

From Oppido Lucano (Castle) to Cancellara (Castle) along ancient rural roads

A moderately difficult itinerary, 10.4 kilometres in length, with an elevation gain of 480 metres uphill and 490 metres downhill, and an average walking time of around three and a half hours. The route links two ancient fortifications—the Castle of Oppido Lucano and the Castle of Cancellara—following evocative rural roads that once connected inland Basilicata with Apulia. It is a walk that brings together history, military architecture and landscape, offering a deep immersion in the medieval memory of the region.

The Castle of Oppido Lucano was built between 1047 and 1051 at the behest of the Normans, in a strategic area guarding the routes between the Melfese and the mountainous zones of Basilicata. Its construction responded to a dual purpose: defensive, to protect the territory and oversee movement along the Bradano valley; and organisational, as a focal point for farmers and the surrounding communities.

Its history is closely tied to the fortunes of the great families who ruled the region. After the Normans, the castle passed to the Swabians and later to the Angevins, who strengthened its defensive structures. In the fifteenth century it became a fief of the Zurlo family, then of the Orsini, and finally of the De Marinis, marquesses of Genzano. Eighteenth-century sources describe it as a *Castrum Magnum*, powerful and imposing, with corner and cylindrical towers, crenellated walls and a drawbridge at the entrance. However, in the nineteenth century large portions of the structure was demolished or altered, resulting in the loss of much of its original form. Today, sections of walls, arches and the bases of towers remain, still dominating the landscape as vestiges of its former power.



Figure 1. Castle of Oppido Lucano

The walk continues along ancient rural roads, grassy paths and ridge tracks used for transhumance, crossing golden hills, fertile valleys and olive groves. The landscape, silent and unspoilt, reflects the harmony of a land where nature and history coexist in balance.

On reaching Cancellara, the route encounters another symbol of Lucanian history: the Castle of Cancellara, an emblematic monument of the village and, since 2014, the seat of the Basilicata section of the Italian Institute of Castles. Built of limestone and arranged over three levels around two inner courtyards, the castle preserves an architectural stratification that reflects centuries of transformation.

The first reliable records date back to the fifteenth century, when the fief belonged to King Ferdinand I of Naples and his son Frederick I, who granted it "*cum castro, seu fortilitium*" to the Sanbasile family. In later periods it passed to the Caracciolo, the Carafa and the Orsini families. In 1604, the feudal lords Marino Caracciolo and Ippolita Pappacoda signed here the deed donating the Church of the Annunciation to the Friars Minor Observant. The earthquake of 1694 caused severe damage to the structure, which was subsequently transformed over the centuries

from a medieval fortress into a baronial palace, later serving as a prison, a school and eventually a private residence.



Figure 2. Castle of Cancellara

Architecturally, the castle preserves elements of great interest: the Norman tower, sloping defensive walls, arrow slits, the wall-walk, the entrance portal with stone corbels, and the internal chapel added in the sixteenth century. The southern façade, with its large windows and the remains of a loggia, bears witness to the seventeenth-century adaptation of the structure into a noble residence. Following damage caused by the earthquakes of 1930 and 1980, the castle is currently undergoing restoration works and is partially open to visitors.

The itinerary from Oppido Lucano to Cancellara is therefore a journey into the fortified history of Basilicata, among castles, ancient paths and legends that evoke the memory of a Middle Ages still vividly alive. Walking along these ancient rural roads means crossing centuries of history, rediscovering the deep bond between land, power and spirituality that has shaped the identity of this region.