

Physical evidence of dedication rites in rock churches of Basilicata and Apulia (Italy). Some case studies

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Abstract

This article analyzes the physical evidence of the rite of dedication, collecting some case studies, coming from a large investigation on walls, columns, altars and vaults of the rock churches of Basilicata and Apulia, and compares them to other regions and foreign countries cases. We'll see the colour, the shape and the materials of the surviving dedication crosses, the former presence of relics on the altars, inscriptions and other evidence of dedication, but also some clear deconsecration signs. The article aims to bring to the attention this rite, to give a correct reading of its rare physical evidence in the rupestrian context, where they are often misunderstood, and tries to define a recognition method, to understand and read better the stratifications of a church.

Keywords: dedication rite, consecration, rock churches, altars, relics, dedication crosses, painted crosses, graffito crosses, epigraphs, inscriptions.

Purification and blessing gestures

The dedication rite of a church consists in a series of purification and blessing gestures, including prayers and litanies, undertaken by a Bishop in order to exorcise and hallow any place that was built or carved to become a place of worship (tab. 1). This applies to all newly built or existing places, which went under restoration, new wall decoration, or - even more - profanation.

The ancient ceremony of dedication was handed down to us evolving over the centuries. Even the term “dedication” is an evolution, preferred to “consecration”, as it has been recognized as the most ancient term used.

If in the Old Testament the altar was the only part of the church involved in the ceremony², from the Early Middle Ages onwards various liturgical texts set the rules for dedicating the whole place. One of the oldest, concerning the description of the *abecedarium* phase (tab. C) already appeared in the 8th century (Treffort, 2008, p. 225), and the first official text, the Pontifical of Guillaume Durand, bishop of Mende, was written in 13th century by (Durand de Mende, 1280/1999; Andrieu, 1940); the rite was fixed and printed in the 1485 *Liber Pontificalis*, then the 1596 *Pontificale Romanum* extended it to the whole Catholic Church. The current ceremony follows the *Ordo dedicationis Ecclesiae et Altaris* of the 1977 *Pontificale Romanum*³, of which we use the 1994 version.

After the construction, the church was prepared for the rite by painting or carving twelve dedication

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² In the Old Testament we see Noah building the first altar and then sacrificing burnt offerings on it (Genesis 8:20); Abraham miraculously found a ram caught in a bush and offered it as a burnt offering on the altar, instead of his son Isaac (Genesis 22:9-13). Jacob erected a stone stele on the place where God had spoken to him, then made a drink offering and poured oil on it (Genesis 35:14-15). In the Exodus God himself instructed Moses how to build a wooden Tabernacle and altar, to overlay them with gold and how to prepare the chrism and the fragrant incense (Exodus 25-27). Solomon built Jerusalem’s Temple in seven years, with a golden altar with four fronts (1 Kings 6-7; 2 Chronicles 3); he also instituted the first Feast of Consecration (2 Chronicles 7:8).

³ The latest Pontifical was elaborated according to the prescriptions of Paul VI after the Second Vatican Council.

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Tab. 1 – The dedication rite according to *Pontificale secundum ritum sacrosancte Romane ecclesie* (Castellano, 1520).

A) The Bishop and the clergy leave the church, except for a deacon, and begin to bless the water mixed with salt. In the meantime, inside the church the deacon lights 12 candels placed in front of the 12 dedication crosses previously made on columns and walls. The Bishop soaks a branch of hyssop in the holy water mixed with salt and with it he sprinkles the external walls, turning around the church three times, followed by the clergy. B) After any round of sprinkling, the Bishop knocks three times on the door with his Pastoral and at the third round the deacon opens it. After signing a cross on the threshold with the holy Pastoral, the Bishop enters the church among prayers and sacred litanies, symbolically taking possession of the building. C) *Abecedarium*: a Saint Andrew's cross is drawn on the floor with the ash where the Bishop marks the Latin and Greek alphabet with the Pastoral. D) The water is mixed again with salt, adding wine and ash. E) On the altar *mensa* are marked four crosses at the corners of with this holy mixture. F) The *mensa* is sprinkled with the hyssop, turning around it seven times. G) Then the interior of the church is sprinkled from bottom to top with the hyssop and the Bishop throws the remaining holy water below the altar. H) A shrine is prepared inside the altar for relics, anointing with chrism four crosses inside the corners and putting in four incense grains; then relics enter the church to be placed in the shrine of the altar and then the closing stone is sealed along the edges. I) The altar is dedicated, by anointing five points (middle and corners) with crosses, first with oil and then with chrism. Incense is burned above the same points. L) With a ladder the Bishop reaches one by one the 12 dedication crosses and anoint them with chrism. M) The altar is "confirmed at the front" by anointing its frontal dedication cross with chrism. N) A white altar cloth is laid and the ceremony of the dedication Mass begins.

crosses on the columns or on the walls, at the height of 2.30 m, so that the Bishop used - and still uses - a ladder to anoint them with the chrism, a consecrated anointing oil (tab. 1L), but, first of all, the church was entirely hallowed, outside and inside its walls (tab. 1A, 1F, 1G).

The Altar of Footprints

To better understand the profound and sacred meaning that makes the rite of dedication a necessity, let's recall one of the oldest "tangible" signs of dedication in natural caves, coming from an hagiographic memory. According to the mid-8th century *Liber de apparitione Sancti Michaelis in Monte Gargano*, the legend of the foundation of Saint Michael's Sanctuary in Monte Sant'Angelo, of Longobard origin (text e traslation in Trotta, 2012: pp. 63-68, 159-165), when the Bishop of

Siponto arrived on the site of the apparition, the Archangel informed him that the cave had already been consecrated by his presence.

