



The Laferrière Citadel: its symbolism and its potential

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Not a palace. Not a fortified castle to protect my estate. I call it the Citadel, the freedom of a whole people. Built by all the people, men and women, old and young, built for all the people! See how its head is up in the clouds, its feet hollow out the abyss, its mouths spit gunfire out to sea, down to the bottom of the valleys, it is a town, a fortress, a heavy stone battleship.

For these people, who they wanted to bring to their knees, a monument was needed which would raise them back up on their feet. Here it is! Risen. Looking out! Look! Look, will you! It is alive. It blares out in the mist. It lights up in the night. The end of the slave-ship! The fearsome ride!

(Aimé Césaire, in La Tragédie du Roi Christophe)

This article refers to the Laferrière citadel, erected in northern Haiti early in the 19th century. I will stress in particular the historical and cultural symbolism of this site which is of an extraordinary architectural dimension and I will highlight its economic and tourism potential.

Haiti proclaimed its independence on 1 January 1804. Two years later, the country was divided into two separate states: the Western Republic, led by Alexandre Pétion, who established a Republic there, while in the geographical departments of the North, General Henri Christophe in 1811 changed the initial Republic into a Monarchy and had himself crowned king under the name Henry I.

King Henry I established a regime of order, discipline and work which brought prosperity to his kingdom. Agriculture flourished, education developed, industry took hold. The king took a personal interest in the daily administration of each political and military jurisdiction. All administrators were obliged to provide him with a detailed report on the financial situations of their districts and of the agricultural employment situation. Every penny spent had to be justified, any breach of the principles established was punished in accordance with the law and with the uses and practices in force within the kingdom. With such a system, the northern monarchy experienced quite a long cycle of

progress and economic prosperity.

If there is one thing which illustrated that economic prosperity or which characterised the hallmark of that continued progress, it is the number of palaces, fortified castles and fortresses built in the kingdom at that time. Two fundamental reasons led the king and his court to construct such infrastructures: the idea of another offensive from the French to take back the territory which had declared its independence and the desire to construct valid and perennial things in the new independent State. Henry I declared that he wanted to build a resplendent civilisation in the Caribbean which would have nothing to envy about the old European civilisations. The king built and arranged the construction of a collection of vast works capable of testifying to the value and dignity achieved by a people newly emerging from the horrors of slavery and colonial domination. So, in record time, churches were built, along with 15 castles, 9 palaces, including the Palace of 365 Doors, the Sans-Souci Palace, and the Laferrière Citadel. These sumptuous and imposing edifices earned Henry I the title of the Builder King.

The Sans-Souci Palace is a masterpiece of its genre. It is a replica, in the Caribbean, of the Palace of Frederick the Great, in Potsdam. Moreover, it bears the same name of Sans-Souci. Completed in 1813, the Palace was a remarkable construction, vast on the outside and richly furnished and decorated inside. Built on sloping land around luxuriant vegetation, it majestically overlooked the community of Milôt. It was one of the very first edifices or monuments built by the former Slaves after the Proclamation of their Independence. It served as the seat of the royal government. A large proportion of this palace was destroyed, in 1842, during a terrible earthquake.

The Laferrière Citadel was built 5 km from the Sans-Souci Palace. The site where the Citadel was erected was chosen in 1801-1802 by the General in Chief Toussaint L'Ouverture, then Governor of



the colony of St. Dominique, as a strategic place of defence against the military expedition of Napoleon Bonaparte, who had already accumulated there a considerable deposit of arms and ammunition under the orders of General Christophe.

Of all the architectural works constructed during the Christophian era, the Laferrière Citadel is the most glorified over the two centuries of Haitian history and remains the biggest fortress in the American hemisphere. Located at the summit of Bonnet à l'Evêque, at an altitude of 969 metres, it extends over an area of 8,000 m². Geographically the Citadel is located in the Department of the Nord; however it also extends its slopes into the Department of Artibonite, from where it can be reached from the area around the town of Marmelade.

