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## A rediscovered sign of the medieval identity in the ancient town of Palermo: a tower house in the Kalsa and its historical stratifications

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# A rediscovered sign of the medieval identity in the ancient town of Palermo: a tower house in the Kalsa and its historical stratifications

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## Abstract

A building supposedly belonged to the House of Chiaramonte (or Chiaromonte) in Sicily reached us incorporating into a larger building in the Kalsa district, which is of Islamic foundation, in Palermo. The sudden detachment of the plaster and some stone elements from its façades at the beginning of the 1980s century made it possible to identify the clear traces of a fourteenth-century towered house, characterized by a series of four three-mullioned windows with archivolt made by rings of broken sticks.

## Una testimonianza ritrovata dell'identità medievale nel centro storico di Palermo: una casa-torre nella Kalsa e le sue stratificazioni

Un palazzo presumibilmente appartenuto al Casato dei Chiaramonte (o Chiaromonte) in Sicilia è stato custodito per alcuni secoli all'interno del volume edificato di un edificio nel quartiere della Kalsa, di fondazione islamica, a Palermo. L'improvviso distacco dell'intonaco e di alcuni elementi lapidei all'inizio degli anni Ottanta del XX secolo permettono di identificare le evidenti tracce della facciata di una casa-torre trecentesca, caratterizzata da una serie di quattro trifore con elementi a sesto acuto ed archivolti a ghiera di bastoncini spezzati.

**Keywords:** Sicily, Palermo, Chiaramonte's Architecture, Cefalà Palace, Conservation.

Sicilia, Palermo, Architettura Chiaramontana, Palazzo Cefalà, Conservazione.

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## 1 | Introduction

A gothic building attributable to the House of Chiaramonte in Sicily has been incorporated and kept for some centuries within the volume of Palazzo Cefalà in Alloro street, in the heart of the Kalsa district, that is of Islamic foundation, in Palermo. The naming of the building may be modified in relation to the its more in-depth historical investigation. The unexpected collapse of the upper part of the façade of Palazzo Bonagia (sited right in front of the building) at the beginning of the 1980s century and the violent impact with Palazzo Cefalà façade caused it some serious damages, such as the fall of the plaster and the breaking of some stone elements. After having removed the unsafe parts, the architectural palimpsest has been unveiled and some significant portions of an elegant façade of a fourteenth-century tower house re-emerged, characterized by a series of four gothic windows with pointed arched elements and archivolt with rings of broken sticks, surmounted by a weft of interwoven bows made by two-tone stone elements (calcarenite and lava stones).

The stylistic analysis of the cited architectural remains of the medieval preexistence and the comparison of construction techniques and materials confirmed the Chiaramonte ancestry of the tower house incorporated in the organism of the current larger building: the common formal and constructive matrix of the cited elements with the similar openings and walls of the Palazzo Chiaramonte (the *Steri*) in Palermo is obvious but there are also others that refer to Palazzo Sclafani, built next the Norman Royal Palace [Di Marzo 1858, 317-337]. Some architectural elements also reveal a certain stylistic and building affinity with a medieval building in Protonotaro street and other remains of façades in S. Antonio street in Palermo. The original

towered house in Alloro street, overwritten during subsequent modernization works and transported to the present day, episodically re-emerged from the eighteenth-century façade, further modified until the twentieth century. After the collapse and the partial removal of the plasters, it resulted as a multi-layered architecture which shows a vibrant system of superimposed and intersected layouts, fragmented and discontinuous, of great visual suggestion [Spatrisano 1972, 94; Ventimiglia 2003, 7-30].

This paper is intended to present a summary of the study activities carried out to better qualify origin and building culture such as expressed into the cited medieval openings and identify the architectural traces that coexist in the current conformation of the building, coming up to the definition of the best strategy for its conservation.

## **2 | The Gothic in Sicily and the Chiaramonte's architecture**

The wise and clever policy of the Normans, their tolerance in religious matters and vast cultural interests, early granted the maintenance and development of the three cultures, Greek, Arab and Latin, existing in Sicily at the time of their conquest (started in 1061). In the peaceful coexistence, the process of assimilation of these three communities began together with the formation of that culture that assumed great prestige in the Christian western world [Spatrisano 1972, 15]. On this political and social background, the style that frames the chapter of the fourteenth and fifteenth-century architecture in Sicily is still Gothic, declined in a serene balance of the three main artistic trends of the time: the trend traditionally faithful to the Arab-Norman motifs founding the so-called "Chiaramonte architecture", the architectural trend of the Durazzos and Catalan gothic styles (not without some original local reworking) and, although to a lesser extent, the Renaissance renewal movement.

The architectural scene of the fourteenth century was certainly very lively and rich in meaning, as the talented stonemasons and decorators gathered the suggestions offered by the local architecture of the past formulating an eclectic, composite and typically Sicilian language, with original stylistic features somehow connected to ideals of the population [Spatrisano 1972, 51-61; Giuffrè 1996, 33-48].

Some historical research confirmed the relationship between Palermo (the capital of the island) and the Gothic, attesting there were fruitful cultural exchanges in the Mediterranean area even later, thanks to the constant presence and conspicuous activity of artists, sculptors and architects between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries [Calandra 1938; Meli 1958; Nobile 1995, 95-103; Garofalo, Nobile 2007, 7-22].

The urban dwellings of the House of Chiaramonte prove to share some substantial stylistic features that were recurrent in Sicily during the fourteenth century, such as the stone use in zig-zag mouldings of Anglo-Norman origin (broken sticks) set in the laced rings of the portals and the two or three-pointed arched windows (mullioned or trifora), very common even in other southern Italian territories, like the Amalfi's district and Neapolitan areas. They were currently implemented in order to beautify the external and internal facades of churches, palaces, monasteries, bell-towers, convents and hospitals. This stylistic code rapidly became a clear signal of political power.

