

FICUZZA ROYAL HUNTING LODGE: A ROYAL PRESENCE IN INLAND SICILY

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Abstract: *Ficuzza Royal Hunting Lodge: a royal presence in inland Sicily.* Sicily, a land of legend and myth, an exotic island of overwhelming charm, full of colour, perfumes and flavours is likewise, sadly, well-known for the sinister menace of the 'Mafia'. An obscure phenomenon rooted in the past, deriving from the heart of latifundism, it remains one of the worst scourges of modern society. An endemic evil that attracts and then kills, the blood it spills staining the whole community and depriving it of honesty, justice and dignity. This scourge is most greatly concentrated in inland Sicily, where a lack of faith in the institutions, unemployment and desperation at not being able to escape from misery results in delinquency and violence, which in turn spread terror that leads to a wall of silence. This land tells the story of people massacred by Mafia gangs and of ferocious crimes. Corleone and Ficuzza are places historically linked to the Mafia. Ficuzza Wood has formed the backdrop to part of the area's history: a hideout for armed bands, unauthorised farming, animal theft, kidnappings and 'dulcis in fundo' crimes that have become legendary. Some sources mention an unspecified number of bodies, Mafia victims, buried here.

Rezumat: *Locuința regală de vânătoare Ficuzza: o prezență regală pe tărâmul Siciliei.* Sicilia, un tărâm de mit și legendă, o insulă exotica plină de farmec, parfum și flori este recunoscută în sens negativ datorită prezenței mafiei. O realitate obscură, născută din trecut care derivă din vechiul latifundiarism care rămâne unul dintre cele mai grave flageluri ale societății moderne. Pare un demon endemic care atrage și ucide, sângele colorând întreaga comunitate lipsind-o în acest fel de onestitate, dreptate și demnitate. Acest flagel este prezent în Sicilia unde lupta la nivel instituțional, șomajul și disperarea nu au reușit să neutralizeze mizeria, delincvența și violența care în contrapartidă generează teroare ce conduce la crearea unui zid al tăcerii. Acest teritoriu povestește despre oamenii uciși de mafie prin crime deosebit de atroce. Corleone și Ficuzza sunt două palate istorice care își leagă destinul de prezența și activitatea mafiei fiind un loc istoric distinct: un sit utilizat ca ascunzătoare



pentru trupe armate, o fermă ilegală, un loc în care erau aduși cei răpiți, un loc al crimelor care a devenit legendar și recunoscut la nivel macro-scalar. Unele surse vorbesc despre un număr incert de cadavre, victime ucise în trecut, care au fost înmormântate aici.

Key words: Ficuzza Royal Hunting Lodge, Sicily, inland, mafia.

Cuvinte cheie: Palatul Regal de Vânătoare Ficuzza, Sicilia, interior, mafia.

1. INTRODUCTION

We can only imagine what the original, natural panorama of the area was like. During the years of Greek colonisation the wood seems to have occupied as much as 80% of the island. Today, it is limited to a few thousand hectares but nonetheless it is the only large green belt in western Sicily. Therefore, what remains of the original woods, a varied landscape sometimes arid, almost an outpost of the African desert, other times brightly coloured and luxuriant acquires a new worth. A land of strong contrasts which are found both in the landscape and in the way of life¹. As Tomasi di Lampedusa defined it in 'The Leopard', an island in which 'beasts drown where two weeks before they died of thirst' (Scarpulla, 1994, p.11). The history of a natural environment like that of Ficuzza is fundamental in understanding our territory in its entirety: the climate, rivers, landscape, animal species and the signs of anthropization of the territory that are still visible. It is necessary to understand to what extent man has conditioned nature and/or nature has conditioned man. However, a lack of dependable sources makes it equally difficult to reconstruct the natural landscape. Bare mountains today were at one time densely covered with luxuriant green woods. The presence of the forest has been proven by archaeological findings in some of the mountainous zones, indicating that the environment of those times was greatly different from today (Schicchi, Giardina, 2000).

2. FICUZZA WOOD AND ITS TERRITORIAL CONTEXT

Ficuzza Wood is one of the most important 'green areas' in the Palermo hinterland. In the past it was one of the most important sources of energy. In particular, the great wars caused considerable devastation mainly due to the cutting down of mature trees which were the most suitable for making new railway sleepers² (Calcara, Cirrito, 1978). In the post-war period the first attempts were made to reclaim and reinvigorate the biome of the area, which led to a strengthening of the existing vegetation (oak) and the introduction of new species (pine, ash and eucalyptus). The agricultural landscape marks the border between the territory's biological system and the process of anthropization. Ficuzza Wood forms part of the characteristic hilly, rural, inland landscape of Sicily and still preserves a large part of its original elements visible in the elaborate complexes of fortified rural buildings and solidly

¹ There is undoubted proof that Ficuzza shares a common heritage of ancient Sicilian customs.

² When the Second World War broke out, the ever-growing need for wood to burn was the cause of renewed devastation of the woods, unrestrained felling and illegal uprooting of trees causing still further damage.

built farms linked by a grid of rural roads. The predominance of extensive farming in this area has led to an agricultural system dominated by pastures and cultivable land. At intervals the uniformity and consistency of the fields are interrupted by the presence of the olive groves and vineyards that are typical of the island. These are to be found almost exclusively in small plots that form a real 'agricultural mosaic'. This varied, complex system becomes less unspoilt as you go northwards where, from the Seventies on, the countryside has been invaded by urban sprawl.

