BEFORE WRITING

Sacred Landscapes and the Power of Narratives in the Bronze Age Sanctuary of Madonna di Loreto (Trinitapoli, Italy)

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Memory was not written
It was performed

Context and Research Problem

The prehistoric sanctuary of Madonna di Loreto at Trinitapoli (Apulia, southern Italy) represents one of the most significant ritual landscapes of the Mediterranean Bronze Age. Extending across approximately five hectares, the site is characterised by a complex system of monumental hypogea connected to fertility cults, cosmological observation, and cyclical agricultural practices, dating from the eighteenth to the tenth century BCE.

Despite its scientific relevance, such contexts often remain confined within specialist discourse, with limited impact on contemporary cultural identity. The central issue is therefore not the lack of data, but the difficulty of transforming archaeological knowledge into accessible and shared narrative forms.

Aim

This contribution proposes to interpret the Archaeological Park and the Museum of the Hypogea as narrative environments, capable of activating processes of cultural recognition within contemporary communities.

Prehistoric sanctuaries offer a unique condition: the possibility of constructing narratives that precede writing, grounded in gestures, spatial practices, and the repetition of ritual actions rather than textual sources.

Methodology and Case Study

The analysis adopts an integrated approach combining stratigraphic reading of archaeological contexts, functional analysis of hypogeal structures, and contextual interpretation of material evidence, in dialogue with public archaeology and heritage communication.

Within this framework, the sanctuary of Trinitapoli represents a long-term ritual landscape. The hypogea—monumental underground structures accessed through dromoi and corridors—lead to chambers associated with complex ceremonial practices. Archaeological evidence suggests activities related to fertility rituals, life–death cycles, deposition practices, and possible astronomical observation, attesting to a stable and enduring ritual system.

Results and Discussion: "Memory Before Writing"

This continuity can be interpreted as a form of pre-textual memory: a system of cultural transmission based on the repetition of meaningful actions. Ritual practices such as lighting fires, performing sacrifices, burying the dead, and entering the earth through sacred architecture constituted a shared symbolic language.

Archaeology enables the reconstruction of these behavioural sequences and their translation into narratives capable of conveying fundamental human experiences such as survival, belonging, and continuity.

From this perspective, the sanctuary emerges as a narrative landscape in which scientific research, heritage communication, and community engagement converge. Narrative archaeology thus restores the past as a shared cultural experience, making heritage not only visible, but culturally active.

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