The Chiaramontes arrived in Italy and settled in Sicily at the time of the Norman conquest, affirming their hegemonic role under the Swabian and Aragonese dominations. A branch of the family remained in Puglia. Federico was a son of Ugo Chiaramonte (probably the first arrived in the isle in 1066), who married Marchisia Prefolio in Agrigento; Manfredi, Giovanni and Federico II were born from their marriage, soon starting the rise of the family in the island. They became

prominent members of the Parliament of the Kingdom of Sicily established after the assembly of the Curiae Generales convened in Palermo by Roger II of Hauteville in 1130. The saga of the dynasty ended in 1392 with the death of Andrea, beheaded in front of the Chiaramonte Palace in Palermo. The genealogical tree of the Casato of Chiaramonte in Sicily was traced in Spatrisano [Spatrisano 1972, 271-276; Sessa 2000, 214].

The Chiaramontes built a considerable number of religious, civil and military buildings, many of which still existing in western Sicily (*Vallo di Mazara*) and the county of Modica, since the beginning of the fourteenth century. Signs of common gothic pattern are also found in England, France, Normandy and in various places where architectures characterized by the same stylistic and constructive features are observed [Fanelli 2007, 331-354].

According to some hypotheses, the heads of the family had begun their work of architectural embellishment since two centuries before the Norman invasion of Sicily [Sessa 2000, 221]. Becoming extremely powerful in the isle along the fourteenth century, the Chiaramontes demonstrated their influence through the construction of many civil and religious buildings, in which they imposed their artistic seal resorting to the moulding of zig-zag sticks (a sort of family mark), an architectural connotation that came from the Arabs and that was adopted by the Normans for decorating portals, columns and windows [Mauro, Sessa 2004, 36-65]. Before to be observed in Palermo, this architectural feature was adopted in the city of Agrigento and its neighbourhoods, because the state-owned city of *Girgenti* (Agrigento's ancient name) had already been under the direct jurisdiction of the Chiaramontes for a certain period. It's important to underline that the cited architectural connotations are not apparent in the buildings of other hegemonic Sicilian families of the time, like the Sclafanis, the Ventimiglias and the Moncadas [Sessa 2000, 213]. The ancient building discovered in Alloro street in Palermo added some fundamental elements to the knowledge of Sicilian architecture of the fourteenth century: it reveals many stylistic and formal features which can be observed also in other edifices, such as in Palermo both in the *Steri* palace (the main residence of the Chiaramontes, built since the beginning of the fourteenth century) and the palace of the Sclafanis, started to build in the 1430s. It also shows some similarities to other architectures of the same period, even if some features may suggest it can be earlier.

### 3 | The road of the Laurel in the Islamic district of Kalsa

Retracing the urban evolution of the place in which the building developed can add some elements to the reasoning on Cefalà Palace and its medieval inclusion. Alloro street was the main road of the Islamic citadel, assuming different names over time. A large laurel tree grown in the courtyard of Palazzo Bellacera was explanted in December 1804 due to the intrusive size it had reached, but Rosario La Duca clarified that the name of the street has remained unchanged even after the removal of its remains. The road however had different names over the centuries [Morso 1827, 209; La Duca 1985].

After the impetuous flood of the Kemonia river in 1557, the city Senate diverted the river's path towards the bed of the Oreto river; the ancient riverbed was filled and a new road was established in the available area, first called the "road of the Germans" (*Strada dei Tedeschi*). Villabianca reported that the dwellings "of the halberdiers of the Germans palace" (*Tedeschi alabardieri di palazzo*, i.e. the Alemannic troops that formed the Viceroy's personal guard) rose along it, but he did not introduce detailed references to their precise locations [Gaetani 1760, 122; La Duca 1984].

A description of the *Ruga de Alamani* is reported in a parchment dated 1293, stored in the archival documents of Palermo *Tabulario della Magione* (TM)<sup>1</sup>. It is therefore specified the location of

<sup>1</sup> Palermo, Archivio di Stato, *Tabulario della Magione*, parchment dated 11 May 1293, TM 257.



