

The Rectorate of the University of Palermo A Piece of History of the Town

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Excellencies, authorities, dear colleagues and friends, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honour for me to have the opportunity of addressing you the warmest welcome personally and on behalf of the University of Palermo. Being a chemist, although an industrial one – you know, nobody is perfect – I easily recognize, in the program of your congress, highly valued research and strong elements of innovation.

Let me stress the symbolic relevance of this Congress, which opens the series of events devoted to the celebration of the two hundred years of life of our University.

I have been asked, by the organizers, to address you a welcome speech, focussed on the history of this University, and I have chosen to enter into the matter through the history of the building where the rectorate is placed, building which represents a consistent part of the history of the town of Palermo.

But before starting to tell the story, let me express some feelings I am sure you share with me, on the particular role universities are called to play, connected to the tragic events occurring in the world, due to intolerance, incommunicability, incapability of understanding each other the reciprocal reasons and motivations. Language of science extends per se over nations and has been in any occasion the main way for maintaining the relationships between communities elsewhere hostile each other. You are, attending this meeting, speaking words of wisdom and peace, with the feeble voice of reason, against the blind aggression of terrorism and violence.

And now let me enter into my story, which begins in the fourteenth century, in times very distant from that in which our university was founded, when Sicily, after different dominations following the collapse of the roman empire, from the Byzantines to the Arabs, from the Normans to the Germans of the Staufen dynasty, stayed under the French power of the Anjois. But the French government had difficult life: population and large part of the nobility did not agree with modes and methods of the new owners, and a revolution, which, according to tradition, had a specific starting point from an affront of a French soldier to a young bride, but which was in any case to be expected considered the deterioration of the relationships between the two social groups, exploded and resulted in a bloody expulsion of French governors, troops and related population. At the beginning of the fourteenth century Sicily was in a political decay, with no real central guide, and with a few noble families contending each other the power on the island with crossed

weddings, alliances and betrayals.

In this context we see the raise of a noble family, the Chiaromonte, which, although with various ups and downs had a great power over large part of this island. They had a role in the Courts of Normans and of the Staufen, and maintained relationships with noble north Italian families.

Sign of the power of the family, but also of its relevant cultural level, was their magnificent mansion. Shaped as a castle, built in different phases since the beginning (1307) until the second half of the century (1380), this impressive house, called Steri, from the Latin Osterium, the main house of the town, was placed outside the medieval walls, where three centuries before the Arabs had built their stronghold.



A unique in the south Italy wooden ceiling, decorated with stories representing a sort of repertory of late middle age iconography, from the Bible to Tristan and Isolde, from the stories of Unicorn to that of Helen of Narbonne, surely had an astonishing effect on the local nobility, confirming the superior role of that family over the others.

For the whole century the French Anjois and the Spanish Aragon fought for the domination of the country. The error of the Chiaromonte was to invest on the return of the French power. They could not envisage that from the beginning of the fifteenth century, for more than 450 years, the Spanish crowns in different ways had the control of this island. The last pupil of the family of Chiaromonte, Andrea, paid the highest price for the mistake made choosing the wrong alliance: on the first of June, 1392, he had his head cut off in the square in front of the Steri. The family disappeared. Since then Sicily was

no more a kingdom by itself, but just a part of the Spanish kingdom, a place of vice kings.

At that time the mansion of the Norman kings and of the Staufen, the powerful royal palace, was badly ruined, and the Steri was the major building of the town. Therefore it was the seat of the Spanish vice kings until the first half of the sixteenth century, and saw the sumptuous entertainments of the Spanish courts, the visit of the kings, the administration of the central power over all the island



The transfer of the court to the royal palace left Steri in progressive deterioration until the beginning of the seventeenth century, when the tribunal of the Holy Office, brought to Sicily one century before by the Spanish government in order to try to turn Sicilians to the right way, found in the Steri its final seat. For a bit less than two hundred years in place of the joyful noise of banquets and entertainments, the house heard the screaming of tortured prisoners, saw the horrible furniture of sadistic tribunals and dark prisons. More than the condemned to death – not more than 200 in two centuries, some contemporary tribunals reach this goal in ten times less time – the major crime of inquisition was to have condemned to disappear, buried for their life in its prisons, thousands of innocent people, charged of inconsistent accuses of heresy, or of sacrilege, often merely for the need of the affirmation of the religious power over the temporal one. Very soon the Steri was no more large enough to host so many prisoners, and an architect

was sent from Spain to build nearby a prison devoted only to inquisition. Prisoners, forgotten by the society as well as by their families, starving, wrote their desperation on the walls of their cells: drawings, prayers, poetries, invocations, time by time carefully covered by the warders.

