

## The Grotta dei Cervi (Otranto – Lecce)

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**ABSTRACT** – Warburg (1988) offers an interesting interpretative approach to the images of Grotta dei Cervi by the notion of the concept of 'survival'. We can read them as the images of memory which acquire other meanings every time they are brought back to the present flow.

**IZVLEČEK** – Warburg (1988) ponuja s konceptom 'preživetja' zanimivo pojasnitev podob v Grotta dei Cervi. Jamske poslikave lahko razumemo kot podobe spomina, ki vedno znova spreminjajo svoj pomen.

**KEY WORDS** – Neolithic; art; Grotta dei Cervi; Italy

In the art of the Grotta dei Cervi and therefore of the Neolithic period, Graziosi (1980) believes that two trends can be recognised: the first is simplification, the tendency to contract reality into simple graphemes in order to make their meaning more immediate; the other is the tendency to complication, by which a real subject is made more obscure, thus expressing its immaterial essence. On the other hand, Whitehouse (1992) sees in this a reproduction of roles in Neolithic societies: the woman corresponds to nature, the man to culture, since the former is always depicted in her biological nudity, and the latter is always depicted with artefacts or weapons such as the bow. The cave, therefore, must have been used by secret societies of men for initiation rituals which enabled them to exert control and power over women. Finally, other authors generally prefer to refer to it as a place connected with initiation rituals reserved for a few prominent individuals.

From the first discoveries of prehistoric art dating back to the Upper Palaeolithic Period, all scholars have attempted the difficult task of decoding incised or painted images and signs on the walls of caves or on simple artefacts. However, the use of images as a means to interpret what their authors thought entails a series of difficulties, as has been acknowledged du-

ring a long debate in which historians of art and philosophers have participated.

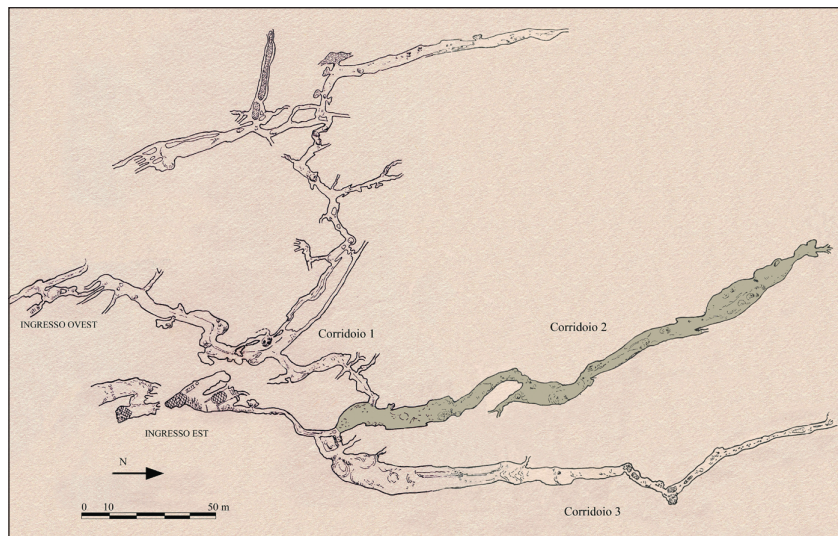
The material remains of Neolithic cultures undoubtedly show that they were societies that lived by agriculture and farming. Thus, agricultural practices played a central role, as they allowed people to have rich harvests and store food in case of shortages. In this way, the land became the main source of survival and wealth. All this, of course, does not authorize anyone to believe that there is a clear connection between living conditions and symbolic production, since the relationship between them is more complicated than it seems. Yet, many ritual practices seem to refer to the celebration of the land, as in the case of those discovered in many caves where, however, it is not always easy to distinguish cult aspects from funerary rituals. While offers of agricultural products enable us to hypothesize that agrarian cults were performed, other evidence show such a vast range of situations that it is impossible either to make a generalization or to give just one single interpretation. With its ancestral allusion to subterranean depths, the cave has always represented a powerful metaphor which has to do with the beginning and the end of everything: the Great Mother from whom everything is born and to whom every-

thing returns. A cosmic principle that regulates the universe, marking the cycle through birth, death and resurrection.

Female statuettes are the re-incarnation of this, and some authors consider many decorative motifs on pottery a re-proposal of the goddess (*Coppola 1999–2000; Grifoni Cremonesi 2004*).

It is a fact that the ideological world of Neolithic societies has come down to us through a discontinuous and heterogeneous documentation, such as the one regarding social and political organization and the consequent power relations inside the communities. It is normal, therefore, that the possibility to interpret their embedded meanings is limited compared with the various evidence of funerary and cult rituals. Nevertheless, it is not inappropriate to remember that such difficulty – even more present in prehistory – concerns all historical periods when having to deal with the immaterial world and all its unexpressed concepts. In fact, because of its nature, symbolic activity is irreconcilable with the ordered and hierarchical world of reason, since it draws from the subconscious of countless experiences, of which there is no trace in the records or in archaeological findings.