This source underlines a key theme of the rite of dedication: the need to neutralize the presence of negative forces in the cave by an exorcism performed by the Bishop, a Papal messenger. But the case of this Sanctuary is unique, because the Archangel appears as a Divine messenger.

An anonymous 11th century Irish Homily, discovered in 2007 (*Leabhar Breac*, XVI Homily, composed by for 29 September *dies festus* in Picard, 2007: p. 141; Trotta, 2008: pp. 161-174; text e traslation in Trotta, 2012: p. 170), reporting the same foundation episode, provides us new information, integrating what we already knew on the origin and conformation of the Sanctuary: first of all the Archangel's fight with a dragon and his far and wide flight inside the Gargano cave in the form of a beautiful bird («*in forma avis*»; Centonze, 2022b),

aimed at delimiting its sacred border, indeed consecrating the place. He finally imprints on the rock the marks of his claws «that still remain there»⁴.

The old path that the pilgrims took to the Sacred Grotto passed through the place recognized as the exact point of the apparition: it's the so-called *Altar of the Footprints* (tab. 2A), that today is not immediately visible, because it's now incorporated into the museal itinerary (tab. 2B).

We're speaking of a preeminent nucleus for the Gargano's cult: a consecrated altar that received the contact with the Saint, it's itself a relic.

Altars and relics

In all other cases, the altar was (and is) consecrated by the Bishop with the deposition of relics (tab. 1H, 1I) and by anointing the frontal dedication cross (tab. 1M). This cross still survives in some rupestrian examples. In Matera we can see it carved in relief in the monolithic altar of Santa Maria al Vitisciulo (tab. 2C), or fresco painted in San Falcione (tab. 2D) and in Sant'Eustachio, where the cross was also repainted during a rededication (tab 2F).

In some cases we can imagine the former presence of relics in an hemispherical housing, "the shrine", usually excavated in the upper part of the altar, that by now is empty: to give a few examples, this can be seen in Mottola, on the altars of Santa Margherita (tab. 2E) and of San Nicola di Lamaderchia, in San Simine in Pantaleo in Massafra, or again in Matera, in Santa Maria al Vitisciulo (tab. 2C).

External and internal inscriptions

One of the most representative places of the rupestrian area, that testifies its foundation and dedication through an inscription, is the church of Santi Andrea e Procopio in Monopoli. Here we see an incised cross pattée in the middle of the lunette, and above it an engraved 11th century epigraph (tab. 3A), which mentions the client, the *magister* and the Archbishop Pietro who officiated the rite⁵. Also the anonymous church improperly known as Sant'Andrea, near the Masseria Irene, between Matera and Montescaglioso, has an inscription engraved next to the entrance (tab. 3B) and another text is red painted on an arcosolium. Unfortunately they are both compromised and not readable. Other churches and chapels only show a sacralizing cross on the front lintel (tab. 7B,C): probably several of them have lost their inscriptions, so today only the

deeply carved ones survive. It's very likely that these external inscriptions were painted too and the red pigment has gone for the exposition to the elements. In fact, some of the inscriptions carved inside the places of worship partially maintain the red colour, as we see in the right niche of Cappuccino Vecchio in Matera⁶ (tab. 3C) and in the apse of the anonymous church at Vallone Tufara of Montescaglioso (tab. 3D), which opens with a *crux* and closes with *EP* (abbreviation of *Episcopus*) and the monogram of the Bishop.

Other internal dedication inscriptions are simply painted with a brush or a finger. It's the case of the right altar rail of San Nicola di Lamaderchia in Mottola, where a red inscription dedicates the chapel to Saint John the Baptist (tab. 3E).

Roberto Caprara brought to attention the case of San Giuliano al Bradano in Matera (also identified as San Possidonio by Pelosi and Lionetti, 2021: p. 445): an 80 cm cursive inscription, painted in red on the apse of the church (tab. 3F,G). The reading provided by Caprara «(*crux*) *Ego magister et presbiter indignus*»⁷ (Caprara, 2016, revised in Caprara, 2017) must be amended into «(*crux*) *Ego Magiper presbiter indignus*»⁸. As for the dating, by calling the writing a "Gothic", Caprara attributed it to the 14th century. On the contrary, as confirmed by Carlo Tedeschi, the writing is a Beneventan minuscule, dating back to the 11th -12th century.

Other investigations (Centonze, 2022a: p. 123) have rebuilt a more complex situation: the red inscription was painted to overwrite the faded trace of a previous red Latin cross⁹ that was in the apse; in the upper zone there's a cloud of other red crosses, among which a Jerusalem cross stands out, then at the right follow some potent crosses, a Papal cross (with three cross-bars) and a *Menorah* sign. Moreover on the left there's another inscription in which the text is partially missing, but the word *INTRANTE* seems to be repeated; the last line *incipit* is «(*crux*) *Ego*», as we saw in the apse.

All these elements attest that the bishop Magiper was in charge of rededicating this church. The Papal cross seems to recall the Pope's delegation to the dedication, and for this reason the Bishop humbly considers himself *indignus*, unworthy. Let's also pay attention to the *Menorah*, painted in a "V" shape, as It's described in the Bible, representing the flame that had to burn permanently on the altar¹⁰.

⁶ The text, at the moment is illegible, but in the past someone has read «(*crux*) *Mihi Johannis*» (BMR 1916: p. 24). Today it is not possible to confirm or deny the news. A similar imprint is in the first symmetrical niche of the left aisle, but this is even less readable.

⁷ In Caprara's reading «(*crux*) *Ego magister et presbiter indignus*», was the anonymous signature of the *magister*, the architect of the church.

