

Museo Civico del Torrione “Giovanni Maltese”

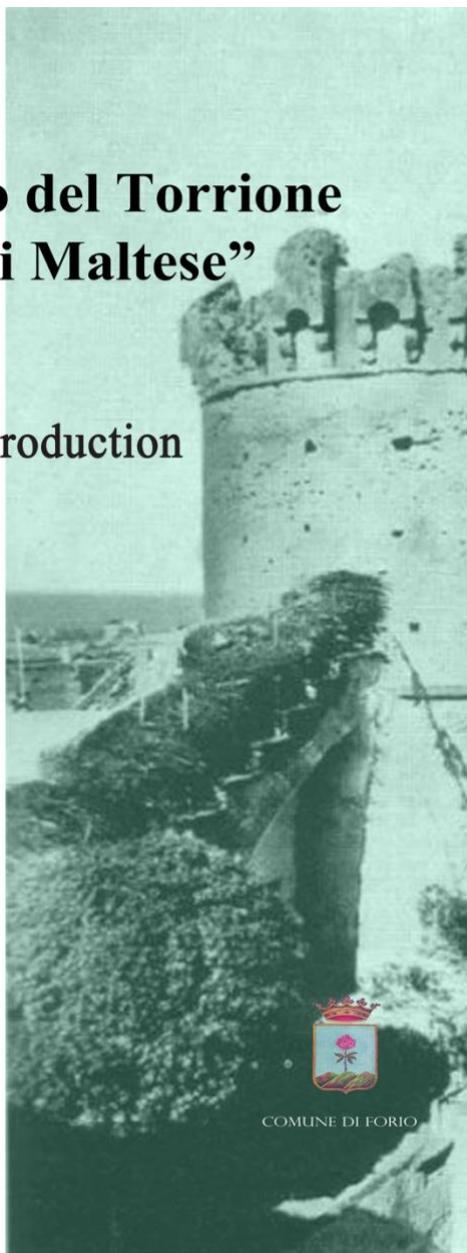
a brief introduction



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COMUNE DI FORIO



*Dedicated to
Captain Giuseppe Magaldi,
whose memory will be cherished
in our hearts forever*

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Printed by Serpico Advertising s.r.l.s., December 2020.

BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The island of Ischia, originated through intense volcanic activity over 150 thousand years ago, shaped by the action of eruptions (the last in 1301), telluric movements, wind and water, shows the first hint of human settlements in the Later Stone Age⁽¹⁾.

Its favorable position in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, just a few miles far from the mainland, determined its crucial importance in the maritime routes of ancient times.

Chosen by the Greek colonists in the VIII century BC for their first settlement in the western Mediterranean Sea, they founded Pithecoussai in the area of Lacco Ameno (one of the six municipalities of the island). Later, the Romans used the place mainly as a port dock, a harbour where ships were loaded, unloaded, repaired. Remains of the Roman period, discovered underwater after around two thousand years, give evidence to the sudden abandonment in the II century AD, most probably due to eruptions and catastrophic seismic events.

For this reason, local people frequently left the main island and took refuge on the islet where the Castle was built. The minor island, just a couple of hundred meters distant, has been through the ages the safest place in case of natural disasters, but also in occasion of wars and attacks by enemies. Its strategic position caused the islet to be involved in long-lasting battles between different dynasties intentioned to conquer Naples.

After the experience of plundering by Visigoths, Vandals, Ostrogoths, occupied by Arabs, then ruled by Normans and Suebi, at the beginning of the 15th century the *insula minor* was part of the Kingdom of Naples, dominated at that time by the

French dynasty of the Angevins. Joanna II of Anjou Durazzo, who got the title of queen after the death of her brother (the former King Ladislao I) was better known for her turbulent love affairs rather than her political achievements. Besieged by the rival Louis III of Anjou, she asked for the support of the King of Spain Alphonse of Aragon, promising him the throne, but soon changing her mind.

Determined to get the possession of the kingdom, Alphonse took the first step in the plan of conquest by occupying the minor island, turned it into a military base, established a strict bond with the inhabitants, letting Spanish soldiers marry women of the most influential local families. Thanks to their support, he finally got his aim: in 1441 he was celebrated as King of Naples. Alphonse rewarded the favors obtained by the Ischians, not only assuring privileges of purely fiscal nature (exemption from taxes, legal autonomy, free use of beaches and coastal area); he transformed the little island of the Castle into an impregnable fortified city, where everyone, noble people as well as simple peasants and fishermen, could find shelter in case of natural disasters or attack by enemies. The Aragon Castle became the most important town, hosting a large part of the population (in the XVI century 1892 families were registered at the Castle).

