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*The Civita and Sassi:
a breathtaking
panorama.*

TRE ARCHI VIEW POINT

It is an extraordinary result of settlement activity by man who, through the centuries, was able to discover, appreciate and make use of what the surrounding nature offered him, to the point of recognizing himself in that Heritage of caves, cliffs and homes that now belongs to humanity.

We know of its historical developments thanks to the story by Francesco Volpe who, shedding for a moment the role of strict historian, decided to end his description with a dream-like image of the town:





"This town's public Archive contains a edict by Philip, Prince of Taranto and Count of Matera, dated 1373, with which he includes the Town of Matera in his domain, along with its farmhouses, possessions, holdings, jurisdictions and competencies.

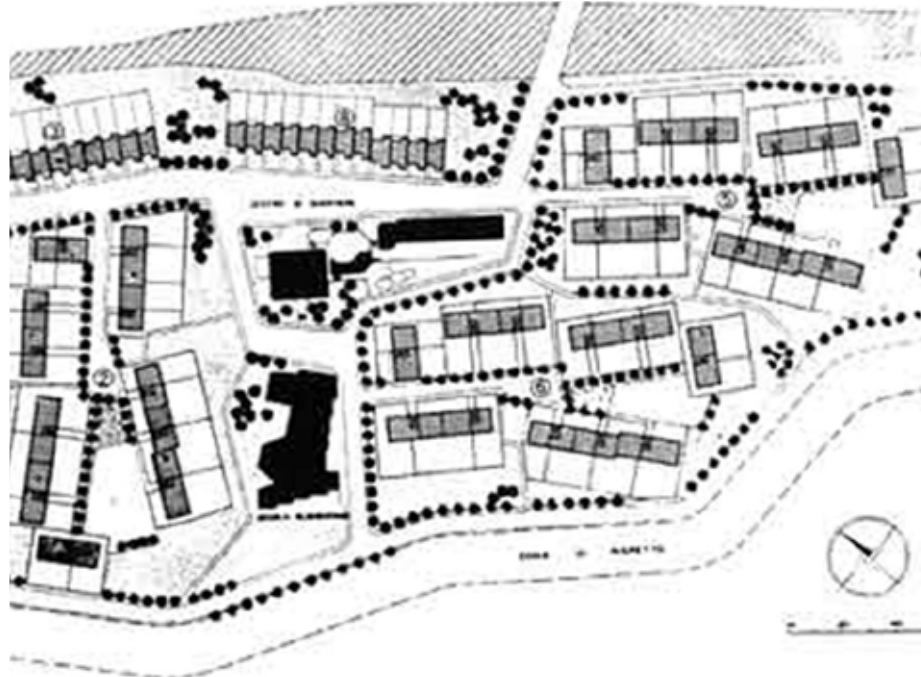
From that period, the town changed appearance.

The valleys were no longer considered as two boroughs of the ancient town, but as the main body of this town: and the name was changed to Sasso (Stone), due to the huge number of homes built on and hewn from the natural rock; as an indication, the one opposite of the town of Montescaglioso was called Sasso Caveoso, and the other, opposite the City of Bari, Sasso Barisano. Img11 116 The ancient town's name remained Civitas, nowadays Civita.

The houses that stand in these valleys are not on the same plane and level. They are one above each other, so they seem to be hanging above one another. So, when evening dusk arrives, spectators on the high ground can see the lights burning inside them like countless stars fallen from the sky."