⁸ For this new reading I have to thank Carlo Tedeschi, Full Professor in Palaeography at the "G. D'Annunzio" University of Chieti-Pescara, and Principal Investigator of the ERC-2020-AdV Graff-IT Project.

⁹ The old faded cross is decorated at the base with some red and ocre yellow swirls.

¹⁰ In the etymology *alta res* or *alta ara*, the altar has the meaning of "sacrificial pyre" on which the priests burned incense and where a flame must always burn by divine disposition (Lev 6).

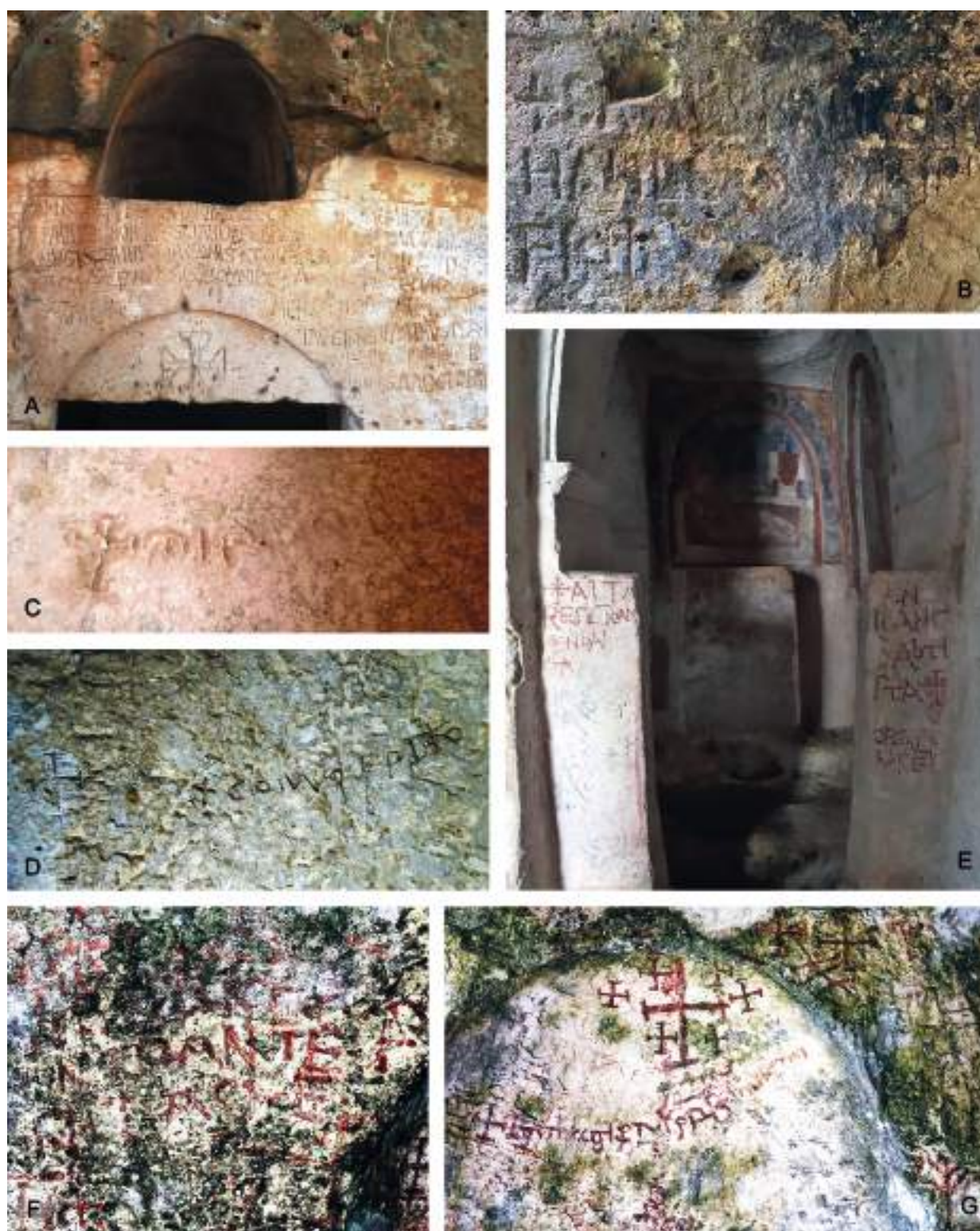
⁴ The manuscripts refers to the signs imprinted in the rock «as if it was soft wax».

⁵ «*Hoc templum fabricare fecerunt Johannes, Alfanus, abbas Petrus, Paulus in onore sancti Andree Apostoli et sancti Procopii martyris per manus Joannis diaconis atque magistri et dedicatum est per manus domini Petri archiepiscopo secondo die intrante mense nobember. Hoc scripta fieri fecit laquitnus presbyter, filius suprascripti magistri per manus Rodelberti presbyteri*».



Tab. 2 – Altars and relics.

A) Altar of Footprints, Sanctuary of Saint Michael the Archangel, Monte Sant'Angelo, Foggia (photo S. Centonze). B) North-south section of Monte Sant'Angelo's Sanctuary: we see the 12 m natural elevation of the original floor in the Sacred Grotto, the Angevin changes (forepart and walking surface), and The Altar of Footprints that is hidden below (graphic edit from Trotta M., 2012, p. 298). C) Monolithic altar of Santa Maria del Vitisciuolo, Matera, with an embossed dedication cross on the front (photo S. Centonze). D) San Falcione's altar in Matera: the remains of the red Latin dedication cross inscribed in a red frame. In the right quadrants we can hardly read a C at the top and an A at the bottom, preceded by another red sign that stands for K, so we can reconstruct the acronym IC XC and NI KA, «Jesus Christ conquers» in Greek (Antros Archive). E) Altar of Santa Margherita in Mottola: an empty relic chamber carved in the calcarenite monolith (photo S. Centonze). F) Sant'Eustachio's altar in Matera, with two layered fresco crosses (dedication and rededication) (Antros Archive).