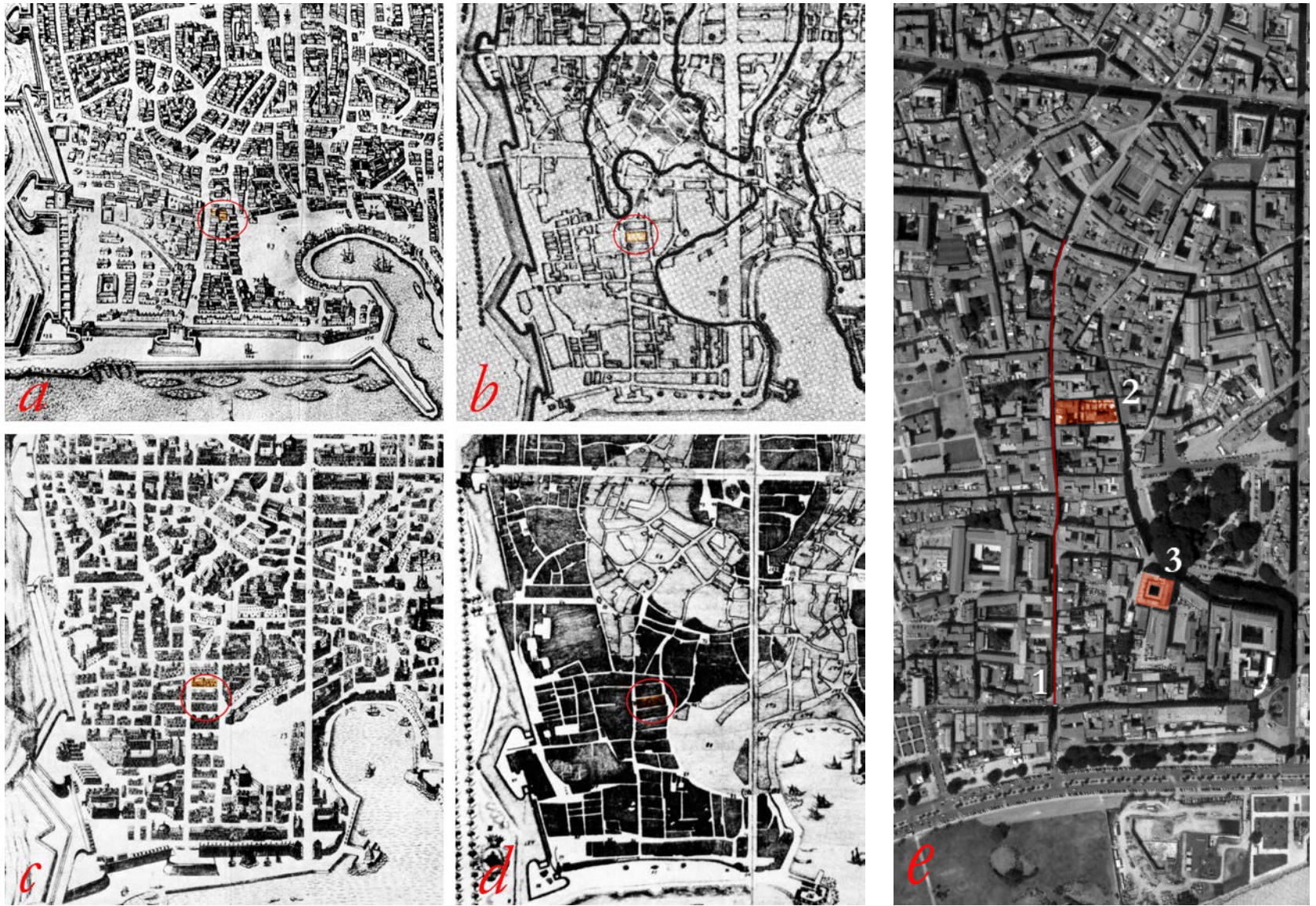


Fig. 1: Palermo, the Kalsa old district and the case-study building in the historical and current maps: a) Georg Braun, Franz Hogenberg, *Palermo*, in *Civitates Orbis Terrarum: Liber quartus Urbium Praecipuarum totius Mundi*, Colonia, Koeman, 1588-97, tabula LVI, part.; b) Domenico Campolo, *Palermo*, 1726, part., Biblioteca Comunale of Monreale; c) Antonio Bova, *Palermo nel terremoto del primo settembre 1726*, part., in A. Mongitore, *Palermo ammonito, penitente e grato nel formidabil terremoto del primo settembre 1726*, Palermo, Felicella e Gramignani, 1727; d) Francesco Maria Emanuele Gaetani marchese di Villabianca, *Pianta geometrica e novella secondo lo stato presente della città di Palermo...*, 1777, part. [de Seta, Di Mauro 1998, 6, 71, 106, 107]; e) Alloro street (1), Palazzo Cefalà (2) and Palazzo Chiaramonte (3) in a current aerial view.

the Cistercian House of the Magione, in a street that was only one road away from the *Ruga de Alamannis* (that is the closest parallel) and nine streets from the Oreto river. At that time, the river was also called *Abbes* in Arabic or *fiume dell'Ammiraglio*. The parchments dated 14 August 1293 (TM 259) and 27 February 1384 (TM 670) contain references to the *ruga nova* too. The scrolls of the *Tabularium* are kept in the State Archives of Palermo, housed in the former monastery of Gancia. Its cartography can be consulted also at the State's archive seat in Vittorio Emanuele street. This evidences that the road was already existing at the end of the thirteenth century; consequently, it cannot be identified as the road located in the area of Kemonia river. The document clarifies that the Cistercian monastery of Magione was built in an area close to the *Aleman-ni* road, which should be identified as the current Alloro street [Lo Cascio 2011, 161-162, 363]. The remains of the fourteenth-century building recognizable through the cited medieval openings discovered onto the facades of Palazzo Cefalà have confirmed the historic position of this street and the near alley as preserved over centuries. The height of the street level was instead modified when a vast landfill of the two riverbeds of Palermo was made by the Cistercians of the Magione reclaiming the area of *Chalesa* (or *Kalsa*, the Arab quarter) [Tomaselli 1997, 284-295; D'Angelo, Garofano 1997, 296-310]. Today's path of Alloro street partly corresponds to the main road of the Arab citadel *Al Halisah*, where the administrative headquarters and residence of the Emir were allocated to get a safer fortified site for the control of attacks from the sea and the defense against internal incursions of the local population. Around 973, the Islamic citadel was one of the five independent and circumscribed quarters that constituted the structure of a multifaceted and cosmopolitan city [Hawqal 1880; Ruta 2009]. During the medieval expansion of the city, the ancient road of the Laurel confirmed its role as a fundamental urban fulcrum: the construction of Gancia's church and Palazzo Abatellis, two of the most celebrated edifices of Aragonese origin, rectified its route to the sea, so creating the basis for the subsequent interventions in the Baroque age [Sommariva 2004, 307; Giuffrè 2006, 158-161; Nobile 2007, 39]. All through the sixteenth century, the entire area was reformed through the opening of new roads. Between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the most important noble families of Palermo built their palaces along Alloro street, according to Villabianca, such as "a sequence of magnificent buildings" that persisted until the sunset and the impoverishment of the baronage, that then caused the slow abandonment and decay of those palaces [Gaetani 1760].

#### 4 | The current palace and the discovery of the fourteenth-century house

The history of the palace that belonged to the Dukes of Cefalà is as complex as the urban events of the district and the road along which it stands. The architectural organism is part of the system of long blocks, divided by narrow lanes whose origins date back to 1421, today marked by some second post-war reconstructions. The nucleus built in the Chiaramontes' period re-emerged after the collapse of the façade of the Bonagia palace and the subsequent removal of the plaster from the main façade of Palazzo Cefalà. According to some sources, the original nucleus of the palace was built in the late fifteenth century, being then repeatedly transformed since the sixteenth century [Chirco 2006, 198]. In his *Palermo restaurato* manuscript, Vincenzo Di Giovanni reports that the palace of Vincenzo Pizzinga, once a royal residence, was in the "strada del lauro" next the house of Bellacera (today's palazzo San Gabriele). It can be assumed that the Pizzingas owned the palace at least until 1456 [Di Giovanni 1615, 144, 234]. During the sixteenth century, the Cefalà palace certainly belonged to the Pezzingas, family of Pisan origin long established in Palermo and Messina<sup>2</sup> [Gaetani 1760, 122; Patricolo 1986, 104; La Duca 2000].

