

Assisi (Italy)

No 990

Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	Assisi, the Basilica of San Francesco and other Franciscan sites
<i>Location</i>	Province of Perugia in Umbria
<i>State Party</i>	Italy
<i>Date</i>	30 June 1999

Justification by State Party

The town of Assisi represents a unique example of continuity of a city-sanctuary from its Umbrian-Roman origins to the present. The birthplace of Saint Francis, Assisi has been related to the cult of the saint and the development of the Franciscan movement in the world, as well as being an eminent reference for Italian art in the 13th and 14th centuries and the symbol of his universal spiritual message.

Abundant evidence provides a complete picture of the historical-archaeological evolution of human settlement in this region since Neolithic times and the Bronze Age, later enriched in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. The stratigraphy has been well preserved up to the present, and the archaeological significance of the site is to be seen in the extensive terraces, built over a hill at the foot of Mount Subasio, making Assisi an impressive example of uniform urban planning in the pre-Roman period and the sole example north of Rome based on Hellenistic canons. The ancient remains are clearly present in the urban fabric, including the Temple of Minerva (1st century BCE), one of the best preserved examples of sacred Roman architecture.

The urban and environmental significance of Assisi is seen in the extraordinary continuity of morphological, functional, and landscape relations, especially in the relationship of the town with its surroundings. The territory forms a cultural landscape with natural and human elements, such as settlements, religious ensembles, road systems, traditional systems of cultivation, and agricultural management structures. From the Middle Ages this framework is enriched with three remarkable elements, the basilicas of San Francesco and Santa Chiara and the Rocca Maggiore fort. Assisi is an example of remarkable continuity in its urban form, building types, styles, and construction techniques, as well as in its spatial qualities, green areas, public spaces, and richness of elements.

The artistic and architectural significance of Assisi is exemplified in the Basilica of San Francesco, which has

contributed to the development of building types and building techniques, as well as presenting the pictorial cycle that is at the origin of all great Italian painting. Artists such as Cimabue, Simone Martini, Pietro Lorenzetti, Giotto, and his disciples have made Assisi a model and a fundamental reference in European art history, inspired by the innovative spiritual and religious movements of the Franciscans.

Assisi represents a masterpiece of human creative genius, which has had a considerable influence on Italian and European developments in art and architecture.

Criteria i and ii

It constitutes an exceptional testimony of an ensemble of archaeological, monumental, urban, and landscape values in an almost completely preserved historic centre. **Criterion iii**

Being the birthplace of Saint Francis, Assisi has from the Middle Ages been closely associated with the cult and diffusion of the Franciscan movement in the world, focusing on the universal message of peace and tolerance even to other religions or beliefs. **Criterion vi**

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 *site*.

History and Description

History

The Roman plan of the city is based on the set of terraces, the construction of which started in the north-eastern part of the town (close to San Rufino), then extending toward the west. Culturally, the region belonged to Umbria but was on the border with Etruria. Abundant archaeological evidence, in fact, shows that the city's foundation relates to the Umbrian phase, being later taken over by the Romans. The Roman monuments include the Temple of Minerva dating from the 1st century BCE to the time of Augustus, as part of an important sanctuary in the forum area, as well as theatres, bath-houses, and other public buildings. The ancient city walls were about 2300m long, enclosing some 55ha with vast green areas. The extent of the settlement and the fact that it was granted the status of *municipium* in 89 BCE demonstrate not only its role as a religious centre but also its political and economic significance. From the 3rd century CE, the city shows little evidence of construction until the beginning of the new millennium. Even so, the site continues being associated with religion, and the development and diffusion of Christianity are elements that deeply characterize the scenario, also closely associated with the ancient rituals and therapeutic treatments linked with water. The first Christian martyrs were killed in water, according to a legend, Bishop Rufino being one of them.

