

6. MYTH AND HISTORY SURROUNDING CASTEL DELL'OVO

Castel dell'Ovo stands on the **small island of Megaride**, where the Siren Parthenope is said to have been washed up, and is one of the oldest and most characteristic castles in Naples. Its name is linked to the legend of the magic egg which originated in the Middle Ages. This egg is capable of protecting the city and its people from disaster or danger. **Virgil** is supposed to have hidden it in some secret place in the castle, preserved in a glass jar placed inside a metal cage.

The Greeks landed on the island of Megaride in VIII century B.C. They found it such a beautiful and strategically-placed island that a settlement grew up against the backdrop of one of the most wonderful bays in the world. With the arrival of the Romans, the island became part of the villa belonging to the roman knight and patrician **Lucio Licinio Lucullo**, and was called ***Castrum Lucullanum***. It is believed that its grounds extended from Santa Lucia (including the Pizzofalcone hill) right down to the island of Megaride. It was on the island itself that Lucullus had part of his rich and extravagant villa built, and the gardens covered the rest of the site. Lucullus was responsible for introducing fruit trees like cherry and peach to the region. He imported them from Cerasunto and Persia which is where their Neapolitan names derive from; "cerase" and "persiche". **Sumptuous feasts** were eaten in the shade of these trees and other vegetation, and even two thousand years later Italians still picture these banquets in their use of the adjective "**Lucullian**" meaning sumptuous.

The Roman strategist also invented the idea of cultural conferences which led to the creation of the first big library in the Roman world.

With the death of Lucullus and his son, the villa lost its importance until the Emperor **Valentiniano III** decided to transform it into a fort.

This ancient pleasure palace provided the backdrop to a sad event in 476 A.D. Inside the villa, **Odoacre**, king of the Eruli, deposed the last Roman Emperor in the West, **Romolus Augustolus**, and imprisoned him in the fort until his death.

At the end of V century a small community of Byzantine monks of the order of Saint Basil settled there. They built the Church of San Pietro. The underground passages and cells carved out of the tuff were used by the monks for prayer. There are still traces of the Constantine crosses carved into the tuff that they used to pray before, and also of the loculus and ossuaries.

It was with **Saint Patrizia**, however, that the place assumed a real aura of holiness. Legend has it that she was promised in marriage against her will and so fled Constantinople in a small boat. After a long and eventful journey she landed on the island of Megaride where the monks took her in. It appears that her blood continues to **liquefy** like that of San Gennaro.

In 1139 Naples lost her independence when **Ruggero the Norman** took control of the city. He had the island of Megaride extended, and planned the defence system which included the fort which would be known throughout history as the Castel dell'Ovo. The first tower was termed the **Norman** tower and then **Federico II of Svevia** had other work done and another three towers added, working with the architect **Nicolò Pisano**.

With the **Angevins**, the Castle became the Royal Treasury. **Roberto D'Angevin** had the towers altered so they were rounded instead of square-shaped which was more typically Angevin in style. During that same period, the castle went back to being used as a **state prison**. The Angevins sent the son of King Manfredi of Svevia there and then locked the Princess of Acaya up there too after refusing to marry the son of King Roberto as she had been ordered to.

The castle was used as a prison for many centuries. The philosopher **Tommaso Campanella** was detained there before being condemned to death. In XIX century it was converted to a proper prison and lots of Jacobins, Carbonari and Liberals were imprisoned there, including **Francesco De Sanctis**.

The long and convoluted history of the castle also includes a natural disaster: in 1370 a violent tsunami rocked the foundations, causing serious damage to the weight-bearing walls and made the towers collapse. Although the actual damage to the castle was immense, it was nothing compared to the panic that seized the population when word got round that the magic egg, which was supposed to protect the city, had got broken in the catastrophe and thus caused the towers to collapse. The Queen, **Giovanna I d'Angevin**, had to intervene, pledging to replace the egg with a much more powerful one and reassuring her people that the towers would be rebuilt immediately.

After some fierce battles and destruction, the rule of the **Spanish Viceroy** signalled a period of calm for the castle. In 1555, a year after **Philip II** came to the Spanish throne, the fort was fully illuminated. The flickering light from the hundreds of **torches** which could be seen from miles away, almost gave the impression the castle was on fire and enhanced its majesty and beauty.

During XVIII and XIX centuries, the castle was no longer the seat of Royal power and its buildings were used for **military** purposes only.

Under Spanish rule, **Carlo di Borbone** tried to turn it into **a glass and mirror factory**.

In **1799** Castel dell'Ovo performed its last protective duty when it welcomed the leaders of the **Repubblica Partenopea**. They were forced to use the cannons to intimidate those members of the population who were against the entry of the French troops who had come to help them.

Over the following years, the castle was still in a good enough state to provide **Gioacchino Murat** with a seemly welcome and then, in 1871, when there was an awards ceremony for the best urban plan for a new city, a group of scientists, writers and artists won, with a project which included knocking down the castle to make room for a new residential area. The castle, which had survived the ravages of time and war, looked set to disappear for ever. Fortunately, the project was never carried through.

Today the castle houses important exhibitions and is one of the city's most popular tourist attractions.