

TRACES OF RUPESTRIAN CIVILIZATIONS IN SALENTO

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ABSTRACT

In the Apulia region with reference to Salento area you can find characteristic monuments and megalithic constructions (big stony structures).

These structures date back to the Bronze Age (III-II millennium B.C.) and are known as dolmens, menhirs, dry-stone buildings like trulli and big defensive structures.

Moreover, there are lots of natural and artificial hypogeums used as residences as well as shelters. They have often shown important and old human traces.

Most of the Salento area is characterized by carbonatic rocks of hard platform even if fractured and often karstified and cataclastic. They are surmounted by sandy-calcareous layers with a different degree of compactness and cracking. Therefore, the Salento area shows favourable conditions for the development of a megalithic civilization. Actually, a connection exists between the geological parameters of the ground, the building techniques and the deriving building products.

Hypogeums, both natural (part of the salentine karstic system) and artificial (dug into tufa covers) are very important structures highly widespread within the primordial settlements.

On the Adriatic coast of Salento, especially between Otranto and Leuca, you may find a higher concentration of megalithic settlements that comprised both isolated communities and settlements organized as real villages which then evolved into towns surrounded by megalithic walls.

Direct mapping and techniques of prospecting from space carried out through the monitoring system called SIMONA have shown the presence of isolated megalithic structures of various shapes, types and importance as well as traces and mosaics of very advanced settlements for the Era in which they developed.

This research represents a further approach towards a vision of the megalithic settlements in Salento (around Lecce area) considered not only from a geological point of view but also environmental and territorial, that is in a perspective of human and urban geography. The Salento region (Apulia, southern Italy) is characterized by the presence

of characteristic monuments and megalithic constructions (big stony structures), dated to the Bronze Age (III-II millennium B.C.) and known as dolmens, menhirs, dry-stone buildings like trulli and big defensive structures (Corrado, 2010). Moreover, there are several natural and anthropic caves, used as residences as well as shelters, in which important and old human traces have been often found (Centenaro et al, 2003).

In particular, dolmens consist of some rocky slabs put vertically into the ground and surmounted by a large flat horizontal capstone. On the other hand, menhirs are monolithic standing stones of various shape and height whose function remains unclear.

Dry-stone buildings, known as trulli (from the Greek word *trullon*, cupola/dome), are buildings of different shapes, above all trunk-conical, with dome-shaped corbelled vaults and generally composed of a single room.

Heaps of stony materials, known as *specchie*, and the terraced towers should also be mentioned talking about dry-stone buildings.

Defensive structures consist of big rocky calcarenitic elements (megalithic walls) that can be dated approximately to 2500 B.C. These structures represent the defensive sectors of huge messapic settlements (for example Muro Leccese, Vaste, Castro etc., see figure 1).



Figure 1 - Messapic walls in Castro (LE)

All these structures are influenced by the nature of the geological substratum outcropping in the area and by the availability of stony materials that are easy worked.

The most used materials are the calcareous and arenaceous lithotypes, above all if layered and fractured. Even rocky coarse incoherent elements are used. They are easily traceable and can be used especially with bad

environmental conditions, far from quarrying and working places concerning proper building materials. In the Salento area there are traces of old caves characterized by tufo.

They were used to build single structures or entire settlements surrounded by megalithic walls like the caves of Santa Cesarea Terme's baths up to Porto Miggiano.

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Hypogeums, both natural (part of the salentine karstic system) and artificial (dug into tufa covers) are very important structures highly widespread within the primordial settlements (Figure 2).