After the period of the barbarian invasions, which caused a considerable reduction in population, the regional layout of Assisi is characterized with the affirmation of Christianity, involving ancient sites associated with water and martyrdom. Water in fact becomes the symbol of life after death and its control takes on a liturgical nature. The territory is marked by the linkages between monastic and religious centres, settlements (eg San Vittorino, San Benedetto), and

hermitages (eg Le Carceri). The region was subject to profound changes from the 11th and 12th centuries with the change of land ownership from important patrons to the classes of artisans and merchants. It also meant new types of cultivation and deforestation in view of new dynamism in development. A series of castles were built on the margins of the valley, and others were developed as centres of pastoral culture in the mountain region. In addition, there were new rural settlements, including the characteristic Umbrian building type of tower house, which remains a feature of all Assisi iconography until the present day.

Through the period from the 11th to the 14th centuries, the ancient town of Assisi was subject to important changes. The development focused on four main points: Piazza del Mercato, Murorupto, Santa Maria Maggiore, and San Rufino. The market becomes the centre of noble families, as well as having various churches (San Nicolo, San Paolo, Sant'Agata). The bishop's citadel was built close to the ancient cathedral of Santa Maria Maggiore, and San Rufino became the new cathedral in the 11th century, rebuilt in the 13th century. The walled area was enlarged in 1260 and 1316, showing an increase in population.

The most important event in the history of medieval Assisi was undoubtedly the life and work of Francis of Assisi (1182–1226), who initiated the Franciscan Order, one of the most influential monastic orders in the Christian world, and who was canonized in 1228. Francis was born in Assisi and, although he travelled a great deal, some of the key references to his faith are in Assisi, including the grottoes of *Le Carceri*, *San Damiano*, and the *Porziuncola*, where he died. His companion, Clare, later canonized, founded the sister order to the Franciscans. After the canonization of Saint Francis, it was decided to build a monumental church in his honour, involving the Church of Rome as well as the City of Assisi. This construction was followed by the *Basilica of Santa Chiara* to honour Saint Clare.

The construction of the Basilicas of San Francesco and Santa Chiara represented a new input to the urban form of the town, and gave the relatively small medieval settlement a completely new physiognomy. This included the development of the main square over the former forum area with the Temple of Minerva. The construction of the Basilica of San Francesco, in particular, changed the earlier Franciscan symbol of humility into an exaltation of the figure of the saint, and the order thus affirmed its mission in the world. The city walls were once again enlarged in the 14th century, when also the fort, *La Rocca*, on the top of the hill was rebuilt as part of a series of castles to protect the interests of the papacy in the region.

The social and political events from the 15th to the 18th century left their traces in Assisi, in the form of new construction and improvements in management and draining of arable land. In the 14th and 15th centuries, Assisi was involved in wars with Perugia and in conflicts with Guelphs and Ghibellines, and the city suffered from sacks and fires. Through this period, however, the symbolic importance of Assisi in relation to Saint Francis continued. The first detailed town plan that has survived till today dates from 1599, by Giacomo Lauro, indicates Assisi as the *patria* of Saint Francis. In the late 15th century the most important urban project was the construction of the public squares in front of the Basilica of San Francesco. In the 16th century Galeazzo Alessi designed the large basilica of Santa Maria

degli Angeli down in the valley, and it became a shelter for the Porziuncola of Saint Francis. He also restructured the cathedral of San Rufino and designed the tabernacle for the lower church of the Basilica of San Francesco. In the 17th and 18th centuries the city continued developing and a number of noble families built their palaces in the Baroque style. This period also included the church of San Francesco Converso by Giacomo Giorgetti in the 17th century.

In the 19th century, the discovery of the bodies of Saint Francis and Saint Clare gave new vigour to construction activities, including the restructuring of the convents of S. Damiano and S. Maria di Rivotorto. There were also some changes in the centre of Assisi, including the new postal offices in the Piazza del Comune. After World War II the renewed interest in Assisi provided an incentive for the protection of the historic town and its surroundings. In 1954, Assisi received the first conservation master plan in post-war Italy. At the same time, the entire municipal area became subject to nature protection.

