

certainly become a milestone of figurine research and a firm stepping stone for work to come.

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Ernestine S. Elster, Eugenia Isetti, John Robb and Antonella Traverso, eds. *The Archaeology of Grotta Scaloria: Ritual in Neolithic Southeast Italy* (Monumenta Archaeologica 38). Los Angeles: The Cotsen Institute of Archaeology Press. 2016, 446 pp., 230 figs, 121 tables, hbk, ISBN 978-938770-07-4)

Scaloria Cave is well-known to scholars working on Neolithic Italy. Its lower chamber (Scaloria Bassa) has produced important and convincing archaeological evidence of a water cult, including pottery vessels specially placed to catch water dripping from stalactites, while its upper chamber (Scaloria Alta) is known to have housed a large cemetery. Two typologically influential ceramic styles have also been named after the painted pottery found in these two chambers. However, for decades, the published preliminary reports on the excavations undertaken at this site during the late 1970s have been a source of frustration—particularly when trying to understand the nature and duration of the cemetery, and the place of this cave within the densely settled Neolithic landscape of the Tavoliere Plain in northern Apulia. In addition, only scraps of information were made available concerning the Palaeolithic remains identified in the cave. Indeed, with the death of both excavation directors—Marija Gimbutas of UCLA and Santo Tiné of Genova University—any hope of a

definitive publication looked distinctly unpromising. We therefore owe a debt of gratitude to Ernestine Elster, Eugenia Isetti, John Robb, and Antonella Traverso, whose significant commitment has resulted in salvaging the excavation archive, according it an array of post-excavation analyses, and bringing it to full publication. This alone is an outstanding achievement.

Their volume contains an extensive range of synthetic and specialist chapters and sub-chapters, authored by an impressive cast-list of over thirty scholars. It begins with a history of the archaeological investigations at Grotta Scaloria, and is then broadly divided into sections that cover: the cave, its archaeological deposits, and human occupation; the human remains; and the artefactual remains. Some of the chapters overlap—particularly the earlier ones in the volume—but additional details are gained in the process. These are supplemented by online appendices of the preliminary publications and archival data. The volume is plentifully

illustrated, with a combination of sharply-reproduced colour and grey-scale images. Data are also presented and summarized in numerous tables. A summary in Italian helpfully accompanies each chapter, the text of which has been excellently copy-edited. In the light of the old and new data brought together so effectively in this volume, then, what do we now know about Grotta Scaloria, including the history of its archaeological investigation, the nature of the cave and its various human occupations, and the people who were buried there?

The cave was accidentally discovered by workmen in 1931. This was followed by poorly recorded archaeological excavations in the upper chamber and in the neighbouring Occhiopinto cave directed by Ciro Drago and Quintino Quagliati of the Apulian Antiquities Superintendence. Scaloria Bassa was then discovered by cavers in 1967, and its surface remains subsequently planned by Eugenia Isetti and Santo Tiné. Collaborative excavations by the University of Genova and UCLA, nominally directed by Tiné and Gimbutas but in practice managed by Shan Winn and David Shimabuku, were then undertaken between 1978 and 1979. It is difficult to judge the quality of their work based on the largely upbeat narrative provided in this volume, but my impression is that it was carried out at a somewhat faster pace than a research excavation in a cave would be today. The team initially used a mechanical earth mover and drill outside, then excavated its stratified deposits via trenches with shovels, trowels, brushes, and sieves. Outside, a 2.5 m deep trench was dug, and inside Scaloria Alta a series of ten small trenches, where the 1 m deep deposits were found to have been extensively looted since 1931. The choice of a trench excavation technique (as opposed to area excavation) partly reflects upon the goal of this project, which was to shed light on

wider southeast Italian prehistory (especially its economy, ecology, and chronology) as much as on the ritual practices identified in the upper and lower chambers of the cave. (As some of the authors acknowledge, 'one would inevitably dig such a site differently today' (p. 117).) After lying dormant for over two decades, the research project was then reactivated by John Robb of Cambridge University in 2006, which—after a decade of work—has finally resulted in the current publication. The catalogued archaeological data that we now have at our disposal are significant, both in terms of quantity and quality, but we cannot overlook the loss of contextual information stemming from Quagliati's early 'excavation', the subsequent looting of the site, the more recent excavation via multiple trenches, and the dispersal (even neglect) of the excavation archive for so long afterwards.

Grotta Scaloria itself can be described as a large cave complex. Unfortunately, with the exception of Scaloria Bassa, the publication does not describe the cave's natural morphology in sufficient detail (and two plans—figs. 2.1.4 and 2.1.9—lack scales), so it is difficult to imagine what it might have felt like to move through this cave system. However, it is evident that the upper chamber is large (some 90 m wide), with a low ceiling and numerous stalactites in its deepest parts, while the lower zone, accessed via a downward sloping gallery, can be divided into an upper area with a very low ceiling, a lower area, and the lower chamber proper with stalactites, a high ceiling, and a lake. Earthquakes are thought to have been the cause of ceiling collapses, rock-falls, and broken stalagmites, although no attempt has yet been made to date such events. The original entrance to the cave (which is thought to have taken the form of a sink-hole) appears to have been partly blocked by a massive collapse of rock and soil

towards the end of the Neolithic, with the upper cave probably completely sealed by alluvial fan sediments around AD 830–960 (in contrast to the adjoining Grotta Occhiopinto, which remained open and continued to be used beyond the Neolithic right up to modern times).

