Historical-Descriptive Report on the Properties at Via Civita 22, Matera

For a better understanding of the text, please refer to the attached images

Introduction

We are located on the northern slope of a rocky promontory now occupied by the Civita district. Although archaeological finds in the area attest to human presence since the Bronze Age, a proper urban center originated in the early Middle Ages (8th - 9th century AD). The location chosen for the birth of the fortified city was precisely the current Civita district, due to the site's characteristics. It was indeed an easily defensible area, naturally protected by a canyon (the *gravina*), at a point where it creates a bend embracing the promontory on several sides. To make the site even safer, two deep valleys eroded by two tributaries of the *gravina* (called *grabilioni*) contributed, today occupied respectively by the Sasso Barisano district to the north and Sasso Caveoso to the south.

The need for an easily defensible site originated in an extremely conflictual historical period for this area of Italy, contested between Lombards, Saracens, and Byzantines, who indeed alternately besieged and occupied the city during the early medieval centuries. In addition to the settlement advantage of defense, there was the fundamental presence of spring water sources in the immediate vicinity (along the current Piano district) and the presence of cultivable land.

The steeply sloped areas of the promontory, such as the ledge where we are, if they could not benefit from flat surfaces to raise buildings, could exploit the malleability of the rock, creating volumes within it through the realization of artificial cavities used for the most diverse purposes. Among these, productive and storage uses stood out, for which the cavities offered advantages over built equivalents thanks to their insulating power (oil mills, tanneries, cellars, granaries, etc.). Furthermore, the cavities could have residential, ritual, and funerary uses. The excavated material, appropriately shaped, was used as construction material, also to build the outposts in front of the cavities themselves. In fact, calcarenite—the rock of marine origin present on-site—is sufficiently malleable to be excavated with only arm strength, yet compact enough to allow the excavations to be self-supporting and to be used as building material.

We reiterate here that within the urban center of Matera, when inside a "cave," it is always a totally artificial cavity and never a natural cavern. This clarification is necessary because one is often misled by the term "grotta" (cave), which in Italian almost always describes caverns of natural origin (usually generated by karst phenomena), and not artificial cavities as in our case.

Archaeology of Architecture

The reading of an excavated site, in order to deduce its architectural evolution, differs from the reading methods of a built site. Excavation, in fact, is an irreversible phenomenon, where uses over time proceed by removing rock rather than adding material. This often causes the erasure of previous forms whenever the cavity was adapted to a different use or when an expansion was needed. While this circumstance makes the historical reading

of architecture more difficult, on the other hand, artificial cavities offer greater durability and resistance to time compared to constructions, whether made of stone or, even more so, perishable materials. For these reasons, today we can study artificial cavities abandoned for centuries, often still in excellent preservation, an activity not possible with long-abandoned buildings, of which only sparse traces remain after a few centuries.

The Courtyard of Via Civita 22

Via Civita is part of an important road axis that runs halfway up the slope of the district of the same name overlooking the *gravina*, and which connected two strategic gates that opened along the city walls: Porta Civita to the north, near the Metellana Tower, and Porta Postergola to the south, near the Monastery of Santa Lucia. In a central position along this axis, a portal refined by two moldings supporting a round arch offers access to a large quadrangular courtyard onto which the two cavities in question face. These, of extreme interest and monumental development, are heralded externally by two simple openings and a heavily modified and inconsistent front. This certainly depends on the fact that the context was a victim of collapses affecting both the front area of the cavities and the built outposts that almost certainly occupied part of the current open courtyard.

Under the walking surface, there is a cistern for collecting rainwater for non-potable uses. It differs from the usual bell-shaped cisterns (circular section) as it has a rectangular base plan with flared walls that narrow towards the top, similar to medieval "trench" cisterns. In the corner between the left wall of the courtyard and the front of the slope, once sheltered by a masonry vault of which clear traces remain, there is a small oven. This oven, lined with terracotta bricks, consists of a dome without a chimney, as smoke was dispersed via a hood placed immediately outside the oven's mouth. Due to these characteristics, we are in the presence of an oven suitable for baking bread: the interior was first heated by open flames, and later, once the fire was extinguished and the wood removed, the loaves of bread were placed inside to be cooked by the heat slowly released by the terracotta bricks. The presence of a domestic oven for baking bread is widely documented in the countryside but is an extremely rare case in an urban setting, where bread-making occurred almost exclusively in large collective ovens.

