

The Umbrian cave of Grotta Bella. The diachronic evolution of a meeting place

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ABSTRACT

In the absence of broad Italic ethnicities and clear-cut territorial boundaries, sanctuaries played a vital aggregative role in the life of peoples, often acting as poles around which local communities formed. Sanctuaries in antiquity, especially in the pre-Roman period, were rarely manmade structures. Evidence of early ritual activity can be found in or near watercourses, lakes, mountains, and caves. By virtue of their liminal and otherworldly characteristics (obscurity, humidity, permanency, and silence), able to condition humans' psycho-emotional sphere, caves stand out from other places within the landscape. They inspire imagination and trigger the innate human curiosity to explore hidden spaces. Perhaps not coincidentally, Plato used the evocative context of a natural and dimly lit cave to allegorically represent the intelligible nature of human life. Caves are not only geographic features but also cultural constructs that can become highly charged symbols in identity construction and in the development of communal complexity and territoriality.

Using new speleological and archaeological data as well as a cross-cutting temporal approach, this paper analyses how the cave of Grotta Bella, in Umbria, Central Italy, functioned as a place of human gatherings across time: first as a temporary dwelling, then as a funerary space, and, lastly, as a sacred space. In this last phase, and possibly also due to the long-lasting memory of its previous functions, the cave appears to have had a distinctive connection to the surrounding territory, anchoring the identities of those who participated in the ritual that took place within this underground space.

KEYWORDS

Cave archaeology; sacred spaces; votive offerings; pre-Roman Italy.

INTRODUCTION

The investigation of cult places presents a unique opportunity for understanding broader issues of cultural continuity and change. As has been widely demonstrated by scholars working on the ancient communities of central and southern Italy, the people that lived in the areas surrounding sacred spaces and the fortified centres nearby, used those spaces not only to express their religious sentiments but also to gather together as a community (BRADLEY - GLINISTER 2013; DI FAZIO 2018).¹

Inspired by De Polignac's work on Greek sanctuaries (DE POLIGNAC 1995), numerous scholars have maintained that sacred spaces in central and central-southern Italy functioned

1 Some sanctuaries, such as Lucus Feroniae on the border between Ager Capenas and the Tyrrhenian port sanctuaries at Gravisca and Pyrgi, Sabinum seem to have held prominent roles as gathering points between different cultural groups. Some others had the function of strengthening the political bonds between entire communities. Well-known examples include the Temple of Jupiter Latiaris on the Alban Hill, the Fanum Voltumane at Orvieto (ancient Volsinii), and the sanctuary at Pietrabbondante.

as markers of the territorial boundaries of certain communities.² This interpretation seems, however, to overlook the difficulties of tracing ethnic boundaries in the archaeological record. As recent work has emphasized, ethnic boundaries in pre-Roman Italy were blurred, and local cultural identities appear to have been more predominant than ethnic and political ones (JONES 1997; SCOPACASA 2018; PEREGO 2014; LOMAS 2009; BRADLEY 2000b). Indeed, in the absence of clear-cut ethnic boundaries and full-fledged urban centres, sanctuaries appear rather to have functioned as poles of aggregation around which communities formed. A case can be made for this role in Umbria where cemeteries and votive objects existed before the formation of urban centres between the 4th and the 2nd centuries BCE.

In this paper, we report the results of archaeological and speleological work that we conducted in the cave of Grotta Bella, in the Italian region of Umbria, tracing the diachronic development of this multi-functional space. Evidence of votive activity performed in pre-Roman times highlights the connection between the sacred space and the community living in the nearby territory. Our research further supports the possibility that the use of local sanctuaries may have strengthened a sense of belonging to specific communities and may even have played a role in the formation of communal identity.

GEOGRAPHIC SETTING AND DESCRIPTION OF THE CAVE

The site lies on the north-eastern slope of the Monte L'Aiola (756 m.a.s.l.). This mountain is the easternmost extension of the Monti Amerini chain, between Monte Castellari to the south and Monte Pianicel Grande to the north. It now makes up the territory of Avigliano Umbro, eight kilometres from the town of Amelia (ancient Ameria) and some two kilometres east of the village of Santa Restituta (**Pl. 1/1**).

A slanting depression on the slope of the mountain constitutes the cave entrance, which is hidden from view due to the thick vegetation growing on all sides (**Pl. 1/2**). The entrance of the cave leads to a vast area of collapsed layers, illuminated by the daylight that enters from the surface (LAROCCA 2022). This first room is massive: the major axis measures 40 m and the minor axis 30 m; its average height is about 10 m. In the innermost sector, a hole opens on the vault in the rock. It rejoins the surface after a few metres, although only through cracks inaccessible to humans. If, at immediate contact with the entrance, the hall is relatively flat, along the southern perimeter it declines steeply with a series of dips and abrupt drops. This underground sector is characterized by a large number of calcite concretions: stubby stalactites hang from the walls and the rocky vault, causing intense dripping water during rainy seasons; below, in the innermost depths of the cavity, there are numerous stalagmite formations, stalactite-stalagmite columns and abundant patches of white calcite.

From the most sunken sector of the Entrance Hall, three distinct tunnels continue on into the cave. Each of them has been given a conventional name: 1) Via delle Strettoie (Narrow Passages Route); 2) Ramo Delle Firme (Signature Branch); and 3) Condotta Preistorica (Prehistoric Passageway). The Via delle Strettoie is a branch characterized by a sequence of low walkways, which can be crossed only by experienced speleologists. It flows into a tunnel of significant size, only recently explored and for this reason still absent from the plan shown in **Fig. 1**.