Description

The nomination area as first proposed by the State Party consisted of the historic town of Assisi within its medieval walls, including the *Basilica of San Francesco*. Subsequently, the State Party has proposed the addition of four more Franciscan sites, *Le Carceri*, *San Damiano*, *Rivotorto*, and *Santa Maria degli Angeli*, and the perimeter of the nomination has been extended to include the entire municipal area, already fully protected. The parts of the municipal area of Assisi, which have been developed (eg close to the site of S. Maria degli Angeli) are proposed as buffer zones.

The city of Assisi is built on the slopes of the hill of Asio, at the foot of the Subasio mountain. The form of the urban settlement is elongated and extends from the south-east towards the north-west. The town thus faces the valley in a broad panorama, being built over the ancient terraces of Umbrian-Roman foundation. The west end of the town is occupied by the Basilica of San Francesco with the spectacular substructures and arcades of its monastic buildings. The urban fabric is characterized by two or three main streets running along the terraces, with smaller alleys connecting these arteries.

The townscape of Assisi is highlighted by its main monuments, starting from San Francesco in the west, San Pietro, Santa Maria Maggiore, and Santa Chiara in the lower part of the town, facing the valley, and the complex of the Piazza del Comune in the centre, including the Temple of Minerva, Palazzo del Podesta, Torre del Popolo, and the municipal palaces. At the east end, there is the cathedral of San Rufino and above this the remains of the ancient amphitheatre. Up on the hill there is the imposing the Renaissance fort of Rocca Maggiore. The city walls include parts of the ancient Roman structures, built into the medieval defence system, articulated by small towers and gates. At the east end the 1950s master plan has included a small new development of modern housing.

The urban fabric is mainly built in limestone, which gives a harmony all along the historic time-line of the town, from antiquity up to the most recent constructions. The centre of the town consists of relatively large palaces and public buildings, while the area around the amphitheatre and down at lower levels is characterized by vernacular housing. It is

characteristic of the houses of Assisi that even the transformations in different periods have respected the same type of material and structural system, which gives unity. In fact, the Assisi type of stone construction marks an area of its influence in the region.

Down in the valley, the territory is articulated by the ancient road system, based on Hellenistic and Roman land divisions and connections. These were enriched in the Middle Ages through pilgrimage routes, with some additions in more modern times. Furthermore, the land is marked by some monastic complexes, of which the most important are the Renaissance monastery and basilica of Santa Maria degli Angeli, San Damiano, and Rivotorto. The landscape is further enhanced by a variety of other structures, including farmhouses and towers, often of medieval origin. As a result of land-use and conservation policies, the territory has maintained its historical stratigraphy intact, particularly within the municipal area of Assisi, thus remaining an essential reflection of the fundamental connection between the town and the valley.

The mountainous regions to the north and east of Assisi are forested. In these areas there are also numerous hermitage sites, such as Le Carceri, and monastic complexes, such as San Benedetto. The valley to the north of the Basilica of San Francesco is part of the area where Saint Francis spent his childhood, discovering nature. This area is protected, maintaining its woods and small-scale agricultural land divisions, as well as including some historic complexes, farmhouses, and ancient towers.

The historic town of Assisi contains a large number of important historic buildings, including basilicas, churches and convents, oratories, private palaces, public buildings, medieval walls and gates, museums, archives, libraries, and fountains. In addition, there are archaeological sites and remains, including the city walls and gates, partly dating from antiquity, Porta Urbica, Temple of Minerva, the Roman Forum under the main city square, and the Roman amphitheatre.