<sup>2</sup> Archivio di Stato di Palermo (Sezione della Gancia), *Carte Gesuitiche*, grant act of 1857.



During the fifteenth century, the palace began to be enlarged; the promulgation of King Martino's Pragmatics in 1421, allowed who wanted to expand noble palaces to acquire small buildings or courtyards in the next surroundings, by paying their market value increased by a third as taxing. The revision of the urban structure of the district and the transformation of the buildings started at that time. The document, in addition to dictating rules relating to new buildings, authorized the expansion of the existing palaces based on the incorporation, unification or demolition of old structures.

According to the Marquis of Villabianca, the ownership of the building passed to Nicolò Diana Castello, Duke of Cefalà, in 1615. He was the first duke of the territory of Cefalà Diana, as let him with concession of the title in 1684, representing one of the most important family figures [Gaetani 1760]. Francesco Maria Emanuele Gaetani, Marquis of Villabianca, in the manuscript Palermo d'oggiorno, compiled in the last decades of the eighteenth century, clarifies some changes in the building ownership. The extension of the building took place during the eighteenth century when the original layout was altered. A new large portal was opened in the main façade, that was completely revised in its general setting and design, opening new windows and plastering it [Piazza, Scaduto 1995, 543-562; Scaduto 2000; Scaduto 2013, 57-68]. The palace was bought by Alessandro Filangeri, Prince of Cutò and Marquis of Lucca in 1673. Gaspere Guercio (engineer of the Senate) and Carlo Mansanto (master builder) produced an estimation to evaluate the building setting, as well as the interventions necessary to «meliorare e quella ingrandire e farà una casa più ammanata che daria decoro e magnificientia alla città». The act was stipulated by the notary Domenico Cirafici on 7 August 1673; today it is preserved in the State Archive of Palermo [Giuffrè 1995, 543-562; Romeo, 2007].

In 1816, the property passed to the family La Grua Talamanca, to which belonged the Princes of Carini; in 1859 it was sold to Ignazio Pilo, the Count of Capaci. The large building was then divided between many owners, thus more modifying its layout. The act stating the emphyteusis of the wide property was written on 10 September 1859 by the notary Giovanni Pietro Azzarello in Palermo. Nowadays, Palazzo Cefalà's fronts have a degraded and incomplete aspect due to the damage caused by the collapse of the façade of Palazzo Bonagia, placed just in front of it. Then, the bombing of Palermo during the air raids in 1943 produced serious damage within the district of Kalsa and all the city of Palermo.

On the basis of the metric survey, instrumental investigations and stylistic comparison with other buildings resulting from the synthesis of Hispanic and late gothic elements of Anglo-Norman origin, traditionally ascribed to the Sicilian tradition of the Chiaramontes' architecture, it is maybe opportune to reformulate the hypothesis about the foundation of the building, placing it during the first half of the fourteenth century, slightly prior or contemporary to the construction of Chiaramonte Palace, the family main urban edifice in piazza Marina, and the Sclafanis' Palace in the area of Royal Palace.

The topographic survey of the entire building was carried out in 2002 by using an electronic total station. The main façade of Cefalà Palace was detected by photogrammetric procedures and investigated through thermography too. The mineralogical-petrographic characterization of calcarenite taken from the front of the medieval building confirmed that it is the same stone used in Palazzo Chiaramonte, i.e. the main urban residence of the family, of proven dating. Moreover, the dimensions of the small blocks of stone are the same in the two cited buildings. The identity of the first owner of the building is unknown but the Chiaramontes and Sclafanis dominate the local political scene since the beginning of the fourteenth century and stimulate



