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Cuvinte-cheie: sanctuar, pelerinaj, spațiu sacru, Creta, Sicilia

Munți, arbori, peșteri: peisaje și spații sacre între lumea antică și folclorul contemporan

Rezumat

Sacralitatea unui loc nu poate fi înțeleasă ca o calitate inerentă care se dezvăluie pur și simplu ființelor umane. Ea reprezintă, mai degrabă, o calitate atribuită pe baza unor criterii culturale, adică prin intermediul reprezentărilor și experiențelor comune ale realității. Sacralitatea locurilor este asociată invariabil cu o legendă, cu descoperirea unei imagini sau a unei relicve sacre, cu o apariție, un miracol ori un alt eveniment extraordinar. Statutul sacru al unui loc este confirmat fie prin utilizarea sa ca spațiu de cult, fie, dimpotrivă, prin interdicții de contact. Caracteristicile naturale sau artificiale ale peisajului pot întări percepția asupra sacralității unui loc, însă nu o determină. Deși numeroase locuri sacre posedă o frumusețe și o forță de atracție strâns legate de semnificația lor religioasă, altele pot rămâne lipsite de sens pentru cei care nu aparțin tradiției religioase respective. Aceste aspecte sunt analizate prin intermediul mai multor studii de caz etnografice, bazate atât pe lucrările unor cercetători de prestigiu, precum Robert Hertz și Angelo Brelich, cât și pe observații directe de teren: cultul Sfântului Besso de la Monte Fautenio, sanctuarul Santissima Trinità de pe Monte Autore, Madonna del Mirto din Palianis, Sfânta Veneranda din Skotino și Sfânta Rosalia din Palermo.

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Keywords: Sanctuary, pilgrimage, sacred spaces, Crete, Sicily.

Mountains, Trees, Caves: Sacred Landscapes and Spaces Between the Ancient World and Contemporary Folklore

Summary

The sacredness of a place cannot be understood as an inherent quality that simply reveals itself to human beings. Rather, it is a quality attributed according to cultural criteria, that is, through shared representations and experiences of reality. The sacredness of places is invariably associated with a legend, the discovery of a sacred image or relic, an apparition, a miracle, or another extraordinary event. A place's sacred status is affirmed either through its use as a cult site or, conversely, through prohibitions on contact. The natural or man-made features of the landscape may reinforce the perception of a place's sacredness, but they do not determine it. Although many sacred places possess a beauty and fascination closely linked to their religious significance, others may hold little or no meaning for those outside the religious tradition to which they belong. These issues are examined through several ethnographic case studies drawn both from the works of distinguished scholars such as Robert Hertz and Angelo Brelich and from direct field observation: the cult of Saint Besso at Monte Fautenio, the Santissima Trinità Sanctuary on Monte Autore, the Madonna del Mirto at Palianis, Saint Veneranda in Skotino, and Saint Rosalia in Palermo.

Mountains, Trees, Caves: Sacred Landscapes and Spaces Between the Ancient World and Contemporary Folklore

I. The sacredness of mountains. At the beginning of Book IX of his *Geography*, which is devoted to a description of Phocis, Strabo observes that Mount Parnassus, running along the northern part of the region from the area of Delphi to the point where the Mounts Eteos and Etolios meet, divides the various districts and the peoples who inhabit them. To these observations on political geography, Strabo adds a further observation highlighting the mountain's significance for the surrounding communities and, more broadly, for the whole of Greece: the whole of Parnassus is considered sacred (ἱεροπρεπής: lit. befitting a sacred place, venerable) as it is home to caves and other sites held in honour and regarded as sacred. Of these, the best known and most beautiful is the Corycian Cave, a nymph's cave bearing the same name as that found in Cilicia².

Parnassus is therefore a sacred mountain. On its slopes stands the Delphic sanctuary, with its Castalian Spring, consecrated to the cult of Apollo Pythius but previously, in the version of the myth given by Euripides in his *Iphigenia in Tauris*, to an oracular cult associated with the goddess of the Earth (Gaia) and the serpent Python³. The nearby town of Delphi was, moreover, already a thriving centre in the Mycenaean period and was certainly involved in cult practices associated with the sacred mountain. It is well known, in fact, that alongside urban sanctuaries, the Mycenaeans frequented cult sites, defined in the literature as 'mountain-top sanctuaries' or 'highland sanctuaries', thus reviving and developing a practice already known—one need only think of Mount Ida and its cave in the Minoan world (cf. Cultraro 2006, 163).

