

Hypogea 2015

Proceedings of International Congress of Speleology in Artificial Cavities
Italy, Rome, March 11/17 - 2015



EDITORS

Mario Parise

Carla Galeazzi, Roberto Bixio, Carlo Germani



CAVE SETTLEMENTS IN SOUTHERN APULIA. RUPESTRIAN EVIDENCE IN THE VALLEYS OF OTRANTO

Stefano Calò

University of Salento; calostefano@hotmail.it

Abstract

Since the 1970s cave settlements have been studied because of their major role in explaining human urbanization and settlement patterns. The settlements in Southern Italy show cultural similarities with those found in several other Mediterranean countries. In Salento (Apulia, southern Italy), there are several types of cave settlements: from small villages (composed of few units) and underground churches to complex rupestrian villages, many of which show common features with the *sub-divo* settlements. Both Serre Salentine and eastern Salento revealed significant cultural evidence in this regard. This paper aims to study the rupestrian landscape of Otranto (eastern Salento), where a systematic analysis has contributed to build a register of all cave units. The same analysis led to define the urban characteristics of the settlements which are partially similar, in terms of organization and structure, to urban settlements.

Keywords: rupestrian settlements, Otranto, Monte S. Angelo, Salento, Apulia.

Riassunto

Il rilevante fenomeno del vivere in grotta, oggetto di studi sin dagli anni Settanta, descrive una tendenza abitativa che si riscontra in molte regioni dell'Italia meridionale e che ha notevoli legami culturali anche con altri paesi del bacino del Mediterraneo. Nel Salento gli abitati in rupe si mostrano sotto molteplici forme, si va dai semplici e circoscritti insediamenti composti da poche grotticelle, alle chiese-cripte, fino ad arrivare a dei veri e propri villaggi rupestri caratterizzati da alcuni elementi riscontrabili anche negli insediamenti sub-divo. Gli abitati in rupe della sub-regione salentina si sviluppano con delle significative espressioni culturali che si notano sia nella zona delle Serre Salentine che nelle aree orientali. Il paesaggio rupestre del centro di Otranto, fulcro culturale del Salento Orientale, è stato oggetto di un'indagine analitica e sistematica che ha portato al censimento delle unità rupestri e ipogee e ha inoltre contribuito a definire il carattere civile di un ampio sistema insediativo rivelatosi in parte simile, nell'organizzazione e nella struttura, agli abitati urbani.

Parole chiave: insediamento rupestre, Otranto, Valle delle Memorie, Monte. S. Angelo, Salento, sub-divo, Puglia.

Foreword

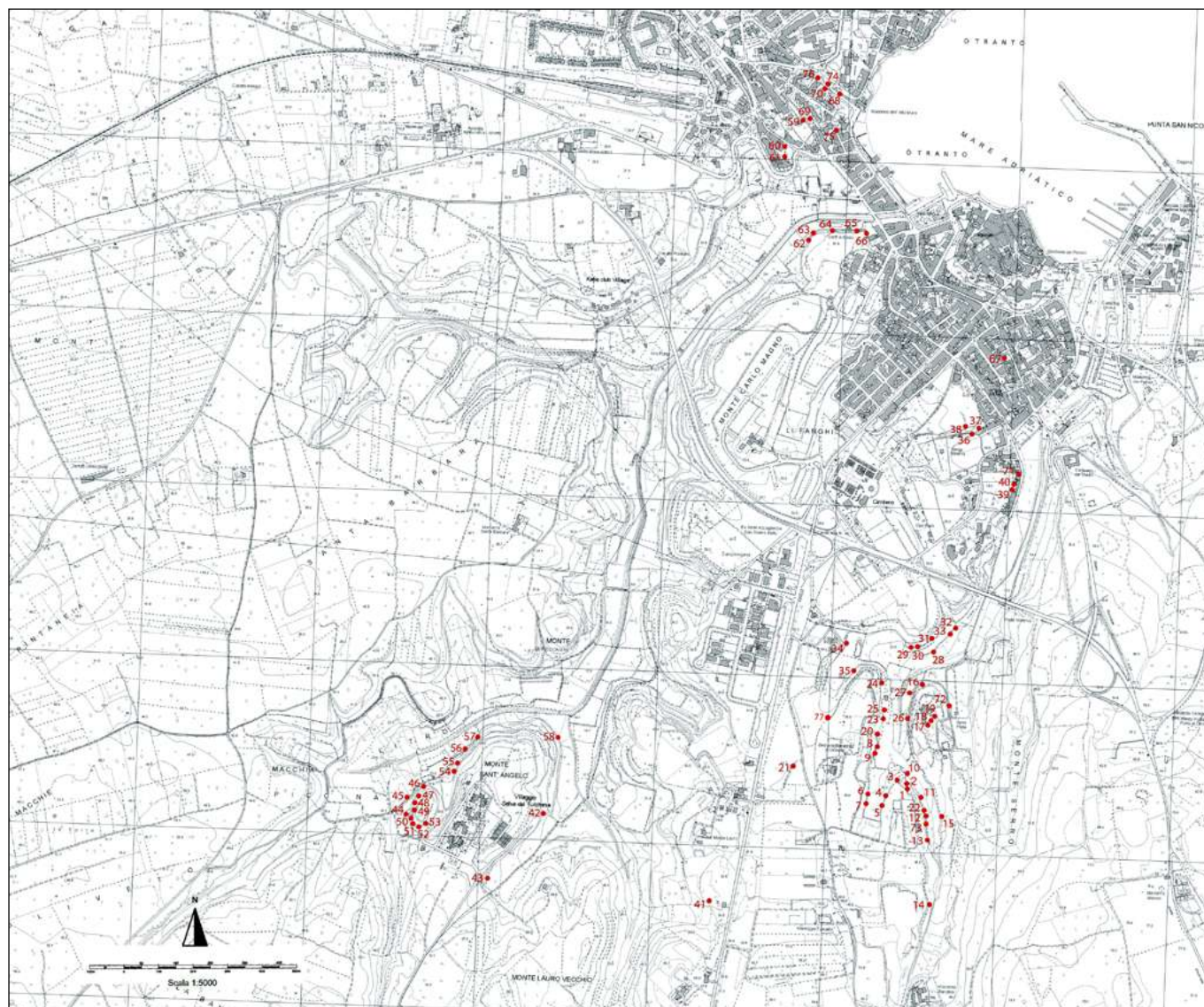
The phenomenon of Apulian cave settlements, together with other rupestrian settlements in southern Italy, has been under investigation since the 1970s. Various studies suggest that Apulian settlements share cultural similarities not only with other southern Italian settlements, but also with those in other areas of the Mediterranean basin (FONSECA 1970-1075, Vv. AA., 2012).