2 According to de Polignac, extra-urban sanctuaries of the 8th and 7th centuries BCE were founded to assert territorial control and mark boundaries between separate communities. Comparable interpretations that follow this territorial model have been put forth for central and central-southern Italy.

GROTTA BELLA - 19 U/TR

(Santa Restituta of Avigliano Umbro, Terni)

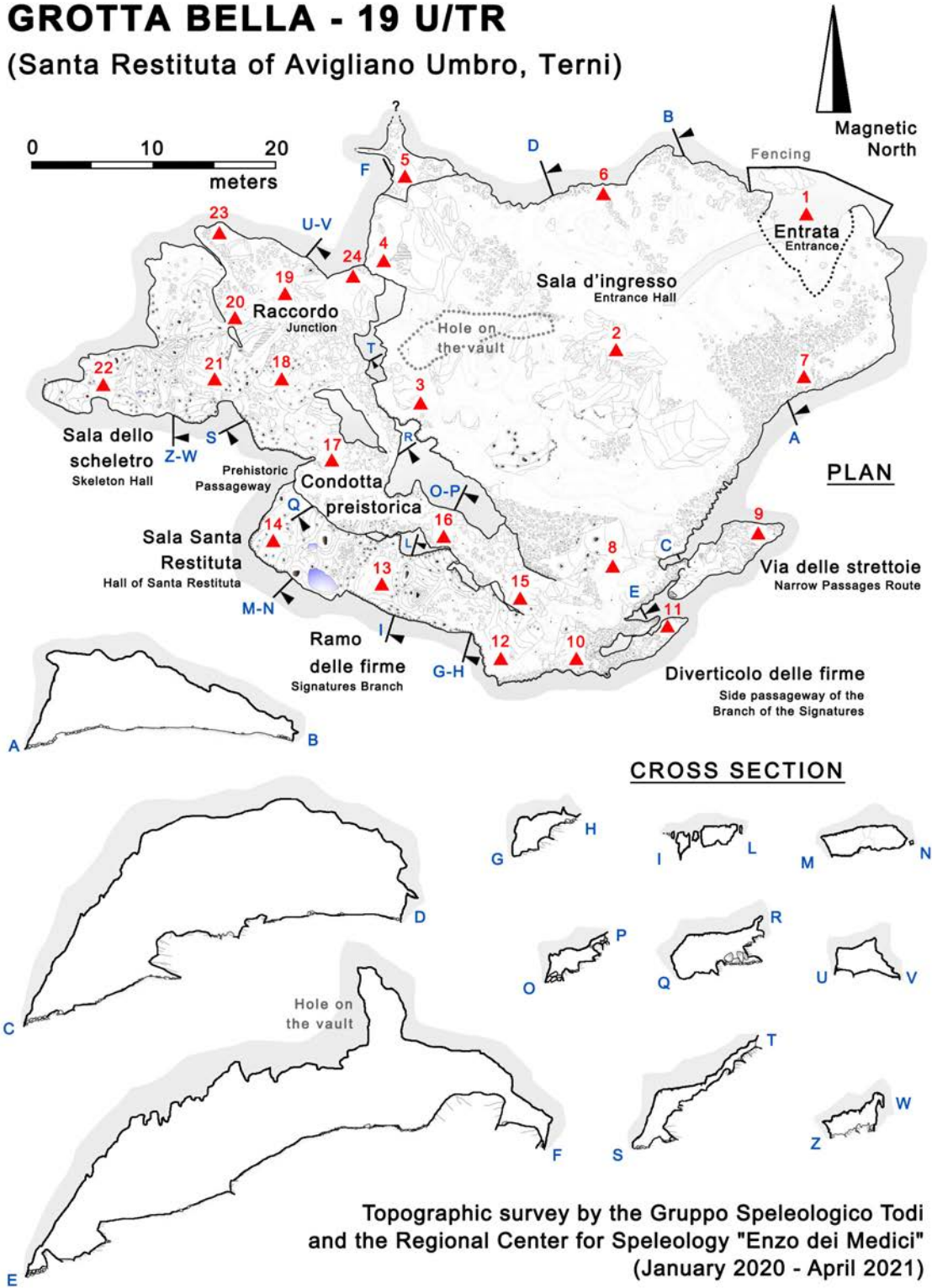


Fig. 1: Planimetry and cross sections of the cave derived from the most recent topographic survey (drawing by F. Spiganti and F. Breglia).

The Ramo delle Firme is one of the deepest parts of the cave. This passage owes its name to the curious fact that almost all of the rock walls are covered with signatures and inscriptions, left by former visitors to the site as a reminder of their underground descent. Though decades and, in some cases, even centuries have passed, names and dates are mostly still clearly legible. The Signature Branch ends inside the so-called 'Santa Restituta Hall', which lies at a depth of 30 m compared to the entrance elevation.

The Condotta Preistorica owes its name to the identification of macroscopic traces of human frequentation found in the collapse layers on the ground and walls. Here, abundant remains of impasto pottery can be linked to the first use of the cave in the prehistoric period, when human groups descended down this branch – completely obscure due its distance from the surface – and went on to reach even deeper areas. These include the so-called Sala dello Scheletro (Skeleton Hall), a small chamber used as a prehistoric burial ground, as recent research has highlighted. The Sala dello Scheletro, further discussed below, is located at 31 m below the entrance elevation and represents the deepest underground area among those known today.

