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ARTIFICIAL CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS CAVE «SKANOVO» IN THE PENZA REGION, RUSSIA

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Abstract

The article deals with the study of the Christian cave monastery “Skanovo”, dating back to the 17th century. The cave complex is located on the territory of Russia, in the Penza region. The first historical information about the cave were published in the 19th century. The first exploration began in the late 20th century by speleologists and other researchers. The article presents information on the history, geography and development of the study of the cave monastery, with a description of the cave complex, and discusses some analogies with other Christianity cult cave in Eastern Europe.

Keywords: religious cave, cave monastery, Christianity, asceticism, church archeology.

Riassunto

La Grotta di Skanova è situata 1 km a SE del villaggio Skanovo nella regione di Penza (Russia). Gli ingressi della grotta si trovano sulla collina coperta di foreste che è il punto più alto della zona. Ai piedi della collina si trova una sorgente, chiamata in onore di S. Antonio e Teodosio Grotta dei monaci di Kiev. Si tratta di una cavità scavata nella roccia arenacea. Secondo gli storici la grotta è stata realizzata a metà del XVII secolo. Il primo che iniziò a scavarla fu il monaco Giovanni e dopo di lui il monaco Arsenio II che visse prevalentemente in grotta. Nel XIX secolo sulla collina fu costruito un tempio (oggi perduto). L'ingresso principale della grotta era decorato con ornamenti scolpiti mentre le pareti erano imbiancate. Ci sono molte leggende su questa grotta: una di esse parla di un lago sotterraneo con statue di giada sulla riva. Un'altra descrive parecchi livelli della grotta (mentre oggi ne sono noti solo tre). Nel corso degli ultimi 10 anni la grotta è stata oblitterata a causa del riempimento e in fase di ricostruzione una parte dei sotterranei è stata rafforzata da muratura. Negli anni 2011-2014 gli autori di questo contributo hanno effettuato un censimento e un nuovo rilievo della grotta. Secondo i risultati del lavoro la lunghezza totale è di 747 metri. La grotta ha tre livelli e si estende in quasi tutta l'area della montagna. La lunghezza del piano superiore è di 115 metri, quella del livello intermedio è 270 metri e quella del livello inferiore 362 metri. La grotta ha tre ingressi e presenta un pozzo di ventilazione. Il livello medio è il più interessante in quanto ha subito meno danneggiamenti rispetto ad altre zone della grotta, e qui si conservano le celle dei monaci, le mensole per appoggiare le reliquie e le icone. La grotta di Skanova è per estensione la terza grotta di culto in Russia dopo le grotte di Belogorskaya (~ 900 m) e Kalachaeuskaya (892 m). Purtroppo alcune parti di questa struttura sono in cattivo stato ed è necessario proseguire gli studi per proteggerla.

Parole chiave: grotta di culto, monastero rupestre, Cristianesimo, asceti, archeologia sacra.

The present article deals with the cave complex located in the European part of Russia, nearby the settlement Scanovo, in the Penza Region (Fig. 1). According to the historians, the cave, situated in a forest-covered hill, was founded in the middle of the XVII century, associated with the foundation of the Skanovo Holy Trinity Monastery. The first publication about the cave was published in XIX century (TROITZKIY, 1877), dealing with the reconstruction to expand the cave. According to other legends, this monastery was founded by monks from Kiev-Pecherskaya Lavra (Ukraine), during a time when digging caves was one of traditional religion practices in Russia (POLEVA, 2009). Thus, it seems that the cave was excavated when the Skanovo Holy Trinity Monastery was already working at the surface.

At the beginning of the 20th century at the top of the hill, the church and chapels were built over the entrances of the cave. However, after the Great October Revolution 1917 the cave and monastery were abandoned, and local people disassembled all buildings on the hill for

household needs. In 2000 works to restore the cave complex were started.

In 1976 this underground complex was explored by speleologists from Moscow. Prokofiev's group has done the most serious works in the cave from 1979 to 1981 (SAMSONOV, 1996). More recently, the authors of this article have been working in this cave since 2007 (AGAPOV, 2007, 2011, 2013; LEONTIEV, 2014).

Description of the cave monastery

Skanovo Cave Monastery is an underground complex of rooms and passages on three levels (Figs. 2 and). The deepest point is 18 meters below the surface, the highest point is 6 meters below the surface. The length of this complex is 747 meters (according to our 2014 survey). The temperature in the cave is between +8^o and +10,5^oC, and there is absence of water.