The most comprehensive analysis of medieval cave settlements in southern Salento has been conducted by Cosimo Damiano Fonseca in 1979. Before his studies, the scientific community was mostly attracted by cave churches which were considered particularly interesting for their art and architecture. Since the beginning of the XX century, they have been viewed as part of a "panmonastic" system, which considered all representations of Byzantine art in caves as a consequence of the cultural heritage brought to Italy by Greek monks at the time of the iconoclast persecutions. Under this perspective, all caves had been unambiguously interpreted as Basilian eremitical crypts and monastic settlements (GABRIELI, 1936; MEDEA, 1939). In 1960s-1970s, some authors proposed a different interpretation, according to which these settlements had a different origin and function, and were considered civilian and not monastic (FONSECA, 1970-1975). Although significant results were

achieved, none of these studies could benefit from any systematic topographic or archaeological analysis. For these reasons, we have decided to conduct a systematic analysis of the rupestrian settlement structures around Otranto (Lecce province) (Tab. 1). The methodology used in this analysis took advantage of a systematic survey with GPS georeferentiation that, with the help of a critical review of the existing literature, allowed to build a complete register of cave units, necessary for analysing the extension, function and characteristics of the settlements.

Lack of written sources

The lack of written sources, concerning in particular the early medieval period, is a serious issue that affects the majority of all medieval settlements located in the Terra d'Otranto. These sources started to be available at the beginning of the Norman Age, and then became widespread during the Angevin period. This situation, however, made it difficult to establish the period to which every source dates back, especially as regards the most ancient ones (ARTHUR, 1997, 2006). Therefore many historians, especially local experts (MAGGIULLI, 1914; ANTONACI, 1974; GIANFREDA, 1977) were led to misinterpret the meaning of the settlements located in Otranto. Following a "panmonastic" vision, they considered these cave units as a settlement inhabited by communities of monks, a hypothesis that is not



Tab. 1: cave settlements location map.

Tab. 1: carta di distribuzione degli insediamenti rupestri.

currently supported by any scientific evidence. Thus, despite carrying out a deep analysis of the small caves interspersed in the area around Otranto, these historians did consider them as the result of a coenobitic settlement. Probably they based their thesis on an approximate interpretation of a source that was assumed to support it at that time. This is a letter by bishop San Paolino from Nola, who had lived in the V century. In the so-called "*Carmen XVII: De reditu Nicetae episcopi*", he mentioned a community of clerics, women and men, who lived in the territories between Lecce and Otranto at that time (ANTONACI, 1974, pp. 118-119). Unfortunately, the letter does not specify the precise location of the community, nor it explicitly clarifies the meaning of the two terms "fratrum" and "sororum", whose reference to nuns and monks is ambiguous, thus it is not sufficient to support the idea that such a community, which had settled down in the Valle delle Memorie, was coenobitic or not. Other theories, following the same perspective, link these settlements to the nearby existence of the San Nicola di Casole's monastery, founded around

1099. It is likely that the name of the monastery originates from the word "casole" (small dwellings) referred to small caves, and therefore was used to refer to such units. Although the presence of hermits in the caves was not proved, these settlements were undoubtedly linked to the coenobium of San Nicola di Casole, whose sphere of influence, especially during the Byzantine period, also included other feuds located in Torre San Emiliano and Uggiano La Chiesa, near Otranto (FONSECA *et al.*, 1979, pp. 147-148).

The structure of the cave complex

The cave complex under investigation is located on three main areas surrounding Otranto, and comprises part of the town and the territory outside it. These areas can be easily identified as *Valle delle Memorie*, (Valley of the Memories - south of Otranto); the Idro Valley (SW of Otranto - this is the largest area delimited by the Idro river and includes the Monte S. Angelo area); and the combination of the San Giovanni (St. John - NW of the town) and the S. Antonio (St. Anthony - at the beginning of the Idro Valley) areas.



Fig. 1: cave n.16, hypogeal dromos and circular room with niches.

Fig. 1: grotta n.16, dromos dell' ipogeo e ambiente circolare con nicche.

Valle delle Memorie

Located S of Otranto, Valle delle Memorie extends for around 1.5 km² and has an altitude of 50-60 metres above sea level. It is surrounded by two modern highways, and morphologically characterised by many small hills, such as the area named Borgo Minerva¹ where the “massacre of the 800 martyrs” took place during the Turkish invasion in 1480 B.C. The Monte di Minerva area is located approximately at the centre of the valley and a stream flows along it. Some units belonging to this settlement can be already found in the town suburbs. A systematic analysis allowed to identify 46 caves used as dwellings, reservoirs and service rooms.

1) The toponym “Minerva” originates from the presence of an ancient temple, presumably located there and dedicated to goddess Minerva (ANTONACI, 1974).

Popular and important examples are the Torre Pinta hypogeum (cave no. 16), close to the manor farm bearing the same name, the cave church of San Nicola (St. Nicholas - cave no. 12), located approximately 400 m to the S, as well as the Padreterno underground chapel (cave no. 67). The hypogeum, which probably served several purposes across decades, is composed of a long corridor and a dromos with a vaulted ceiling around 33 m long. It ends with a circular room connected to three barrel-vaulted rooms equipped with a staircase at the entrance.

