

THE CIVIC TOWER OF ARQUATA DEL TRONTO: A SYMBOL OF REBIRTH FROM EARTHQUAKE RUINS

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Abstract:

This paper deals with the issue of the vulnerability (aesthetic, functional and structural) of emerging elements such as the civic towers that represent tangible signs of urban identity, and the landscape of the historic centres of the Marche landscape. The events of the Monument to the Fallen of the First World War in Arquata del Tronto, a small Apennine town in the province of Ascoli Piceno, are illustrated. This offers the opportunity to illustrate the difficulties of those areas that were so badly hit by the earthquakes of 2016-2017. The community has always maintained a strong link with its assets of identity; both the intangible and the material heritage express a concrete manifestation of the spirit of the community, whose preservation can only represent an instrument for a sustainable rebirth. The reconstruction of the monument, strongly desired by the citizens, can be a symbol of rebirth for the whole community, for its identity values, becoming a “beacon of memory” not only in memory of the war dead, but also of those who sadly lost their lives to the earthquake. The most complex issue is that of identifying the tools for an intelligent, sensitive and historically-aware reconstruction of the need for an act of reinterpretation, through new linguistic codes. More than an abstract conservation or a pseudo-mimetic reproduction of the things which existed prior to the earthquake, we must pursue an overall protection of the “civilisation of a place” and an enhancement linked to a more articulated narrative, in which ancient and new instances can converge towards a renewed local identity.

Keywords: vulnerability; earthquake; identity; recollection.

The events of the monument to the Fallen of the First World War in Arquata del Tronto, a small Apennine town in the province of Ascoli Piceno, on the border between Lazio, Umbria and Abruzzo, provide an opportunity to illustrate the difficulties experienced by the territories which were so severely affected by the earthquakes of 2016 -2017.

The Apennine landscape is dotted with smaller villages joined by a weak infrastructural network and an axis that has played a decisive role in history: the Salaria consular road¹. The community has always maintained a strong link with its assets of identity that represent its intangible and tangible heritage. The intangible heritage, a reflection of the community's vitality, is made up of all the knowledge, artistic expressions, social practices, religious rituals and traditional techniques of craftsmanship. Traditions have continued to mark the lives of populations, as an expression of the adaptation and use of the environment in which they have always lived and in which they would like to continue living. Both the intangible and the tangible heritage express a concrete manifestation of the spirit of the community, whose preservation can only represent an instrument for a sustainable rebirth. For this reason, it is necessary to understand how this community has been able to respond to the disastrous event, modifying both its habits and its ways of perceiving, to strengthen its capacity for resilience. Within this scenario, a capacity for reaction in response to changing circumstances has manifested itself, prioritising a wide-ranging consultation, to create a sense of sharing in the decision-making process aimed at building a strategy for the rebirth of the territory of the Municipality of Arquata del Tronto².

There is no definite information on the origin of Arquata; some scholars identify it with the ancient *Surpicanum*, located between the two *Statio* of the *Pentingerian* Table. It is commonly agreed that Arquata has, from its origins, represented one of the most important stations of the Via Salaria between Ascoli and Rome. Its first mentions date back to the 11th century. In 1255 it was spontaneously subjected to Ascoli, from which it received a large amount of autonomy in return. During the fourteenth century it

¹ P. L. Dall'Aglio, E. Giorgi, *La mutatio di 'Surpicano' e i diverticoli della Salaria nell'alta valle del Tronto*, in G. Paci, E. Catani, (eds), *La Salaria in età antica*, Proceedings of International Conference, Ascoli Piceno-Rieti, 2 to 4 October 1997, L'Erma di Bretschneider, 2000, 171-183.

² Arquata is the capital of a vast territory that includes several villages, almost all of which were severely damaged by the earthquake (among the main ones: Capodacqua, Tufo, Pretare, Pescara del Tronto, Spelonga, Trisungo). A unique feature of the Arquatano territory is the fact that it is the only municipality in Europe which lies between two national parks, the Gran Sasso and Monti della Laga National Park and the Sibillini Mountains National Park. N. Galiè, G. Vecchioni, *Arquata del Tronto: il Comune dei due Parchi Nazionali*, Società Editrice Ricerche, 2006.

had enjoyed relative independence from Ascoli until 1429 when Pope Martino V ceded it to Norcia, under whose dominion it remained until the eighteenth century. With the French invasion of 1809, the Prefecture of Norcia was abolished and Arquata was subjugated to Spoleto; a permanent garrison will be assigned to it and the third fortress of the Department of the Trasimeno will be declared. After the fall of Napoleon, the Papal Government of the Restoration gave Arquata to Umbria and incorporated it into the delegation of Ascoli Piceno, where it became part of the Pretoriale Jurisdiction in 1832³.

