



Restoration Anamnesis as a Knowledge Tool: The Case Study of St. Nicholas' Basilica in Bari

Laura Morero , Antonella Guida , and Nicola Masini

Abstract

G. De Angelis d'Ossat stated that the restoration of monuments cannot be considered as a cultural product of modern civilisation, but must be understood as a phenomenon that can be traced back to the continuous architectural interventions that have taken place throughout the ages.

Before any conservation work is carried out it is necessary to study the building both from the point of view of architectural design and conservation state, as well as material-constructive events that have marked its existence.

The constructive reading of historical architecture, through an in-depth analysis of the published and unpublished sources, can be a valuable cognitive tool to acquire all information that constitutes the basis of a conscious restoration intervention. The possibility of consulting and using the archival documents and the historical data they contain is a guarantee of a deeper knowledge and anamnesis of the monument.

The interpretation of documentary memories is therefore configured as a concrete cognitive tool and, consequently, a planning tool for restoration work.

The key is to understand restoration history as a model of knowledge and a methodology of initial diagnosis to be carried out through history.

This chapter is conceived as a metaphor for a journey through time and dusty documents that unveils the historical truth of one of the most important Romanesque monuments in southern Italy; St Nicholas' Basilica in Bari,

recounting the interventions that have modified its architectural consistency and decoration, in order to arrive at that cognitive basis, the anamnesis, that consciously guides future conservation interventions.

Keywords

Anamnesis · Restoration · St Nicholas' Basilica · Apulian architecture · History · Archival sources

1 Introduction: Archival Research as a Knowledge Tool for the Restoration Project

Guglielmo De Angelis d'Ossat affirmed that the restoration of monuments cannot be considered merely as a cultural by-product of modern civilisation alone, but rather must be understood as a phenomenon that can be traced back to the continuous architectural interventions that have taken place throughout the ages (De Angelis d'Ossat 1995).

Indeed, before carrying out any conservation intervention, it is necessary to study the building both from the point of view of its architectural design and its state of conservation, as well as, as Professor Claudio Galli sustains, in relation to all the material-constructive and transformative events that have marked its existence (Galli 2009).

It is only by establishing a dialogue between direct information of a technical nature, such as geometric and technical-constructive data, and that found through the study of indirect sources contained in books and archives, that a deeper, more critical and conscious knowledge of the architectural building on which one intends to intervene can be achieved.

Knowledge thus becomes a means and, at the same time, a guarantee capable of guiding the intentions and choices of

Antonella Guida and Nicola Masini are co-authors to this chapter.

L. Morero (✉) · A. Guida · N. Masini
University of Basilicata, DiCEM—Department of European and Mediterranean Culture: Architecture, Environment and Cultural Heritage, Matera, Italy

CNR—National Research Council of Italy, ISPC- Institute of Cultural Heritage Sciences, Potenza, Italy

e-mail: laura.morero@unibas.it; antonella.guida@unibas.it; nicola.masini@cnr.it

a restoration project, and in this sense archival research, the first moment of this process, is configured as a dynamic research tool capable of guaranteeing the maintenance of the diachronic aspect of the monument-document over time.

The archive, the place of preservation of historical memories par excellence, preserves the scientific and design heritage of the architecture; its history is made up of completed works and others left unfinished, of construction site documents, drawings, and the dense correspondence between the state and local authorities involved, the clients and the designers.

From this point of view, it is legitimate, if not essential, to state that the first restoration is that of the archive; the mediating place of knowledge.

The interpretation of archival documents is therefore configured as a concrete cognitive and, consequently, planning tool for restoration work, since it allows us to relive and reread the events on the architecture, to know the construction techniques and the materials used in the historical work.

In this sense, the basilica of St. Nicholas, chosen as a case study, proved to be emblematic, since the restorations carried out were distributed over a period of more than two centuries (Luceri 1929; Gervasio 1931).

It is an admirable chronological and cultural reference, a rare example of a palimpsest of techniques, practices and theories that have evolved over time.

