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CASTEL DEL MONTE

“It can be compared to a gigantic cake moulded in stone; or, seen from above, to an ice crystal; or to one of the shapes obtained in a kaleidoscope, through a reflection of mirrors.”

Viaggio in Italia, Guido Piovene

As soon as you catch sight of the unmistakable profile of Castel del Monte from a distance, resting on the top of a green and isolated hill in the Murgia plateau, you cannot help but cry out in wonder. It was Frederick of Swabia (1194-1250), one of the most charismatic figures in medieval Europe, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire and King of Sicily and Jerusalem, who wanted it built; although he is better known by the epithet *Stupor mundi*, he was a man of exceptional culture and multi-faceted interests, which ranged from science to the arts, from falconry to astronomy and he anticipated the figure of the humanist who surrounded himself with scholars and learned men from every corner of the Mediterranean. Historical interpretations and fanciful ones – some of which are very daring – have always circulated about Castel del Monte – as a hunting lodge, a calendar in stone, a royal crown, or lay cathedral – without ever having put an end to the question once and for all. Even without having to act as a hunter of mysteries, it is impossible not to be bewitched by the subtle symbolism that seems to lie in every stone. The octagon is the perfect fusion between the circle and the square and everything in Castel del Monte revolves around eight, a number with countless geometric, astronomic and spiritual implications. The enigma continues and curiosity remains alive around this very solemn and harmonious castle.



CULTURAL HERITAGE

UNESCO DOSSIER: 398
PLACE OF INSCRIPTION: MÉRIDA, MEXICO
DATE OF INSCRIPTION: 1996



CRITERIA FOR SELECTION: In the fusion of cultural elements from Northern Europe, classic antiquity and the Islamic Orient, the architecture of Castel del Monte perfectly embodies the cosmopolitan spirit and the scientific interests of its creator, Frederick II of Swabia.



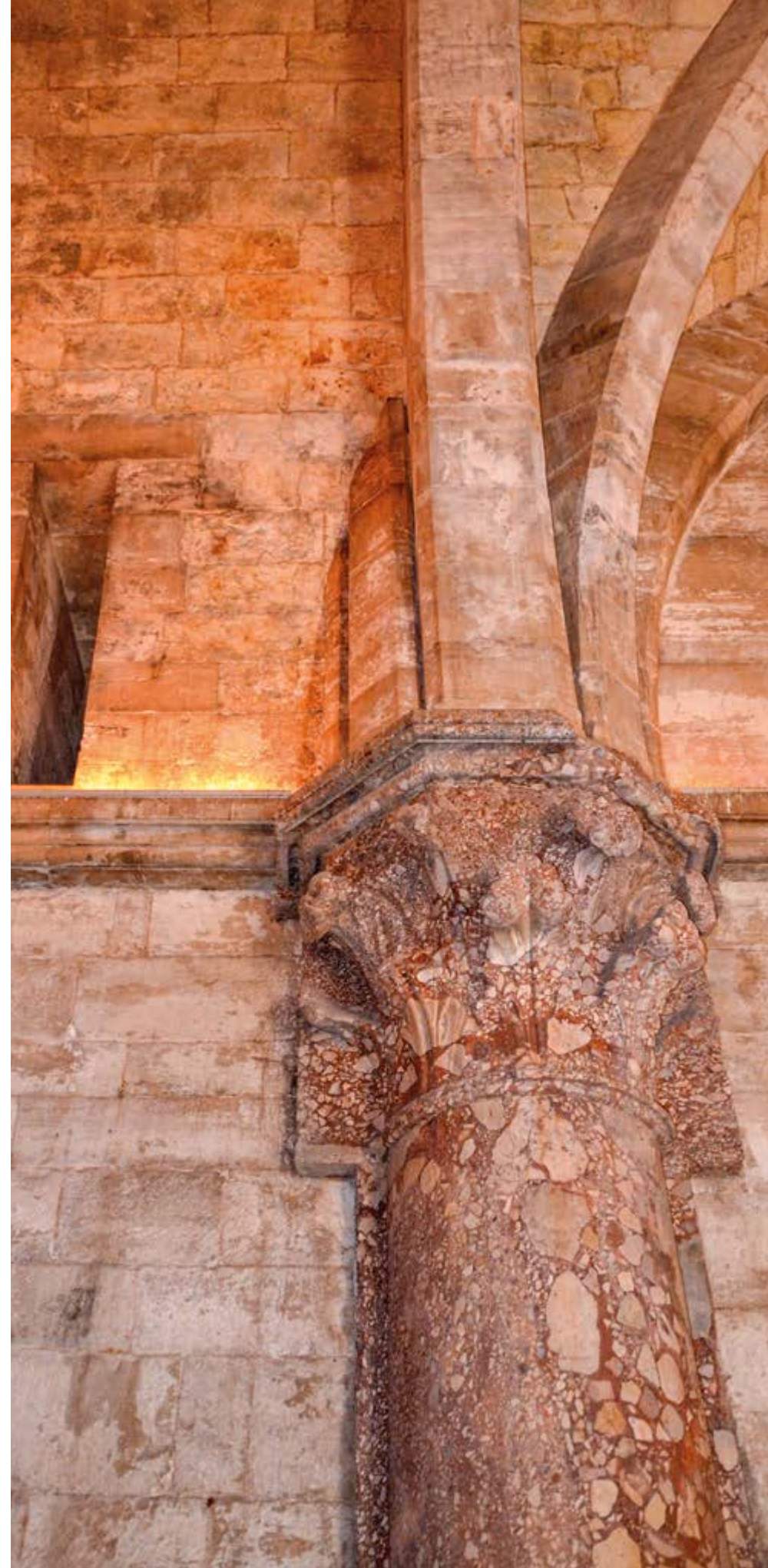
“It is not easy to find, and perhaps even to imagine, an architectonic concept executed with greater mathematical regularity. A fundamental design or a unique simplicity has been implemented here [...] and, without giving in to the fantastic, it always remains elegant and noble.”