The climate is cold and humid in winter, hot and arid in summer; the prevailing winds are from the west and the sirocco. During the summer the woods are pleasantly cool and offer the visitor a relaxing, refreshing silence. Rainfall is irregular but frequent during the autumn and winter periods. Snow falls every year but never lasts long. However, at Christmas the whitened landscape provides a splendid framework for the traditional local crafts market which is held in the splendid Bourbon square. In this Christmas atmosphere typical local foods are sold amidst the snow-covered trees, a particularly evocative sight. The forest is dominated by Rocca Busambra, an imposing limestone massif that crosses the landscape in an east-west direction. The steepest side of the mountain faces onto the woods which spread all around its base.

The state of the woods near Ficuzza and Godrano was disastrous, to say the least, until they were handed over to the Forestry Administration, which managed to halt the degradation that had ruined the wood and its wonders. A management and protection plan was then set up for the woods. Its characteristic morphological structure and vegetation, among the most typical and unique of the island, together with the climate which is influenced by the imposing presence of Rocca Busambra, has turned the area into a very popular holiday resort. Following its shady paths, bordered by ashes and oaks, we can rediscover the centuries-old connection between man and the wood.

The creation of the Nature Reserve was an important turning point, making the area a prestige symbol and an example of forestry management (photo 1). Together Ficuzza wood and Rocca Busambra have given rise to one of the largest natural reserves in Sicily (one of the most extensive and scientifically important protected areas in the south of Italy, measuring 7,397 hectares). The landscape is beautiful and varied, one important aspect being the biodiversity of plant life and the complexity of the area's characteristic ecosystems. The Reserve rises from Ponte Arcera (480 m) to the peak of Rocca Busambra (1,615 m) the highest mountain massif (Schicchi, Giardina, 2000). Covering more than 4,000 hectares, with a varied environment characterised in parts by a rich, luxuriant vegetation and surrounded by the delicate colours of the earth, the Ficuzza area is typically a bleak, arid, wild zone. It is an inaccessible area with a wealth of breathtaking views, partly unspoilt and partly anthropized. The signs left of man's earlier presence have inevitably marked and delineated the territory.

There is an undeniable relationship that has been established over the years between man and his surroundings, an indissoluble link of interactive and interdependent continuity. The need that pushed man to settle in this hostile, dangerous area in the first place relates back to remote times. To fill the area with a centuries-long history it is enough to mention that the River Eleuterio flows from Rocca Busambra and Ficuzza Wood. The first bearers of civilisation penetrated the area at the end of the third millennium BC following the course of this river. In fact, the numerous karstic caverns used by primitive men as a refuge are proof that the area was inhabited in prehistoric times.



Photo 1: A general view of the palace including part of the Bourbon piazza (Ficuzza). Main facade of the Royal Hunting Lodge (source: Nuccio, 2011)

The Elymians were indigenous to these sites during the Iron Age. In Roman times, the western part of Rocca Busambra was crossed by a road, the line of which coincides more or less with the present-day main road between Palermo and Corleone. The whole vicinity of Rocca Busambra was a strategic point for controlling the territory and an ideal place to live, safe from external dangers and attacks. On the eastern side of the mountain it was possible to observe what is today the town of Mezzojuso and control the Vicari plain and the main roads leading inland and towards Agrigento. On the highest parts of the area, Pizzo del Re (King's Peak) and Pizzo Castello (Castle Peak), there are the remains of a fortified residential settlement dating from the VI century BC believed to have been built by the Elymians. Moreover, in late Roman times a settlement was reported near the branching Alp, a fortified site mentioned by the Arab geographer Al Idrisi³ (Tusa S., 2000).

Nowadays, this precious natural, historical, artistic and architectural heritage still preserves a note of rare beauty for the local community and visitors. Its protected ecological world is of great cultural and scientific interest and has always attracted a variety of disciplines including, geography, zoology, botany, geology and agriculture. Different categories of scholar have been attracted to explore this beautiful, mysterious island of Sicily while opinions and the results of the careful, scrupulous analyses carried out on its soil have often been contradictory: from the rocky composition of Etna (Famoso, 2002)⁴ to the origins

³ Al Idrisi, the Arab geographer, defined the fortress of Al Hazan “a prosperous village with holdings and farms”. The farms, spreading over the Rocca Busambra area and the wood, testify to the exploitation of the local resources “ab antiquo” in the inaccessible parts of the massif and functioned in two ways: open farms during periods of peace and in times of war well-defended retreats.

⁴ Lazzaro Spallanzani.

of Rocca Busambra⁵. The area is easily reached from Palermo and from the various towns in the neighbourhood or simply by following the main Palermo – Agrigento road and taking the turning for Cefalà Diana or Godrano, or continuing as far as the exit for Mezzojuso and Campofelice di Fitalia. This wood with its small, characteristic mountain village attracts a large number of visitors every year to the local festivities and events, people come to use the picnic facilities and there are guided tours of the Bourbon Royal Palace⁶. In 1901 the ‘inalienable Ficuzza Wood’ was designated a resort, over the years becoming the prime summer holiday destination for the citizens of Palermo, a clear sign of an improvement in the way the wood and the mountain were perceived.

Visitors are attracted mainly by a number of characteristic factors that make this extraordinary territory a many-faceted complex of natural, artistic, historic, cultural, folkloristic, architectural and traditional elements which are the expression of past epochs. The identity of the territory is marked by a uniquely precious, intercultural - naturalistic mix. The wood is also indispensable to the economy of the area due to a series of productive activities that are connected with it. In the past, vast areas were indiscriminately exploited. These have now been redeveloped and exploited in line with environmental norms for an environmentally friendly development (Giardina, 1994). The area, which together with the Madonie Park constitutes one of the largest green areas in western Sicily, acquired an enormous value when it attracted the attention of Ferdinand IV of the Royal House of Bourbon (1751-1825) at the end of the 18th century⁷. After the King’s death, the wood was used irrationally, devastating felling and unrestrained grazing drastically reduced part of it and gave rise to its slow decline⁸.