Tab. 3 – Inscriptions.

A) Santi Andrea e Procopio's church in Monopoli: a central cross pattée and an engraved 11th century dedication epigraph mentioning the client, the *magister* and Archbishop Pietro who officiated the rite (photo R. Latorre). B) The anonymous church near Masseria Irene, between Matera and Montescaglioso, has an engraved dedication inscription next to the entrance, anticipated by a cross (Antros Archive). C) Dedication inscription in the right niche of Cappuccino Vecchio in Matera, engraved, painted red and anticipated by a Latin potent cross (photo S. Centonze). D) Dedication inscription in the apse of the anonymous church in Vallone Tufara, Montescaglioso: it's engraved and painted red, with a Latin potent cross at the beginning and the Bishop's monogram at the end (Antros Archive) E) Red inscription on the right altar rail of San Nicola in Lamaderchia in Mottola, dedicating the chapel to Saint John the Baptist (photo S. Centonze). F) San Giuliano al Bardano, Matera. Sacralizing inscriptions painted red (with a brush or a finger) at the left of the apse (Antros Archive). G) Apse of San Giuliano al Bardano, Matera. Dedication inscription painted red with a brush or a finger, with a Jerusalem cross and several potent crosses, including a Papal cross and a "V" Menorah (Antros Archive).

Surviving dedication crosses on vertical surfaces: shape, colour, materials and location

The shape, the dimensions, the colours and the materials of dedication crosses are always very variable. According to the realization technique and to the surface, we can find them carved in low or high relief on the rock, incised on rock, plaster or previous frescoes, directly painted on the bare rock or fresco painted¹¹.

For the shape we can speak of large recurrence of potent crosses and cross crosslets typology, but also the Latin and Greek crosses had their part in dedication. Another recurrent element is the *rota*, a circle or a frame in which the cross was inscribed. Then we have to mention the compass drawn crosses, like crosses pattée, four or six petals flowers and more rarely eight petals flowers.

In the first centuries of the Middle Ages, red and simple shapes were the most frequent kind, the red colour has always been preferred, alluding to Christ's sacrificial blood, shed on the Cross.

In postmedieval and later examples more complex shapes appeared, as interlaced crosses, floral elements and polychrome decorations.

Red painted and polychrome crosses

An important testimony of red cross dedication is in Ognissanti's church, located on the Gargano promontory¹². Although the church is currently used as a shelter for tools and animals, here we still see some intact attestations of the rupestrian dedication in the internal walls, where we can record ten red crosses. The peculiarity lies in the central hole of the carved and painted Latin crosses (tab. 4A), which was used to house the wooden arm that held the candle lit in front of the cross during the rite (tab. 1L); here also appear some Latin cross crosslets painted on the calcarenite (tab. 4B).

The case of San Nicola di Lamaderchia in Mottola, Taranto, is one of the most interesting and best preserved. The church has an unusual typology of red painted dedication crosses (also described in Maglio, 2021): a Latin cross with four stylized nails, arranged in an X (*crux decussata* or Saint Andrew's cross) at the crossbar connection point, alluding to the four nails of the Crucifixion¹³. Inside the church there are twelve red crosses: six of them are painted along the intrados of the barrel vault of the central apse (tab. 4C), alter-

nating crosses with nails and crosses of various kinds (Latin, Greek or Calvary crosses); three are inside the right impost of the central arch leading to the presbytery and another (faded) Greek cross is on the left on the counterfacade. Two more Latin crosses with four nails are at the two ends of the dedication epigraph of Saint John's altar, seen before (tab. 3E).

The upper right of San Nicola's church facade also features four red crosses, painted in the basin of a collapsed arcosolium tomb (tab. 4D): a large potent Latin cross stands in the middle, two eight-pointed Latin crosses are in the lower quadrants and a powered Latin cross, inscribed in a circle (a typical *in rota* dedication cross), is in the lower left quadrant. Even these external crosses are provided with four nails.

It's an added value for Cappuccino Vecchio being the only rupestrian church in Matera to preserve a certain number of red dedication crosses. The red potent crosses are painted on the bare calcarenite on the intrados of the right parabolic arch (tab. 4E): a potent Greek cross is clearly visible on the keystone, and there are traces of at least three other crosses placed at regular distance, following the curve of the arch downwards. Other red potent Latin crosses are on the intrados of the two arches that lead to the presbytery, placed at the arch's impost: the most visible ones are in the left arch (tab. 4F). These testimonies of the dedication adds to the epigraph engraved and painted in red in the first niche of the right aisle, we saw before (tab. 3C).

Four red crosses inscribed within *clypei* have been reported (Sammarco, 2000: pp. 45-51) in the apse of Sant'Elia's crypt in Patù, Lecce. Other two red crosses are located on the west wall, on either side of a fresco frame, and on the south end wall (unspecified number), painted at a regular distance of 1 m from each other (tab. 6B). It's a clear, rare case of a rock church that still keeps its red dedication crosses.

A different peculiar case is Madonna delle Rose's church in Massafra, where there are at least three coeval floral variants of painted dedication crosses in the same place (tab. 6C,D,E): they're not in their best conditions, but we have a white cross pattée contrasting with an outlined red *rota* and with red and white petals, there's another red cross pattée on a white background (worn, encrusted and not very legible), and a green and white free anchored cross (without a *rota*), outlined in red, with a distinct floral character.