Along the perimeter of the circular room and the corridor, there are traces of a lithic seat; on the walls of all the rooms and the dromos there are approximately one hundred squared niches, probably already existing at the time when the original structure was built. Those niches were likely to be dovecotes, in line with the purpose served by the whole hypogeum over time.



Fig. 2: cave no.12, cave church of San Nicola, entrance.

Fig. 2: grotta n. 12, chiesa rupestre di San Nicola, entrata.



Fig. 3: cave no.12, cave church of San Nicola, interior.
Fig. 3: grotta n. 12, chiesa rupestre di San Nicola, interno.

The hypogeum shows many traces of excavation and restoration works that took place when the stonework tower was built, which dates back approximately to Modern Age (FONSECA *et al.*, 1979) (fig. 1). The top of the tower is characterised by triangular battlements built along the roof covering the central room, which was probably barrel-vaulted. The small niches on the walls are holes measuring roughly 35 x 60 x 25 cm each, some of them being arch-shaped. Inside, there is evidence of further modifications which allow to distinguish the room walls from the corridor walls. The overall shape of the structure is obviously linked to its original function which, according to different hypotheses, could have been either funerary or cultural. The latter is supported by those experts who considered this hypogeum as “a pre-Christian structure initially used as a funerary area and then transformed into a religious one during the Constantine Age by the first Christian communities” (ANTONACI, 1974, p. 124). Nevertheless, no evidence inside the building confirms this hypothesis and it is even likely that it was built at a later stage. The presence of other elements, some of them being difficult to date back, shows that the purpose of this hypogeum as well as of the whole area around it, did change over time. It is difficult to state whether these elements date back to the same period. Their ruins seem to testify the presence of another rounded columbarium, perhaps incomplete, which is horizontally truncated at one metre from the ground, has a 4 m diameter, and is enriched with some rectangular niches on the internal walls, similar to other structures with niches that were found both in the Valle delle Memorie and the Idro Valley (cf. BERNARDINI, 1957; FONSECA *et al.*, 1979). The second building, located west of the hypogeum, is a one-room cave with vaulted walls and blocks of stone placed near the entrance and on top of it, which is almost impossible to access. It was probably used to store snow underground. The second relevant and well-known building in the Valle delle Memorie is the cave church of San Nicola, built along a vertical rock ridge near a stream. Frontally, two ample entrances can be identified, whereas a third entrance is located eastwards (figg. 2-3). Inside, there are several rooms which underwent various changes during time.

For this reason, interpreting the planimetry of the building is quite difficult.

The church interiors are divided into three naves, separated by columns, and are closed by three apses pointing S.

On the eastern side of the main room, a tunnel leading to another room, presently inaccessible, can be found. The original floor is completely covered with backfill and sediments, while the ceiling, mostly flat, is about 2.30 m high. The most remarkable renovations took place at the entrance and on the apses where, in addition to the dismantling of some of the pillars and the opening of a third entrance, some niches and a reservoir were built. It can thus be inferred that, at a certain point in time, the church lost any religious significance. Throughout the building, there are numerous remains attributable to a lithic step, but there is no evidence of other possible holy furniture (FONSECA *et al.*, 1979). As for the wall decoration, there is still plaster on the walls and light traces of colour on one of the pillars at the entrance. These traces might belong to an ancient pictorial cycle which depicted a cross-shaped nimbus, probably belonging to a Pantokrator Christ, and part of its background. Similar remains have also been found in the supposed apse of the western nave, where the nimbus is made with white beads. The building was used in the Middle Age as a rural chapel, and later adapted to a warehouse for agricultural purposes or a barn. As already mentioned, some local historians assumed that this place was as a religious centre of what ought to be a *lavra* (monastic settlement) (cf. MAGGIULLI 1914; GIANFREDA 1977). However, this hypothesis seems quite unlikely. As stated by Fonseca, if that was the case, the absence of the iconostasis and of religious symbols in the naves would be really unusual for a church in Otranto, given its century-old link with both the Byzantine world and the Greek liturgical practice (FONSECA *et al.*, 1979). Furthermore, the structure of this building is not particularly suitable for religious ceremonies and no other cave church in southern Apulia is similar to it in terms of planimetry.

The third cave unit known in the area is the so-called Padreterno underground chapel. This seems to be one of the oldest cave churches in the area, and there is very little information about it apart from the data furnished by local historiography (DE FERRARIS, 1558; TANZI, 1902; GIANFREDA, 1977; FONSECA *et al.*, 1979).



Fig. 4: cave complex of San Giovanni.
Fig. 4: complesso rupestre di San Giovanni.



Fig. 5: cave no. 34.
Fig. 5: grotta n. 34.



Fig. 6: cave no. 65.
Fig. 6: grotta n. 65.

It is located near the Minerva hill, along the Ottocento Martiri street. It is built into the rock and its interiors are accessible only via a single entrance consisting of a small staircase. Internally, it features a main room connected to the others by monolithic pillars linked to arches. The hypogeum is divided into three naves; along the walls traces of a lithic seat can be found. The name of the building comes from the Padreterno fresco, some traces of which are still visible in the main apse. The interior also features fragments of other frescoes testifying the change from the Greek to the Latin liturgy, such as representations of the Virgin Mary and a procession of hooded figures typical of the XVI century. This hypogeal church is located in the current urban area, in the so-called Dominicans area (the name probably derives from the donation or sale of the church by archbishop Stefano Pandinelli to the Dominican order in 1478-79).