3. THE BOURBONS: A DYNASTY

It was in the year 1735 that Don Carlos of Bourbon was crowned in Palermo and his full powers as King of Naples and Sicily were confirmed. This marked the beginning of the Bourbon period in Naples, a dynasty that was destined to dominate the whole of the South and Sicily until 1860. The ‘good king’ had conquered the crown of Sicily in 1734, creating the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies and thus rekindling hopes in Sicilian hearts of a return to the legendary reign of Frederick II. However, their hopes were quickly deluded. While Naples, the beloved capital of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies was inundated by very

⁵ The position of the magnificent rocky massif has always been a matter of discussion among scholars. In particular, as regards the origins of Rocca Busambra, French and German geologists supported the theory of strata overthrust, while Sicilian geologists favoured the autochthonous theory. In the first case, Rocca Busambra is a large tectonic flake which became detached elsewhere and was only later (10 million years ago) transported southwards. Instead, the second hypothesis sees Rocca Busambra as a large fragment of an autochthonous rocky mass which perforated the younger Miocene terrigenous rocks of the Ficuzza and did not arrive from elsewhere. Rocca Busambra appears to be the most exterior part of a rocky mass that extends down into the earth for a couple of kilometres superimposing the older parts onto the more recent underlying buried calcareous mass. Geologists believe that this anomalous superimposition of older rocks onto more recent is the result of a whole-scale deformation of geological masses uprooted from their original regions to be later moved and superimposed on the rocky masses of neighbouring areas. Therefore, it can be maintained that Rocca Busambra is the superficial part of a large rocky mass transported from further away to its present position (Catalano, 2000).

⁶ The Ficuzza Wood, Cappelliere Wood, Rocca Busambra and Dragon’s Gorge Nature Reserve was set up on 26 July, 2000 under the management of the Regional State Forestry Department.

⁷ During his reign the Ficuzza Royal Palace was built where court life was intense and luxurious.

important public works (the building of imposing monuments which, however, did not resolve the serious planning problems that plagued the city) Sicily was neglected. However, the works in Naples were not well-designed and did not take into account the aesthetic and morphological features of the surrounding landscape, nor did they respond to planning needs. The result was that demarcation lines were created, separating the state of misery and horror in which the poorest classes and outcasts lived (but this is the history of all times) from the privileged conditions of the Neapolitan nobility. This disparity could be understood from just a quick glance at the buildings which flaunted the most unrestrained luxuries, with decorative elements, statues, fountains, gardens and everything else that served to entertain the King and the nobles that supported him. The picture that emerges demonstrates the irresponsible behaviour of the Bourbon ruling class and the nobility of the times: the Bourbons are often accused of being parasites, dissolute, idle and inefficient as regards undertaking works of public interest. In reality, many structures of considerable size were planned and begun in the Bourbon era and completed in later periods. Among the marvels created in the Bourbon period the following are worthy of note: the magnificent Park and stunning Royal Palace of Caserta and the colossal Royal Hostel for the Poor, an ambitious project which still dominates the city today derelict, but austere (Manzi, 1987). These beautiful works served to decorate and make the city more pleasant, so as to offset the shameful state of abandon and degradation into which it had fallen under the Spanish Viceroyship. Undoubtedly, King Don Carlos, during his time in Naples, made the city beautiful and hospitable. Called the 'enlightened' King because of his ideas on reform, he tried to resolve the decadence of the town without renouncing the privileges of absolute sovereign.

With intelligent measures he tried to improve the destiny of his kingdom, favouring the grain trade for example and dedicating attention to relationships with other Mediterranean countries⁹. Some of the reforms that he enacted were incisive, others remained incomplete, but it is certain that they contributed to directing the kingdom towards radical cultural and civil change, among which the abolition of the feudal system. The situation very quickly changed, the King was called to the throne of Spain (1759) and abdicated in favour of his son Ferdinand IV of Bourbon then still a child, who came to power under the care of a tutor¹⁰ (Manzi, 1987). Occupying the throne of Naples in 1782, Ferdinand left the control of Sicily to his viceroy, Domenico Caracciolo, ex-Ambassador to Paris. Caracciolo, a disciple of the French encyclopaedists' reforms, wanted to follow a programme of reforms in Sicily inspired by the widespread idea of development. The Viceroy's programme did not receive support even from the country people in that it upset their traditions without there being any guarantee that it would be successful. To succeed in his aims, Caracciolo would have had to count on the support of a rich, open-minded, dynamic middle-class which did not yet exist. His reform policy came to an abrupt halt with the outbreak of the French Revolution.

⁹ Don Carlos of Bourbon signed a variety of treaties to open up the North African markets to Sicilian exports.

¹⁰ A central figure in the history of Ficuzza, son of Charles, III King of Spain, VII King of Naples and King of Sicily, and Maria Amalia of Saxony, Ferdinand married Maria Caroline of Hapsburg. He became King of Naples and Sicily when his two brothers gave up the throne, one because he was declared insane and the other because he was destined for the Spanish throne (Canzoneri, Cavaretta, Giardina, 2001, p.55).