Incised, engraved and sculpted crosses

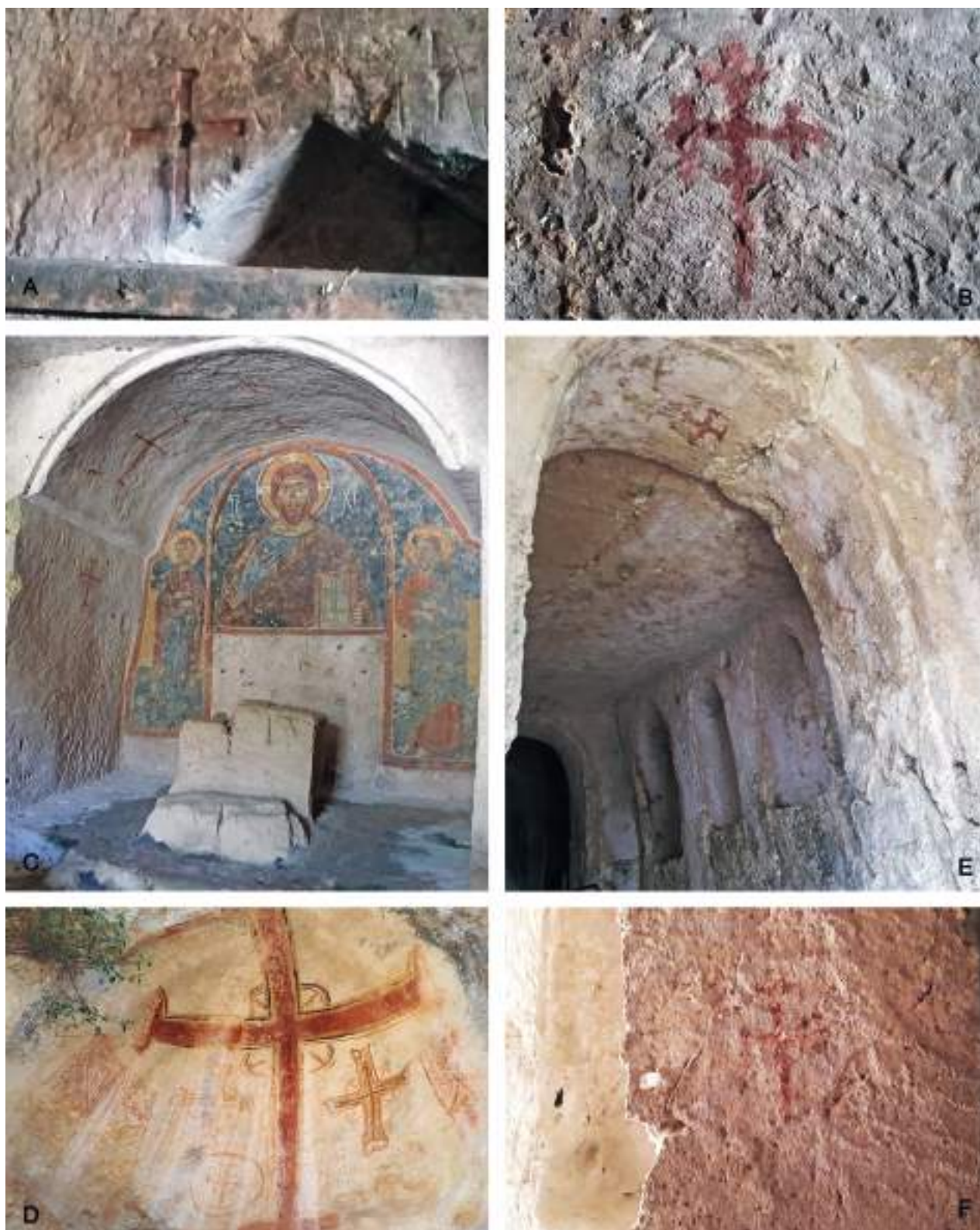
Graffiti has always been used to represent crosses, in every historical period, both in rock and subdial areas¹⁴. Graffiti dedication crosses are always a large number in the rupestrian areas: incised on the bare rock, scratched on plaster and frescoes, or engraved,

¹¹ Stucco and marble crosses should be mentioned, they appear almost exclusively in subdial cases or in late remodeled rock churches of the Baroque period.

¹² Along the *Scala Santa*, a mountain pilgrimage pathway that leads from the Gulf of Manfredonia to the Sanctuary of Saint Michael in Monte Sant'Angelo. Along the way, near Jazzo Ognissanti the sacred attestations carved in the rock (simple and inscribed crosses) intensify.

¹³ As we see in several medieval representations in that period (and further) the nails were thought to be four, two for the hands and two for the feet.

¹⁴ According to the paleographic literature also red inscriptions and crosses, directly painted on rock or plaster, can be classified as graffiti, as well as the incised or scratched ones (Favreau, 1997: p.31).



Tab. 4 – Red dedication crosses.

A) Ognissanti's church, Monte Sant'Angelo, Foggia: one of the carved and red painted Latin crosses, with a central carved hole used to house the wooden arm that held a dedication candle (photo R. Rinaldi). B) Ognissanti's church, Monte Sant'Angelo, Foggia: a dedication Latin cross crosslet, painted red on the bare calcarenite (photo R. Rinaldi). C) San Nicola di Lamaderchia, Mottola, Taranto: some of the red dedication crosses painted on the presbytery vault in a unusual typology of a potent cross with four nails, arranged in a X (*crux decussata*) at the crossbar connection, alluding to the four nails of the Crucifixion (photo S. Centonze). D) San Nicola di Lamaderchia, Mottola, Taranto: the basin of a collapsed arcosolium tomb, in the upper right of the facade, features four red crosses of various types, painted in red and ocre yellow and provided with four nails (photo S. Centonze). E) Cappuccino Vecchio, Matera: at the keystone of the right parabolic access is clearly visible a potent Greek cross and there are still traces of at least three other crosses following the curve downwards (photo S. Centonze). F) Cappuccino Vecchio, Matera: the most preserved red potent Latin cross at the intrados of the left access to the presbytery, placed at the arch impost (photo S. Centonze).

they are often misunderstood and confused among the layered devotional signs

To identify the dedication marks, we should isolate the signs drawn with more care and proportion. Other important data is the recurrence of one or more types in the same place, the similarity of the “hand” who traced them, the localization and their modular repetition at a regular distance. As we’re going to see, the Pontifical’s fixed height of 2.30 m, for placing the crosses, is hardly respected in rock churches, due to the lower height of the liturgical space.

