

The Aragonese Castle of Taranto

History and general description



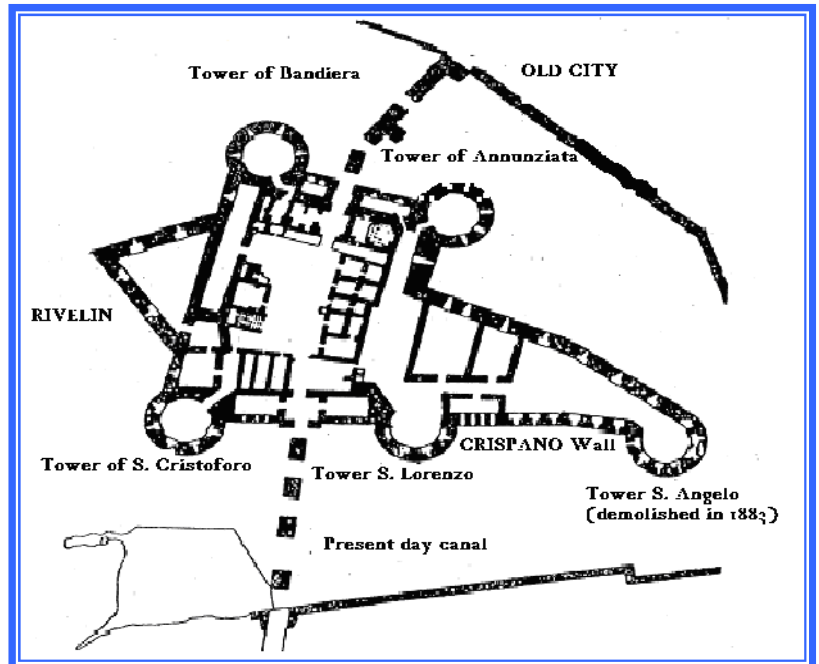
The Castle of Taranto, called Castle S. Angelo, is located close to an ancient natural gradient of the rocky bank upon which rises the old part of the city and is basically an Aragonese reconstruction of a previous Norman-Swabian-Angevin fortress built in the same area but having very different

characteristics since it was a typical medieval castle with numerous tall and narrow towers built over previous Byzantine fortifications that had foundations dating back to the Greek period (IV-III century b.c.).

The improvement of artillery in the XV century made medieval castles obsolete as their thin walls could no longer stand up against the artillery of the attackers nor allow its use by the defenders. The conquest of Otranto by the Turks in 1480 made it all too clear that this type of fortification was now inadequate. The King of Naples, Ferdinand of Aragon, thus decided to strengthen the kingdom's coastal defence.

Within this context, between 1487 and 1492, the Castle of Taranto was reconstructed following perhaps the specific design of the great Senese architect Francesco di Giorgio. The new castle had a shape vaguely reminiscent that of a scorpion, with five round towers located at the corners of the construction. These towers, lower and thicker than the previous ones, were named S. Cristoforo, San Lorenzo and Sant' Angelo for the three facing the current canal, while the two facing the old city were called Annunziata and Bandiera. Towers and walls were of the same height, 21 meters, and almost the same thickness, about 8 meters; all the towers had a diameter of 18 meters except for San Cristoforo which was 10 meters wider. Facing the outside harbour, according to the probable design of Francesco di Giorgio, a triangular bulwark, (a true prototype of the XVI bastion, incorrectly called ravelin), was added in 1491 to reinforce the southern curtain wall and improve flank defense capability of the access to the moat that was enlarged to connect the outside

with the inside harbour. The XV century fortifications had great aesthetic appeal but a rather ephemeral military value due to the rapid progress of artillery. The Spaniards, who succeeded the Aragonese in 1502, widened the top platforms to facilitate the movement and use of artillery. They also filled with soil many of the corridors inside the walls and the upper casemates of the towers to strengthen them and to build artillery emplacements on the towers top. In spite of the Spanish interventions, the fortress progressively lost military significance and, after playing the leading role in numerous battles, including the repulse of a Turkish assault in 1594, it ended up being used as a prison and as barracks. This different function led to a fragmentation of the internal premises, with the closing of passages and corridors. Furthermore, the increased residential requirements, together with the lower cost of plaster and cement, led to the widespread use of such materials to cover walls and floors in order to improve hygienic conditions. The Castle, however, remained substantially intact except for the tower of S. Angelo, demolished in 1883 to make way for the swing bridge.



Since 2003, the Italian Navy, custodian of the castle from 1883, has begun the systematic restoration of the interior of the fortress with the intent of bringing back the Aragonese configuration and identifying the previous Greek, Byzantine, Norman, Swabian-Angevin structures. The internal restoration, carried out by Italian Navy personnel supervised by the local Superintendence of Architectural Heritage, consists mostly in the removal of plaster and cement to bring to light the original surface of walls and floors and in the re-opening of corridors, rooms and passages, in order to re-establish the internal permeability of the castle and the functionality of the various defensive elements. During these activities huge quantities of soil have been excavated and removed jointly with the University of Bari, under the supervision of the Superintendence of Archaeological Heritage, leading to the discovery of numerous relics from different eras encompassing almost three thousand years of history.