King Ferdinand was forced to take refuge in Sicily with his queen and retinue, when the popular uprisings of 1798 created havoc in Naples¹¹. In 1799, Sicily saw a real King return to sit on the throne in Palermo and everything led to presume that the antique splendour of Frederick II's Court, which at one time hosted artists, writers, philosophers and scholars, would be restored. However, history took another course. Sicily was a secure place where the King would be safe from popular uprisings and the advance of Napoleon's formidable troops because it enjoyed the protection of the invincible Royal Navy under its famous admiral, Lord Nelson¹², whose reputation as an infallible leader preceded him. The king wanted to stay away from the island capital for what were, sometimes, even long periods of time. Escaping from the boredom of political duties and his Kingdom, continually subject to Jacobin conflicts and revolts was an imperative for the King. This behaviour underlined his propensity to detach himself from state affairs and court duties which he preferred to leave to his wife, who acted in accord with her own mind. In any case, his position as sovereign was limited by the powers of the large landowners and the presence of the English forces under Lord Bentinck, given that they administered the whole island, at least in part (Manzi, 1987).

Sicily was a strategic point on the Mediterranean perimeter for which reason, among others, it had always been of interest to a variety of so-called colonising peoples, like the English who occupied it for a certain period. As for the barons who should have defended their land, they got drunk celebrating in the teeth of patriotism and had no intention of giving up their ancient privileges to make the administration of the Kingdom easier. They fought against the Court and flirted with the English. The English were silent invaders or rather, extremely astute, but history teaches us that distant, powerful masters are always better than close, needy ones. It was a paradoxical situation with the English, who supported the barons, imposing a Constitution. Ferdinand had certainly not inherited his father's propensity to rule, even less his political ability. His passion for hunting and other distractions led him to search for a number of royal sites on the island¹³. He wanted somewhere that came up to his expectations, a site that would distract him from his royal duties. He had hunting lodges built and the Royal holdings of the Favorita and Ficuzza came into being. In the Ficuzza holding everything went smoothly, the King lived tranquilly because when he was hunting he no longer feared revolutions: he became the happiest of kings¹⁴. In the conflict between the Bourbons and the English, the hunting lodges, created for relaxation and entertainment, were transformed into retreats of a symbolic exile. In January, 1812 it seems that the King was even confined in Ficuzza, while the English minister William Bentinck besieged Palermo and decided on the composition of the new

¹¹ Ferdinand proclaimed himself the fourth King of Naples, then the third King of Sicily and finally in 1815 he became the first King of the Two Sicilies. On that occasion his Naples subjects ironically commented on his investiture, saying that having started from the title of fourth he would finish at zero, thus diminishing and deriding his authority (Canzoneri, Cavaretta, Giardina, 2001).

¹² King Ferdinand of Bourbon gave the possessions of the Dukedom of Maniace in the Nebrodi Park, close to Bronte (Catania) to the English Admiral Horatio Nelson (Nelson's Castle) to reward him for services rendered. With his gift, Ferdinand conferred on Nelson the right to pass on the Dukedom to any of his relatives but also to others who were unrelated. In 1981, the estate was bought by the town of Bronte.

¹³ Among which were included the fiefs of Ficuzza, Lupo, Capelliere, Marineo and Turdiepi.

¹⁴ He often enjoyed mixing with the populace, selling fish and organising markets and races: it is said that on one occasion during a horse race, a certain Di Marco distinguished himself by his courage and the ability of his magnificent horse. The King wanted to buy the horse but the courageous, unwise jockey refused to sell.

government: a Constitution was necessary! (to slight the French)¹⁵. King Ferdinand once again displayed no interest in the situation in Palermo and refused to speak to Bentinck after being so slighted. Hunting lodge and strange retreat, the Ficuzza hunting lodge was used for just a brief period. It was abandoned in 1815 when the outcome of the war made it possible for Ferdinand to return first to Palermo and then to Naples and later sacked during the uprisings in 1820. In 1862 history touched it again when Garibaldi's followers camped there. With no other hunting Kings, the Royal Hunting Lodge was silently abandoned, even if the place appeared bucolic and could easily have become a farm. But it was only a short distance from Corleone, a town besieged by the forces of the Mafia¹⁶.

4. THE HISTORIC RESIDENCE: FROM PLANNING TO REALITY

Amidst the intense green of the oak trees, with the imposing, rocky walls of the Rocca Busambra in the background dominating the whole neighbourhood, the austere residence desired by Ferdinand IV of Bourbon reigns supreme. King Ferdinand, a simple, pragmatic man (who often spoke in dialect) had a limited culture and very little interest in politics and devoted himself to hunting and residential idleness. An enthusiastic hunter, he bought a vast woody area on the slopes of Rocca Busambra, the magnificent limestone mass in the heart of north-west Sicily, unifying the fiefs of Ficuzza, Cappelliere, Lupo and Lupotto and then ordered a hunting reserve to be built there¹⁷. The large hunting lodge on two floors that he had built in Ficuzza now holds the Forestry Administration offices. About 45 km from Palermo along an old carriage route that led to Corleone, the Lodge was undoubtedly an inviting place that the King and his retinue could easily reach by carriage in half a day. Ferdinand of Bourbon arrived in Sicily on Christmas Eve in 1798¹⁸. He spent a number of years in Sicily and once the Lodge had been built in Ficuzza, stayed there almost without interruption for about two and a half years, from 1810 to 1812. Ferdinand, in exile in Palermo after the events in Naples, had the Royal Hunting Lodge built in Ficuzza to satisfy his passion for hunting¹⁹. The control of the works was entrusted to Giuseppe Venanzio Marvuglia, an affirmed architect of the time who, with his proven experience and the collaboration of an able workforce, built this excellent construction which can still be

¹⁵ The King was in Ficuzza when he learnt of the nature of the English constitution which everyone wanted but which very few understood. Ferdinand, as always with no mind for government, became depressed and did not want to celebrate his birthday. Maria Carolina confided her worries to the Prince of Butera with regard to her husband's frame of mind and the veto on going to Ficuzza to 'pay homage'. In spite of the veto she eluded English surveillance and arrived in Ficuzza secretly. Bentinck did not approve, the King's ministers replied that the Queen would return as soon as the snow-covered roads allowed, a reply that must be considered in the light of the fact that carriage roads did not exist in Sicily. While attention was focused on the presence of the Queen in Ficuzza the king, driving his own 'carriage' went to Palermo. But he was turned away and had to return to Ficuzza. The Queen, who was then obliged to leave Sicily, declared herself the victim of villains and their powerful protectors.

