RESEARCH ARTICLE

Pelagio Palagi's Floating Castles: 'Risorgimental Neo-Medievalism', Architectural Ephemera, and Politics at the Court of Savoy

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In 1842, the court artist Pelagio Palagi (1775–1860) devised four temporary floating castles on the river Po for the remarkable urban celebrations for the nuptials of His Royal Highness Victor Emmanuel of Savoy-Carignan (1820–1878) to Her Imperial and Royal Highness Maria Adelaide of Habsburg (1822–1855) in Turin. The structures formed the central pieces of a broad medievalist programme that, during the reign of Charles Albert of Savoy-Carignan (1831–1849), brought the Middle Ages back to life in the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia. Challenging the classicised image of the Sabaudian monarchy, this article insists that neo-medieval architecture and the architectural style that I call 'Risorgimental neo-medievalism' mirrored a calibrated medievalist and royalist strategy against the background of Italy's 'resurgence'. Countering recurrent biases that read Italian revivalist architecture as an exercise in taste, it discusses Palagi's designs as the tools of a political reworking of the Middle Ages, in open dialogue with the disciplines of architectural history and medievalism studies. By reading the urban festivities staged in the capital as a strategically orchestrated political act, this article assesses the medievalist initiatives, culminating in the spectacle on the river Po, as propagandistic vehicles to convey meaning to a vast public, which underscore the role of medievalist rhetoric in challenging the dominant classicist iconography and forging the 'identity' of the modern Sabaudian nation.

Keywords: neo-medievalism; architectural ephemera; Savoy; Risorgimento; politics; Italy

Introduction

The year 1842 was a memorable one in Sabaudian history.[1] On 12 April, at the Castle of Stupinigi, His Royal Highness Victor Emmanuel of Savoy-Carignan (1820–1878), Duke of Savoy — better known as the last King of Piedmont-Sardinia (1849–1861) and first King of Italy (1861–1878) — married his cousin, Her Imperial and Royal Highness Maria Adelaide of Habsburg (1822–1855), daughter of the Viceroy of the Kingdom of Lombardy-Venetia. The spectacular wedding celebrations, which concluded a month later in the Basilica of Saints Maurice and Lazarus (12 May), brought the Middle Ages back to life in Turin. Among the plethora of events and iconographic episodes staged in the capital was a *bal costumé* at the Royal Palace (13 April), a tournament in Piazza San Carlo (22 April), lighting decorations on Palazzo Madama (23 April), and an extraordinary show on the river Po centred on four floating castles (8 May), depicted in two of Virgilia and Emilia Lombardi's chromolithographs in the album *Ricordi delle Feste Torinesi nell'Aprile 1842* (**Figures 1** and **2**).[2]

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The wedding of the heir to the throne was celebrated in a long series of published materials (Viale Ferrero 1980). There is, however, little evidence of the ephemeral castles. The four structures, described as 'floating citadels, of appropriate solidity and sagacious conception' by the *Gazzetta Piemontese*, were demolished after the festivities (9 May 1842).[3] The project does not feature in the short autobiography of Pelagio Palagi (1775–1860), the highly creative and versatile artist from Bologna who was called to Turin in 1832 by His Majesty Charles Albert of Savoy-Carignan (1798–1849) (BA, FPP, 25/1). Through the inked captions of the four watercolours depicting the elevations of the castles we know, nonetheless, that it was he who designed this 'sagacious conception' (**Figures 3, 4, 5** and **6**). This article gathers together the sources that one can draw upon to study and explore these works, with a focus on the documentation conserved at the Biblioteca dell'Archiginnasio di Bologna, the Archivio Storico della Città di Torino, and the Archivio di Stato di Torino, and includes accounts in the press of the time.

Despite the fascinating designs, the floating structures almost never appear in art-historical literature. References to the project are limited to brief mentions, such as Anna Maria Matteucci's contribution to the exhibition catalogue *Pelagio Palagi: Artista e Collezionista* (1976: 151).

Figure 1: Virginia and Emilia Lombardi, *Fuochi Artificiali del Real Valentino Eseguiti dagli Artificieri Romani*, 1840s, chromolithograph (ASCT, SIM D 2085/14). © Archivio Storico della Città di Torino.

Figure 2: Virginia and Emilia Lombardi, *Fuochi Artificiali del Real Valentino Eseguiti dagli Artificieri Nazionali*, 1840s, chromolithograph (ASCT, SIM D 2085/15). © Archivio Storico della Città di Torino.
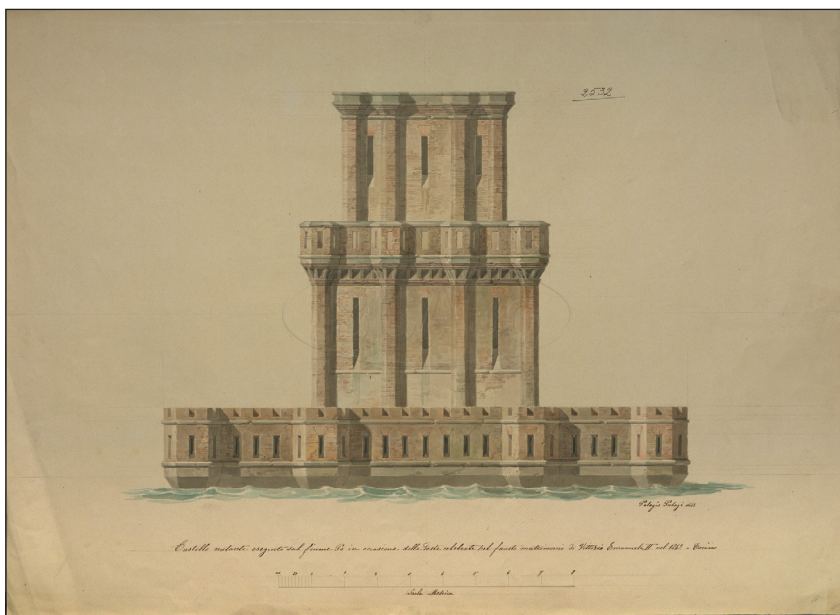

