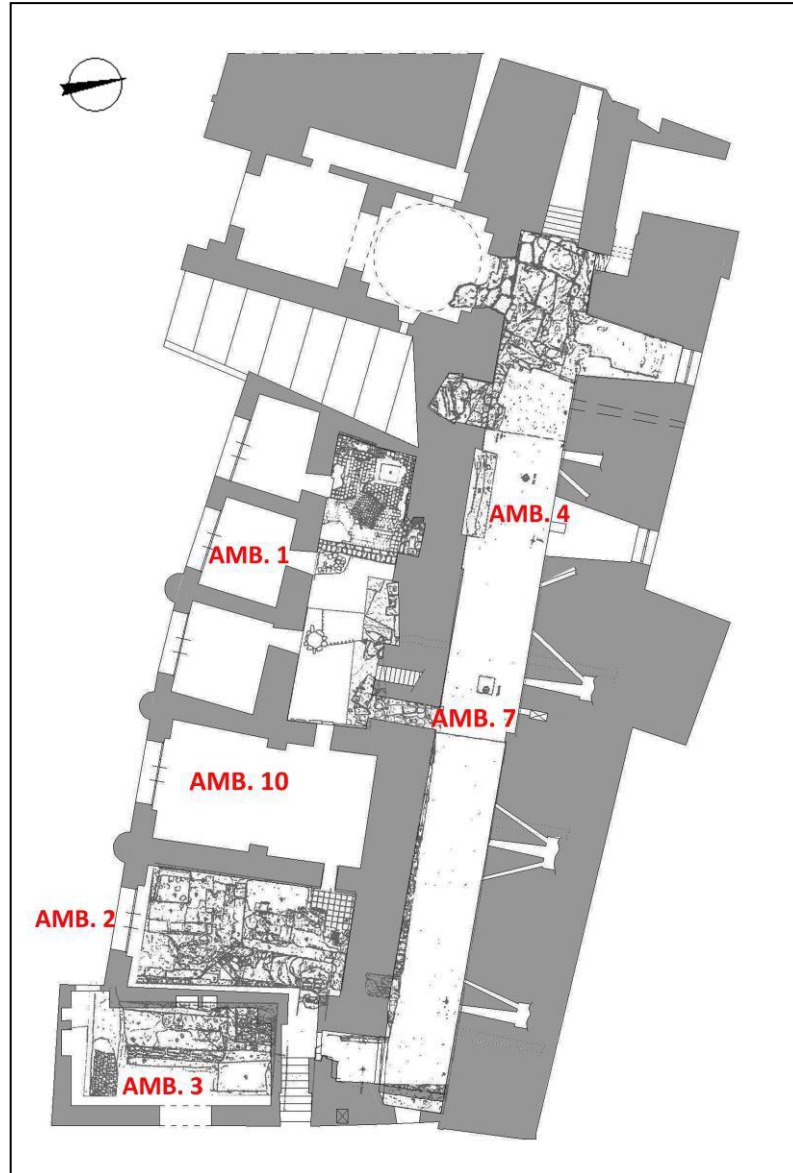


Figure 3: Castel Sant'Angelo, plan is representative of the environments subject to archaeological excavation .

¹ For an accurate and detailed description of the premises and facilities of the Castello Aragonese, please refer to Carducci 1995, pp.. 101-178; D'ANGELA, RICCI 2006; RICCI 2007; D'ANGELA, RICCI 2009; Carducci 2009. Activity conducted within the archaeological monument Aragonese, please refer to GILETTI 2012, GILETTI 2013th, p. 19-37; GILETTI 2013b, p. 521-544.

The results of the excavations, both in terms of the topographical and from that of the cultural development, show the importance of rebuilding urban discoveries of ancient settlements, of which an attempt was made to scan the organisational types, the choices made and the goals identified². Not being able to propose in detail the analysis and reconstruction of all structural elements revealed by the excavations that have affected the entire complex of the Castello Aragonese we will just present certain aspects by extracting from the north wing of the monument only some of the findings considered most significant for an overall interpretation of the phenomenon of settlement of the area. ³.

Just inside the north wing, beyond the so-called Doric Temple of Piazza Castello, were made in openings in the bank calcarenitic-geological outcrops that retain traces of mining activity recognizable in clean cuts, regular and oriented north-south, aimed at the recovery of large rectangular blocks.

This would be a quarry dug into the calcarenitic bank abandoned in the second half of the sixth century BC, as evidenced by pottery.

