Between landscape and fortified architecture: traces and memory of rural civilization in the territory of Pesche in Molise

HERITAGE 2022 INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

VERNACULAR HERITAGE: CULTURE, PEOPLE AND SUSTAINABILITY

Eds. C. Mileto, F. Vegas, V. Cristini, L. García-Soriano

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Universitat Politècnica de València

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HERITAGE 2022
International Conference on Vernacular Heritage: Culture, People and Sustainability

Preface

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"HERITAGE2022, International Conference on Vernacular Heritage: Culture, People and Sustainability" is organized in the framework of the "VerSus+ | Heritage for PEOPLE" project, co-funded by the Creative Europe Program of the European Union (grant 607593-CREA-1-2019-1-ES-CULT-COOP1) and led by Universitat Politècnica de València (Spain) in partnership with Università degli Studi di Firenze and Università degli Studi di Cagliari (Italy), CRAterre – ENSAG (France) and Universidade Portucalense - Departamento de Arquitetura e Multimédia Gallaecia (Portugal). The "VerSus+ | Heritage for PEOPLE" project focuses on the transmission of knowledge to communities and the general public. It pays special attention to the society of the future (children and young people), as well as local, regional and national authorities in charge of heritage management, and includes specialists and experts in the field of architecture (architects, engineers, cultural managers, historians, ethnographers, university students, etc.) together with craftsmen and companies in the construction and tourism sectors, cultural and social associations, and educational institutions.

Vernacular heritage is a tangible and intangible heritage of great importance to European and global culture. This architecture, born from the practical experience of local inhabitants, makes use of local materials to erect buildings taking into consideration the climate and geography, developing cultural, social and constructive traditions based on the conditions of the surrounding nature and habitat. Above all, it plays an essential role in contemporary society as it is able to teach us important principles and lessons for a respectful sustainable architecture. These lessons from vernacular heritage for contemporary architecture have been extensively studied in the "VerSus: Lessons from Vernacular Heritage in Sustainable Architecture (grant 2012-2792/001-001 CU7 COOP7)" project, co-funded by the European Union between 2012 and 2014, and the "VerSus+ | Heritage for PEOPLE" (2019-2023) project, which follows on from the previous project, focusing on the transmission of this knowledge to society, as seen earlier. The wisdom of vernacular architecture in the field of environmental, sociocultural and socioeconomic sustainability is increasing both in interest and significance in the world today. Climate change, depopulation and the pressure of tourism all pose major challenges, as do the increasingly rapid social changes and loss of traditional trades resulting from the industrialization of the construction process. These challenges alert us to the pressing and growing need for education and increased awareness in society and for the documentation and conservation of architecture within a framework of up-to-date integration into contemporary life, managing territory and heritage assets for the sustainable development of society in the future.

The second project involved in this conference is "RISK-Terra. Earthen architecture in the Iberian Peninsula: study of natural, social and anthropic risks and strategies to improve resilience" (RTI2018-095302-B-I00) (2019-2022), funded by MCIU (Ministerio de Ciencia, Innovación y Universidades), AEI (Agencia Estatal de Investigación), FEDER - UE (Fondo Europeo de Desarrollo Regional, Unión Europea). This project is geared towards the conservation of earthen architecture in the Iberian Peninsula, both monumental and vernacular, which continues to be undervalued and barely recognized. The RISK-Terra project aims to provide scientific coverage of the study of natural threats (floods, earthquakes, climate change), social threats (abandonment, social discredit, demographic pressure, tourist development), and anthropic threats (neglect, lack of protection and maintenance), as well as the mechanisms for deterioration

and dynamics and transformation (replacement, use of incompatible techniques and materials, etc.) to which architecture is exposed. The objective of the project is to establish strategies for conservation, intervention and rehabilitation which allow the prevention and mitigation of possible damage through compatible actions and/or actions to increase resilience.

