

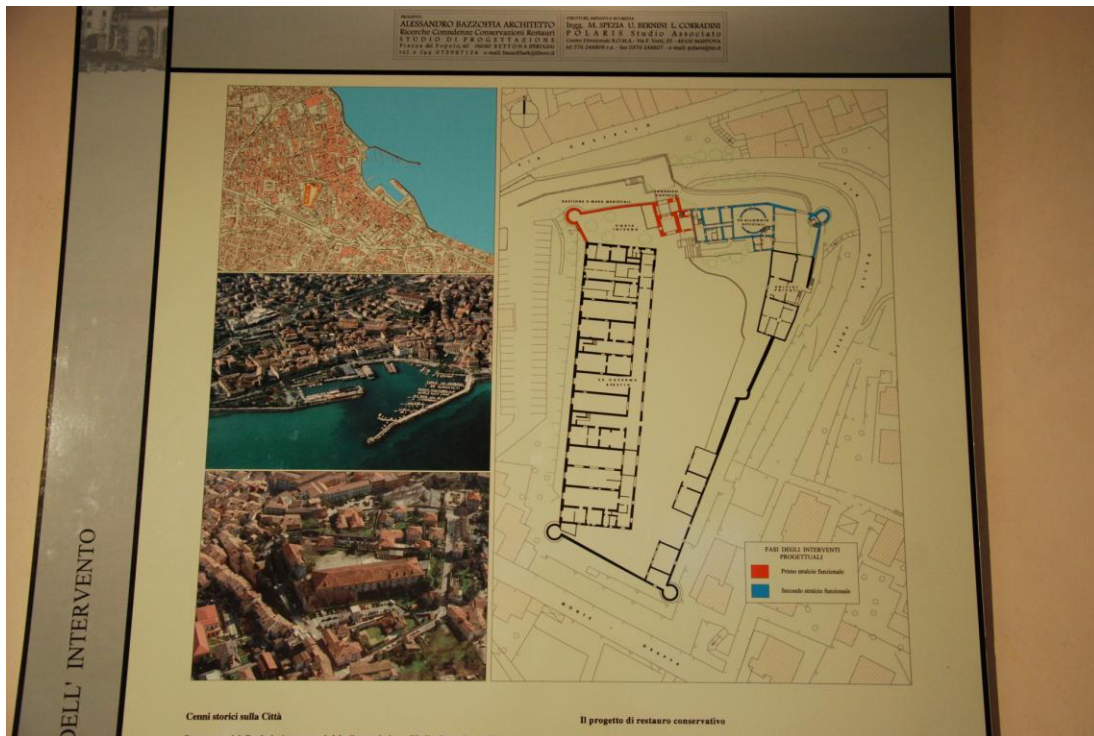
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An Italian castle in Finnish eyes – The castle of Desenzano del Garda in comparison to the Häme castle

Having a good understanding of even a very specific field can prove surprisingly insightful in a wider perspective, and give some good viewpoints on other things. I found a good example of that when visiting the castle of Desenzano del Garda in northern Italy after having worked two summers in the Häme castle. The two medieval castles seem to have little in common, apart from both being medieval castles. There is a major difference in when and where they were built, considering the differences between 11th century Italy and the peripheral 14th century Finland. Because of such a difference in both location and timing of the castles, one might not come to think of many similarities between the two. However, there are similarities to be seen if one knows how to look.

The castle of Desenzano del Garda as a museum

Before comparing the castles, however, I want to note that the castle of Desenzano is an interesting place to visit in many ways, in both good and bad. Standing on a hill on the southern shore of the lake Lago del Garda, the castle offers magnificent view over the rooftops of the city from its base and tower. This alone makes the castle a place worth a visit. The entrance fee to the castle is only few euros, which gives a visitor no reason not to visit the place. But once inside a visitor can feel quite lost. The castle is a small but beautiful stone castle with two storeys of rooms in the eastern wing, an inner courtyard and an entrance tower, but information about the castle is quite hard to come by. The castle does offer a lot to look at in the rooms of the eastern wing, in the outer wall surrounding the courtyard and the stairway leading up the tower. There are many stone-walled rooms, some with and some without furniture, and between the rooms there are some signs showing directions to other rooms. These signs do not give any proper information about the uses or ages of the rooms, but have short poems in Italian, which might offer some insight to the castle, if understood by the visitor. If a visitor doesn't have a good knowledge of the castles history, it is easy to just end up wondering the halls trying the hardest to imagine something about the castles past.