In fact, there are very few architectural episodes for which it is still possible to trace such conspicuous and detailed archival documentation because in most cases the sources are difficult to find, not published or kept in various territorial institutions (public and private archives, libraries and Superintendencies) that are not always quickly and easily accessible.

The availability of this anthology of knowledge makes it possible to understand how the restoration practice has evolved, what has been done and how, in order to direct and guide future interventions and, with a view to optimising resources, to avoid all unnecessary ones.

Even rarer are the cases, at least documented, of buildings that have passed through the cultural temperament of all the epochs; the heated debates that have animated the development of the theoretical foundations of the discipline and, consequently, the practice of restoration: from Camillo Boito to Gustavo Giovannoni, from the issuing of the Charters of Restoration to the formulation of the principles of critical restoration.

And it is precisely by reading critically that one realises that there are histories full of events, ideas, protests, projects conceived and never realised, projects executed and then reworked following or opposing, case by case, the theories of restoration in vogue and codified theories of restoration. Stories that can never be read and understood as a whole on the basis of the architectural text alone, must be

deepened, deciphered, confirmed and disavowed through the continuous and indispensable confrontation with history.

The research project can therefore be understood as a metaphor for an itinerary through time and dusty documents, revealing the historical truth of one of southern Italy's most important monuments, the basilica of St. Nicholas in Bari, narrating the interventions that have changed its architectural consistency, in order to arrive at that cognitive basis, the so-called anamnesis, that will critically and consciously guide future conservation interventions.

2 St. Nicholas' Basilica and Its Restoration: From Its Origins to the 2000s

The monumental basilica of St. Nicholas is the prototype of Apulian Romanesque architecture; the building is located on the edge of the old town, close to the sea and surrounded by four large squares.

Its construction began in 1087 and was probably completed in the first half of the twelfth century, with three naves, transept and three apses (Archive Superintendence of Archaeology, Fine Arts and Landscape of Bari [A-SABAP-BA] 1998).

Originally, the site of construction was the residence of the Byzantine governor of southern Italy, the so-called *Catapano*. In fact, Bari was the capital of Byzantine Italy (968–1071) with a huge political and economic development (A-SABAP-BA 1999).

In 1071, the area was conquered by the Normans and the city's role became increasingly marginal compared to the splendour of the Byzantine period.

In 1087, in order to restore some of Bari's former glory, the translation of the relics of Saint Nicholas, which were kept in Myra, a coastal town in southern Turkey, was organised. At that time, having a venerated saint was of political and economic importance, thanks to the pilgrimages that the relics attracted (Depalo et al. 2015). This event, one of the most celebrated episodes of the Middle Ages, allows us to date the first construction phase of the basilica with certainty.

Some buildings from the Byzantine period were demolished, while others were modified and incorporated into the new construction (A-SABAP-BA 1999). All that remains today is a medieval tower behind the apse, which in the Middle Ages was used to defend the relics of the Saint.

In May 1087, a group of sailors landed the sacred relics stolen from the Saracens on the city's quay and entrusted them to the Benedictine Abbot Elias. It was thanks to the popularity and enthusiasm of this monk that the construction of the church began (Belli D'Elia 1974, 1985).

Work on the construction of the church began immediately with the common desire of the people, the nobility and the clergy to build a dedicated house to Saint.

It began with the crypt, which was completed in two years. Pope Urban II consecrated the new church in October 1089 and placed the sacred remains under the altar of the crypt (Ceschi 1936).

The progress of the work on the upper basilica is not specified in the documents that have come down to us, which contain fragmentary and often contradictory information that generates uncertainty about the events in the basilica.

Abbot Elias, who died in 1105, did not live to see the completion of his basilica, which is confirmed by the fact that he was buried near the entrance to the crypt. His successor, Abbot Eustasius, consolidated the Basilica's legal position by issuing the famous Bull of Pope Paschal II of 18 November 1106, which solemnly declared the Basilica directly subject to the Holy See. The Bull speaks of St Nicholas as basilica *aedificanda* and *max futuram ecclesiam* (basilica to be built and future church), which, although it is also said that it was in a condition to be able to conveniently officiate there, confirms that at that time the basilica was still far from being completed (Ceschi 1936).