Figure 3: Pelagio Palagi, *Castello Natante Eseguito sul Fiume Po in Occasione delle Feste Celebrate pel Fausto Matrimonio di Vittorio Emanuele II nel 1842 a Torino*, 1842, watercolour and pencil on paper (BA, RP, 2532). © Biblioteca dell'Archiginnasio di Bologna.
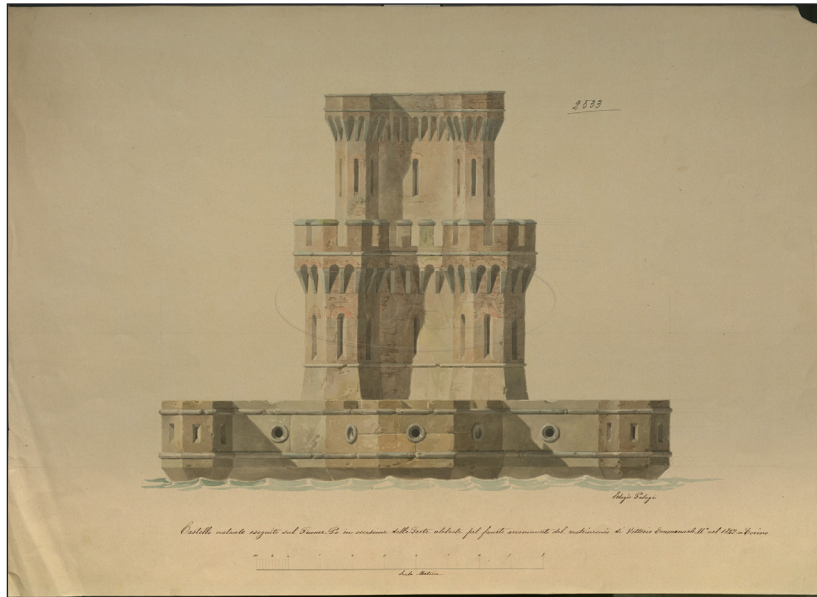
Figure 4: Pelagio Palagi, *Castello Natante Eseguito sul Fiume Po* ..., 1842, watercolour and pencil on paper (BA, RP, 2533). © Biblioteca dell'Archiginnasio di Bologna.
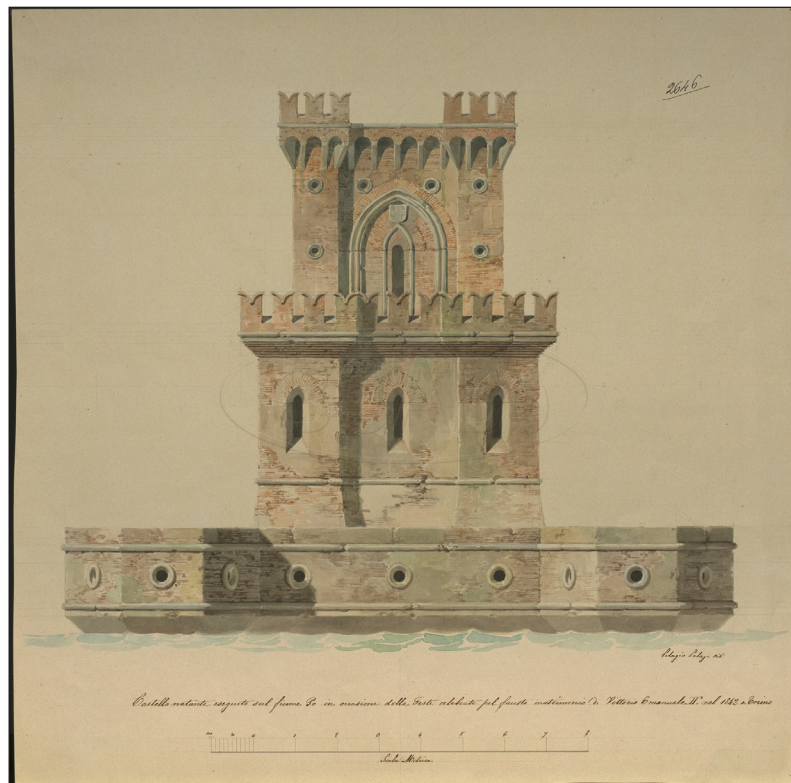

Figure 5: Pelagio Palagi, *Castello Natante Eseguito sul Fiume Po* ..., 1842, watercolour and pencil on paper (BA, RP, 2646). © Biblioteca dell'Archiginnasio di Bologna.

The reasons for this absence are varied, not least of which is the temporary and revivalist nature of the work.

This study arises from the awareness that scholarly research on 19th-century Italy tends to privilege permanence over ephemerality, often neglecting the role of temporary erections to convey symbolic meaning. It also springs from the concern that the literature tends to ignore, or even dismiss as vacuous *rêverie* or bad imitation of foreign motifs, the neo-medieval architecture of the Risorgimento, instead of situating it against the larger discourses about 'making and remaking Italy' (Ascoli and von Henneberg 2001). Despite some interesting accounts of medieval revivalism in Italy (Dellapiana 2005; Patetta 1975), the relative lack of literature on the topic often leads to the paradoxical assumption that the Italian peninsula embarked on medievalist projects only in rare instances and, surprisingly, with scarce results. Significant contributions have been made to the study of post-union neo-medievalism (Malone 2017; Meeks 1966; Zucconi 1997). Yet the contribution of medieval revivalism on the Risorgimento path to nationhood in the fragmented reality of pre-union Italy remains little understood.

Figure 6: Pelagio Palagi, *Castello Natante Eseguito sul Fiume Po …*, 1842, watercolour and pencil on paper (BA, RP, 2647). © Biblioteca dell'Archiginnasio di Bologna.

In the context of rising national self-definition, the case of the House of Savoy is particularly appealing as a subject of architectural history, not least because focus has traditionally been on early-modern Baroque and post-union neo-classicism. Indeed, the first architecture that comes to mind when referring to the monarchy is often the Vittoriano, Giuseppe Sacconi's Neo-Classical composition (1885–1911) that celebrated Victor Emmanuel II as the 'Father of the Fatherland' in Rome. Classicist aesthetics remained central as an instrument of royal legitimation during the Risorgimento, being tied with the representational needs triggered by the accession to the royal throne in the 18th century, and foreshadowing those demanded by the accession to the Italian throne in the second half of the 19th century: the Church of the Grande Madre di Dio (1818–1831), for examples, or the royal tribune realised as part of the ephemeral amphitheatre in Piazza San Carlo for Victor Emmanuel's wedding (**Figure 7**). Nonetheless, in the historicist reworking of notions of crown and nationhood, the first half of the 19th century contributed to the proliferation of the iconographical modes of Sabaudian imagery and, as in the celebrations of 1842, to the very challenging of and, in some aspects, subversion of classicist hegemony.

Although the topic has failed to establish a genre, since the 1960s, architectural historiography has taken a more consistent approach to neo-medieval projects and the medievalist architects related to the crown (Boidi 1965; Dalmasso 1968). An example is the Piedmontese engineer-architect Ernest Melano and his restoration of the medieval Abbey of Hautecombe (1824–1843), or his collaborative work with Palagi at the royal complexes of Racconigi and Pollenzo in the 1830s and 1840s (Boidi 1965; Dellapiana 2012; Vertova 2009). Renato Bordone, focusing on Piedmontese medievalist culture rather than architecture and architects, dedicates a remarkable essay to Charles Albert and his cult of the Middle Ages (1993: 75–96). Yet, Umberto Levra notes that the medievalist phenomenology related to the sovereign has not been explored in the way it deserves (2000: lxxviii).[4] The existing literature, whilst focusing on descriptions of unique and mostly permanent architectures, and their architects and patrons, has failed to unearth and systematise the political roots of medieval revivalism.

Beyond individual projects, architects, patrons, or a superficial deployment of medievalist imagery, we should talk about an *architectural tradition*. 'Sabaudian neo-medievalism' here stands for the visual representation of 'Sabaudian medievalism', a wider programmatic cultural and political phenomenon that, in open dialogue with medievalism studies, we can define as a post-medieval reworking of the Middle Ages as a tool for the dynastic legitimation of the House of Savoy. Among the various medievalist narratives celebrating the house, Palagi's ephemeral castles — potent manifestations of the confluence of medievalist and royalist ideals and imagery at a delicate moment in the history of the house — are profoundly appealing as a subject of architectural history, as they are for medievalism studies. Their study seeks to expand Duccio Balestracci's overview of the confluence of the Risorgimento and the Middle Ages to the Sabaudian context (2015), as well as to shift to pre-union Italy the ongoing explorations on 'political medievalism', which usually focus on contemporary history (Carpegna Falconieri (di) 2011; Fugelso 2020).
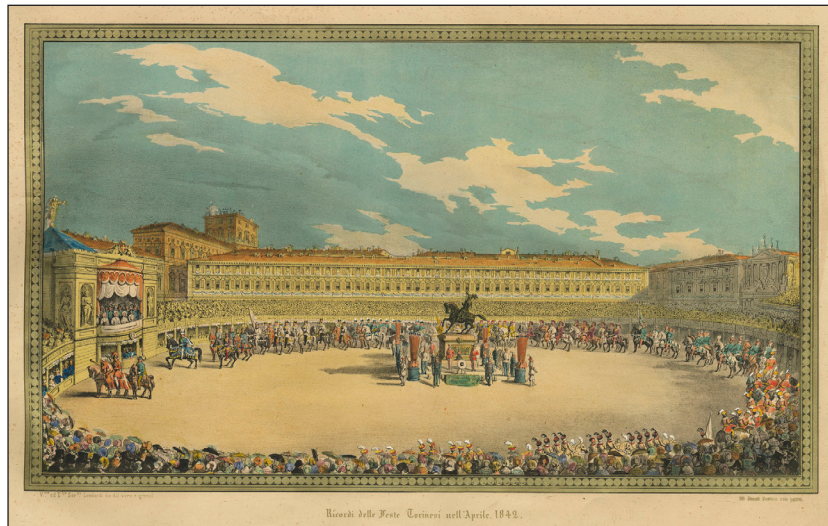
Figure 7: Virginia and Emilia Lombardi, *Veduta del Gran Torneo Eseguitosi sulla Piazza di S. Carlo*, 1840s, chromolithograph (ASCT, SIM D 2085/3). © Archivio Storico della Città di Torino.

