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## **CAVES IN DIVNOGORYE AND BELOGORYE: MONASTIC AND FOLK TRADITION IN THE RIVER DON CAVES CONSTRUCTION**

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### **Abstract**

There is a general list of Podonye cult caves presented in the paper. The list contains over 50 items plotted by the author on the base map. There is a topo survey of the caves in Divnogorye and Belogorye. These caves have been chosen to demonstrate monastic and national tradition in caves construction. Construction of the cave in Divnogorye came out of monks migrations caused by interreligious clashes. As legend has it the first migration flow was moving from Italy in the reign of Greek emperor Andronik. The total number of Byzantine emperors with such a name is five, and all of them ruled in the period from XII to XIV centuries. The second flow was moving from the territory of Western Ukraine in the first half of XVII century. The cave in Belogorye being the largest in Eastern Europe, 985 m, was created in accordance with national tradition of cult Christian caves construction. It was began at the end of XVIII century by Mariya Sherstyukova. At a later time the local people started to help her. Later at the place of the cavate hole constructed by the peasants there appeared Belogorsky monastery. At the present day Divnogorsky and Belogorsky cave monasteries are large pilgrimage and tourist areas.

**Keywords:** caves, Divnogorye, Belogorye, monastery, monastic structures, Russia, migrations monks, inter-religious clashes.

### **Riassunto**

*Il lavoro presenta l'elenco generale delle grotte di culto di Podonye. Si tratta di oltre 50 strutture illustrate su una mappa di riferimento. Nel contributo vengono presentati i rilievi topografici delle grotte di Divnogorye e Belogorye, quali esempi della tradizione monastica e nazionale nella realizzazione delle cavità. La grotta di Divnogorye si deve alle migrazioni dei monaci che fecero seguito agli scontri interreligiosi. Secondo la leggenda il primo flusso migratorio si mosse dall'Italia durante il regno dell'imperatore greco Andronico. Cinque imperatori bizantini assunsero questo nome e governarono fra il XII ed il XIV secolo. Il secondo flusso partì dal territorio dell'Ucraina occidentale nella prima metà del XVII secolo. La grotta di Belogorye, la più grande dell'Europa orientale con i suoi 985 m di sviluppo, è stata realizzata nel rispetto della tradizione nazionale di culto Cristiano. Fu iniziata alla fine del XVIII secolo da Mariya Sherstyukova ed in un secondo momento la popolazione locale apportò il suo aiuto. Più tardi, al posto della piccola cavità scavata dai contadini, apparve il monastero di Belogorsky. Al giorno d'oggi i monasteri rupestri di Divnogorsky e Belogorsky sono grandi mete turistiche e di pellegrinaggio.*

**Parole chiave:** grotte, Divnogorye, Belogorye, monastero, strutture monastiche, Russia, migrazioni dei monaci, scontri religiosi.

There are over 50 cult caves within the Middle Don (Russia). The abundance of significant sites is due to specific character of the physical, historical and cultural environment. The region in question forms part of Middle-Russian Belogorye, where typically chalk exposures are present (MILKOV et al., 1985). It was in this rock type that the cult caves were constructed within the developing official monastic and folk orthodox tradition.

The tradition was initially connected to settlement of Christians in the region. The first wave of settlement dates to the XIII-XIV centuries. At that time there were numerous old Russian settlements within the Middle Don being parts of the Golden Horde in the historical area of Chervlyony Yar (TSYBIN, 1987). They belonged to Carai and Podonye eparchy and Ryazan eparchy. The second wave of Christian settlement dates to XVII century. It was dictated by people moving from Western Ukraine and Central Russia to the southern end of Muscovy. At that time the Middle Don was a part of Belgorod and Voronezh eparchies.

The Divnogorye Monastery of the Dormition is a remarkable example of official church tradition of cult caves construction. According to A. KREMENETSKY (1999) that tradition had been initially brought to the region by monks Xenofont and Iosaf from Southern Italy. Escaping from Catholic expansion, the orthodox monks took Sicilian icon and founded a new monastery on the bank of the river Don. The monastery created by the monks in the period of High Middle Ages could have survived up to XIV century and was destroyed as a result of Russian and Tatarian conflicts. The early existence of the monastery in Divnogorye is indirectly proved by drawing of the Illuminated Compiled Chronicle of XVI century illustrating the text about metropolitan Pimen's travelling on the Don river to Constantinople in 1389. It shows rock-cut entrances to the caves. There is also a legend written by PATRICK GORDON in 1696 while visiting the Divnogorye Monastery. The abbot showed him "a rock-cut chapel in the chalk hill. Above the chapel there were ruins of a very ancient monastery which had been founded according to a





Fig. 1: Sicilian icon of the Mother of God.