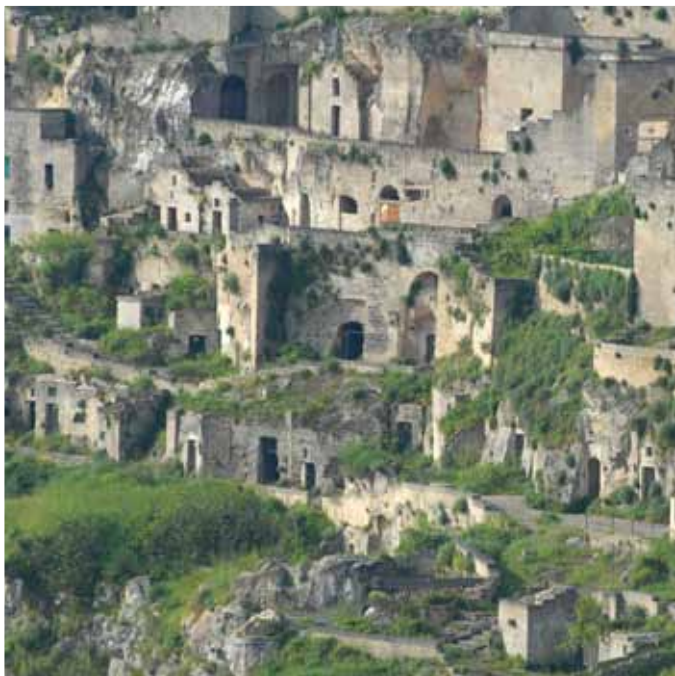
2 THE DISTRICTS OF THE MODERN NATIONAL TOWN-PLANNING



The "Città Del Piano" - Plan Town: this is the idea that followed the evacuation of the 20,000 inhabitants of the Sassi of Matera in the 1950s. The new districts, planned to host the evacuees of the place described as a "national disgrace", became a real town-planning workshop.

The most important designers were called in to build the new town. The Serra Venerdì district, designed by architect Luigi Piccinato, was the first to be built in chronological order.

The design ideas of the Neorealist school linked with Italian Rationalism led to the realization of Borgo La Martella - which was built a few kilometres from the town - and the Spine Bianche district.



The Villalongo, Lanera and Agna districts, and the other suburban district - Borgo Venusio - completed Matera's new town planning layout.

Around the seventies there was a new phase of town planning that led to the town assuming a narrow elongated layout stretching along a north-south axis, to avoid the natural obstacles represented by the Gravina and the steep slopes of the hills of the valley of the River Bradano.

The "new" Matera could not do without the "old" one and this necessity led to the start of the recovery of the Sassi district and the Murgia plateau facing it. The 1986 law marked the beginning of the work for the recovery and safeguarding of the Matera Sassi and the inclusion of the town in the UNESCO World Heritage List was the highest acknowledgment for this renewed feeling of identity that ties the town to its inhabitants and the people of Matera to their history.



3

Let's go along the square, towards Via delle Beccherie. The area that opens up is dominated by what was once the centre of Matera's administrative life.

Let's listen to the stories, the happenings and the personalities connected with this place.

4

PIAZZA DEL SEDILE



The four Cardinal Virtues, a sundial, a clock and the town's Patron Saints. The image we have before us is an allegory for correct government of public life.

It is Palazzo del Sedile, the building in which Matera's administrators sat from the Renaissance to the Second World War.

Justice, Fortitude, Temperance and Prudence - like guides that regulate the passing time of the town's public and civil life, under the protection of the Madonna della Bruna and Saint Eustace.



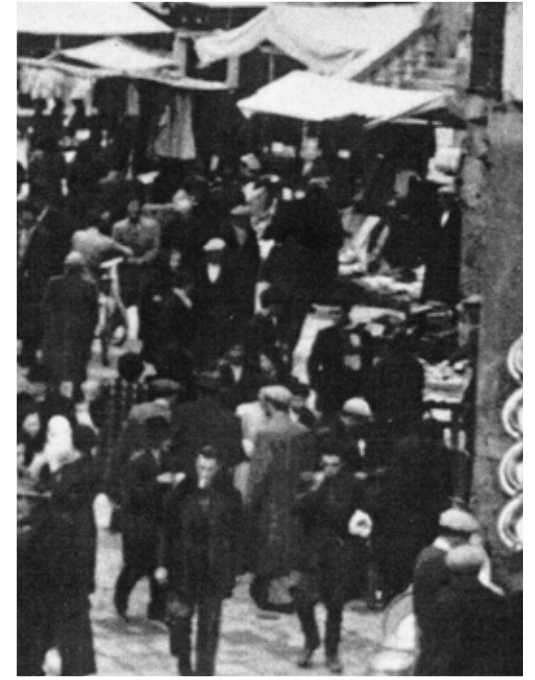


Universitas Civium, the Whole Body of Citizens. This term was used to indicate the Government of towns in the Kingdom of Naples.

"Until 1806 it was still the custom for the population to elect the Governors in a public assembly, and also entrust the town's administration to a mayor, six ordained or elected men, and eighteen other individuals, usually convened in private assemblies, with the choice of the mayor being taken alternately, on even years by the noble class, and on odd years on that of the people.