¹⁶ In the square of the tiny hamlet on the evening of 20th August 1977, a Carabinieri captain Giuseppe Rosso was killed while he was investigating a tender for the Garcia dam which was worth millions. After decades, centuries even, the only war that has never come to an end in Sicily is the undeclared war of those men who fight against the Mafia

¹⁷ The Royal Hunting Lodge and the village of Ficuzza are sited in an 'administrative island, not forming part of the Corleone commune but included in that of Monreale.

¹⁸ He had fled from Naples after the Revolution.

¹⁹ In Abatellis Palace there is an original drawing of the plans for the Ficuzza Royal Hunting Lodge drawn up by H.M. Ferdinand which testifies to his lively interest in carrying out the project.

admired today despite its present neglected state (photo 2). Thanks to the inventories that have been discovered, we can also understand the complexity and nature of the palace furnishings and what tools and instruments were used in the adjoining buildings (Dispenza, 1987).



Photo 2: *The servants' lodgings and stables. (next to the palace)*
(source: Nuccuio, 2011)

The work was initially entrusted to an engineer, Carlo Chenchi, who during restoration works was accused of using architectural techniques that were a little excessive for the strength of the plans. The sophistication of some of the decorations forming the façade of the Ficuzza Lodge, regardless of its typically neoclassical style, were very similar to styles found in temple architecture (noticeable in the corbels). The whole was enriched with typically northern elements such as chimneys, a sign of an eclectic style that brought together different elements from various origins. The building material for the Lodge came from a nearby quarry and were similar in its uniform colour to the stone used for temple buildings in ancient times. However, the criticism levelled at Chenchi very quickly persuaded the King to call in another expert architect, the above-mentioned Giuseppe Venanzio Marvuglia. According to some sources that throw light on the situation of the two experts, the plans were in effect entrusted to Chenchi, leaving Marvuglia in charge of the direction of works. The latter, however, did not limit himself to the simple realisation of the works but introduced modifications in order to perfect the style of the structure²⁰. From an analysis of the documents that have played a key role in identifying the rooms, according to their destined use, there are differences between what was originally planned and what was built and has been preserved (Cavarretta, Morello, 1998). Marvuglia was assigned the architect, Nicolò Puglia and the master mason, Matteo Chiti. Marvuglia had already carried out the Favorita Park works and the town residence of the Royal Family known as the Chinese Palace, a whim on the part of the king, in line with the taste and fashion of the times

²⁰ If the original plans by Chenchi and the finished Palace, which can still be admired today, are compared they are decidedly different. On the exterior façade opposite the entrance there are two clock towers in place of the eight ornamental vases in the original Chenchi plans.

for oriental style architecture²¹. The two architects sent the King occasional reports to keep him informed as to the progress of work on the lodge. However, generally speaking, the works proceeded along the lines set down by Chenchi, Court Engineer and Commander of the Magione (Royal Household)²² who was assigned the task in 1802 (Scarpulla, 2000). The works dragged on until 1807, employing various able craftsman: stone masons, stucco decorators, masons, marble cutters, carpenters, joiners, cabinetmakers, painters, sculptors and furnishers. In front of the building a large space was created, bordered by storehouses and stables, watering troughs and lodgings for the numerous dependents engaged in the internal affairs of court and in managing the royal concerns. Temporary workshops were set up in front of the building for the production of the necessary materials²³. The initial idea for the Ficuzza Royal Hunting Lodge dated back to 1802²⁴.

The palace rose against the spectacular background of the limestone walls of the rocky mass called Rocca Busambra²⁵ supported by fiefs that were once the property of the Mensa of Monreale²⁶. In the space of only a few years, woods were planted, country houses were restored and carriage roads were built. Moreover, given that the hunting lodge also functioned as a farm, farm buildings, beehives for honey and an aviary were constructed. The King provided one thousand onzas (doubloons) a month and Felice Lioy, the Household administrator, controlled the site works where builders were hired and the master mason arrived specifically from Florence. The works were finished in 1807. On the ground floor there were the servants' quarters, the kitchens and storerooms, while the King's lodgings and those of Prince Leopold were on the first floor, traditionally called the noble floor (photo 3). Most of the furnishings came from Naples, simple but refined: only the proud coat of arms on the façade – Dian and Pan with wild boar and deer – revealed the identity of the royal owner (photo 4).

²¹ Giuseppe Venanzio Marvuglia, a well-known, sought-after architect of the time, classically trained but open to experimentation with other styles, often indulged the requests of his customers. His works included the Abbey of San Martino delle Scale and the Rossella Hunting Lodge, commissioned by the Prince of Belmonte only a few kilometres from the Ficuzza Lodge.

²² The Church of the Magione (corruption of the French word 'maison') was founded around 1150 by Matteo Aiello, Grand Chancellor under the title of the Trinity and entrusted to the Cistercian monks. They were then ejected by Emperor Henry VI because they sided with Tancredi during the political controversies of that time and the church and its possessions were given to the Teutonic order which thus gained numerous privileges and properties. Control of the church and its belongings was given to the General Preceptor of Sicily who also had the jurisdiction over all the houses or 'manciones' (from which derives the epithet Mangione (glutton) which were added to the heritage over the years. Control was then passed to a number of clerics and also laymen of high lineage, the last being Cardinal Branciforte, Prince of Scordia and Bishop of Agrigento. On his death in 1786 the King wrote a despatch on 7th October of that year passing it to the Constantine order of Saint George of which the Bourbons had inherited the right to be Grand Masters from the Farnese family and passed the command to Prince Gennaro and on his death to Prince Leopold. When Prince Leopold died, the Ministry of Finance acquired the heritage until 1864 (Dispenza, 1987).

