

CULTURAL HERITAGE  
AND IDENTITY  
ACROSS EAST AND WEST

Italy, China, Japan, South Africa  
between Law and History

*Edited by*

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## NAPLES AS A CASE STUDY

*Luigi Gallo*

The case of Naples represents an example that highlights in a particularly eloquent way the importance of cultural heritage for the identity of a people. It is in fact a city that has a very long history (over 2,700 years), characterised by continuous contacts and mingling, and which still retains substantial traces that testify its past. I will limit myself pointing out briefly some particularly significant phases and the most important monumental traces left behind.

The history of Naples begins in the 7th century BC with the birth of Parthenope on the hill of Pizzofalcone: this settlement, which takes its name from one of the mythical sirens, is not however an autonomous city, but simply a maritime station under the control of Kyme, which in this period was the power that dominated the gulf. A real city was born only later, around 470 BC (or, according to a less probable thesis, around 500 BC), when the Cymeans and other groups of Greeks founded Neapolis in the area of the present historical centre. The new city soon experienced rapid development, replacing Kyme in the control of the gulf, and is also notable for its multi-ethnic vocation: when, in the second half of the 5th century BC, Kyme was conquered by the indigenous people of the Campanians, Neapolis managed to preserve its autonomy by establishing peaceful relations with the Campanians and welcoming a group of them into the citizenship. Not many but significant are the traces of the Greek city of Neapolis in the contemporary historical centre (which today is a UNESCO World Heritage Site). It is sufficient to remember that the remains of walls that have been brought to light in various places (e.g., Piazza Cavour and Piazza Bellini) and that bear witness to the imposing wall circuit that surrounded the city in the 5th and 4th centuries BC, delimiting an area of about 70-80 hectares (which suggests a population of less than 10,000, not a big city in reality).

The urban layout itself, with its regular pattern of streets intersect-

is enough to mention the Maschio Angioino or Castel Nuovo, which replaces Castelcapuano as a royal palace, or Castel Sant'Elmo, on Vomero hill, or the various churches built in the historical center (and which have undergone further interventions in subsequent periods), such as S. Lorenzo Maggiore, S. Domenico Maggiore, the monastery of S. Chiara, and the Cathedral itself, S. Gennaro, which has absorbed older structures. It must also be added that in this phase the population of the city increases, reaching about 50,000 units, and therefore its multi-ethnic character increases, as a consequence of the immigration of merchants and craftsmen from other parts of Italy and that of French and Provençal people (whose presence has left traces also in the linguistic field). But for the Angevin dominion the moment of the end comes as well. After a series of complex dynastic and military events, in 1462, Naples passed under the dominion of the Spanish dynasty of the Aragonese, and for some time it was the capital of an autonomous kingdom, to be then annexed, in 1503, to the kingdom of Aragon and Castile. Of this long phase (the Viceroyalty Period) there are also numerous monumental traces: it is sufficient to remember the construction, in present-day Piazza Plebiscito, of the new Royal Palace, which will also be the seat of the successive Bourbon dynasty, or that of various baroque churches (such as, for example, Gesù Nuovo or S. Giacomo degli Spagnoli), because this well-known artistic phenomenon has one of its main centres precisely in Naples. This was also the period when Naples became a large city for the first time (one of the biggest in Europe), reaching a population of about 300,000, and when, as a result, its multi-ethnic character was further accentuated thanks to the immigration of a substantial Spanish component. Linguistic influences and traces in toponymy are an eloquent testimony to this.

And eventually we come to the age of the Bourbon dynasty, which began, after a brief phase of Austrian viceroyalty, with the conquest by Charles III of Bourbon in 1734 and ended with its annexation to the Kingdom of Italy in 1861. The most significant monumental testimonies, in this case, all date back to the first sovereign, Charles III: in fact, he is responsible for the construction of the Teatro S. Carlo and the Reggia di Capodimonte, built specifically to house a collection of works of art, as well as that of the Real Albergo dei Poveri, a work of gigantic dimensions (over 100,000 square metres) which in the original project should have been even bigger. During the Bourbon periods Naples was a large European capital with just under 500,000

ing at right angles, can be reconstructed easily enough because it has remained almost unchanged in the contemporary historical centre.

Involved in the Second Samnite War, in 326 BC Naples was conquered by the Romans with the consent of the aristocracy, which included both Greeks and rich Campanians. So, the city was absorbed into the hegemonic orbit of Rome, although it initially retained a certain autonomy and maintained its Greek identity and traditional civic institutions for a long time. Reduced to a Roman *municipium* at the beginning of the 1st century BC and economically penalised by the development of the nearby port of Puteoli, Naples is still an important centre from a cultural point of view because of the prestige that derives from its Greek tradition. An eloquent demonstration of this is the institution, in honour of Augustus, of the solemn games called *Sebasta isolympia*, regarding which evidence recently found during the construction of the underground (the remains of a temple and the epigraphic texts) provides a valuable testimony. Also worthy of mention, for the Roman age, are the remains of luxurious villas built from the 1st century BC onwards in the area of Posillipo (today the location of a charming archaeological park), and which testify that the city, not by chance defined *otiosa* (in a positive sense) in some Latin sources, was also a resort for the wealthy Romans.

As regards the population, the epigraphic evidence allows us to ascertain that even in Roman times Naples was a multicultural city, where Greek, Roman and Italic elements, as well as other groups, such as Jews, lived side by side.

With the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476 (the last emperor, Romulus Augustus, was exiled into the so-called castrum Lucullanum, today Castel dell'Ovo, originally a Roman villa), foreign dominations began for Naples, which had the effect of further increasing the multicultural character of the city. After the Byzantine conquest in the 6th century AD and the period of the autonomous ducat (8th-12th century), when Naples saw important artistic achievements (almost always incorporated in later structures, such as, for example, various mosaics brought to light only recently), in 1139 the city was conquered by the Normans and absorbed into the kingdom of Sicily, with Palermo as capital. The short period of Norman domination, which included, among other things, the construction of the first royal palace, Castelcapuano (now the seat of the court) and the subsequent period of Swabian domination (1194-1266), which is noted above all



for the foundation of the first European public university by Frederick II, were followed by the longer phase in which Naples was under the rule of the French dynasty of the Angevins. There is obviously much to be said about the architectural achievements of this period, to which some of the most important monuments of Naples date back: it is inhabited, home to important cultural and ecclesiastical institutions, and attracted a considerable immigration also thanks to the job opportunities related to its port economy.

So, it is difficult to move around Naples without encountering traces of its past. Its monumental heritage is an eloquent testimony to the long and complex history of a city whose cultural identity, because of the events it has been through, can only be that of an open and multicultural city.