A map of the castle in an information board showing the different parts of the castle. Coloured red is the 11th century walls, courtyard and entrance tower, blue is the 15th century eastern wing and black is the 19th century barracks.

Coming up from the first wing to the tower of the castle the visitor finds the first information boards in the castle. The problem with these is that the text and images are very academic descriptions about the condition of the castle and repairs made in the castle, which do not offer much to the common visitor. In fact, the first information board describing the castle's history and the ages of different parts of the castle in general can be found eventually by the exit from the castle. This board gives a good description of the castles history and building phases along with a map. Giving the visitor all the general information seems like a very strange option to take leaving the visitor clueless for the large part of the visit. Although, maybe this way of giving information could possibly be seen as giving the visitor an open mind to look at the castle just as it is without directing one's thoughts too much.



On the left, the entrance tower of the castle of Desenzano seen from the courtyard. On the right, the stone remnants of the Häme castle's entrance tower can be seen in the brick wall from the courtyard.

The two castles

Despite not knowing anything about the castle's history in Desenzano and there being very little information on display before exiting, knowing the Häme castle's history did give some ideas about the Italian castle's history. Having worked at the castle of Häme for two summers and studied the medieval castle quite thoroughly, I started to wonder whether the Italian castle's tower next to an inner courtyard surrounded by walls might be an entrance tower, similar to the entrance tower that was built in the Häme castle among one of the first building phases in the 14th century. After all, it was quite common in medieval Europe to build such towers even to small castles like the ones in question. Then, in Desenzano the eastern wing on the other side of the tower didn't seem to fit the medieval structure, which would have seemed more logical to be centred around the courtyard. Besides, the ceilings in the rooms were not barrel vaulted like the ceilings in the tower, or in the oldest parts of Häme castle. The ceilings in the rooms were instead very similar to the renaissance-styled ceiling in one of the bed rooms in the Häme castle, nowadays reconstructed to its 15th-16th century form. Therefore the eastern wing seemed newer than the tower. Finally reaching the exit and its information board actually confirmed what I had theorised about different building phases of the castle in Desenzano and showed the tower and the courtyard to be the earliest structures, to which another living quarter was added on the eastern side about 500 years later.



Similar barrel vaulted ceilings from the two castles. On the left from the castle of Desenzano del Garda's tower, on the right from one of the Häme castle's oldest remaining parts.

Generally speaking the similarities in the big picture of the two castles' histories, as well as stylistic features, were quite surprising. Without going deeper into detail here, both had similar building phases in first having an entrance tower and a courtyard, which was later expanded with larger living quarters. Both had served as military bases, buildings for local officials and central places in their surroundings, both of which were then eventually turned into a barracks. Although mostly these changes happened in Desenzano hundreds of years before they did in Häme. What was interesting was seeing just how much only the walls of a castle in Italy could tell, when one knew how to read the walls of a castle hundreds of years younger in Finland. Surely this is only one case with a small castle in Desenzano, and larger, historically more significant ones might not allow quite such comparisons in the same scale. However, it just goes to show that even working in some certain museum and learning about that exact museum's history and subject can possibly lead to larger understanding of a broader spectrum of things than one might imagine.

The writer is a student of European and World History and museology, and has worked two summers as a guide in the Häme castle.

All pictures taken by Mikko Myllyntausta. The pictures of the Häme castle used with the permission of the Finnish National Board of Antiquities.

More information about the castles:

http://www.nba.fi/en/museums/hame_castle

http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Castello_di_Desenzano (Italian)