

## Frescoes studies at the Byzantine church of Madonna delle Grazie, Matera (Italy)

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This article shows the layout of the habitat model of Matera (Italy), in its unique architecture of house-cave documented from Paleolithic times. Among these structures stand out the rock churches from the Ancient Age. We focus on the study of one of these churches, Madonna delle Grazie and Crypt of St. Lucy. Byzantine church with a continued religious use until the Baroque period, and which remains as a dwelling - cave to date. Between its spaces, it emphasizes the altar, the vaults, the crypt, the wells of water or the fresh paintings ones, not studied until the date.

*Keywords:* Matera, cave churches, frescoes, High Middle Ages.

The Matera village, in the Italian Basilicata province, exhibits an original style of communal life dated to prehistoric times. The Matera hills are composed of Altamura limestone, a malleable and easily excavated material. The model of habitat in caves is well documented here with 35 levels dug into the rock of the mountain slope. The “Sassi” or houses in the central and oldest area of caverns is known as Sassi Caveoso. From here cavern houses have been excavated dating to the High Middle Ages, the Sassi Barisano areas being the most recent one<sup>1</sup>.

The earliest human occupations at Matera are attributed to the area of the karstic flat roofs, at the Paleolithic and Mesolithic period, as made evident by archaeological remains found. These occupations keep going along the centuries, till the development of the proto-urban arrangement, which will become a model for the Medieval village, the present view we have of the place<sup>2</sup>.

These caved houses are organized in series of steps on the hillsides and are dug in an oblique shape, in such a way that the entrance receive the greatest amount of sunlight. According to their sizes, they could have several interconnected rooms, the main one at the entrance had the longest daylight available, of course, and here the everyday life took place.

<sup>1</sup> Copeta, C., S. de Giacomo, E.; López L.; Marzulli, F. <The Sassi and the Park of the Rupestrian Churches of Matera. Rehabilitation, Cultural Tourism and Local Development Policies>. In Pazos, M., Piñeira, M., Paül I Carril, V., (Coords). *Touristic Management of World Heritage Monuments and Cities*, 2013, p. 195-217.

Mecca, I. <In situ experimentations for the compatibility and durability of the restorations: the case study of the Sassi of Matera> *Vitruvio: International Journal of Architectural Technology and Sustainability*, (2016), p. 35-48.

<sup>2</sup> Rota, L.; Conese, F; Tommaselli, M. *Matera. Storia di una città*, Matera, Ed. BMG, 1990.

Over the centuries, other caverns were carved for specific functions, including, as the society embraced common religious practices, cavern rooms fashioned as churches.

Several hundreds of religious caverns have been documented here including areas with mainly Pagan cults, which existed since Ancient times, and which later, would be reused by Christian Benedictine monks who built annexed structures close to areas inhabited by parishioners, who would take charge of their maintenance, and so these churches are found scattered among streets and houses of the site, at areas of “the civita” and other more remote locations. In time, these religious places exhibited a clear Byzantine influence and a Latin kind of distribution of space and underwent a transformation on their use and in modern and contemporary centuries became habitat both for humans and cattle<sup>3</sup>. By 1464 Pope Paul II blessed the Ciminelli family, to improve the Saint Peter of Barisano church, one of the Rupestrian churches, which was in the Sassi district of Matera<sup>4</sup>.

Among the most outstanding and more fully studied church caverns, both for their sculptural, architectural and decorative richness, we can name the Original Sin crypt (IX century), the church of St. Lucy alle Malve (IX century), the St. Barbara church (VII-VIII centuries) or the St. Giuliano church (XI-XII centuries)<sup>5</sup>, as well as the St. Madonna delle Grazie church and the St. Lucy crypt we are considering here (although it is not considered among the most outstanding ones<sup>6</sup>).

## Materials and Methods

This cave-house, which became the St. Madonna delle Grazie church, was originally a Rupestrian church with an aisle opening onto a chapel, with a Baroque altar. It has, on the upper side, a terracotta image of the Madonna and the child with blue and ochre colors which give rise to the church’s name.

Within the church, after the first flank, we encounter a little altar, provided with two open niches, perhaps the one of the original church, when this was named Santa Lucia, as it seems that it was by 1840 when it passed to be named as St. Madonna delle Grazie<sup>7</sup>.