On the walls of the aniconic lower crypt of Madonna della Scala’s Sanctuary, Massafra, Taranto, both in the narthex and main body, we find several Greek and Latin crosses of dedication, deeply engraved in the calcarenite at regular distance between them and at the height of the arches’ impost (tab. 5C).

Also in Madonna delle Tre Porte, in Matera, some deep, simple Greek crosses are placed on the arches between the naves (tab. 5B): they are likely to be the oldest dedication crosses, for to the precision of the sign and their position at the arch impost (at the midpoint of the intrados and on the front).

Sometimes dedication crosses are integral part of the church decoration, as it happens in the Candelora, in Massafra, where an inscribed in rota dedication cross pattée becomes the bas-relief of the capitals (tab. 5D)¹⁵. With the destruction of the facade in the 19th century, the apse was almost completely lost, but in the upper tympanum we can still identify other three dedication crosses pattée inscribed in rota, two symmetrical and one in the middle (tab. 5E).

Partial evidence, rededications and desecration signs

Due to the perishability of the attestations (both materials and surface) and to all the changes occurred to our rock churches, we often find less than 12 crosses of the same typology. The other missing exemplars may have been covered up by later plaster or frescoes, or they may have disappeared for vandalism. Moreover, in some cases we clearly recognize the intention of desecrating the church.

A typical case of partial dedication evidence is in Madonna with Child’s chapel, in Santa Maria della Palomba’s Sanctuary in Matera, where we find six dedication crosses in the shape of eight petals flowers with gray pistils, which form an eight rays *chrismon*¹⁶, four on the bottom and one on each side (tab. 5A), all in good conditions, painted in red and ochre yellow. We

should assume this crosses belong to a complete 17-18th century rededication, of which we lost the second half of the 12 crosses.

In Madonna delle Tre Porte’s church our attention goes to the fresco red cross on the central pylon (tab. 6A): it’s a Greek cross inscribed in a triple square frame alternating black, white and red, at its base there’s a floral swirl decoration. This cross suggests a 15th-16th century rededication, contemporary to the frescoes of the nearby apses. This church is also known as “Madonna delle Croci”, for the large number of crosses scratched on its pylons and walls: the church went under various planimetric changes and decoration, so the cross crosslets and the layered crosses at medium-low height belong to subsequent rededications.

In Santa Croce’s church, Massafra, we can recognize some partial cross pattée: they are compass drawn in a four petals flower and inscribed in a rota on a thin fresco plaster, on which they are red painted. We can find their traces in the apse (tab. 6F), on the pylons and on a previous 13th -14th century fresco (tab. 6G), thanks to which we can connect all these crosses to a rededication of the place of worship, occurred starting from the 14th century (Caprara, 2006: p.16). In a final stage the crosses have been disfigured in order to desecrate the church.

Before we saw another immediate, tangible sign of deconsecration of the altars, in the carved empty container, which lost its relics (tab. 2E).