However, the Abbot himself was also involved in the continuation of the work, with particular attention to the interior decoration and the mosaic floors of the lower church and the apsidal area of the upper church.

At the time of his death in 1123, at least the main nave, which covers the whole of the crypt, must have been completed, since it was during his reign that the high altar was built, with rhyming couplets inscribed on its steps, referring to the builders of the basilica (A-SABAP-BA 1999).

Another chronological fact comes to us from the chronicles of the destruction of the city in 1156 by order of Guglielmo the Malo. Out of respect for the cult, only the basilica and the surrounding buildings were spared (Ceschi 1936).

Towards the end of the century, the north-western tower was built and the hexaforated gallery on the southern façade. In the thirteenth century, the basilica was completed in its organic form (A-SABAP-BA 1999).

From the beginning, the iconographic scheme was that of a Latin basilica with three naves and a transept, whose floor, higher than that of the naves, is set above the vaults of the crypt.

After all the surrounding towns erected cathedrals in the thirteenth century in the artistic wake of St Nicholas' Basilica, it underwent its first significant transformation in the fourteenth century, which marked the beginning of its decline. The wealthiest families wanted chapels dedicated to the burial of noblemen to be built in the basilica and, for this purpose, the side arches were used, which were walled in at the outer edge of the columns (Ceschi 1936).

In the fifteenth century, after earthquakes, the basilica had to be consolidated again and many openings were walled up, including the mullioned windows.

At the same time, the three transversal arches were built, which changed the proportions of the central nave and reinforced the structure by limiting the rotation of the wall structures due to the irregularity of the walls.

During the Baroque period, the interior underwent numerous embellishments according to the tastes of the time, and the stone walls disappeared under stuccoes of little artistic value (A-SABAP-BA 1999), the only valuable work is the lacunar ceiling with paintings by the Apulian painter Carlo Rosa (Ceschi 1936).

However, the sixteenth century was also characterised by an increase in the number of burials, repairs to the wooden roofs and work to replace the floor of the crypt due to the constant flooding that caused serious decay.

The century ended with the occupation by French troops in 1799, which led to the removal of the treasury. This episode marked the beginning of a period of decadence characterised by the progressive deterioration of the church, both structurally and in terms of its ornamentation.

The situation worsened in the following century due to a lack of funds. The only significant episode was the replacement of the wooden roofs, financed by King Ferdinand II in 1847 (A-SABAP-BA 1998).

After centuries of royal jurisdiction, with the unification of Italy the basilica suffered another severe blow; all the properties were confiscated by the State, and, from 1891, even the daily administration was controlled by a lieutenant of the King. This continued until 1929 when royal jurisdiction ended and papal jurisdiction began (Bartolini 1882; Cioffari 2018).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the need for a complete restoration of the basilica became so evident that in 1910 the engineer Chiaia drew up a programme of all the necessary works to be carried out.

The major restorations were characterised by a constant contradiction between the intentions of conservation and the need to remove everything that did not conform to the original style and therefore did not deserve to be preserved. The predominance of the latter directive resulted in a serious loss of important historical and artistic evidence, both for the basilica and for the city as a whole.

The major restoration work that returned the basilica to its original appearance began in 1927 and was completed in 1932. The work was supervised by the then Superintendent Prof. Quagliati, who, in order to solve the problem of the architectural restoration and the numerous static difficulties, chose to reopen the lateral arches and recompose the hexaforated lodge (Figs. 1 and 2).

The liberation of the apses and the removal of the plaster brought to light a group of fourteenth-century frescoes, the