The establishment of open-air cult sites, on the summits of mountains and hills, featuring simple altars or more complex buildings, or within caves and mountain ravines, is not, moreover, a custom exclusive to pre-Hellenic and Hellenic civilisations. It is found in most cultures (from the Mesopotamian to the Hittite and Indo-Iranian) that have emphasised the celestial dimension of the sacred by designating the heavenly regions as the temporary or permanent abode of divine entities and powers and, consequently, the 'high places' as the privileged place for encountering the sacred⁴. In these albeit diverse contexts, it can be said that every sacred mountain functions as an *axis mundi*, a centre of spatial orientation and a place of descent and manifestation of the divine (Harva 1923). The perception of the sacredness of mountains must therefore not be confused with the 'worship of mountains': what is sacred and considered an object of veneration is, in most cases, the

² «ἱεροπρεπὴς δ' ἐστὶ πᾶς ὁ Παρνασσός, ἔχων ἄντρα τε καὶ ἄλλα χωρία τιμώμενά τε καὶ ἁγιστευόμενα: ὧν ἐστὶ γνωριμωτάτον τε καὶ κάλλιστον τὸ Κορύκιον νυμφῶν ἄντρον ὁμώνυμον τῇ Κιλικίᾳ» (Strab. IX 3, 1).

All translations, whether from ancient or modern languages, are by the A.

³ See Scott 2014, 33 ff.; Graves 1955; Paus. X 5, 6 and 6, 6. See Visintin 1997, 213 and notes.

⁴ See Van der Leeuw 1986: 34 ff.; Eliade 1958: XXX ff.; Ries 2010.

sacred power that resides within them or that may be more readily approached through the heights.

This is certainly the case for the Greeks, who, as Motte (2010, 136–137) reminds us, if they define mountains as divine, it is not because they consider them divine, but because they are frequented by the gods, who in the sanctuaries dedicated to them even ensure a constant presence. Thus, Olympus is the permanent abode of the Immortals to whom, precisely, a certain celestial air is attributed, given that their mountain is the closest to Heaven.

II. Characteristics of sacred spaces. The sacredness of mountains and their associated sanctuary spaces, whether natural or man-made, is not an experience exclusive to ancient cultures. This is amply demonstrated by the numerous mountain sanctuaries in Europe and Asia, which are particularly widespread in Christian countries—both Catholic and Orthodox—and in countries with a Hindu tradition⁵. It is not uncommon, however, for such contemporary sanctuaries—often of medieval foundation in Europe (think of the Lombard sanctuary of San Michele Arcangelo on the Gargano, or the later Sanctuary of the Madonna di Polsi, or even the Sanctuary of the Madonna del Tindari)—reuse and repurpose, after a long interval and sometimes in continuity with ‘pagan’ practices, even reviving certain ritual practices. These spaces were already used in antiquity as places of worship. As Zumthor (1995, 53) notes regarding certain sanctuaries in central and northern Europe:

There is no doubt that the sacredness of these places dates back uninterrupted to a very ancient past. Many [sanctuaries and] monasteries of the early Middle Ages were built on ancient Gallo-Roman or Celtic sites of worship.

Thus, in turn, Eliade (1958, 369), proceeding from the premise of the autonomy of hierophanies: “The rocks, springs, caves and woods venerated from the earliest historic times are still, in different forms, held as sacred by Christian communities today”, because, adds Van der Leeuw (1986, 393-394), the consciousness of the sacred character of the locality that has once been chosen is, therefore, always retained. And this is also the reason why, during its expansion, Christianity has sought its sacred places preferably in localities adopted by the older cults.

Regardless of any phenomenological fascination, the fact remains, as Carmichael and Hubert observe in the Introduction to *Sacred Sites, Sacred Places*, that there are broad similarities among sacred sites in various parts of the world, just as there are in their relationships to the surrounding landscapes and to certain parts of it. These sites are connected to specific natural and landscape features, such as mountain peaks, springs, rivers, woods, and caves. Sacred sites, in almost all cases, are the setting for offerings and other ritual practices, similar not only in function – primarily appeasement, supplication, and thanksgiving – but also in the materials and objects used. It should also be noted that the significance of sacred sites can transcend cultural change, assimilation, and religious

⁵ Cf. Heiler 1985, 46 ff.; Eck 2005 [1987], 6212–6215; Eliade 1976, 386 ff.

conversion⁶. It should also be noted, above all, that for the sacred to reveal itself to humankind, it must necessarily ‘embody’ itself in a place, a symbol, or a material (Papotti 2007; Fabietti 2014).

There are, Zumthor (1995, 52–54) writes, places everywhere capable of being imbued with the sacred: especially those that rise to meet the gaze, breaking the monotony of ordinary reality—hills, mountains, gigantic trees, or some natural or artificial wonder that exalts that which, within us, aspires to rise and grow. [...] At times, the natural form of the place, or that of the object which authenticates it, provokes awe, even fear, and demands prostration and prayer.

Van der Leeuw (1986, 394) observes much the same: “man adds nothing at all to Nature; the mysterious situation of a locality, its awe-inspiring character, suffice”. One might say: a place is sacred because the god dwells there, but if the god dwells there, it is because that place possesses special characteristics. A similar situation is described in a letter by Seneca:

If a forest dense with ancient trees, towering above the usual height, should present itself to your gaze—a forest that blocks the view of the sky with the density of its branches stretching out and overlapping one another—then that towering forest, the solitude of the place, and the wonder produced by such a thick and continuous shadow in an open space will lead you to believe in the presence of a deity. And if a cave with deeply carved cliffs seems to hold the mountain aloft—not made by human hands, but formed so vast by natural causes—your soul will be struck as by a religious foreboding. We revere the sources of great rivers; where a mighty stream bursts forth unexpectedly from a hidden place, altars are erected; hot springs are objects of worship, and certain lakes, whether for the darkness of their colour or their immeasurable depth, are considered sacred⁷.