The election was held on the first Sunday in August, in a public general assembly, which, for the benefit of the town, in order to prevent riots, was chaired by the royal governor. The newly elected members did not enter office until the first week of September".

...however, sometimes neither the Virtues, nor the Patron Saints can remedy man's actions, which Time has the duty of reminding us.



The peasants claimed the land stolen by the owners from the State. The latter also included Francesco Gattini, offspring of a very ancient family of Matera nobility, who presented himself as a sympathizer of the new liberal ideas. The population, however, wasn't of the same opinion, believing him to be one of the main usurpers of the state lands allocated to them by the agreements reached in the town Parliament, which they asked to be returned.

To convince him to accept this request, Gattini had to be taught a lesson. At a meeting in a house in the Sassi, the peasants decided to cover the main door of the palace of Count Francesco with turpentine and set fire to it.

Sticks, sickles, hoes and a few rifles were brandished in front of the palace of the Count, whose only answer, after having sent his family to safety in the town of Trani, was to make the mistake of openly challenging the throng, throwing small coins from the balcony.

The unrest turned into murderous anger. The door was knocked down. The Count was captured and dragged into this square. After undergoing a trial in which his conviction was taken for granted, he was killed.

On the night between the 7th and 8th of August 1860, while Southern Italy was in a state of turmoil for the advance of Garibaldi's Redshirts from the south, tragic brutal bloodshed was taking place in Matera.



5

We pass the space bounded by the ancient Porta de Juso and go up along Via Duomo, as our journey back through time must necessarily stop off in the zone occupied by the ancient castle in the Middle Ages.

The few remains left can help us to just presume its outline and imagine its structure.

6 CASTELLO VECCHIO
(OLD CASTLE)



"It should have been here. But it's not. There are only homes, beautiful ones, yes, but none look like castles".

"In fact it was here, between the Piazza del Sedile and the top part of the Civita; these are the nobility's palaces built in the area of the Castello Vecchio after Giovanni Orsini del Balzo donated it to the town in 1448, the palaces gradually englobed its structures."





"But what did this castle look like?"

"We no longer know – it may just have been a simple fortified stronghold, or perhaps actually built as a castle..."

"Was it ancient?"

"According to some, it dates back to the ninth or tenth century, but the first certain news is from 1160, when the lord of the castle was a certain Bisanzio."

"It must have been beautiful here!"

"The defence walls that surrounded the entire Civita, the oldest part of Matera, protected the town as well as the escarpment, which seemed to be a natural moat of hard rock. Attackers must have had a hard job conquering this place."

"So what did anybody wanting to enter do?"

"All round the walls there were of course entrance gates: that of the Civita or of the Torre Metellana, which enabled to go down the Sasso Barisano side; that of the Pastergola which was used to reach the bottom of the gorge and, lastly, the Porte Empia or Saints' Gate, which, along with the Giudice Pirrotto gate led to Sasso Caveoso."

"But I can't see them – where are the towers?"

"Traces remain of just two: the one called precisely the tower of Metello or 'metellana' and another that has the name of a Matera citizen, the Capone tower."

I would really have liked to have seen all this!"



7

Let's continue up along the Civita and immerse ourselves entirely in Matera's civil affairs, whose key players are the families of Matera's nobility, also responsible for the construction of the palaces that embellish this town.

8 PALACES AND NOBLES OF MATERA



The process of Matera's urban development is also shown by the construction and the beauty of the palaces of the noble families that lived in them and from which they exercised their power.

As one goes up towards the Civita, the antiquity and importance of the palace and the family that lived in it becomes increasingly clear, as is the case with the palace of the Malvezzi palace that stands in the area on the right of Piazza Duomo.

The chronicles report that in 1588 the viceregal court of Naples requested proof of nobility from the Kingdom's families. The result was the creation of a real trend in literary genre, that of noble lineage. In fact, some of the Matera nobility hastened to demonstrate a series of ancestors dating back to personalities of the Greek or Roman literary tradition, others likewise dated their ancient origins back to some crusader or medieval knight.