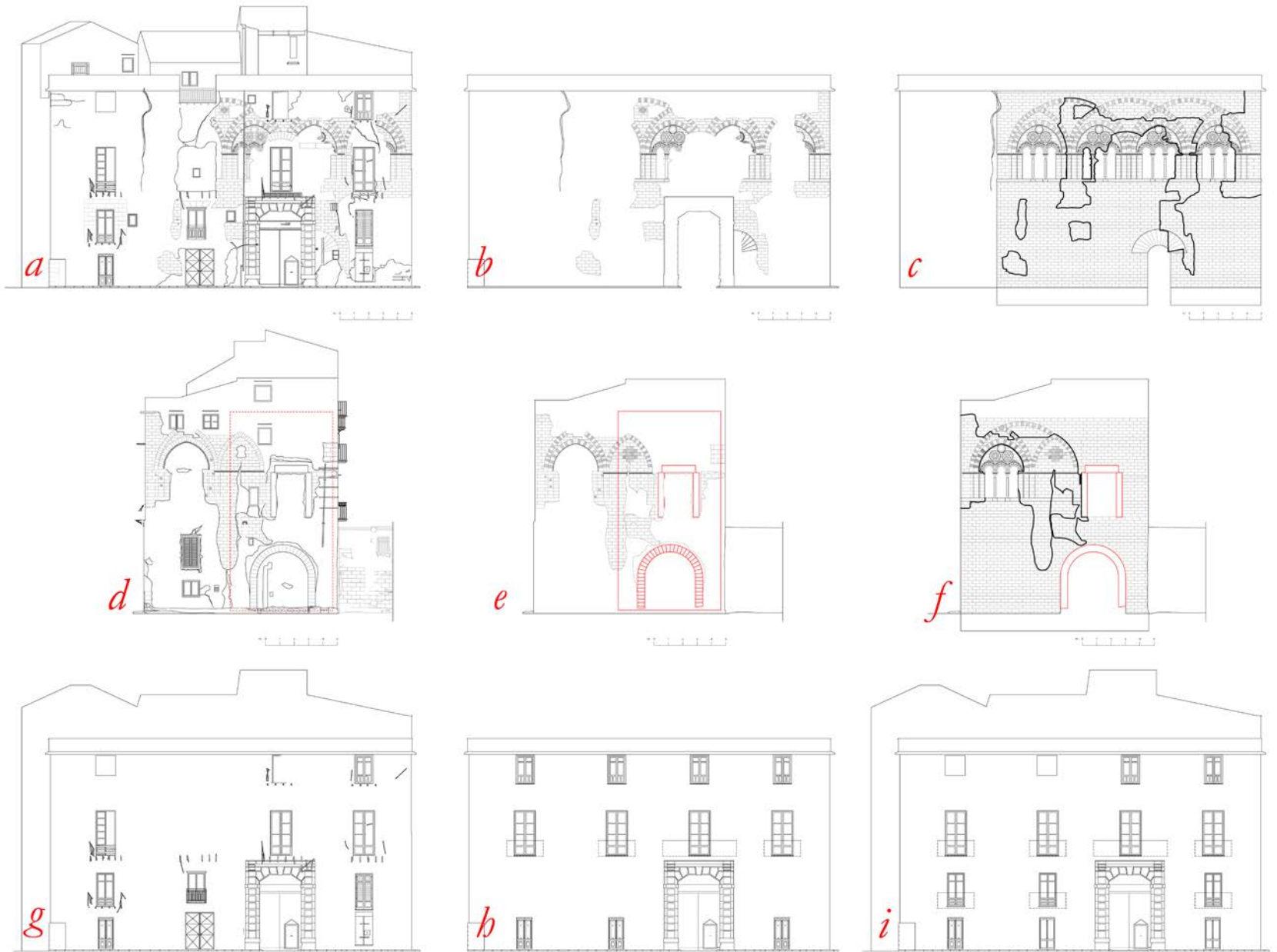


Fig. 2: Palermo, palazzo Cefalà, the external façades and details of the supposed building phasing; identification of the original architectural elements and the hypothesis about the fronts of the fourteenth century tower house (a-c main façade, d-f side front); the hypothesis about the eighteenth-century façade alteration in time (g-i). The traces of a pre-existing tower (perhaps dating back to the Islamic domination) then incorporating into the medieval edifice can be seen in the side front hypothesized in red, d-f (by the author).

Fig. 3-4: Palermo, Cefalà Palace. The front damaged by the collapse of the façade of Palazzo Bonagia, before the removal of the plaster and recent reinstating of the surfaces (photo 3 by Giovanni Trovato, early 1990's; photo 4 by the author).



the edification of new buildings characterized by specific stylistic features [Spatrisano 1972, 51-52, 80; Capitano, 1974; Ventimiglia 2003, 31-145]. The large three-light window on the main floor of Palazzo Chiaramonte in Palermo, which opens to the internal courtyard, presents a significant consonance with the remains of the windows re-emerged under the plaster of Palazzo Cefalà: the general layout, the constructive system, the main features defining the style of their decorations have unquestionably many traits in common each other. By reading the signs left by their stonemasons, formal and geometric characteristics, it is possible to frame the building in the Chiaramontes' artistic culture, revealing its assonances and affinities to other edifices and structures owned to that family, which are attributed and dated philologically [Spatrisano 1972]. The comparison between the three-light windows allows us to formulate the hypothesis that the same hands worked them, perhaps in similar time too. The three-light windows of the two buildings are designed following similar proportions, using approximately the same decorative elements and building materials. The slightly protruding bi-chromic bands that develop intersecting arches in succession above these three-light windows are also present in the façade of Palazzo Sclafani, similarly to the other cited cases, both for the proportions and the building materials. Some details are also common in two other fourteenth-century buildings in Palermo, sited in Protonotaro street and S. Antonio street, of which less extensive or only episodic pieces have been preserved [Ventimiglia 2003, 13; Sutera 2007, 31-38; Scibilia 2007, 113]. It should be excluded that about a century passed between architectures that (basing on a meticulous comparative stylistic and constructive analysis) reveal the work of artisans who bear the same technical-artistic culture related, at most, to two successive generations of stone masters.

### 5 | The visual poles of the Chiaramonte: architecture, politics and image

The structural collapse occurred in Alloro street in the early eighties of the twentieth century fortunately did not produce victims, although the facade of Palazzo Cefalà was seriously damaged by the collision: the road was completely blocked by the rubble consisting of stone elements, pieces of plaster and remains of the iron railings of the balconies. The fall was sudden and certainly due to the absence of static equipment in the remains of Bonagia Palace, largely landed in the course of the bombing of Palermo during the Second World War. Removed the debris, the detachment of the finishes from the façade brought back to light the architectural elements of a medieval building that should be recognized as a towered house belonging to the Chiaramonte's architectural culture [Ventimiglia 2003, 24]. In this regard, it is appropriate to re-

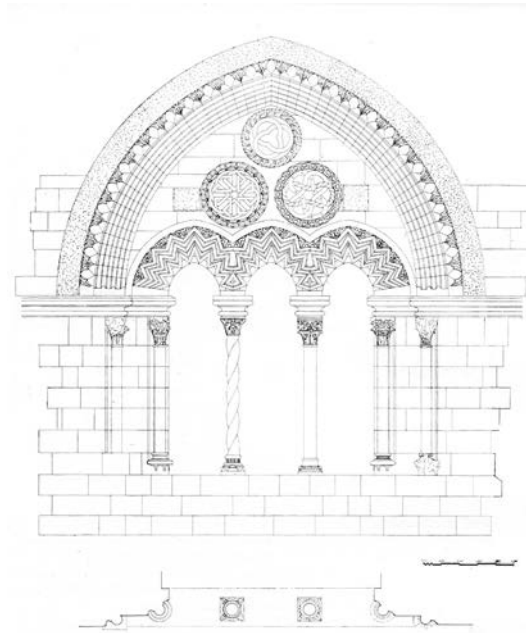


Fig. 5-6: Comparison between the fourteenth-century windows of Palazzo Cefalà (left) and Palazzo Chiaramonte in Palermo [Spatrisano 1972, 52].

