Rocca Sillana

Among the many monuments and settlements that dominate the undulating hills of the Cecina Valley, the Rocca Sillana castle is one of the most significant.
The castle, opened to the public a few years ago, stands alone on a hill surrounded by thick woodlands and commands a site rich in history that was densely inhabited during the Middle Ages.
According to hearsay, the castle, which controlled a vast territory, was named after the Roman general Sulla who besieged Volterra in 80 BC. In actual fact the name given to the castle today, Rocca Sillana, is much more recent. Until the mid-eighteenth century the castle was known as the Sillano castle or fortress, a name which is recorded in a document dating back to 945 A. D. On the other hand it is more probable that Sillano derives from Silvanus meaning woodland, as this was an area dense in woodlands during the Middle Ages.

The approach to the castle is framed by an extraordinary landscape.
Like all medieval castles, the Sillano castle was strategically built to dominate a large area and keep guard over the surrounding towns, roads, churches, farms and forests. The landscape has evolved greatly throughout the centuries and is now very different from the time when these strongholds were inhabited.
A medieval traveller would have certainly experienced a different sight although some features are still perceptible.
The rather secluded road from the village of San Dalmazio leads to the valley floor of the river Cecina and to the castle itself.
The road, now tarmacked, is the very same road that existed way back in history. This tract is only a small stretch of a much longer road that connected the city of Volterra to the extensive territory of the Upper Cecina Valley, once abundant in silver, iron and copper mines that made the bishops of Volterra rich and powerful during the Middle Ages. This was the route that the convoys, laden with silver mined in Montieri, took as they passed through Castelnuovo, by the Rocca Sillana, Berignone and finally to Volterra.
For this reason, some historians have renamed this road the Via dell'Argento -The Silver Route.

The entire route was controlled by fortified towns most of which have disappeared. In the Berignone forest there used to be an important castle, now in ruins, which for a certain period of time minted the bishop's coins, which were brought to the Bishop's Palace situated in the city of Volterra.
Castelnuovo Valdicecina still exists as a small-fortified town to this very day, although the Rocca Sillana settlement was abandoned.
Along the side of the road from San Dalmazio, just before the detour that leads to the top of the hill and to the Rocca Sillana, there is the parish church dedicated to St. John at Sillano.
Although the church is in ruins, most of the facade and parts of its interior are still visible so that we do have an idea of its original size and floor plan. The church is mentioned in a document dating back to 945 A. D, but the visible remains date back to the twelfth century. Its large size, a ground plan that included not only one nave and two isles but three apses are all important features that tell us that this church was certainly one of the most important churches in the Cecina Valley.
The architectural and artistic features of the façade and the position of the main doorway are still visible. On the right, there are the remains of a bell tower, which was not detached from the church, but incorporated into the building. In the interior of the church, the remains of the chancel, on which a raised altar once stood, are also visible.

Given that this church was a pieve meant that this was originally a parish church with the right to hold baptisms, to bury the faithful and served as a point of reference to the other churches in the area. The parish church at Sillano had nine subordinate churches, including that of the Rocca Sillana and the church in Montecastelli. In 1842 the parish church dedicated to St. John the Baptist was abandoned and the religious services transferred to the nearby church of Lanciaia.
A point of reference for the Rocca Sillana castle and its territory, this pieve, like many others, was traditionally built close to the road, at some distance from the settlements. It would not have stood alone as usually there were other buildings, which served as a home for the clerics and their servants, storehouses and even a boarding house to accommodate travellers. Many of them were built of wood and have not survived.

Proceeding further down the road the sight of the castle towering over the dense vegetation comes into view. Today the road is lined by trees, shrubs and unkept bushes that at intervals open out to reveal a view of open fields and woodlands, a landscape due to centuries of neglect. During the Middle Ages, when the castle was inhabited, the road was lined with small settlements, rural buildings, cultivated fields, pastures and forests which provided timber and fruit. The castle had to be visible from almost any point of the road and so the sides of the road were kept clear to see who was approaching.

