

Welcome to the Sarno Valley

Few geographical realities, in Italy, allow to be reached from whatever cardinal point: for a long time, in the valley that takes the name from the river that ploughs it, different streets of earth, of river, of mountains, of sea insist.

This connotation has allowed, from millennia, the fusion of foreign ethnic groups, the passage or the settlement of others; in conclusion, its fortune.

Today, such characteristic is simplified, to the detriment of peculiarity that nothing has to do with changed means of locomotion: the time dimension, a collapsed urban landscape, similar to an imposed microgalaxy.

Nevertheless, the architectural and cultural network, woven in its territory, moulded by the water of the deified river and by the Vesuvius fire, it is not entirely torn. More and more widened parts are recovered: the memory of the traditions, of the environment, of knowledge, in order to propose to the inhabitants and to the curious greedy of art, always in search of lost tastes.

Where should we start, then, to the "discovery" of the Sarno Valley?

We could begin from the three different sources of the river or from the slopes of the Saretto, the mountain that dominates the nowadays Municipality of Sarno.

It was in that places, among the forests once blooming and thick around the secular castle, that Jacopo Sannazaro placed Salices, a small poetic composition dedicated to the nymphs of the classicism, transformed by the god Sarno in the sinuous trees in order to escape the assaults of impetuous satyrs.

A lazy walk, in the late spring or in the incipient autumn, from the ancient suburb below the castle as far as the secluded resort of Foce, satisfies the sight with the open view on the Tyrrhenian, up to the Capri island.

The excursion continues downhill, toward San Valentino Torio, where the inside roads are made cheerful and festive by the original murals that decorate many façades, otherwise anonymous, of city blocks: learned and academic quotations in the iconographic subject alternates to fantastic, coloured and evocative figures.

The small public park recently arranged, instead, extends around a secular chestnut tree, which represents the real beating heart of the park. Further on San Valentino Torio, in San Marzano sul Sarno, another urban park that extends from the center along via Roma, is articulated by the presence of strong platans.

For decades people walked under the wide foliage, pushing through to the ancient and imposing bridge on the river, many times destroyed during the twentieth century, during the second war conflict, in order to obstruct and interrupt in such a way the terrestrial communications toward Scafati.

For a long time the flat land of Scafati has been marked by the presence of innumerable rural houses, not yet completely absorbed by the new housing warp.

All the houses, following the same architectural scheme of the numerous rustic villas of Roman age, individualized and brought to light, preserve the farmyard and the fresh wine cells, waiting for a probable reuse, tuned with the improvement of the banks of the Sarno river which were tightly tied to.

On the east, already in the territory that once belonged to the great Nuceria Alfaterna — one of the most known and florid cities in ancient Campania — we find on the Lattari mountains, that close the Valley to the southward, the Chianiello or a naturalistic park, rich in varied herb essences. From this elevated tableland, situated in the Municipality of Angri, the young people, especially during the greedy day trip into the country on Easter Monday, glance towards the open shores of Castellammare, punctuated by the rock of Rovigliano and by the unmistakable and uncontainable architectural scene of Vesuvius.

For a short time, in the ten thousand square metres of the wide park, the town administration of Angri has also inaugurated the house of the keeper in order to make the area more controlled.

Continuing along the ridge of the mountain, Sant'Egidio del Monte Albino is reached, village which was the birthplace of Aniello Califano, composer of the very famous Neapolitan song Torna a Surriento.

The town territory, declared patrimony of the humanity by Unesco for the luxuriant citrus plantations, containing and protecting, almost a sort of oasis absorbed in the green, the small historical centre that has risen to, become a city symbol, the marmoreal fountain with the representation of the Sarno river, portrayed under deified dress, during the terrestrial and human cycle of life.

The modern road, cutting the mountain, climbs toward the peak through continuous hairpin bends and it goes beyond the Municipality of Corbara: just after an ample ascending curve, the horizon below fans out on the picturesque gulf of Naples and on the earths of the Sarno Valley; once more, at every time of the day, the tortuous bights of the Dragon (such was the name of the river in the Middle Age) and the sweet profile of the volcano dominate the scene.

The small centre clings on the rocky ridge: the tiny districts overlap, sheltered and hidden by the center of the mountain.

Downhill, the yelling Pagani, with its resounds of the thousand ancestral echoes of sacred and profane rites, in an apparently confused and chaotic dimension.

Defined, not without reason, earth of saints, merchants and artists, it still lives the concerted nature of the common faith, in an arcane purifying bath of collective passion, during the Holy Friday. Also at the time of Alfonso Maria de' Liguori, the lawyer saint of the Enlightenment, author of the tender song *Tu scendi dalle stelle*, the human heat was the same as today.