As these two projects have major points of contact, particularly in relation to the challenges mentioned above, with potential for common reflection, their main themes have been combined in this Heritage2022 conference. The topics established for the conference are: 1. vernacular architecture: matter, culture and sustainability (study and cataloging of vernacular architecture; urban studies of vernacular architecture; studies of traditional techniques and materials; sustainability of vernacular architecture); 2. heritage education (research in heritage education; heritage education and social inclusion; heritage communities; creativity and heritage education); 3. artisans and crafts of traditional construction (intangible heritage: the management of know-how and local construction culture; training in traditional construction crafts; tradition and innovation in traditional construction crafts; plans and experiences for the recovery and maintenance of construction crafts); 4. conservation, restoration and enhancement of vernacular architecture (conservation and restoration projects of vernacular architecture; materials and intervention techniques for vernacular architecture; difficulties and possibilities of using traditional crafts in conservation; management and maintenance of vernacular architecture).

The scientific committee was made up of 102 outstanding researchers from 24 countries from the five continents, specialists in the subjects proposed. All the contributions to the conference, both the abstracts and the final texts, were subjected to a strict peer-review evaluation system by the members of the scientific committee. Out of the 200 proposals submitted, 134 papers by 254 authors from 25 countries from the four continents were chosen for publication. All the articles have been published in print and online in the two-volume book "Vernacular Heritage: Culture, People and Sustainability".

"HERITAGE2022 (Versus+ | RISK-Terra), International Conference on Vernacular Heritage: Culture, People and Sustainability" was held from 15 to 17 September 2022 in in-person and online modality at the Universitat Politècnica de València. The conference was under the aegis of: ICOMOS-CIAV (International Scientific Committee of Vernacular Architecture); ICOMOS-ICICH (International Scientific Committee on Intangible Cultural Heritage); IEB (Instituto Español de la Baubiologie). The organization, publication and implementation of the conference have been made possible thanks to co-funding of the Creative Europe Programme of the European Union for the project "VerSus+ | Heritage for PEOPLE" (grant 607593-CREA-1-2019-1-ES-CULT-COOP1); and the MCIU, AEI and FEDER - UE for the research project "Risk-Terra. Earthen architecture in the Iberian Peninsula: study of natural, social and anthropic risks and strategies to improve resilience" (ref.: RTI2018-095302-B-I00). Furthermore, Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura and PEGASO - Research Centre for Architecture, Heritage and Management for Sustainable Development of Universitat Politècnica de València have also contributed to the whole project.

Finally, we would like to thank all the authors who contributed to the quality, range, diversity and richness of these publications with their articles. We give special thanks to all the partners of the European project "VerSus+ | Heritage for PEOPLE" and the national research project "Risk-Terra" for participating in the conference and helping to spreading the word about it worldwide. We are grateful for the aid of all the members of the advisory committee and the scientific committee for their work throughout the process of revising the abstracts and papers. And, above all, we thank the organizing committee for the complex setting up of the whole conference, the style and language reviewers for their corrections, and all the collaborators for their invaluable work in the management and organization of all stages of the process.

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Between landscape and fortified architecture: traces and memory of rural civilization in the territory of Pesche in Molise

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Topic: T1.2. Urban studies of vernacular architecture

Abstract
The small village of Pesche in Molise extends along the slopes of Monte San Marco, in a perfect symbiosis between architecture and nature. Pesche's origins date back already between the 5th and 6th centuries, when the steep natural slope was chosen as a place for the construction of a safe village, consisting of many small houses side by side and built using local limestone. Its position, guarding the Isernia valley, characterized at the top by the ruins of the castle-enclosure, supports the idea that Pesche may have played a dominant role in the passage along the ancient Pescasseroli-Candela sheep track. The castle-enclosure itself is evidence of the traditional medieval building site, but also of a rural civilization which until the beginning of the 20th century probably continued to live in these places, used as houses, stables and barns. This contribution focuses on the architectural and material characteristics of the buildings in the territory of Pesche, which, despite the current state of decay and neglect, are evidence of the use of local materials and the use of construction techniques that have characterized the traditional Molise building site.