The territory of the Municipality of Arquata includes twelve hamlets, all at high altitude dispersed over a large wooded area; they crown the high eastern slopes of Monte Vettore and of the Sibillini chain. At the centre of the vast territory lies the capital, characterised by interesting testaments to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that were organised to form an urban structure around the piazza Umberto I. The piazza, an example of a strongly-polarised space, was the vital heart of the village, not only for its architectures, some of which were important, but also for the large number of activities that made it a socially-relevant place⁴.

This space, with its elongated shape defined by irregular wings of buildings belonging to different periods, was dominated by the ancient civic tower. Archival research shows that the town of Arquata was surrounded by a solid wall system, with the exception of the south side which was protected by the natural shape of the land. In it, there were some access gates and at least five or six defence towers, located at strategic points along the ancient transit roads, and which were able to counteract enemy invasions; the civic tower, also called *Bell tower* or *Public bell tower*, was the most important, connected to the stronghold located at the highest point of the village, from which control could be easily exercised and which looked over the surrounding region⁵. Originally the bell tower had to have a crenellated end, but later it assumed the shape of the typical bell tower, with a round arch for housing the bell dating back to the mid-sixteenth century; at the beginning of the twentieth century the other three sides were added, forming a proper belfry to better protect the ancient bell, to which in 1661 a second one was added⁶.

The tower, with a square floor of 4 m on each side and around 19 m high, was made of local sandstone; the high wall structure was crossed in the base part by a round arch in worked stone blocks that led to a steep ramp which descended towards the river Tronto and was reunited with the Salaria road. The tower had been damaged during various earthquakes, including the one in 1672; in 1703 the strong shocks that had hit the centre of Italy, with epicentres and intensities which were similar to the recent earthquakes, had again ruined the bell tower. The chronicles report information on the situation recorded in Arquata, where the churches were “weakened”, the bell tower and the Rocca “indemnifiable”, while many houses had collapsed and those which remained were considered unusable⁷. The tower was promptly restored, and about two centuries later the decision was taken to build a memorial plaque dedicated to the Fallen of the First World War on its north wall. The Arquatano territory had left a large number of soldiers on the battlefield during the Great War, being a border area where very intense fighting had taken place. For this reason, in the various hamlets of the City numerous memorial plaques and monuments had been made in memory of those sad events⁸.

³ On Arquata del Tronto history, A. Bucciarelli, *Dossier Arquatano*, Grafiche D’Auria, 1982; B. Carfagna, *Rocche e Castelli dell’Ascolano*, Edizioni La Sfinge Malaspina, 1996, 59-63; G. Pinto, *Origine e sviluppo delle autonomie comunali marchigiane: Ascoli e il suo territorio (secoli XII-XIV)*, in Villani V. (ed), *Istituzioni e statuti comunali nella Marca d’Ancona. Dalle origini alla maturità (secoli XI-XIV)*, Deputazione di Storia Patria per le Marche, II, 2, *Le realtà territoriali*, 2007, 309-311.

⁴ The characteristics of Umberto I Square are described in A. Ferrero, E. Mandolesi, *Piazze del Piceno*, Gangemi, 2001, 54.

⁵ B. Carfagna, *Rocche e Castelli dell’Ascolano*, Edizioni La Sfinge Malaspina, 1996, 59-63.

⁶ G. Lalli, *La Torre Civica di Arquata del Tronto*, Associazione Arquata Potest, 2017, pp.23-25. With the synchronised sound, the two bells had marked the most significant moments for the Arquatana community.

⁷ P. De Carolis, *Relazione Generale delle ruine, e mortalità Cagionate dalle scosse del Terremoto de’ 14 gennaio e 2 Febbraio 1703 in Norcia, e Cascia, e loro Contadi, compresi li Castelli delle Rocchette, e Ponte, Giurisdizione di Spoleto*, Luca Antonio Chracas, 1703, 24. In the summary tables of the damage caused by the earthquake in the various locations, we find the damage which occurred to the area of Arquata, still under the Prefecture of Norcia.

⁸ Through the project named *Census and cataloguing of monuments to the fallen of the Great War* edited by the Central Institute for Cataloguing and Documentation (ICCD) with the support of the regional Super-Intendencies, the census and cataloguing of monuments and memorials of civic commissions dedicated to the Fallen of the First World War and created between 1917

Fig. 1 - Cataloging of the memorial monuments in Arquata del Tronto, still present after the earthquake 2016-2017.



For the construction of the most important memorial monument, the capital was chosen as an administrative and religious reference point for the community. In 1925, an invitation to tender competition was published, in which it was planned to build the monument under the medieval fortress at the highest point of the town. Some prominent personalities were invited to take part in the competition, including, the sculptor Arcadio Ferranti, professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome, the architects Cesare Bazzani and Vincenzo Pilotti, both involved in the design of some public buildings in the nearby main town of Piceno.