The German historian Ferdinand Gregorovius visited Castel del Monte in 1875, and it made a deep impression on him. Starting from the most remarkable castle in southern Italy, Andria and Barletta then come in succession and are also linked to the memory of the great Swabian emperor.

At dusk and at dawn, the stones of **1 Castel del Monte** turn a deep orange colour. Who knows whether the emperor, who died in 1250, was ever able to enjoy the magic of this place; incredibly, there are no documents of his ever staying at the castle and even the date it was built (about 1240) is controversial. Castel del Monte is a huge octagon, with eight towers, also octagonal, rising from its corners. There is a courtyard of the same shape in the centre and there are eight rooms on the ground floor and eight on the upper floor, trapezoids of the same dimensions. Only Frederick II of Swabia can have inspired an architecture with such exceptional features. The castle seems to merge French, in particular Cistercian, Gothic, the Norman style

of Sicily and that of the Islamic Orient, which Frederick knew personally, without overlooking reminiscences of antiquity, into something unique that has never been surpassed. The precious marbles and refined sculptures that decorated some of the rooms have almost all disappeared, yet, to realise that it was not built for the purpose of attacks, you only have to glimpse at the refined portal of breccia coralline which evokes a Roman arch of triumph. The only trifora window in the castle looks towards **2 Andria**, which always remained loyal to the Emperor, to the extent that on one of the ancient gates to the city, there are words attributed to the Swabian: *Andria fidelis nostris affixa medullis* (“Faithful Andria, plunged into our depth”). To follow

the personality of the Swabian, you have to go to the Cathedral: Yolanda of Brienne and Isabella of England, two of Frederick II’s three wives and who both died giving birth, are buried in its crypt. If you want to know more about the Emperor, the ideal stopping place is **3 Barletta**. It is not at all certain that the portrait in stone in the Castle, a marvellous work of Swabian architecture modified in the 16th century, depicts the sovereign. The Colosso, on the other hand, seems to tell us much more about his artistic tastes and his political ideals: the identity of this majestic 5th century bronze statue has been debated for centuries, but it is very probable that it was Frederick who had it brought here from Ravenna.



STONE FLOWER

“Too many words have already been said about this place. Studies, impressions, memories. But today, what insolently imposes itself on my mind is the structural connection of this massive building with the monastery conceived by Eco. Or rather the monastery built by Jean-Jacques Annaud for The Name of the Rose. And the cold rooms cut into segments by the ribs, the concentric wandering between spiral staircases and the rooms on the various floors do not evoke for me Frederick the Emperor but the horrible Jorghe.”

