

Sacri Monti (Italy)

No 1068

1. BASIC DATA

State Party: Italy

Name of property: The Landscape of the *Sacri Monti* of Piedmont and Lombardy

Location: *Regione Piemonte:*

- Sacro Monte or Nuova Gerusalemme (New Jerusalem), Varallo Sesia;
- Sacro Monte of Santa Maria Assunta, Serralunga di Crea and Ponzano;
- Sacro Monte of San Francesco, Orta San Giulio;
- Sacro Monte of the Blessed Virgin, Oropa;
- Sacro Monte of the Holy Trinity, Ghiffa;
- Sacro Monte and Calvary, Domodossola;
- Sacro Monte of Belmonte, Valperga Canavese.

Regione Lombardia:

- Sacro Monte of the Blessed Virgin of Succour, Ossuccio;
- Sacro Monte of the Rosary, Varese.

Date received: 28 December 2000; management plan received: 3 January 2003.

Category of property:

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a serial nomination of *sites*. It is also a *cultural landscape* as defined in paragraph 39 of the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*.

Brief description:

The nine *Sacri Monti* ('Sacred Mountains') of this region of northern Italy are groups of chapels and other architectural features created in the late 16th and 17th centuries and dedicated to different aspects of Christian belief. In addition to their symbolic spiritual meaning, they are of great beauty by virtue of the skill with which the architectural elements are integrated into the surrounding landscapes of hills, forests, and lakes. They also contain much important artistic material in the form of wall paintings and statuary.

2. THE PROPERTY

Description

- *Sacro Monte or 'New Jerusalem' of Varallo*

Work began in the last decade of the 15th century to reconstruct the landscape of the Holy Land on a rocky pass overlooking the small town of Varallo. A series of chapels was built, containing approximately life-size statues and

frescoes illustrating various sites of Biblical significance. The theme was changed at the end of the 16th century under the influence of the Counter-Reformation to the Life and Passion of Christ. Many notable artists and sculptors contributed to the work. At the present time the layout comprises the earlier re-creations of Nazareth and Bethlehem set in a wooded landscape, a carefully designed garden area, and 45 chapels located along the main path. The top of the hill is devoted to an evocation of the city of Jerusalem.

- *Sacro Monte of Santa Maria Assunta, Serralunga di Crea and Ponzano*

The origins of the Sacro Monte of Crea date back to 1589, when a project to build 25 chapels illustrating the Mysteries of the Rosary on one of the highest passes of the Monferrato area was initiated. This has been changed over time and now comprises 23 chapels and five hermitages. The complex also includes the buildings of the Sanctuary of the Assumption of the Virgin, which is Romanesque in origin with a number of modifications in the 15th, 17th, and 19th/20th centuries. The chapels contain statuary in polychrome terracotta and paintings from the early period. These were supplemented by further statues (in plaster) during a restoration campaign in the 19th century. The woodland in which the chapels are sited contains an important rare flora.

- *Sacro Monte of San Francesco, Orta San Giulio*

This complex, the only one dedicated to St Francis of Assisi, was built in three phases. The first phase, between 1590, when work began at the behest of the local community, until ca 1630, is marked by Mannerist forms. In the second phase, which lasted until the end of the 17th century, the predominating style is Baroque, with a freer form of Baroque mixed with other influences in the third period, up to the end of the 18th century. The complex consists of 21 chapels, the former Hospice of St Francis, a monumental gate, and a fountain. This sacred mountain is unique in that no changes have been made to the layout since the 16th century. The garden is of exceptional quality and there is a fine view over the lake (the Lago de Orta).

- *Sacro Monte of the Rosary, Varese*

A place of pilgrimage to the headquarters of the eremitic order of *Romite Ambrosiane* from as early as 1474, the Sacro Monte of Varese was laid out after the Council of Trent. Work began in 1604 along a 2 km paved path that represents the Mysteries of the Rosary, which had become increasingly popular since the Battle of Lepanto (1571). Because of munificent donations construction was much faster than at other Sacri Monti, and thirteen of the chapels had been completed by 1623. By 1698 it had been completed, in the form in which it survives today, with 15 chapels, the last of them in the sanctuary of 1474 at the summit. As in the Rosary itself, they are divided into three groups of five. The architecture of chapels, wells, and fountains is varied, as is their ornamentation of statuary and frescoes.