New topographical investigations in the cave allow the assessment of an overall planimetric development of 238 m (the spatial development is 262 m), with 31 m of maximum vertical drop with respect to the entrance.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND SPELEOLOGICAL EXPLORATIONS

The dates visible in the Signature Branch show that Grotta Bella has been continuously visited throughout the past three centuries. The first known historical reference to the cave's existence, however, dates to 1902, when the geologist Bernardino Lotti had the opportunity to visit it. In a note, he briefly described the underground rooms and mentioned the discovery of a small terracotta head from the Roman period that he found in the Entrance Hall. In addition, he recalled the presence of some tunnels located in the deepest part of the cave that he did not dare to explore alone (LOTTI 1902).

The first scientific exploration of the cave and its innermost recesses took place half a century later. At the end of the 1950s, the site attracted the attention of the Gruppo Grotte Pipistrelli CAI of Terni (cavers from Terni, Umbria). The speleologists from Terni, in addition to visiting most of the hypogeal environments, carried out the first topographical examination of the space and surveyed the site in the Catasto delle Grotte dell'Umbria (Cadastral of Umbrian caves, identification position: 19 U/TR). As a result of the speleological investigation, the cave was thoroughly described. At the same time, the presence of ancient artifacts, revealed by clandestine diggers, spurred professional archaeological interest for the first time (MATTIOLI 1968).

In 1970, the Soprintendenza alle Antichità dell'Umbria in collaboration with the Department of Human Paleontology and Palethnology of the University of Milan began the first archaeological investigation of the cave. During four consecutive campaigns, the research effort was concentrated on one external trench and three internal ones. In one of these internal trenches, the excavation of a deep stratigraphic sequence, explored to a depth of seven metres from the surface, allowed for the identification of three phases of occupation of the space (GUERRESCHI *et al.* 1992). The site had been inhabited from Neolithic times (5000–3000 BCE) until the late Bronze Age (1200–1000 BCE) and became a cult place from the Archaic to the end of the Imperial period (6th century BCE to 4th century CE). From the 1st century CE to the 4th century CE, however, the votive offerings noticeably decreased compared to the previous centuries, suggesting more episodic use of the sacred space.

In the 1990s, after a decade in which the cave appears to have been widely forgotten and its stratigraphy disturbed by looters, it became a regular destination of the Gruppo Speleologico Todi. This group explored the entire underground system and discovered a number of new areas. In particular, in the deepest parts of the cave they revealed the presence of a room with a large scattering of human skeletal remains. Here, they found a skull embedded on the base of a massive stalagmite – hence the name Sala dello Scheletro (Skeleton Hall). Unfortunately, this discovery was not followed by a thorough survey of the cave, and, once again, several decades passed before archaeological work in the cave resumed.

In 2019–2021, archaeologists and anthropologists from the Regional Centre of Speleology ‘Enzo dei Medici’, an organization specializing in speleo-archaeological research, and the aforementioned Gruppo Speleologico Todi investigated anew the Sala dello Scheletro. They ascertained the archaeological importance of the site and rekindled scientific interest in the historical stratification of the cave.

HUMAN FREQUENTATIONS IN THE PRE-PROTOHISTORIC PERIOD

Human frequentation from the pre- and protohistoric period, between the 5th and the 2nd millennium is evident both in the first rooms (entrance and Entrance Hall) and in the deepest rooms (secondary branches). The excavation campaigns carried out in 1970–1973 in the Entrance Hall revealed a dual phase of Neolithic frequentation of the site; the oldest connected to the Sasso di Furbara culture and the most recent to the Ripoli culture. Evidence for the Early Bronze Age (Umbro-Tosco-Latium facies) and for the Middle to the Final Bronze Age emerged from the ensuing stratigraphical layers (GUERRESCHI *et al.* 1992).

The morphology of the site, with a vast and hospitable hall adjoining the entrance, must have been deemed suitable for habitation by the first human groups that came into contact with the cave. The general condition of the main underground environment (the present Entrance Hall), in fact, lent itself well to human habitation, temporary or permanent. The factors which seem to have most facilitated human occupation in this space are the almost flat terrain, the diffuse light coming from the near surface, the shelter-effect created by the rocky vault, and even the possibility of an on-site water supply in certain seasons (due to the dense dripping from the stalactites hanging from the vault and walls) (Pl. 1/3). Indeed, evidence of trichrome painted wares, stone millstones, worked flints and obsidian, polished stone tools, and even a few metal tools (from the protohistoric phases) as well as the presence of several hearths near the entrance and faunal remains of leftover meals, point to the residential function performed by this sector of the cave (Pl. 1/4).

Although remains of human bone from the Ripoli culture have been found in the initial part of the cave, they were scattered and by no means indicative of a burial. The most recent investigations, however, revealed that there was a full burial site in the cave, the aforementioned Sala dello Scheletro, and the contrast with the use of space above makes the room of exceptional interest. This hall represents one of the deepest underground districts of Grotta Bella: this place, far from the surface and secluded, can only be reached by walking through a series of completely dark tunnels. The room has a major axis of 10 metres and a minor axis of 4, while the height varies from 2 to 5 metres. Heavy, dripping water caused concretions, resulting in an environment entirely filled with stalactites, stalagmites, and calcite flows. At the base of the stalagmites, the presence of bones points to the use of the area as a burial site. A human skull covered by a stalagmite has been the object of anthropological studies, which

assigned it to a young person aged 6 to 12 years (**Pl. 1/5**).³ Other bones belonging to the same individual are still cemented under conspicuous calcium carbonate flows and can be discerned through narrow fissures between boulders and stalagmites. At a short distance from the skull, additional skeletal evidence was uncovered scattered over an area of about 11 square metres. The evidence seems to relate to at least nine distinct individuals, five infants and four adults (LAROCCA 2022). The chronological horizon of these burials is most likely prehistoric, as suggested by a number of artifacts found in the immediate vicinity: earthenware vessels laid along the rock walls, together with flint blades, and bone awls (the latter perhaps related to the clothing of the deceased or to the transportation systems used to transfer the corpses to this remote underground location) (**Pl. 1/6**).⁴