Monte S. Angelo

The area of Monte S. Angelo, currently part of the municipality of Uggiano La Chiesa, covers a surface of about 0.2 km², SW of Otranto. The area, which is the final part of the Idro Valley, is composed of two small hills located in the eastern and western parts. 17 cave units have been identified, mainly located in the western part and at different altitudes. The overall structure of this settlement is much more complex and detailed than that found in the Valle delle Memorie: access roads, stairs and various paths connecting reservoirs are easily identifiable. These elements make the whole settlement, including the caves located along the Idro Valley, look like a real village. Here caves used both as dwellings and simple shelters or warehouses can also be found. At the centre of this cave village lies the church of S. Angelo (cave no. 45). Remains of this cave, largely destroyed, are the *naos* and the *bema*, separated by a rocky iconostasis divided into three arches. The *naos*, which was the area that hosted the believers and was originally to be made up of three naves, is now only an open atrium. The *bema*, which was the area where the ceremony was celebrated, features three apses facing SE, divided by lithic partitions and linked by small vaulted doors. The apse on the right hand side has an opening, probably built in later times,

that leads to a small flanked cave (*diakonikon*). Both in the atrium and in the apses there are niches of various sizes (FONSECA *et al.*, 1979). An excavation campaign which took place in 2007 helped to better define the characteristics of the whole building (NACHIRA, 2009). The *naos* was found to be a very large rectangular room, about 8 x 6 m, directed NW-SE. On the eastern side, before the iconostasis, there is a cavity thought to be a funerary bed with an unusually high lithic cushion. The vaulted roof of the *naos*, which probably did not exceed 3 m in height and 2 m in thickness, collapsed (this occurred most likely in the Modern Age). It is not possible to establish when the collapse took place, however the holes along the vault suggest the presence of wooden beams to support another roof built to replace the original one. Along the two side arches of the iconostasis, a wall was identified made of blocks bearing traces of plaster, probably belonging to pre-existing structures. This intervention dates back to the XVI century, during the transition from the Greek to the Latin rite. It is thought that two rows of blocks, surrounding the central opening of the iconostasis and believed to be the foundations of a Latin altar, date back to the same period. During excavation works, several graves were found in the area surrounding the church. These graves included those of two children and were placed orthogonally to the building, directed NE-SW. Almost all of them were empty, with no covering plate, except for one, where the buried body was also found. At both sides of the church, two rocky reservoirs have been identified, whose depth ranges from 2 to 3 m. Some of them are considered to have been built before the cave church (NACHIRA, 2009). The wall paintings of the whole church are quite peculiar: both in the *naos* and in the *bema*, there are traces of frescos and plaster. In these paintings, dating back to the XII-XIV century according to various hypotheses, different sacred characters can be recognised, such as saints and bishops (cf. DE GIORGI, 1897; MEDEA, 1939; FONSECA *et al.* 1979). The most important one is Archangel Michael. He is depicted with a scroll carrying what remains of a votive inscription in Greek. It is likely that the inscription read as “Remember, dear Lord, your servant Basil, his father and his mother. Amen”. The original purpose of the above-mentioned caves was certainly religious,



Fig. 7: cave no. 6, interior.

Fig. 7: grotta n. 6, interno.

for the benefit of the rural communities that occupied the area. In addition, the presence of the iconostasis associates the caves to the Greek rite (FONSECA *et al.*, 1979). The votive inscription, the various frescoed characters and the graves suggest that the church was probably built by private citizens. However, it should also be noted that the church served a different purpose, which makes it difficult to interpret its function in a straightforward way. Firstly it was used as a barn equipped with mangers, then as warehouse and finally it was completely abandoned during the Modern Age. In the past, the area of Monte S. Angelo must have been particularly interesting as far as the development of the settlement in the entire Idro Valley is concerned. On the top of the western hillside, towards the southern end of the valley, the remains of a squared structure approximately 10 m-wide can be seen, which can be interpreted as the remains of a fortification. These probably belonged to a tower. The fortification testifies the strategic importance of the area, as from its location it is possible to have a panoramic view of the entire Idro Valley, the area of the monastery of San Nicola di Casole, that of Torre del Serpe directed towards the coast. It is even possible to identify the town of Giurignano in the W. The fortification together with the different types of cave units that can be seen on the various layers of the several ridges of the mountain, show how the settlement developed, going beyond the unique use of rock, as it is also the case of the Valle delle Memorie settlement.

The San Giovanni underground complex

The San Giovanni underground complex, located in the southern outskirts of the present city centre, is only a fraction of a much broader settlement consisting of artificial caves with a specific function. The largest and best-known part of it underwent several important modifications that changed its original entrance. Originally, the complex was presumably composed of several cave units (FONSECA *et al.*, 1979) but only few of them can be identified now and they are interspersed in an area of about two hectares (caves nos. 59-60-61-68-69-70-74-75-76). The largest (cave no. 59, fig. 4) and best preserved part consists of a large entrance

hall with a huge pillar. This room leads to another circular room ending in a quadrangular salon. At the entrance, a *dromos* opens up: it is several metres long and is characterised by holes that, especially in the first fraction of the wall, might be associated to changes in the intended use of the complex. A series of small rooms, featuring square-shaped and semicircular niches, can be accessed from both the *atrium* and the *dromos*. The ceiling of the long corridor is flat, while the *atrium* ceiling is only partially flat: between the pillar and the cells, it curves adopting the typical barrel shape. In the whole complex, the presence of inscriptions, attributed to various periods, is massive. Above the complex, there are other caves, almost impossible to access, while on the other side of the road, another series of similar alcoves (composed by small cells and corridors, cave no. 69) can be found. According to the most recent interpretation, the aim of this settlement was very precise, that is storing late-Roman goods coming from maritime trades. This hypothesis is supported by the existence of the nearby harbour and by the proximity of a road axis, thought to be the end of the *Via Traiana-Calabria* (Traian road), even though this hypothesis has not been entirely confirmed ². According to this approach, the function of the complex was maintained also in the Byzantine period, although over time it was slowly modified, gradually losing all connections with the original one. Before being finally abandoned, the settlement served the ultimate purpose as an olive mill. A different interpretation of these settlements consider them as portions of a small monastic complex (CAPRARA, 2001), but the absence of both religious frescos and altars does not support this hypothesis (FONSECA *et al.*, 1979). As mentioned above, today only a fraction of what must have been a much larger complex remains. Such complex was characterised, above all, by the presence of multiple rooms; other caves, always of the same type, marked by inner cells and internal small rooms, have been found in the surrounding area. Many of them seem to be produced in series, given their standard size. They have been found located towards the coast, a few hundred meters from the coastal pier: this suggests that they were probably used in commercial activities or trade.