Viaggio in Puglia, Raffaele Nigro

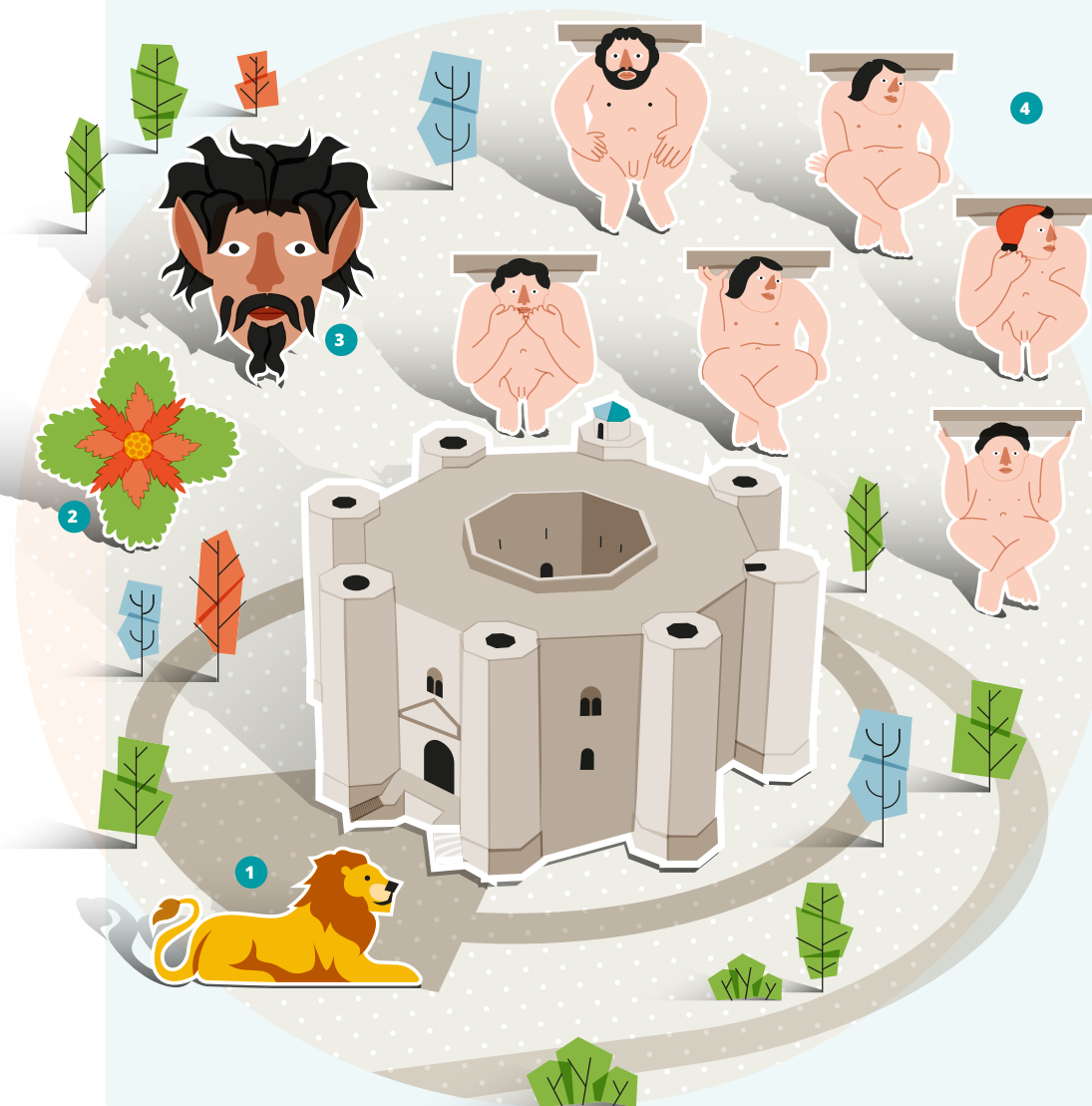
Too small to be a palace and too refined to be only a hunting lodge, the castle was perhaps built to be lived in occasionally by a small court. It boasted large fireplaces and hygienic services that were avant-garde for its time, such as stone basins, pipes and drains for sewage. Another interesting aspect is that it did not have a chapel.



'I DON'T KNOW WHAT THOSE WALLS OF THEBES WERE LIKE, THAT AMPHION, ACCORDING TO THE MYTH, ERECTED TO THE SOUND OF HIS LYRE THAT ATTRACTED AND DISCIPLINED THE STONES OF THE MOUNTAINS; BUT THEY COULD NOT DEFEAT IN BEAUTY THE WALLS OF THIS CASTLE [...].'