On 1 May 1925, the organising committee sent a letter containing the invitation to participate in the competition for the creation of a «targa con sottostante ara votiva, [...] sulla scogliera che sostiene la torre bassa della Rocca Medievale»⁹. On 31 July 1925, Vincenzo Pilotti sent his project, declaring that he wanted to confer a high monumental value on his work¹⁰. On 3 October 1925, after examining all the sketches, the Pilotti project was declared the winner, thanks to his experience in the design of this type of work¹¹. Although it was already in an advanced state of implementation, doubts remained about the location of the monument, as the site was considered unsuitable. As can be seen from the correspondence of 1926, the location of the monument was definitively modified, moving it to the central Piazza Umberto I, on that civic tower that already represented the symbolic building of the old village. The physical place in which to commemorate the deaths of the Great War was thus to coincide with the main urban space, in which the symbolic representation of death was added to the testimonial value of the public tower, a reminder of the independence of the Free Municipality. In the new project of Pilotti the vertical exploitation of the existing tower was foreseen, to affix a commemorative plaque

and 1940 was launched; <http://iccd.beniculturali.it/index.php?it/428/progetto-grande-guerra-censimento-dei-monumenti-ai-caduti-della-prima-guerra-mondiale> (6/07/2018).

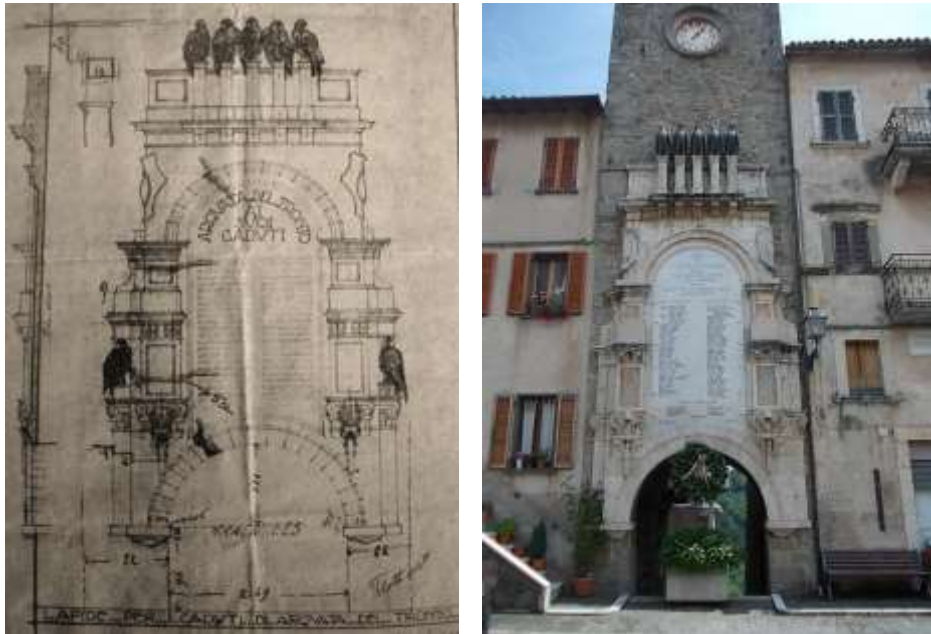
⁹ State Archives of Ascoli Piceno (ASAP), Fondo Pilotti Vincenzo, *Public Commission*, 1925-1928, busta 2, fascicolo 27. In the letter dated 1 May 1925, it is specified that the designers were given free reign in carrying out the theme, but that the monument should not have a “funerary character” and above all it was important that «the design fits in with the austerity of the location chosen as a site». Each designer was required to present drawings and a 1:20 scale chalk sketch, to submit them to a special commission, before 31 July.

¹⁰ ASAP, Fondo Pilotti Vincenzo, *Public Commission*, 1925-1928, b. 2, fasc. 27. In the letter dated 31 July 1925, Sacconi writes that he wanted to give the monument «l'espressione di una viva esaltazione di quegli eroi che seppero immolare la loro vita, per il bene e la grandezza della Patria ... Le linee generali e le sagome architettoniche del monumento in travertino verranno eseguite con grande semplicità per modo che l'insieme dell'opera riesca in armonia alla severità della rocca sovrastante ... nutro quindi fiducia di aver corrisposto ai desideri di codesto On. Comitato».

