

# La chiesa rupestre di Santa Candida a Bari: una rilettura del complesso ipogeo

## *The rock-cut church of St. Candida in Bari: a reinterpretation of the underground complex*

Santino Alessandro Cugno<sup>1</sup>, Franco Dell'Aquila<sup>2</sup>

### RIASSUNTO

La chiesa rupestre di S. Candida è stata scavata nel banco calcarenitico del fianco orientale della Lama Picone, a circa m 200 dalla Strada Statale 16, in un'area ormai inglobata quasi del tutto dalla città metropolitana di Bari. L'insediamento rupestre e gli ambienti più esterni del luogo di culto in grotta, con funzione di accesso e di ricovero, sono stati quasi completamente distrutti dai lavori di sbancamento per la costruzione della vicina circonvallazione: gli studi pionieristici e i rilievi di Franco e Carlo Dell'Aquila, insieme a Francesco Carofiglio, consentono di ricostruirne l'articolazione prima degli stravolgimenti avvenuti alla fine degli anni Settanta del secolo scorso. Le nuove indagini autoptiche hanno prestato particolare attenzione ad un aspetto poco approfondito dagli studi precedenti: l'individuazione di coppie di fori simili e alla stessa quota, su pareti opposte, è di fondamentale importanza per una migliore comprensione del loro utilizzo originario, legato all'adozione di arredi liturgici mobili e in materiali deperibili (pannelli o tende). Un'altra questione poco affrontata dalla letteratura specialistica è l'originario sistema d'illuminazione.

Parole chiave: chiesa rupestre di S. Candida, Lama Picone, Bari, arredi mobili, sistema di illuminazione.

### ABSTRACT

*The rock-cut church of St Candida was excavated into the calcarenitic bank on the eastern side of Lama Picone, approximately 200 metres from the Strada Statale 16, in an area now almost entirely included into the Metropolitan City of Bari. Its existence is first mentioned in a 1194 notarial act, recorded in the Codice Diplomatico Barese; further documents from the 13th and 14th centuries attest to the presence of various terraces with crypts, wine presses, and cisterns. The rock-cut settlement and the outermost spaces of the cave church, which served as access and shelter areas, were almost completely destroyed by excavation work carried out for the construction of the nearby ring road. However, the pioneering studies and surveys conducted by Franco and Carlo Dell'Aquila, together with Francesco Carofiglio, allow for the reconstruction of the underground complex as it appeared before the transformations that took place in the late 1970s. The rock-cut church of St Candida is notable for its considerable dimensions (approx. 120sqm) and a number of architectural features: its composite 'fan-shaped' basilica layout, with a central nave and five aisles extending along a west-east axis, each terminating in an apse facing east; and two distinct ceiling structures, flat in the case of the narthex and nave, and barrel-vaulted in the presbyterial areas. The transition between the narthex and the aisles occurs through an entrance system divided into three arches. While no wall paintings have been preserved, traces of Latin inscriptions painted in red on carefully smoothed rock surfaces remain visible in the apsidal niches, bearing the names of various saints—an exceptional case within the landscape of Italian rock-cut churches. Recent autoptic investigations have paid particular attention to a previously lesser-known aspect: the identification of near-circular holes carved into both the lateral walls and vaults of the entire hypogeal site, which is crucial for understanding their original function. These features are associated with the use of mobile and perishable liturgical furnishings. Specifically, a series of pairs of opposing holes, positioned at the same height above the floor, was intended to accommodate wooden beams from which liturgical panels or curtains were suspended. These served to differentiate and clearly separate areas accessible to the entire community from those reserved for officiants, which were thus concealed from the view of the faithful during sacred rites. Another issue that has received little attention by scholars is the lighting system of rock-cut churches and dwellings. In medieval cave environments, torches, oil lamps, and candles were typically used. In the case of the rock-cut church of St Candida, natural light filtering through the entrance was projected into the innermost areas of the underground complex, forming a sort of triangle: its base aligned with the walls of the three central apses, while its two sides followed the walls of the two central aisles, leaving the two outermost aisles in shadow.*

*Keywords: rock-cut church of St Candida, Lama Picone, Bari, mobile furnishings, lighting system.*