This area, shaped as a rectangular building plane, spreads inside with several adjacent rooms, where a first use related to monastic life was possible, creating baptismal temples, crypts and areas devoted to worship and prayer. Among the visible areas are remains of what once were several tombs of monks and princes, dated between VI-IX centuries; these tombs contained different incinerations<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Salmi, M. *Le Chiese rupestri di Matera*, De Lucca, 1996, pp. 301-302.

<sup>4</sup> A.A.V.V. *Chiese e asceteri rupestri di Matera*, Roma, De Luca, 1995.

<sup>5</sup> Raja, L. <Itinerario artistico nel Materano>. *Raccolta Rasegna Storica dei Comuni*, 3, (1971), p.17-19.

<sup>6</sup> This church is, generally, known as Madonna delle Grazie. It appears named this way on different references, according to the figure preserved on the Baroque altar. In exchange, on the register of historic-cultural heritage state appears named as Saint Mary delle Grazie. Panarelli, F. *Da Accon a Matera: Santa Maria la Nova, un monastero femminile tra dimensione mediterranea e identità urbana (XIII- XVI secolo)*, Münster, Reissue, Vita Regularis, 2012, p.24.

M. Salmi, draws up a table with the basic features for every church documented at Matera. Over a marking scale of 3, he appraises that the Madonna delle Grazie church is worth of 1 point by its artistic value ref.3.

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. Comune di Matera. *Piano strutturale comunale: “Repertorio valore storico-culturale”*. *Repertorio degli areali*, Matera, 2010, p. 112.

<sup>8</sup> Salmi, M. *Le Chiese rupestri di Matera*, De Lucca, 1996, p. 311

Among the areas with a more modern use, are a room devoted to the traditional processing of grape treading and distribution into small tanks, as well as an oven to bake bread, which seems to have been a communal one since the beginning of the XX century till 1980, which was placed at the nearest area to the exit, in order to make easy the removal of the smoke generated<sup>9</sup>.

The different uses and reuses which this place has had, always keeping its original structure, may be seen in the work carried out on the floor. Different paving techniques can be noticed at main rooms. The most ancient one seems to be associated to a cross floor-shaped floor of bricks, perhaps from the archaic style of the Orientalizing period. At some areas, a paving in the shape of (???) is superposed and, more recently, one of brick, laid with a simple straight layout, associated to other buildings of the area, and added around the XIII century<sup>10</sup>.

At year 1543-1544, monk Giovanni Michele Saraceno paid a pastoral visit to Matera, and offered different descriptions of the main religious sites, among them, the St. Lucia church. This is the oldest document kept referring to the site and, thanks to his notes, we know that this place was founded in honor to St. Eustaquio, although it did not bear his name<sup>11</sup>.

## The frescoes

The Byzantine paintings in the church exhibit two very interesting forms: the mural one, which decorates the inner walls of the temple, where the greatest decorative effort was used (as the outer walls were, usually, more), and icons or images painted on wooden boards placed on an easel.

Mural painting was carried out in oils or on tempera and they were huge compositions of a religious subject, with a symbolic character and very compatible with the abstract mentality of Eastern peoples. The use of the frescoes painting to the detriment of other technique used at this period, as the tessellated pavement was, will spread from XI century on, immediately following a progressive economic crisis. The frescoes painting allowed costs to come down, as they were carried out with a mixed technique of a fine frescoes technique, which makes possible a great number of retouching on a dry frescoes painting<sup>12</sup>.

The paintings kept at this church, in a Byzantine and Apulian style and the chronologies of other Rupestrian churches of the area, as well as the archaeological evidences documented at this cove, suggests that they could be dated between VI – XIII centuries<sup>13</sup>.

## Baroque Altar frescoes

The frescoes on this altar try to imitate, on a side, one of the most luxurious materials of all times, marble. Due to the high price of marble, it was usual to imitate it by means of the frescoes paintings. This way, it is very usual to see marbles of different colors, such as green, black, grey,

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. Comune di Matera. *Piano strutturale comunale: "Repertorio valore storico-culturale". Repertorio degli areali*, Matera, 2010, p. 112.