The following are the most important religious monuments in Assisi:

- Basilica of San Francesco

San Francesco is the principal religious complex of Assisi. Its construction was started in 1228, two years after the death of the saint, to honour him and to house his relics. It was built in the west, in an area where there were no earlier constructions. The form of the site and the functions of the church have dictated a particular type of construction. The lower level contains a church with imposing Romanesque arches, dedicated to the cult of the saint; the upper building is conceived as a vast Gothic hall, to represent the life of the saint. The church was consecrated in 1253. The construction of the monastic complex extended over a period of some 250 years, being concluded by the imposing works under Pope Sixtus IV in the 15th century.

The lower basilica of San Francesco is entered through an exquisite Gothic portal (1271), protected by an avant-corps by the Renaissance sculptor, F Di Bartolomeo di Pietrasanta, formed of an arch supported on two columns and an attic. The interior is completely covered with frescoes, dating from the 13th to 17th centuries. The earliest of these date from 1253 and are by an unknown artist, called the Maestro di San Francesco. Furthermore, the paintings include allegories

attributed to Giotto and his school in the presbytery, the Virgin with a Child on the Throne by Cimabue, and the Crucifixion by Giotto, the paintings (1315–20) by Pietro Lorenzetti and his assistants, and the Chapel of Saint-Martin by Simone Martini (1312–20). The upper basilica has a magnificent east front in white limestone, with a large rose window in the centre. In the interior, the walls are decorated with series of paintings related to the faith and life of the saint. These include the dramatic paintings by Cimabue, including scenes of the Apocalypse and the figures of the four Evangelists, as well as paintings by various masters from Rome, the so-called Maestro di Isacco and Giotto himself. The choir of the upper church has magnificent wooden stalls in the Gothic-Renaissance style.

- Cathedral of San Rufino

The first church on this site probably dates from the 8th century; it was rebuilt by Bishop Ugone around 1036 as a cathedral. In 1140 the construction involved Giovanni da Gubbio, and the church was finally consecrated in 1253. The west front is a masterpiece of Umbrian Romanesque architecture, connected with the cathedral and the church of San Pietro of Spoleto. The interior of the church was completely restructured by Galeazzo Alessi in 1571 in simple Renaissance forms. Ongoing excavations in the interior are displaying fragments of earlier structures, including walls from the Roman period.

- Basilica of Santa Chiara

The construction of the basilica to honour Saint Claire started in 1257, under the direction of Fra' Filippo da Campello. In the exterior the structure is characterized by three large flying buttresses, and close to the apse there is square bell-tower. The plan of the church is based on a Latin cross and the whole interior is painted with a cycle of frescoes illustrating the legend of Saint Claire by several artists, influenced by Giotto and Lorenzetti.

- Abbey of San Pietro

Originally built outside the city walls, the Benedictine abbey of San Pietro is recorded from 1029; in the middle of the 12th century it adopted the Cluny reform and it passed later to the Cistercians. The current church was consecrated in 1253, with the splendid main front completed in 1268. The interior is austere, divided in three naves by massive pillars.

- Santa Maria della Minerva

The Roman temple, traditionally dedicated to Minerva, or possibly to Castor and Pollux, is relatively well preserved. It was first converted into a church and then, in 1212, into a prison. From 1456 the building was again used as a church, dedicated to Santa Maria della Minerva in 1539.

In addition to the original nomination, the State Party has subsequently proposed the inclusion of additional sites: Santa Maria degli Angeli and the Porziuncola, the monastic complex of San Damiano, the Sanctuary of Le Carceri, and the Sanctuary of Rivotorto. All sites are closely associated with the life and work of Saint Francis of Assisi. *The Carceri* are located in a valley of the Mount Subasio and consisted originally of a series of caves for Saint Francis and his companions. From the 15th to the early 19th centuries a small convent was gradually built on the site of the saint's grotto. *San Damiano* is a monastic complex, essential for the understanding of the religious