Expressed succinctly, yet perhaps more effectively, the same dynamic is illustrated in a verse from Ovid’s *Fasti*: «*Lucus Aventino suberat niger ilicis umbra, / quo posses viso dicere: “Numen inest”*»⁸.

The perception of the sacredness of a place or a landscape is therefore immediately experienced through the senses, primarily sight and hearing (cf. Zumthor 1995, 53). Visions and sounds, as well as smells and tactile sensations, stir the soul. To quote Seneca: “If it presents itself to your gaze”, “your soul will be moved”.

At this point, we might tentatively ask whether what Michele Cometa observes regarding

⁶ Carmichael, Hubert 1994, 1 ff. See Scarduelli 1985; Squarcini 2007.

⁷ «*Si tibi occurrerit vetustis arboribus et solitam altitudinem egressis frequens lucus et conspectum caeli ramorum aliorum alios protegentium summovens obtentu, illa proceritas silvae et secretum loci et admiratio umbrae in aperto tam densae atque continuae fidem tibi numinis faciet. Si quis specus saxis penitus exesis montem suspenderit, non manu factus, sed naturalibus causis in tantam laxita temex cavatus, animum tuum quadam religionis suspicione percutiet. Magnorum fluminum capita veneramur; subita ex abdito vasti amnis eruptio aras habet; coluntur aquarum calentium fontes, et stagna quaedam vel opacitas vel immensa altitude sacravit*» (Sen. *Ep.* 61, 3).

⁸ «Beneath the Aventine there was a dark forest of shady holm oaks, / at the sight of which you might have said, “Here is a deity”» (Ov. *Fast.* III 295–296).

images might not also apply to landscapes: in the face of them “we are probably not very different from our Palaeolithic ancestors”, that is, we interact with visual and sculptural representations in the same way as our most distant ancestors, experiencing towards them the same feelings of wonder, pleasure, horror, disgust, etc., which must have been part of the emotional makeup of *homo sapiens sapiens* and, probably, of closely related hominin species. On the other hand, *homo sapiens* is *homo narrans* (cf. Cometa 2017) and possesses an “innate and evolved capacity [...] to think narratively” which “has probably not changed significantly over the last 40,000 years” (Marschack 1991, 133 cited in Cometa 2024, 54). Let us turn, if only to verify the validity of these observations, to other sacred scenarios. First of all, to those presented by Apuleius in his *Metamorphoses*: Psyche, pregnant with Cupid’s seed, wanders in search of refuge, pursued by Venus’s hatred.

Rejected by Ceres, at whose temple—situated ‘on the summit of a high mountain (*in ardui montis vertice*)’ and laden with offerings (bundles and wreaths of ears of corn, sickles and other farming implements)—she had stopped to seek help, she resumes her journey in despair (Apul. *Met.* VI 1). And lo and behold, she spies, “in the twilight of a grove that fills the valley (*inter subsitae convallis sublucidum lucum*)”, another temple to which, with renewed hope, she approaches. She then sees precious gifts and garments hung from the branches of the trees and the doorposts, with inscriptions in gold that bore witness to the grace received and to the goddess to whom they had been dedicated (*dona pretiosa et lacinias auro litteratas ramis arborum postibusque suffixas, quae cum gratia facti nomen deae cui fuerant dicata testabantur*).

This is a sanctuary of Juno Salvatrice, the goddess who is wont to “come to the aid of women in labour at the moment of peril” (*praegnantibus periclitantibus ultro subvenire*, Apul. *Met.* VI 3-4).

In just a few lines, Apuleius outlines the settings of two distinct sanctuaries: the first, dedicated to Ceres, on the summit of a high mountain; the second, dedicated to Juno, within a wood. Through his description of the votive offerings found at each, he reveals the specific roles of the goddesses: to Ceres are offered the tools and fruits of the farmer’s labour; to Juno, bandages inscribed with the special grace received—certainly a happy marriage or a longed-for childbirth. Ceres, goddess of the harvest, thus presides in particular over the cycle of time and labour, over production; Juno over the cycle of life and the continuity of the family, over reproduction; both deities can, if favourably disposed, protect mankind and come to their aid in misfortune and adversity.

Protection, production and reproduction are, moreover, fundamental concerns common to all human societies and have always been at the heart of their concerns and prayers. The gods, beyond all human material and profane endeavours, are the only ones capable of ensuring and guaranteeing the safety, sustenance and continuity of human, animal and plant life, provided, however, that one turns to them in the appropriate places and in the appropriate ways: to Ceres, writes Apuleius, Psyche approaches, after a troubled journey, imploring, throwing herself at her feet, wetting them with her tears, sweeping the ground with her hair, and to Juno, praying to her on her knees and embracing her altar. That is to

say, no differently from the way in which the faithful Christians approached yesterday and continue today to approach Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the Saints who reside in the many shrines scattered throughout the mountains and woods of all Europe⁹.