Intersections of the galleries (Fig. 3) mostly have a form of an arch. The width of the passages is between 0,5 and 1,1 meter, whilst the height is between 1 and

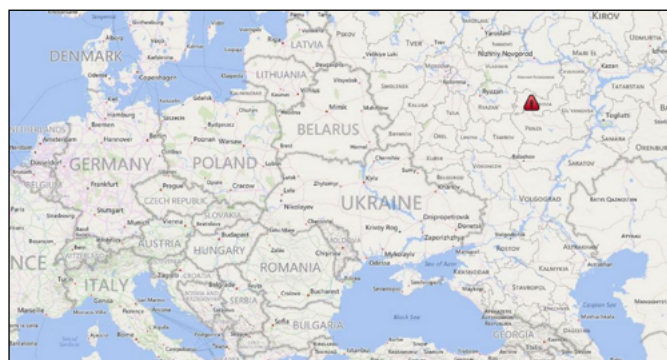


Fig. 1: location map of the Scanovo Cave Monastery.

Fig. 1: localizzazione della grotta Monastero di Scanovo.

2 meters. Some galleries have been reinforced to avoid likely collapses.

The total number of rooms is 33. Structurally, the rooms can be divided into different groups: rooms with a separate entrance; space in the gallery; rooms at the intersection of galleries.

There are many niches for icons on walls and in dead ends, and several crosses are depicted on the walls (Fig. 4).

Description of the top level of the cave

The length of the top level is 115 meters. There is no room at this level. The southern part has connections

