

A CISTERCIAN LANDSCAPE TO SAFEGUARD:  
THE ABBEY OF SANTA MARIA DI REALVALLE IN SARNO PLAIN

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Track A. Conservation and transformation of dynamic landscapes

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The architecture of the Cistercian Order – whose formal rules were defined in France on the basis of the so-called *plan bernardin* during the first half of the Thirteenth century and in the following decades – represents an important example of the human ability to adapt to the natural components of the landscape and to take advantage from their use. Designed on a model of completely self-sufficient monastic and agricultural cities, the Cistercian abbeys were built in sites chosen for their specific topographic characteristics, identifiable in the presence of wide flat areas, nearby forests, and, most of all, of watercourses. According to the Benedictine Rule, in fact, the Cistercians had to cultivate the lands and breed the cattle in order to ensure the livelihood of the monastery. The importance of these activities is testified by the particular spatial articulation of the abbeys which, in addition to the main complex, also consisted of several rural structures – the so-called *grange* – used to manage the farm work.

In order to provide for the constant need of water supply, both for the daily life in the monastery as for the rural activities, the Cistercians were able to exploit of the proximity of the rivers by engaging in the control and distribution of the water. The knowledge demonstrated in the hydraulic field is testified by the realization of different kind of engineering works built to regularize or divert the rivers' course and define alternative routes so as to bring water inside the monastery or near the *grange*. In some cases, the main complexes were also provided with complete installations for the supply and the disposal of water.

Built by order of Charles I of Anjou starting from 1273, the abbey of St. Mary of Realvalle in Scafati represents a rare example of a thirteenth-century Cistercian architecture in the southern Italy. Despite the several transformations carried out during centuries, which have partly compromised the readability of the monastic complex, it is still possible to identify both the spatial articulation of this latter – corresponding to the model of Cistercian architecture – as its environmental qualification. As in the other cases, St. Mary of Realvalle was built in correspondence of a fluvial landscape characterized by the presence of a mostly flat alluvial territory, the nearby Scafati forest, and the Sarno river, still navigable at that time. The original complex – consisting of a central cloister with the church on the northern side, and the other structures placed along the other sides – was provided with a system of canalization which brought

the running water directly from the near Sarno river. Ever there, therefore, the Cistercians were able to use the natural sources offered by the place and, at the same time, to adapt them to their needs.

Taking into account these considerations, the paper aims at deepening the particular relation between the morphological characteristics of the fluvial landscapes and the 'adaptive' architectural components of the Cistercian 'system'. Starting from a more general analysis of the different cases and focusing the attention, later, on the case-study of St. Mary of Realvalle, the essay aims at recognizing and interpreting the historical elements and the transformation dynamics of the fluvial landscape due to the installation of the Cistercian abbey in order to let it emerge new issues for the protection and enhancement of Sarno's landscape.

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