<sup>10</sup> Diehl, C. *L'art Byzantin dans l'Italie Méridionale*, Paris, 1894.

<sup>11</sup> Matera Diocesan Archive. c. 82: Panarelli, F. *Da Accon a Matera: Santa Maria la Nova, un monastero femminile tra dimensione mediterranea e identità urbana (XIII- XVI secolo)*, Münster, Reissue, Vita Regularis, 2012, p.24.

<sup>12</sup> Gispert, C. (1997). *Enciclopedia de Historia del arte: Bizancio. El Islam. Prerrománico y Románico. (Vol. II)*. Instituto Gallach. Grupo editorial Oceano, p. 447.

<sup>13</sup> Frothingham, A. <Byzantine Artist in Italy from the Sixth to the Fifteenth Century>. *The American Journal of Archaeology and of the History of the Fine Arts*, 9, (1894), p. 32-52.

reddish and dark crimson; on the other side, sculptural reliefs are also imitated here, by using a technique named grisaille (relief effect, by means of a very tinged chiaroscuro): this can be seen on the angel which is on the altarpiece and the shell under the altar table, baptismal symbol which refers to the water of life, “to be reborn” by virtue of the insertion in Christ<sup>14</sup>. (Fig. 1).

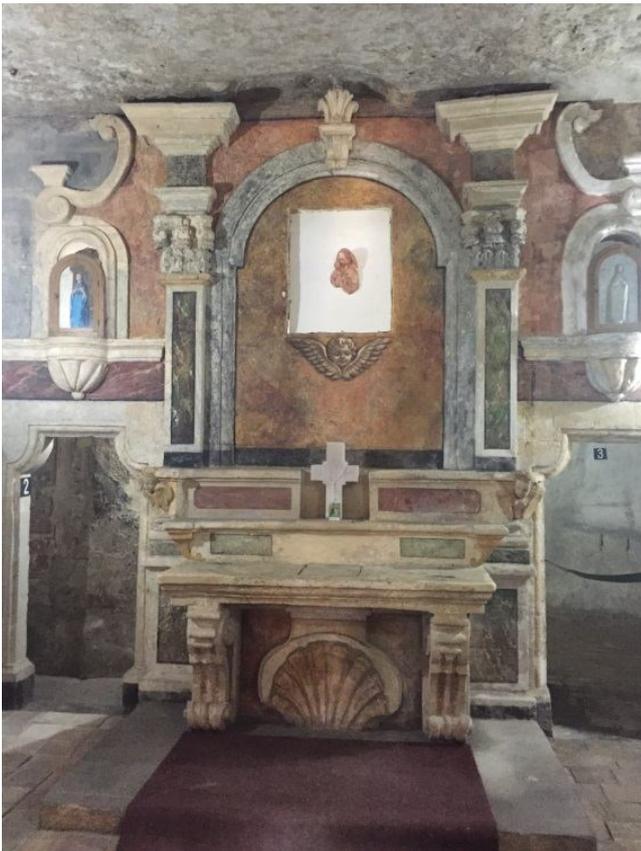


Fig. 1. Baroque altar

### “The Crucifixion” fresco

At the crucifixion scene Christ appears accompanied by St. John of Matera and the Virgin. It shows a superposition of images (or repainting) which tell us about two works corresponding to two different times. It is a very usual practice since frescoes are about a technique allowing corrections and modifications, both in wet as in dry condition. (Fig. 2).

On the 4<sup>th</sup> image, and marked with red line, an older layer of fresco painting can be noticed, in a Byzantine outline, from about VI century. Meanwhile the upper one, in green would be typical of the Apulian Roman style and to which one the scenes of the Virgin and San John of Matera are added (XI- XIII centuries). As a result of moisture and the type of stone, the plaster started chipping off and the original fresco of Byzantine style became visible.

<sup>14</sup> Revilla, F. *Diccionario de iconografía y simbología*, Ed. Cátedra, 1999, p.118.



Fig.2. Full view of the Crucifixion scene and detail of the paint superposition

These paintings can be found on both sides of the Baroque altar, located at the main area, under the Byzantien pair of domes.

Because of this being one of the more religious relevant events, at an emotional and symbolic level, told by Gospels, it is not surprising that they have wished to keep them well presented along the centuries, arriving to restore and modify them in High Medieval times.