The human intervention attests to a continuous settlement that dates back to the eighth century BC.⁴ However, the first traces of a sporadic presence in the area date back to the Bronze Age. The practices of the quarry would affect and change the natural landscape of the south-east of the rise on which now stands the Old Town and at that time would basically appear as a pronounced plateau of just over 9 m above sea level. The southern slope is mentioned in the sources⁵ as a high cliff overlooking the sea and for that reason already possessed natural defences; conversely the eastern side presented a more heterogeneous morphology, with a face oriented north-south, therefore falling further westward with respect to the current profile, and with a surface progressively sloping east to intersect with a natural depression oriented north-south, made as a result of the ditch belonging to the defensive system of the Greek- Roman acropolis, mentioned already in the second century BC by Polybius⁶ at the time of Hannibal's conquest of the city and in the same place as the Canale Navigabile.

Recent studies have also provided an opportunity to identify immediately north of the north wing of the castle, in correspondence with the current northern side of the moat Aragonese, a second depression of the natural geological bank, perpendicular to the first and used as an access route to the height of the Acropolis, with a path oriented to the south west which must have followed the south side of the sanctuary of the so-called Doric Temple⁷.

Newer studies are in progress with the aim of offering a more in-depth analysis from the point of view of the reconstructive macrophases that have marked the evolution of the site from its origins until the final structure, Aragonese. The reconstructions that are exposed here, albeit in summary form, are intended to shed light on a historical-architectural layering, complex and multi faceted, which are those of the Aragonese castle and the adjacent urban environment. Among the most significant phases of the stratigraphic sequence of the site that have been recognized are: the Greek, Byzantine and Swabian.

The remains of a structure of a military nature, dating from the late third century BC, were found in areas 1, 4 and 7. It is a work of masonry believed to be the northern side of a fortified bastion, late

² For further information on the complete sequence of historical stages identified see GILETTI 2012.

³ An overall survey of all archaeological remains of the acropolis was poured in a single database with the help of GIS. This activity is part of a larger project of urban topography of the ancient city of Taranto, which was launched some time ago thanks to the collaboration between the Soprintendenza per i Beni Culturali della Puglia e l'Università Sapienza di Roma.

⁴ For background on the prehistoric and protohistoric phases relative to the site of the Old Town see fifty 2010, pp. 487-506.

⁵ Livio, *Ab Urbe Condita* XXV, 11, 1-9.

⁶ Polybius, *Histories* I, 24, II, 24, 13, III, 75, 4. The defensive system of the promontory where today stands the Old Town is also mentioned by Livy (*Ab Urbe Condita* XXV, 11, 1-9), which indicates the presence of a wall, followed by a moat, protecting the eastern front, and by Procopius (*De Bello Gothico* III, 23), about the description of the city and from the defensive measures adopted during the greek-gothic wars, would seem to confirm the presence of a moat immediately to the east of the rise of the ancient acropolis.

⁷ On this topic, please refer to GILETTI 2013b with an extensive bibliography.

Hellenistic. Its orientation, east-west, and its location just in advanced of the rocky bank have led to the hypothesis that it was a bastion added to the front eastern defences of the acropolis of the classical age in order to protect the access gate⁸.