In the case of the Grotta dei Cervi several authors agree that the images may be of help. But it is known



**Fig. 1. Grotta dei Cervi: plan (after Graziosi 1980).**

that images are also deceitful witnesses, whose content is often untranslatable into words able to convey their meaning. Even representations defined as realistic – the reference is to the hunting scenes in the Grotta dei Cervi – hide various views that are linked to different perceptions of the world and that alternated and stratified throughout time. It is also inappropriate to attempt to find particular meanings in the abstract images, such as the cruciform, spiral-shaped images or the various compositions with geometric motifs. Yet, there is one more possible declination of the image which produces results irreducible neither to its supposed reproduction of reality nor to its nature as a symbol permanently connected to its fixity. The key to avoid these two possibilities is offered by Aby Warburg (1988) and, in particular, by his known and controversial notion of 'survival' (Nachleben) (*cfr. Didi-Huberman 2006.51–59*) as a

statute of images. The time of images is the time of 'survival': not a way to deny the incidence of historical time, but an attempt to correct the evolutive linear conception, acknowledging that during history a mixture of heterogeneous temporal factors also play a role. This mixture disrupts the definition of styles based on 'the spirit of the time' (*Zeitgeist*), since the 'ghosts' (*Ge-spens*) of a remote and never forgotten past merge with it.



**Fig. 2. Grotta dei Cervi: red paintings on the cave wall at the entrance (after Graziosi 1980).**

The action of an image which survives its time is, in other





**Fig. 3. Grotta dei Cervi: red paintings on the cave wall at the entrance (after Graziosi 1980).**

words, that of remembering that there is no past which deposits itself passively in the record of time, but it creeps under the earth like a karstic river along a path with gaps and latent presences, anachronisms and survivals. It is not, as mistakenly thought, the idea of an eternal return, or of archetypes, which in their immutability explain nothing.

What is, then, the meaning of an image that goes beyond its time? Differing from Panofsky, who wanted to understand the meaning of images (according to Warburg), an image, more than being deciphered, needs to be comprehended in its evocative energy. According to Panofsky (1999), the levels of interpretation of an image are threefold: the pre-iconographic level, by which the 'natural' meaning is identified, things and events represented in the image; the iconographic level, which allows the identification of characters and personifications; the third level, the iconological, aims at interpreting the orientations and basic principles of an epoch. Although following independent paths, many scholars of prehistoric art have come to this approach in an attempt to interpret it. Some of the best-known cases are those of Leroi-Gourhan (1965) for the Palaeolithic period and Gimbutas (1982) for the Neolithic period. Even though he later denied it, Leroi-Gourhan believed he had caught – in the art of the Upper Palaeolithic period – a binary representation of the cosmos through the juxtapo-

sition of the masculine and feminine principle exemplified by the relative images. Similarly to Leroi-Gourhan, other authors have drawn from the images of the Upper Palaeolithic period a sort of 'spirit of the time', identified occasionally with the magic of hunting, shamanism etc. (Ingravallo 2006). Gimbutas, instead, has come to the conclusion that the character of a Great Goddess was at the centre of religious conceptions in the Neolithic period in Europe. A Great Goddess thanks to whom Neolithic Europe was to be matrilineal, rural and sedentary.

The risk in similar reconstructions is to reduce to a presumed homogeneity the complexity of periods such as the Palaeolithic and the Neolithic, which lasted thousands of years.

It is on this issue that one may agree with Warburg: the knowledge of an epoch determined by its images is illusory, especially when one tries to investigate the symbolic meanings and come to a solution of the rebuses they embody. Images, those of prehistory, are not meant to fill our gaps. But they 'survive', as they continue to produce rebus chains, challenging a science, such as prehistoric research, which aims at surveying the obscure and unreachable depths of our culture. Here images, stories and legends conceived in unmemorable times acquire other meanings every time they are brought back into the present flow.

The morphological identity which they share is often in contrast with the heterogeneity of their con-



**Fig. 4. Grotta dei Cervi: brown paintings on the cave wall in the second corridor (after Graziosi 1980).**





**Fig. 5. Grotta dei Cervi: hand stencils (after Graziosi 1980).**

texts, and this shows that history had a role behind their forms, in the sense that every context declined them in the way it wanted. While describing the images of the Grotta dei Cervi, though aware of the geographical and sometimes chronological distance, Graziosi (1980) found some similarities with Balkan, Aegean and Anatolian civilizations. Behind this appearance of kinship it is logical to perceive a circuit of exchanges and contacts among cultures which, after thousands of years of sedimentation, have been able to produce isomorphisms. Whether these have also been realised among other cultures in other periods of history is an open question concerning the limits of knowledge of human history. Today, in images of prehistory it is possible to admire their evocative force, comparable to that of mythical characters with the eternal charm conveyed by their countless disguises. Similarly, the 'survival' of the images of

the Grotta dei Cervi is due to their metamorphic capability, which is able to dissolve in thousands of variations, none of which is imprisoned by metaphors fixed throughout time. 'Realistic' motifs and 'abstract' compositions are arrayed on the walls, becoming part of the walls themselves, and with them they perform an enchanting game with which they accompany, perhaps, an initiation path which ends in the room with hand prints.

'*Pathos formulas*', Warburg would say, in which form and content are indissolubly intertwined and in which various times blend and continue to convey emotions and tensions.

The iconographic apparatus of the Grotta dei Cervi cannot be easily deciphered. It offers a cosmic abundance of shapes which can be interpreted and re-interpreted to create the stories of human lives with an unceasing proliferation

of rebuses. In this apparatus the social actors of that time could recognise themselves. By sharing myths and stories transmitted in versions that were never the same, they found a meaning to their own existence.

Images of these people remain and they bring 'ghosts' back to life. If today we still continue to tell their



**Fig. 6. Grotta dei Cervi: anthropomorphic and cruciform motifs (after Graziosi 1980).**



story, it is because in the intertwinement between the world of the living and the world of the dead there is an invisible relationship which links one to the other. What is our research into the past if not

another way of asking the dead for a past which legitimises us in exchange for a future that commemorates them?

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