The scene shows us a resigned Christ, and already deceased Christ, with his tilted head, his eyes closed and his body slightly bowed. Due to the damage in some areas, the wounds made by the nails on his feet and the spear on his right side, they cannot be clearly noticed, in contrast to the nails on his hands, which can be slightly glimpsed. On the lower part of the fresco, at both sides of the cross and in a better condition, we encounter the images of the Virgin Mary and St. John of Matera. The Virgin, with her eyes closed and both hands joined, as in a sign of praying, is dressed in a red robe (a symbol of the Lord's Passion) and she is covered with a dark blue mantel (a symbol of purity and virginity); her head, besides, in a sign of sacrality, is framed by a golden halo. On the other side, St. John, staring to the figure of an already lifeless Jesus on the cross; opens his arms as a sign of affliction, and is dressed with a green robe, a color which is symbol of hope.

The folds marked on vestments (the Jesus cloth of purity included) tell us about the Italian Roman style, but also about the heir of Byzantine style<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> Rolf, T. *El Románico: Arquitectura, escultura y pintura*, Ed. Könemann, 1996, p. 396-397.

### “St. Lucy” fresco

The worship to St. Lucy is a very popular one. She was a virgin born at Siracusa, who would have been tortured at 304, under the rule of Diocletian. St. Lucy names this temple from VI century to 1840, a moment at which it is rebaptized as Madonna dell Grazie.

The Medieval hagiographer Jacobo della Voragine, on his popular the Golden Legend, tells that St. Lucy went, together to her mother Eutiquia, who was very ill, on pilgrimage to Catania, to St. Agueda’s tomb. After her mother’s miraculous healing, St. Lucy decided to share her whole wealth among poor people. Reported as a Christian before consul Pascasius by her suitor, she was sentenced to be taken to a brothel, although they could not remove her, not even with a pack of oxen pulling from her. After different tortures, from which she remained woundless, the Sicilian virgin died, as a victim of some executioners who, to the orders of Pascasius, ran her neck through with a sword. According to another version, she would pull out herself her own eyes and would have sent them, to her suitor, on a tray, although the Virgin would have had them replaced on her with another pair, more beautiful and bright even<sup>16</sup>. This legend is based on the popular etymology of her name: “Lucy, which would derive of the word “lux” (light)<sup>17</sup>.

On this fresco, we can see a full-length portrait of the martyr; in her hands, she is carrying two of the attributes which characterizes her, the palm, which alludes to her torture and the martyr having obtained the supreme victory and, with it, eternal life, and the eyes, which appear placed into a cup, although they can also be found placed on a dish or on a tray<sup>18</sup>. (Fig. 3).

St. Lucy appears dressed as a Roman matron. She is wearing two robes, an inner one in golden color and an outer one in white and, covering her shoulders and one of her arms, a mantle in a reddish color (a color related to torture). The scene appears framed in golden color, in some kind of a vaulted niche. The lower side of the frame is decorated with vegetal motifs<sup>19</sup>. Meanwhile, on its upper side, a slip of paper appears, where the name of the saint can be clearly read, besides the name of the fresco painting’s author, “F. Altomaro F F”, whose biographical particulars remain unknown.

This fresco shows us the great influence that the Byzantine art exerted on Medieval times: weightlessness, the figure of St. Lucy appears to be floating, she rests the tip of her right foot on the floor, while her left one is raised; the author, by means of this gesture, intends to cause a sensation of motion, a gesture he repeats with the mantle which is covering the saint, where we can notice a large shell-shaped fold, which would have taken this shape when raising her right arm to show the cup with her eyes. Her hair appears curled, falling on her shoulders and framing the Saint’s face. The folds are very marked ones and upright shaped.

<sup>16</sup> 4. J. Interian de Ayala quotes textually of Father Pedro de Ribadeyra: “Usually (he says) this beautiful Virgin is painted with her eyes on a dish, which she is holding on her hands. The reason of being painted this way, untold by her history, and neither that she has taken her eyes herself to get rid of a lustful man who was pursuing her, as some people write. And the Spiritual Meadow, which is an ancient book and holds authority, puts down this fact to a maid from Alexandria. Interian de Ayala, J. (1782). *El pintor Cristiano, y erudito, ó tratado de los errores, que se suelen cometerse frecuentemente en pintar, esculpir las Imágenes Sagradas*. T. II. Madrid, p. 460.