This article sets out to tackle the fragmentary reading of the Sabaudian neo-medieval architecture of the Risorgimento and to challenge its reception as a superficial exercise in taste. The first section, through an analysis of the historical work of Luigi Cibrario (1802–1870), and taking into account permanent works of architecture, proposes a definition for a precise *architectural tradition* within Sabaudian neo-medievalism that will be called 'Risorgimental neo-medievalism'. This study makes no claim to be a comprehensive account of the visual idiom nor to compare it with international casuistry, but it ties into the ongoing re-evaluation of 'style' in architectural history (Hvattum 2018) and the political legacies of the medievalist architecture of the 19th century. By exploring the intersection between architectural history and medievalism studies, it seeks to excavate the material foundations of a distinctively Risorgimento phenomenology of medievalism and neo-medieval architecture. Whilst situating the temporary castles in the architectural tradition and exploring notions of medievalist ephemerality, the second section presents Cibrario as the 'master of the past' and Palagi as the *deus ex machina* of the Sabaudian neo-medievalism of the Risorgimento. By reading the staging of the urban festivities in the capital as a strategically orchestrated political act, the third section assesses these medievalist initiatives, culminating in the spectacle on the river Po, as propagandistic vehicles to convey meaning to a vast public, which underscores the role of medievalist rhetoric in challenging classicist iconography and forging the 'identity' of the modern Sabaudian nation.

'Risorgimental Neo-Medievalism'

Among the architectural manifestations of Sabaudian medievalism, Risorgimental neo-medievalism describes a secular architectural idiom centred on a chivalrous and militaristic view of the Middle Ages, which reflected the dynastic programme of the crown of Savoy and its political ambitions in the Italian peninsula in the cultural *milieu* of Italy's resurgence. The term 'neo-medievalism' is favoured over 'Gothic Revival' because it hints at a broader chronology associated with the various ideological, political, and programmatic trajectories of the 'medieval past'. The term 'Risorgimental' by no means implies that the tradition spanned the entire duration of the Risorgimento, but rather that it portrayed the ambitions of the monarchy in Italy *vis-à-vis* that phenomenon, as structured from Charles Albert's accession to the throne.

Indeed, the first King of Savoy-Carignan (1831–1849) is the central figure of the Sabaudian medievalism of the Risorgimento. The literature that deals with his life, politics, and court culture is particularly rich (Gentile 2015; Romagnani 1985). However, though Neo-Medieval production of the 1830s and 1840s has not passed unnoticed by architectural scholars, the adoption of the formula '*Neogotico (Carlo) Albertino*' is problematic, not just for lacking a coherent definition and failing to systematise a precise architectural tradition, but also because it reduces Charles Albert's patronage to the Gothic, whilst attributing to the vague taste of the monarch a much more complex medievalist phenomenology.

We know that Charles Albert's interest in the Middle Ages was influenced by his romanticised idea of the past, probably inherited from his mother (Cibrario 1861: 16, 99). If, as Bordone has argued, his interest was connected more to the realm of feeling than reason, I believe that this reconnection with the Middle Ages also assumed a programmatic political dimension that cannot be reduced to matters of taste (1993: 83). In this capacity, at least since the political Restoration (1814–1815), when it appeared clear that the prince of Savoy-Carignan would one day become king, Charles Albert began 'dreaming' about the medieval history of the dynasty and his political ambitions for the Italian peninsula (Savoie Carignan 1816).

Charles Albert's intertwined dreams of Italy and the Middle Ages found fertile ground in the work of statesmen-historians and, in particular, Cibrario, who paved the way to a Risorgimento employment of medievalism. The son of a notary, Cibrario, man of letters and expert in medieval and economic history, climbed to the upper

levels of Turinese society, and Charles Albert ended up making him his confidant and his personal adviser (Tettoni 1872: 38). Courtierism and history writing were the keys to Cibrario's social climbing at the Court of Savoy where, among other titles, he was nominated secretary of the Deputazione Storica Subalpina (1833) and Senator of the Kingdom (1848) (Gentile 2017; Romagnani 1985: 99–108). Traditionally remembered as the author of *Della Economia Politica del Medioevo*, he should be reconsidered as the grand puppeteer of the Risorgimento-medievalist agenda (Cibrario 1839a).

Cibrario's friendship with Charles Albert had begun in 1820 when Cibrario, then an 18-year-old student, dedicated an ode to the newly born Victor Emmanuel, which sounded like a premonition of his glorious Italian future. Thus, it should be no surprise that, after unification, as Federico Pugno observed, 'for him there is no Italy without the Sabaudian monarchy' (1865).[5]

The 19th-century Sabaudian case is a fascinating example of the unearthing of feudal origins to gain prestige that was a characteristic of noble families, at least since the Renaissance. Whilst medieval history was being broadly repurposed in the context of the invention of 'the myth of nations' (Geary 2003), the House of Savoy boasted of having a direct connection to the Middle Ages and an exceptional dynastic continuity. In his vast literary production, Cibrario gave unprecedented attention to the medieval history of the house (Tettoni 1872). Repurposing the past, his vision hinged on two key points. On the one hand, as a self-evident means of legitimation, expanding a pre-existing historiographical myth, he insistently presented the House of Savoy, today considered a 'European dynasty', as one of Italian origin (Barberis 2007; Cibrario 1825). On the other, Cibrario placed an emphasis on events in which the princes of Savoy had expanded the state on the Italian side of the Alps since the Middle Ages, as if they were proto-Risorgimento attempts to unify the peninsula (1861: 12–14).

He pointedly implied that the king was waiting for his glorious moment in the Italian cause, a sentiment echoed, through medievalist rhetoric, in the resurrection of the motto of the 'Green Count', Count Amadeus VI (1334–1383): 'J'attends [or 'J'atans'] mon astre' (1861: 43, 76). The medieval ancestor of the king was idolised in an unprecedented way under the reign of Charles Albert (Bordone 1993: 92–96). In this capacity, I believe that the mythopoesis of the Green Count was carefully tied to a programmatic Italian political agenda orchestrated by Cibrario. By insisting on his involvement in Urban V's plan for a crusade against the Turks (1366), the endeavours to expand Sabaudian territories on the Italian side of the Alps, but also, fascinatingly, in the mission to defend Italy from 'those beyond the mountains', the historian strategically presented the count — in clear analogy with Charles Albert — as an Italian prince, with Italian ambitions (1844: 93–281).[6]

Risorgimento discourse reached a high point in the presentation of the House of Savoy as not only an Italian dynasty, but as the direct descendant of the renowned sovereigns of the 'Italy' of the Early Middle Ages, thus establishing a direct *fil rouge* to Charles Albert's ambitions in the peninsula (Tettoni 1872: 58–61). Thus, Humbert Whitehand, the acclaimed medieval founder of the house, is described by Cibrario as a descendant of Berengar II and his son Adalbert, who jointly ruled as 'Kings of Italy' from 950 (1840: 41; 1848: 25).