- *Sacro Monte of the Blessed Virgin, Oropa*

One of the oldest sanctuaries dedicated to the Virgin Mary, which attracted many devout pilgrims, is at Oropa. Although work began on the Sacro Monte there as an annexe to the Sanctuary in 1617, it was not completed by

the end of the 17th century. The original plan was to depict the life of the Virgin Mary in twenty chapels, with five more dedicated to other New Testament elements. The project benefited from the patronage of the Duke of Savoy, in whose territory it was situated. The site, the highest in the group at over 2,300 m, is a beech-covered hill surrounded by Alpine peaks. There are now 27 chapels, twelve of them depicting the life of the Virgin Mary and the remainder various religious subjects. Their architectural styles represent the Baroque period in which they were built, as do the statues and paintings that embellish them.

- *Sacro Monte of the Blessed Virgin of Succour, Ossuccio*

This group is situated on the west side of Lake Como and 25 km north of the town of that name; it lies on a mountain slope at 400 m above sea-level facing the island of Comacina. It is completely isolated from any other buildings, surrounded by fields, olive groves, and woodland. The fourteen chapels, all built between 1635 and 1710, are Baroque in style, and vegetation forms an integral part of their layout and appeal. They to a considerable extent copy the Varese ensemble. They lead up to the Sanctuary on the summit, which was built in 1537 and symbolically completes the chain of the Rosary.

- *Sacro Monte of the Holy Trinity, Ghiffa*

Between the end of the 16th century and the mid 17th century a plan was conceived for a Sacro Monte around the old Sanctuary of the Holy Trinity here on this heavily wooded hillside. In the first phase, however, only three chapels were built. This resulted in a substantial increase in the number of pilgrims visiting the Sanctuary and so a major effort of expansion took place between 1646 and 1649. In its present state the Sacro Monte comprises six chapels on different Biblical subjects; there are also three smaller chapels or oratories within the nominated area.

- *Sacro Monte and Calvary, Domodossola*

The Mattarella Pass overlooking Domodossola was chosen in 1656 by two Capuchin friars for a Sacro Monte and Calvary. The result is a series of twelve chapels, with appropriate statuary and frescoes, representing the Stations of the Cross, and three for the Deposition from the Cross, the Holy Sepulchre, and the Resurrection. On the top of the pass is the octagonal Sanctuary of the Holy Cross, building of which began in 1657. Only the Sanctuary, five of the chapels, the remains of the medieval castle of Mattarella, and the Institute of Charity are proposed for inscription.

- *Sacro Monte of Belmonte, Valperga Canavese*

The red granite hill of Belmonte stands apart from the crests of the Piedmont chain. The project for a sacro monte here was the idea of a monk, Michelangelo da Montiglio, in the early 18th century. He had spent many years in the Holy Land and wished to recreate its Biblical sites in northern Italy, and so he laid out a circuit of chapels symbolizing the principal incidents in the Passion, culminating in the tiny existing Sanctuary, which had long been a place of pilgrimage. The chapels, of which there are thirteen, are almost identical in plan: they were financed, and to a large extent built, by local people. In their earliest form they were decorated with paintings of sacred subjects

by local craftsmen: it was only a century later that they were embellished by the addition of Castellamonte ceramic statues. The access path was enlarged at the end of the 19th century to meet the increase in pilgrims to the site.

History

The phenomenon of Sacri Monti ('Sacred Mountains') began at the turn of the 15th and 16th centuries with the aim of creating in Europe places of prayer as alternative to the Holy Places in Jerusalem and Palestine, access to which was becoming more difficult for pilgrims owing to the rapid expansion of Muslim culture. The Minorite guardians of the Holy Sepulchre selected three sites – Varallo in Valsesia, belonging to the Duchy of Milan, Montañone in Tuscany, and Braga in northern Portugal – at which to build 'New Jerusalems' designed to be similar in topography to the original.