Further from Pagani, going eastwards, one finds Nocera Inferiore, the greatest center in the whole Valley. The Fienga Castle dominates the city, for a long time the summer residence of powerful people. In the castle kings have abode (Charles I of Angiò, Carlo Martello) and secluded queens perished (you can think about the unfortunate widow of Manfredi of Swabia, Elena degli Angeli Comneno, held imprisoned by Charles I of Angiò, until her death, in 1271). August writers found hospitality (Giovanni Boccaccio was guest of Niccolò Acciaiuoli, around the sixties of the fourteenth century) and popes were besieged (Urbano VI in 1385), along the whole arc of a dense millennium of crucial events for the fate of the whole Valley.

An illustrious witness of our time, Mimì Rea, dead for a decade, has set many stories rich in carnal humanity in his *Nofì*, as poetically he defined Nocera, without distinction between the Inferiore one and the adjoining Superiore one. This last town — Nocera Superiore — is dominated by the cylindrical outline of the Rotonda, the suggestive early Christian Baptistery of St. Maria Maggiore, risen to symbol of the Christianity for the whole Agro. Yet the Rotonda for centuries, has been an integral part of a grandiose architectural complex that had in the cathedral, the first Episcopal nocerian seat, its highest expression.

And it is also true that even then toward the end of 1300, Teodorico of Niem, the Teutonic historian in the retinue of Urbano VI describes Nocera as isolated, in a desert moor, where once rose the Roman Forum of Nuceria: "going towards the city of Salerno that is eight miles from the castle of Nocera, on the wide plain there is a venerable basilica nearby which today nobody lives in and that is almost entirely deprived of cult. It seems that it was built in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary and similar to the church of Santa Maria that is in the city of Aquisgrana".

But the monument is not the only one present on the town ground that traces the urban perimeter of the ancient Nuceria: a Hellenistic-Roman theatre and a very rich necropolis constitute till now the buttonhole flower of an urban archaeology projected towards the future.

Soon the most meaningful monuments of the antiquity of all the Sarno Valley will virtually be brought back to light, in all the parts that held them and that currently are no longer visible, thanks to the synergistic work of the Territorial Pact for the Occupation of the Agro Nocerino Sarnese with Italian experts and of the University of Virginia.

We will see to relive the protohistoric princess of the homonym deposition discovered in San Valentino Torio, the warrior and his bride buried and painted in the grave no.1799 (Warrior tomb), the Hellenistic theater, small architectural jewel, in Sarno; another theatre, of greater dimensions, in Pareti (Nocera Superiore), will have raised again statues and columns to the proscenium; terminal cusps, decorated sima, togats and funeral epigraphs will return to their places, along the walls and in the enclosures of the grandiose mausoleums of the necropolis of Pizzone, always in Nocera Superiore.

Also the Baptistery of Santa Maria Maggiore will circle once more around the drum cylinder that supports its dome. And Villa Prete in Scafati? The environments in which life brusquely interrupted, in a not yet specified day of the year 79 A.D. under the devastating and disastrous rain of the vesuvian lapillus, will find again their native function and the industriousness that characterized the whole rural complex.

All as a sort of ingenious and perfect Baroque car of the new times, this time no longer pyrotechnic ephemeral to produce amazement and "meraviglia" (wonder), but highly explanatory and didactical.

Continuing the trip, not always easy among the clamours of the traffic in the conurbation of the Agro, turns northeast, in the direction of Roccapiemonte, doubled the Solano, the mountain in the shape of "a sugar's loaf", as the anonymous English traveller had called it, going to the feast of Materdomini, in the calends of August of 1850. Set in the luxuriant vegetation all around, Roccapiemonte preserves an aura of elegant suburb, in the austerity of the buildings, mainly lined up along corso Mario Pagano, in the sobriety of the churches and of the aristocratic Villa Ravaschieri, summer residence of the illustrious central European patrician family. In the house and in the park, during

the II World War the local German commands settled, while a little further away, in Nocera Superiore, in another stupendous abode, in Villa Lanzara, for a short time the English troops stood up to their enemies. From Roccapiemonte one can reach Castel San Giorgio, or better the Lanzara hamlet, studded with interesting architectural complexes that have as background, the slopes of the mountain on which the ruins of the medieval castle rise, the façade and the garden of the Calvanese Palace. The park, restored to the collectivity, constitutes a beautiful example of Mediterranean garden: characterized by false classical ruins, secular forest trees and precious essences arranged on terracing and cliffs, it gravitates around the central fountain. In this same perspective, a little bit further, toward Siano, in the XVIII century was installed the Conforti Palace, that has changed its original function for a long time.

In Siano our excursion finishes, comforted by the relaxing coolness of the Bosco Borbone or of the cherry trees, in the heat of an August night, during the feast of St. Rocco, when the sky illuminates as in the daylight. The phantasmagoric fireworks lights the darkness: the Sarno Valley echoes with distant and repeated crashes.

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