CHAPTER 13

Alfonso I of Naples and the Art of Building: Castel Nuovo in a European Context*

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The Neapolitan humanist Tristano Caracciolo recounts that when, in 1442, Alfonso entered Naples as the new King of the Two Sicilies, he found Castel Nuovo in a ruinous state, abandoned for many years and severely damaged by the war against the French pretender to the throne, René of Anjou, who claimed legitimate sovereignty of the Kingdom of Naples.1

Alfonso must have been dismayed by such a scene of destruction: he was well aware of the original splendour of the Angevin castle, which he had experienced at first hand when twenty years earlier he had lived in Castel Nuovo for two years, as the adopted son of the last Angevin queen, Joanna II.2 Despite its ruinous state in 1442, Castel Nuovo was immediately occupied by sixty-six members of the Aragonese colony, and Alfonso immediately began to reconstruct the building while he temporarily lived in Castel Capuano.3

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This chapter discusses how Alfonso I of Aragon rebuilt Castel Nuovo, combining his extensive knowledge of castle architecture with his interest in antiquity (Fig. 13.1). By conceiving a building that combined the most innovative military techniques with the new requirements for courtly splendour, Alfonso was responsible for creating a new image of a princely residence, which he consciously intended to rival the castles built by other major rulers of his time. In this context this chapter will consider the architectural competition between Alfonso and Duke Francesco Sforza in Milan, who in the same years was building the castle of Porta Giovia in Milan.

When Alfonso arrived in 1442, Naples offered a choice between five different castles: apart from Castel Nuovo, there were two other castles on the coast, Castel del Carmine and Castel dell’Ovo, while Castel Capuano protected the eastern end of the fortifications towards the inland, and Castel Sant’Elmo dominated the city from the top of the hill of San Martino.4 In selecting Castel Nuovo as his residence, Alfonso took symbolic possession of the city, consolidating a long-established tradition according to which, since its construction at the end of the 13th century, it had been the residence of the king of Naples and therefore the principal centre of Neapolitan political and ceremonial life.5 Under Alfonso, Castel Nuovo became the leading royal site for a kingdom which not only reunited the southern Italian mainland with Sicily after nearly two centuries, but which was now, with the addition of the other Aragonese possessions such as Catalonia, Sardinia, and Corsica, aiming to become even larger.6

Alfonso’s main aim in reconstructing Castel Nuovo was to re-establish its character as a defensive fortress, bringing it up to date with the most advanced military techniques. Through his castle he also wanted to express his own image as the sovereign of a transnational kingdom who wielded a power which, even though monarchical, was free from tyrannical ambitions. All such concepts were rapidly and effectively synthesized in the inscription on the frieze of the lower fornix of the triumphal arch at the entrance to the castle: “Alfonsus Rex Hispanicus Siculus Italicus Pius Clemens Invictus” (“Alfonso, king of Spain, Sicily, Italy, pious, merciful, unconquered”).7

Even though he incorporated several structural elements from the Angevin castle, in the inscription in the frieze of the upper arch of the entrance Alfonso

4 Ibid.
5 Giuliana Vitale, Ritualità monarchica, cerimonie e pratiche devozionali nella Napoli aragonese (Salerno: Carlone, 2006), 51–58.
6 Ryder, Kigdom, passim.
7 Hersey, The Aragonese Arch, 47–48.