The Citadel wall has a thickness ranging from 5 to 7 m and its longitudinal walls reach 940 m. The Citadel was built with large tanks to conserve water and depots for storing food in sufficient quantity for a year, for some 5000 soldiers. Inside enormous stores of cannonballs, guns, bombs, shells, gunpowder, lead shot and pillboxes were concealed. At its strategic positions, the Citadel was equipped with some 300 cannon of varying sizes and cannonballs. Elsewhere, important gold objects, carved bricks and precious stones were kept. There were also royal apartments, kitchens, a bakery, a foundry, a theatre and recreational areas.

The building's external precincts housed sleeping quarters, barracks, stores, a powder store, all protected by a front of batteries on several floors from where the artillerymen could comfortably shoot to cover all angles. The Citadel's artillery stock consisted of 160 pieces which is very significant in terms of their nature and variety. That stock alone constitutes an historical and technological treasure unlike any other in the world.

All this gives the Citadel quite a special character, when we think about its true nature and the multiple uses which could be made of this impressive military defence infrastructure. Because the Citadel can be considered as a fortress, a fort-battery, an extraordinary palace, a miniature urban agglomeration, perched on a vertiginous mountain, between heaven and earth, overlooking the sea, the neighbouring towns and villages and everything moving in the surrounding land.

Indeed, everything had been planned to transform this ensemble into a place of strategic resistance and also a space for social conviviality, able to shelter the king, his family, the royal court, members of the

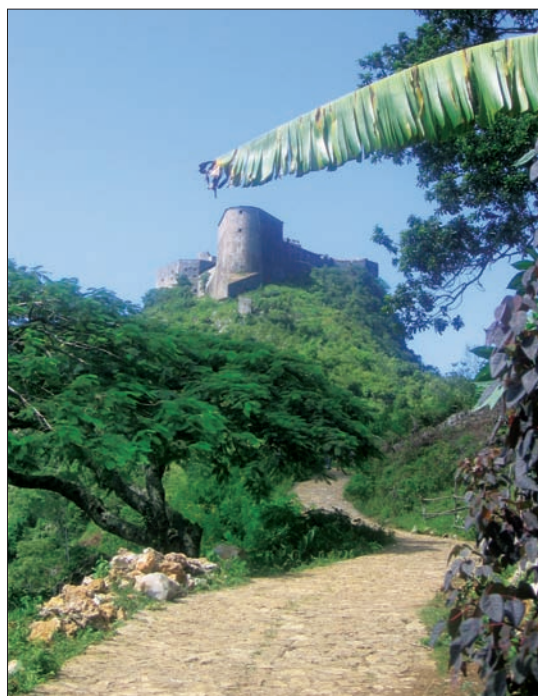
government, and top officials.

The plan of the Citadel had been prepared in 1805, by Henri Barré, a native of Haiti, who also started the initial works, but it was a Scottish architect by the name of Laferrière who finished it. Alongside the engineers and technicians, more than 22,000 workers and labourers of all ages and statuses left their imprint on this work. All in all, considering the volume constructed over a 15 year period, we can say that the Citadel bears witness to the great mastery of the art of construction in Haiti.

The Citadel gives several geographical forms, ranging from rounded curves to rectangular lines, according to the view-point of the observer. It gives a panoramic view over the whole of the northern region of the country and overlooks the city of Cap-Haitien. From the summit of the Citadel, when the temperature is clement, eastern Cuba can be seen. Also, the summit of the edifice offers a quite extensive view of the Caribbean Sea. In short, the Citadel, viewed as a whole, going towards the main external facade, has a strange resemblance to a furious ship sailing the high seas. Did the designers of the work intend to make a distinct reference to the slave ship transporting millions of men and women from the African coasts to the Caribbean and the Americas?

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The Laferrière Citadel is a symbol of the emancipation of the slaves that forged a free and independent Haiti



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silhouette of the Caribbean of yesteryear, that facet of the tortured and pulverised Caribbean. At the same time, it spreads the vision of a Caribbean which has achieved glory and majesty, defying winds and tides to forge a civilisation of its own. At least an endogenous attempt to get out of the woods.