The resurrection of the medieval and, in particular, of notions of Sabaudian chivalry, whilst reflecting an underlying quest for *italianità*, answered the pre-eminent Risorgimento need to prove the military strength of the kingdom. As a looking glass of an unprecedented apology of medieval warfare, since the beginning of Charles Albert's reign, part of Sabaudian neo-medievalism went through *a process of encastellation.*

Whereas history writing set the ideological framework, the visual arts performed a key legitimating function. Through works such as Enrico Gonin's *Album delle Principali Castella Feudali della Monarchia di Savoia*, a flourishing Turinese print culture contributed to celebrating the ruling dynasty (1841–1857). In an age where most of the kingdom's inhabitants were illiterate and could neither read Cibrario's texts nor afford lithographs, architecture as a potent pedagogical and political means was deployed in the propagandistic reworking of royal imagery on the Risorgimento road to nationhood.

There are three key features of this visual idiom. First, as emerges with the Margaria (1834–1843), a farmhouse in the gardens of the Palace of Racconigi commissioned from Palagi by Charles Albert, the style entailed neither archaeological investigation nor philological reconstruction of exact models (**Figure 8**).[7] Rather, it relied on a blurred and distant repertoire of loosely medieval forms, embedded in an amateur approach to medievalist architecture and a broad interest in a legitimating medieval past. It is characterised by an intricate array of neo-medieval motifs assimilated from local, Piedmontese, Savoyard ('of the region of Savoy'), and foreign architectures, integrated with wide-ranging reinterpretations of quintessentially 'Italian' cues. Whilst exuding a fascination with pointed windows, ornamental Gothic features, and the sturdier proportions and materiality of Romanesque and Padan architecture (i.e. from the area around the river Po), it moves away from the rigid categories of the Gothic and Romanesque Revivals, which were instead referenced in a broad repertory to redefine, rewrite, and materialise a glorious past according to a mythic view of the Middle Ages.

Risorgimental neo-medievalism did not aspire to reproduce the spontaneity or picturesque nuances of medieval architecture. It was based on grids, symmetrical planning, monumentality, and what may be regarded as a rather classicist ideal of architectural beauty, which, whilst suiting the representational needs of the crown, and responding to Melano's and Palagi's classicist formations, might be considered the *modus operandi* of *staging* the Middle Ages in the Italian context of the first half of the 19th century. Even whilst operating on a pre-existing and irregular palimpsest, as with Melano's unbuilt project for Palazzo Madama (1847), the design regularises the elevations, privileging symmetry over clarity in the original layout of the plan (**Figure 9**).[8]

The third foundational feature of the style is its reference to castellated architecture, which is particularly evident in the grand tower realised in the 1840s as part of Palagi and Melano's collaborative work at the grand neo-medieval work-site of the Royal Complex of Pollenzo, opened in 1834 (**Figure 10**).[9] The soundness and sturdiness of the castle-like architecture echoed the glorious military tradition of the house, a war-centred notion of the Middle Ages, and a sense of knighthood. Features such as towers, turrets, merlons, battlements, and loopholes lose any defensive purpose and act, instead, as tools to evoke military prowess as part of the Risorgimento revision of royal imagery.

Medievalist Ephemerality, Cibrario, Palagi, and the Floating Castles

The imposing bronze monument of Amadeus VI, designed by Palagi under the patronage of Charles Albert (1844–1847) and inaugurated in Piazza Palazzo di Città in 1853, stands as the most blatant evidence of the Risorgimento medievalisation of the cityscape of the capital (*Gazzetta Piemontese* 7 May 1853). Little is left of this process in the enduring landmarks of Turin, for it found its highest expression in ephemerality and its foundational moment in the celebrations for the royal wedding. The very monument of the Green Count was inspired by a temporary plaster statue by Giuseppe Bogliani that had been positioned

Figure 8: Pelagio Palagi, studies for the *Castello Gotico ad Uso di Cascina da Costruirsi nel Real Parco di Racconigi*, n.d., watercolour and pencil on paper (BA, RP, 2816). © Biblioteca dell'Archiginnasio di Bologna.

Figure 9: Ernest Melano, *Prospetto a Levante del R. Palazzo Madama, col Progetto dei Ristauri Ordinati al Sottoscritto ed Approvati da S.M. Carlo Alberto nell'Anno 1847*, 1 July 1860, watercolour and pencil on paper (AST SC, MS, 7/59). © Archivio di Stato di Torino.
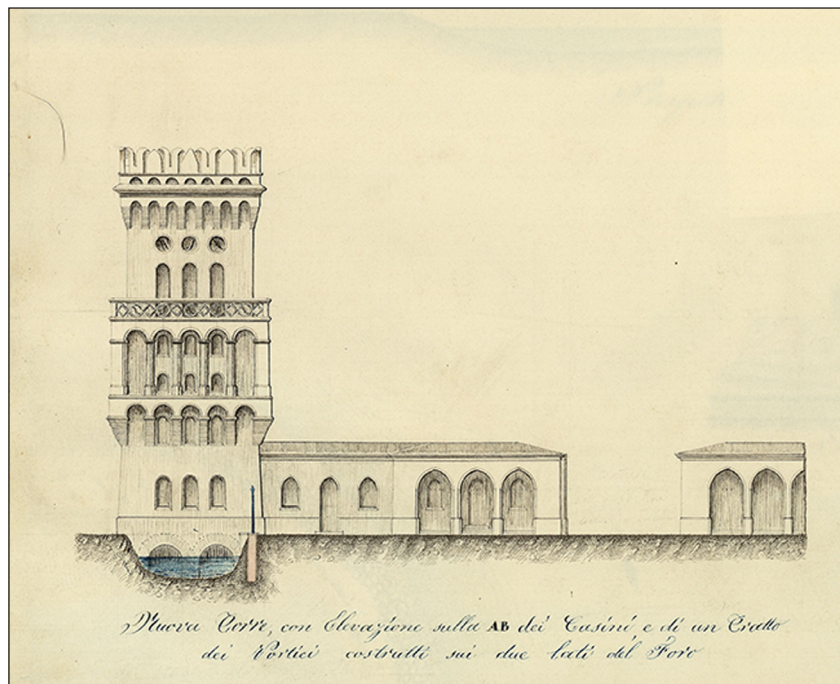
Figure 10: G. Vitiello, great tower of Pollenzo, from plate 8 of *Disegni dei Monumenti e Principali Edifici del Magnanimo Re Carlo Alberto nel Nuovo Parco del Castello di Pollenzo*, 15 September 1850, ink and watercolour on paper (AST SR, CSM, D, 16256). © Archivio di Stato di Torino.

in front of the Palazzo as part of the urban paraphernalia of 1842 (Boidi 1965: 56–63; Cibrario 1842: 83–84).

Ephemeral medievalist structures devised to celebrate royal houses were by no means exceptional in the 19th century. Other examples in the Italian states are the funerary structure devised for the Duomo of Milan in posthumous honour of the Emperor of Austria Francis I (1835) and the pavilion realised in Naples for the wedding of Ferdinand II of the Two Sicilies to Marie Christine of Savoy (1832) (Pane 2016: 61; Patetta 1975: 268). Similarly to Sabaudian ceremonial funerary erections such as the cenotaph realised in Genoa for Charles Felix, the floating castles can be situated against what appears to constitute a leitmotiv in the staging of royal power between festivity and funerary commemoration in Italy in the first half of the century (*Solenni Funerali*, 1831). Yet they retain their Sabaudian nature, not only because ephemeral *macchine* had been part of dynastic celebrations for a long time, as in the wedding of Victor Amadeus III in 1750 (Viale Ferrero 1980: 880), but mostly for their neo-medieval design and the medievalist initiatives tied to the Risorgimento rediscovery of the Middle Ages and the medieval feast as an occasion for transmitting notions of military prowess and chivalry, as found in the literary efforts of Cibrario.