Keywords: *fortified architecture, landscape, Pesche, Molise*

1. Introduction

«This is Molise, beautiful and peaceful» (Brandi, 2019, p. 345). With these words Cesare Brandi describes the small Italian region, too often relegated to a marginal role, but whose rich architectural and landscape heritage clearly testifies to the complex historical vicissitudes that have conditioned its present. In this region, characterized by a continuous alternation of mountainous and hilly areas, fortified architecture has a dominant role, almost guarding the surrounding area. And this is the case of Pesche, a small village in Isernia's province, where the town appears perfectly integrated with the natural rock on which it rests, dominated by the ruins of *Castrum Pesclarum*. The absence of systematic studies and research on the historic sites of Molise, but also the state of decay in which many buildings are found, make the approach to these sites very complex. The present research, conducted through an integration of historical documentary sources and direct knowledge of the object, aims to make known how Pesche still retains all the characteristics of a typical small town in the inner areas of Molise, born for defensive purposes, and then adapted to the needs of a rural civilization, always in a close link between architecture and landscape[1].

[1] This research is part of the Specialization thesis in Architectural and Landscape Heritage achieved in October 2021 at the Department of Architecture of the University of Naples Federico II.

2. Historical outline of Pesche's fortified settlement

2.1. The phenomenon of fortification in the Molise area

Perched on rocky slopes, emerging between natural green expanses or placed to guard a small historic center, the towers, castles and entire fortified centres represent the different types of fortified architecture that can be encountered while crossing the Molise region (Perogalli, 1975; Di Rocco, 2009; Perrella Cavaliere et al., 2011). In most cases these works arise on preexistences of Longobard or Norman origin, but sometimes also Samnite, which have undergone transformations and remodeling due to direct interventions of anthropic nature or natural disasters, such as the frequent earthquakes that have always devastated Molise. The origin of these structures is surely linked to the need to take refuge in safe places protected from Saracen invasions, but also to the desire to repopulate and manage deserted and uncultivated lands. This practice of fortification, indeed, was also the basis of the organizational dynamics of influential religious groups (Wickham, 1985).

2.2 Brief historical notes on *Pesclum*'s origins and transformations

Fig. 1. Aerial photo of Pesche's village, (Source: Facchini, 2020).

The characteristic position of Pesche, which differentiates it from most of the neighbouring villages built on the top and not along the rocky slopes (Fig. 1), gave rise to its toponym, because *Pesclum* or *Pesculum*, later Pesco d'Isernia, derives from *pesclum*, that is "stone" (Galanti, 1781, p. 81; Masciotta, 1984, p. 283). Probably a small community already resided in the flat area of the site, known as *balneum* because roman baths were attested (Tommasini, 1999, pp. 23-24; Greco, 2007, p. 187). The establishment of a first settlement along the slopes of today's Monte San Marco or Monte San Bernardo goes back to the 5th-6th century, when, following the barbarian invasions, the population residing downstream moved towards the naturally protected area, that is towards the rocky mountain called *Pesclatura*. It was only in the following centuries, and then especially during the Norman kingdom, that Pesche took on the appearance of a small fortified village, dominated by the so-called *Castrum Pesclarum*. The history of Pesche is intertwined with that of two important Benedictine complexes, that of San Vincenzo al Volturno first and that of Montecassino then. Although there are no explicit references in the *Chronicon Vulturnense* written by the monk Giovanni - which collects information on the foundation and historical events of San Vincenzo al Volturno's monastery up to the dawn of the 12th century - it is possible to trace donations of goods present in the territory of Pesche which were given to the above-mentioned monastery between the 9th and 10th centuries (Oldoni, 2010, pp. 171, 216, 362). Its fortune, however, is linked above all to the centuries of Cassinese relevance that extend from 1092 - the year of the donation of the Church of Santa Croce and of the *castellum Valneum* by Rodolfo di Molisio to the above-mentioned Abbey[2] - up to 1702, when Pesche was sold to the Diocese of Isernia[3] (Greco, 2007; Greco, 2011). During these centuries, Pesche - to which, as the historical iconography testifies, other toponyms

[2] Archive of Montecassino's Abbey, Aula III, capsula XI, n. 35; cfr. Aula III, capsula XI, n. 42.