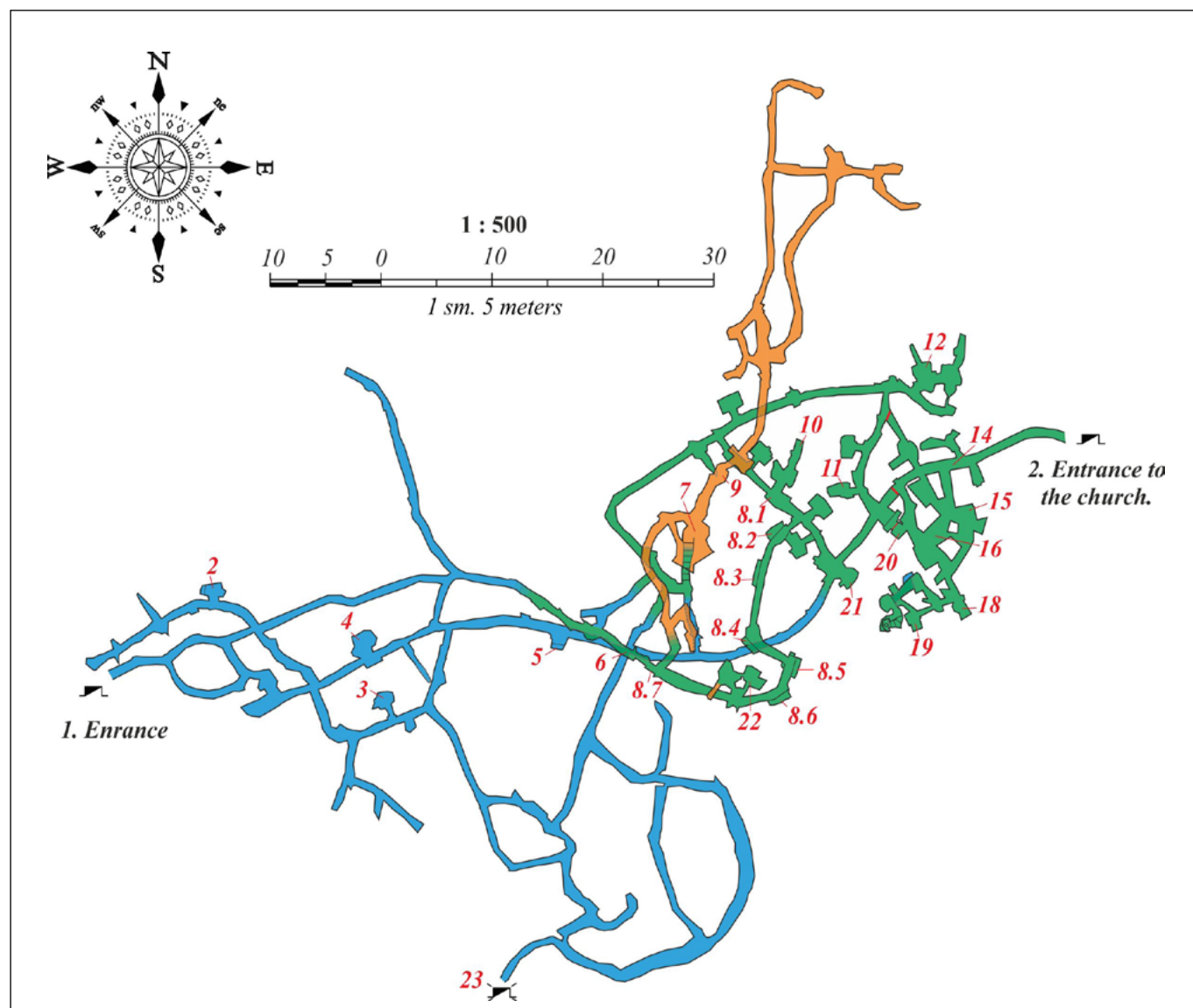


Fig. 2: Scanovo Cave Monastery. Status of the cave after the reconstruction period 2007-2012. Surveying 2014 - speleo-groupe "Styx" (styx-spleo.ru). Legend: 1 - the main entrance (on the 3rd floor); 2 - cell; 3 - cell; 4 - room with arch collapses; 5 - niche for relics; 6 - connect of the 2nd and 3rd tiers; 7 - entrance to the first (top) floor; 8.1-8.7 - niche for relics; 9 - connect of the 1st and 2nd tiers; 10 - cell with a niche for burial; 11 - burial chamber with stove bench; 12 - room with a possible "chimney"; 13 - Entrance to the 2nd tier; 14 - alleged cave temple; 15 - a room with a stove bench; 16 - room; 17 - room; 18 - crypt; 19 - system of galleries; 20 - burial chamber; 21 - Chapel; 22 - two rooms connected by a "window".

Fig. 2: Grotta Monastero di Scanovo. Stato della grotta dopo la ricostruzione del 2007-2012. Rilievo 2014 del gruppo speleologico "Styx" (styx-spleo.ru). Leggenda: 1 ingresso principale (al 3° livello); 2 - cella; 3 - cella; 4 - camera con arco crollato; 5 - nicchia per reliquie; 6 - congiunzione fra il 2° e 3° livello; 7 - ingresso al primo livello (superiore); 8.1-8.7 - nicchia per reliquie; 9 - congiunzione fra il 1° ed il 2° livello; 10 - cella con nicchia per la sepoltura; 11 - camera sepolcrale con stufa a sedile; 12 - camera con probabile "camino"; 13 - ingresso al 2° livello; 14 - presunta grotta tempio; 15 - camera con stufa a sedile; 16 - camera; 17 - camera; 18 - cripta; 19 - sistema di gallerie; 20 - camera sepolcrale; 21 - cappella; 22 - due camere collegate da "finestra".



Fig. 3: gallery (photo Agapov I.).

Fig. 3: galleria (foto Agapov I.).

passages with the middle and bottom levels. There was a gap from the surface in the second half of the 20th century. It was used like an entrance during this time, because the original entrances were collapsed. These were restored during the period 2003-2007.

In the final part, there is a gallery to the north. In this direction on the surface there is an ancient settlement, dated to the 10th-13th centuries.

Description of the middle level of the cave

The length of the middle level is 270 meters. It is located on the NE sector of the whole complex, and presents an underground church, still functioning today.

There are many rooms at this level. Some of them are monastic cells and others are tombs (Fig. 5). Probably, this is the oldest part of the complex. The main gallery has seven niches for relics (Figs. 2 and no. niches 8.1-8.7; Fig. 6).

Description of the bottom level of the cave

The length of the bottom level is 362 meters. The main entrance to the cave complex was made as a chapel (Fig. 2). Another entrance to the south has collapsed. There are many passageways, quite randomly distributed, and leading to different directions. Probably, the creators of this ways dug them without any purpose just trying to understand God through the work.

Similarity with another cave monastery

Some rooms in the cave monastery are similar (BOBROVSKY, 2007) to the rock architecture of ancient cave monasteries of the Dnieper and Podesen, in Ukraine (the monk's sells with a bed; a room with a u-shaped bed; room with no beds, etc.). Figure 7 shows the sample space cave monasteries of medieval Kiev, with which there are similarities.

Group A, 1a-type rooms (residential or household purposes) without beds (ubiquitous), type 1b-burial chamber (has some similarities with the camera in the No. 20, Fig. 2); Group of niches A2 and A3 are similar to a niches at number 5, 8 and niche in cell no. 10, etc. (Fig. 2).

Group B1 and B2 are residential cells with a bed, with high or low aperture similar to many rooms or burial chambers in the second and third levels of the complex. Group E, 1a-type is the living cell or burial chamber with "U"-shaped bed (similar to room no. 15, Fig. 2).

Thus, the number of architectural analogies speaks about the tradition, which follow from the Dnieper (Ukraine, old Russian territory) to the western part of Russia.