Only once, among such an overwhelming demonstration of power, roles inverted. A poor monk, Diego La Matina, charged of heresy, in the course of the trial, tied by the wrists by heavy chains, killed, with a tremendous stroke of its chains, the great inquisitor, don Cisneiros. That was the only occasion in which poor, deprived, victims had their revenge.

An illuminist vice king, Caracciolo, in 1783 closed for ever the Holy Office in Sicily, but, probably due to the influence of the local nobility, which had no interest in diffusing information on their relatives condemned by the inquisition, burned all the traces of the tribunal: archives, instruments, decorations. Prisoners that for two centuries suffered in those cells were killed for a second time, as no memory at all of them and of their sufferings could survive.

Let me close, for a while, this dark page and go to a light, different, story, as you will see related to this University, involving, just at the end of the eighteenth century, king Ferdinand the third of the Borbone House, king of Naples and Sicily, who had to leave in great haste the capital of its kingdom, Naples, because of a popular rebellion. The king repaired to Palermo, on the war ship of the Admiral Nelson, and was hosted in the royal palace, where the civil and penal Tribunals had their seat. In fact, Ferdinand was not exactly a king devoted to the responsibilities of its reign: biographers say that on the deck of the Nelson's ship he was discussing with his dignitaries whether the season was good or not for hunting woodcocks in Sicily.

Once in Palermo, his interest was essentially devoted to hunting, women and leisure. The royal palace was not large enough for his large court, the chase apparatus, dogs and hunt servants, for favourites and dignitaries, therefore he forced the town administration to restore Steri, which was abandoned after the closure of the Holy Office. In eighteen hundred Steri, restored in a great hurry, became the seat of the Tribunal of the town and of the Customs offices.

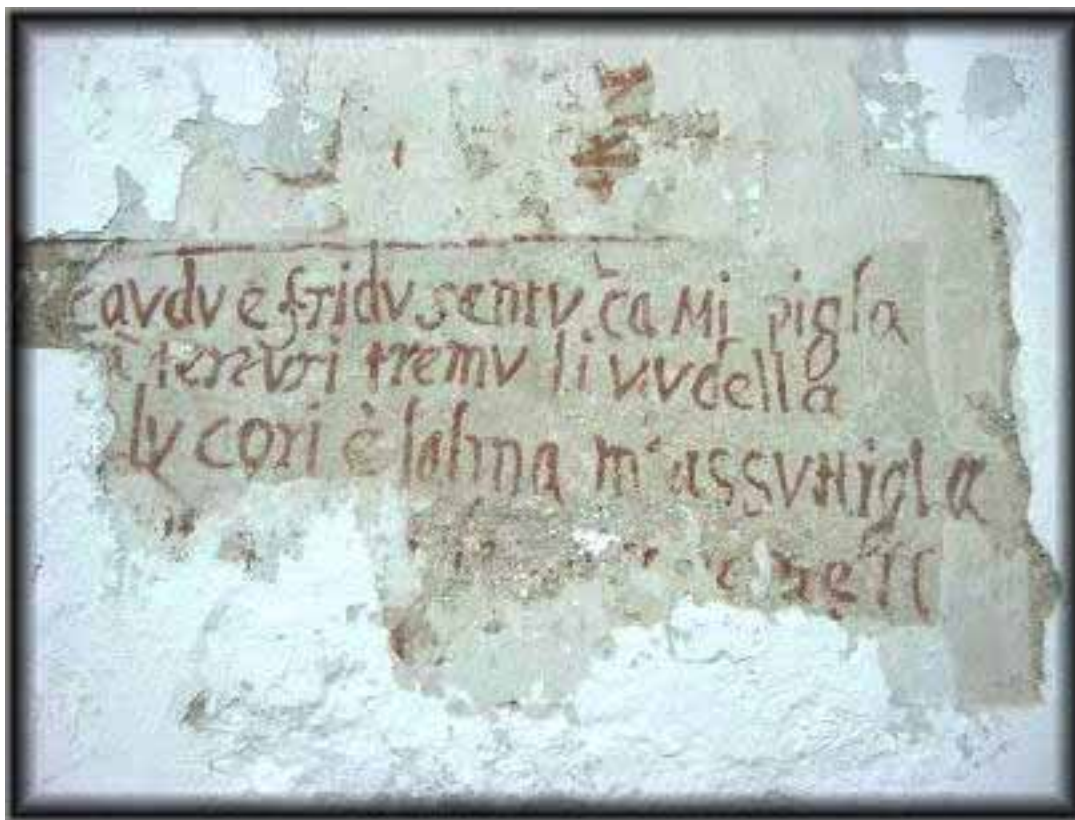


Once back in Naples, Ferdinand did not forget the hospitality enjoyed in Palermo, and, in September 1805, two hundred years ago, he satisfied the Senate of the town in its long waited aspiration: the transformation of the local Academy of Studies, created by a religious order since twenty five years, into an University, able to release degrees in medicine, theology, law. For centuries people in Palermo envied Catania and Messina, the two other largest towns of the Island, for their possession of Universities. For centuries Catania and Messina had made any possible effort to avoid that Palermo had its university. At the end the goal was reached, although the whole structure, resulting from the transformation of a religious institution, remained under the administration of the order of Teatini.