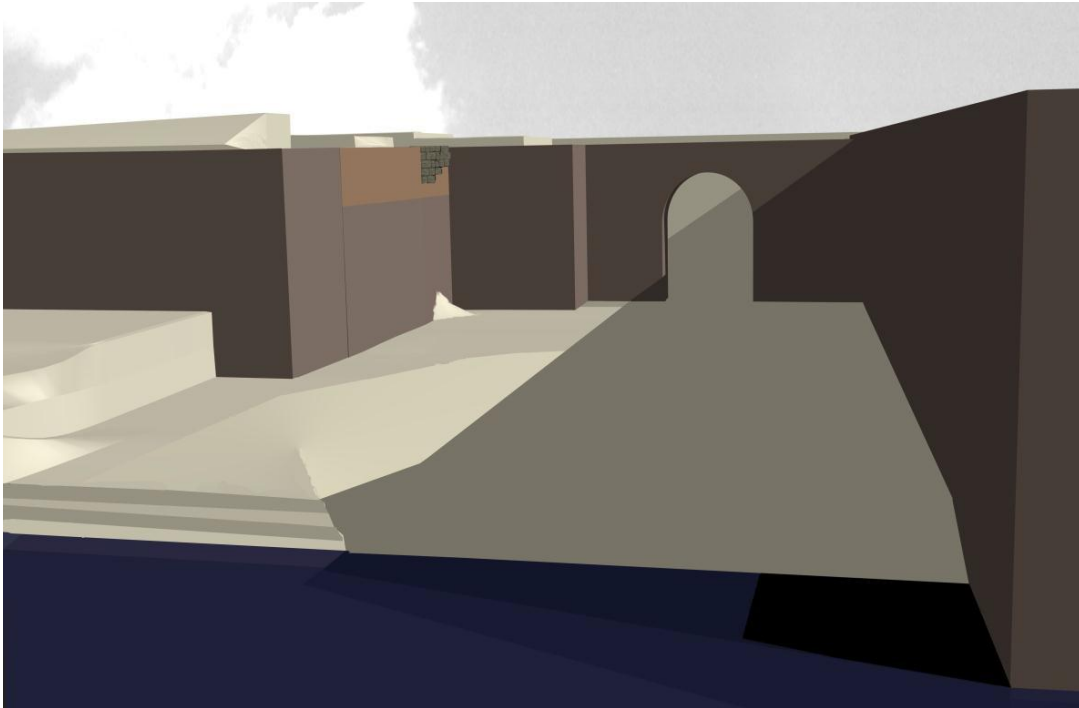


Figure 4: Schematic hypothetical reconstruction of the bastion of the front door and Hellenistic acropolis. In particular, are highlighted in orange structures reconstructed on the basis of certain archaeological data, in brown, however, the parties are assumed building. View from the east.

It had a double curtain wall structure, with east-west orientation, with an overall thickness of just over 5 meters, consisting of parallelepiped regular bare blocks. Presumably, this structure was the terrace of an artificial bank created with the dumping of waste materials. The excavations have substantially revealed three parts of the double curtain wall: a first section forming part of the external curtain, unplastered, gradually regularized in according to subsequent additions. The other two parts, internal facing, both walls are made of two portions covered by the foundations of a later wall (precisely dated between the late eleventh and early thirteenth century), which is also reused as part of the Aragonese. Only a portion of the two component parts of the inner curtain is in a good state of preservation. The structure is located beneath the foundation level of the northern wall of the empty Ex kitchens and is easily distinguishable from the layer of foundations made by pouring sharps of blocks of medium and small sizes poured into a hollow foundation.

The set of data collected has allowed us to recognize, therefore, the central sector of the military work that has the same characteristics of the Hellenistic poliorcetica spread to other major centres of Ancient Greece and Greece. Structural similarities and topography refer mainly to examples such as the fortifications of the acropolis of Selinunte and the Castle of Euryalus Syracuse. This last example, in particular, has been affected by the installation of new equipment to military integration in the defence system of its predecessor, particularly between the end of the fourth century and the beginning of the third century BC, through innovative and specific structural devices, closely influenced by the orography and the morphological characteristics of the place.

⁸ La Porta Rosa Velia, built within a channel used as a ramp for the ascent to the Acropolis, and the door north of Castiglione di Paludi, are a model for what concerns the spatial relationship between defensive structures, roads and buildings falling in the urban sector of the ancient polis (GILETTI 2012; GILETTI 2013th, p. 22-23).

A second macro step is to identify between 965 and 969 AD with the foundation of the new Byzantine city built by Emperor Nicephorus Phocas on the height of the ancient acropolis, the realization of which represented a major construction project in the evolution of the history of Taranto, especially in the urban development of the area now known as Old Town, and a moment of transformation to large nature settlement, marked by the final abandonment of the late antiquity centre of the lower town and the definition of what will be the urban space of the next millennium.

The Taranto of the tenth century AD, transformed into a veritable *kastron*, had now lost the sense of the ancient city. The concept of extended urban space was permanently replaced by a fortified settlement; the operational business of war became permanent. The fortifications draw a perimeter following the topography of the bedrock characterizing the tip of the isthmus, as per the classical age enclosing an urban longitudinal east-west, particularly tight in north-south⁹.

To this historical phase is attributable the corner from a quadrangular tower, which was found in the south-western compartment Ex Restoration Hall (room 2). The structure is made of bare horizontal sub blocks originating from building of the Greek-Roman era, fixed together with mortar.

Two other towered structures have been identified, respectively, in the south-east of the castle¹⁰ and below the current Municipal Gallery¹¹, also characterized by the same structural and topographical characteristics observed for the tower discovered in the area Ex Sala Restauro, primarily, the building techniques with its quadrangular development plan.

The hypothetical reconstructions of the three towers reveal a defensive wall divided by regular spatial intervals, roughly equal to thirty meters.