The western part of the major island with its long sand beaches, comfortable bays, plain fields without any natural defense, was sparsely inhabited by farmers and fishermen. The defenseless little villages and farmhouses had been subject to pirates' raids since the Dark Ages⁽²⁾. In the XVI century, the island was subject to even more fierce attacks by ferocious corsairs coming from North Africa and the Middle East.

In 1528 Francis I King of France (1515-1547), in search of support in the everlasting fight for the control of the Italian territory against the Spaniards of Emperor Charles V, allied with the Turkish sultan Solim I. Two years later (1535), the Ottoman Turks lost the control upon Tunis, defeated by the new imperial fleet, led by the Genoese admiral Andrea Doria and Alfonso D'Avalos marquis of Vasto (member of the family who had been granted the island of Ischia in fief, in return for military service and loyalty to the King Alphonse of Aragon). Tunis was the headquarter of Khair ad-Dīn Barbarossa, Sultan of Algiers and newly appointed *kapudan pasha* (supreme captain) of the Ottoman Empire. His desire of revenge fell upon our little island in the night of June 22nd 1544. His vessels reached the beaches of Citara, Sant'Angelo and Maronti, thus assaulting the villages of Forio, Panza, Serrara, Fontana, Buonopane, Testaccio, Barano. Took by surprise in the silence of the night, old people were killed, women brutally raped, children and young men kidnapped and sold as slaves, entire villages depredated and burnt down. Nine months later, some local women happened to give birth to dark-skinned babies (since that age, the inhabitants of Forio are said to have mixed Turkish blood in their veins). Such things had already happened before, not at that large scale, but people were aware of the threat of pirates, especially those living in Forio, who had worked out their own way of protecting their families, transferring the village from the open bay of Citara to an inner place, building their dwellings with such an intricate scheme of narrow lanes and tortuous alleys, most of which dead ends, a sort of labyrinth, where only the local could easily move and find the way out.

In 1480 the University ⁽³⁾ of Forio invested 700 ducats for the construction of the first huge tower, which would control the coastal area and defend the village. In the first half of the XVI century, the King of Spain and his viceroy don Pietro de Toledo ordered the communities of the southern Italian coastal area to build towers. A special committee of engineers was gathered with the task of organizing and supervising the construction of towers. A large number of towers were erected from then on. In the XVIII century the village of Forio counted 16 towers in the main village plus 5 in the district of Panza, bestowing the title of “towered town” ⁽⁴⁾.

THE WAY TO THE TOWER

The tower stands on a high position overlooking the sea, close to the little harbour, clearly visible by the sea, but still not easy to find the access way to, mingled with the intricate net of narrow lanes.

If you come from the port terminal, take the second side-street on the right; a few steps and you will pass alongside Palazzo Covatta (18th century building where Mussolini’s wife was exiled at the end of World War II); keep on walking and you will reach the tower. If you’re walking on the main street of the shopping area, Via F. Regine, take the Fountain ⁽⁵⁾ as a reference point; stand with your back at the fountain and you’ll see in front of you Via del Torrione.

Attached to the wall by the side of the steps leading to the entrance, a curious mosaic of ceramic tiles will catch your attention. Weird phrases (written in local dialect) are painted on

the tiles, with the interpretation in current Italian language. Each of them is a “nickname”, referring to a peculiar quality, a defect or the activity run by the forefather of a family, which has been inherited by the descendants and has become the distinctive way of recognition of that branch of family. This custom is still in use and works well in distinguishing persons with the same surname, but actually belonging to different families, eg “Nes’ pelus” (meaning “hairy nose”), “U Pustin” (the postman).

THE TORRIONE

Built in 1480 by the University⁽³⁾ of Forio, it is the oldest and most imposing among the different towers of the town. The tower is located on a huge mass of tuff stone. Green tuff cut from the same boulder mixed with trachytic stones are the materials used for the construction. The structure, based on a circular plan, with an internal diameter measuring around 8 meters, a total height of 16 meters, three-metre thick walls, is composed of three levels:

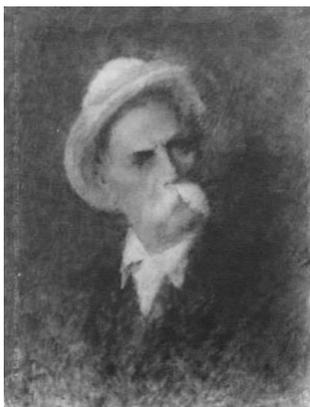
- one basement, chiseled in the rock, formerly used as a cistern for the collection of rainwater;
- a ground floor (with domed vault), originally conceived as a storage room⁽⁶⁾ for food and artillery, now used as exhibition hall for artistic and cultural events;
- an upper floor (with domed vault), where the garrison of soldiers stayed and organized the defense at the time of pirates’ raids, now hosts the permanent exhibition of works created by the artist Giovanni Maltese.