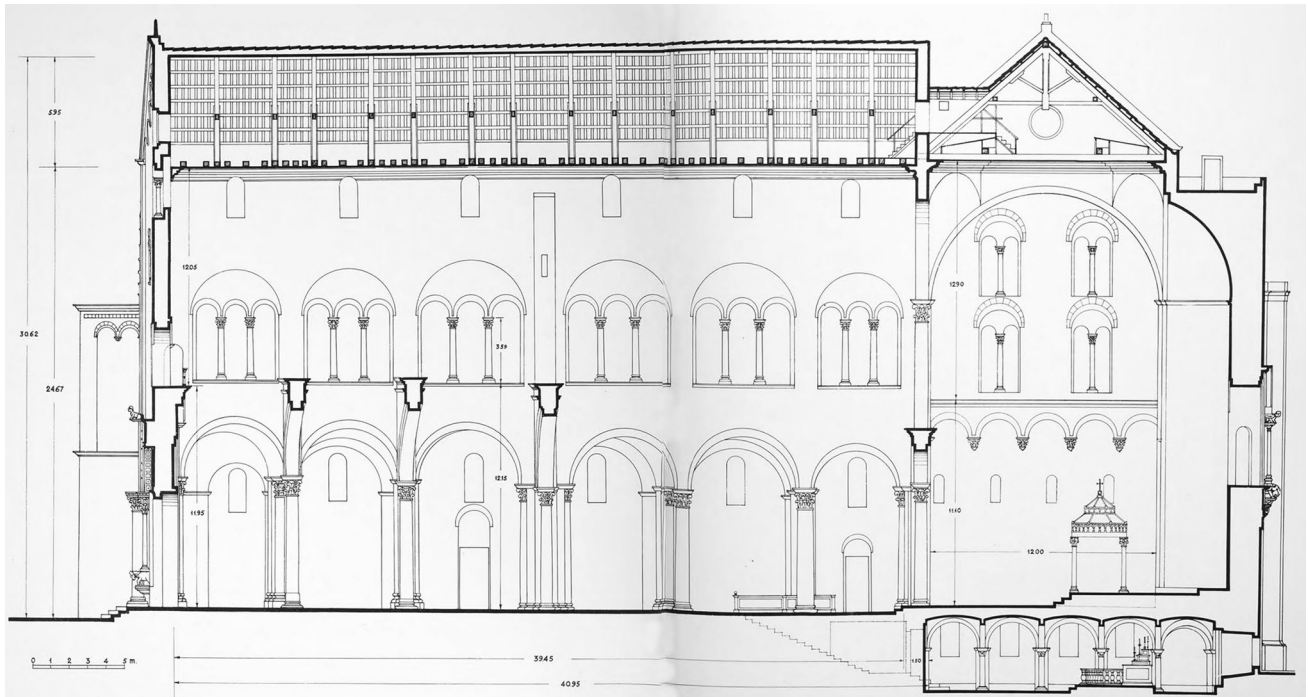


Fig. 1 Tav. IV-V longitudinal section of the basilica (Ceschi 1936)

Fig. 2 Detail of the hexaforated lodge of the south elevation, 1998 (A-SABAP-BA 1999)



only evidence of an ancient votive pictorial decoration that must have covered part of the basilica's interior (Ceschi 1936).

At the same time, these works aroused much controversy: in 1930, Engineer Babilacqua contested the demolition of the decorative apparatus from the post-foundation period,

thus anticipating the fundamental principles of conservation that the Athens Restoration Charter, promulgated the following year, would define as guiding elements in the practice of monument restoration (A-SABAP-BA 1999).

A report from 1932 stated that the restoration of the Romanesque apsidal window had been completed, the

masonry torn by the eighteenth-century window had been reconstructed, and the mullioned window above had been restored and consolidated (A-SABAP-BA 1932).

In 1946, the last phase of the restoration began. Under the direction of the Superintendent, Arch. Franco Schettini, the area behind the apse was cleared of the adjacent buildings, allowing the restoration of the rear façade and the opening of the apsidal window. At the same time, the basilica was isolated from its context, with the demolition of the buildings on top of it, thus modifying the image that had been stratified, especially in that aspect of communication between the courtyards that is no longer appreciable today and that was part of a different way of living the urban fabric (Schettini 1967).

Work continued in the crypt, which housed the seventeenth-century altar of the Saint, precious marble columns with Byzantine capitals, numerous stuccoes and Baroque altars. Apart from the decoration, the most worrying thing was the decay caused by the rising water level, which had been undermining the foundations for years (Ceschi 1936).

Therefore, in 1955, the isolation of the foundations was completed (by injecting cement mixtures under the floor), the eighteenth-century stuccoes were demolished, and the altar and all the ornaments of the Saint's tomb were dismantled.