The impact of the historian's work was twofold. First, Cibrario had paved the way for the medievalist nature of the events of 1842, as a sort of invisible orchestrator of the ceremonial through his explorations of medieval jousts and festive initiatives, focused on those organised in honour of the Green Count (Cibrario 1839a: 241–269; Cibrario 1839b; Cibrario and Promis 1834: 62). Second, by publishing a successful monographic work on the wedding in the spring of 1842, he became the central chronicler of its legacy and of the Risorgimento mythopoesis of the ruling house in medievalist rhetoric (1842). Indeed, with

clear analogies to a chiefly Risorgimento initiative such as the marriage between the crown prince and the daughter of the viceroy of Lombardy-Venetia, his account opens with a historical overview of medieval weddings between the House of Savoy and other renowned houses (Cibrario 1842: 5–12). By referencing the tournament that had taken place in the 14th century for the wedding of Anne of Savoy and the emperor of Byzantium, the grand puppeteer of Sabaudian medievalism built a bridge between the modern and the medieval (1842: 61–75, esp. 65). At the same time, as part of a clear Risorgimento vision, he explicitly remarked that to the 'fortunato avvenimento' — i.e. Victor Emmanuel's wedding — 'were committted the hopes of the people, the future of Italy' (1842: 10).[10]

If Cibrario's role in the events of 1842 was captured in the words of the *Gazzetta Piemontese*, which referred to him with the rather fitting epithet of 'master of the past' ('padrone del passato'), the artist behind the lasting monument to Amadeus VI proved to be the finest interpreter of that past, crafting the Risorgimento-medievalist agenda in the built forms of ephemeral castles (23 April 1842). As an extremely prolific and long-lived polymath, painter but also active furniture designer and sculptor, avid collector, numismatist, antiquarian, and bibliophile, Palagi's architectural work is easily eclipsed (Grandi and Morigi Govi 1976; Bernardini, Matteucci and Mampieri 2007; Poppi 1996). Born and educated in Bologna before moving to Rome (1806–1815) and Milan (1815–1832), he had acquired a multifaceted Italian background before his call to the Court of Savoy by Charles Albert. After his first commission reworking the Royal Castle of Racconigi, on 3 May 1834, he was appointed by the king to the chair of the new Ornato School of the Accademia Albertina and assigned the prestigious position of Royal Painter 'preposto alla decorazione de' Reali Palazzi', which he held

until 1856 (*Gazzetta Piemontese* 28 May 1834). The title hardly captures his flourishing Sabaudian production, from the redecoration of the Royal Palace and the realisation of its neo-classical ballroom, up to his design for the statue of Amadeus VI. If, as artist-architect, Palagi's architectural work has often been overlooked, Matteucci concludes that architecture was a marginal commitment for the artist who, because of his classicist education, did not understand the structural principles of the Gothic (1976: 105–125).

Whilst the neo-Etruscan *Gabinetto* realised in the Castle of Racconigi, the neo-medieval design for the Margaria, and the classicist palimpsest of his intervention at the Castle of Pollenzo demonstrate the multifaceted nature of his work, Palagi needs to be reconsidered as one of the finest interpreters of 19th-century historicism for his transposition of neo-medievalism onto the broad shoulders of neo-classicism. He was a true pioneer of neo-medievalism in Italy and the *deus ex machina* of the Sabaudian neo-medievalism of the Risorgimento. First — in answer to Giuseppe Carità, who noted that Charles Albert's reasons for asking Palagi to work at the Court of Savoy were ambiguous (2004: 5) — his involvement of the artist in royal patronage seems, in my view, to mirror the programmatic Italianisation of the crown: *Palagi was an Italian artist, for an Italian king*. Who could better materialise the Risorgimento ambitions of the crown than a prolific polymath with a long 'Italian' experience? Unlike his Piedmontese colleague Melano, Palagi could boast a mixed training in different key cities of the peninsula and a background of medievalist experimentation. In Bologna, he had been exposed to the set-design tradition that had early experimented with neo-Gothic themes and the culture of a city in which the medieval had 'survived' through the never-completed project of the Basilica di San Petronio. He matured in the vibrant *milieu* of Milan where, in 1820, Francesco Hayez presented his *Pietro Rossi*, an early example of a Romantic-Risorgimento mythopoesis of the medieval period in the visual arts. In the same city, the 'staunch classicist' Carlo Amati worked on the completion of the elevation of the Duomo (1806–1813) and published *Memoria sullo Stato dell'Architettura Civile nel Medio Evo* (1825), which Luciano Patetta considers the first and most balanced re-evaluation of the architecture of this historical period to appear in Italy (1975: 263–264). Moreover, Palagi's correspondence with Alessandro Sanquirico hints at his proximity to a central figure in the discourse surrounding the completion of Milan's cathedral, and one of Italy's most renowned set designers and experts in ephemerality (BA, FPP, 28/16).

Answering to the spectacle entwined with Risorgimento and Sabaudian modes, Palagi broadly championed the art of ephemerality at the Court of Savoy in work ranging from a temporary *ricchissima loggia* for Palazzo Madama, part of the urban paraphernalia set out for the twentieth anniversary of the Restoration, to his realisations for the posthumous commemoration of Charles Albert, and the allegorical carts for the fifth anniversary of the Statute (*Gazzetta Piemontese* 27 May 1834; Matteucci 1976: 151). The floating castles, in this sense, constitute a fascinating case. The absence of Melano, with whom the artist-architect

collaborated on the work-sites of Pollenzo and Racconigi, the redecoration of the Teatro Regio, and the funerals of Charles Albert, highlights the architectural work of Palagi who, as reported in a *mandato di pagamento*, was also involved in the redecoration of the royal apartment for the occasion of the wedding (AST SR, CSM, 1885). As part of the great feast at the Valentino Castle organised under royal initiative, which explains Palagi's involvement, the floating ephemera underline Charles Albert's central role in the gestation of the Sabaudian neo-medievalism of the Risorgimento, but with an important difference from Racconigi and Pollenzo: these were openly propagandistic tools displayed in a festive context in the capital.[11] Last but not least, as temporary erections of wood and ephemerality resolved through Risorgimental neo-medievalism, the floating structures enlarge the definition of the style beyond stone, brick, and the aspiration of longevity.

As with the definition of the visual idiom, the four ephemera are ruled by a rigorously geometrical, symmetrical, and classicist layout, far from the more picturesque outcomes of neo-medievalism. With evident similarities to the great tower of Pollenzo, the castles are based on a square plan, with a lower platform and central towers, the result of the superimposition of quadrilateral volumes, elements that reveal Palagi's neo-classical roots and theatrical, rather than structural, approach to medievalist design (see **Figures 3, 4, 5, 6** and **10**).

The *mélange* of neo-medieval architectonic features and decorative cues enriches and differentiates the designs, which employ a catalogue of features to evoke the Middle Ages rather than philologically reconstructing exact medieval models. Drawing 2532 proposes a castle with Guelph merlons on the lower level, an eclectic mid-terrace sustained by short brackets, a simple parapet on the top floor, high quadrilateral openings, twelve pilasters on each volume of the tower, and twelve octagonal protrusions of the floating platform (see **Figure 3**). The one on watercolour 2533 is characterised by eight octagonal turrets, scarp walls at the base of the tower, no merlons on the platform, and elongated arched brackets sustaining Guelph merlons on the mid-balcony and a parapet on the top level (see **Figure 4**). It showcases arched loopholes on the tower and a mix and match of circular and quadrilateral openings on the platform, which expands into eight octagonal volumes of two different sizes. The version depicted in drawing 2646 has quadrilateral turrets, no merlons on the platform but dovetail ones on the higher levels, lancet windows, circular loopholes, and four octagonal extensions of the platform (see **Figure 5**). The castle represented in watercolour 2647 has neither turrets nor protrusions of the floating base (see **Figure 6)**. Its mid-terrace is held by arched brackets and features rectangular merlons crowned by small pyramids. A large round-arched opening is balanced by high loopholes on the tower and round-topped arches on the platform.