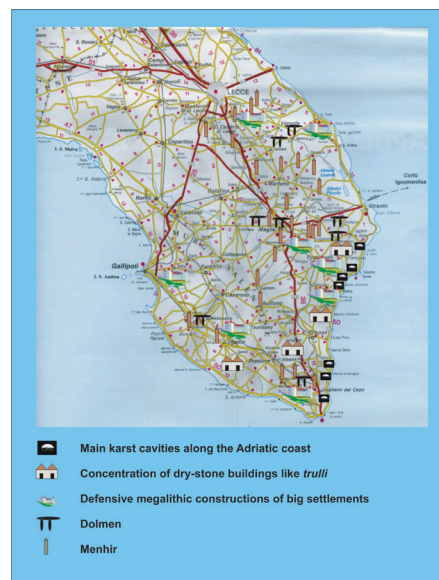


Figure 2 - Megalithic settlements in the province of Lecce

Researchers have sometimes underestimated the environmental and territorial context in which the megalithic civilization developed. In fact, the territory and its resources, the environment and of course the lithology have played a key role in the choice of those

sites in which this ancient civilization developed and stratified over time, thus, leaving important traces regarding the settlements and their organization. (Lazzari, 2005).

On the Adriatic coast of Salento, especially between Otranto and Leuca, you may find a higher concentration of megalithic settlements that comprised both isolated communities and settlements organized as real villages which then evolved into towns surrounded by megalithic walls. (Daquino, 2010)

Direct mapping and techniques of prospecting from space carried out through the monitoring system called SIMONA have shown the presence of isolated megalithic structures of various shapes, types and importance as well as traces and mosaics of very advanced settlements for the Era in which they developed. (Lazzari, 2011).

Thanks to the above mentioned technologies it has been possible to identify lots of evidence. For example, the systems of dry-stone walls used both as a separation for properties or a defense for the settlement. Other traces regard the delineations of paths and rest places, systems of hypogeums dug into the tufa rock, cisterns for the gathering of water and pits for the sampling of the superficial stratum together with many other traces of a primordial civilization whose growth and environmental adjustment was impressive. In fact, it created a sort of a union between natural elements and human settlements that presumably developed also ways of bartering with people from the sea.

Consequently, the numerous traces found can't represent isolated elements. They are part of a mosaic that must to be reconstructed and interpreted on a higher level because rupestrian settlements have gradually evolved into organized urban systems many of which have survived up to now (Figure 3).

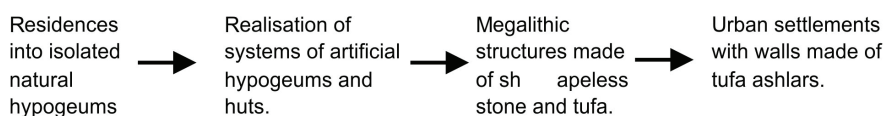


Figure 3 – Hypothetical reconstruction of the evolution of the megalithic settlement system in Salento.

The megalithic traces are those of a civilization conditioned and favored in its development by environmental components not only of geological nature but also climatic, vegetational and faunal as well as by community relationships.

In this regard the Salento area is thought to show some primordial organized settlements whose communities were peopled and devoted to rudimentary forms of agriculture, hunting, fishing and also to the production of commercial products, such as sea salt. The rupestrian site of Castro Marina's port

is thought to be an example even if today it is partially destroyed by recent urbanization. (Lazzari, 2004).

Along the Adriatic coast the mapping from space has identified at least two organized systems of ancient megalithic structures suitable for the survival and the development of communities in expansion which had human and commercial relations with inland areas where subsequently settlements surrounded by megalithic walls developed (Figure 4).



Figure 4 – Glimpse of a megalithic settlement along the Salento eastern coast line.

This research represents a further approach towards a vision of the megalithic settlements in Salento (around Lecce area) considered not only from a geological point of view but also environmental and in a perspective of human and urban geography.

As a consequence of these elements, it emerged the hypothesis of a civilization related not only to activities, such as hunting and harvesting, but also to more complex and rather advanced forms of life.

The same evidence contribute to characterize the local landscape. The landscape is unique and it is connected with the stone, its colors and shapes, therefore with the karst area delineating significant geosites subjected to a rigid protection in order to

safeguard assets that are progressively and strongly compromised.

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