

The places of faith: the religious hospitality in the Italian sanctuaries in the Early Modern Age

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Biographies

Silvia Beltramo is a researcher in Architectural History at the Politecnico di Torino and, from the same university, received a PhD in History and Critic of Architecture. In the 2012 she was selected as expert to examine applications for the Cultural Route of the Council of Europe certification. Her researches focuses on history of the architecture and the city in medieval and modern period; cultural heritage, cultural routes and tourism itineraries, cultural project for the promotion of local areas, territorial analysis and cultural identity.

Abstract

Since the Middle Ages, Northern Italy has been characterized as a territory of pilgrimages to monasteries, sanctuaries and Sacred Mounts. The sources testify a significant proliferation of *hospitiae* and *hospitales* in the main religious settlements, more precisely since the 12th century in the monasteries and since the 14th century in the sanctuaries. An authentic architecture of hospitality can be identified in the centres of Piedmont and Lombardy.

The proposal, which is the outcome of a research in progress, intends to deepen in detail some meaningful examples amongst the main Italian sanctuaries – namely: Oropa (Piedmont), Tirano (Lombardy), Loreto (Marche) - analyzing the solutions adopted to host the wayfarers: the hospitality spaces which have characterized the architecture dedicated to pilgrims from the Middle Ages to the Modern Era.

Introduction

The strong affluence of pilgrims soon determined a veritable culture of hospitality, which was manifested by the building of new spaces dedicated to guest quarters. The sources testify a significant proliferation of *hosteriae* and *hospitali* in the main religious centres, in the monasteries - from the 12th century - and in the sanctuaries - from the 14th century. An authentic architecture of hospitality can be identified in the centre of Piedmont and Lombardy, with solutions which couple the indications dictated by the rules of the different monastic orders with the adaptations which were required by the area and its geomorphologic conditions.

From a methodological point of view, the research has led to the investigation of unpublished documentary sources found in numerous archives preserved in the sanctuaries investigated, iconographic sources mainly dating back to the modern age and analysis of preserved architectures.

Cases studies

1. La fabbrica de' Disciplini in the sanctuary of Oropa

Attention to the local forms of worshipping always played a major role in the religious policies of Carlo Emanuele I of Savoy. The significant connotation as an area of pilgrimage played by Oropa since the late Middle Ages received a remarkable impulse during the Counter-Reformation, thanks to the action played by the civil and religious community of the neighbouring town of Biella. During the plague of 1599, the population of Biella decided to make a vow to the statue of the Black Madonna with Child in Oropa. Bishop Ferrero of Vercelli, close to Federico Borromeo, convinced the community to link the vow to the erection of a new church. The reconstruction of the church was associated to the definition of the new Sacred Mount, of the tavern buildings and of the house of the Disciplini within the fencing.

The increment of pilgrims to Oropa recorded between the end of the 15th century and throughout the following century, deeply influenced the decision of extending the religious nucleus of the Middle Ages. The hospitality to the 'viatores' coming from the neighboring areas, the dioceses

of Vercelli, Ivrea, Novara, but also from Milan and Aosta, had been the main mission since the beginning of the history of the sanctuary.

The availability of a consistent number of rooms then became a contingent need for the complex. At the end of the 15th century, the opportunities to host pilgrims in Oropa was limited to the *domus sancte Marie et eius porticus*, but – already in 1507 - Sebastiano Ferrero, member of one of the most prestigious families in Biella, promoted the building of a two-storey house with kitchen at floor level, to host the pilgrims. Besides casa Ferrero, the pilgrims could use other small rooms made available by the noble families of Biella when they were not using them themselves. The accommodations were very simple and made of few rooms: the one of Messer Maffiotto consisted of a space to be used as a cellar for wine and wood, a heated room, a service space and an inhabitable room, with the image of Saint Francis painted on the door, to distinguish it from the other housing facilities of the area.

The new building for the pilgrims, articulated into the areas for the hospitality, the housing of the farmer and the stable, a 'caminata' and bottega, was completed between 1580 and 1585. In May 1609, the complex of Disciplini also featured a tavern, run by Giacomo Mestiatis, before the establishment of a purposely-allocated building, started in 1619 and completed 1623. The double order arcade was ended in 1618, as evidenced by the legacy of Nicola Viono, drafted in Oropa, in the Galleria detta de Disciplinanti.

The consistently increasing flow of pilgrims, which occurred during the Coronation in 1620, called for the opening of a new tavern within the fencing, which - in the 17th century - was committed to laymen external to the sanctuary. On July 7th 1607 the Duke of Savoy, Carlo Emanuele I, was requested to grant tax exemption to the tavern of Oropa. The plea clearly depicts the status of the hospitality of the pilgrims and the planned organization: it reports that «there are some rooms and housing facilities to accommodate the pilgrims, but since not all of them can receive food as they are some 7 miles far from Biella, someone should establish a tavern to sustain the poor».