The Caves of Via Civita 22

Facing the courtyard, as mentioned, are two suggestive artificial cavities, the subject of a successful restoration by the Sextantio hospitality structure, which made them accessible after seventy years of total abandonment. This abandonment occurred following the total evacuation of the Sassi districts, which also affected the properties in question, carried out over a few years starting in the early 1950s. Archive documentation shows that the last use before abandonment was as a private residence, where a married couple lived: Francesco Paolo Tataranni and Filomena Di Lecce. Evacuation operations for the house began in February 1954, the year the couple was moved to the La Martella village. This village was built starting in 1951, even before the famous De Gasperi law, thanks to funds from the Marshall Plan, and hosted the first families evacuated from the Sassi after the war. Built in a rural setting, it saw contributions from intellectuals like Adriano Olivetti and architects like Ludovico Quaroni. In subsequent years, urban neighborhoods funded by the De Gasperi law were built, completing the almost total transfer of the population from the Sassi. The

first families to be moved were those living in cave-houses, as their living conditions were worse than those of families living in built buildings within the Sassi. It is therefore no coincidence that the Tataranni couple were among the first to be moved, as their home included the two contiguous caves discussed here.

Genesis of the Cavities (Places of Worship)

The current state of the cavities is significantly altered and is the result of a stratification of events and different uses over the centuries. The architectural forms suggest that the first excavation had functions similar to a place of worship and was certainly carried out in the Middle Ages.

- The left cave features a rocky diaphragm in which a large monumental arch opens, originally a round arch, enriched by a ring of which residues remain on the inside (Fig. 1).
- Along the under-arch, there are some holes for housing beams.
- Beyond the arch, the large room is split into two equivalent parts, like naves, divided by a partition wall left during excavation, which runs along the architectural axis.
- Both pseudo-naves show residues of lenticular domes (red outline in Fig. 2) at the back, similar to typical apsidal basins found in rock churches.
- Together, these features leave little doubt about its original function as a place of worship.

This deduction is reinforced by observations in the right cave. Here, the large quadrangular room shows incontrovertible traces on the ceiling of the original presence of a triforium (or *templon*; Fig. 3a). This consisted of three openings divided by two columns, used to separate the hall from the presbytery, similar to an iconostasis. This structure was later destroyed by knocking down the two columns, though residues are still visible where they joined the flat vault (Fig. 3b). The presence of a triforium is found only in other places of worship, such as the nearby church of San Benedetto and Santa Lucia alle Malve.

In conclusion, both cavities were medieval places of worship. In the Middle Ages, many were private chapels for funerary use or "pro remedio animae" (for the remedy of the soul), funded privately to ensure prayers for the owner's soul. These private churches underwent significant changes starting in the mid-16th century with the Council of Trent, which required high standards of decorum, often leading to their conversion to secular uses. The high concentration of such places on the northern slope of the Civita might be due to the low housing density in the Middle Ages and the proximity to a "Coemeterium" (cemetery) near the Cathedral.

Site Accessories

Collapses have given both cavities a disorganized appearance. In the left cavity, there is a large circular pit at the entrance, possibly for storage or production after its use as a place of worship. A similar pit is found at the back of the right pseudo-nave, serving wine presses (*torchi*). The presence of a press in each nave is recognizable by the slots for wooden beams and the central "endless" screw (Figs. 4 and 5).

To the right of the monumental arch is a structure that looks like a bell-shaped cistern but lacks waterproofing plaster (*cocciopesto*) and has a double bottom. These features suggest it was a *neviera* (ice house) for collecting ice. Ice was crucial for food preservation and health uses, such as lowering body temperature during epidemics.