²³ A kiln was built so that the clay-masters S. Lunetta and B. Colletti could make the vaults (Scarpulla A. *Il Palazzo Reale*. Edited by Raimondo F.M., Ficuzza, Storia e Natura, 2000).

²⁴ The Royal Hunting Lodge was decorated with tapestries, stucco work, frescoes, furniture, statues and paintings.

²⁵ A huge stone set in the intense green of the Ficuzza Wood.

²⁶ The Mensa was responsible for the management of the Monreale diocese properties in the area.

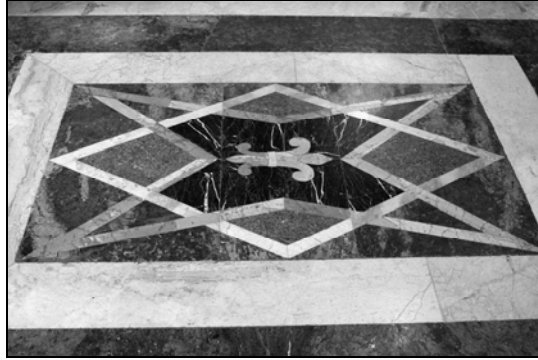


Photo 3: *A detail of the noble floor (The Bourbons symbol Lily)*
(source: Nuccio, 2011)



Photo 4: *The Bourbon coats of art.*
(source: Nuccio, 2011)

The Palace was rectangular in shape with the servants' lodgings, guardrooms, storerooms and kitchens on the ground floor. Cellars had been made in the foundations which were connected to the outside world by a passage that emerged a short distance from the building – for escapades or as a future escape route. Beneath the kitchens, stairs led to a cellar where the provisions were kept to feed the household and guests. These cellars, which were abandoned for years, have recently been restored and can now be visited. Other areas of the foundations were used to house the King's carriage and other equipment. The façade, as it appears today, has the pleasant, restrained aspect of Van Wittel-inspired²⁷ neoclassical architecture. The main entrance where the King entered in his carriage is centrally placed. The entrance to the Royal Chapel²⁸ is on the right, while the servants' passage is on the left.

²⁷ Born into a Dutch artist family (Van Wittel), Luigi Vanvitelli, founder of 'landscape painting' was one of the most important Italian architects between the Baroque and Neoclassical periods.

²⁸ There is a painting by the artist Giuseppe Velasco in the Chapel.

The façade has two rows of windows separated by a simple cornice. The upper part is crowned by an overhanging cornice supported by sandstone brackets decorated with triglyphs. In the centre of the cornice there is an imposing sandstone sculptural group featuring the Bourbon coat of arms (see photo 4), surrounded by garlands of flowers and surmounted by a crown. The work was carried out by Giosuè Durante, a sculptor from Palermo who worked between the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries (Morello, 1998). Next to the coat of arms there is a statue of the God Pan, guardian of fields, grazing flocks, hunters and shepherds, while on the right side there is a statue of Diana, sister of Apollo, Goddess of the hunt, woods and vegetation, surrounded by deer and wild animals. In the execution of the work Giosuè Durante was assisted by Francesco Quattrocchi, a descendant of the numerous Palermo dynasty of prestigious stonemasons. Finally, on top of the cornice at the two extremities of the façade there are two clocks which were made by Giuseppe Lorrìto and sons, as testified by the engraving that can still be partly read on one of them (photo 5).



*Photo 5: One of the two clocks in the main facade
(source: Nuccio, 2011)*

The formal positioning of the two clocks, symmetrically placed at the two lateral extremities gives the palace façade an impetus. A red marble stairway to the right of the entrance leads up to the noble floor (photo 6).



*Photo 6: The red marble stairway leads up to the noble floor
(source: Nuccio, 2011)*

The marble was quarried from the southern side of Rocca Busambra, in the Rocca Argenteria quarter, where the faint outlines of columns and other abandoned projects can still be seen. The royal quarters were on the noble floor and the rest of the palace hosted the nobility invited by the sovereign to take part in the hunt and the ministers who dealt with the most urgent court duties. The only room that is still able to give us an idea of the King's presence is the central hall (photo 7). In typical neoclassical style, one wall opens onto the corridor that leads to other royal rooms. The vault is supported by four pairs of marble columns with pedestals and capitals and fluted with bevelled hips. The taste for the exotic that was typical in Palermo at the end of the 18th century – which in the restructuring of noble and bourgeois residences and in the Chinese Palace produced artistic results that were in the vanguard in Europe – made it possible for Marvuglia, the architect, to satisfy his client's wishes for a serene, neoclassical style. In fact, observing the frescoes of the Chinese Palace similarities can be found with the formal, style of the capitals and the column partitions used in the Royal Apartments. Existing documents demonstrate the accuracy of the work and above all the management of G.V. Marvuglia. The most critical, delicate phase of the building works seems to have been the foundations. The land slopes gently westwards and needed to be levelled; clayey soils were brought from the eastern side of the area and this is the main reason for the instability that can be seen today at the western end where the Chapel is located (photo 8).