Once the management issues were solved, there was still the need to enhance the spaces used for restoration. It was then decided to proceed with the building of new spaces next to the 'fabbrica dei disciplini'. The erection site was committed to builders from Lugano who were

concomitantly attending the erection of the church, in particular to Giovanni Troni and Pietro Somazzi, whilst the stone decorations of both the doors and the windows were committed to masters Francesco Aprile and Alberto Solaris. The site was concluded in 1623 and the premises were committed to Pietro Cuzza for three years.

The tavern wing, built in the block perpendicular to the church, in front of the current entry of the sanctuary, is shown in the views of the 16th century. In the two votive paintings of the processions held by the communities of Perloz and Lilliane in 1685 and Fontanamora in 1684, the prospect of the structure is similar to the current one.

1. Tirano and the palace of Saint Michael

The mountain sanctuary of Tirano in Valtellina represents a meaningful case because of the importance attained by a religious space, which conjugates and receives in its spaces a set of structures related to the hospitality of the pilgrims . Its strategic position, at the center of the Alps, in an area which can be easily reached from the Grigioni (Switzerland) through the Bernina pass, from Milan and the Lombardy, as well as from Trentino and Tirol, has always made of it - since its origins - a place of trading traffic, so that - as from 1514 - the fair of Saint Michael has been held there in the very day of the Saint's holiday. Moreover, the popularity of the miracles ascribed to the Madonna di Tirano made of it a significant point of call.

Since the first acknowledgement by the bishop in 1504, the temple had been stimulating intensive devotional practices outside the valleys, arousing the generosity of the devotees and obtaining acknowledgement from the authorities of the Christianity. The building of the oratorium dedicated to the Blessed Virgin of Tirano - started in the spring of 1505 - corresponded to a stage of remarkable expansion of the settlement and economic structures of Tirano. As a result of the strong attraction exerted from the 13th century on both the local populations and the ones of the bordering alpine regions, the neighbourhood was the most populated centre of the medium and high valley. Its geographic position - besides consolidating the position as a crossroad for the transit of goods and men - was the fulcrum of the defence system designed by the Sforza against the Grigioni.

The square around the sanctuary soon became the area selected for the trading activities and for the hospitality of the numerous pilgrims coming from the whole Alps. The palace called of Saint Michael - originally *hostaria granda*, a place for the rest of the merchants, travelers and pilgrims who were passing along this section of the Alps - began to be erected on the space in front of the sanctuary, at the same time as the church site. The construction was already at an advanced stage in the first decade of the 16th century: the columns which circumscribed the archway were erected in 1513 and then the activities accelerated also as a result of the concession to hold the fair on the church yard.

2. *Hosterie and hospitalia* in the sanctuary of Loreto

The Holy House of Loreto is one of the most interesting cases for the study of the themes linked to pilgrim hospitality, because of the significance attained by the sanctuary as a centre of pilgrimage between Northern and Southern Europe. Furthermore, the remarkable richness of documentary sources kept in sanctuary archives is still today a remarkable opportunity for study and knowledge.

The first information on the church of *Santa Maria de Laureto* are reported in a document dated 1315 which witnesses the level of devotion reached and the steady frequentation by different types of people, even some who were not animated by the noblest purposes. The church soon became the worshipping centre of the Madonna for the diocese and community of Recanati, as it seems to be ascertained by the visits of the bishop and religious authorities in 1369 and - a few months later - the ones of the podestà and priors of the city. In the second half of the 14th century, mainly as a result of the granting of the indulgence to the worshippers by pope Gregory XI, in 1375, and by Urban VI in 1389, the origin of the worshippers overcame the local borders of the March.

The growth of the devotional flow determined the birth - within the core of the villa - of different building structures to the service of the church and to pilgrims. A series of 'logge' next to the church and the housing facilities of the presbyteries had been used by pilgrims and by 'mercariii' since the second half of the 14th century. A first *hospitale*, i.e. a hospice for the poor pilgrims, was built at the beginning of the following century, and a second one was completed in 1468; in 1485, the brotherhood of San Giacomo arranged for the building of the large hospice . The need

of new systems for the supply of water determined the implementation of new wells and reservoirs and these activities are documented in the early 15th century. Also private citizens contributed to building works allocated to trading and to hospitality, which were then rented to merciarii and hospitatores. The new houses were built at the edges of the road that led to the devotional centre running along the ridge of the hill of Monte Prodo. The very urban pattern was modelled in compliance with the flow of devotees: houses and shops, hotels and inns were set in a row and aligned along the ancient road which led to the basilica; behind this road, called “via dei coronari”, a second road, essentially allocated as a service structure, opened as from the 15th century. When, in the last decades of the 16th century, the dimensions of the settlement were too small to support the mass of pilgrims and a fast growing population, pope Sixtus V widened the borders of the villa in the South-West direction, towards Monte Reale, dictating all the communities of the Marche to build up their own building in the area called “addizione sistina”.

Conclusions

Throughout this period of the Middle and the Early Modern Ages, the continuous increase in pilgrimages implied new definitions of the space within the sacred enclosures, with the building of new shelters for the pilgrims, taverns and shops. The cases presented make it possible to analyse the arrangement of the areas dedicated to the travellers in their architectural components, which were either designed from scratch or were an adaptation of the areas to the pilgrim’s needs.

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