awakening of Saint Francis, as well as being the convent of Saint Clare, where she also died. *Santa Maria degli Angeli* is a Renaissance church designed by G Alessi in the 16th century to protect the original chapel of *Porziuncola*, the site from where Saint Francis sent his order to their mission and the site where he died. The three surviving chapels contain important early paintings, and are carefully preserved as religious relics. The church of S. Maria degli Angeli and the adjoining monastery contain significant art works and were originally built to receive the large numbers of visitors. After some serious earthquake damage the church was provided with a new main elevation in the 19th century. The ancient road from Porziuncola towards San Francesco has recently been excavated, revealing parts of the original paving. The Sanctuary of *Rivotorto* contains a small medieval complex, preserved as a relic and relating to a site of Franciscan pilgrimage. This site is more modest but has a religious significance for the Franciscans.

Management and Protection

Legal status

The principal monuments and listed buildings of Assisi, such as the basilicas and other religious complexes as well as the listed urban and rural buildings, are protected by law and under the direct control of the Italian State Superintendence offices of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage responsible for art and architecture, archaeology, or archives. The local authority is in charge of controlling the implementation of the law and the legal norms. In addition, the entire municipal area is under legal protection for its natural environment. Since 1954 the municipality has had a master plan, adopted in 1966 and approved in 1972, which identifies the areas of protection and conservation and regulates land-use. This master plan has been updated to meet emerging needs, and another variant taking into account the World Heritage nomination is under consideration by the City Council in the spring of 2000.

Management

The in-depth study for the urban master plan carried out by G Astengo in the 1950s was an avant-garde initiative and has been taken as a reference for later conservation planning of historic cities, such as that of Urbino by G De Carlo. The studies focused on the territory and the Franciscan places and contain a respectable amount of information regarding the single buildings and sites in the town itself. The master plan provides a good basis for the management of Assisi and has been mainly responsible for the strict control of development in recent decades. The master plan identifies a fairly large perimeter for the protected historic zone, including not only the historic town but also the relevant parts of Monte Subasio, the valley to the north, and the territory up to San Damiano and Rivotorto. The single religious properties, such as the basilicas, convents, and monastic complexes, are well managed by the Franciscan Order.

In addition to the urban master plan, the entire commune of Assisi is subject to environmental protection, established under different legal instruments. These include particularly the protection of natural environment, one of the major concerns for the Franciscans. Land-use management concerns the agricultural land, which so far

has been in continuous use. As in other parts of Europe, there are social and economic changes which may have an impact on such continuity, and possibly meaning changes in the use of the buildings. Guidelines are under consideration for such rural settlements.

Assisi is one of the major targets for tourism in Italy, perhaps the second most important after Rome, in this Jubilee year. The normal number of visitors to Assisi is around 5.5 million, of whom some 600,000 will remain an average of two nights in hotels. There are currently about 8000 hotel beds in Assisi. The main tourist influx is from April to October. The structure for visitor management has been provided in the Astengo master plan. At present full advantage is being taken of the opportunity of the Jubilee for the improvement of visitor management. In the case of San Francesco and Santa Maria degli Angeli this has made it possible to make some major improvements, providing underground facilities for the former and new museums for the latter.

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

Since the Middle Ages the Franciscan places have been targets for tourism and pilgrimage, and they continue to be one of the major places for visitation in Italy today. As a consequence the historic sites have been subject not only to respect but also to restoration and renovation. This has particularly been the case in the 19th and the 20th centuries. The aim has been to respect the character of the building and the type of construction. As a whole the historic town of Assisi has maintained its medieval structure and appearance fairly well intact. A major restoration period coincided with 1926, an anniversary of Saint Francis. In the spirit of the time there have also been some constructions in revival styles. Another important period of restoration was in the 1950s and 1960s, when for example the Basilica of San Francesco was subject to major works in its roof structures. Some of these reinforcements have proved to be too rigid, causing problems in the recent earthquake. In other cases they have helped the historic structure to survive. The current works are designed to take into account the experimentally determined structural behaviour, in order to guarantee the maximum respect of the historic structural system.

