



The Castle of Canossa

Geomorphology

The Castle of Canossa rises isolated in the Reggio Lower Appennines, on an arenaceous rock, at the centre of a wide sweep of hills, surrounded by a suggestive ravines amphitheatre.

Historical outlines

In the mid of the 10th century, as Donizone reported in his notes, the castle of Canossa was built by Adalberto Azzo. In January 1077, Pope Gregory VII, who was coming from Rome and heading to Augusta, found hospitality by the fortress; on the 25th of January Emperor Henry IV arrived too and, after three days of penance, obtained the Pope's forgiveness and the revocation of the excommunication. This is the event that has made Canossa known worldwide. The fortress was attacked and destroyed several times during the past centuries: in 1255 by the Army of Reggio Emilia, then in 1412 by the Este army captains and again in 1557 when Octavius Farnese carried the fortress with his artilleries, because of his antagonism to the ducal family of Este. After many vicissitudes and several transfers of property, the fortress was bought by the Italian State and given the status of a national monument in 1878.

Matilda and the Canossa family

The family of Canossa comes from ancestor Sigefredo, who spread his power from Tuscia to the Po Valley around the 10th century. His son Adalberto Azzo, created a strategic landowning system, through prudent annexations and cessions of several estates. His son, Tedaldo, extended his possessions to Ferrara and Brescia.

His successor, Boniface obtained the title of Marquis and Duke of Tuscia and married in second marriage Princess Beatrice of Lorraine. From this marriage Matilda of Canossa was born in 1046. Matilda inherited the ducal title quite young, at first she ruled her vast domain with her mother's help then, when her mother died, on her own. In 1069 she married Geoffrey the Hunchback in first marriage and in 1088, Duke Guelph of Bavaria in second marriage, but both the marriages turned out to be unhappy. During the Investiture Controversy between the Papacy and the Holy Roman Empire, the Countess, who was a strong Pope's supporter, became a pivotal political element. She died in 1115.

Donizone

Most of the information we have about the Countess and her family have been written by a benedictine monk, Donizone. A contemporary of Matilda, Donizone lived in the monastery of St. Apollonio, where he also became abbot; he wrote a poem about Canossa, known today as Vita Mathildis.

Archaeological excavations

Canossa was first excavated in 1877, under the direction of archaeologist and palethnologist Prof. Gaetano Chierici; we owe him the overall knowledge we have of the fortress and of the several phases of its development. His work was taken up by Prof. Naborre Campanini, who created the first museum on the stronghold ruins.

The fortress architecture

During Matilda's time, three elements formed the fortress: the keep, the palace of the Count and the religious complex of St. Apollonio. The keep was located on the highest point of the rock, on the north side of the fortress. The palace was situated on the west side of the courtyard, on its ruins the current museum was built. The ruins of a tower on the south side were probably the main entrance to the fortress.

referred to by Donizone as the vestibulum canusinum. The religious complex of St. Apollonio was situated on the south side of the rock and comprised several buildings: the church, the monks' cells, the communal spaces, probably a cloister and a scriptorium. In the crypt of St. Apollonio's church there were the ancestors' tombs. The ancestors' bodies were placed into ancient roman sarcophagi. The church also hosted the magnificent christening font sculpted in sandstone on display at the museum of the fortress. Only the crypt and some portions of the walls still remain, they formed a part of a new palace built during the Este rule. Evidence of the windows and of the chimneys of this last palace can still be seen on the surviving walls.