¹¹ Vincenzo Pilotti aveva progettato il monumento ai Caduti per la città di Grottammare nel 1924, un obelisco in travertino circondato da bracieri e fiamme votive e quello per la vicina Porto San Giorgio nel 1925, sulla sommità del quale è posta la statua in bronzo raffigurante la Dea Roma Vigilante. Per le opere di Pilotti nella provincia picena, si veda M. L. Neri, *Ascoli immaginata/Ascoli costruita*, in U. Tramonti, S. Martellucci (eds), *Vincenzo Pilotti (1872-1956). Città immaginata, città costruita*, Alinea, 2003, 15-19.

in white Carrara marble with dimensions of 4.25x8.20 square metres that developed upwards, also incorporating the basal arch in the composition. Carved elements and mouldings constituted the frame of the central headstone, containing the names of the fallen and surmounted by five corbel supporting bronze eagles¹². In March 1927 the contract for the creation of the plaque was signed by the contractor Cinelli, for an amount of 25,000 lire including marble, while the bronze sculptures were made by Fonderia Vignali of Florence for an amount of 6,500 lire.

Figs. 2 -3 - Project for the War Memorial of Arquata del Tronto by V. Pilotti in 1926-27. Source: State Archives of Ascoli Piceno, ASAP, Fondo Pilotti Vincenzo, Public Commission, b. 2, fasc. 27; the civic tower and the monument to the Fallen of the Great War before the seismic events 2016-2017, photo by the author.



Over the centuries, the civic tower of Arquata has undergone various changes that have undermined its resistance, through the opening of gates, the closing of windows with unsuitable walls, the changing of the floors and the superelevation, making it particularly vulnerable. Pilotti's own project had created considerable weight in the structure where some cracks had already occurred¹³.

The territory of Arquata del Tronto was severely hit by the seismic sequence that affected central Italy in 2016, with two significant episodes (24 August - magnitude 6 and 30 October 2016 - magnitude 6.5) that caused significant collapses, undermining the consistency of the architectural heritage of the small Apennine villages. After the shock of 30 October 2016, all the buildings around Piazza Umberto I collapsed; even the civic tower, which was already particularly vulnerable, has not held up to the violence of the earthquake and has collapsed, carrying with it the great memorial plaque to the Fallen of war. The citizens immediately strived to save the only recognisable testimonies of the monument, namely the bronze eagles and the ancient bell placed on the top of the tower. This event demonstrates how, in the event of a crisis, the population turns its gaze to those comforting artefacts, now an integral part of daily life, to rediscover the spiritual connection which, although weakened, remains to mark the terms of a strong identity character.

¹² On Pilotti's indication of, the sculptor Enrico Brunelleschi of Florence, the 75 cm eagles were depicted with wings closed, the central one looked forward with a fierce expression, while the others looked to the side. Brunelleschi states that «With this arrangement a harmonious and well-matched whole could be obtained». Under the corbels were the coats of arms of the Municipality, two helmets decorated the capitals while on the ring of the arch, other symbols were placed that recalled the events of the war. G. Lalli, *La Torre Civica di Arquata del Tronto*, Associazione Arquata Potest, 2017, 91-92.

¹³ In 1988, the Administration started a series of preparatory studies for carrying out a restoration intervention to improve the structural whole, which had already been weakened by previous earthquakes. The documents are collected in the Archives of Super-Intendencies "Archeologia, Belle Arti e Paesaggio" of Marche Region, Arquata del Tronto, AP. 9, *Lavori di restauro della "Torre campanaria" comunale, Relazione tecnico illustrativa dell'intervento di restauro*, 1988.

Figs. 4-5 - Collapse of the buildings in the piazza Umberto I of Arquata del Tronto after 30 October 2016, and detail of one of the fallen eagles with other sculpted fragments. Source: pictures taken in November 2016 by S.Corradetti.



As some recent Italian earthquakes have highlighted, many historic buildings, particularly those of monumental significance, while having a significant role in the formation and expression of the urban image, are extremely vulnerable and present risks not only for material security but also for the collective memory. They represent social values, shared over centuries of history, which manifest themselves through tangible signs in the territory.

In addressing the theme of a conscious reinterpretation of the places hit by the earthquake, some reflections are necessary which pose, as a fundamental question, that of the architectural and urban relationship that must be established between pre-existence, even mutilated and fragmentary, and new interventions. These can be graded from a real restoration, which is more or less reintegrative, to various forms of reconstruction, oscillating between operations carried out according to the «how it was and where it was», or more current methods. The most complex issue is that of identifying the tools for an intelligent, sensitive and historically-aware reconstruction of the need for an act of reinterpretation, through new linguistic codes. More than an abstract conservation or a pseudo-mimetic reproduction of the previous existences scarred by the earthquake, we must pursue an overall protection of the “civilisation of a place” and an enhancement which is linked to a more articulated narrative, in which ancient and new instances can converge towards a renewed local identity. As Marc Augé observes, we find ourselves today in front of the city which is understood as an immense ruin where historical and current debris coexist; for this reason we need to free our imagination towards “small utopias”, rejecting the grandiose visions of a “total planning”, instead proposing a “collage city”, where we can activate gradual processes of regeneration and timely adaptation of what remains, favouring progressive adaptation paths focused on some significant public spaces.

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