<sup>17</sup> Revilla, F. *Diccionario de iconografía y simbología*, Ed. Cátedra, 1999, p.270.

<sup>18</sup> Revilla, F. *Diccionario de iconografía y simbología*, Ed. Cátedra, 1999, p.270, 334.

<sup>19</sup> Pijoán, J. *Summa Artis. Historia general del arte: Arte Cristiano Primitivo y Arte Bizantino (Vol. VII)*, Espasa Calpe, S.A, 1996, p.211, 339.

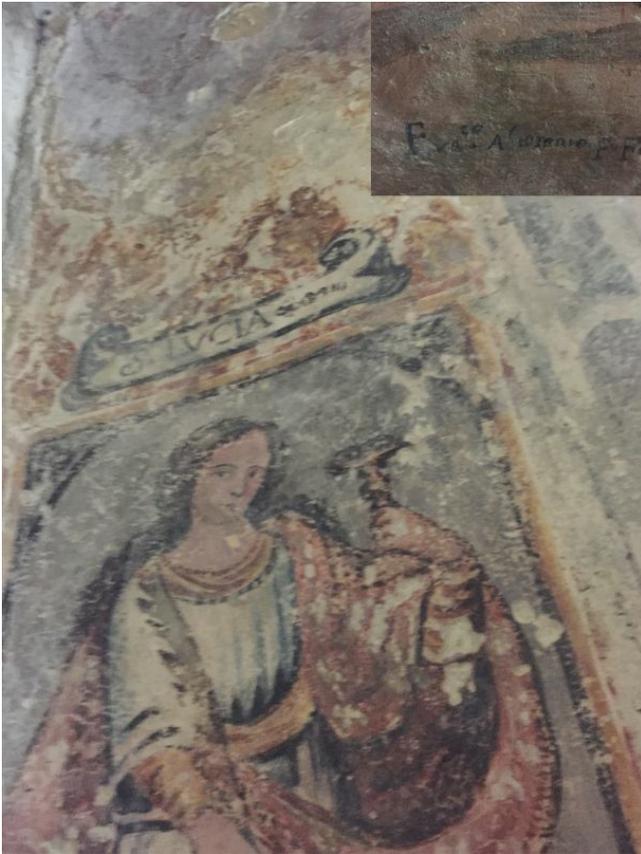


Fig.3. Detail where can be seen the text with the name of St. Lucy and the signature of its author (upper right side "F.vo. Altomaro F F.").

The inexpressiveness on her face, although typical of the Byzantine art, has a difference of its own, as the eyes are large but not almond shaped ones<sup>20</sup>.

### "St. Francis of Assise" fresco

St. Francis of Assise was the founder of the Minor Fathers, also named Franciscans. He preached poorness as a value and he proposed a plain way of life, based on the Gospels' ideals. He wished to retrieve the calmness of the origins previous to the guilt, a situation longed, not only by him, but by the whole mankind. Pope Innocent III approved his way of religious life orally, granted him a permit to preach and ordained him as deacon. By September 1224, during a retreat at this last years of life, St. Francis of Assise got his stigmata (the Christ's wounds on his own body)<sup>21</sup>.

It is precisely this moment which can be observed in the fresco of an Apulian stile (XIII century). St. Francis, who fills the right half of the type-setting, is wearing a dark robe, fastened with a rope and showing the Roman tonsure on his hair (something typical of the Franciscan Order).

<sup>20</sup> Rolf, T. *El Románico: Arquitectura, escultura y pintura*, Ed. Könemann, 1996, p. 396-397.

<sup>21</sup> Revilla, F. *Diccionario de iconografía y simbología*, Ed. Cátedra, 1999, p. 188.



Fig.4. St. Francis of Assise with his stigmata

He can see as a fireball is approaching to him (upper left side) and raises his hands (which already show the stigmata). We can notice that the hands are out of proportion in respect to the remainder of the body. This recourse was usual enough at the Medieval paintings, in order to enhance certain relevant aspects: at his case, we are talking about the moment when St. Francis is receiving his stigmata, which leads the artist to enhance his hands. (Fig. 4).