A systematic investigation

The structure of the villages

The systematic investigation has led to a timely identification of 77 cave units, classified on the basis of assumptions about their use and their morphological characteristics. Besides the caves mentioned above (46 caves of the Valle delle Memorie and 17 at Monte S. Angelo), other 14 caves, some of which consisting of multiple rooms, have been found and detected between the areas of San Giovanni and S. Antonio, at the beginning of the Idro Valley. These caves can be divided into several categories, such as simple living units, warehouses, hypogea and religious places. The whole set of caves defines a conglomeration in the valley

2) Please note that in the same area an early Christian necropolis has been identified (cf. DE MITRI, 2010).



Fig. 8: steps and carved road.

Fig. 8: *scalette e strada scavata.*

set up on different levels and inhabited at different times. All their entrances are roughly rectangular and the majority are single-celled with a quadrangular, rectangular, elliptical or sub-circular planimetry. In more than one case a lithic pillar on the back separates two rooms, perhaps intended for different uses. Similar structures have been regularly found in other cave sites of southern Salento, such as Macurano, near Alessano and in some caves in the Capo di Leuca (SAMMARCO, 2000; SAMMARCO et. al., 2008). Only in a few cases a more complex planimetry has been identified: the reason is certainly attributable to their residential use (caves nos. 18-19-27-34-64, fig. 5). Similar planimetries have already been identified in previous literature (CAPRARA & DELL'AQUILA, 2004; CAPRARA, 2007). The internal structure of these caves is quite simple: the presence of holes, used as vents or fireplaces, is widespread as well as that of niches of various dimensions and shapes. There are small quadrangular or arched niches, located both internally and externally with respect to the entrance, that can be considered housings for lamps; large and rectangular niches in some cases equipped with shelves or slots for shelves or wooden furniture; and very large units used as storage rooms. Where resting areas were conceived, there remain parts of beds, either dug inside the *arcosolia* or located at the corner of each room, or created on purpose by excavating the walls (cf. CAPRARA, 2004). The function of these caves is extremely various and cannot be identified in all cases with absolute certainty: in addition to living-spaces, there are shelters, warehouses, barns, hypogeal depots (cave no. 33), *arcosolia* (caves no. 3-5-65, fig.6) and burial graves and the like. In cave no. 6 (fig.7) several niches, extremely worn out but still recognizable and arranged in four parallel rows, have been identified on both long sides. This suggests that the structure was used as a small burial *columbarium*, probably dating back to the late Roman period, since the surrounding area shows a strong concentration of sigillata African ceramic fragments and of Late Roman 1 type amphorae, dating back around the IV-V century (cf. DE MITRI, 2005). A

peculiarity of these settlements lies in the presence, in some cases, of holes or notches at the entrance, or in the area immediately in front of it, which would suggest the presence of structures that would increase the volume of the caves. Thus, we assume the excavated part to be somehow complementary to the one that was built. Other elements underline a rational territorial organization: hiking trails (some of which are marked by minor roads and others dug along the ridges of the rocky hills), steps, wells, tanks and terraces (fig.8). The coexistence of both dug and built elements is also testified by the presence of a tower and a fortress, as it has been seen at Monte S. Angelo (the latter including part of the cave village too). As far as the area in the valley is concerned, there is no direct link with the main street axes, although it is known that a path exists that begins in Otranto and goes south, towards Uggiano La Chiesa. A necropolis has been found along this way (AURIEMMA, 2004). Apart from it, the hypogeal complex of S. Giovanni might be the only remaining cave settlement linked to the ancient road axes. The complex was built on a road that once led to the Alimini Lakes and that was thought to be the ancient Via Traiana-Calabra (UGGERI, 1983). To conclude, the cave villages around Otranto can be divided into two big groups, apparently not connected to each other and which developed in the valley. These settlements were characterised by the presence of several religious sites which, although they are hard to date, certainly played a part in uniting the rural communities who settled down in those areas. It is also worth mentioning the presence of caves with specific functions, such as dovecotes or possible worksites, where people performed their working activities.

The epigraphic signs

During the field survey, entering the caves allowed to identify several types of inscriptions belonging to a repertoire of cruciform signs and inscriptions (CAPRARA, 2007). The most common sign is a cross, found in several caves (caves nos. 11-12-34-54-57-58).



Fig. 9: cave church of San Nicola, votive inscription.
Fig. 9: chiesa rupestre di San Nicola, iscrizione votiva.

Based on the methodology used, they can be divided into three types: inscribed crosses realised through the use of sharp instruments; crosses with a flat and smooth groove, made by the blade of a pickaxe, and crosses with a deep groove of about 3-4 cm, resulted from repeated engravings (cf. LOMBARDI, 2009, pp. 381-391). The recognised shapes of these crosses are: the Greek and the Latin crosses, both found mostly in the church of San Nicola (cave no.12) and in caves nos. 11-34-54-57 and 58; the cross with Calvary (cave church of San Nicola, one of the pillars), the cross with apicals (cave no. 11) and the patriarchal cross (caves nos. 57-58). Except for the church of San Nicola (where crosses appear on the pillars), all crosses found in the caves are located on the walls, both on the side and back walls. Only in one case, cave no. 34, the cross appears externally placed on top of the partition wall of the entrance. Crosses in the religious building were made by different people and at different times, which shows active attendance of the church by the rural community during the Middle Age.