Precisely the recognition of the ancient coat of arms was behind the rivalry between some Matera families. The Troiano family clashed violently with the Malvezzi family, to the point of confirming the threat and grudge against the adversary in the verses in vernacular shown in their heraldic coat of arms:

*"Io so cano chi rodo un osso
Vorìa boiar et non pozzo
Venerà tempo chi potrò boiare
Muzucaro a chi
non mi lassa stare"*

in other words:

*I am a dog – that gnaws a bone
I'd like to bark – but can't;
But the time will come – when I can;
I'll bite whoever molests me.*



9

We have reached Piazza Duomo: the wide courtyard of the cathedral that occupies the summit of Matera.

In 1203 Matera was raised, along with Acerenza, to the status of archbishopric and, at the will of archbishop Andrea, the new church was built by 1270, in Apulia Romanesque style, on the highest point of the Civita.



10 CATHEDRAL (EXTERIOR)

*We saw it from
a distance.
Its silhouette
dominates the view
of the town...
and now, here
we are
in front of it.*

The side facade is the one that first attracts our attention.

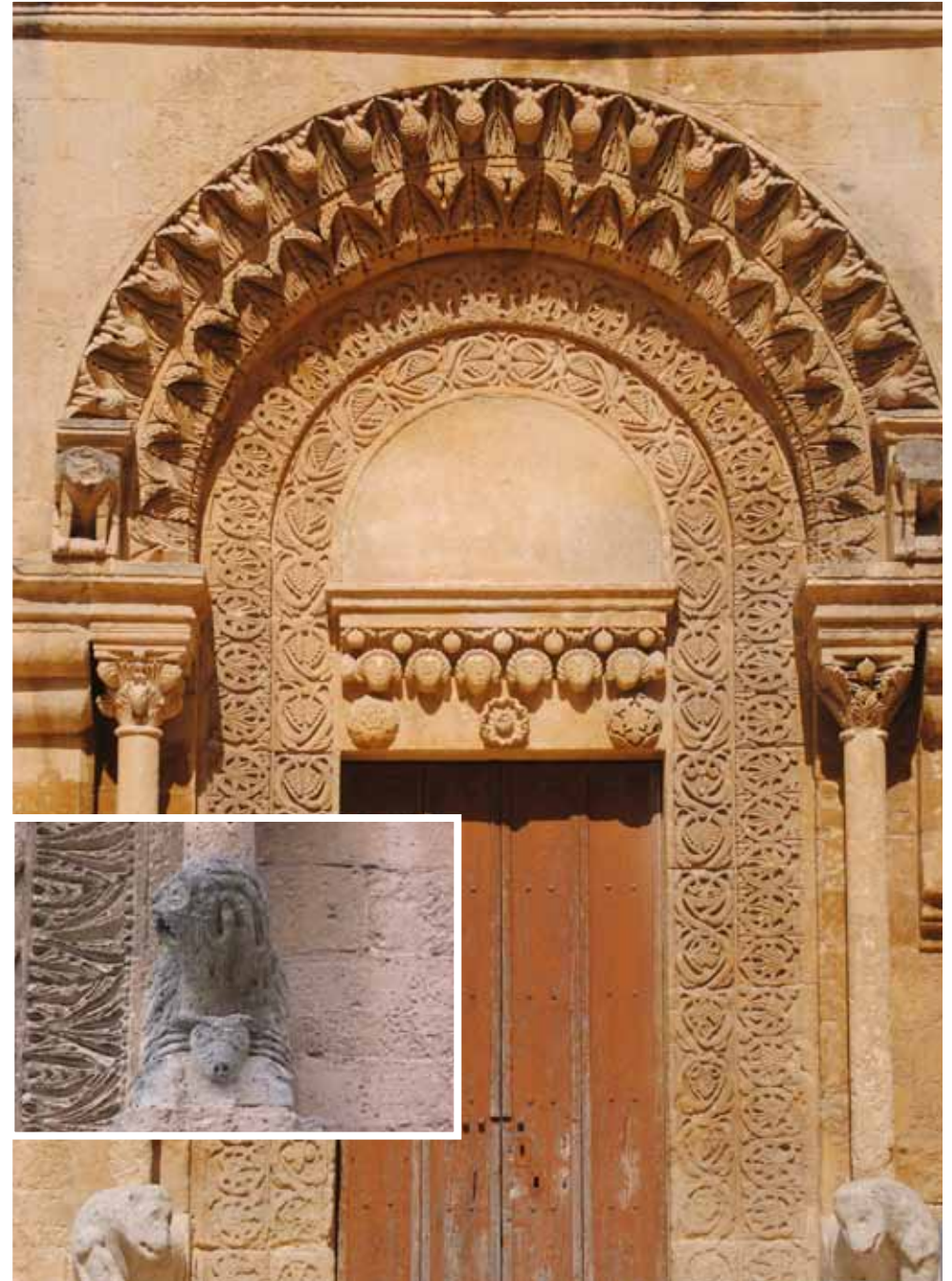
The monks and the patriarch, the sphinxes and the judge, the eagle and the lions.