III. Ethnographic case studies. We find ourselves, alongside Apuleius, in the 2nd century AD; yet, when we pause to observe the environmental contexts, the types of offerings and the devotional practices, we might well think we were in the present day (see Buttitta 2013 and 2023). Indeed, throughout Christian Europe, there are numerous churches, shrines and chapels scattered across the countryside, standing on the ruins of or near older places of worship, or on the peaks of mountains and hills, or near caves, sacred stones, springs, wells and woods, all of which have a documented history of ritual use, sometimes dating back a very long time. Sometimes, between the traces of the most ancient cults and contemporary practices, there are breaks in continuity that span centuries; at other times, the available evidence suggests almost uninterrupted access to the sanctuary sites. Among mountain sanctuaries, we may recall the cases of the sanctuary of San Besso on Monte Fautenio (Piedmont), studied by Robert Hertz (1928), and that of the Santissima Trinità on Monte Autore (Lazio), studied by Angelo Brelich (1953–54).

Having analysed the rites and history of these places, Hertz (1994, 204–205) concludes:

There is a good chance that the study of an Alpine cult will reveal very ancient forms of religious life; the mountain [...] is a marvellous place of preservation [...] The Italian Graian Alps are, in this respect, a blessed land, a sort of reserve [...]. Just as primitive rock sometimes emerges in the Alps from beneath the mass of more recent strata, so too do customs of Europe's most ancient civilisation still exist in some remote corner of these mountains. In the valley floors, beliefs and ritual gestures have been perpetuated for millennia, not as relics or 'superstitions', but as forms of a genuine religion which, through a transparent veil of Christianity, lives a life of its own in broad daylight. The main interest of the cult of Saint Besso lies, without doubt, in offering us a fragmentary and perhaps overloaded, yet still clear and vivid, image of prehistoric religion.

Brelich would arrive at similar conclusions, noting in his essay with the eloquent title: *A Living Prehistoric Cult in Central Italy: A Historical-Religious Essay on the Pilgrimage to the Holy Trinity on Mount Autore* [*Un culto preistorico vivente nell'Italia centrale: saggio storico-religioso sul pellegrinaggio alla SS. Trinità sul Monte Autore*], as

⁹ Spineto notes, regarding the relationship of continuity between Greek and Roman cultures and Christian culture, that "this is a continuity whose strength and specific manifestations must be investigated on a case-by-case basis, but which is historically indisputable. There are 'pagan' and Christian rituals which, by the very fact that they are situated in the same geographical contexts and in periods of time linked to one another, cannot be assumed to be fundamentally heterogeneous; rather, the opposite should hold true. [...] The journey of a person who goes to a saint's shrine or a Marian shrine to implore healing bears much more resemblance to that of the Greek going to the temple of Asclepius or the Roman going to the temple of Diana and leaving an *ex voto* (and the resemblance is neither merely superficial nor external!) than to that of the pilgrim going to the Holy Land" (2014, 70).

in the case of the unorthodox behaviours exhibited by the faithful during the pilgrimage to the sanctuary of the Holy Trinity, one cannot speak of ‘isolated survivals’ but rather of the relative continuity of ‘culturally homogeneous’ elements of prehistoric origin (Brelich 1953–54, 41). The behaviours and beliefs of pilgrims that fall outside the bounds of official Christianity, which “do not depend on Catholic ritual and dogma”, cannot, in fact, according to Brelich, be considered “surviving elements of one or more religious civilisations” but must, rather, be regarded as organic components of a “cultic complex that has remained substantially unchanged under the guise of a Christian cult” (Ibid.).

This is not the place to reflect on the socio-political dynamics which, from place to place and from era to era, have sustained the widespread phenomenon of the reuse of sacred spaces and the repurposing of both places and ritual practices. Rather, we shall continue our discussion of certain issues relating to the relationship between the environment and sacred places, and the religious reasons that may have led to the continued use of places of worship and their associated ritual practices.

Exemplary cases from this perspective include the Madonna del Mirto in Palianis, the Madonna delle Grazie in Ventimiglia di Sicilia, and the sanctuaries of Santa Rosalia in Palermo and Agia Paraskevi in Skotino. The first exemplifies the veneration of a sacred tree, the second that of baetyls, and the latter two that of caves.

The sanctuary of the Madonna di Palianis stands near the village of Venerato, along the road leading from Heraklion to Agia Varvara, on a hill nestled amongst higher peaks (see Buttitta 2015). The small stone church, dedicated to Saint Mary Panagia, is built on an ancient sanctuary site (probably dedicated to Artemis) dating back to the 6th century BC¹⁰ and houses within it a venerated icon of the Virgin *Myrtidiotissa*¹¹. The feast of the Virgin, celebrated between 23 and 24 September, is divided into several parts: the pilgrimage, the solemn religious service, the procession of the icon around the church (circumambulation), and the blessing of the bread brought by the pilgrims. They come from Venerato and other neighbouring villages to pay homage to the miracle-working Virgin, bringing silver *ex-votos* that bear witness to miraculous healings. However, the *ex-votos* are not placed, as is the case in similar instances, near the icon inside the church, but hung on the branches of a centuries-old, imposing myrtle tree standing outside, not far from the apse. It is believed, in fact – as the legend recounts, known both to the faithful and to the devout nuns residing at the sanctuary – that within the trunk there is miraculously embedded an older and more sacred icon of the Virgin, of which the one kept in the church is a faithful reproduction: a fact that makes the tree a sort of emanation of the icon itself and, in effect, a permanent (living, present and tangible) epiphany of Mary.