Fig. 1: *la Madre di Dio raffigurata in una icona siciliana.*

legend by Greek emperor Andronicus" (VENEVITINOVA, 1986, p. 14). All the five Byzantine emperors with this name ruled in the period of XII-XIV centuries.

In XVII century the monastery came alive again. This time it was made by people from Western Ukraine. It has to be noted that at that time, as well as in Italy in earlier period, there were orthodox cave monasteries suffering from Catholic expansion (NIKOLSKY, 1904). The recreated Divnogorye Monastery turned into the largest monastery of the region during the XVII-XIX centuries. In the late XIX century there already were two stone churches: one was in honour of the Dormition and the Sicilian icon, whilst the second cave church was in honour of the Nativity of St John the Baptist. The Divnogorye Monastery did not function during the Soviet times. Its premises were partially destroyed, some of them were converted to a health resort. During the 1990s construction and restoration works began in the monastery. At the moment there are 13 monks headed by hegumen Maxim (Lapygin).

The caves near the monastery had been being created and reconstructed in the whole field of the monastery's existence. The greatest part of works for the caves creation was made in XVII century. At present the total length of the caves is 351 m. The main place of the whole cave complex is the temple in honour of the Nativity of St John the Baptist which is surrounded by a walkway for procession of the Cross. The temple (18.5 m x 7.5 m in size) is opened to the NE. The full height of the temple divided by two rows of columns

into three naves is 5.24 m.

NW of the temple there is an outbuilding for household and practical needs, it has windows to the day surface; there is also a buried underpass to the monastery.

The walkway for procession of the Cross turns round the temple leading to the NE. Its width ranges from 0.8 to 1 m, its average height from 1.8 to 2 m. The walkway symbolizes the "Way of the Cross" (latin *Via Crucis*) that was went by Jesus Christ to the place of his crucifixion. Over the course of the walkway there are six small rooms connected to turns of the walkway. Two of them could be chapels, the rest of the rooms could be the "stations" on Jesus Christ's way to Golgotha (GUNKO et al., 2014).

Apart from the official monastic tradition of cult caves construction in the area of Podonye there also was a folk tradition of cave digging. This created the majority of cult caves. The rise to development of the tradition was given by MARIYA SHERSTYUKOVA's act of faith who began cave digging in 1796 near the village of Belogorye after her pilgrimage to the Kiev-Pacherskaya Laura. Initially, the local authorities tried to prevent her from doing it: they backfilled the caves, and took her to court. Only after the personal intervention of emperor Aleksander I the persecutions were stopped and the cave digger was helped (TIMOFEEV, 1869). The temple was dedicated on 30<sup>th</sup> August of 1819 to ALEKSANDER NEVSKY. The local people actively helped MARIYA SHERSTYUKOVA to build the caves. After her death IVAN TISHCHENKO and ANDREY VASILCHENKOV arranged works on the caves further construction (NIKOLSKY, 1910). The official monkhood started in the caves in 1866 and initially came under the Divnogorye Monastery of the Dormition (TIMOFEEV, 1869). In 1882 a separate Host Resurrection Monastery was established.

There were 42 monks in the Monastery before the revolution of 1917. With the beginning of Soviet power they started suffering deprivation. The monastery was deprived of its land in 1918 and soon the brethren had to leave the monastery. In 1924 – 1927 all the outbuildings of the monastery were sold out and knocked down. The last building, the cathedral, was blown up in accordance with Pavlovsk district executive committee in 1931 (KALASHNIKOV, 1966).

The Belogorye cave monastery's revival was begun in 2003. In 2005 according to the metropolitan of Voronezh and Borisoglebsk Sergiy's decree hieromonk Tikhon (Zhdanov) was nominated cave temple beneficiary, and he started hard work of an Orthodox church revival. Large amount of restoration work in the caves, construction of a site for the monks, a chapel building on a sacred spring, and a well were realized during his occupation of the post. At the present time the monastery is managed by hegumen Simon (Kamnev). Contemporary research show that the total length of the cave labyrinth of the Belogorye Monastery is 985 m (STEPKIN et al., 2013). It is the largest cult catacomb in Eastern Europe. It contains premises of different functions: a temple, burial vaults, chapels, cells, a monastery canteen, and mechanical wells. The underground temple of St Aleksander Nevsky is located