Different meanings can be attributed to the various types of crosses: they could be distinctive signs of ownership by private individuals, or serve an apotropaic function in the case of caves used as shops, offices or worksites. This point of view may also explain the meaning of some groups of crosses, mainly found in caves nos. 57 and 58. The Latin cross placed on the left wall inside cave no. 54 has certainly a votive function; it is located near a niche that may have been used as a small altar. It is also likely that the room was used as a small chapel: in this case the cross is realised with a very small and sharp object carrying extremely thin and simple furrows. The types and forms of all these crosses show similarities with many other elements found in Apulia; in some cases, they even represent a constant factor, especially as far as religious places are concerned. In addition to Lecce province, these crosses can be also found in the Taranto area (cf. DELL'AQUILA & MESSINA, 1998),

Brindisi area and even in the central-northern Apulia. The presence of cross-shaped signs can be also found in the hypogeal complex of San Giovanni (cave no. 59), where besides the Greek and Latin crosses there is also a starred cross. Here these cross-shaped signs are placed next to the "Chrimson", the monogram of Constantine (CARLETTI, 1979; FONSECA *et al.*, 1979; CARLETTI, 1994; DELL'AQUILA & MESSINA, 1998; FELLE, 2001; LEPORE, 2009; LOMBARDI, 2009). Inscriptions are the second category of epigraphic signs found in the caves: regarding the caves directly investigated, the most significant epigraphic "corpus" has been found in the church of San Nicola. In this case the inscriptions are realised on the pillars and on the wall of the left nave. In the middle of the pillar, where the reservoir lies, an inscription appears referring to a Greek name: Stefano (Steven) (FONSECA *et al.*, 1979). The epigraph, whose initial part is incomplete, bears large letters carefully engraved with a sharp instrument. The second inscription can be found on the same pillar and on the same side but above the first one. Once again this is in Greek and shows a poor state of preservation (CAPRARA *et al.*, 2008; CAPRARA, 2009, 2011). Written on five lines, it reads as:

¹ [M]AP(IA) MIΘ(HP) Θ[EOV] [MNHCOHTI TOV]

² [A]OYAO[V COV] [...]

³ ...]AMO[... AMA THC]

⁴ CMB[IOV COV]

⁵ AMBR[...]

"Mary, Mother of God, remember your servant ... **amo** ... and his wife **Ambr** ...". The inscription (fig.9), made by a poorly-educated and not very experienced hand, with characters of various form, show many itacisms due to the fact that the devotee used to write following the pronunciation of the words. It is very difficult to recreate the name of the devotee, since the only readable syllables -"amo"- could refer to either Priamos or Eramos, probably a vernacularised form of Erasmos or something similar. It seems easier to recreate the name of his wife, who might have been Ambrosia. Westwards next to this epigraph, there are traces of what looks like an anthropomorphic face, of which the face and the eyes can be recognised. The fact that this is supposedly an invocation to the Virgin Mary instead of God should not be surprising: in the cave church of Palagianello (Taranto province) there is even an inscription devoted to Archangel Michael (CAPRARA, 1979). In the sanctuary of Sant'Angelo in Santeramo, there is an inscription addressed to both God and the Archangel at the same time, which might have also been addressed to the pilgrims who visited the sanctuary. On the second pillar, in the eastern nave next to various engraved crosses, several letters in Greek appear, once again spread over multiple lines. Their poor state of preservation makes it impossible to read them. The set of Greek inscriptions found in the same building continues on the eastern wall of the nave, showing the votive formula - Μνήσθητι Κύριε - of which only the name - ΛΕΟΝΤΟC - remains, probably referring to a priest. This inscription is spread over

several lines too. At least four of them are recognisable, and some letters are uppercase and have an orderly progression: Θ [... / ΔΟ [...] Π [... / ΑΕΟΝΤΟC / ΑΜΗΝ Φ (FONSECA et al., 1979). All these inscriptions confirm the continuous visits of the devotees to the church when it was used as a religious building. However, it should not be excluded that these inscriptions could also belong to individuals simply passing by or to pilgrims who, given the importance Otranto had in the Middle Age as a pilgrimage centre, may have also found shelter in some of these caves. It is also likely that they visited the church and therefore left traces of their passage. The presence of inscriptions on the walls has been identified in other cave units in the valley. In cave no. 39, on one of the internal walls, other inscriptions appear which are more difficult to detect and interpret. The collection of inscriptions continues in the underground hypogeum of San Giovanni where similar inscriptions, such as a series of six Φ arranged in a row, could be found along the corridor. A monogram with the IX initials under a cross ending with another Φ (-'Ιησους Χριστός φως-) was also found, together with an inscription which might refer to a name and other no longer legible. Conversely, in the church of Monte S. Angelo painted inscriptions appear on the iconostasis, inside the *naos* and associated with what remains of frescoes, including the exegesis to *chionédon*. Of it “Ο ... Ο / ΡΗΟ” remains, coupled with the already mentioned votive sentence by devotee Basil (DE GIORGI, 1897; GUILLOU, 1963), which has almost disappeared.

Concluding remarks

Our systematic investigation contributes to the understanding of cave distribution and density in the valleys of Otranto. Unfortunately, due to a complete lack of pottery for about 75% of the investigated areas, there is no sufficient evidence for establishing a precise and undeniable chronology of the cave settlements under investigation. The sampling of ceramic remains only provides some evidence for assigning a date to the human presence in the caves. As already mentioned, the presence of a possible *columbarium* for funerary purposes, of Late Roman 1 ceramic fragments and of sigillata amphorae found in some areas close to the end of the valley, provide limited evidence of the human presence in the area in late Roman times. Certainly, though, the period of maximum development of the rupestrian village was the Middle Age. Nevertheless, we cannot identify the precise times we are referring to: evidence of pottery remains relating to the IX and X century has been found together with that of other fragments of the XII-XIII century. The former belong to containers of the “Otranto type series” and to tableware items of the “Mitello” series. The latter are fragments of painted pottery with red bands comparable to some late medieval containers similar to amphorae (ARTHUR, 1992a, b; LEO IMPERIALE, 2001; DE MITRI, 2005; TINELLI, 2006). Unfortunately, without conducting further and thorough systematic excavations and territorial surveys, it is impossible to



Fig. 10: cave no. 11, with two rooms separated by a small stone wall.