The evidence discussed above clearly shows the spatial division of the cave during the prehistoric period, with a living area located at the entrance of the cavity and a burial area secluded in the deepest part of the cave. Above, in immediate contact with the surface, was the world of the living; below, the world of the dead, arguably not intended for open viewing, since it was situated in the deepest, darkest, and most restricted part of the underground cave. The location of the burial ground in the innermost part of the cave, reachable only by overcoming uncomfortable and winding paths, does not exclude, however, that the presence of humans in that part of the cavity could also have had a cultic significance, a usage in line with interpretative trends on the human/cave relationship during prehistory and protohistory suggested by some authors.⁵ To this point, however, we cannot give a definite answer at present. Investigations are still at an early stage, and many useful elements for reaching a reliable interpretation of the context (for example, a consideration of the type of material culture found in association) still require further analysis.

ARCHAIC PERIOD

After an interruption in use during the protohistoric age, the main chamber of the cave was given a new function starting in the 6th century BCE. The presence of votive deposits evidences a transition from a space of habitation to a theatre of ritual practices connected to the psychic sphere and closely linked to religious sentiments. It is no wonder that the cave, with its liminal quality of a space and located at the edge of inhabited landscapes – between above and below, inside and outside, the sacred and the profane – lent itself to highly ritualized activities that involved communication between two worlds.⁶ Furthermore, it is possible that the memory of earlier site occupation may have played an important role in the decision to use the cave

3 Anthropological analysis was possible thanks to the direct on-site study conducted by Dr. Alessandra Cinti.

4 Radiometric dating of the funerary context is currently in progress.

5 WHITEHOUSE 1992; PACCIARELLI 1997.

6 From the Caribbean to the Mediterranean, caves have a long history as centres of cult and religion and as such are acknowledged as a significant part of the archaeological evidence. For an overview on the diachronic ritual of caves see: MOYES 2012. A thorough discussion on the meaning of cave spaces and votive materials in the 1st millennium BCE Greece and southern Italy see: KATSAROU – NAGEL eds. 2021. In the specific context of the Italian peninsula, the funerary and cultic frequentation of caves seems to begin in the Bronze Age (Tane del Diavolo near Orvieto and the Gola di Frasassi) to then decrease during the Iron Age. Starting in the 6th century BCE, cults in caves appear to be widespread until the Hellenistic period (Grotta de Re Tiberio in Riolo Terme, Grotta del Colle di Rapino in Chieti). In ancient Umbria, the only known sacred cave dated to these periods is Grotta Bella. On these and other caves in ancient Italy, see PACCIARELLI 1997. Although cults in natural

as a ritual space, and perhaps even served to legitimize its sacralization.⁷ Further, as Tilley convincingly argued, the material properties of stone, from its varied texture and colour to its surface, must have had an impact on the way people experienced and interacted with the cave visually, acoustically, and sensorily.⁸

The cult place appears to have been connected to a system of settlements whose fortifications have been identified on the summit of the Amerine hills: on Monte Castellari and Monte Pianicel Grande. The fortified areas defined by these defensive walls controlled the east-west routes that connected the southern Umbrian centres of Tuder and Ameria with central Etruria. The fulcrum of this territorial organization was the Umbrian town of Ameria, where a permanent settlement seems to have existed since at least the 6th century BCE. A mountainous path connected the cult place with both the Tiber valley and the pre-Roman routes that led to Ameria and was retraced by the Via Amerina in the 3rd century BCE.

The votive material that attests to the new ritual use of the cave in the Archaic period consists of 24 pieces of *aes rude* and 289 figurines, mostly made out of bronze and a few of lead, published by Monacchi (1988) and more recently by Zapelloni Pavia (2020).⁹ Both the fragments of *aes rude* and the figurines were found by the excavators in disturbed layers, mixed with earlier and later objects.

The vast majority of votive figurines belong to the so-called Esquiline Group, according to Colonna's conventional classification of Umbro-Sabellic votive bronzes.¹⁰ The 268 figurines of this group have flat, narrow, and relatively elongated bodies with stiff arms and legs.¹¹ The legs are very slender and have pointed endings; the head is also elongated, with eyes indicated by two grooves and the mouth by an incision; the arms' endings are sometimes characterized by transverse grooves to indicate the fingers. There are 30 females, 203 males, and 35 warriors. Females are depicted wearing a long tunic; males are naked with clear genital protuberances; warriors bear a highly schematic crest on their heads and their right arms are pierced to make space for a spear.

A similar schematic design characterizes 15 figurines representing animals. These consist of six cows, one goat, two sheep, five pigs, and one unidentifiable animal. Standard features of the type are elongated bodies, pointed feet, and anatomical details rendered by grooves or by small circles carved in the bronze. Additionally, two figurines of the so-called Nocera Umbra Group represent warriors, identifiable by the presence of the helmet and a hole for a spear. Their bodies are filiform, flat, and presented schematically, with only the crest on the heads

places are common in ancient Umbria, the only known sacred cave dated to these periods is Grotta Bella: AMANN 2015.