The Madonna del Mirto of Palianis is, for this reason, one of the most vivid examples of that broad category of so-called arboreal Virgins¹², whose analysis often leads to

¹⁰ See Detorakē, Psilakēs 1986, 57 ff.; Buonsanti, Galla 2004, 71.

¹¹ The cult of Our Lady *Myrtidiotissa* is attested in other parts of Greece, both in the Aegean islands and on the mainland (cf. Bouras 1982: 14 ff. and 25 ff.; Paspalas 2008).

¹² European folklore literature abounds with legends concerning apparitions of the Virgin and the

references to pre-Christian cultic forms and evokes Greco-Roman deities and female sylvan entities and powers of uncertain profile and unfathomable historical depth¹³. At first glance, in this case too, both the presence of material traces of an older sanctuary and the ritual symbolism that unfolds there during the pilgrimage – the tree cult, the votive offering of bread, the circumambulation of the sacred site¹⁴ – seem to point, at least on a morphological level, to pre-Christian contexts and ritual practices. It should be noted, however, that beyond the objective and functional relationship between the ‘sacred’ tree, the Virgin Mary and the sanctuary, the symbols and associated ritual practices that unfold during this pilgrimage are widely observable in a multitude of pilgrimages still practised today in Crete, in Greece and throughout the Aegean region and, more generally, with no substantial variations, in other Mediterranean contexts, and should therefore be considered within the broader historical dynamics of the formation of expressions of European popular Christian religiosity¹⁵. It remains striking, however, that, in addition to the legendary and material association between the Virgin Mary and the tree—which leads Cretan pilgrims to remove the ‘powerful’ twigs of the latter for protective and therapeutic purposes—the practice of hanging votive offerings on the tree’s branches persists, given the recurrence of ‘archaic’ ritual gestures underpinned by constant motivations (the cure of an illness, the desire for a fruitful birth, etc.). This belief and practice are even more striking when we consider the well-known association between goddess and tree in the Minoan era¹⁶ and certain folkloric customs, such as those recorded by Angelo Mosso (1907, 167–168) at Hagia Triada:

In the villa at H. Triada, at the northern end of the esplanade, there is a small square building with thick walls left rough on the inside, which Prof. Halbherr believes to be the *temenos* or enclosure of the sacred tree. Every day, on my way to the Mycenaean villa, I

discovery of Marian images near or amongst the branches of trees, as well as within forests, scrubland, ravines, etc. – places steeped in pre-Christian magical-religious beliefs (see Manselli 1980 and 1985; Le Goff 1988; Grégoire 1990) and favoured sites for supernatural manifestations (cf. Harf-Lancner 1989) – as well as accounts of cults, predominantly sanctuary-based, of tree-dwelling Madonnas (cf. Gumpf 1839–1847; Roussel 1954, 80 ff.; Nolan, Nolan 1997, 87 ff.; Hierzenberger, Nedomansky 2000, 12 ff.). There are numerous accounts relating to Italy (see Salvatore 2000; Faeta 2005, 171 ff.; Seppilli 2008a; Seppilli 2008b; Buttitta 2015).

¹³ The ritual and cultic association between trees and female deities (or Madonnas, or Saints) is attested across a wide area and is often linked, in the Euro-Mediterranean region, to the Neolithic cults of the Great Mother (cf. Boetticher 1856; Philpott 1897; Gimbutas 1987 and 1989; Buttitta 1992 and 2006). Burkert (1985, 85) notes that a recurring element in the Greek sanctuary is the tree, which “corresponds not only to the Minoan-Mycenaean tradition but also to the Near Eastern tradition. The shade-giving tree epitomizes both beauty and continuity across the generations. Most sanctuaries have their special tree”.

¹⁴ Cf. Roussel 1954, 100 ff.; Dupront 1993, 410 ff.; Lattanzi 2008.

¹⁵ It suffices to note that in this, as in many other cases, the cult of the miracle-working saint is characterised by the presence of the sacred bread, a fact which clearly indicates that the saint (or the goddess) is called upon to guarantee and restore both the order of the body and the order of time: to offer protection, to promote human, animal and plant reproduction, to sustain life cycles and to support humans in their productive activities.

¹⁶ See Evans 1901; Capdeville 2003.

passed a strange tree covered in fetishes. This too is a sacred tree. Near a ruined church, there is an olive tree from which hang the rags that the peasants tie to the branches, and there are hundreds of shreds of every colour, frayed by rain and wind. [...] pieces of black woollen cloth, red handkerchiefs almost intact, ribbons, and a multitude of shreds: a veritable sample collection of the poor fabrics worn by the peasants, left exposed to the elements. I asked what the strange decoration on that tree was, and I was told that those suffering from malaria tie a piece of their clothing—a handkerchief or a ribbon—to the tree, and, having said their prayer, hope to be cured.