Within a few years, especially after the Council of Trent (1545-1563), these models, and in particular that of Varallo, built around 1480, were used for another purpose, and especially in those dioceses coming under the jurisdiction of the Milan Curia. This was to combat the influence of Protestant 'Reform' by promoting the creation of more Sacri Monti as concrete expressions of their preaching. These were dedicated not only to Christ but also to cults devoted to the Virgin Mary, saints, the Trinity, and the Rosary.

This ideal project, which went into specific standards for the typology and architectural styles to use, received a strong impetus from Carlo Borromeo, Bishop of Milan. In accordance with the ideas that stemmed from the Council of Trent, he went straight ahead with the completion of the Varallo sacro monte before starting work on the others. This phase went on throughout the 17th century until around the middle of the 18th century. Varallo was succeeded by the sacri monti at Crea, Orta, Varese, Oropa, Ossuccio, Ghiffa, Domodossola, and Valperga. Although at the outset these followed certain basic rules, as they were being constructed they developed individual artistic and architectural aspects.

Other sacri monti were designed and built throughout the 18th century, but many of these were no more than examples of different styles, lacking the religious motivation, the authenticity of composition according to strict rules, and the fine architectural and artistic elements which had marked the earlier phase in the 16th and 17th centuries.

Management regime

Legal provision:

As historic, artistic, and architectural properties, all the Sacri Monti are subject to the provisions of the main Italian protection Laws Nos 1089/1089 and 352/97, as well as Legislative Decree No 490/99. No intervention of any kind may be made to these properties with the authorization of the relevant *Soprintendenza (Beni Ambientali e Architettonici de Milano, based in Milan, and Beni Ambientali e Architettonici del Piemonte, based in Turin)*, which are the regional agencies of the Ministry of Cultural Properties and Activities in Rome.

In addition, various forms of legal protection are extended at Regional level to each of the properties:

- Varallo: A Special Nature Reserve (Piedmont Regional Law No 30 of 28 April 1980);
- Crea: A Natural Park and Protected Zone (Piedmont Regional Law No 5 of 28 January 1980);
- Orta: A Special Nature Reserve (Piedmont Regional Law No 30 of 28 April 1980);
- Varese: A legally recognized ecclesiastical organization;
- Oropa: The *Santuario di Oropa* (Sanctuary of Oropa) is defined legally as an 'autonomous lay religious organization';
- Ossuccio: A legally recognized ecclesiastical organization;
- Ghiffa: A Special Nature Reserve (Piedmont Regional Law No 7 of 28 April 1987);
- Domodossola: A Special Nature Reserve (Piedmont Regional Law No 65 of 27 December 1980);
- Valperga: a Special Nature Reserve (Piedmont Regional Law No 30 of 28 April 1980).

The objectives of all the Regional reserves cover the protection of natural, landscape, architectural, archaeological, cultural, and art-historical values, encouragement of appropriate agricultural and silvicultural activities, and development of research.

Management structure:

- Varallo: The property is owned by the civil administration of the Sacro Monte de Varallo (Varallo Sesia Comune) and managed by the Natural Special Reserve office, Varallo Sesia;
- Crea: The property is owned by the Ente Santuario Diocesano Madonna di Crea, an ecclesiastical body set up by the Diocese of Casale Monferrato and managed by the Park office in Ponzano;
- Orta: The property is owned by the commune administration of Orta San Giulio, with the exception of the former Convent, which is in private hands. Management is the responsibility of the park authority;
- Varese: The property belongs to the Parish of Santa Maria del Monte;
- Oropa: The 'Sanctuary of Oropa' (the name usually used for the *Santo Luogo della Madonna Santissima di Oropa*) is the owner of the property and responsible for its management;
- Ossuccio: The property is owned by the Diocesan Curia of Como and managed by the Capuchin Lombard Province of Milan;
- Ghiffa: The property is owned by the Commune of Ghiffa and managed by the Nature Reserve authority;
- Domodossola: The property is owned by the Rosminian Fathers of the Italian Province of San Maurizio and managed by the Nature Reserve authority;
- Valperga: Different parts of the property are owned by Count Luigi di Valperga, the Province of Minorite

Brothers, and other individuals, and their management is overseen and supported by the relevant *Soprintendenze*.