The Wine Cellar

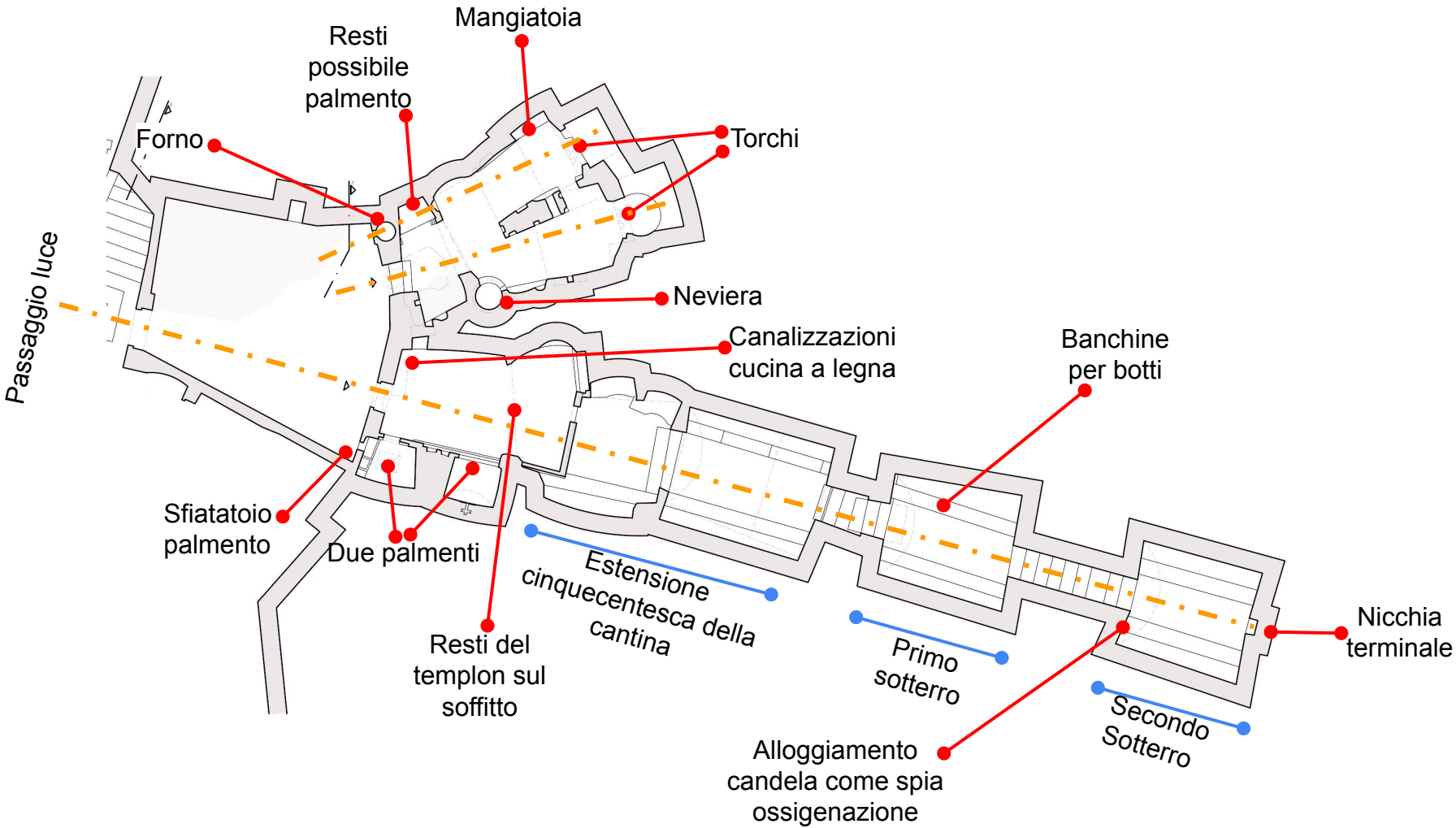
The presence of *palmenti* (vats for treading grapes) and wine presses makes it certain that the cavities were later used as cellars for wine production and storage. The right cave clearly shows the typical layout of 16th-century Materan cellars, with rooms for barrels and deep "sotterri" (underground levels). These deep environments maintained a constant temperature of 15°C year-round, ideal for wine. They were designed to be illuminated by diffused daylight while avoiding direct sunlight, which would raise the temperature. A small niche at the back of the deepest level certified that the excavation was done correctly according to the projection of light from the entrance.

The Recent Decades

After the decline of wine production in the late 19th century due to phylloxera, the cavities were converted into homes for agricultural laborers. Traces of this domestic use include a manger for a mule in the left cave and flue pipes for a wood stove in the right cave (Figs. 9 and 10). In 1954, the state expropriated the properties, moving the owners to Borgo La Martella. Recently, the Sextantio group has carried out a conservative restoration of the site after seventy years of abandonment.

Legend of the Plan (Fig. 9):

- **Passaggio luce**: Light passage
- **Forno**: Oven
- **Sfiatatoio palmento**: Vat vent
- **Resti possibile palmento**: Remains of a possible vat
- **Mangiatoia**: Manger
- **Torchi**: Presses
- **Neviera**: Ice house
- **Canalizzazioni cucina a legna**: Wood stove flues
- **Banchine per botti**: Barrel benches
- **Due palmenti**: Two vats
- **Estensione cinquecentesca della cantina**: 16th-century cellar extension
- **Resti del templon sul soffitto**: Remains of the *templon* on the ceiling
- **Primo sotterro**: First underground level
- **Alloggiamento candela come spia ossigenazione**: Candle holder for oxygen monitoring
- **Secondo Sotterro**: Second underground level
- **Nicchia terminale**: Terminal niche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