The design is driven by a castellated view, confirmed in a pencil sketch by the artist which seems to be a preliminary study for the castle shown in drawing 2647, and rejects rigid Gothic and Romanesque taxonomies (**Figure 11**). Akin to more lasting examples of Risorgimental neo-medievalism, the reference to fortified architecture in

the floating ephemera echoes a war-centred view of the Middle Ages as a means to spectacularise military prowess. At the same time, by mirroring the crown's quest for *italianità* and Palagi's Italian experience, including his realisation of an imposing neo-medieval tower for the Traversi family in Desio (Lombardy) on the model of the Abbey of Chiaravalle in the 1830s, the structures incorporate an openness to Italianate castellated cues, the typology of dovecote towers, and the warm tones of the medieval architecture of the Po Valley rather than the colder tonalities associated with the Savoy and the Château des Ducs de Savoie in Chambéry.

Despite their ephemeral nature, the castles draw together the defining features of Risorgimental neo-medievalism. As such they can be stylistically and ideologically located within the Sabaudian neo-medievalism of the Risorgimento, of which the wedding marked an important threshold. Whilst intrinsically tied to Charles Albert's vision, the medievalist rhetoric broadly celebrated the crown and Victor Emmanuel, highlighting the unexpected role the Middle Ages played in crafting the public image of the future first king of Italy. Moreover, the employment of such rhetoric in a propagandistic initiative in the capital emphasises the role of the castles as political devices.

Staging the Risorgimento

The nuptials of 1842 were an orchestrated political event, as is evident in the spectacularised use of Turin as privileged Risorgimento stage to convey meaning. Unsurprisingly, among the urban iconography, classicism played a central role, as in the two ephemeral loggias in Piazza Vittorio Emanuele that welcomed the couple into the city on 12 April and the temporary ballroom in the courtyard of Palazzo di Città for a ball organised by the municipality on 25 April, both the work of Giuseppe Barone, or the royal box designed by Amedeo Peyron for the horse-races in Piazza San Secondo, on 17 and 24 April (Cibrario 1842).[12] In this context, answering, in a sense, Cibrario's insistence on the medieval feast as political event ('ufficio di savio politico'), Bogliani's ephemeral statue of Amadeus VI in front of the Palazzo di Città and its temporary ballroom stand defiantly as the neo-medieval bulwark of the municipal and royal initiatives that challenged classicist hegemony and contributed, on an unprecedented scale, to the popularisation of medievalist rhetoric in celebrating the ruling house (Cibrario 1839a: 241).

First, on Wednesday 13 April, the day after the wedding, Palagi's ballroom of the Royal Palace was inaugurated with a *bal costumé* (Viale Ferrero 1980: 876–877). For the duration of the ball, the neo-Greek overtones of the
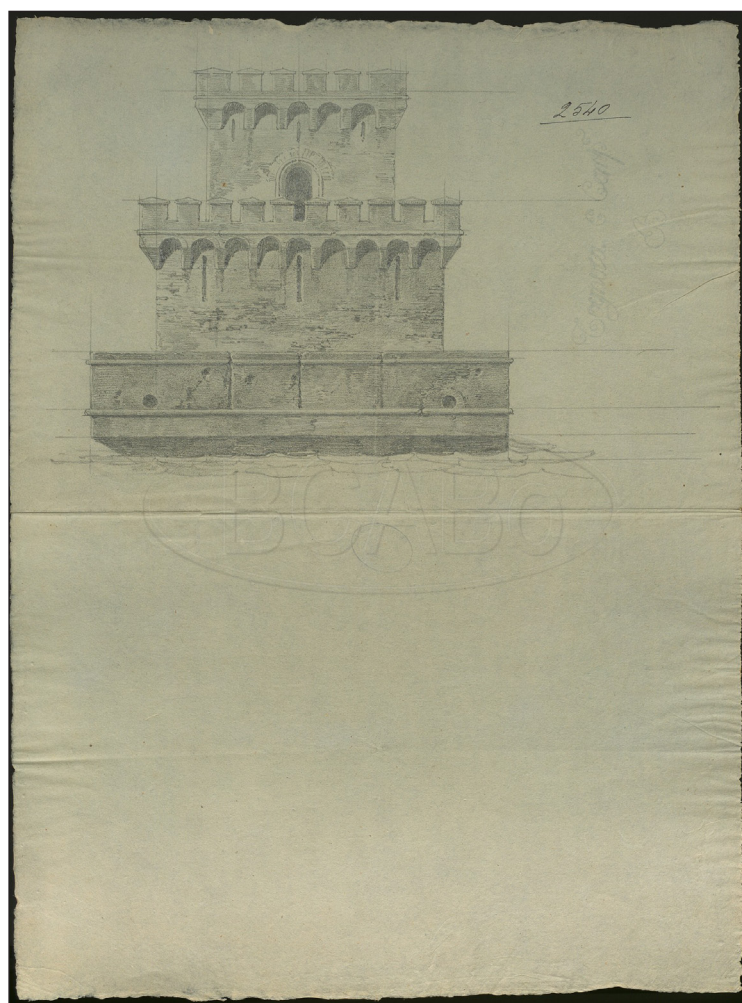

Figure 11: Pelagio Palagi, preliminary sketch for *Castello Natante Eseguito sul Fiume Po …*, 1842, pencil on paper (BA, RP, 2540). © Biblioteca dell'Archiginnasio di Bologna.

artist's work were contrasted with the variety of costumes worn by the guests, which included references to medieval Sabaudian history (**Figure 12**) (Cibrario 1842: 44–52). This is not surprising as balls, re-enactments, pageants, and feasts between the 1820s and the 1840s often employed a medievalist rhetoric. One thinks of aristocratic balls, such as that held in Milan by Count A.G. Batthyany in 1828, in Turin by the English ambassador in 1834, or even of the Eglinton Tournament in Scotland in 1839. In some cases, similar *divertissements* assumed royal overtones. One can point to (*cause célèbre*) Victoria and Albert's *bal costumé* held on 12 May 1842 in the Throne Room of Buckingham Palace, or to the often overlooked ball held one month earlier in Turin. Indeed, if between the 1830s and 1840s, Sabaudian imagery and medievalist culture were often intertwined in festive events, examples such as the *bal costumé*, or even the carousel organised in the Teatro Regio on 21 February 1839 (Cibrario 1839b), were only attended by a rather exclusive and elitist audience.

Whereas, Cibrario wrote, 1,200 knights and more than 300 ladies had taken part in the ball at the Royal Palace, the following events of a medievalist nature openly displayed an affinity between the crown and the populace by accommodating a larger public (1842: 44). Architectural ephemera contributed a great deal to staging these moments in the cityscape. On 22 April, in the temporary amphitheatre realised by Giuseppe Leoni, 20,000 spectators were accommodated in Piazza San Carlo to assist in a beguiling medievalist tournament under the initiative of the municipality (1842: 61–69). On first sight, the medievalist atmosphere of the event which, similarly to the event in the neo-Greek ballroom, awed the crown and the wedding couple with a show of chivalry and neo-feudal ideology, seems to be contrary to the classicist outline

of the architecture (see **Figure 7**). Yet, intriguingly, the neo-classical royal box was enriched not only with statues of two pre-eminent early-modern personalities of the Savoy-Carignan line, Prince Thomas and Prince Eugene, but also — with implicit analogies to Charles Albert and Victor Emmanuel — with those of Amadeus VI and his son Amadeus VII of Savoy (the 'Red Count'), which signified the public commencement of a specific medievalist mythopoesis (1842: 65).