In 1957, the work culminated in the demolition of the bar-bican in the rear apse area and the eighteenth-century sacristy, thus recovering the entire volume of the transept. This completed the restoration work aimed at recovering the original image of the basilica dedicated to the Patron Saint (A-SABAP-BA 1999).

In 1962, in a minute of the Superintendence's office, it was stated that the entire restoration programme of the monumental complex had been completed.

In 1965, the Cassa di Mezzogiorno approved a new project for the restoration of the roof entrusted to Resta company. According to the technical report, when the tiles covering the nave were removed, it was found that they rested on a heavy clay slab foundation and a wooden framework. Due to the precarious state of preservation, mainly due to dampness, it was decided to completely dismantle and replace the structure (A-SABAP-BA 1965).

In 1976, Superintendent Chiurazzi carried out an inspection to determine the causes and extent of some instabilities, reported by the Prior Tarcisio Alessio. The inspection revealed a subsidence phenomenon in the last left span, at the intersection with the transept (A-SABAP-BA 1968); a general process of flaking of the limestone curtains, especially on the main façade and in the transept area; some destroyed architectural elements and several stone blocks that flaked off when touched. The surveyor proposed a general overhaul with inspection of each stone block; replacement of crum-

bling elements; pouring of fluid cement and treatment with water-repellent substances (A-SABAP-BA 1976).

There are no documents attesting to the execution or non-execution of any work, probably due to lack of funding, until the 1980s when measures were taken to repair the damage caused by the floods.

The report drawn up by the Civil Engineers shows that the infiltrating water caused the plaster to detach, with falling rubble on the floors and scratches on the most exposed fixtures. There were also depressions in the roof slabs, which meant that the roofing had to be removed. Urgent works to be carried out (consolidation, restoration, waterproofing and protection) were therefore identified, especially for the rooms and the paving of the churchyard (A-SABAP-BA 1985).

Unfortunately, the situation worsened because the heavy rains of August 1985 were followed by those of February 1986. In a state characterised by disconnections of the stone facings, cracks, damaged wooden fixtures and deformed frames, another storm hit the basilica in 1987 (A-SABAP-BA 1987).

New work was therefore urgently needed, with priority given to consolidation work and the supply of new fixtures. Superintendent Mola carried out an inspection and noted that the planned interventions mainly concerned the wall face, which was partially affected by physical and chemical deterioration of the stone. He provides some indications on the methods of intervention to stop the deterioration process and, in cases of irreparable damage, to replace and integrate the face (A-SABAP-BA 1987).

The next information on the basilica's state of conservation dates back to 1994, when Superintendent Di Paola stated that, in general, the façade did not present any particular conditions of deterioration with the exception of the bell tower, where one part showed a disintegration of the ash-lars with flaking and erosion phenomena (A-SABAP-BA 1994).

The last decade of the twentieth century ended with the Rector of the basilica, P. G. Distante, writing to the Superintendent Arch. Riccardo Mola to remind him that the original restoration plan included other unfinished works, such as those on the supporting arches of the nave, the columns, the wall coverings and the crypt (A-SABAP-BA 1994).

The request was not heeded and was again proposed in view of an important event: the ninth centenary of the Council of Bari (1098–1998) for which an international conference was to be organised (A-SABAP-BA 1997).

The opportunity to proceed with the restoration was provided by Law n. 270/1997 '*Plan of interventions of national interest concerning Jubilee and pilgrimage routes in locations outside Lazio*'. In October 1998, the designated planning team drew up two separate projects: one for the construction and restoration work, the other for the installations and retrofitting (A-SABAP-BA 1999).



