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CASTLES IN THE MONFERRATO AREA AND AROUND THE CAFFE' RISTORANTE DEL PESO

THE MONFERRATO AREA AND ITS CASTLES

The area of the Monferrato is a land rich of history and tradition: discover its castles, its vineyards and its hills. starting from the Basso Monferrato and the Castello dei Paleologi, to the castle of San Giorgio Monferrato.

THE CASTLE OF CAMINO

The castle of Camino is considered to be on the most beautiful castles of the Monferrato area. Founded by the Aleramici, it vaunts beautiful defensive walls and towers, the tallest of which was 44 metres high.

At the time, it was the tallest of the whole Monferrato area. The castle was initially built for defensive purposes in the 11th century, and belonged to the marquis of the Monferrato.



In the 13th century, Teodoro Paleologo was short of money, and turned to two brothers of the Scarampi family, who took over the castle's property. In 1952, the Scarampi family donated the castle to the religious group of the Padri Somaschi. The last of the Scarampi descendants, Ferdinando, renovated the castle in the 19th century, following the French school of Viollet Le Duc.



Over the years, the castle has welcomed many famous people, such as Don Bosco, King Vittorio Emanuele III and Benito Mussolini in 1928.



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THE CASTLE OF CASALE MONFERRATO

During the 10th-13th centuries, the *castrum* wasn't an actual castle yet: it was merely the fortified housing area around the church of Sant'Evasio.

In the 14th century, Giovanni II il Paleologo, marquis of the Monferrato area, commenced the works for the construction of the castle. The castle was completed in 1357, not as a mean of protection for the inhabitants of the area, but as a mean of control for the marquis over his lands. This original edifice was of square plan, and protected by a surrounding moat.



During the 15th century, the town of Casale obtained the title of 'city' from the marquis and the castle became the headquarters of the court. In this period, the castle was renovated both by Guglielmo VIII (1464-1483) and Bonifacio V (1483-1494), and some of the ancient rooms went lost during the transformations.

The 16th century was a tumultuous one for the Monferrato area: the fertile lands passed to the Gonzaga family of Mantua, and, in the same period, the last marquis of the Paleologi family died (1533). In this period, and particularly between 1560 and 1570, given the many protests and wars, the castle was fortified and its walls were thickened in response to the new military developments.



In the 17th century, the castle resumed its role as headquarters for the court. The dukes of Mantua were frequently busy with negotiations with the House of Savoy, and often stayed at the castle. At the beginning of the 17th century, given the prolonged stays of the noble family, Vincenzo I embellished the castle with paintings and various works of art, most of which were shown in the "galleria nova", which had been especially designed as show room inside the fortress. Again in the 17th century, the castle received an aesthetic impulse with Carlo II Gonzaga-Nevers (1637-1665), who continued to embellish the castle during his stays, particularly with paintings.

During the 18th century, the Gonzaga dynasty declined, and so did the castle. The city of Monferrato passed to the House of Savoy, and the castle was used as a military barrack for various centuries. In this period, the castle's fortifications followed strict maintenance, but the insides of the castle, its precious furnishings, tapestries and paintings were, in most part, destroyed.

In the 19th century, after the War of Independence (1848-1849), the city of Casale was fortified. This order came from the Conte di Cavour, who believed in the possibility of a new upswing of the war against Austria. The walls were torn down and reconstructed, as part of the Cittadella, and the Castle was included within the new walls.

In the 20th century, the castle has been used as a military base. Over the years, the castle started to show its decline and was abandoned in the early 1980s. The city of Casale appropriated itself of the

castle in 1999, and a first renovation took place in 2001. Today, the castle is considered part of the protected historical sites of the region.

THE CASTLE OF GABIANO



In dominant position over the Po Valley, the "Castello di Gabiano" has a rich history dating back thousands of years. In fact, there are traces of the castle as early as the 8th century, where the Castle is mentioned in texts as “cortem magnam nominam Gabianam”. The castle’s site was historically considered extremely important for its strategic and economic setting. For this reason, the Castle was the object of long contentions by the Montiglio and Gonzaga families and the duke Ferdinando of Mantova. Duke Ferdinando eventually ceded the property in 1622 and the castle passed to the Genovese Agostino Durazzo Pallavicini.

The labyrinth

The labyrinth of the Castle of Gabiano is one of the rare examples documented within the framework of historical gardens in Piedmont. This is of exceptional importance not only for its rarity but also for the historic period in which it was realized. The Gabiano labyrinth evokes the return to the past and finds its place within the framework of the restoration project assigned by the marquise Matilde Giustiniani to the Parma architect Lamberto Cusani to whom we owe the actual neo-medieval aspect of the castle and surroundings. Designed by the architect Lamberto Cusani in the 1930s during a renovation of the castle, the labyrinth is representative of many elements: mythological travels, religious symbols, philosophy and mathematical perfection.

The labyrinth can be found at the heart of the park’s grounds and its position emphasizes the medieval conception of opposites in nature. The location of the labyrinth is a metaphor of the contrast between the rigid and geometrical lines of the structure and the natural park that surrounds it, calling to mind the medieval concept of “forest” as natural labyrinth (park) and labyrinth as artificial forest where nature is rigorously manipulated and controlled by man. Today, the labyrinth’s maintenance is of dire importance, as it is composed of age-old *buxus sempervirens*.