Comparisons with subdival cases: exceptions and other evidence of dedication

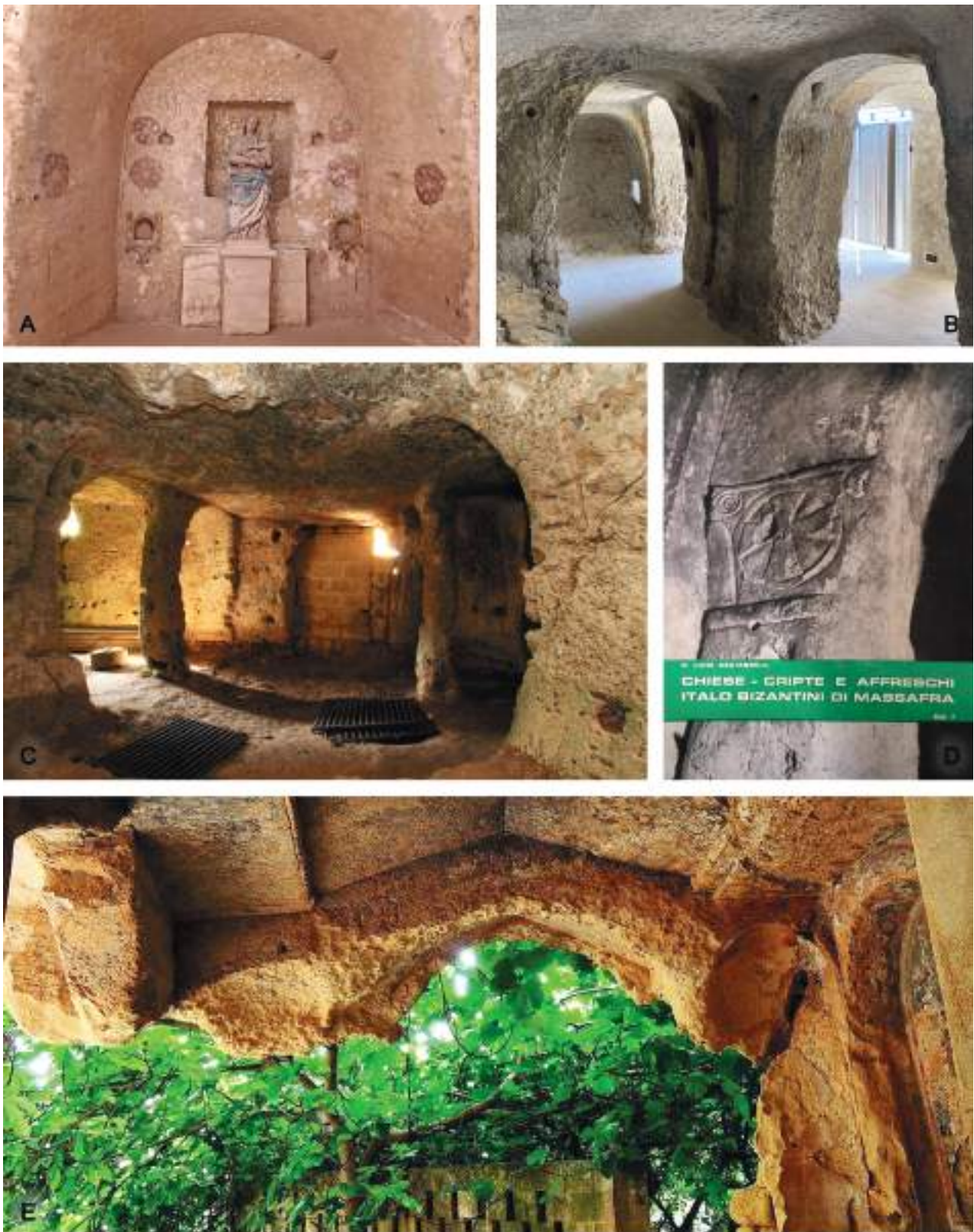
Comparisons between subdival and rock cases (an extract in tab. 8) show almost a perfect match in the evidence of dedication, confirming that architecture by subtraction is the mirror of the built one also in the liturgical sphere. At the same time they underline some important exceptions occurring in rupestrian churches. We have just seen the derogation in placing the crosses at the fixed height of 2.30 m, as the rupestrian spaces had a remarkable lower height than the built ones. Other exceptions were due to the natural conformation of a rock church, which usually had only one free front, and the rest of the walls, vault and floor were part of the ground. It results that the Bishop could not go around the place of worship and hallow it, therefore we should assume that the different evidence of dedication - we are going to analyze - are related to variations of the rite.

The *abecedarium* sign (tab. 1C, 8A) was an ephemeral phase that left no traces, even if sometimes graffiti fix its memory on the walls¹⁷ (tab. 8B). We can record cases of medieval crypts and subdival churches where the floor is sacred by one or more *in rota* crosses (tab. 8F, even the continuous Cosmatesque inlays alluded

¹⁵ Here Father Abatangelo noticed a certain number of patent crosses in rota: they were so well defined on capitals and archivolts, that for the first time he revealed doubts about the purely decorative function of these crosses, in favor of the sacral one. He did not arrive at the real solution, but he depicted one of them on his book cover (tab. 5D).

¹⁶ The style of these fresco crosses is contemporary with the other frescoes made between the second half of the 17th century and the first thirty-five years of the 18th century.

¹⁷ At the moment we can record some alphabetic series alluding to *abecedarium* only in crypts and subdival churches.



Tab. 5 – Main localization of internal dedication crosses.

A) Madonna with Child's chapel, Santa Maria della Palomba, Matera. Six dedication crosses are painted in red and ochre yellow near the vault impost, in the shape of an eight petals flower with gray pistils, which form an eight rays *chrismon* (photo S. Centonze). B) Madonna delle Tre Porte's church, Matera. Simple Greek crosses, deeply carved on the arches impost between the naves: due to the precision of the sign and to their position, they are likely to be the oldest dedication crosses in this church (photo S. Centonze). C) Lower crypt of the Madonna della Scala Sanctuary, Massafra, Taranto. Simple Greek and Latin dedication crosses deeply engraved in the calcarenite at regular distance, placed at the impost height (photo G. Mastrangelo). D) Cover of a book depicting the bas-relief of a capital of the Candelora's church in Massafra, Taranto, with an inscribed *in rota* dedication cross pattée (Abatangelo, 1966). E) Half collapsed apse of the Candelora's church, Massafra, Taranto: in the upper tympanum archivolt we still can find three inscribed *in rota* dedication crosses pattée (photo G. Vezoli).



Tab. 6 – Dedication crosses of different shapes and colours.

A) Madonna delle Tre Porte's church, Matera. The isolated red cross painted on the central pylon, suggesting a rededication. Below several scratched and layered rededication cross crosslets (photo S. Centonze). B) Sant'Elia's crypt, Patù, Lecce. A potent red cross inscribed in a *rota*, one of several (and misunderstood) dedication crosses of the rupestrian church (Patù Centopietre Archive). C, D, E) Madonna delle Rose, Massafra, Taranto. Three different floral shapes for these polychrome dedication cross (photo A. Conforti). F) Santa Croce's church Massafra, Taranto. This dedication cross in the apse has been deliberately disfigured in order to desecrate the church. It was originally an *in rota* inscribed cross pattée (formed by a four petal flower) scratched with a compass on the calcarenite and then painted (photo S. Centonze). G) Santa Croce's church Massafra, Taranto. In the same church we can find a similar *in rota* cross pattée, scratched with a compass on a previous older fresco and then painted. In this way this cross testifies the rededication of the place (photo S. Centonze).



Tab. 7 – Exceptions: sacralizing crosses on vaults, archivolts and upper rock extrados.