The first teacher of Chemistry of the new university was a well-known dialectal poet, Giovanni Meli, a priest, a physician, an intellectual of wide interests, author of several books of delicate and intense poems, who took with great sense of responsibility his new duty, and prepared his lectures very carefully, translating into Italian, word by word, the most modern texts of the newly rationalized chemistry. It is amazing to read his translations, from English, French and German, demonstrating the large European culture of such a heterodox professor. The new university was placed in the monastery of Teatini, an historical seventeenth century building in the centre of the town, which was until thirty years ago also the office of the rector.

In eighteen sixty Garibaldi, financed by the north-Italian kingdom of Piemonte, conquered the island, drew the troops of the Borbone out, and gave Sicily to his northern supporters. The influence of religious power on local institutions had its end and the university of Palermo had its first non religious rector – a chemist, of course – professor Filippo Casoria, from Naples.

The university grew more and more, in the number of Faculties and schools – engineering and architecture, natural sciences, mathematics, chemistry – and of students. Several religious buildings, in the historical centre of the town, were forfeited to their orders and given to the new institution. Great scientists gave their contribution to make the university of Palermo universally well-known. Let me quote the outstanding personality of Stanislao Cannizzaro, who taught chemistry and made part of his researches at our university during several years, and is now buried in the basilica of S. Domenico, here in Palermo.



But let me turn back to Steri, the noble castle which at that time was used as seat of the tribunals of the town. By the end of the nineteenth century it was decided to utilize some of the cells of the prison of the inquisition for the storage of the documents of the tribunal. During the work for positioning the shelves part of the plaster of the walls detached, bringing to the view the graffiti of the prisoners. An ethno-anthropologist active in Palermo, Professor at our university, Giuseppe Pitrè, immediately understood the importance of the finding, and provided to a complete uncovering of graffiti: the silent scream of prisoners, stifled, hidden for two hundred years, reappeared in all its dramatic evidence.

In the course of the second world war the centre of the town underwent severe bombing, and many important historical buildings resulted deeply damaged. Almost miraculously Steri survived: no bombs, no fires, no thieves, and its beautiful ceiling is now precious part of our cultural heritage. In the sixties of last century the tribunal moved to its present accommodation, once again leaving Steri abandoned. In the half of the seventies, overcoming the concurrence of other public institutions, the mansion was given to the University of Palermo, which by the end of the eighties transferred in the main building and in other premises of the same complex the central administration and the office of the rector.

The two stories merge here: the superb house of the Chiaromonte family hosts no more tribunals and inquisitors, but an university, a place where scientific meetings,

debates, free expressions of free minds are usual, obvious. A place where the remains of the graffiti of prisoners are preserved as precious documents demonstrating to ourselves and to next generations where superstition, obscurantism and violence can bring the human being.

And now let me shortly introduce the University of Palermo today, with its twelve faculties, eighty PhD courses, seventy five research departments, sixty seven thousand students, more than two thousand permanent teachers. Our interests go from humanities to science, from economics to medicine. Chemistry is largely represented in several Faculties, although primarily in Natural sciences, Pharmacy and Engineering. Our courses are performed mainly in Palermo, but also in other parts of the central western island – more or less where more powerful was the presence of the Chiaromonte seven hundred years ago. We have strong interactions with national and local administrations, with industries and social institutions, and are extremely careful in maintaining and promoting international relationships. Let me quote, as an example of international action we are performing in this period, the institution of a joint university between Libya and Italy, having here in Palermo and in Tripoli the head offices, extending its organization to the other Sicilian and Calabrian and to all the Libyan universities. History teaches us that a proper choice of allies is vital for the prosperous growing of an institution. We, cultural institution by definition, see you scientists, today our distinguished guests, as our best allies for the future confrontations.

Dear friends coming here from all over the world, as you know, Italy is a republican state which is intended to be democratically structured. I feel quite happy of this order, although I cannot ignore how difficult is to be really democratic, asking the majority to assume its responsibilities, but respecting the rights of the minority. This is the reason why sometimes, but just for a moment, I have the dream of a monarchy able to impose wisdom where it is absent, consciousness where it fails, mutual respect where hate and aggressiveness prevail. But, dear friends, if I remember who sent to Palermo the vice king who closed the Holy Office tribunal, who restored Steri, who founded the University of Palermo, if a king I have to dream about, he cannot be anybody else than that irresponsible full-time play-boy of Ferdinand the third of the House of Borbone, king of Naples and Sicily!