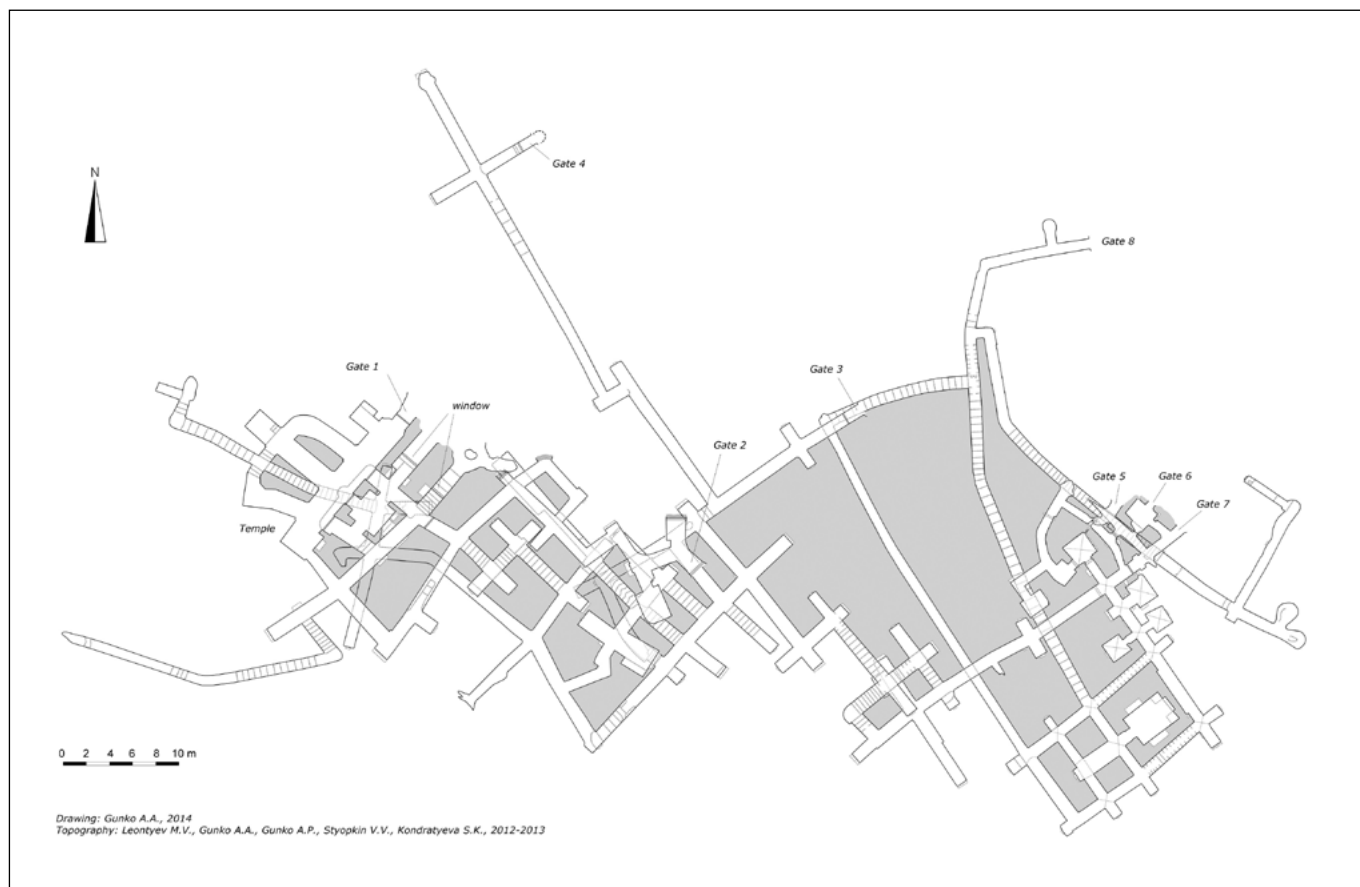


Fig. 2: the Belogorye Monastery caves' plan (drawing Gunko A.A., 2014).

*Fig. 2: planimetria delle Grotte Monastero di Belogorye (grafica Gunko A.A., 2014).*