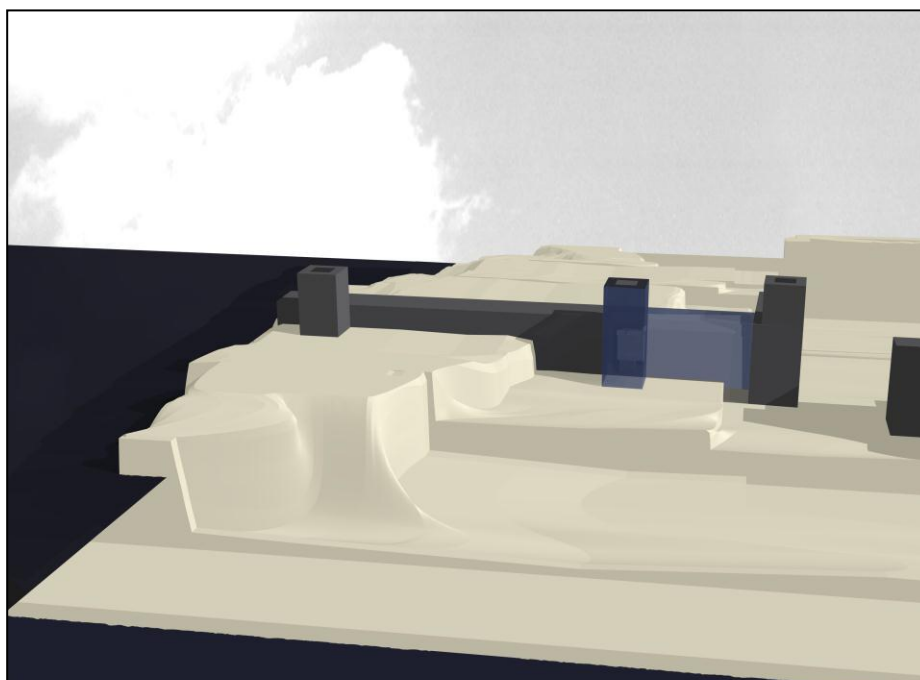


Figure 5: Schematic hypothetical reconstruction of the Byzantine phase. In particular, are highlighted in blue structures reconstructed on the basis of certain archaeological data, in gray, however, the parties envisaged building. View from the east.

⁹ VON FALKENHAUSEN 1968, pp. 137-138; D'ANGELA 2002, pp. 76-77.

¹⁰ The existence of the two towers would be demonstrated by a faceless design of the mid-sixteenth century AD The Castle of Taranto. Image and design. Documentary exhibition organized on the occasion of the fifth centenary of the reconstruction of the Aragonese Castle of Taranto (Taranto, 25 November to 18 December 1992), Galatina 1992, p. 143.

¹¹ D'ANGELA, LIPPOLIS 1996, pp. 7-45. The identification of the remains of the second tower inside the basement of the Municipal Gallery is due to Enzo Lippolis. The scholar also based on the placement of this tower aligned with the orientation of via Duomo, the artery crossing the longitudinal axis of the Old City in Roman and Byzantine times, had proposed to place north of the Municipal Gallery, the gateway to the greek-Roman acropolis of the city, in the place of the tower of St. Angelo demolished to make way for the swing bridge.

These works were going to be placed immediately below where the cliff changes in height covering the eastern wall on the cliffside in defence of the new fortified city.

The defensive wall had to be interrupted by an opening falling on the same site where once stood the ancient entrance to the Acropolis of the Greek-Roman period, which coincides roughly with the current north-western arm of the Aragonese moat identified by the name and the toponym Terranea¹². Third and last macrophase, finally, was identified in the Swabian period. Based on ceramic materials and a polygonal framework of cladding at the Byzantine tower described above showed another fortification, characterized by the construction of walls with regular parallelepiped blocks of large dimensions.

The structure is preserved almost entirely on one side whose length is equal to 2.80 meters allowing you to realise a complete reconstruction in an octagonal form, of a size and shape similar to the octagonal towers of Castel del Monte, the average length of each side is 2.70 m.

Also belonging to the Swabian stage, but in a position slightly to the east of the tower, are preserved the remains of some stonework by the escarpment, oriented along the north-south axis¹³, and founded directly onto the bedrock.

