

17. THE HISTORY AND LEGEND SURROUNDING THE *CASTRUM NOVUM*

Castel Nuovo, better known as the **Maschio Angioino**, is one of the most symbolic sights in Naples and one of the most famous castles in Italy. Its imposing façade dominates **Piazza Municipio**, and creates an indisputably beautiful picture-postcard view.

Charles of Anjou, the head of the French dynasty in Naples, commissioned the building because, having failed to find a suitable place to live in Castel Capuano, he decided to build himself a fortified palace by the sea. He chose the area known as *Campus oppidi*, where there was a small Franciscan church. A group of French architects were chosen to design the **Castrum Novum**, or New Castle as it was called to distinguish it from the old Capuano and Ovo castles. Building work started in 1279.

The history of Naples is, to a large extent, reflected in that of the castle.

In 1294, **Pietro Morrone** was elected as Pope **Celestino V**, but he decided to give up the post only a few months later. **Dante Alighieri** in canto III of his *Inferno* refers to him as *the man who abdicated out of cowardice*. His abdication led to the rise to power of the new Pope **Benedetto Caetani**, better known as **Bonifacio VIII**. The story goes that it was actually Bonifacio who persuaded Celestino to abdicate. Bonifacio knew that Celestino was an impressionable kind of man so he pushed a megaphone in through his window while he was asleep and, pretending to be a messenger from God, he recommended that Celestino give up the job. The new Pope immediately transferred his seat to Rome to get away from the Angevins and their influence.

This was a castle at the centre of international politics but also one which was famous for its intellectual creativity, especially during the reign of **Robert the Wise** who called on famous writers like **Petrarch** and **Boccaccio** to work for him. During his stay in Naples, Boccaccio had an affair with **Fiammetta**, the presumed daughter of the King and protagonist of his early work *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta*.

And what about **Giotto**? The great Florentine master came to the city in 1328 as the official court painter to decorate the most important rooms in the Maschio Angioino. Unfortunately, nothing remains of the **three series of frescoes** which Giotto painted inside the castle. The ones of the ancient heroes in the *Sala Maior* picturing Samson, Hercules, Solomon, Paris, Hector, Achilles and Aeneas, probably with their companions, have been lost. The ones showing scenes from the Old and New Testament in the Palatine Chapel have been removed, and the paintings in the King's private apartment have also disappeared.

Life at court in Naples changed with the death of the King because two queens then came to the throne between the XIV and XV centuries. They were both called **Giovanna** and both were members of the Anjou family – the first was King Roberto's niece, the second Ladislao's sister – and their personalities were very similar.

These two women made their mark on history less for what they achieved during their reign than for the supposed vicissitudes of their love lives. The stories that grew up around these two women give a distorted impression of what they were like and are largely the result of malicious gossip. The Queen "Giovanna" we hear about today, be it the I or II, is still described as wicked, ruthless and lustful; a traitor by nature with a thirst for blood and power.

Giovanna I of Anjou became head of the kingdom of Naples when she was only just 18. Known as the "**First Queen of the South**", she became famous for the tenacity with which she ruled and defended the throne, and for her four marriages, the first of which was sealed when she was only 7 years old. Legend has it that she had numerous lovers and had them all killed. But her own death can hardly be described as peaceful: Carlo di Durazzo had her **strangled**.

Giovanna I was also the Countess of Provence, and she featured in various literary works including a play by Lope De Vega. There is no kind of record of her in Naples, and she has no grave.

Giovanna II was Queen of Naples from 1414 until her death in 1435. She was the daughter of Charles of Anjou and Margherita di Durazzo, and she came to the throne at 41 years of age after the death of her first husband, Duke Guglielmo d'Austria. Right from the beginning of her reign, her "favourites" had a lot of influence over her in State Affairs. The legends surrounding Giovanna II all focus on this, with the result that the image that has been passed down to us is a distorted one. The more sinister episodes relate to the vices she is said to have had. The Queen was said to receive lovers from all walks of life in her boudoir and that, once they had satisfied her lust, she would simply have them killed in order to safeguard her reputation. Some of her most famous victims include **Sergianni Caracciolo**. When he started to become a problem for her, she had him beaten to death inside Castel Capuano.

People, for centuries, used to say that the Queen had a **secret trapdoor** in the castle. Once her lovers had done their "duty", she would toss them down through the trapdoor to be eaten by the sea creatures below. This led to the story of the **crocodile**, which came all the way from Africa across the Mediterranean to the waters under the castle. This terrifying animal became the symbol of the awful fate that awaited Giovanna's lovers, and gave rise to yet another Neapolitan legend.

When Giovanna II died in Naples, it signalled the end of the Angevin dynasty

While there is no record of the first Giovanna in the city, there is a statue of Giovanna II in the imposing monument that she had built for her brother Ladislao in the Church of Giovanni a Carbonara, as well as her tomb at the foot of the main altar in the Church of the Annunziata.

Another legend connected to the castle and its history is that of its two **underground chambers**, which were popularly known as the crocodile pit and the **Barons' conspiracy prison**. The crocodile pit was used to store grain and was originally referred to as the **grain pit**. It was later used as a prison for defendants who had received the harshest sentences. But these prisoners mysteriously disappeared. The solution was finally discovered. A crocodile had managed to find a way into the underground chamber and used to grab the prisoners by the legs and drag them into the sea. To kill the crocodile, they used a huge **horse's thigh** as bait. Once the animal was dead, it was stuffed, then hung in the entrance to the castle, as **Benedetto Croce** explains in his work.

The legend varied according to which sovereign was in power. Where Giovanna was concerned, the story went that the crocodile was used as a convenient way of getting rid of her old lovers. A different version said that King Ferrante d'Aragona used to feed his enemies to the crocodiles.

The **Aragonese**, who came to power after the Angevins, also made Castel Nuovo the political and cultural headquarters of their government. They seized the throne in 1442 when, after a long siege led by Alfonso d'Aragona, a group of soldiers managed to break into the castle through an underground passageway leading from Pozzo di Santa Sofia. The new King did some major renovation work on his royal residence. He chose the architect **Guglielmo Sagrera**, who made the building what it is today.

The old **Sala Maior** formed the backdrop to another historical event, that of the **Barons' Conspiracy** against King **Ferrante d'Aragona**, the son of King Alfonso, in 1486. Once the King uncovered the plot, he invited all the conspirators to dinner to celebrate his niece's wedding. He pretended that he wanted to forget what had happened and restore peace to the country. The Barons accepted the invitation but as soon as they were safely in the Hall, the King barred the doors and had them all arrested. Many of them were imprisoned and suffered terrible torture and deaths.

There are still **four coffins** in the chamber today that have no inscription and which probably contain the mortal remains of the Barons who took part in the conspiracy. Research has shown that the corpses wore XV century clothes and that one of them, maybe a prelate, died of suffocation.

As far as *Castrum Novum*'s past is concerned, we have little idea what is history and what is only story. It is this that makes the castle such an intriguing place.