The Scanovo Cave Monastery is one of the largest in Eastern Europe among the cave monuments of this group. In the European part of Russia, it can be considered to be the largest. For length of the underground galleries, it is the third site, following the Belogorsky Monastery (Voronezh Region, date 18th-19th centuries, length 985 meters) and the Kalachaevskaya Cave (Voronezh Region, date 14th-19th centuries, length 892 meters).

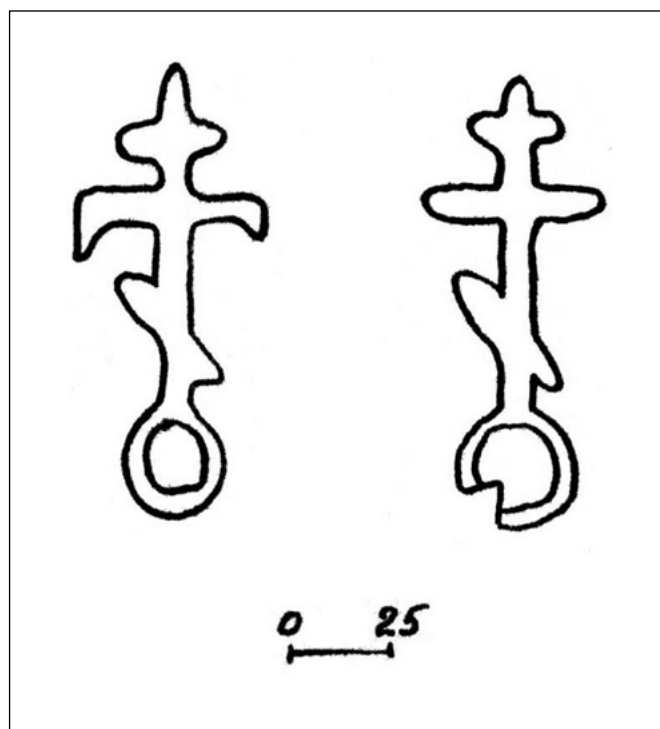


Fig. 4: image of crosses on the walls of galleries (after DRONOVA, 1980).

Fig. 4: immagine delle croci sulle pareti delle gallerie (da DRONOVA, 1980).



Fig. 5: burial chamber with stove bench (photo Agapov I.).
Fig. 5: camera sepolcrale con stufa a sedile (foto Agapov I.).



Fig. 6: niche for relics (photo Agapov I.).
Fig. 6: nicchia per reliquie (foto Agapov I.).

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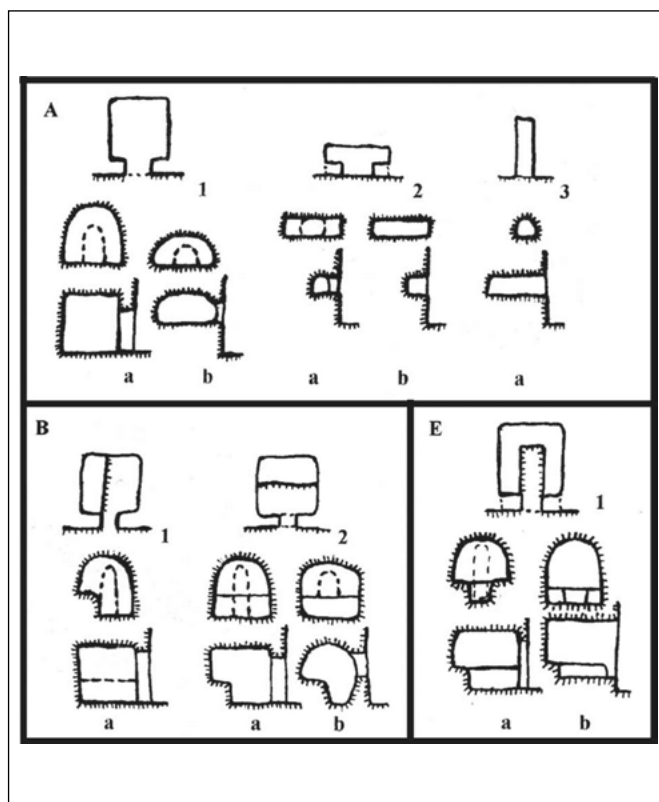


Fig. 7: underground structures of cave monasteries of medieval Kiev (Ukraine), which have similar structures to the Skanovo Cave Monastery (for the architectural typology, see BOBROVSKI, 2007).

Fig. 7: strutture sotterranee di monasteri rupestri della Kiev medievale (Ucraina), che presentano tipologie simili alla grotta Monastero di Scanovo (per la tipologia architettonica, vedere BOBROVSKI, 2007).

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