- 7 The link between Umbrian archaic sanctuaries and earlier sites has been noted by Bradley (1987, 114; BRADLEY 2000a, 63) and Stoddart (1994, 152) who reasonably connected it to similar situations in Greece and Latium, where it was not unusual to legitimize the sacralization of a place by appealing to its antiquity.
- 8 TILLEY 2004.
- 9 The plain back of the figurines suggests that they were cast in a one-sided mould, see below **Fig. 8**.
- 10 Giovanni Colonna (1970) categorized votive groups according to their stylistic affinities and named the groups after their find sites, even if this was not their likely place of manufacturing. They go from a low level of sophistication, with figurines of the so-called 'Esquiline Group' (COLONNA 1970, 103), 'Amelia group' (COLONNA 1970, 90–93), and the 'Nocera Umbra group' (COLONNA 1970, 100), to figures of the stylistically more sophisticated 'Foligno Group'. Figurines of animals and anatomical parts are not considered by Colonna.
- 11 The number does not include small fragments whose attribution to specific figurines remains problematic.



Fig. 2: Bronze figurines representing males, females, and warriors; Esquiline Group (photos by A. Zapelloni Pavia and F. Larocca).

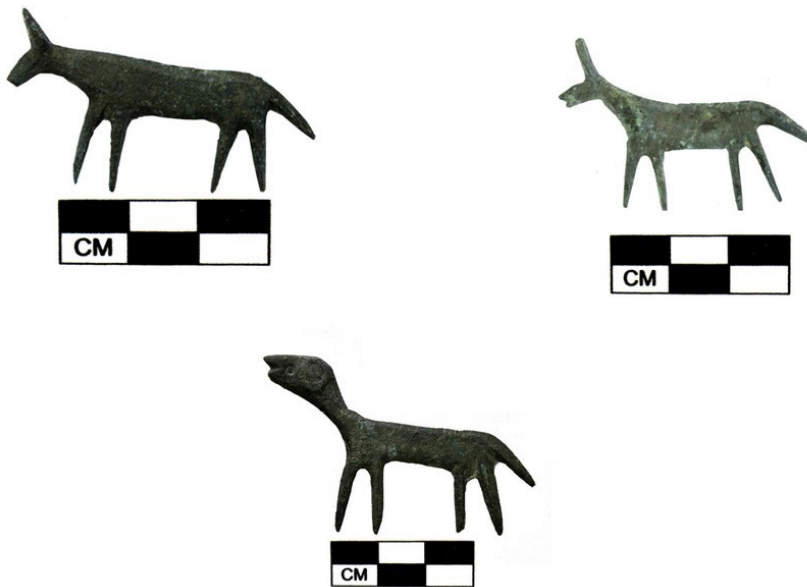


Fig. 3: Bronze animal figurines (photo by A. Zapelloni Pavia).

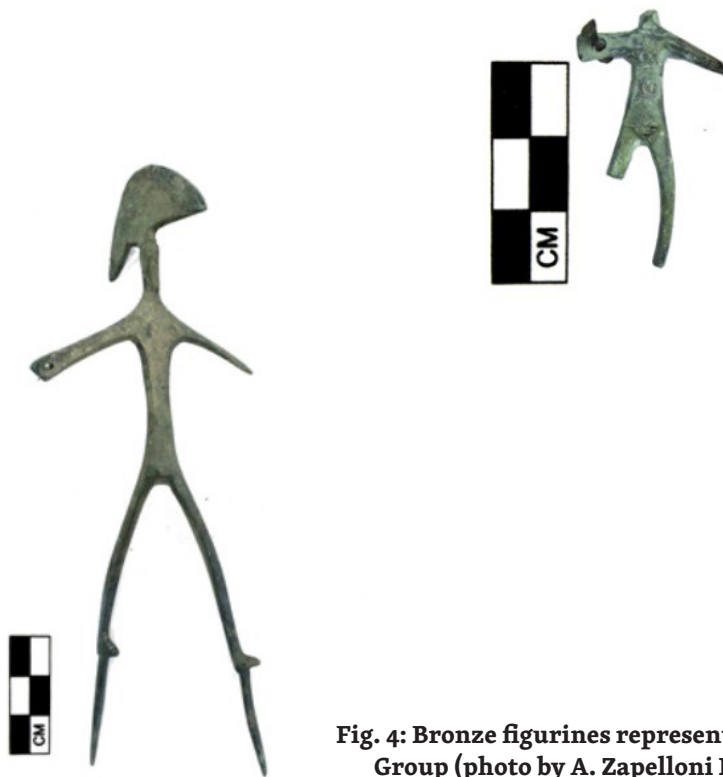


Fig. 4: Bronze figurines representing warriors, Nocera Umbra Group (photo by A. Zapelloni Pavia).