call some aspects of the Chiaramonte's building policy and the distinctive features of the architectural language of their buildings. The dwellings belonging to the Chiaramonte in Sicily recall some figurative features of the fortified structures built by the king Frederick II Hohenstaufen [Di Blasi 1846; Maurici 1985, 3-25; Belvedere, Santoro 1994; Di Stefano, Cadei 1995, 367-696; Giuffrè 1997, 215-234; Maurici 2015, 18-27]. They are characterized by the formulation of a specific trend – recognizable as “the Chiaramonte's architecture” – directly related to the Sicilian medieval tradition mixing Norman and Swabian building cultures. However, the defensive vocation is here coordinated to the residential one, creating a scenario of rigorous solemnity. The powerful dynasty of noble warriors, wealthy owners of fiefdoms, great patrons of arts and architectural promoters, expressed indeed a definite political image, even in competition with the royal programs of the Aragon dynasty of Sicily [Di Marzo 1858, 317-337; Sessa 2016, 131-156]. Unlike the other families gathered around the first kings of Sicily of the Aragon court, the Chiaramonte demonstrated a clear desire to make their buildings recognizable since the first decade of the fourteenth century. They assigned a key role to the pointed portals and windows (single, double or triple) adorned with archivolts that circumscribe radial segments mainly defined by stone or lava inlays, with shaped bosses or with complex radial rings carved in stone. These architectural elements usually appear molded with concentric motifs of broken zig-zag sticks; some stylistic recurrences are to be attributed to probable transfers of exceptionally skilled carvers and stonemasons operating in various sites [Di Marzo 1858, 317; Capitano 1974; Santoro, Belvedere 1994; Filangeri 2000; Lima A. I. 2006; Rizzuto 2009, 389-394; Lima 2015, 13-



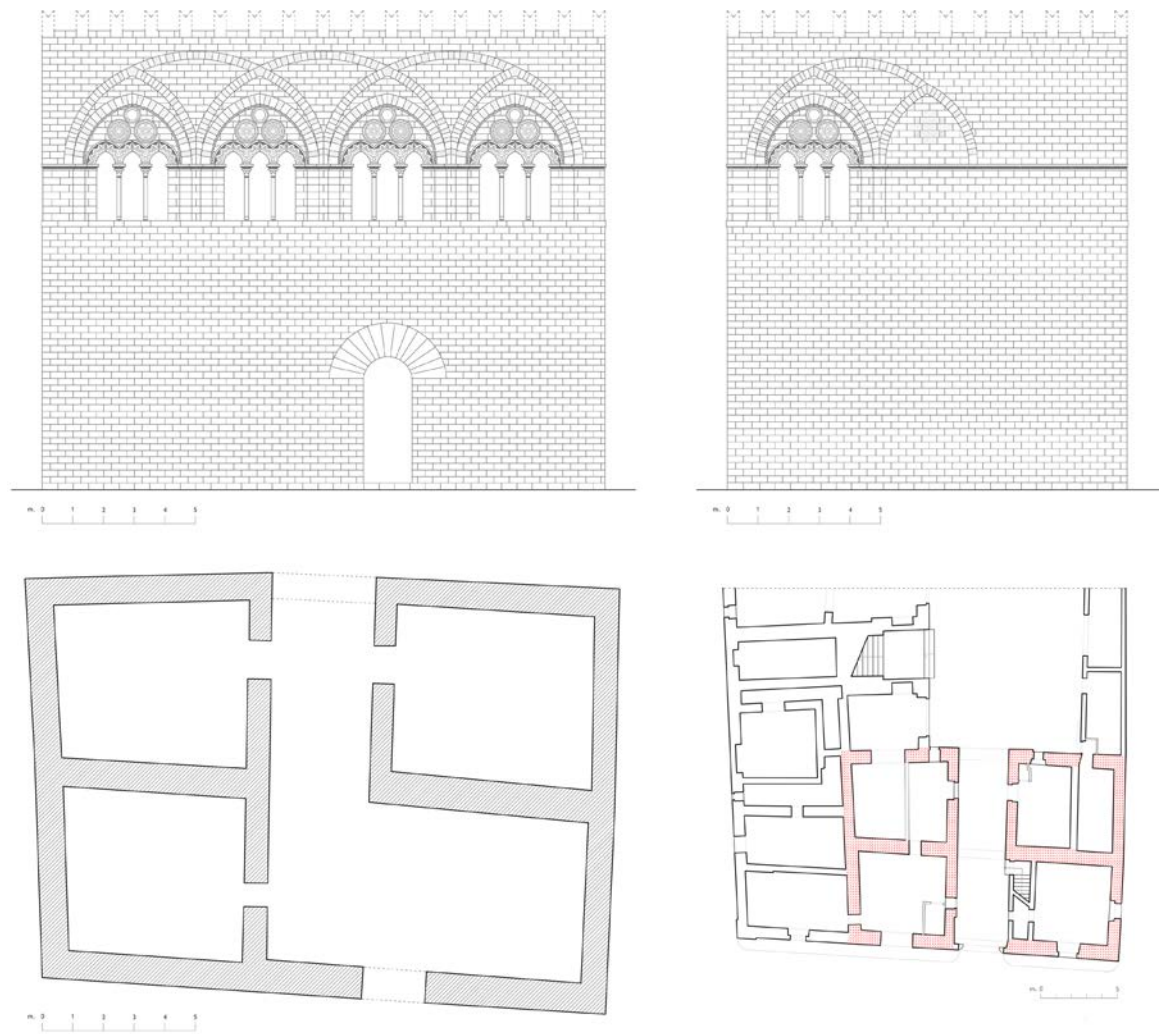


Fig. 7: Palermo, the Chiaramonte's former architecture englobed in the current Cefalà Palace in Palermo: graphic hypothetic reconstruction of the medieval fronts based on the metric survey of its current material evidences (the crowning battlements are not verified by any evidences) and graphic reconstruction of its ground floor plan in the current planimetric layout of the building (by the author).