Whilst in Palianis the tree is the defining element evoking archaic scenes, in other places—such as San Besso—it is the rock. The same is true in Ventimiglia, a rural town in the province of Palermo, where on 15 August, on the feast of the Madonna della Grazia (formerly known as the Rocca), a festival marking the end of the wheat harvest, a pilgrimage takes place (see India 2014). On this occasion, from 1 August until the morning of the feast, the so-called “quindicina [fortnight] *da Matri Razia*” takes place. Every morning, at first light, the faithful, reciting the rosary, set out from the village towards the rural sanctuary situated near two imposing sacred trees. These, leaning against one another, form a small natural cavity. Inside this, where legend has it that an image of the Virgin of Graces was found, the faithful place candles, bouquets and votive offerings, thus evoking a remote cultic context, notably ritual practices directed towards female deities of a chthonic nature, guardians of the vital cycles of plants and humans (Eliade 1976, 222). From this perspective, it is significant that, in addition to the explicit reference to the end of the harvest, until the 1980s, the Marian image was carried in procession not only during the festival but also during periods of severe drought. On such occasions, the image of the Madonna, after the customary procession, was placed near the Castello fountain situated in the centre of the village.

Caves are certainly places of ancient cultic activity, often reused over time. Such is the case with the cave of Saint Rosalia, patron saint of Palermo, to whom the faithful of Palermo dedicate not only the great patronal festival in July but also a pilgrimage in September, the *acchianata*, to her sanctuary on Monte Pellegrino, a mountain frequented for cultic purposes at least since Punic times (Giustolisi 1977). The official pilgrimage takes place on the night between 3 and 4 September. On this occasion, writes Giuseppe Bonomo (1971, 342), “a crowd of the faithful climbs the old road leading to the sanctuary, and many proceed barefoot, carrying large candles which they will light in the Saint’s cave”. In doing so, they intend to fulfil the vow they have made to ‘repay’ the Saint for the grace received. Arriving during the night, the faithful stop to sleep outdoors near the sanctuary in the hope of absorbing the beneficial energies believed to emanate from it and from the Saint.

The heart of the sanctuary consists of a vast cave containing Rosalia’s tomb, to which the faithful pay homage. Spring water, believed to possess miraculous powers, seeps from the walls and is channelled into a basin where the faithful approach to wet their hands and make the sign of the cross. Goethe (2002, 36–37) writes of this in his diary (6 April 1787): The cave itself has remained intact; but since water drips continuously from the rocks, it

was necessary to keep the place dry. This was achieved by placing lead gutters along the edges of the rocks, connected by various fittings [...]. The water is fed, partly from the sides and partly from behind, into a clear basin, from which the faithful draw water to be healed of all ills.

For decades now, alongside the Catholic faithful, numerous Hindu immigrants—mainly Tamils and Mauritians—have been making the ascent to the mountain, viewing Monte Pellegrino as the *axis mundi* and Saint Rosalia as the patron deity of the land that has welcomed them and the Mother Goddess of the place, repeating the ancient Hindu practice of the *tīrthayātrā* (see Viani 2016, 83). Moreover, as Igor Spanò (2016, 183) points out, in their country of origin, “the cult of the Goddess is a predominant element, particularly in villages where she is identified as the protector of the borders against external threats”. There are, moreover, certain characteristics of the sanctuary that can be compared to the specific features of Indian temples. In the Hindu temple, the tower and the *garbhagrha*, which houses the statue of the deity, refer respectively to the mountain and the cave, elements that we find in the sanctuary of Santa Rosalia. Another factor that determines the choice of location for the construction of temples is the presence of water, and, as it has been previously noted, inside the sanctuary of Santa Rosalia, at the foot of her wooden statue, there is a basin in which water, considered miraculous, is collected. But there is more. The very iconography of the Saint, which depicts her alongside a skull and other human bones, refers, in the Hindu imagination, to the goddess Kālī Durgā, the dark manifestation of Śakti Devī.

The ascent of Mount Pellegrino by Hindu Pilgrims, in fact, demonstrates how the cultural pathways charted by one community can be readily adopted by another community with a different system of values, beliefs, and way of life, provided that the fundamental elements which shape a culture and make it distinguishable and identifiable are not lost (Spanò 2016, 182–183).

Among these are, quite clearly, the geomorphology of the places, the natural elements, and the ritual symbols.

From Palermo, we return to Crete and its sacred caves. Specifically, the cave now dedicated to Agia Paraskevi (Saint Veneranda), which opens near the sanctuary of the same name in Skotino, was previously investigated by Evans and extensively described by Paul Faure in his *Fonctions des cavernes crétoises* (1964).