Fig. 3 1998, Basilica main elevation (west side) (A-SABAP-BA 1999)



Fig. 4 1998, Detail of the crypt (A-SABAP-BA 1999)

The documentation reports a careful survey of the state of the church, which reveals a considerable difference in the state of conservation, from the interior to the exterior. Indeed, if the naves and the transept are in good condition, also thanks to recent restoration work (A-SABAP-BA 1990), the state of the exterior walls (Fig. 3), the spaces behind the apses, the towers, the crypt (Fig. 4) and the hexaforated galleries is quite different, as they are in need of major restoration work both from a structural point of view and due to the state of conservation of the materials, which are seriously deteriorated. In addition, the north-west tower, the masonry in the area behind the apse and, in particular, the masonry on the east elevation is affected by static instability, with evidence of lesioning and deformation phenomena in progressive evolution (A-SABAP-BA 1998, 1999).

Faced with such a complex situation, the interventions were defined to solve the structural problems and, in general, to consolidate all the deteriorated masonry, but also to restore all the deteriorated situations by cleaning the facings and repairing the lesions, local consolidation, revision of the roofs and the restoration of the sculptural and decorative elements by specialised restorers.

The project also addresses the issue of accessibility and provides for the restoration of the ancient access stairways to the southern portals, which were modified during the work carried out in the 1950s under the direction of Superintendent Schettini. More specifically, it is planned to dismantle the existing stairways, recover them with reusable material and rebuild them as they were before the restoration work. It is also planned to restore the pavement of the portico in relation to the access to Largo Abate Elias, that is, to lower the pavement to the level of the two squares by uncovering the existing pavement, excavating it and replacing the pavement that has been removed (A-SABAP-BA, 1999).

No restoration or maintenance work has been recorded in the last 20 years.

The opportunity for a new conservation intervention is provided by the EU co-financing to the Apulia Region 2014/2020 POR FESR '*Interventions for the valorisation and fruition of cultural heritage*'. The project is also part of the wider Regional Strategic Project for the valorisation and enjoyment of the cultural heritage belonging to ecclesiastical institutions.

The current work is being carried out by the Regional Secretariat, directed by Arch. Piccarreta and coordinated by Arch. Corrado.

3 Discussion: Critical Reading of Interventions

So far, this paper has provided an overview of the construction processes and restoration work carried out on the Basilica of St Nicholas over a significant period of time, from 1300 to the early 2000s.

Between the lines, the reader will have easily understood the exceptionality of the case taken as an example, as it allows one to read the evolution of the *modus operandi* over time in parallel with the theoretical and methodological evolution of the restoration discipline.

The basilica, completed at the beginning of the thirteenth century, became the artistic reference for all the cathedrals of Bari in the thirteenth century.

However, in the fourteenth century, it underwent its first significant transformations, with the enrichment of the interior (a new choir and a wooden box for the royal family) and the construction of chapels dedicated to the burial of members of noble families. The noble families themselves further enriched the already conspicuous Nicolaesque ornamentation by introducing new liturgical furnishings to decorate their chapels.

The embellishments continued into the sixteenth century, as did the number of burials: the most notable episode was the construction of a Neapolitan funerary monument dedicated to Bona Sforza in 1593.

To place it in the main apse, it was necessary to change the position of the marble seat dedicated to Abbot Elias and, above all, to rework and partially sacrifice the medieval window in the central part.

In the centuries that followed, the main works carried out on the basilica were aimed at adapting the medieval temple to the dictates of the contemporary art of the time: the Baroque.

As is often the case with religious buildings, during the Baroque period the interior underwent numerous adaptations according to the tastes of the time, with numerous embellishments that had nothing to do with the original forms of the past.

In particular, the walls, arches and vaults were re-decorated.

Furnishings and decorations were renewed, new altars were replaced or built, and some places, such as the sacristy of the upper church, were enlarged.

One of the most significant interventions, and one that later became controversial, was the numerous stuccos of different colours, of little artistic value, that covered the living stone that characterised the walls of the crypt (A-SABAP-BA 1999).

Of all the Baroque decorations, the only valuable work that has survived is the lacunar ceiling, with painted canvases

inserted in carved wooden elements such as cornices, coats of arms and puttoes decorated with pure gold (Ceschi 1936).

In the second half of the nineteenth century, however, a theoretical debate began to take shape in Italy that would become particularly intense and would be codified in normative documents that are still admirable references for restoration methodology: the Restoration Charters.