Unlike the tournament, attended by a vast crowd but, as documented in the *Gazzetta Piemontese*, requiring a ticket to gain entrance, the grand illumination of the city centre and the fireworks in Piazza San Secondo, organised by the municipality on 23 April, turned the cityscape itself into an open spectacle (29 March 1842).[13] Among the various structures illuminated for the nocturnal event were the Grande Madre di Dio and ephemeral erections which reinforced the centrality of classicist iconography (Cibrario 1842: 80–82). On that occasion, nonetheless, such hegemony was challenged by a beguiling camouflage of Palazzo Madama, for the occasion 'ridisegnato a gotico' with artificial lights (*Gazzetta Piemontese* 25 April 1842). More broadly, the centrality of the palace to the nuptial festivities is remarkable for the fact that it remained open to the public to allow visits to the Regia Pinacoteca, with evidently propagandistic intent, and to host two ostensions of the Sacred Shroud (AST SR, CSM, 1876a; Cibrario 1842: 94–95; Gentile 2019: 297–303). Between the leading role of the pre-eminent 'medieval' landmark of the cityscape and the diachronic rituality of the exhibition of the House of Savoy's most famous reliquary, the ephemeral project adds a further significant medievalist component to one of the key episodes of the celebrations. Cibrario himself commented on the hierarchical positioning of Palazzo

Figure 12: Giuseppe Leoni, L. Gandolfi, and G.F. Hummel, *Ballo a Corte con Travestimenti la Sera del 13 Aprile 1842*, 1842, lithograph from Cibrario 1842. © HathiTrust.

Madama and its neo-medieval camouflage within the urban paraphernalia set for 23 April:

> [T]he great mass of Amadeus VIII's castle attracted the eyes the most … the dark building wore the dress of a different age, and advantageously took the distances from the repetitive patterns of the city of Turin. (1842: 83)[14]

The camouflage of Palazzo Madama contributed a great deal to the subversion of the dialectic with classicist imagery enacted that night. A visual comparison between one of the chromolithographs depicting the ephemeral construct and an illustration of the palace in 1845 makes clear how the decorations sought to disguise and regularise the pre-existing structure (**Figures 13** and **14**). The 'medieval' elevations were temporarily rectified through a neo-medieval framework. Whilst the design for the palace was characterised by two storeys of pointed, double-arched windows, interrupted on the ground floor by the main entrance and topped by quatrefoil motifs, the one for the two polygonal towers flanking the eastern elevation had an additional level of Gothic windows above the quatrefoils. The adoption of a grid, an abstract reference to medieval cues, the use of Gothic windows and traceries on a castellated ensemble, and the confluence of medievalist and royalist imagery — most evident in the cross of Savoy emblazoned on the elevation — enable the pro-

Figure 13: Virginia and Emilia Lombardi, *Illuminazione della Piazza Castello verso la Via di Po*, 1840s, chromolithograph (ASCT, SIM D 2085/5). © Archivio Storico della Città di Torino.

Figure 14: Auguste Deroy and Nicolas-Marie-Joseph Chapuy, *Turin le Vieux Palais*, 1845, lithograph (ASCT, SIM D 657). © Archivio Storico della Città di Torino.

ject to be seen within the context of Risorgimental neo-medievalism.

Risorgimental neo-medieval ephemera in the form of Palagi's castles served as the theatrical focal point of the nocturnal event set on the river Po at the Valentino Castle (1842: 98–102). As one of the concluding episodes, and the most spectacular, the royal initiative, intended for 23 April but rescheduled for 8 May, was the high point of the nuptial celebrations.[15] The Grande Madre di Dio and the main streets of the city, especially those leading to the Royal Castle, as well as other landmarks throughout the valley, such as the Basilica di Superga, were brightly lit with artificial light, and once again ephemera enriched the architectural palimpsest (1842: 98, 101). A triumphal arch bearing a central dynastic device and the inscription 'CARLO ALBERTO' welcomed spectators to the Valentino where, on the shores of the river Po, the royal box had been erected along with temporary tribunes (**Figure 15**). On the other side of the river was a colonnade crowned by pediments backed by a monumental structure with three towers (see **Figures 1** and **2**). Whereas the attribution of the project is uncertain — Cibrario mentions that the 'stupendo colonnato' was the work of Carlo Sada, Palagi's collaborator, whilst the *Gazzetta Piemontese* attributes it to the author of the floating castles — classicist imagery seems to rule the iconographic programme (1842: 101; 9 May 1842).

The poster of the event tells a different story (**Figure 16**). The illustration, hinting that at least three of the four castles were mostly built according to Palagi's drawings, reveals the centrality of the neo-medieval ephemera in the festive event (see **Figures 4, 5** and **6**). The caption in the poster states that the arrival of the floating structures opened the feast after the greetings of the king,

accompanied by nothing less than artificial dolphins and water horses that, in the words of the *Gazzetta Piemontese*, 'made such a great impression' (9 May 1842).[16] The event began after eight in the evening when the king was welcomed to the royal box with the families of the couple by cannon shots, 'Evviva il Re!', music, and the valley brightly lit (9 May 1842). A rather thrilled Cibrario described the waterfront:

> Many splendidly adorned boats with globes of different colours were visible on the river, and four great and tall floating fortresses, with square plan, parade ground, tower with balconies, and garnished with men-at-arms at every floor, majestically moved on the waves. (1842: 99)[17]

The centrality of the 15-metre-wide and more than 10-metre-tall castles — loaded with troops, cannons, and rockets — was emphasised by their exhibition on the river with the symbolically loaded Bucintoro, the iconic Sabaudian vessel commissioned by Charles Emmanuel III (1730) on the model of the state barge of the Venetian doges (1842: 99–100). It was a dialectical collision between the emblem of the accession to the royal throne of Sardinia in the 18th century and the medievalist banners of the Risorgimento road to the throne of Italy.

Whilst the arch in front of the Valentino and the classicist ephemera on the other side of the river did not have such iconographic roles to play in the nocturnal events as, respectively, marker of arrival at the venue and backdrop to the feast, the floating castles were the focal point. The first part of the spectacle consisted of a monumental display of fireworks, balloons, and 'other bizarre things that do not have a name but look like enchantments of
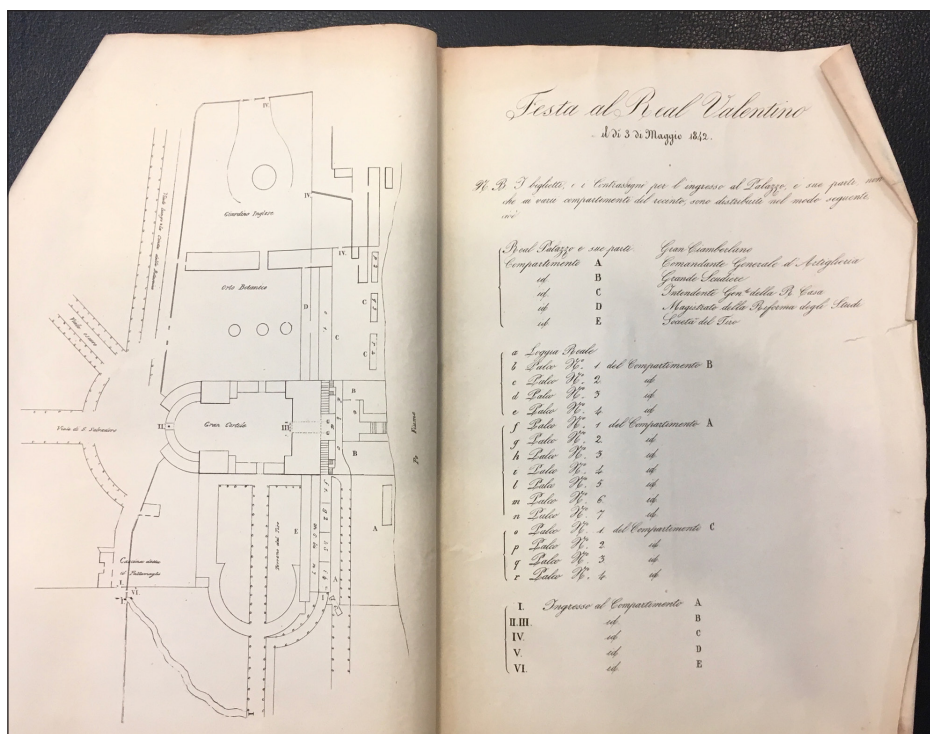

Figure 15: *Festa al Real Valentino al Dì 3 di Maggio 1842,* 1842, leaflet (AST SR, CSM, 1876b). © Archivio di Stato di Torino.