Another character is going to appear on the scene, a witness of what has happened, Friar Leon. His face, left hand and a part of his habit can be seen on the lower left side of the scene displayed. The whole scene appears in a frame although this one, in golden color, is worn out on both lower and upper sides.

Unlike the St. Lucy's fresco, this image does not show a feeling of weightlessness because of the dark color of the robe by which the artist confers weight to the figure, which does not seem to float, and neither the inexpressiveness is appearing here as a slight smile, perhaps as an indication of his sufferings have not affected his deep love of God and the Creation.

### “Angel” fresco

The set of paintings is completed with the finding of a bit of an angel and a piece of what, it seems, is a crown, all of them out of context, used as building material on an annexed wall to the Baroque altar. This fragment of a fresco is placed in a rotated 180° position, which confirms its reuse and precludes knowing its original positioning.



Fig.5. Detail of the painting with the angel with the rotated 180 degrees image.

The angels on the painting have always been represented as winged beings, to the adaptation of Eros iconography, and they are conceived as beings of light, created and fully devoted to the service of God<sup>22</sup> (Fig. 5).

The best preserved part of this little fresco is the wing of the angel. Its shape and feathers are enhanced by the use of very broad black lines, besides the refilling of the inner gaps of the same with a very light brown color, making them to appear as more enhanced ones. The face and the remaining part of the body appear as blurred and no sign of expression could be identified. The scene displayed would, probably enough, show another angel holding the other end of what looks like a central golden crown.

## Conclusions

Church of Madonna delle Grazie is one of the Ruprestrian churches forming the ensemble of the historical heritage, appointed by UNESCO at 1993. Hewn out of the hillside, this site is not only exhibits the Matera cultural heritage but also embodies an unique ensemble of the field of architecture, historical landscape, archaeology, sculpture and painting.

This study offers an architectural and artistic analysis of the Madonna delle Grazie and the Crypt of Saint Lucía, which have not been studied in depth. Now in the hands of a private individual, this church has been recently been opened to the general public, without control or oversight institution specializing in the management of this kind of heritage.

At its inside, this church – crypt is highly outstanding, not only by the typical model of cave occurring at the area, but also because of having had a religious use since High Medieval centuries, as evidenced by significant frescoes paintings, in Byzantine style, with representations of St. Lucy, St. Francis of Asís and the crucifixion of Christ by the Virgin and St. John (of Matera).

Unfortunately, the lack of responsible preservation makes it likely that these frescoes will be damaged little by little, as no care is being provided or supervision of the visitors.

<sup>22</sup> Revilla, F. *Diccionario de iconografía y simbología*, Ed. Cátedra, 1999, p.33,365.

A management seems to be necessary, not only towards the visitor, to control their caring, but also to ensure protection of the frescos against possible mishaps or vandalic actions, and to address the special conditions which such paintings have because of the cave conditions, and the deterioration of all that time (physical, biologic, and chemical agents), as well as the damage itself of the cave structure, limestone<sup>23</sup>. We are talking about a crypt, where remains of wall painting of the beginnings of the Byzantine art are preserved, which are very scarce nowadays and which become a relevant source of information on this artistic period and which, without the right protocol of preservation, may disappear.

To this concern occasioned by the environment of the frescos, they also are endangered by inept modifications which have been carried out, as for the structure of its spaces, by bulding walls, blocking up bows all done with no standard of restoration, with moderns materials such as bricks of concrete and cement, as well as reusing ancient elements which, out of context, lose a part of their original value ( as the case of the above named angel).

Hopefully this study serves to provide evidence of the heritage value preserved at this church, as well as of the need for controlled restoration and visitor access to allow the due recognition of the heritage of the Church of Madonna delle Grazie, as is already carried out with other churches.

### Acknowledgments

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<sup>23</sup> Mecca, I. (2016). In situ experimentations for the compatibility and durability of the restorations: the case study of the Sassi of Matera. In *Vitruvio: International Journal of Architectural Technology and Sustainability*, pp. 35-48.  
Beltrán, A. <La conservación del arte ruprestre>. *Quaderns de prehistòria i arqueologia de Castelló*, 13, (1987), p. 61-81.