Shortly afterward, at the third Congress of Engineers and Architects held in Rome in January 1883, it was Camillo Boito who promoted the fundamental principles that would later be taken up by the Athens Charter of 1931 and the Italian Restoration Charter of the following year.

According to these principles, restoration should not be based on the search for stylistic unity, which was preached in France by Viollet Le Duc and spread to the Italian peninsula, but on a philological reading of the monument that respects the signs left by time.

This changes the concept of monument conservation, which is understood as a document of history and, as such, must be protected from any form of stylistic falsification.

In this new vision, each monument is a unique case and, the restoration must also be unique and studied on a case-by-case basis.

During the twentieth century, the need for an integral restoration of the basilica became increasingly clear, leading to the definition of an operational programme that included all the works that the building needed, and in particular the restoration of the Baroque splendour that adorned the church.

In fact, the first phases of the debate on the interventions to be carried out were characterised by a constant contradiction between the intention of preservation and the need to remove everything that did not correspond to the original style and was not considered worthy of preservation.

A first project proposed interventions such as the removal of all the Baroque stuccoes, furnishings and side chapels, the removal of the arches and hexaforates, the lowering of the floor of the crypt and the construction of a channel for the collection of water, the demolition and reconstruction in Romanesque style of the buildings adjacent to the basilica (Quagliati 1930).

The Commission rejected the project and work began in 1927 and was completed in 1932. It began with the freeing of the six holes and the excavation of the crypt to see if it was possible to free the lateral arches of the chapels.

At the same time, these works caused a great deal of controversy: in 1930, the engineer Bevilacqua vehemently contested the demolition of the decorative apparatus of the post-foundation period, on the grounds that it would lead to a serious loss of important historical and artistic testimonies, both for the basilica and for the whole city. Controversies that, in their nuances, were to become the basic principles of the practice of monument restoration, as defined only a year

later in the Athens Charter of Restoration (A-SABAP-BA 1999).

Gradually, the rich and ornate church of the nineteenth century gave way to an austere façade in the original Apulian Romanesque style. The basilica, as we admire it today, was restored to its original form (Quagliati 1930).

It is no coincidence that in the years when the restoration was being carried out, Italy could boast the theoretical work of a great master: Cesare Brandi. Brandi's vision of restoration, understood as a cultural act moved by a value judgement of Riegl's memory, would strongly influence the drafting of the Venice Charter of Restoration four years later, which from its first lines stressed the importance of the historical aspect of a building.

His theory would have a large following in the 1950s, and it cannot be excluded the possibility that this new cultural lymph moved the decision to proceed to a new phase of work.

In fact, despite the controversy, not only did the work continue, but it also expanded outwards, inaugurating, in 1946, the last phase of the 'great restoration' under the direction of Superintendent Arch. Schettini.

The area behind the apse was cleared of the adjoining buildings, which made it possible to restore the entire rear façade and to uncover the Romanesque apsidal window, while at the same time rebuilding the masonry that had been broken by the eighteenth-century window, which had a span of 5.50 × 2.00 metres over the original space.

At the same time, the basilica was isolated from its context, with the demolition of the buildings behind it, thus modifying the stratified image, especially in the aspect of communication between the courtyards, which is no longer visible today.

In 1955, work continued on the interior of the crypt, where the seventeenth-century silver altar, the precious marble of the columns with Byzantine capitals and the numerous Baroque stuccoes and altars were conserved. Apart from the ornaments, the most worrying thing was the continuous deterioration caused by the rising water level, which had been undermining the foundations for years (Ceschi 1936).

For this reason, the isolation of the foundations was completed (by injecting cement mixtures under the paving), the paving, which had previously been raised by about 30 cm, was returned to its original height, and, above all, all the eighteenth-century stuccoes were demolished, the altar and all the decoration of the Saint's tomb were dismantled.

Two years later, in 1957, the work culminated and ended with the demolition of the barbican in the rear apse area and the seventeenth century sacristy, thus recovering the entire volume of the transept (A-SABAP-BA 1999).

This was the end of the restoration work aimed at restoring the original image of the Apulian Romanesque style to the basilica that the city had dedicated to its patron Saint.