The three levels were connected internally by wooden stairs. Originally, the ground floor was inaccessible from outside. Terrace and balcony with romantic panoramic sea view have been added later in the XIX century. The only access to the tower was the little door at the upper floor, which could be entered only if the drawbridge connected it with the formerly truncated staircase. An internal wooden stair lead to roof, surmounted by sturdy large battlements; one of these battlemented parts still shows a look-out turret.

The tower was equipped with four bronze cannons. Once the risk of pirates' raid had ceased, they were still used for blank-firing during the festivals. This custom was interrupted when a gunner died in an accident (29th July 1787). The cannons were removed.

The tower has been used with different functions: as a watch-and defense-tower, refuge at the time of piracy; as a jail for political prisoners during the Restoration⁽⁷⁾; as artist's home and studio. Today, the tower is a Civic Museum dedicated to the local artist Giovanni Maltese, who lived there for thirty years.

THE ARTIST GIOVANNI MALTESE (1852- 1913)



1 Selfportrait, charcoal drawing

Son of a local land-owner, Giovanni (fig. 1) was born in Forio on January 7th 1852. He lost his mother at the age of seven; his father married a second wife and passed the child to the care of a couple of aged relatives. The young boy seemed destined to a simple rural life, but his innate artistic talent soon came out, striking the attention of the mayor of the time Orazio Patalano, impressed by his extraordinarily realistic sculptures, carved in wood by using rough tools. The mayor obtained for Giovanni a scholarship to attend the Fine Arts Academy in Naples (a grant of 30 Lire per month).

After the graduation, selected by the sculptor Giulio Monteverde⁽⁸⁾, he moved to Rome for a period of apprenticeship in his atelier. Noting the remarkable skills of Giovanni in using charcoal to draw copies of the *Bust of the Belvedere*, details of the *Laocoon*, *Julius Caesar* and other works exhibited at the Capitoline museums, Monteverde decided to entrust him with a work commission to be carried out in the Castle of Chenonceau. The

young boy didn't finish the job; he had an argument with the site manager and left the Castle. He spent some time in Paris, making his living as a street artist, mainly as a portraitist. He probably spent time at the Café Garbois, the cultural center of the newly born Impressionist movement. After a brief stay in Wien, he went back to Naples.

The earthquake on 28th July 1883 was a terrible shock. Giovanni was on vacation, spending some time with his brother and his little nephew. The earth trembled with violence, destroying the entire town of Casamicciola Terme, smashing buildings and lives all around the island. His family-house collapsed. He spent five days digging into the rubble, managed to save his sister-in-law; the rest of his relatives, the house where he was born, were lost forever. In that moment he decided to remain in Forio. Having no place to stay, he asked the mayor to rent that old tower, which hadn't been used for ages. He was granted the tower in emphyteusis. Giovanni Maltese spent the rest of his life in the Torrione. Living room and bedroom were located at the ground floor; at the upper floor the artist arranged his studio, where he spent nights and days drawing, modelling clay or plaster, casting the models in bronze, and writing. In the last decades of his life he started composing satiric verses, using the dialect, making fun of those corrupted local authorities, bearing a strong resentment against those people who had not supported his project of foundation of a local arts institute. He had two collection of poems published anonymously, "Cerrenne"⁽⁹⁾ and "N'grocchie"⁽¹⁰⁾, widely known among the townsfolk, who loved to recite by heart such verses as they saw the referred persons passing by.

In 1901 his solitude was finally interrupted by a refined English lady, Fanny Jane Fayrer (fig. 2). She was a painter, a watercolourist. It was love at first sight. One year later they got married. They lived together in the tower thirteen years of passionate love.



2 F.J.Fayrer, charcoal drawing

On 21st August 1913 Giovanni Maltese died.

His wife donated the tower and the entire collection of the artist's works to the Municipality of Forio, with one proviso: a museum dedicated to Giovanni Maltese, to be opened in the place where he had produced his creations.