The material used was ashlar “Molara Stone flakes with lime and sand” (Bivona, 1845). The crossbar basement vaults were built with baked clay bricks placed on edge. In the basement it is also possible to see an asymmetric chute and a two-volume tank, located in the western corner which was the septic tank connected to the toilet in the royal apartments (photo 9). After a careful selection of many areas in Sicily, one of the reasons why the King chose Ficuzza Wood as the site for his hunting lodge was because it included the greater part of the surface area constituting the three ancient fiefs, Ficuzza-Lupo-Cappelliere which were the property of the Royal House of Bourbon. During his stay in Ficuzza, the village and its woods with all their inherent activities acquired an incredible splendour thanks to his care for detail. The beautiful well-maintained woods, numerous herds of different species, excellent crops and pastures and abundant game, were all the

merit of the King. When Ferdinand died, both the hunting and the forest declined. Less than ten years after, three quarters of the immense spread of woods had been destroyed. This devastating felling was followed by unregulated grazing and numerous fires. With the forest ruined, the buildings crumbling, the roads impassable, the property passed to the state which alienated almost all the lands which had already been deforested and dug over: the last lands and buildings were sold between 1867 and 1869 and the same fate would have befallen the Ficuzza, Lupo and Cancelliere Woods if providential laws had not declared the whole territory unalienable and entrusted it to the Forestry Administration.



*Photo 7: A detail of the royal room
(source: Nuccio, 2011)*



*Photo 8: Inside the chapel there is a painting of S. Rosalia
by the artist Giuseppe Velasco.
(source: Nuccio, 2011)*



*Photo 9: Bidet, the only survivor of the original interior design
(source: Nuccio, 2011)*

5. ENVIRONMENTAL PROCESSES AND TRANSFORMATIONS

The economic life of Ficuzza has always revolved around the wood and those activities connected with it. Wood, charcoal and other products deriving from the wood served to maintain and feed the village population who worked there under different auspices; gamekeepers, woodcutters and workmen. A few even became quite distinguished, holding important posts in the administration of the wood. Some tried to survive by grazing and agriculture, using old-fashioned growing methods while others emigrated to the city (Palermo), to the north of Italy or abroad. The numerous fortified farms are witness to the presence of man in the hilly areas. The mountain herds (proof found in the highest regions of Rocca Busambra) were functional productive units part of the feudalization of the territory. The presence of the fortified farms was important. They were situated in deforested clearings and gradually eroded the margins of the wood. Here and there control of the territory was guaranteed by noble castles such as those in Marineo and Cefalà.

At times inside the wood, actual villages of ‘pagliai’ were built, huts made of straw and dry stone their roofs covered in branches, which were abandoned at the end of the productive cycle. The place-name ‘Paghiarotti’ most probably derives from a settlement of this kind. Moreover, in the Sovarita quarter of the wood it is easy to come across remains of habitations of this kind, whether isolated or in groups. The lands of Bifarera, Cefalà and Marineo, for the most part grain producing, exported cereals to Palermo and overseas. The territory was exploited. In other cases lands were subject to tallage by rich farmers, breeders or merchants who were less affected by the rot of wars and epidemics.

Later events in the woods, with turbulent changes of ownership during the course of the 14th and 15th centuries, make it difficult to trace the history of the territory with any certainty. Rich landowners and abbots, played on ancient concessions received from the Normans, the Swabians or the Aragons to exploit the resources of the area, either for themselves or through tallage. In any case it was of little importance to the owners whether the agricultural cycles used on their territories followed a rational criterion. They were interested in maximising profits in the shortest time possible. Grazing, wood-cutting and

sowing rights were exercised more and more indiscriminately. Uncultivated lands and pastures predominated. The general circumstances in which economy found itself, with low prices for grain and food products, meant that in the course of the 15th century there were very few changes to the forms of settlement and production, although the rebirth of Mezzojuso on the western margins of the wood, thanks to the Albanians, was an isolated example of a new settlement. The situation changed in the sixteenth century. The price of grain rose and stimulated the ploughing up of lands that had been pastures for centuries. Rich feudal lords, merchants and bourgeois threw themselves into the great undertaking of transforming the territory with the foundation of new towns by means of 'licentia populandi'. The newcomers were given advantageous conditions of land ownership, facilities for agricultural activities, fiscal exemptions and civic use of common land. The new colonists' hunger for land further eroded the wood which contracted enormously.

It is easy to imagine what the wood was used for during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For the populations that lived on its edges it was a vital resource to which they had access but under specific conditions and with restrictions while for the landowners it was a resource to be exploited economically. According to some sources, in the seventeenth century Ficuzza was a noble fiefdom belonging to the Archbishop of Monreale who oversaw its administration. According to these sources the wood appeared beautiful and young, with marshes and abundant water and with no houses inside. Under Rocca Busambra there are ditches where it seems that snow was collected and kept (yearly tallage about 900 onzas (doubloons) besides the advantage of 'carnaggi', loads of untaxed snow (It is said that the best lemon sorbet of the whole area was produced from the snow of these reserves).

Busambra was conceded to fortified farms in order to exploit the arable land but most of the lands were empty. Feudo Lupo had only one fortified farm of 70 salme where there were many reserves of water for cattle. The royal horses that pastured there were made into herds which were later abolished by order of King Philip II. At the end of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth centuries 320 salme (an old measurement equal to 731 hectares) of woods are documented²⁹. Therefore, we have a total of 1188 hectares of more or less intensely wooded lands (appearing somewhat degraded). The history of the wood took a sudden upturn at the end of the eighteenth century thanks to the presence of the hunter king, Ferdinand of Bourbon.