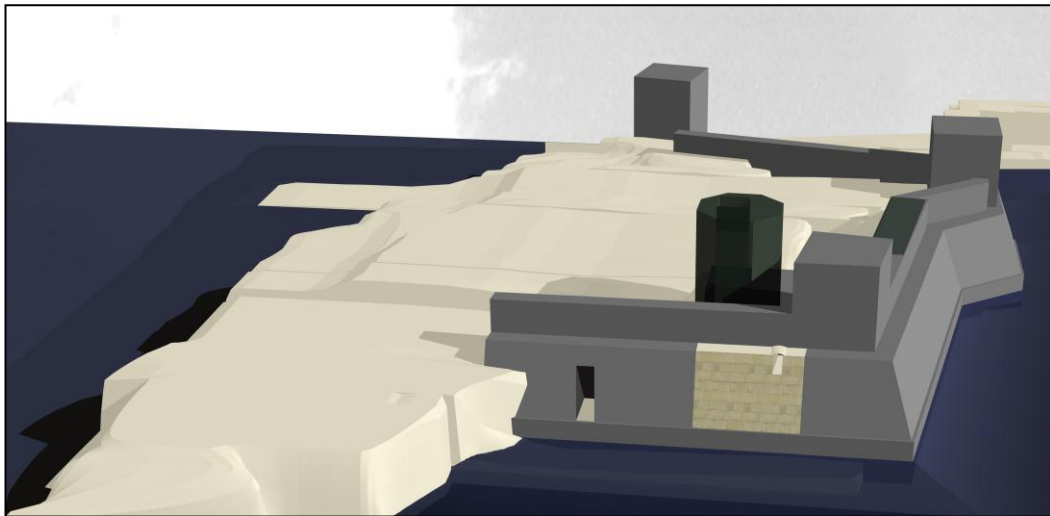


Figure 6: Schematic hypothetical reconstruction of the Byzantine phase. In particular, the structures are highlighted in green, reconstructed on the basis of certain archaeological data, in gray, however, the parties envisaged building. View from the east.

The individual parts highlighted within the Aragonese monument as seemingly separate and independent elements contribute to the formulation of reconstructive solutions in the shape and arrangement of the castle of Federico of Taranto or at least a good part of its northeastern sector.

¹² A door, Terranea is mentioned for the first time in 1042 during the failed attack by the Normans in Taranto. The topographic classification of this entry is provided in Kiesewetter 2009, pp. 18-19 with bibliography; GILETTI 2012, p. 33-36.

2 CONCLUSION

The complex and detailed stratigraphic palimpsest derived from research conducted and still on going in the Aragonese Castle provides important information not only on the intended use of a particularly strategic ancient urban space, but also for the study and the reconstruction in phases of the pattern of the urban landscape of the southern sector of the east side of the Old Town, defined by changes over time and significant actions.

From the quarry of the ancient Greek period to the defensive preparations between the late fourth and early third century BC, to protect the entrance to the Acropolis according to new techniques from Hellenistic poliorcetica activities, the main function of the site from this time will be the defensive, recognizable in the turreted walls of the Byzantine city until the Swabian polygonal tower and other forms of medieval fortifications that preceded the Aragonese construction.

The different systems of fortification shown in the Byzantine city walls of the second half of the tenth century up to the age of the Swabian form of fortification, lay against the natural face of the rise, using the previously mentioned height of the geological site approximately 9 m above sea level, that was to influence the morphology of the area and to establish its strategic value. In addition, all structures show a progressive enlargement of their various parts to the east, with the clear intention of increasing the protection of the side not protected by the natural shape of the rise, namely the eastern side.

Follow-up research is currently mainly focused on the systematic study of materials, documentation of on going activities and stratigraphic investigations in the entrance space of the tower of St. Christopher and coinciding with restoration activities.

In this area the researchers are gradually bringing to light structures and areas of public attendance, probably relating to a place of Christian worship and belonging to a period of time from late antiquity until the early Middle Ages.

¹³ News about Swabian Castle of Taranto and some of its structural parts can be found in the so-called *Statutum de Reparatione Castrorum* of Federico II. E. STHAMER, *L'amministrazione dei castelli nel regno di Sicilia sotto Federico II e Carlo I D'Angiò*, Bari 1995, pp. 83-93 (orig. Tedesco *Die Verwaltung der Kastele im Königreich Sizilien unter Kaiser Friedrich II. Und Karl I. von Anjou*, Lipsia 1914); R. LICINIO, *Le strutture castellari in Puglia*, in *Itinerari federiciani in Puglia. Viaggio nei castelli e nelle dimore di Federico II di Svevia*, edited by C.D. FONSECA, Bari 1997, pp. 23-33; KIESEWETTER 2006, pp. 41-50 with bibliography; H. HOUBEN, *Statutum de reparatione castrorum*, in *Federico II. Enciclopedia fridericana II*, Roma 2005, pp. 774-775.

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