The cave is situated approximately 1.5 km from the village of Skotino (a settlement of fewer than 200 inhabitants, some 22 km from Heraklion), on the slope of a 225-metre-high hill, topped by a small Christian place of worship dedicated to the Saint, and is indeed one of several Cretan caves which, repurposed and integrated into Christian cults¹⁷, in ancient times hosted rites and devotional practices more often associated with divine powers and entities linked to the cycles of human, animal and plant life and attributable to an “omnipotent female good” (Marinatos 1940-1941, 129). Capdeville (2017, 68) writes:

¹⁷ See Rutkowski, Nowicki 1996, 36; Castleden 2002, 60.

It is not surprising that the first caves to be consecrated were dedicated to a Great Goddess under various ‘avatars’. The religion of the first great Cretan civilisation could be regarded as a form of monotheism; such is the importance of the role of this Great Goddess, who dominates the entire pantheon and reigns over all of nature – sometimes with the local prevalence of one aspect or another, and under different names.

The Skotino cave, now part of the pilgrimage route to the small rural church of Agia Paraskevi, featured, at the time of Faure’s survey, large blocks of travertine, certainly man-made, in anthropomorphic and theriomorphic forms. Faure (1964, 163) writes:

It seemed to me that on each of the rounded faces of the third rock mass that had escaped erosion, black with soot and cryptogams, a central figure stood out: on the left, a standing child, on the right, a woman seated beneath a sort of canopy and holding a disc or a bilobed shield. I also thought I saw a large figure standing at the left-hand end of the first face, and a small figure to the left of the seated woman. [...] It should also be noted that to the right of the large historical stone slab, two hollow stones receive water dripping from the vault, which is currently considered sacred (ἁγίασμα). This, together with the fantastic images, explains the frequent visits to the cave.

The anthropomorphic rock formations and the variety of offerings (household pottery, weapons, statuettes of worshippers, vases, oil lamps, liquids) which bear witness to the cave’s use for cult purposes even before the Neopalatial period and, continuously, up to the period of Roman rule, lead Faure to believe that the deities worshipped in the cave must have included, probably in a prominent position, a “déesse de Skotino”, “divinity of the earth, the sea and the sky”, perhaps in antiquity Britomarti, Diktinna or Ariadne or Anadyomène and subsequently Artemis or Aphrodite Urania (Faure 1964, 166)¹⁸.

Finally, in describing this landscape historically dominated by the divine feminine, Faure (*ibid.*)¹⁹ notes that every 26 July (the feast of Saint Parasceve), local farmers dance and sing love songs in two areas set up at the entrance to the cave; this practice may date from the time of the construction of the nearby chapel in the early 17th century.

At Palianis, I had the opportunity to take part personally in the pilgrimage as part of the mission to Crete organised by the Department of Culture and Society at the University of Palermo, then headed by Prof. Nunzio Allegro and now by Prof. Chiara Portale. I reproduce here my field notes: the sanctuary of Santa Veneranda, Agia Paraskevi (Ἁγία Παρασκευή), stands about two kilometres from the village of Skotino in Crete, on a modest hill overlooking a hilly landscape planted with olive trees and cereals.

Beneath the Christian temple, surrounded by dense vegetation, lies a vast cave from whose walls water flows, to which therapeutic properties are attributed. The festival begins on the afternoon of 25 July. Entire families arrive on pilgrimage from the village and neighbouring hamlets, each carrying bunches of basil and flowers along with large, sweet loaves. The loaves, brought in devotion to honour deceased family members and at the same time in thanksgiving for a healing, are marked with cards bearing the names of the

¹⁸ See also Willetts 1965, 120 ff.; Castleden 2002, 124 ff.

¹⁹ See also Faure 2018, 240 ff.

families making the offering. After visiting the cave, inside which sacred icons are placed, the pilgrims proceed to the sanctuary and lay the loaves on a table set up for the occasion. At the end of the procession with the sacred icon of the saint around the sanctuary, the loaves are cut up, distributed, and consumed by all those present, thus repeating gestures of great symbolic value well known to folklorists no less than, in the ancient world, to historians of religion, who, once again, refer to rituals of protection and auspices of fertility and abundance²⁰.

IV. Concluding remarks. The landscape features and natural elements characteristic of the sanctuary areas of Monte Fautenio and Monte Autore, as well as those of Monte Pellegrino, Palianis and Skotino, are common to numerous other Christian cult sites and, most notably, to the so-called ‘minor’ sanctuaries – precisely those where traces of pre-Christian occupation are most frequently observed. This circumstance, of course, must not lead to interpretative automatisms conditioned by a sort of geo-religious determinism that presents the sacredness of certain places as self-evident and, consequently, a cultic continuity between pre-Christian religions and Christianity, wherever ‘typical’ environmental qualities and natural features are observed. The widespread association between certain landscapes/natural features and sanctuary sites has, moreover, led some authors to write that “les lieux sacrés semblaient choisis pour associer à l’idée religieuse la beauté ou encore le mystère de la nature” (Roussel 1954, 12)²¹ and to speak of ‘natural sanctuaries’, believing that certain “elements of the landscape are perceived as intrinsically sacred due to some particular feature or position and are therefore suitable for embodying or hosting theophanies” (Marucci 2000, 26 ff.). Edith Turner (1987, 328) writes that the sacredness of places is also defined by the natural conformation of the site or certain of its characteristics (rivers, caves, mountains, rocks, woods, islands or certain oddities of nature); these characteristics play a part in exerting a magnetic influence on the devout. Nature, on the edge of the mundane, can represent the point of entry into the realm of the spiritual. But worship, as Burkert (1985, 85) rightly observes, can certainly not be “a response to the experience of the landscape. If ever a breath of divinity betrays some spot as the sphere of higher beings, then this is evoked by the institutionalised cult”.