Fig. 10: grotta n. 11, con due ambienti separati da un piccolo muro in pietra.

determine whether and which of these caves belong to a certain period of time, thus making it also difficult to establish its precise chronological pattern. Based on our evidence it is only possible to establish a *terminus post-quem* to the extent to which late Roman pottery is considered. To sum up, the systematic investigation showed and confirmed the civil and secular nature of these caves, in contrast with the previous thesis that erroneously considered them as the result of a monastic-coenobitic community establishment. Indeed, these caves can be classified according to their characteristics. In addition to single-cell rooms having mostly quadrangular planimetries, characterised by the presence of niches with shelves or alcoves (CAPRARA & DELL'AQUILA, 2004), there are caves with oval or sub-circular plans, sometimes equipped with lithic pillars or walls in the middle that separate the interiors. There are also cave dwellings (fig.10) characterized by large interior spaces, holes used as vents or fireplaces, beds and shelf-niches next to alcoves. As far as their position and function are concerned, while cave dwellings are more numerous near Monte S. Angelo, in the Valle delle Memorie there is a greater number of reservoirs, used for activities such as storing or sheltering. From a more general point of view, however, the simplicity of their planimetries supports the hypothesis that these caves served a wide range of purposes. Both in the Valle delle Memorie and at Monte S. Angelo, it is possible to observe the presence of wells, tanks, staircases, paths connecting terraces. The peculiar shape of some of them testifies the complex rationality behind the articulated organizational structure of the settlements (ANTONACI, 1974; FONSECA et al., 1979). As described above, its complexity is also proved by the presence of other elements which explicitly testify how these caves developed spatially. These elements contribute to shed light on the coexistence of rupestrian and artificial components, a characteristic that associates these settlements to the *sub-divo* ones. This aspect, that

appears to be a common feature in the investigated area, is very well pronounced in particular in the area of Monte S. Angelo thanks to the presence of the remains of the tower and the fortification. They let us assume that this area developed similarly to any other rural settlement. Moreover, based on some of the elements found in the caves, we can state that differences with respect to *sub-divo* settlements are minimal (cf. GALASSO, 2009), not to mention the fact that some of them are absorbed into the current urban area and almost touch the perimeter of the ancient city of Otranto. Thus, the overall distribution of these caves almost defines a village that developed just outside the city walls.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Paul Arthur, University of Salento, for the opportunity to study this topic and to begin this research. I wish to thank also the owners of the manor farm Torre Pinta for their availability during my fieldwork and Serena Boccardo, Marta Toma and Enzo Pagliara for the English translation. To Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e del Turismo – Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici della Puglia for granting the permission to publish photos of the caves. A special thanks go to Professor Roberto Caprara, for his precious contribution in interpreting the rupestrian inscriptions of the cave church of San Nicola commented in this paper.

References

- AA.VV., 2012, *The rupestrian settlements in the Circum-Mediterranean area / Chrima cultural rupestrian heritage in the Circum-Mediterranean area Common identity, new perspective*, Firenze.
- ANTONACI A., 1974, *Otranto, cuore del Salento*, Galatina.
- ARTHUR P., 1992 a, *La produzione di anfore Bizantine*, in P. ARTHUR et al., *Fornaci altomedievali ad Otranto. Nota preliminare*, in Arch. Med., XIX, pp. 103-110.
- ARTHUR P., 1992 b, *Amphorae for Bulk transport*, in *Excavations at Otranto. Volume II: The Finds*, a cura di D'ANDRIA F., WHITEHOUSE D., Lecce, p. 199-217.
- ARTHUR P., 1997, *Tra Giustiniano e Roberto il Guiscardo. Approcci all'archeologia del Salento in età bizantina*, in *I congresso nazionale di Archeologia Medievale*, Pisa, 29-31 maggio 1997, Firenze 1997, pp. 194-199.
- ARTHUR P., 2006, *L'archeologia del villaggio medievale in Puglia*, in: M. Milanese (a cura di), *Vita e morte dei villaggi rurali tra medioevo ed età moderna. Quaderni dei villaggi abbandonati della Sardegna*, 2, Firenze, pp. 97-121.
- AURIEMMA, 2004, *Salentum a salo. Porti, approdi, merci e scambi lungo la costa adriatica del Salento*, Vol.1, Galatina.
- BERNARDINI M., 1957, *Grotte e cellette in alcune località della Provincia di Lecce*, estratto da "Studi Salentini", vol. III-IV, giugno-dicembre, pp. 128-133.
- CARLETTI C., 1979, *Iscrizioni murali del santuario di S. Michele sul Gargano*, in *Il santuario di S. Michele sul Gargano dal VI al IX secolo*, a cura di C. CARLETTI, G. OTRANTO, Bari.
- CARLETTI C., 1994, *Nuove considerazioni e recenti acquisizioni sulle iscrizioni murali del Santuario garganico*, in *Culto ed insediamenti micaelici nell'Italia meridionale fra tarda antichità e Medioevo*, a cura di CARLETTI C., OTRANTO G., Bari, pp. 173-184.
- CAPRARA R., 1979, *L'insediamento rupestre di Palagianello*, vol. 1, *Le chiese*, Firenze.
- CAPRARA R., 2001, *Società ed economia nei villaggi rupestri. La vita quotidiana nelle gravine dell' arco Jonico Tarentino*, Fasano.
- CAPRARA R., DELL' AQUILA F., 2004, *Per una tipologia delle abitazioni rupestri medievali*, in Arch. Med. XXXI, pp. 457-472.
- CAPRARA R., 2007, *Popolamento e centro di culto micaelico a Santeramo (Bari)*, in *Puglia tra grotte e borghi*, Atti del II convegno internazionale sulla civiltà rupestre, Savelletri di Fasano (BR), 24-26 novembre 2005, a cura di MENESTO' E., Spoleto, pp. 144-158.
- CAPRARA R., CARAGNANO D., DELL' AQUILA F., FIORENTINO G., RAMPINO L., 2008, *Il santuario di Sant'Angelo in Santeramo*, Bari, pp. 45-82.
- CAPRARA R., 2009, *Iscrizioni inedite, mal edite e poco note in chiese rupestri pugliesi*, in "Archivio Storico Pugliese", LXII, pp. 7-28.
- CAPRARA R., 2011, *Siti e iscrizioni di Crispiano e dintorni nel panorama rupestre del Tarantino*, in "Riflessioni. Umanesimo della Pietra", Martina Franca, pp. 93-114.
- CAZZATO M., COSTANTINI A., DE VITIS V., MANNI L., 1998, *Guida di Otranto. La città, il territorio e la costa*, Galatina.
- CORCHIA A., 2009, *Otranto, monumenti e memorie* in "lu Lampiune", anno VI, n.III, pp. 109-111.
- DE FERRARIS A., 1558, *De situ Japigiaie*, trad. di BIFFI N., Galatina 2004.
- DE GIORGI C., 1897, *La provincia di Lecce. Bozzetti di viaggio*, vol. 2, Lecce.
- DE MITRI C., 2005, *Otranto, anfore da trasporto di età tardo romana (IV-VI sec. d. C.)*, in LRCW I 2005, pp. 413- 424.
- DE MITRI C., 2010, *Inanissima Pars Italiae. Dinamiche insediative nella penisola salentina in età romana*, Oxford.
- DELL' AQUILA F., MESSINA A., 1998, *Le chiese rupestri di Puglia e Basilicata*, Bari.
- FELLE A. E., 2001, *Un caso di scritture non esposte. Le iscrizioni a sgraffio del sepolcreto della chiesa di S. Pietro a Crepacore (Torre Santa Susanna, BR)*, in *Scrittura e Civiltà*, XXV, pp. 343-370.
- FONSECA C. D., 1970, *Civiltà rupestre in Terra Jonica*, Milano - Roma.
- FONSECA C. D., 1975, *La civiltà rupestre medievale nel Mezzogiorno d'Italia. Ricerche e problemi*. Atti I Convegno Internazionale di Studi sulla Civiltà Rupestre Medioevale nel Mezzogiorno d'Italia (Mottola-Casalrotto 1971), Genova.
- FONSECA C. D., BRUNO A.R., INGROSSO V., MAROTTA A., 1979, *Gli Insediamenti Rupestri Medievali Nel Basso Salento*, Galatina.
- GABRIELI G., 1936, *Inventario topografico e bibliografico delle cripte eremitiche casigliane di Puglia*, Roma.