Those properties designated Special Nature Reserves (Varallo, Crea, Orta, Ghiffa, Domodossola, and Valperga) are covered by plans drafted and approved under the provisions of Regional Law No 12/90; these are integrated with the master plans of the surrounding communes. Only the Oropa Sacro Monte has its own restoration and organization plan, approved in 1999 and responsible during 2000 for an initial series of interventions on four of its chapels.

Overall responsibility for the protection of all the properties is the Piedmont Region, based in Turin. There are various bodies in the properties themselves with management committees composed of representatives of the local authorities and experts nominated by the Piedmont Region. These employ personnel responsible for day-to-day management, guardianship, and maintenance. Funding is provided by the Piedmont Region, supplemented in some cases by national and European grants.

In the designated Nature Reserves there are boards of management, whose remit extends to research and documentation promotion of their objectives in local communities as well as surveillance, maintenance, and (where funding can be secured) conservation and restoration projects.

The relevant Diocesan Curia is responsible for the management of the Varese and Ossuccio Sacri Monti, with the support of the *Soprintendenze*. A similar arrangement is in force at Oropa: the council of the *Santuario di Oropa*, founded in 1644, is composed of members elected by the Chapter of the Cathedral of Biella and the commune authorities. It is responsible for management of the property, with the support of the *Soprintendenze*.

Justification by the State Party (summary)

Criterion ii: The Cultural Landscape of the *Sacri Monti* of Piedmont and Lombardy is an outstanding example of this type of property, in which natural elements (mountains, woods, water) have been used as places of sacred and symbolic representation with paths, chapels, and sacred scenes (life-size statues in polychrome terracotta) illustrating the life of Christ, the life of the Virgin Mary, the cult of the Trinity, the cult of the Rosary, and the lives of the saints. The overall result is a cultural landscape laid out on a grand scale, remarkable for its interest and its beauty, with high religious and historical value, and great spiritual quality in which nature and elements created by humans are blended in a harmonious and unequalled style.

Criterion iv: From the mid 16th century the 'instructions' given to the clergy opposed to the Protestant Reformation led in northern Italy to the development of sacri monti, a phenomenon that was to repeat itself in many guises up to the early years of the 18th century. The Cultural Landscape of the *Sacri Monti* of Piedmont and Lombardy is an exceptional example of the structuring of the land, the 'sacralization of the landscape' in a landscaping project which makes use of natural element and the work of humans for religious purposes.

3. ICOMOS EVALUATION

Actions by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS expert mission visited the property in July 2001. The ICOMOS/IFLA Scientific Committee on Historic Gardens and Cultural Landscapes was consulted on the cultural values of the nominated properties.

Conservation

Conservation history:

Systematic conservation of this group of monuments did not begin until 1980. Before that time, they were subject to intermittent interventions, some of which made radical changes to the original designs. They also experienced long periods of neglect, which resulted in serious deterioration of the structures and decoration owing to the harsh climatic conditions of the region.

State of conservation:

Efforts since the creation of the Nature Reserves concentrated in the first instance on weatherproofing the structures, and more particularly on restoration of the roofs. Attention then focused on the interiors, and on the restoration of the paintings and sculpture. At the present time the overall state of conservation is acceptable, although a considerable amount of work remains to be done on certain of the chapels.

Management:

The management plan that was requested by the World Heritage Committee in June 2002 was provided by the State Party in December of the same year. This plan is the joint agreement by all the parties involved, ie the state superintendence for the protection of cultural heritage, the regional and municipal authorities, as well as the religious authorities. The purpose of the plan is to coordinate the conservation management of the properties in a coherent manner, adopting common policies and strategies regarding the promotion of cultural, social-economic and tourist activities. Furthermore, the parties have constituted a 'Permanent Conference' for the establishment and implementation of the system of management. The practical aspects are the responsibility of the *Permanent Operational Working Group*, and the *Secretariat* of this Conference is guaranteed by the Regione Piemonte. The plan provides the framework for the management process and the responsibilities of each party, as well as outlining the programme of activities for 2003-2006.