The writer Mario Praz uses fairy tale-like words in *Viaggi in Occidente* to describe his encounter with Castel del Monte, one of the strangest castles in Italy. If you are lucky enough to find a one cent coin minted in Italy, you will discover that the monument shown on the reverse is Castel del Monte, the shape of which resembles a star or a snowflake, or that of a king's crown on top of a head. If you like geometry, you will remain amazed when you discover that the castle was built using only the basic figure of the octagon. If you could fly over it, you would realise that the central courtyard is octagonal, that there are eight towers and they are also octagonal, that there are eight rooms

on the lower floor and eight on the upper one. Yet not all the towers have steps to go up or down, and to reach some rooms at times you have to go all the way round the castle or cross the courtyard. This magic of numbers and shapes has an unmistakable signature: that of Frederick II of Swabia, the medieval emperor who was particularly fond of Apulia. He built several fortresses all over southern Italy, but none is as enigmatic as Castel del Monte. Before going in, observe the **1 lion** at the main entrance. It guards the castle, but does not seem particularly fierce. This is the start of a journey that will lead you to discover faces, flowers and figures hidden in rooms and towers. First of all, though, you have to equip yourself with curiosity, a spirit of observation and possibly... a good pair of binoculars. Now and again, looking upwards, you will see a carved **2 flower**: this element is called a "keystone" and is used to keep arches joined together on the ceiling and avoid them from falling due to their weight. In some cases, this flower becomes a head with pointed ears and hair blowing in the wind. For example, try and peek into the inside of tower number three, where a very beautiful head with two small horns and pointed ears will appear to be watching you: it is a **3 faun**, a figure from ancient mythology. Then go to tower number seven: looking up you will see no fewer than **4 six men** in stone, kneeling, who seem to be holding up the vault only with the strength of their shoulders! Doesn't it remind you of the shape of an umbrella? Who knows whether the emperor was ever able to see them, since he may have been short-sighted. Go out into the open air and try and imagine Frederick II while, from the top of a tower, he releases the falcons that he loved so much flying off to capture their prey.



CASTEL DEL MONTE in books

Reading suggestions to penetrate the secrets of the castle.

- **In Puglia**, Ferdinand Gregorovius (1874-75). The German historian fell in love with Apulia and its people, giving us a fresco of the region as it was just over a century ago, not without some forays into older history.
- **Viaggi in Occidente**, Mario Praz (1955). A collection of articles on the author's travels in Europe and America.
- **Viaggio in Italia**, Guido Piovene (1957). Piovene travelled in Italy for three years to write this unique and meticulously detailed reportage, considered a classic of Italian travel literature. From the Alps to Sicily, stopping at Castel del Monte, the author's gaze is an invitation to discover our wonders.
- **La vergine napoletana**, Giuseppe Pederiali (2009). It is 1293. The doctor Giovanni da Modena and the Sicilian Saracen Yusuf Ibn Gwasi endeavour to restore glory to the Swabian dynasty, starting from the rumour that Conradin of Swabia, Frederick's grandson and

the last sovereign of the family, is alleged to have married a Neapolitan virgin in secret, having a son by her. The adventurous journey can only start from Castel del Monte, to then be unravelled in Lucera, Naples and Melfi, all places that are closely linked to the feats of Frederick.

• **Otto. L'abisso di Castel del Monte**, Alfredo De Giovanni (2010). An exciting novel, accompanied by fine illustrations and full of plot twists and suspense. It is focused on the natural number of eight, present everywhere in Frederick's castle, where the main characters decide to explore its underground parts.

• **Castel del Monte**, Franco Cardini (2016). One of the most illustrious scholars of the European Middle Ages draws a complete and thrilling profile of the castle, offering different interpretations, but all focused on the extraordinary figure of the emperor.

• **Castel del Monte: la storia e il mito**, Massimiliano Ambruoso (2018). A medieval specialist and writer, the author goes over the historical stages of building the castle, illustrating the various hypotheses on the functions and the different interpretations that have been given over the years, including the most eccentric ones, in

a useful compendium to find our way around a very complicated subject which too often is mystified.

Children's books:

- **Storia e leggenda di Federico II**, Daniele Giancane (2011). With illustrations by Liliana Carone, this is a book for very young children, who will love the character of the emperor, his passion for hunting and castles.
- **Stupor mundi**, Néjib (2017). A graphic novel which is also a medieval thriller and a reflection on man. Hannibal Qassim El Battuti, the most famous scientist in the Arab world, reaches Castel del Monte from distant Baghdad to ask Frederick II for support. At his court, he finds illustrious personalities in every subject, all attracted by his revolutionary invention, the "House of Light".
- **Enrico e l'ottagono di pietra**, Francesca Garofalo (2023). Anybody who likes Harry Potter and magical stories will not fail to be captivated by the story of Enrico and his two friends, Antonino and Saverio, who are no longer very young it has to be said, but who are irresistibly drawn to Castel del Monte, a sort of Apulian Hogwarts.