A history full of events, debates, additions and subtractions, moved by the tastes of the times, by a greater awareness of the discipline of restoration, but also by repeated neglect or, even worse, by interventions that were not carried out properly.

The constant flooding that damaged the crypt for years (A-SABAP-BA 1998, 1999) is certainly an example of this and was not resolved by the drainage and consolidation work just described, even though it was considered one of the most important and consistent interventions to mark the basilica.

For example, we know from the documents that in 1999, both the crypt and the retro-apsidal areas showed widespread rising dampness and blackening, and that as a result new restoration and dehumidification work was carried out by creating an external perimeter cavity on the south side.

It is therefore legitimate to define the basilica as a palimpsest monument that, for better or for worse, gives us not only a beautiful piece of architecture but also real texts on which to read the layers, time and actions. A kind of journey through time that reveals the historical truth of the monuments, reconstructing the authentic text to which Brandi himself referred.

4 Conclusion

The proposed research has been animated by the objective of gaining a deep knowledge of the historical past, which, in an emblematic case such as that of the basilica of Saint Nicholas, has allowed for a temporal and cultural excursion of admirable reference as a rare palimpsest of techniques, practices and theories that have taken place over two centuries.

Looking at this path and placing it in the more general context of the architectural heritage, it becomes clear that the achievement of the above objective can only be pursued through a renewed awareness and, consequently, in a new way of making culture.

The key is to understand the restoration anamnesis as a model of knowledge and a methodology of initial diagnosis to be carried out through history. As such, it must therefore be pursued in order to achieve a significant qualitative improvement in the planning and execution of conservation work, both physical and cognitive, on monuments.

The availability of this body of knowledge will make it possible to understand, case by case, how restoration practice has evolved, what has already been done, and how, in order to direct and guide future interventions and, with a view to optimising resources, avoid all unnecessary ones.

A proposal for a method capable of unifying and bringing together two disciplines, one of a more humanistic nature and the other of a strictly technical and scientific nature. Both are aimed at preserving the dual historicity of the building: the architectural text, full of informative aspects to be

grasped through technical-visual knowledge, and the documentary memories, the in-depth study of which allows the historical meanings of the building to be rediscovered.

Today it is very rare to be able to trace the main documentary sources relating to the history with the same level of detail as in the case of the basilica of Saint Nicholas because in most cases the sources are difficult to find, unpublished or kept in various territorial institutions (public and private archives, libraries and Superintendencies) which are not always quickly and easily accessible.

From the point of view of a restoration approach that changes and evolves over time, but always with the aim of preserving knowledge, the idea of a digital data synthesis tool can be a fundamental help both for research and for the definition of restoration and maintenance interventions, as it would guarantee easy retrieval of general and specific information.

The study, the systematisation, the digitalisation and the possibility of making the entire corpus of information on the architectural heritage available online are fundamental means of disseminating knowledge and an urgent priority for the executive guarantee of correct interventions on monuments.

The rethinking of this system, by channelling different types of data into a single reference tool, can therefore allow a complete knowledge and anamnesis of the heritage, avoiding the possibility of making incorrect design choices for lack of an adequate cognitive substratum of the built.

The structuring of online information platforms that can be implemented with continuously updated data (such as works in progress or monitoring surveys) is, in all respects, a valuable decision-support tool that has the advantage of avoiding the dispersion of known and emerging data.

A system that would allow knowledge to be preserved and managed in a sustainable way, but above all, it would allow resources to be optimised.

In other words, by defining only the necessary interventions, the logic of *trial and error*, an economically wasteful and often damaging activity for both the monument and the environment, is eliminated.

This historical methodological approach therefore guarantees greater effectiveness of the interventions themselves, with a consequent saving of resources.

A guarantee that is given precisely thanks to the comparison with history; a comparison that is certain because it cannot be interpreted or refuted.

After all, the premise of research is to know in order to restore, and more precisely, to restore consciously.

The validation of this methodology, which is still in progress, will take place through the planning and execution of a targeted instrumental research plan, defined on the basis of the knowledge acquired through the historical-archival anamnesis. For this reason, the authors reserve the right to deepen and share the results in a future contribution.

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