



BE TAKEN THROUGH THE HISTORY OF MAN, FROM HIS ORIGINS UP TO NOW

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I SASSI DI MATERA WORLD HERITAGE OF HUMANITY

The ancient city of Matera has been inhabited since time immemorial, from as far back as the Paleolithic Age up to now. Here men have left the evidences of their settlements: natural grottoes, hypogeal structures, cisterns, huge enclosures, farms and various rupestrian churches with Byzantine frescoes, all dug or built in the tufa of the Gravina. A unique urban complex and a singular fusion of man with the land.

MATERA HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Matera (401m a.s.l.) has been the ideal place for human settlements since Prehistory. At Matera, whose name comes from "mata" and means "heap of rocks", people have established in the Sassi and in the Civita along the sheer cliffs of the Gravina, a rocky promontory behind a deep gorge through which runs a torrent and surrounded by two broad valleys where the waters converge.

What makes Matera unique of its kind is the permanent presence of Man starting from 400,000 years ago, when he was just a simple hunter. It is said that the first human settlement goes back to the early Paleolithic Age (150,000 years ago) and refers to the age of the Man of Altamura, the most ancient find of the Neanderthal Man.

Matera is also so important because of its Neolithic findings. It was the orography of the area that, together with the nature of the tufa, an easy-to-dig rock, have always favoured the presence of men: natural grottoes caves became their first dwellings while canals and cisterns were dug to bring water to them.

The extent of this urban structure and the underground development of the town is really unimaginable, where you can count up to ten floors excavated one under the other, in a chaotic but ingenious way. Since its origins various religious communities have also established themselves here and in the surroundings, such as the Benedictine monks (8th century) and the Basiliani monks (12/15th centuries). In time more than 50 rupestrian small and big churches, excavated from the rock but rich in frescoes, appeared close to the Gravina and in the rough big Murgia valleys, often not easy to be reached.

I SASSI di MATERA

Today Matera is renowned thanks to its exceptional historic center and for its most characteristic districts: the Civita, set on the promontory with the Duomo and, in the two lateral valleys, Sasso Barisano and Sasso Caveoso whose name "Sasso" means caved in the rock.

The whole urban complex, known as "I Sassi di Matera", since 1993 has been inscribed in U.N.E.S.C.O.'s World Heritage List.

Great masters of cinema have set films in this evocative atmosphere, increasing the fame of the place. Well-known is the movie "The Passion of the Christ" by Mel Gibson, shot at Matera in 2002.

THE CIVITA AND THE DUOMO

The most ancient residential unit in Matera is the Civita, an area that preserves the evidences of substantial human settlements since the 9th century B.C. Because of its features, the Civita can be considered a natural fortress, clinging to a plateau overlooking the gorge of the Gravina and some sheer cliffs that have defended the site from assaults for centuries. Today the Civita, besides the remains of the various towers that used to encircle it, is characterized by the presence of the Duomo, built on the acropolis to symbolize the importance of the place in comparison with the Sassi located outside the city walls.

Matera has an Archbishop's See and can boast various old churches such as S. Domenico, S. Giovanni Battista, S. Francesco d'Assisi, Santa Chiara, Purgatorio, S. Francesco da Paola and more, all of them of remarkable style as regards their period of construction. The most impressive is the Cathedral, built in the Apulian-Romanesque style on the remains of an ancient church dedicated to Sant'Eustachio, the Patron Saint of the city. Completed in 1270 and since 1389 called Santa Maria della Bruna, the Duomo has a beautiful stone façade with a rose window that symbolizes the wheel of Fortune, and a tall quadrangular campanile with seven bells.

The Latin-cross interior is divided into a central nave and side aisles by columns with capitals each one different from the other. Also remarkable are the stone-made Presepe or Crib by Altobello Persio dating 1534, the wooden choir of 1453 by Giovanni Tentino, the Renaissance Cappella dell'Annunziata by Giulio Persio and a Byzantine fresco of the Madonna della Bruna (12th century). Various drastic Baroque restorations of the 18th century have altered the harmony of its original Romanesque style. A few significant frescoes were found during some restoration works, among which one of the Last Judgment of the 14th century, represented as per the Byzantine iconography.

THE SASSO CAVEOSO

The origin of the name is uncertain. It lies to the south of the Civita and has the reputation of being the most excavated area; it became an integral part of the city around 1500, when Matera underwent a big expansion. Then, throughout the ages, the dwellings of this area were more and more used as cellars for the production and conservation of wine.

The Idris rock features the landscape of the whole Sasso Caveoso that hosts the significant churches of the Madonna dell'Idris and San Giovanni in Monterrone.