A) Calvary cross carved in the rock bank above San Basilio Magno, Castellaneta, Taranto (photo A. Gregucci). B) Cross pattée inscribed in a *rota* on the archivolt of the rock chapel of San Basilio Magno in Castellaneta, Taranto (photo P. Manigrasso). C) High relief Latin cross on the archivolt entrance of Madonna del Giglio in Matera (photo S. Centonze). D) The complex rib vault of Santa Eugenia in Matera, with a bas-relief Latin cross pointing east (photo S. Centonze). E) Madonna dell'Attarico, Marina di Andrano, Lecce. A rare case of a still red painted cross pattée on the vault: a typical cross pattée inscribed in a *rota* used the dedication rite that reconnects the unpainted ones sculpted on the vault, clarifying their utility in the dedication of a church (photo A. Romano). F) Cross pattée inscribed in a *rota* on the altar vault of Santa Maria de Balneolo, Matera (photo F. Foschino). G) In *rota* Cross pattée carved on the altar vault of San Gregorio in Mottola, Taranto (photo S. Centonze). H) Lily cross pattée in *rota* carved on the vault of San Donato, Convicinio di Sant'Antonio, Matera (Antros Archive).



Tab. 8 – Comparisons: subdival and rock dedication/rededication evidence.

A) *Abecedarium* during the rededication ceremony of Westminster Abbey in London in 1910 (newliturgicalmovement.org). B) Bartoccini Tomb in Tarquinia, Viterbo. Graphic restitution of a dedication graffito on a fresco: an *abecedarium* next to a Latin cross crosslet (Tedeschi C., 2012: p. 39). C) Matera's Cathedral: an avellana rededication cross on a previous in *rota* dedication cross pattée (photo S. Centonze). D) A red rededication cross pattée on a fresco of the Basilica of SS. Martyrs in Cimitile, Benevento (photo S. Centonze). E) One of the rededication cross pattée on a previous fresco of Santa Maria Maggiore in Tuscania, Viterbo (photo S. Centonze). F) Floor of the crypt of Isina's Cathedral, Matera: a large polychrome *rota* with a six petals flower used as a cross to sacralize the ground flooring (photo S. Centonze). G) Lily cross with four heart-shaped petals on the vault of the Eremo di Poggio Conte, Ischia di Castro, Viterbo (photo S. Centonze). H) Crosses and other dedication symbols painted in red on the plaster of San Giovanni d'Antro, Pulfero, Udine: lily crosses, branches and crowns recalling the hyssop (photo J. Ariton). I) In *rota* six petals flower painted as dedication cross in San Giovanni d'Antro, Pulfero, Udine (photo F. Serino).

to a form of floor protection), on the contrary, the floor of a rock church was the same rock, had no finish with other flooring materials, so these kind of attestations did not reach us.

Nevertheless in the Middle Ages, some variants appear on the vaults, along the nave or upon the presbytery, especially above the altar, where a cross (inscribed in a *rota* or free) is sculpted in relief. This means there was a particular attention in sacralizing ceilings and vaults, in order to isolate them with the exorcism of the dedication cross, the holy Christ's cross. All the crosses marked on the entrance and those that were engraved on the extrados of some rupestrian churches, appear useful to this purpose (tab. 7A, B, C).

Matera adorns the vaults with a plenty of these *rotae*: some lily crosses pattée are in Sant'Antonio Abate and San Donato (tab. 7H), three different variants (a cross pattée, a potent cross and a bordoned one) are sculpted in Madonna della Croce, a potent cross is in Sant'Agnese, two potent crosses are in Cappuccino Vecchio (on the altars), while in San Pietro e Paolo's crypt there's a barely detectable red painted cross. A smaller cross pattée inscribed in a circle is carved on the altar vault of the church identified as Santa Maria de Balneolo (Foschino, 2017, or Sant'Eustachio ai Pedali in Pelosi and Lionetti, 2021: p. 205), and three crosses pattée in bas-relief are on the hemispherical domes of Madonna delle Virtù's church.

Other isolated sculpted crosses protect the presbyterial area from the vault, as the cross pattée in Oratorio dell'Ofra (Centonze, 2020: p. 121) and as the Greek cross in Santa Lucia alle Malve; on the rare complex

ribbed vault in Santa Eugenia's church (tab. 7D) we find a bas-relief Latin cross pointing the east raising sun on a specific day.

There are other examples of sculpted vault cross in Mottola, among which we should mention an irregular bordoned cross in Madonna delle Sette Lampade's church and a cross pattée on San Gregorio's altar (tab. 7G).

Moving to Ischia di Castro, Viterbo, we find a large lily cross pattée with four heart-shaped petals¹⁸, sculpted in relief on the vestibule of the Eremo di Poggio Conte (tab. 8G): thanks to this polychrome exemplar with the petals painted in red and blue, we can assume that some of these vault crosses were painted in the past. The presence of a red cross on the vault of Madonna dell'Attarico in Marina di Andrano, Lecce, has led to a wrong attribution to the Templar knights, but it's clear this shape is a classic dedication cross pattée inscribed in a *rota* (tab. 7E). This last is a fundamental specimen, because it manages to reconnect all the unpainted sculpted examples we have just seen, clarifying the role of the vault crosses in sacralizing these rock churches: we have no written sources, but we can imagine that all the aspersions, lustrations and anointations during the dedication rite could reach to touch the vaults, thanks to the low height of the places.

Vault crosses phenomenon is limited to the Middle Ages period, then - probably due to a change of mentality - these specimens slowly disappeared and the vaults became smooth.

¹⁸ Similar to the Cistercian crosses schemes appearing in Fossanova Abbey, Priverno, Latina.

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