[3] Ivi, Aula III, capsula III, n. 65.

are attributed such as *Pesculu a Sernia*, *Pesculu apud Isernia*, *Pescora*, *Le pescora*, etc. (Fig. 2, 3) - is entrusted as a fief to important noble families, such as the Ceva Grimaldi, who were the last owners until the subversion of feudalism in 1806, becoming an autonomous municipality only at the beginning of the 19th century (Tommasini, 1999, p. 170).

Fig. 2. Speculum & Exemplar Christicolarum. Vita Beatissimi Patris Benedicti Monacho[rum] Patriarch[a]e Sanctissimi, 1586 (by Pistilli, 2016).

Fig. 3. G. A. Magini, detail of the map *Contado di Molise et Principato Ultra*, 1620.

3. The medieval village

3.1. Architectural features of the historic centre

For those who arrive in Pesche from the Molise capital of Isernia, what is most striking is the singular panorama consisting of a «waterfall of houses» (*Guida d'Italia del Touring Club Italia*, 1926, p. 342), placed side by side and following the rocky slope, so much so that, according to tradition, King Ferdinand II of Bourbon, during a trip to Molise, compared Pesche to a bookshop (Amorosa, 1924, p. 99; Trombetta, 1984, p. 253 and p. 293 note 90). The constant use of limestone left exposed helps to fortify the fusion between the historic building and the rock on which the buildings rest. The village of Pesche, of which it is still possible today to perceive a very compact urban fabric, is crossed by a main longitudinal axis in an east-west direction (now via Arciprete Biondi), from which a series of secondary paths branch out which, through ramps or gradients, lead directly to the *castrum*. Although the historic center is still partially inhabited, it is possible to come across characteristic abandoned buildings in a state of ruin. Among them, a block of several buildings located near Piazza Roveto has a particular value, characterized by a three-arched loggia and a mullioned window at the top with frames in white limestone (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4. Buildings of Pesche's historic centre (2021).

In the same Piazza Roveto there is the ancient gate to the fortified city which still retains traces of the crowning with battlements. Another characteristic of the historic center is the presence of

portals in worked white stone that unite many of the small houses and on which it is possible to glimpse symbols or initials of names attributable to the owner families.

3.2. Pesche and the historical road system: the Pescasseroli-Candela sheep track

The Molise territory is also known for being crossed by the so-called sheep track, the long green paths intended for transhumance, which descended from the Abruzzo mountains towards the flat areas located in the current Apulia. Especially, Molise is crossed by the five most important sheep tracks of southern Italy, including the Pescasseroli-Candela Regio sheep track - perceptible today only in some pieces - which connects Pescasseroli, in Abruzzo, with Candela, in Apulia, after having also crossed Molise and Campania (Petriccione, 1999).

Fig. 5. Pesche's castle-enclosure (ortomosaic obtained with the software *Agisoft Metashape*).