31]. According to Ettore Sessa, «i Chiaramonte [...] si distinguono nel novero dei tanti feudatari dell'isola anche per una sorta di programmatica attività edificatoria che, oltre alla realizzazione di chiese e complessi monastici e ad ingenti opere di fortificazione e infrastrutturali su gran parte del territorio siciliano, riguardò un formidabile ciclo di dimore. [...] Un'architettura di questa dinastia doveva essere sempre riconoscibile quale parte del medesimo sistema di dominio, non tanto per la presenza di insegne e sigle araldiche quanto per il comune denominatore stilistico» [Sessa 2000, 213]. Once the War of Vespers was over, the Sicilian aristocracy re-launched its feudal vocation, even by a systematic defensive redevelopment of their premises, building or restoring castles, fortified villages and towers. It has been pointed out that «questa nobiltà, pur





Fig. 8: Palermo, Cefalà Palace. Remains of the sequence of four three-mullioned windows in a photogrammetric image of the façade processed in November 2002 [Ventimiglia 2003].

facendo del feudo nell'interno montuoso dell'isola il proprio punto di forza sia economico che di potere armato [...] inizia ad assumere un ruolo egemone anche nelle città eleggendole a luogo di residenza e di organizzazione dei sistemi di possedimenti e affari ma vi importa, trasformando prevalentemente "tenimenti di case" acquisiti solitamente per fasi successive, il modello munito di dimora, quasi sempre con dipendenze limitrofe» [Sessa 2000, 217].

The typology of the towered house had been already quite widespread in Sicily, especially within the coastal towns with conspicuous mercantile activities and flourishing Jewish communities, as in Palermo, mainly in the urban district of *Kalsa* and in the area surrounding the port. The aspiration to set up an influential *Signoria* soon determined a type of noble variant of the tower house model, characterized by its stereometric aspect and marked defensive imprint. To this political and architectural background must be then traced back the rediscovered testimony of the Chiaramonte's building long remained incorporated within the organism of Palazzo Cefalà until its sudden resurfacing.

### 6 | (Re-)Emerging architecture as a sign of urban memory

As already clarified, a collapse of the higher portion of the façade of Palazzo Bonagia, due to the abandonment of the building, happened in 1981. Because of the violent impact of the stone blocks to the front facade of Palazzo Cefalà, all the protruding parts on the road were damaged or completely removed, as well as a portion of the masonry collapsed. The roadway was invaded by rubble in the collapse area and the local Soprintendenza ai Beni Culturali e Ambientali supervised a following phase of monitoring and emergency measure. The detachment of some pieces of plaster brought to light some masonry elements hidden for centuries under the covering layers and a first intervention on the front of the building was financed in 1997. The necessary intervention consisted of cognitive investigations to be carried out by removing the plaster to completely uncover the architecturally relevant elements; at that time, no other preliminary study action (also through instrumental diagnostic investigations) was carried out; at that time, no other preliminary study action (also through instrumental diagnostic investigations) was carried out. The first phase of the "liberation" ended in February 1998, when it was announced that "struc-

Fig. 9-11: Comparison between the windows of some fourteenth century palaces in Palermo. Chiaramonte palace on the left, Cefalà palace at the centre and the series of windows at the main floor of palazzo Sclafani on the right (photos by the autor).





tures of significant architectural importance” came to light during the execution of the cognitive tests; that is why a further inspection of the Superintendence technicians was requested. On 19 February 1998, following an on-site inspection and the building survey, the total removal of the finishing layers (some of high historical interest) was considered indispensable although the most current culture of restoration prohibits carrying out “liberation” treatment on ancient buildings. Once the scaffolding had been removed, it was clear the pointed triple-arched system of windows that could be seen on the façade in Alloro street is an emanation of the same architectural culture that created the three-light window that opens towards the inner courtyard of the Chiaramonte Palace, sculpted by the same masters of stone carvers. But there are also affinities with the stylistic formulation of the building that Matteo Sclafani (related to the Chiaramonte) built in Palermo in 1330 near the Royal Palace. Ettore Sessa recently reminded that the facades of the Palazzo Sclafani «sono modulati con eleganza calligrafica sublimata nella trama di archi intrecciati sul paramento in corrispondenza del piano nobile», the same ones emerging on the façade of Cefalà Palace, even if there with less severe proportions [Sessa 2000, 213-228].

## **7 | Constructional features and proposals for the conservation of the architectural palimpsest**

All the ancient buildings in the historical districts of the European towns are often the result of a long and complex series of construction, redevelopment, connection of buildings previously arisen, transformation, but also of functional and aesthetic revisions frequently connected to social or political factors. The structural and stratigraphic knowledge of a building is one of the fundamental requirements to approach the understanding of heritage buildings, the basic factor for appropriately designing their conservation and enhancement.

The structural instabilities of the case study were to be directly related to typology, dimensioning and state of preservation of its direct and continuous masonry foundations: the centuries-old building history of the edifice seemed to highlight the hypothesis of non-homogeneous behaviour towards seismic events. Furthermore, although not directly hit by the bombs during the Second World War, the strong vibrations and fires caused by the explosions in the neighbouring certainly determined consequences on the state of its structure and materials during the Second World War. The cultural address now shared and confirmed by the cultural heritage rules considers a preliminary diagnostic approach as an indispensable initial phase to understand and assess the building behaviour, not only the seismic one, from which basically must derive any actions to be carried out on it later [Ventimiglia 2003, 32-145].

The outer faces of the walls structuring the fourteenth-century building here studied are made up of small blocks of calcarenite laid with a minimum quantity of mortar. The impression of a dry pose is probably offered by the outermost layer of the walls, which add an aesthetic value to the structural role. The thickness of the fourteenth-century masonry is about ninety centimeters, but the building seems to have incorporated a preexisting older structure that may possibly be a tower of the Arab settlement. The constructive typology of the bearing walls is substantially the same that can be found in the Chiaramonte and Sclafani Palaces in Palermo, and in other architectures attributable to the same artistic trend in Sicily.