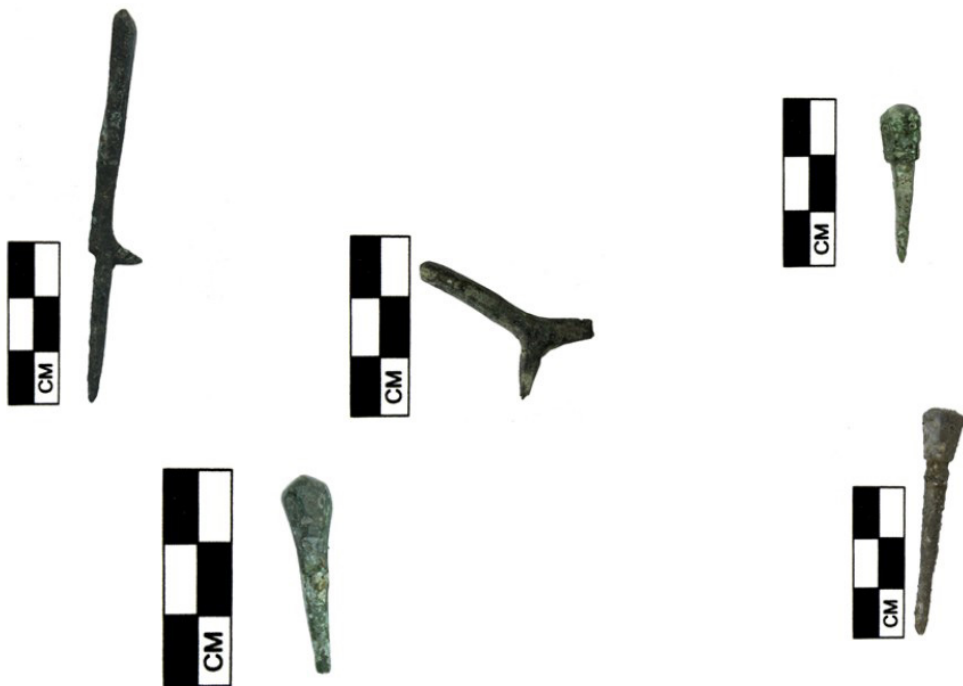


Fig. 5: Bronze figurines representing heads and anatomical parts (photo by A. Zapelloni Pavia).

rendered three-dimensionally. Arms and legs are opened wide, and anatomical details are rendered with small grooves, similar to the Esquiline Group. There is an indication of feet, but these lack any detail.

Three votives present schematic heads and four reproduce anatomical parts of the body. The heads of the former group are extremely schematic with eyes marked by small grooves and the mouth by a small horizontal incision. The neck is elongated and spiked at the end. The anatomical parts consist of two legs, one foot, and one arm. The legs are extremely filiform, with little distinction between the upper and lower part. The foot is equally schematic with no rendering of the toes. The arm is represented as outstretched and is supported at the elbow's level by a spike; due to a break running above the wrist, the hand is missing.

LEAD SHIELDS AND HUMAN FIGURINES

While the types of bronze figurative votives mentioned above have been found abundantly in Umbrian sanctuaries, some figurines found in the cave are unique to this cult place and to the Pantanelli sanctuary, located some six kilometres from Grotta Bella, and do not have any comparisons in the Italian peninsula. These are made of lead and show six females, seven warriors, and nine decorated miniature shields. As suggested by Monacchi (1988), the shields would have been originally moulded together with the male figurines, who must, therefore, have been at least nine.

Both female and male figures are represented in profile, except the bust which is frontal. The former group wears a long tunic decorated either with a zig-zag motif or with wavy lines, visible also on the back. The hair is held in a sort of ponytail, and the anatomical details are rendered with small embossed circles. The male figurines are shown with wide-open legs and wear short chitoniskos and armour with shoulder straps held by bosses. Their right arms are lifted as if in the act of throwing a spear or holding a sword.



Fig. 6: Lead figurines representing males and females (photo by A. Zapelloni Pavia).



Fig. 7: Lead shields (photo by A. Zapelloni Pavia; shield with gorgoneion after MONACCHI 1988, tav. 36).

The shields are decorated on both sides. While the back of all the specimens shows an arm fastened to the shield, the front, the *episema*, shows one of three possible motifs. The first one, attested on six specimens, consists of three schematic figures with outstretched arms arranged in a circle under a bare tree with several wavy branches. Embossed circles fill the space and are arranged circularly on the outer edge of the *episema*. The second motif is attested on a single specimen only and shows a gorgoneion with wide open eyes, a long nose, and thin mouth with its tongue extended. The outer edge of the *episema* is decorated with a zig-zag pattern. The last motif, also attested only on one specimen, depicts a central circle surrounded by what seem to be either waves or rays.

The closest comparison to our lead figurines comes from the sanctuaries of Artemis Orthia and the Menelaion in Sparta, which have yielded a number of lead figurines representing warriors, deities, and female figures dated to the mid-7th century to the mid-5th century BCE.¹² A distinctive feature of these warriors is the shield design which can consist of concentric circles around a central boss, straight lines radiating from a central boss, rosettes, or curved lines radiating from a central boss. The presence of similar votive offerings in two places in the Mediterranean illustrates how common figurative themes could be adopted to create standardized votive types that could satisfy the request of the devotees. However, some motifs seem to reflect individual choices and preferences of the worshipping communities.

The motif of the three men under a tree does not, to our knowledge, have comparisons in the votive records either in the Italian peninsula or in Greece. A similar iconographic theme is recognizable in two black-figure Athenian amphoras from Etruria dated to the middle of the 6th century BCE.¹³ One side of the body of these vases depicts three men harvesting olives.

12 In general, on Laconian lead figurines see: GILL - VICKERS 2001. On the Sanctuary of Artemis Orthia, see BRAUND - ENGSTROM 2022; LLOYD 2021; MUSKETT 2014; on the Menelaion see: CAVANAGH - LAXTON 1984.

13 BEAZLEY 1956, 273.11 and 270.50.



Fig. 8: Lead figurines from the Sanctuary of Artemis Orthia (after GILL - VICKERS 2001, fig. 2).



Fig. 9: Lead figurines from the Menelaion (after CAVANAGH - LAXTON 1984, pl. 3).