THE MUSEUM

The exhibition hall at the upper floor offers a rich display of the variety of works created by Giovanni Maltese: charcoal drawings representing prominent citizens, anatomical studies; two self-portraits of the artist, a portrait of his beloved Fanny; works made from molded clay, plaster bas-reliefs, plaster- and bronze- sculptures and busts reproducing prominent figures in the history of the local community as well as modest peasants, fishermen, young boys and girls in realistic spontaneous attitude, revealing the ability of Maltese as a pure representative of the artistic movement known as Verismo.

Among the exhibits, the sculpture group “I Pidocchiosi” (two brothers, one combing lice out of his brother's hair; fig. 3) shows a peculiar scene of life. “Il Naufrago” (the shipwrecked man, fig.4) clung to the rock, conveys the desperation of a person who has lost everything and is still risking his life in the middle of

the storm (a clear autobiographical reference). “La Solfatrice” (fig. 5) is a tribute to the indefatigable strength of women, who bring life, take care of their family, do household chores and still work in the fields, sprinkling the vine with the sulfur. A bronze copy (cast in 2017) stands in the little square of Saint Gaetano, stressing the vocation of the territory for vine cultivation and winemaking. In the middle of the room the dramatic scene of a shipwreck, “Il naufragio di Agrippina” (fig. 6), bring us back to the age of Roman Empire. The Emperor Nero had invited his mother Agrippina to a festival in Baia (near Pozzuoli); the boat supposed to take her back home had been designed to sink. The plaster sculpture represents the woman in the tragic moment of the shipwreck; her posture has lost elegance, her face upset and disfigured.

More information will be given on the spot by the volunteers, members of “Radici” Cultural Association.



3 *“I Pidocchiosi”, plasterwork*

THE “RADICI” ASSOCIATION



The name chosen by the association “Radici” means “roots”, evoking the sense of feeling deeply rooted in one’s territory, in the history of the territory, affectionately attached to one’s own origin. The idea of the association has been conceived by the dear departed President Captain GIUSEPPE MAGALDI (1974 – 2020; picture above), who passionately gathered a group of friends, put all his energy in the effort of bringing to new life the long time-closed Museum. In 2013 he founded the association and re-opened the tower, letting people access this treasure of art and history at any time, all year long. The volcanic creativity of Giuseppe has realized a wide range of cultural events, visible on the official web site www.iltorrioneforio.it, as indelible memory of the intense activity of our polyhedric unforgettable dear friend Giuseppe, whom the entire community of Forio is grateful to. Giuseppe Magaldi held the position of Director of the Museum from 2013 to 2020. The friends of Radici Association will carry on the task of guardians of the memory of the past and promoters of culture and art.



4 *"Il Naufrago"*, plasterwork



5 *"La Solfatrice"*, plasterwork



6 *"Il naufragio di Agrippina"*, plasterwork

Notes:

- (1) Tools in flint and obsidian dating back to the Later Neolithic have been found in Citara bay and Zaro, evidence of human activities in those areas of Forio. Most probably people lived at that time in caves around the promontory of Cape Imperatore.
- (2) After the disastrous attack by the Mauri in 812, Pope Leone III wrote a letter to the Emperor Charlemagne, asking him to take care of the population of the island “*quae dicitur Iscla majore*”. This is the first document, where the island is referred to as “Ischia”.
- (3) The term was used in the Middle Ages with its original significance, meaning “corporation or association of people”, indicating in this case the political administration of the town.
- (4) Pietro Monti, *Ischia archeologia e storia*, Lino Tipografia, Napoli, 1980, p 624-625.
- (5) The fountain was inaugurated in 1958 to celebrate the new water main that finally linked Ischia to the water system supply of the mainland, through underwater pipes. Before this, the island had suffered lack of fresh water, despite the many natural hot springs, most of which are salty.
- (6) The entrance to the water tank and the carved canal, through which the water flew into the cistern, are still visible on one side of the room.
- (7) 300 volunteers from the island of Ischia perished in the riots of 1848; they were led by Commander Giuseppe Pezzillo and deputy Aniello Di Maio, mentioned on a plaque in the main street of Forio. After the revolutionary riots, a large number of “political prisoners” were captured and kept in confinement because of their political beliefs.
- (8) Giulio Monteverde (1837-1917) was born in Bistagno (Alessandria), where the largest Italian plaster cast gallery resides. Author of countless works, including the marble group of “Doctor Edward Jenner who inoculates the smallpox vaccine to his son”, a tribute to the medical research conducted on one’s own risk by that time, in fact the sculpture shows the English doctor in the act of experimenting, injecting the serum in the arm of his own little son.
- (9) “Cerrenne” means “making a selection”.
- (10) “N’grocchie” indicates a little group of people talking gossip.

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