The King established boundaries and hunting restrictions that went beyond the edges of the wood where pillars can still be seen bearing the initials R.R (Royal Reserve) and R.C. (Royal Casato/family). He set up a group of gamekeepers who were to inform him as regards the game available. On the basis of the reports he received he learned that there were hare and wild boar. To protect the smaller game he imposed culls of foxes, martens and wild cats. Inside the wood he had built keepers' houses, farms and shelters for the breeding herds of cattle and horses that he established. In the rigorous wood, with the splendid Palace in its midst, numerous hunts were held by the King and his court which undoubtedly fortified the local economy. An animal market was set up in Ficuzza, Godrano

²⁹ Attributed to the Court of the Royal Patrimony in 1796 as part of ecclesiastical incomes destined for public works. This management had already seriously damaged the wood, cutting trees to build gunboats. In 1799 the Royal Steward took over the administration of these lands: in effect they were directly aggregated to the Crown, given that the Commander of the Magione (Royal Household) had become an autonomous Royal business directly dependent on the King. The King improved access to his holding, personally visiting and following the building of his rectangular Hunting Lodge.

lake was filled with fish and a hide was also built from which to hunt the birds that gathered there to drink. Some places still bear names that recall the heritage left by the sovereign during his stay in Ficuzza (King's pulpit, Leopold's statue). The 1820 revolt damaged the woods and the King's works. The Palace was sacked by prisoners who escaped from prisons in Palermo during the tumults, animals were stolen or killed and parts of the wood set on fire. Everything was restored by King Ferdinand I when he returned immediately after the revolt. Frances I who succeeded him continued his father's work maintaining the splendours of the place even if he reduced the hunting reserve to only the wood. His successor, Ferdinand II, arranged that all the luxury goods that the Royal Family possessed in the house, together with Ficuzza, should form the endowment of a royal prince, though this was against the dictates of the 1812 Constitution. This was the course of events during the Bourbon dynasty. There was certainly no lack of problems between the administration of the properties and the inhabitants of the nearby towns.

The keepers were often downright bandits who taxed breeders and peasants. Periodically, Ficuzza Wood provided shelter for armed bands who attacked the passersby that crossed the area in great numbers to get to the markets. When Italy was united the state sold off Lupo, Lupotto and part of the Ficuzza and Cappelliere holdings to private individuals. In 1871 a provident law³⁰ proclaimed the inalienability of Cappelliere Wood, some land in Lupo and its woods, and also Ficuzza with its Hunting Lodge. These were then placed in the care of the Forestry Administration by the Agriculture and Commerce Ministry. The Forestry Administration was not able to bring back the pomp of Ferdinand I's times. After being abandoned for years, at the end of the century the administration enlarged the state lands with further acquisitions and started the painstaking work of reconstruction. In 1910 Godrano Wood, previously owned by the Forestry administration by Royal Concession, was added to Ficuzza Wood most of which was sited on land belonging to Monreale, Corleone and Mezzojuso³¹. In 1953 the Bosco and Canonica holdings, which at the time consisted mainly of bare meadows and grazing lands, were added to the Ficuzza-Godrano territories³². The wood has been under the care of the Sicilian regional authorities for about forty years now and the painstaking work of protection and development has begun.

6. STATE OF THE ART

Today the Ficuzza Wood area is searching for an identity as a territorial resource now that its traditional role as a provider of wood, charcoal and wild fruit no longer exists. A policy is required for the use of its resources in which tourism is just one, but not the only, resource. The area has a large archaeological heritage, still partly unknown and not only to the general public. There is a considerable artistic and cultural heritage that has accumulated over the centuries in the shadow of the church towers of the towns which developed in the area like Mezzojuso, a place where Latin and Greek cultures meet; Marineo with its castle, fortified farms and art treasures accumulated by the churches. Cefalà has a castle, the Bagni,

³⁰ The law made it possible to protect what remained of the ancient woods.

³¹ The woods were technically and administratively separate until 1920 when they came under the same management.

³² Today they constitute the enchanting panorama that forms the backdrop to the imposing mass of Rocca Busambra.

whose ruins stand out majestically in the landscape, a splendid example of Arab-Norman architecture (Scarpulla, 1994). The area should be given a new identity by making didactic use of its great historical heritage and the extraordinary wealth of flora and fauna to be found in the wood (a habitat of great naturalistic interest). Particular attention should be given to the beautiful Reserve with its woods, rocky walls and the 'gorges' (the Tondo, Lungo and Drago gorges) which are really small natural lakes. Rocca Busambra (1613 metres) hosts a number of interesting species such as the golden eagle, the Greek partridge and a large colony of lesser kestrel falcons. Some specimens of wild cat and marten live in the wood.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The pride of this new identity is the Ficuzza Woods used as a royal hunting reserve by King Ferdinand IV of Bourbon, with the renowned 'Royal Palace' around which the small village of Ficuzza developed. Since it became the property of the Sicilian Regional Forestry Agency they have aimed at creating a series of infrastructure in order to exploit its great natural beauty and to increase public awareness with regard to environmental education³³. The Ficuzza regional centre for wildlife recovery (C.R.R.F.S) has three sections: the animal hospital, the aviary and the classroom. The animals that come from all over Sicily, are immediately examined by expert vets who decide on the correct treatment according to the pathologies that they find. The towns around the wood, in particular Godrano, Mezzojuso, Marineo and Cefalà Diana, are in ideal positions to be high quality mountain resorts, not only due to their rich environmental and cultural heritage but also because of their almost unchanged traditional values which preserve old customs and represent a valid economic resource. However, over and above them all, the Royal Hunting Lodge is an architectural jewel, a symbol of more luxurious times but also a metaphor for the decadence of the old, powerful, social classes that history has sized down.

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³³ In 1996 the first veterinary hospital for wildlife opened in Sicily, the centre is located in buildings belonging to the Sicilian Regional Forestry Agency, which also finances the centre's work, while the Lipu (the Italian Society for the Protection of Birds) manages the centre (Sgueglia, Giardina, 2000).

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