

UNIQUE PREHISTORIC CAVE ART FOUND IN ITALIAN MOUNTAINS

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UNTIL about 20 years ago, it was firmly believed that there were no examples of palaeo- or mesolithic rock art to be found in Italy. In fact, in comparison with the examples of art of this period to be found in France and Spain, the carved bull in Grotta Romanelli (Apulia) and the schematic figure painted on the walls of the Arnalo dei Bufali (near Sezze Romano) are entirely marginal manifestations.

The year 1949 marked the first sensational discovery of a double series of carved and painted figures in a small cave of the Cala dei Genovesi group located on the tiny island of Levanzo, which forms part of the chain of the Egadi to the west of Sicily, in far-off times Levanzo was probably joined to the Sicilian mainland (*I.L.N.*, August 12, 1950). There followed (in 1953) the discovery of a very much more complex group of carvings in the Grotta dell'Addaura on the slopes of Monte Pellegrino, near Palermo (*I.L.N.*, August 1, 1953). Later still there was the further discovery of some other animal figures in other caves, both on the Grotta Miscemi and on the Trapanese (Grotta Racchio).

Only very recently, however (1961), has there been any indication that there were similar paintings or carvings on the mainland of Italy itself. Examples of these recent discoveries are the figure of a bull (*I.L.N.*, Oct. 7, 1961) carved in the Romito rock shelter near Papisidero in Calabria (more figures have since been discovered here), coupled with wall paintings (figures of houses and the imprints of hands) and carvings on boulders or bones in the Grotta Paglicci near Rignano Garganico. But as far back as 1953, the Italian archaeologist Radmili had discovered a boulder bearing the figure of a wolf in the Grotta Polesini near Tivoli.

There has now been a new and important discovery in an area lying between Papisidero and Rignano Garganico. The discovery is that of a notable series of highly schematic human and animal figures on the wall of a rock cave in the Agro di Filiario in the province of Potenza.

The background to the discovery may be summarised as follows: While exploring all the high ground lying in the region of the Bradano, the Bradanello, and their tributaries during the years 1962-64, the aim being to discover traces



2. The rock shelter with the wall paintings lies near the summit of the Tупpo dei Sassi (2883 feet.) Here, visitors are looking at the pictures on the wall below the overhang.

of ancient settlements, we were told by some shepherds of the existence of a number of "inscriptions" on rocks on the property known as Agro di Filiario. In spite of a very thorough search through hundreds of hectares of thickly wooded land, no trace was ever found of these so-called "inscriptions." This was, however, partly due to the fact that the shepherds were very vague as to their exact location and nature. But recently, in the light of much more definite information provided by Mr. Francesco Verrastro, who had at one time tilled some fields near the place where the actual discovery was made, the "inscriptions" were at last discovered. In the event, they proved to be not inscriptions but rock paintings.

Tупpo dei Sassi is about 2883 feet above sea level, set in a wooded stretch of the Doria-Pamphili property. The surrounding countryside is a series of hills and dales (average height above sea level: 2300-2400 feet) with all the slopes under cultivation and most of the hilltops crowned by dense oak woods. At the most inaccessible and highest point of the Tупpo, which is reached (through the village of Carpino) after nearly an hour's climb up a goat track, are a number of high ridges of hard, close-knit sandstone. Some are embedded in the soil, while others are heaped higgledy-piggledy suggesting the aftermath of an avalanche.

Beneath a natural vault (2), which had been choked with debris, is to be seen on the upright end wall a rectangle 65 cm. long (vertically) by 52 cm. wide. Within this framework (partially crumbled at the edges due to the centuries-old effects of frost) there appear painted representations of crowded scenes. Men and animals—stags and goats (it is very difficult to distinguish any cattle)—make up a general hunting scene, depicted without any apparent sense of geometric coordination. Two animals have been captured and lassoed (or perhaps wounded in some way) by two men whose outlines are conveyed by the superimposing of two oval bodies joined together by a low narrow trunk. In one of the figures, the upper oval has a certain continuity with short low appendages to represent arms; in this oval the head is represented by a cone-shaped figure which widens out towards the base (length of the animals: 18 cm., the lower one; 16 cm., the upper one). This same association of man and animal would appear to be repeated a third time, though smaller, in the upper left-hand corner. However, this time the two figures are farther apart and are not interconnected; moreover, the human figure is represented as a cylindrical body with an indication of arms.

Between the lower group and the middle one, there is another animal (length, 20 cm.), undoubtedly a stag, with horns indicating the fact. To its right, towards the top of the painting, there is a less comprehensible figure (23 cm. long). It could be an animal

which has been killed and so is lying on its back with its legs in the air: a victim of the chase? However, the figure is difficult to decipher because of the overlying patina, and it may well be that the animal's feet do, in fact, point downwards. If so, then the two upper protuberances could be the arrows or javelins with which the animal has been struck and killed.

At the top, and again to the right, appears the most interesting figure of all (1): a huge man (8 cm. high with three superimposed oval shapes that form arms, legs, and head: is this a deity or a witch doctor? Other smaller animals complete the picture, which continues above the figures just described but is scarcely discernible on the right-hand side owing to a very dark patina. Traces of other figures at the edge, where the rock has crumbled, show that the scene must have extended further downwards. Other hieroglyphics, both in red and black, and difficult to interpret, can be detected in other parts of the cave.

The figures which form part of the main scene are painted in red ochre on sandstone prepared with yellow ochre. They are very schematic indeed, and may for this reason be linked with those discovered at Levanzo; this would mean that the latter no longer constitute an isolated example. The schematisation of the human figure in the form of a violin or of a cylinder with a more or less accentuated indication of the arms is particularly reminiscent of the Levanzo paintings. This schematisation recurred in the Aegean Bronze Age in the small idol figures of Troy and the Cyclades, but significant examples have also been found in the caves of Spain. A significant feature is the intimate link which occurs no less than three times between the human figures and those of the animals, which the man either captures or strikes down. This connection, which could be presumed only in a single instance (man and dog?) at Levanzo, is undeniably present here.

It is perhaps too daring to see, in the progressive reduction in size from bottom to top of the picture, an attempt at perspective—which would mean that the figures are not isolated but constitute a single complex hunting scene whose happy outcome is assured by the protection of a deity or the incantations of a witch doctor (represented by the large figure at the top).

Be that as it may, these figures introduce us to a world of hunters where the economy is based on organised tribal hunting and in which both beliefs and religious rites are tailored to suit. It would be difficult to identify such a world with that of the farmers and shepherds of the neolithic or metal ages, and so they would seem to take us right back to an earlier culture of the mesolithic or late palaeolithic type. It will be possible to suggest a more accurate dating only when we are able to complete further systematic excavations in the grotto.



1. Above: The Tупpo dei Sassi rock paintings seem to show several hunting scenes with a presiding deity or, perhaps, a witch-doctor, above. Transcription by Professor Ranaldi.