These "grassy streets" are still today a fundamental testimony of the memory of rural and country life that characterized this inland area of Italy. There are various cities that have developed along the Pescasseroli-Candela sheep track, such as *Bovianum*, *Saepinum*, *Aeserniam*, but, above all, there are various types of structures built along the route to ease the journey of both animals and farmers, such as the *tabernae*, the *mansiones*, the *caupona*, and others. The bibliography and cartography published on the Pescasseroli-Candela does not explicitly include Pesche among the halts of the journey, but its proximity to Isernia and its strategic position, clearly visible from what was once the path of the sheep track and today partially retraced by the SS 17, it is possible to hypothesize that it had a non-marginal role. A series of spontaneous architectures that can be found within the Oriented Nature Reserve that extends behind the castle-enclosure contribute to corroborating this thesis, such as the two fountains, Iodata and Maiuri (or Majuri) fountains, which are assimilable to drinking troughs used to quench the thirst of animals. Even more characteristic is the presence of dry-stone hut structures, called *toloj* or usually "*pagliari*", made by shepherds in the internal mountain areas and along secondary paths, for resting and sheltering from bad weather, but also for milk's processing (Carnevale, 2008). The existence of these structures, therefore, also found in other neighbouring Molise sites, testifies to the presence of a peasant civilization also in the Pesche area, perhaps reachable through a detour from the main sheep track.

4. *Castrum Pesclarum*: knowledge and conservation of the castle-enclosure

4.1. Architectural features

Fig. 6. Southern elevation (elab. by author).

The structure of Pesche's *castrum* presents a plan similar to a trapezium, but, very likely, the original structure had to be more extensive than the one preserved today, if we consider the position

of the ancient gate of access still preserved in Piazza Roveto. The characteristic conformation of the so-called castle-enclosure represents almost an *unicum* in the Molise contest (Fig. 5), if we exclude a few examples such as that of Roccamandolfi and Roccapipirozzi, also in the province of Isernia, while it is a widespread typology especially in the Abruzzo territory (Perogalli, 1975; Trombetta, 1984). As has happened in many other sites, some environments of the fortress have been incorporated into other constructions built or subsequently adapted and their recognition is now almost impossible. Along the outer perimeter of the castle-enclosure it is still possible to observe two ancient access gates to the site: a door on the southern side, directly from the historic center of Pesche (Fig. 6); another on the western one, which connects the site with via Fontanavecchia. Along the eastern curtain, on the other hand, there is a postern, from which the external path branches off which leads directly to the highest point of the fortress, identified with a tower that must have probably been a *donjon*. The *donjon*, or more commonly the keep, occupies the north-western corner of the enclosure and it is preceded by two semi-circular towers lying on the rocky slope, and, in particular, the one on the west side still retains the crowning with the battlements (Fig. 7). A photo of the early 20th century and kept in the Alinari Archive allows us to reconstruct the portion of the keep that collapsed in recent decades (Fig. 8). Once you have passed the entrance located to the south, you can go along *via Torre*, which is also the only more easily accessible route of the entire *castrum*, unlike the internal system of stairs and ramps which served to overcome the difference in height. All the rooms, many of which over time have been used as barns and stables, as already attested by the land registry of the late 19th century buildings[4], are in a state of abandonment and neglect. Most of them are inaccessible due to the total or partial absence of floor slabs or roofing, leaving us only to imagine how they could be organized. Even inside the *castrum*, the small houses are side by side, thus helping to strengthen the defense of the site. Despite the abandonment, traces of domestic and rural life are preserved in some houses: in two of them it is still possible to observe ancient fireplaces with small furnaces side by side, typical of the less poor residences of the Molise area (Fig. 9, 10). The hearth, indeed, called *fucagn'*, represented the heart of the house and was usually located in the kitchen, where in addition to heating the room, it was also used for cooking (Guerrizio, Libertucci, 2008). Continuing eastwards and past the small access passage, it is possible to continue towards the path that leads to the highest part of the site and which flanks the perimeter of the Oriental Nature Reserve.

Fig. 7. External view of the keep (2021).

Fig. 8. A. Trombetta, *View of the castle of Pesche in the surroundings of Isernia*, 1900-1910, (Source: Archive Alinari, Collection Trombetta, Florence).

[4] State Archives of Isernia, Catasto dei fabbricati, registro delle partite, Pesche voll. 1-8.