This Citadel was the symbol of power of Henry I, who wanted to extend it even further and connect it to other royal palaces, including the Sans-Souci Palace, and the Les Ramiers Palace. When the king committed suicide in 1820, the work was discontinued, as was royalty as a system of government in Haiti.

Over time, the Citadel lost a little of its royal splendour, but it still kept the whole of its legend and its mystique, if we bear in mind the fact that it inspired a number of renowned writers and poets like Aimé Césaire, Edouard Glissant, Alejandro Carpentier, and a Nobel prize winner for literature Sir Derek Walcott, to mention just a few. This shows that the Citadel, itself a work of imagination, remained alive enough in the collective imagination of the intellectuals and creators of the Caribbean and elsewhere.

In 1980, UNESCO launched an international campaign to safeguard the historical sites and monuments of Haiti for new generations. For that campaign, it goes without saying that the Citadel was at the top of the list of heritage sites to safeguard, not only because it is a gigantic fortress with impenetrable defensive walls, but also because it is a kind of symbol representing the emancipation of Slaves who freed themselves and forged a free and independent country under their own initiative and who subsequently built that masterful and imposing work, testifying to that emancipation.

In 1982, the Citadel, one of the monuments of the Haitian National Historic Park was declared a World Heritage Monument by UNESCO. There are those who consider it the 8th wonder of the world. During the good years of Haitian tourism, (the 50s-early 80s), it was, together with the Bicentenaire area of Port-au-Prince, the ruins of the Sans-Souci Palace, the small and sumptuous church of Milôt, the main attraction for tourists. With the aid of UNESCO, in the late 1980s, it was restored. Today, it has rediscovered its former glory and splendour. Already a number of tourists have started to come back to it and embrace it again. For example, it is part of the “package” of some tourism companies from the Dominican Republic which include it in what is called multi-destination tourism.

That is to say that the Citadel, to use the motto of

King Henry I, is in the process of rising again from its ashes. Indeed, a totally new interest is being paid to the huge edifice. For example, the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Haiti organised, in partnership with “Caribes en Créations” of the French government, from 22-23 June 2007, a new cultural event titled: “Un Monde à Partager” (A World to Share). This activity brought together a large number of artists, writers, intellectuals, dancers and creators of all kinds, on the ancient platform of the Citadel. A great number of participants were Haitians, the other participants/guests at this royal feast, came from the Caribbean, the Greater Caribbean, France and Europe in general, the United States of America (USA) and Africa. For two consecutive days, they were fortunate enough to stay – which perhaps King Henry I never had the chance to do while he was alive – live and sleep in the open air within the area of the Citadel, outfitted for the occasion. There they celebrated culture and shared their common cultural identities, related to the themes and concepts of liberty, emancipation and independence and in a programme of recitals, conferences, round tables and artistic representations.

Nowadays, it is a matter of reviving tourism activities in Haiti. In this revival project the plan is to give back (real) life to the Citadel and make it a favoured destination. It is a question of connecting it, as the old King Henry I had originally thought, to the Sans-Souci Palace, which is to be rebuilt from the exterior, and the site of the Les Ramiers Palace which is going to be upgraded. These latter sites will form a royal tourism complex more suited to the taste of the industry at the current time. The Laferrière Citadel itself remains a tourism gem and an historic site which many people would very much like to visit, to walk around or ride round on horseback and spend a night there under the stars, following the bohemian example of the guests at the “Monde à Partager”.

The region of Grand Nord in Haiti, which includes the geographical departments of Nord, Nord-Ouest, Nord-Est and Artibonite, is abundant in historical and cultural sites which, when renovated, remodelled, or fortified, may constitute a source of important currency for the Haitian economy. With the glorious Citadel as an historical, cultural and architectural site to explore and the tomb of King Henry I to visit, immortalised like a Pharaoh inside the Citadel, and Labadie Beach, miraculous and splendid at the same time 10 km away close to Cap-Haïtien, the legendary colonial city, the revival of tourism in Haiti is indeed promising. Even better than in the good old days! ■