Knowing and possessing space, an inescapable aspect of human life, requires that the realms of lived experience and the imagination be framed within a grid of meanings, removed from semiotic non-existence. Sacralising a space involves the assignment of specific values, meanings and functions. The sacredness of a site, therefore, must always be traced back to its historical and cultural context and cannot and must not be understood, phenomenologically, as something that pre-exists and reveals itself to humanity²², but rather as a quality assigned based on shared cultural criteria²³, that is, based on one’s own related

²⁰ See Buttitta, Cusumano 1991; Papa 1992; Cavalcanti 1995; Scarpi 2005; Grimaldi 2012; Lombardi Satriani, Cipriani 2013.

²¹ See also Gallini 1971, 26 ff.

²² See Van der Leeuw 1986, 393 ff.; Eliade 19, 376 ff.; Gagliardi 2008, 258.

experiences and representations of ‘reality’ (cf. Remotti 1993, 31 ff.). There are, therefore, no landscape features or natural elements that can be characterised *a priori* as sacred. The sacredness of places is, not by chance, always linked to a story, to a legend concerning the discovery of an image or a sacred object, a relic, or to an apparition, a miracle, an extraordinary event—in any case, to some divine *signum* (cf. Profeta 1970). Finally, it may be said that the sacredness of a place is determined by the perception that a human group has of this space – previously neutral, one might say, emotionally amorphous – and is established ‘positively’, in which it becomes the site, or ‘negatively’ by prohibitions on contact.

The process of attributing meaning to an image as well as to a landscape, certainly conditioned by common, millennia-old human structures of thought, cannot therefore disregard, on the one hand, the relationship with the specific historical and cultural backgrounds of the observer/user, nor the relationship that systematically links the various elements comprising them. If it is true, as noted at the outset, that there are numerous sacred places which “have a beauty and a power that are elements of their religious dimension”, nevertheless there is no shortage of sacred places which “are unimpressive to someone outside the tradition” and do not convey any religious sentiment to those who do not share the same cultural context, since “In different cultures, various kinds of places suggest the presence of deities” (Brereton 2005 [1987], 7978–7979). It can therefore be said that certain natural or man-made features of the landscape may at most contribute to reinforcing the sense of sacredness of places, but in no way determine it.

In short, contrary to what phenomenologists maintain, a place is sacred only when it is interpreted and recognised as such. Places are sacred, writes Brereton (2005 [1987], 7978), “because they perform a religious function, not because they have peculiar physical or aesthetic qualities”. On the other hand, the sacred is a product of history and of humanity’s cultural development, the trajectory of which can be traced, its genesis followed, and its structure and mechanisms of operation identified and defined, though it is in any case devoid of ontological substance (Scarpi 2009, 19)²⁴.

The meaning of a sacred landscape, therefore, is not self-contained; it does not possess a self-referential value. Rather, in evoking the other-than-itself that is within it and which it aspires to represent, it requires, in the process of achieving its own semantic completeness, a multi-dislocated relationship, a network of relationships between the various symbols that compose it, and a relationship with the observers/participants in the ritual. Only in this way do the natural elements and their relative symbolic values bring

²³ See Lattanzi 2008, 49. One can therefore speak of the ‘pre-existence’ of a place’s sacredness exclusively in relation to the changes and socio-political dynamics affecting individual communities, in the sense that, to remain within the Christian sphere, such sacredness is assigned and recognised by the faithful even before the institutionalisation of worship and the related construction of a place of worship: church, chapel or shrine. The sanctuary is, therefore, a place attributed with sacredness by the *consensus fidelium* even before it is, and regardless of whether it is, recognised as sacred by religious authority (cf. Gagliardi 2008, 259–262; Otranto 2014, 46).

²⁴ Cf. Scarpi 2014; Santi 2004, 17–58.

about what is announced and/or made present, bringing with them the real presence. Their co-essential interaction functions as a clarification and definition of every constituent element of the system, such that every component of the landscape evokes the meaning of the whole without representing it, referring to the overall meaning of the vision whilst being only a part of it in a play of reciprocal references of meaning. In other words, every element of the sacred landscape, and the sacred itself that resides therein, cannot be understood as an autonomous entity but as part of a historically fluid system, of a context of meaning in which the subject(s) is/are an integral part of mutually *resonant* semantic and functional interrelationships that contribute to the overall signification²⁵.



Taormina; foto: Corina Isabella CSISZÁR

²⁵

See Pizzo Russo 2007, 15; Florenskij 200.



Taormina; foto: Mariana CSISZÁR

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