This plan is considered to fully satisfy the requirements of the conservation management of the properties concerned.

Authenticity and integrity

The authenticity of the Sacri Monti as landscapes is high: little has been lost in almost every case of the original symbolic layouts of the chapels within the natural landscape. An essential feature of the Sacri Monti is that they preserve intimate links with not only the natural landscape but also the neighbouring human communities.

The level of authenticity in materials and workmanship is also substantial and fully in conformity with the

requirements of the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*. Whilst modifications were carried out to certain ensembles and individual buildings during the 17th and 18th centuries, these have largely retained their integrity in terms of materials and workmanship. Recent restoration work has conformed fully with modern principles of conservation and restoration.

So far as authenticity of function is concerned, all the chapels are preserved as places of prayer and reflection, the purposes for which they were originally constructed.

Comparative evaluation

The concept of the Sacro Monte ('sacred mountain') originated with the Counter-Reformation of the 16th century, following the Council of Trent (1545-63). It was a continuation and diversification of the earlier practice of reproducing the main topographical elements of the Holy Land in European landscapes for the benefit of the faithful who were unable to embark on pilgrimages.

Those in northern Italy, including some of the earliest to be created, took various aspects of Christian belief as themes: these included not only the Passion of Christ but also cults devoted to the Virgin Mary, the saints, the Trinity, and the Rosary. Sacri monti were established in different parts of Europe which adhered to Roman Catholicism. Later, there was a concentration on the Passion and the creation of 'calvaries' on a grand scale, covering large areas of landscape. One of the most important of these, the Kalwaria Zebrzydowska in Poland, was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1999.

Most of the later *Sacri Monti* that were created during the 18th century were little more than exercises in style. They lack the spiritual motivation, the strict adherence to rules of composition and design, and the outstanding architectural and artistic quality of the 16th and 17th century examples.

Because of their early date, their integrity, and their high level of authenticity, the group of *Sacri Monti* that make up this nomination are of outstanding significance and exceptional examples of this important spiritual phenomenon.

Outstanding universal value

This group of *Sacri Monti* ('sacred mountains') in northern Italy are potent symbols of the Counter-Reformation of the 16th century. They utilize sacred imagery and natural landscape to create ensembles with profound spiritual significance. They are noteworthy for the quality and diversity of the structures that compose them and the art that they contain, but also for the close links established with the natural landscape.

It is understood that there are two Sacri Monti of the same period and type in the neighbouring Swiss canton of Ticino. Consideration should be given by the Swiss Government to an eventual trans-frontier extension to the Italian nomination.

The term 'sacred mountain' is the standard designation of natural mountainous features that are themselves the object of veneration, rather than any structures built upon them:

examples are Taishan and Huangshan (China) and Mount Fuji (Japan). The Italian *Sacri Monti* are, however, not worshipped as natural objects but solely because of the chapels erected upon them to symbolize important Christian cults. It is suggested that the Italian term might be retained in this case and not translated, so as to indicate a different spiritual function from that of the oriental sacred mountains.

ICOMOS believes that there may be a case for the application of criterion vi in this case. However, it is not recommending doing so because the State Party has not proposed the properties for inscription under this criterion. It should also be borne in mind that this criterion was not applied in the case of the Polish property, the Kalwaria Zebrzydowska, in 1999.

4. ICOMOS RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation for the future

ICOMOS suggests that consideration be given to changing the name of the property in the English version to 'The *Sacri Monti* of Piedmont and Lombardy'.

Recommendation with respect to inscription

That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria ii* and *iv*:

Criterion ii: The implantation of architecture and sacred art into a natural landscape for didactic and spiritual purposes achieved its most exceptional expression in the *Sacri Monti* ('Sacred Mountains') of northern Italy and had a profound influence on subsequent developments elsewhere in Europe.

Criterion iv: The *Sacri Monti* ('Sacred Mountains') of northern Italy represent the successful integration of architecture and fine art into a landscape of great beauty for spiritual reasons at a critical period in the history of the Roman Catholic Church.

ICOMOS, March 2003