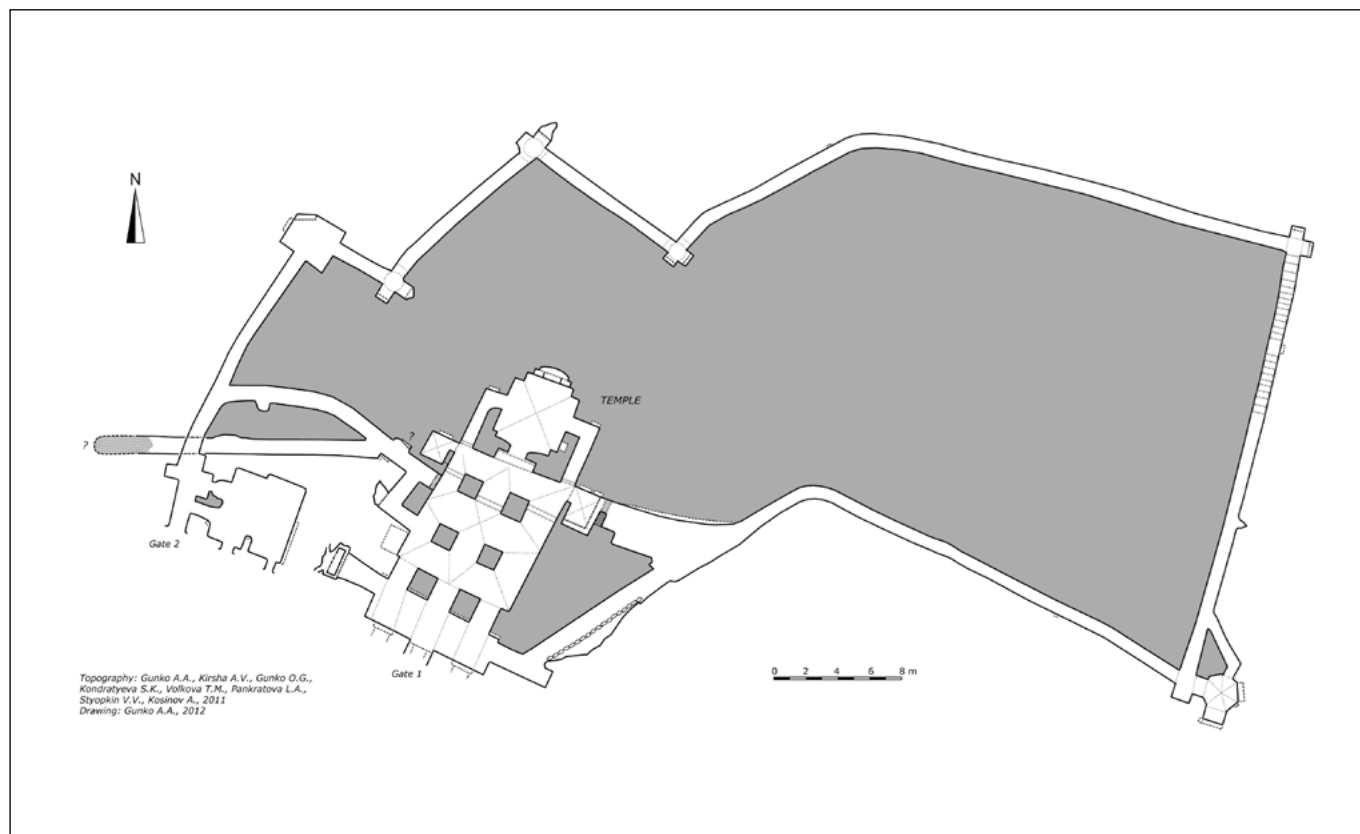


Fig. 3: the Divnogorye Monastery caves' plan (drawing Gunko A.A., 2012).

*Fig. 3: planimetria delle Grotte Monastero di Divnogorye (grafica Gunko A.A., 2012).*

by entrance to the upper floor of the caves. Occupying a pretty area of the upper floor it has a floor space of 95 m<sup>2</sup>. Its height in the part of omphalos, where there is a cut dome, reaches 5.1 m. The altar is directed to the SE. Two columns divide the space into three classical naves. There is a walkway to the lower cave floor at one of the columns base.

The burial vaults settled in different levels of the cave are two small rectangular rooms with horizontal niches (*cubiculum*s) just above the floor for burial purposes.

The native people called the chapels in the lower part of the cave labyrinth Small and Big Colour Rooms because of fan-shaped circles and semi-circles on their walls painted in red. At the present time Big Colour Room is being converted into altar of the temple in honour of the Holy Spirit.

There are five underground cells which are mainly concentrated in the lower part of the cave complex and occupy about 4 m<sup>2</sup>. In some of them there are tracks of chimneys cut in chalk.

One of the Belogorye cave monastery's features is its numerous communication ways placed in different levels. In addition the sudden drops of heights are equipped with stairs. In some places there are double tunnels which allowed reducing the pilgrim burden. The tunnel meeting places are usually prolonged with dead ends. As a result of such method the caves have numerous crossings being sacred *loci* dividing the monotonous rhythm of the vast labyrinth.

The Divnogorye and Belogorye cave monasteries are today regional centers of pilgrim and tourist activities.

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