Two crouched monks seem to remind the Square of the distant filial relationship between God and man, of which the Patriarch Abraham, commemorated in the lunette, is the first of a long list.

Two sphinxes and two lions honour the memory of the Saracen Judge who worked in the town in the middle of the thirteenth century.

Two lions support a pair of columns and give the name to this entrance door, even if above them an eagle stands out, but, having lost its head, cannot show its regality.





The statues of Saint Paul on the right and Saint Peter on the left, who protect the Madonna with Child, honoured by Saint Eustace and his wife Theopista.

If the figure of this "Lady" has already fascinated us ...all we need to do is win her heart.



Let's go to the main facade. We'll turn our back on the Sasso Barisano and admire the ornaments of this "beautiful lady".

The small arches of the crown and the four small columns; perhaps signs that no longer talk of ancient times: the Apostles who follow Christ with his Cross positioned above and the Evangelists, witnesses of the story of Salvation.

The rose window with sixteen spokes, the wheel of Life or of Fortune, surrounded by the Archangel Michael who looks over it, and the three social strata of the Matera community who turn it.



The cathedral, as is written in the inscription on the architrave above the bell tower's entrance door - was completed in 1270 and later dedicated to the Madonna della Bruna, who was nominated patron saint, without forgetting the original patron, Saint Eustace.

To fully understand the devotion of the people of Matera to the town's two Patron Saints, let's listen to a passage of the chronicles by Francesco Volpe:

"In Matera there is age-old veneration for the glorious martyr Saint Eustace,



11 CATHEDRAL
(INTERIOR)



stace, a great General at the time of Trajan and Hadrian.

It is said that, before the year 1,000, when the town was besieged by the Saracens, the Saint appeared with his glorious Family, came to the town's aid and saved it, and the Matera people, later told of the miracle that had occurred, rapidly acclaimed them as their Patron Saints and Guardians. Every year, on the 20th of May, when it is said that the apparition took place, their Feast day is formally celebrated with veneration and splendour.



It is celebrated in a more decorous manner on the 20th of September, when their glorious martyrdom occurred. A long time ago, it was an ancient custom for the Knight Commander of the town to go on the 20th of May to the Church of Saint Eustace for the first Vespers, taking an offer - a tribute - consisting in a torch covered in silver coins and numerous baskets of fruit, flowers and other things, and accompanied by music and songs in honour of these Patron Saints."

In exchange for this offer, the Commander was given "a loaf of bread, a barrel of wine and numerous hard ricotta cheeses, plus a torch of pure wax."

The Cathedral preserves "The image of the Vergine della Bruna", so-called due to the darkness of her face, and also known as Santa Maria di Matera in a testament, or Santa Maria dell'Episcopio.

His Holiness Pope Urban 4th [who was Bishop of Matera from 1365 to 1377], having seen the great devotion of the people of Matera for this Holy Image, in 1389 established a festivity in its honour, on the 2nd of July [making it coincide with the celebration of the Visitation, established that same year].



She was therefore confirmed as the patron Saint and worshipped with the name of Maria Santissima della Bruna, with such a wonderful, characteristic and baroque celebration that she seems mid-way between legend and reality.



12 PIAZZA DUOMO VIEW POINT

We are looking at the town from Largo Duomo, the wide courtyard of the cathedral that occupies the summit of Matera's first urban nucleus.

From this point, it is possible to admire the complex structure and layout of the ancient town and glimpse the monuments that we shall visit: the Sasso Barisano, where, on the right, the monastery of Sant'Agostino stands and, looking slightly to the left, the church of San Pietro Barisano, immersed in a cluster of houses and buildings; in front of us, the three arches looking on to Piazza Vittorio Veneto, surmounted by the facade of the complex of the Annunziata.

On the left, looking carefully, it is possible to also make out the battlements of the Tramontano Castle and the gables of the bell tower of the church of San Francesco.