The Basilica of San Francesco has been inaugurated after major structural repair and restoration of the vaults and the tympanum of the basilica, as well as the monastery. Minor works are still going on in the monastery. The restoration of the mural paintings will be a long process and is being carried out using the best knowledge available. The front and the interior of Santa Chiara were damaged but the works are almost complete, although the convent will still remain under repair for at least three more years. The restoration of the splendid west front of San Rufino has been completed after eight years' work, but there are still archaeological excavations in progress inside the building.

Several palaces suffered in the earthquake, and of these the complex of the Vescovato is subject to major works. Restoration of the Municipal Palace is completed. While many houses have suffered some damage, some of these have already been repaired already or the repair is planned for the near future. As a whole the city of Assisi is in good

condition, and the earthquake has made some important improvements possible as a result of additional funding. To these can be added the renovation of the street paving, planned to start in 2001. As part of the renewal, the municipality is planning the reorganization of the traffic system in the historic town. The street lighting is also currently under discussion.

Authenticity

Assisi has maintained its historical integrity and authenticity in a remarkable manner. This is not only limited to single monuments but also extends to the entire historic territory of which it is part. The artistic works by Cimabue, Giotto, and other masters have been well preserved. Even though the recent earthquake did cause some damage (eg collapse of parts of the vaults in the Basilica of San Francesco), the monuments and important art works have since been subject to restoration works following internationally accepted policies.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS expert mission visited Assisi in January 2000.

Qualities

Assisi, already an ancient sanctuary in antiquity, has been associated with Saint Francis and the Franciscan Order since the 13th century, exercising an important influence in Italy and in the world. Assisi and its built territory represent an outstanding example of an Umbrian hill town and cultural landscape that has maintained its historical stratigraphy since antiquity. The works of medieval masters have made Assisi a fundamental reference point for the development of Italian art and architecture.

Comparative analysis

Assisi is unique in its association with the life and work of Saint Francis. The Basilica of San Francesco is an outstanding example of an Italian type of church at two levels, which differs from similar French and Germanic churches in the functions given to each part of the building. The historic town of Assisi is an outstanding example of an Umbrian hill town. It is distinguished by virtue of having been built over the ancient terraced sanctuary, which has dictated its overall form. The relationship of Assisi with its exceptionally well preserved territory is also of particular significance, partly because of the connections based on the Hellenistic and Roman land divisions and road systems but also because of the pilgrimage routes dating back to the 13th century.

Brief description

Assisi, an ancient sanctuary and a medieval hill town, is the birthplace of Saint Francis and fundamentally associated with work of the Franciscan Order. The masterpieces of medieval art, such as the Basilica of San Francesco and the paintings by Cimabue, Simone Martini, Pietro Lorenzetti, and Giotto, have made Assisi a fundamental reference point for the development of Italian and European art and architecture.

Recommendation

That the site be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria i, ii, iii, iv, and vi*:

Criterion i Assisi represents an ensemble of masterpieces of human creative genius, such as the Basilica of San Francesco, which have made it a fundamental reference for art history in Europe and in the world.

Criterion ii The interchange of artistic and spiritual message of the Franciscan Order has significantly contributed to developments in art and architecture in the world.

Criterion iii Assisi represents a unique example of continuity of a city-sanctuary within its environmental setting from its Umbrian-Roman and medieval origins to the present, represented in the cultural landscape, the religious ensembles, systems of communication, and traditional land-use.

Criterion iv The Basilica of San Francesco is an outstanding example of a type of architectural ensemble that has significantly influenced the development of art and architecture.

Criterion vi Being the birthplace of the Franciscan Order, Assisi has from the Middle Ages been closely associated with the cult and diffusion of the Franciscan movement in the world, focusing on the universal message of peace and tolerance even to other religions or beliefs.

ICOMOS, September 2000