Based on the iconographic similarities, we can surmise that the shields depicting men under a tree may draw from the local activities of the area (the harvest?), but we cannot exclude that the iconography may also reflect local myths, ritual performances, or the ritual context of Grotta Bella.

Notwithstanding the uncertainties related to the iconographic and iconological meaning of these votives, the presence of the lead figurines from Grotta Bella, and the nearby Pantanelli, sheds some light on the use of the sacred cave. The absence of any familiar type of votive figurine appears to indicate an appreciation for a distinctive type of aesthetic through which the worshipping community would have singled itself out. The presence of lead figurines of men, women, and shielded warriors only at specific Umbrian sanctuaries, suggests that the use of the sacred space may have been directed towards the surrounding community. In addition to dedicating the types of votive offerings widespread in the region, the community strove to highlight its own uniqueness. Furthermore, the presence of lead and metal slag and metal working tools, could indicate that the figurines were produced *in loco*, likely, given the overall coarse rendering of both lead and bronze offerings, with only small-scale investment on the part of the worshippers.

Although we cannot make inferences on the social status of the devotees,¹⁴ the relative affordability of these objects suggests that the ritual practice of dedicating them was within the reach of different strata of the community and that people acted collectively within the sacred sphere regardless of the place they occupied in society. The low cost of these objects and the possibility for virtually the entire community to partake in the practice of dedicating votive figurines emphasizes the bond between inhabited centres and the sacred space. It is thus possible that the use of local sanctuaries may have strengthened a sense of belonging to specific communities and may have played a role in the formation of community identity.

DISPLAY OF GROTTA BELLA VOTIVE FIGURINES

Unfortunately, given the lack of information on the original depositional position of the votives, it is not possible to know with certainty where they were displayed within the cave. Nevertheless, some hypotheses can be made about the placement of the objects. As is clear from the above description of the figurative votives, all bronze figurine types have sharp points on the lower surface. The argument made by Bradley (2000a, 72) that this characteristic feature may indicate that ‘they were designed for display, probably for being fixed onto a wooden surface’ thus seems plausible. This hypothesis seems even more convincing when we consider the several nails that have been retrieved at other Umbrian sites such as the Monte Ansciano and the Colle Mori sanctuaries.¹⁵ Such items may have been either used to affix together multiple wooden planks and/or to mount them on the walls/platform of the temple, or, in the absence of a built structure, to attach them somewhere within the sacred area. It is possible that the 169 nails found at Monte Ansciano may have been used to fix a wooden plank somewhere within the precinct of the sanctuary.¹⁶

14 As Bradley (1997, 118) rightly points out, the simplistic rendering of the figurines does not necessarily imply the low status of the donor. As he notes, in fact, it could also be possible for aristocrats to dedicate many votives each.

15 For these sanctuaries see: STODDART 1994 (Monte Ansciano) and STEFANI 1935, DE VECCHI 2002, and BONOMI PONZI 2010 (Colle Mori).

16 Unlike Umbrian bronze figurines, some Etruscan and Venetic figurines have been found still attached to their original supports. In Etruria, these consist of stone bases, sometimes inscribed

Unlike the bronze figurines, the lead votives do not terminate in spikes, suggesting that they may have been displayed differently. Interestingly, thanks to the abovementioned new speleo-archaeological work undertaken in the cave, it was possible to investigate unexplored areas and closely inspect the large rocks that made up the cave. Here, hidden deep inside the fracture of one rock a lead figurine of a warrior was found broken into three parts. Although more work is needed to determine the number and type of figurines that were hidden from view, it is possible that at Grotta Bella the votive practice of dedicating figurines did not always include their public display, and that, sometimes, devotees preferred to conceal their offerings in secluded spaces where they were almost impossible to find.¹⁷ Furthermore, the fact that the hidden figurine is one of the votives that are typical of this area further differentiates them from standard, pan-regional votives and opens the possibility that a specific ritual was connected to their deposition.

CONCLUSION

Grotta Bella provides a unique glimpse into the diachronic use of a space where successive generations gathered for thousands of years, selectively creating, occupying and sacralizing a liminal point of contact with the supernatural. As a visible and permanent marker in the landscape, the cave would have functioned as a material reminder of the collective experience of the different groups who used it and who, through the retelling of narratives of place and origin over successive generations, maintained its importance. During the pre-Roman period, the presence of unique lead votive offerings and the overall low-cost of the lead and bronze figurines highlight the bond between the cave and the community living in its vicinity. In an area that had not yet been urbanized, the presence of the sanctuary may have strengthened a sense of a distinctive local identity that eventually led to a more centralized settlement system.

with the name of the donors, their affiliation names, and the recipient divinity, and could have supported as many as eight figurines, as is the case at Campo della Fiera near Orvieto. See STOPPONI 2011, 33–35. In some cases, the bases have been found without the figurines that they originally held; at Pasticcetto di Magione, pieces of the lead used to fix the figurines to their base have been found within the votive deposit (RONCALLI 1989, 122, 4.32) and at Marzabotto moulded travertine bases with traces of lead and small holes for the placement of one or two figurines is associated to the votives found at Fontile Sanctuary. Here, the preserved bases are deliberately disproportionately shaped in relation to the size of the votive figurines in order to adapt their display to the architecture of the monumental complex while at the same time making the votive offerings visible from afar (GUALANDI 1973, 63; GUALANDI 1983, 42; MANSUELLI 1983, 48–49). Similarly attached to stone bases were the bronze figurines from the Venetic sanctuaries such as the Sanctuary of Raetia (Este), where bases, ca. 50 cm in height, are sometimes moulded and accompanied by a dedication to Reitia (CHIECO BIANCHI 2002, 21), or the sanctuary at S. Pietro Montagnon (between Padua and Este), where remains of figurines held by lead to a base have been recovered (DÄMMER 1986, 65). In one isolated case in the Venetic area, at Lagole, a bronze foot is pierced at the top suggesting the possibility that it could have been hung in the sanctuary area (FOGOLARI – GAMBACURTA 2001, 153, n. 82).