Moreover, these annotations of a historical, technological and aesthetic nature lead us to hypothesize the hasty closure of the fourteenth-century construction site of the tower-house in Alloro street, due to the displacement or higher concentration of workers in a site of greater prestige, such as that of the *Osterio Magno* in Piazza Marina. A careful analysis of the surfaced remains has confirmed that only one of the four original windows was completed in its decorative



Fig. 12: Proposal for the restoration of Palazzo Cefalà in Palermo: preservation of all the architectural elements that can be attributed to each phase of the transformation of the building and critical reintegration of the gaps in the plaster. Below: graphic overlay between the nineteenth-century facade and the front view of the Chiaramonte tower-house (by the author).

Fig. 13, next page: Palermo, Palazzo Cefalà, current view of the main front on Via Alloro and partial view toward the side alley (photo by the author).





apparatus; the other are cruder, with smooth rosettes and without the articulated decorations with arabesques of branches and leaves carved in stone. In a moment that cannot be specified, the stonemasons were probably moved to work on the upper level of the large Palace in Piazza Marina (then left incomplete) and, probably, they were also asked to realize a three-light window able to match the allure of those already made in a minor architecture, that is the tower house just built along the road of the Laurel, one of the buildings of the House of Chiaramonte. The insertion of the three-light window that opens into the loggia of the inner court in the main floor of the *Steri* is considered by some historians to be later than the first erection of the walls. This hypothesis was based on the simple highlighting of the diversity of the window in the court compared to the smaller and two-dimensional ones in the external fronts, even if enhanced by lava inserts [Spatrisano 1972, 39-87; Lima 2015, 13-31].

Based on the new acquisitions, the hypothesis can be considered founded and reasonable since the palace in the “road of laurel” seems to anticipate the realization of the three-light window in the main residence of the Chiaramonte family near the port of Palermo; those rediscovered windows may probably be considered as a sort of prototype for the most refined and mature formulation that can be observed in the *Steri*.

After the Second World War, the structure of the building changed further with the creation of the mezzanine floors. The repopulation of the historic center of Palermo and the transition to the new owners then determined more divisions, elevations and additions. New masses weigh on the structures of the building that grew by modifying its shape, with possible repercussions in terms of static vulnerability of the ancient building.

The building is to be considered an interesting case for the development of a project and a restoration site due to its state of conservation and the presence of many historical stratifications. The remains of a rare example of artificial stone plaster (perhaps the oldest one to have survived in Palermo) can be identified in the main façade of the building [Ventimiglia 2012, 131]. The intervention strategy must begin with a general technique of pre-consolidation of stone and finishing surfaces for the reason that all the material components must be preserved in the multi-layered façade. The consolidation and cleaning of every evidence of plaster and stone on the external fronts must be performed on the detached or swollen parts, choosing techniques based on the use of water, cleaning compresses, non-abrasive and high manual control; consolidating micro-injections are also among the procedures to be performed in the restoration site. Some gaps can be filled with a compatible mortar properly composed and pigmented but made distinguishable with respect to ancient mortars. After having carried out the preliminary compatibility and efficacy diagnostic tests (on-site and laboratory ones), the type of consolidating substance (as the ethyl silicate) and its solvent will be evaluated for the applications on stone elements [Musso 2013, 225; Ventimiglia 2008, 253].

A very prudent and highly conservative restoration should be carried out on the two facades with the fourteenth-century remains where, after the cleaning and consolidation of the wall pieces and finishing surfaces, it will be possible to fill the gaps with plaster properly distinguishing the new surfaces from the ancient one. This can be performed by using a pigmented lime mortar in such a way as to redraw the shapes of the missing parts (as windows, archivolts and overlying bands) in simplified silhouettes, only with very minimal protrusions or recesses that will be highlighted by the way light affects the fronts.

Operating according to the most current theoretical formulation of the restoration discipline, the criteria of the potential reversibility and the distinctiveness of the added parts will be re-

spected; moreover, the potential unity of the work will be achieved without falsifying the historical testimony. Any possible stylistic completion of the defective parts must be strictly excluded. Fascinated by the chiaroscuro suggestion of the older facade and subsequent revisions, the observer will be guided in understanding the Chiaramonte's elements and stimulated to the mental definition of a unitary image, without implementing anachronistic reinstating.

## 8 | Conclusions

The rediscovered architectural testimony is certainly one of the visual poles of a system of political and cultural control in the historical dimension of Palermo and late medieval Sicily, established by the House of Chiaramonte.

The knowledge and conservation of an ancient building that has undergone numerous changes over the centuries require a rigorous and interdisciplinary analytical approach and this research tends to confirm some aspect about the dynamics of the genesis of the fourteenth-century tower-house. The original building kept changing over time and extended its volume to occupy the entire block, incorporating some adjacent buildings; a new façade redefined its front on via Alloro covering all the traces of its previous medieval connotations. In cases like this, the study is very complex because of the scarcity or absence of historical sources or archival documentation. In conservative terms, reasoning about the need for the restoration of the building and the methodological approach to develop it, the questions are no less complex for reasons of various nature, for example, operational, critical, aesthetic or the ones related to the need to guarantee a potentially unitary reading of the monumental ensemble, excluding a classificatory and selective approach to the established historical phases.

Of course, the episodic character of the architectural fragments bound together, the lacunose parts and the re-emergence of numerous material components, of various ages and styles, could confuse the ideas. The ancient building, in cases like this, is characterized by many evidences of great historical value, but the forms of degradation and structural damage to be remedied through a restoration work site make the research activities more complicated.

Based on the assumption that history is an uninterrupted process, the lack of elements that define a unitary framework should never lead to the anachronistic choice to restore the style by reconstructing the lost parts where they were and as they were. For these reasons, the case briefly presented here is certainly interesting in order to reflect on the issue of material authenticity, and on the very current theme of the critical reintegration of the incomplete image, very dear to the Italian restoration culture [Dalla Negra 2017, 34-65].

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