As you climb the hill to the castle, today's landscape is the result of a series of changes in land use throughout the centuries. There have been periods in which it was densely inhabited, especially the early centuries of the Middle Ages. After the fourteenth century the countryside was gradually abandoned leaving empty houses and the uncultivated fields became woodlands. By the end of the eighteenth century, complete abandonment of the area coincided with the development of the mining industry and at a later date with the development of the geothermal plant.
From the top of the hill where the Rocca Sillana stands you can see the puffs of steam from the geothermal power plants in the distance, the Pavone valley (Peacock valley), the side of a hill on which the nearby village of Montecastelli spreads and the traces of waste from the Pavone copper mine.

The imposing presence of the Rocca Sillana, with its 15th century curtain walls built in brick, can be seen almost anywhere in the Cecina Valley and what we see today was only a part of the fortified settlement. Like all the best castles, the Rocca Sillana provided rings of defensive walls and many other buildings that included dwellings, shops and storehouses .
These fortified settlements, which we call castles, were built by wealthy and powerful families with the safety and security of its occupants in mind, to protect and guard over precious resources or simply the territory itself.

In fact, during the Middle Ages settlements were scattered and mostly concentrated in agricultural areas or located near the mines in order to make the most of the natural, available resources. It was not always easy for farmers and workers to get to their work place every day. For this reason, castles were built to protect the productive areas and their inhabitants, to collect the tolls and to make sure the storehouses were secure. The castles were all under the control of the rulers of the area. In Volterra, the bishop ruled over its territory. The bishop would appoint a loyal figure as a feudal lord who was entrusted with a castle and its territory in exchange for a percentage of the taxes or concessions of land use.
In the early Middle Ages, castles were very small and only consisted of a stone tower where the lord resided with his family, enclosed by a wooden fortification that also protected various buildings built in wood to accommodate soldiers, servants, storehouses, kitchens and stables. As the territory flourished, the fortifications and wooden buildings were gradually replaced by solid stone buildings and the feudal families converted the towers into larger buildings, real palaces in which they resided and from which they governed.

Over time, growing wealth through trade and the productive yield generated by the castle and its territory meant that more houses and buildings were constructed around the walls and another defensive wall was needed to protect these buildings. Castles were thus divided into two areas: the keep, which was the earliest centre and heart of the defence, and the village which consisted of homes and buildings used for industry and trade.

The Rocca Sillana also had this same layout. The earliest building is the eleventh century tower constructed in the central area of the castle, popularly known as the Guardingo-the Open Eye. Recent excavations have revealed the traces of the foundations of wooden buildings that surrounded the tower, replaced at the beginning of the thirteenth century by stone buildings, protected by a circle of stone walls.
The remains of the circle of stonewalls are still visible at the foot of the enormous brick walls that now surround the keep. In these walls there is a small door, protected by a narrow access and fortified as it was the only access to this area.

Traces of the village, which surrounded the keep, were revealed during the excavation work carried out on the site. When the castle was abandoned, the houses were all destroyed by time and by the inhabitants of the area who stripped the stones and bricks for use in the construction of new buildings.
Wealthy, very large and densely populated, we know that the Rocca Sillana was one of the main castles in the area. In 1221 the inhabitants of the castle swore allegiance to the City of Volterra, and through documents recording these oaths we also know the names of many people who owned properties in this settlement.
Traces of houses with their own wells, some even with two stories, ovens and other support structures are all indications of the wealth of the inhabitants. There was also a large cistern that supplied a good amount of water to the settlement and a church which was not as important as the parish church of St. John, but which held the daily services for the inhabitants of the castle.
The village was surrounded by a large circle of brick walls accessed by two gates: the Volterra Gate and the San Rocco Gate. Today the access to the castle is through the St. Rocco Gate which was further protected by a portcullis: a heavy grilled gate often added in the fourteenth century to ensure extra defence in case of attack.

The strategic location on the top of the hill, all the different phases of construction, from the building of the tower to the defensive walls, were functional choices to secure and withstand the numerous sieges and incursions which often occurred during this tumultuous era of the Middle Ages.
In the Middle Ages the land around the castle was cleared of natural foliage and trees to ensure protection in case of attack. Over the last century the woodland and shrubs have grown around the top of the hill where the settlement originally stood. A photograph taken at the beginning of the twentieth century clearly shows the imposing ruins of the castle without any surrounding trees or bushes.