- GALASSO G., 2009, *L'altra Europa. Per un'antropologia storica del Mezzogiorno d'Italia*, Napoli.
- GIANFREDA G., 1977, *Il monachesimo italo - greco in Otranto*, Galatina (Le).
- GUILLOU A., 1963, *Art et Religion dans l'Italie grecque medievale* in *La Chiesa greca in Italia dall' VIII al XVI secolo*. Atti del Convegno Storico Interecclesiale (Bari, 30 aprile - 4 maggio 1969), vol. II, Padova, pp. 724-758.
- LEO IMPERIALE M., 2001, *Otranto, cantiere Mitello: un centro produttivo nel Mediterraneo bizantino. Note attorno ad alcune forme ceramiche di fabbricazione locale* in *La ceramica altomedievale in Italia*, Quaderni di Archeologia Medievale VI, atti del V Congresso di Archeologia medievale (Roma, CNR, 26-27 novembre 2001) a cura di S. PATITUCCI UGGIERI, pp. 327-342.
- LOMBARDI R., 2009, *I segni cruciformi incisi in ambito rupestre nell'area di Fasano (BR)*, in *Dall'abitat rupestre all'organizzazione insediativa del territorio pugliese (secoli X-XV)*, Atti del III convegno internazionale sulla civiltà rupestre, Savelletri di Fasano (BR), 24-27 novembre 2007, a cura di MENESTO' E., Spoleto, pp. 381-391.
- LEPORE G., 2009, *La frequentazione funeraria nelle lame del territorio di Fasano*, in *Dall'habitat rupestre all'organizzazione insediativa del territorio pugliese (secoli X-XV)*, Atti del III convegno internazionale sulla civiltà rupestre, Savelletri di Fasano (BR), 24-27 novembre 2007, a cura di MENESTO' E., Spoleto, pp. 257-298.
- MAGGIULLI, 1914, *Laura basiliana primitiva in Terra d'Otranto*, Matino (Le).
- MEDEA A., 1939, *Gli affreschi delle cripte eremitiche pugliesi*, Roma.
- NACHIRA D., 2009, *La cripta di S. Angelo in Uggiano La Chiesa, una testimonianza bizantina nella Valle dell'Idro*, in *Spicilegia Sallentina* n. 6, 2009.
- SAMMARCO M., 2000, *Gli insediamenti rupestri nel Capo di Leuca*, Galatina.
- SAMMARCO M., PARISE M, DONNO G.P, INGUSCIO, S. ROSSI E., 2008, *Il sistema rupestre di località Macurano presso Montesardo (Lecce, Puglia)*, Atti VI Convegno Nazionale di Speleologia in Cavità Artificiali - Napoli, 30 maggio - 2 giugno 2008, Opera Ipogea 1/2, pp. 273-282.
- TANZI F., 1902, *L'archivio di Stato in Lecce. Note e documenti*, Lecce.
- TINELLI M., 2006, *Evoluzioni e trasformazioni dell'anfora dipinta dal Medioevo al Rinascimento. Osservazioni dal Salento*, in FRANCOVICH R., VALENTI M. (eds.), IV Congresso nazionale di Archeologia Medievale, Abazia di San Gallo (Chiusdino-Siena), 26-30 settembre 2006, pp. 485-489.
- UGGERI G., 1979, *Otranto paleocristiana: Itinerari* (Contributi alla Storia dell'Arte in memoria di Maria Luisa Ferrari) vol I, Firenze, pp. 37-46.
- UGGERI G., 1983, *La viabilità romana nel Salento*, Fasano.