4.2. Materials and construction techniques

Molise architecture is strongly influenced by the geographical characteristics of the territory, dominated by the mountain ranges of Matese and Mainarde, with a terrain that has typical characteristics of the central-southern Apennines. The nature of the territory is reflected both in the use of local materials, also due to the poverty of the regional economy, and in the typological and structural choices adopted, which also derive from the common earthquakes that hit the area (Varagnoli, 2006; Varagnoli, 2016).

Fig. 9, 10. Typical fireplaces in environments of the *castrum* (2021).

These characteristics have determined the prevalent use of local limestone in the traditional Molise building site, and therefore also in the territory of Pesche, used since the Middle Ages both in fortresses and castles and in civil and religious buildings. It is possible to find a prevailing use of blocks in mountain areas, while the recourse to pebbles near rivers. However, the use of travertine is limited, found mainly in the province of Campobasso in the Boiano area, and even more so is the use of tuff. The Molise architecture, however, is also affected by the influence of the workers from neighbouring regions, for example from Abruzzo, Campania and Apulia, mainly along the coast.

Fig. 11, 12. Details of *castrum*'s masonry (2021).

Furthermore, there are also influences of the workers employed in the San Vincenzo al Volturno site and its appurtenances, who introduce the knowledge developed in the Benedictine sites that revolved around Montecassino. The masonry devices that can be found in the architecture of the *Castrum Pesclarum* consist largely of facing with rough blocks of local limestone and with different dimensions, bound with mortar

and placed irregularly, without horizontal alignments (Fig. 11, 12). In the cantonal it is possible to find the use of larger and squared blocks. There are few traces of brick walls, certainly dating back to a subsequent phase and probably to a consolidation intervention. In some environments it is still possible to observe the type of floor used, consisting of a main frame with wooden beams with an almost quadrangular section and a secondary frame with wooden strips with a circular section to form a canopy. There are also particular small niches obtained in the wall thickness, with a semi-circular shape and made with splinters and scraps of stone and brick. At last, it is interesting to observe how some curtain walls of the enclosure and the towers are characterized by the presence of small holes: quadrangular, with a section of about ten or twenty centimetres, intended for the pontoon holes, and circular holes, in diameter of about ten centimetres, intended to host connection and reinforcement beams between the curtain walls of the masonry. These holes, visible above all in the central tower on the northern side (Fig. 13), suggest the use of the *opus gallicum* technique, very common in medieval construction sites, especially in fortified works of the Norman period, such as in the the case of the castle-enclosure of Roccamandolfi (Marino, Dinelli, Nenci, 1996; Marino, 2008). The *opus gallicum*, so called because it was described by Caesar in *De bello gallico*, provided for the use of wooden beams as chains between two curtains of the masonry and was a technique used both for consolidation and for reinforcements already under construction, especially useful for seismic risk areas, as Pesche has always been. Furthermore, this tower still retains small typical loopholes of medieval defensive structures.

5. Conclusions

In its many centuries of history, starting from the first agglomeration built on Monte *Pesclatura* up to the partial abandonment of the last century, Pesche, and especially the fortified city developed inside the enclosure, has been evidence of the traditional building site of the region, based on the use of simple and easily available materials on site and using construction techniques suitable for the nature of the area.

Fig. 13. Central tower with circular holes (2021).

The presence of excessive vegetation and the continuous collapses of the structures certainly represent an obstacle to the overall knowledge of the site and its accessibility, but the characteristics and authenticity of what remains of the historical environments can still be preserved by a careful conservation and enhancement project. This state of decay and neglect, which unfortunately unites many other minor centres, both on a regional and national scale (Russo, Pollone, Romano, 2020; Varagnoli, Serafini, Verazzo, 2020), today compromises the use of the many fortified structures that characterize Molise and in particular of those located in the inner areas, in those territories considered too often fragile, but which should be considered «strategic places for the care of the territory» (Oteri, 2019 , p. 169). Therefore, the same feeling of nostalgia that pervades us as we pass through these places that must become the engine to rethink their future (Teti, 2017), understanding the real resource that these territories can represent for the national heritage.

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