Figure 16: *Programma della Festa al Real Valentino nella Sera del 8 Maggio 1842*, 1842, poster (ASCT, CS, 1148). © Archivio Storico della Città di Torino.

wonder and happiness' led by the Artisti Romani on the opposite shore of the river (see **Figure 1**), a sailing competition ending in front of the royal box with the Duke of Genoa waiting on the Bucintoro, and games and fires on the water by the hands of the Artiglieri Piemontesi (see **Figure 2**) (1842: 99–101; *Gazzetta Piemontese* 9 May 1842).[18] The concluding episode of the show preceded a general illumination of the valley, which took place before midnight, confirming that the castles were not mere background but the central pieces. A beguiling naval battle was staged around the floating castles, with two series of six vessels, one defending and one attacking the fortifications, ending when the attackers' flagship was set on fire, awarding victory to the defenders and the castles (Cibrario 1842: 101). Cannon shots, flaming balls, puffs of smoke, and excitement entertained the audience for about an hour, to the extent that Cibrario reported that 'never before a fake battle was fought with such enthusiasm'

(1842: 101).[19] Whilst a potent Risorgimento spectacularisation of military prowess, the event marked a paramount moment in the dialectic of classicist and medievalist rhetoric in the celebration of the dynasty. For that night, with Palagi's floating castles as theatrical stage, the hierarchical relationship of neo-classicism–neo-medievalism was subverted, and through the means of medievalist ephemerality rather than permanence.

In terms of spectatorship, the event is no less extraordinary. The seating plan involved a strict ceremonial and entrance tickets, which demonstrates a hierarchical structure in its participation and seems to hint at an elitist dimension to the event (see **Figure 15**) (*Gazzetta Piemontese* 6 May 1842). However, this hypothesis can be contested. Unlike the *bal costumé*, around the royal box and the tribunes on the shore of the river, as in more distant locations on the neighbouring hills, the show was witnessed by 'an infinite multitude of people of all conditions'

(*Gazzetta Piemontese* 9 May 1842).[20] This, Cibrario noted, was a feast that celebrated the 'paternal affection of the beloved Monarch for his subjects from all backgrounds' (1842: 101–102).[21] What, in architectural terms, was born in the private gardens of the Crown of Delights and, in literary terms, in the writings of Cibrario, was triumphantly and pedagogically deployed on the stage of the capital of the kingdom in the nuptials of 1842, in front of a vast public of every social class and education. Medievalist rhetoric was displayed openly as a political tool as part of a uniquely Risorgimento initiative.

Conclusion

Ephemeral architecture — sometimes more than stone and bricks, printed media, and literature — played a decisive role in communicating and celebrating notions of the Risorgimento to a wide audience. At the same time, there is strong evidence that the neo-medieval architecture of Italy's resurgence cannot be dismissed as a matter of taste, but rather demands to be tied to underlying cultural and political matrixes. This was, indeed, the case at the court of Charles Albert where, through Risorgimental neo-medievalism, festive initiatives, and the involvement of personalities such as Cibrario and Palagi, medievalist rhetoric was openly deployed as a propagandistic vehicle for the crown's Italian agenda. If this opens up intriguing questions about the reception of such notions and of this architectural tradition, what may also be concluded here is that architecture and medievalism had important roles in the reworking of royal imagery during the Risorgimento, in relation to Charles Albert but also, unexpectedly, Victor Emmanuel, the very same who was celebrated with very different iconography in the Vittoriano. So, what truly distinguishes the latter from Palagi's castles, apart from a different 'neo'(-classical/-medieval)?

The Altare della Patria can still be found in Rome, a *cause célèbre* of post-union royal imagery in the eternal city. In their ephemerality, the Risorgimento feasts and the floating castles constructed for the nuptials of 1842 require our intervention to, as the reporter in the *Gazzetta Piemontese* wished, 'mark an epoch in art history' (9 May 1842).[22]

Notes

[1] 'Sabaudian', or the more frequent '*sabaudo*' in Italian (drawn from the Latin '*Sabaudia*'), in this article broadly stands for 'of the House of Savoy'. See Vester (2013).

[2] The work of the sister-artists constitutes a visual account of the wedding of the dauphin to the crown as an optical event, a sequence of theatrical tableaux.

[3] 'cittadelle galleggianti, di solidità appropriata e di sagace congegnamento'.

[4] 'L'operazione [medievalista] carloalbertina non è ancora stata analizzata in tutte le sue componenti, come meriterebbe'.

[5] 'per lui senza monarchia sabauda non v'è Italia'.

[6] 'que' d'oltremonte'.

[7] On the project, see Roggero Bardelli, Vinardi and Defabiani (1990: 376–377).

[8] On Melano's project, see Dellapiana (1995).

[9] On Pollenzo, see Carità (2004).

[10] 'a quello sono commesse le speranze de' popoli, l'avvenire d'Italia'.

[11] 'Ieri sera seguì, col miglior esito, con un esito senza esempio, la grande festa data da S.M. sul Po presso al Valentino'. *Gazzetta Piemontese*, 9 May 1842. As regards the initiatives of the municipality, the diary of the public administration is considered by Manzo and Peirone (2007: 80–111).

[12] Whereas Cibrario erroneously refers to 'domenica 16', the first round of horse races took place on Sunday 17 April. *Gazzetta Piemontese*, 18 April 1842.

[13] Originally scheduled for 14 April, the 'Grande Illuminazione' and 'Fuochi d'Artificio' were rescheduled due to bad weather. See AST SR, CSM, 1876a; *Gazzetta Piemontese*, 13 April 1842. For the events organised by the municipality, see AST SR, CSM, 1877.

[14] 'la gran massa del castello d'Amedeo VIII attraeva di preferenza gli sguardi. [...] il bruno edifizio avea vestito l'aspetto d'un'altra età, e si staccava vantaggiosamente dalle perpetue simmetrie Torinesi'.

[15] The troubled rescheduling of the event from 23 April to 3 May and, eventually, to 8 May is documented in the *Gazzetta Piemontese*, 22 April 1842; 30 April 1842; 6 May 1842.

[16] 'erano comparsi, sino dal principio della festa, e facendo di se la più imponente mostra, vennero ad ancorarsi a traverso del fiume'.

[17] 'Sul fiume vedeansi molte barche splendidamente inghirlandate di globi a vario colore, e moversi maestosamente per l'onda quattro grandi ed alte fortezze natanti, di forma quadrata, con piazza d'armi, con torrione e ballatoio, guernite ad ogni piano di difensori'.

[18] 'altre bizzarrie che non han nome, ma sembrano incantesimi e destano maraviglia e contento'.

[19] 'Finta battaglia non fu mai con maggior arte combattuta'.

[20] 'una moltitudine infinita di gente di ogni condizione'.

[21] 'improntate della paterna sollecitudine dell'amato Monarca per tutte le condizioni de' suoi sudditi'.

[22] 'formar debbono epoca nella storia dell'arte'.

Author's Note

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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