THE SASSO BARISANO

The Sasso extends to the north-west of the Civita, in the broad limestone valley lying in front of the Cathedral.

Almost all the dwellings are partly cut out of rock, even if they are concealed by built structures. Two churches, among the various ones built in the area, are particularly important: the Parish Church of San Pietro Barisano and the Parish Church of Sant'Agostino; this one was built in 1594 and rises on a rupestrian crypt dedicated to S. Guglielmo (12th century). The restoration of the Sassi only started from the Sasso Barisano that now hosts more hotels and refreshment services than Sasso Caveoso and the Civita.

THE TOWN DEVELOPMENT

The Sassi, that were inhabited by more than 18000 people, experienced a period of decay from the end of 1700 until the middle of the 20th century.

Many were the causes, such as overpopulation, recurring agricultural crisis and the backward economic situation of the whole of the Italian south. Because of the nature of the territory, it was quite impossible to make use of water mains and a sewerage system and the deterioration was so serious that the dwellings were used for both people and animals in connecting rooms. In the 40s, Carlo Levi wrote the book "Criso si è fermato a Eboli" (Christ stopped at Eboli) describing the miserable life style. Antifascist and exiled at Aliano in Lucania, Carlo Levi deeply experienced the lives of the isolated population, the inhuman life conditions in the Sassi and at the same time the sorrowful beauty of Matera "a wonderful, picturesque and striking city".

The book caused such a sensation as to move men of culture and politicians to visit the Sassi and take care of the problem.

The Government decided to transfer people from their dwellings to new quarters designed by important sociologists and town planners as by the law of 1956. Besides rural villages (La Martella, Venusio and Picciano) built for the farmers' families near the land to be cultivated, other districts such as Serra Venerdi, La Nera, Spine Bianche, Agna Cappuccini were realized, according to the Scandinavian model, with vast green areas, external bypasses and small squares.

People could get newly built houses in exchange for their dwellings in the Sassi that became state properties.

After fifteen years the Sassi were totally deserted and were described as the largest abandoned and decayed historical center in the world.

A long work of restoration started in the 60s and the Sassi are now becoming a living part of the city with monuments and museums as well as restaurants, pizzerias, pubs, hotels, typical handicraft shops and even a residential area. Since 1986 a substantial part of Sasso Barisano has been restored, while in the district of Civita and Sasso Caveoso there is still a lot to do.

The Sassi have been inscribed in UNESCO's World Heritage List: not just a single monument or a urban complex, but the whole life system has been considered as important enough to be preserved and handed down to posterity. o ritenuto così importante da essere considerato Patrimonio dell'umanità, da preservare e tramandare ai posteri.

THE "FESTA DELLA VISITAZIONE"

The Festa della Visitazione was established by Pope Urbano VI in 1389. Its origin is uncertain and has become the topic of various legends. One of them tells about an unknown young lady that asked a farmer to take her to Matera on his cart. When they reached Piccianello, suddenly the lady changed into the statue of the Madonna and before mysteriously disappearing, made this wish: "In this way, on a decorated cart, I want to enter my city every year". Another legend tells of the population's strenuous defence of the cart to avoid letting it fall into the Saracens' hands. The ritual of the destruction of the Carro Trionfale is unusual and unique and it takes place at Matera on 2nd of July every year: at the height of the Festa della Visitazione everybody tries to catch a fragment of the cart that will be devoutly preserved in people's houses. The dismantling of the cart is a reminder of the renewal of life after death and the cycle of seasons.

Cuisine

The gastronomy of Maratea is linked to the agricultural and pastoral traditions of Lucania and has very ancient roots.

Famous is the "luganega", well seasoned and spiced pork meat, made into sausages, as per a process learnt from the Roman soldiers to better conserve and more easily transport the meat. Very special

is the IGP bread made with natural yeast and durum wheat flour. At Matera and in the surroundings you can find every kind of food.

Not to be missed is the cheese such as "mozzarelle alle treccie", "burrate", "scamorze" and the soft "ricotta" as well as the rolls with ham and rucola.

The most famous wine is surely the noble Aglianico for years known as one of the best Italian wines, but also the red wine DOC of Matera, very pleasant and full-bodied, is becoming more and more well known.

Getting to Matera

By car: Motorway Bologna-Taranto, exit Bari Nord. Then go along SS 96 and SS 99 Altamura-Matera.

By plane: The nearest airport is Bari Palese, only about 60 km away.

By train: F.A.L. Railway service connection to Bari station.

Autobus: Marino Bus services connect Matera to Milano, Ancona, Bologna, Chianciano, Fiuggi, Napoli, Novara, Parma, Reggio Emilia, Sassuolo, Urbino and also various foreign towns.