17 An interesting comparison of votives hidden in a rock crevasse comes from Grotte di Pertosa, near Salerno (Campania) and was described in LAROCCA ed. 2017, 122–123.

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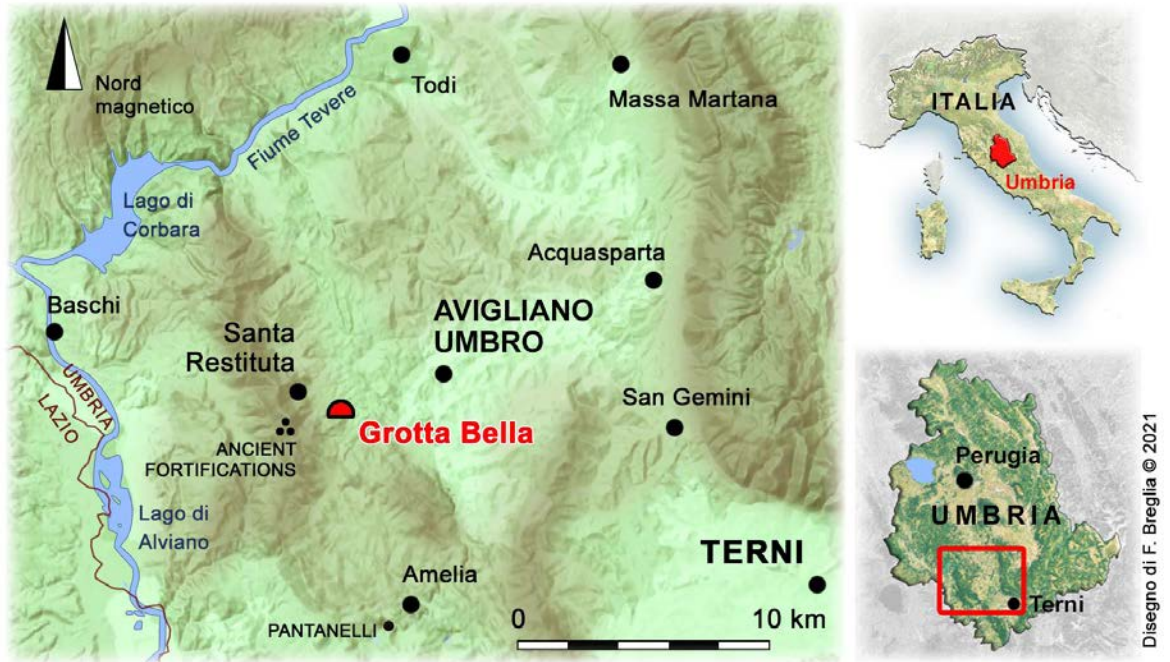
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Pl. 1/1: Map of the area with the location of Grotta Bella (drawing by F. Breglia).



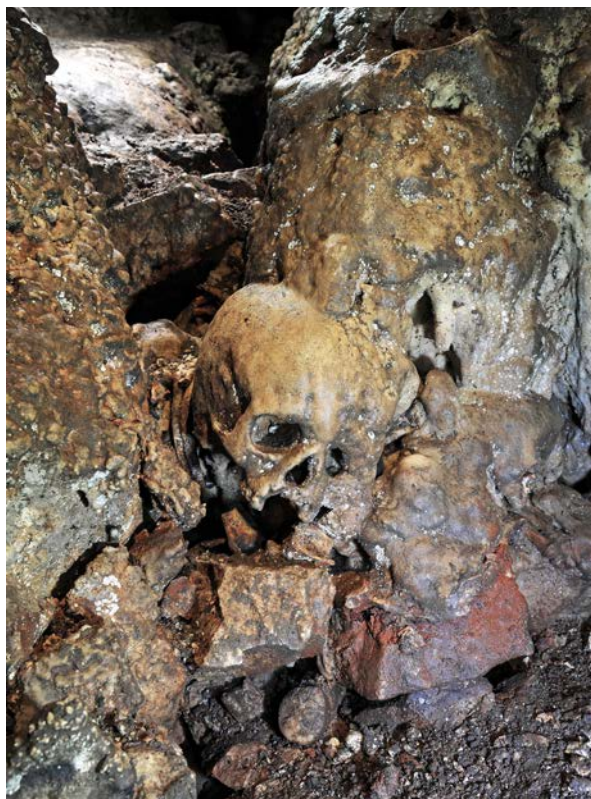
Pl. 1/2: The entrance to the cave (photo by F. Larocca).



Pl. 1/3: View of the so-called 'Entrance Hall', the largest room in the cave (photo by F. Larocca).



Pl. 1/4: Neolithic-age vessel with trichrome decoration, Ripoli culture (photo by F. Larocca, National Archaeological Museum of Umbria).



Pl. 1/5: Human skull from the so-called 'Skeleton Room', in the deep rooms of Grotta Bella (photo by F. Larocca).



Pl. 1/6: Skeleton Hall. On the left: small impasto pottery vessel forming part of a funerary equipment (inside white circle); on the right two flint blades with trapezoidal cross-section found in the burial area (photo by F. Larocca).