Thirty-two radiocarbon determinations, combined with stratigraphic data and pottery typology, indicate various occupations. There were at least two phases of sporadic Late Upper Palaeolithic (Epipalaeolithic) occupation, during the twelfth millennium BC and between the late tenth and early eighth millennia BC, with food refuse dominated by wild ass (*Equus hydruntinus*) then by aurochs, fallow deer, and red deer. The cave was reoccupied during the Early Neolithic (marked by Guadone style pottery) during the first half of the sixth millennium BC, when the cave may have been used for ‘habitation’. The cave was used more extensively during the Middle Neolithic (with Scaloria Bassa/Catignano style pottery), c. 5500–5200 BC. Abundant external surface remains, branch-impressed daub fragments, regularly burnt dung deposits, and more fragmented ceramics are suggestive of seasonal sheep/goat stabling and human dwelling activity in and around the entrance and light zones of the cave. By contrast, funerary activity took place in the low-ceilinged dark zone of Scaloria Alta. This was broadly contemporary with water cult activity (and occasional mortuary activity) performed in the relatively inaccessible Scaloria Bassa. Ritual use of the cave complex then continued into the Middle-Late Neolithic (with Scaloria Alta, Ripoli, and Serra d’Alto style pottery), c. 5300–4850 BC. This phasing is very welcome, but the authors’ related attempts to define past human activities result in an assortment of terms—ranging from pastoralism and stabling, to habitation, settlement, and

household, to funerary ritual and water cult—which ultimately perpetuate a simple domestic/ritual interpretative dichotomy and struggle to do justice to the (probably meaningfully integrated) diversity of events and activities undertaken in and around the cave during the Neolithic.

Some of the best archaeological analyses and details in the volume relate to the various funerary treatments accorded to the human remains found in the upper chamber. A cross-section of the population is represented, although infants are underrepresented. Earlier in the sequence, lightly flexed single burials were deposited, which were later disturbed, with some bones then being placed in a collective secondary burial pit. Skull removal and redepositing were also practiced. Single articulated burials, with or without grave goods, are then characteristic of the later part of the sequence (as elsewhere in later Neolithic Apulia). A new discovery is that systematic defleshing (indicated by cut-marks on bones) was undertaken as part of a process in the mourning and transformation of the dead (nicely described as ‘ritual decommissioning’ (p. 380)). (Future research will look at whether this practice was unique to Grotta Scaloria or more widespread than previously recognized in prehistoric Italy.) Associated objects include pottery vessels, flint blades, a polished greenstone axe blade, flaked flint axe blades, a bone awl, boar’s tusk pendants, an antler, animal vertebrae, sea-shells, and a painted pebble.

By contrast, the ceramic analysis looks rather traditional. Typo-chronological classification of the decorated pottery according to standard stylistic categories dominates. But this does not detract from the fact that at least fifty-five vessels were deposited in the lower chamber during the Neolithic. Provenance studies indicate that these were made in the Tavoliere Plain area (rather than imported from elsewhere in Italy). It

is also interesting to note that as wide a range of vessel types were found here as in the settlement site of Catignano in Abruzzo (where a typo-chronologically comparable assemblage has been excavated), suggesting that the ceramics deposited in the lower chamber were not specially produced for use in ritual. Much less can be made of the lithic, bone, and shell assemblages, due to loss of their contextual data. However, it may be significant that the majority of the chipped stone artefacts were found outside the cave, hinting at some distinct activities being practiced there.

On the basis of new stable isotope data, Neolithic Scaloria cave is interpreted as a special gathering place, journeyed to by people based especially at the ditched agricultural villages of the Tavoliere, where people of heterogeneous origins were buried (as opposed to the dead of a single local community). A few further attempts are made to contextualize the human occupations of Grotta Scaloria. For example, we learn from the charcoal analysis that, in the Neolithic, fuel was initially obtained from a mixed forest of deciduous trees but over time from a wider catchment characterized by the presence of watercourses. However, surprisingly little attempt is made to connect the radiocarbon chronology, cultural sequence, and

portable material culture of the cave to the archaeology of the adjacent, extensively settled and studied, Tavoliere Plain. As a consequence, this volume does not change the current picture of Neolithic Apulia, although it does add some useful details.

The conclusion to the volume acknowledges that there remain a series of unanswered questions—questions one would expect to be answered by any modern cave archaeology project. What was the original configuration of the cave? Were the various uses of the cave contemporary? How and why did the dark zone of the cave become ritualized? Did the funerary deposition in the upper chamber occur in a limited number of episodes or more continuously? What was the place of Scaloria in the context of the Neolithic cultural landscape of the Tavoliere? With these questions in mind, one cannot help but think that, with the old archaeological excavation backlog now cleared, the modern scientific work of researching Grotta Scaloria's prehistory has only just begun.

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Álvaro Fernández Flores, Leonardo García Sanjuán and Marta Díaz-Zorita Bonilla, eds. *Montelirio. Un gran monumento megalítico de la Edad del Cobre* (Arqueología Monografías. Sevilla: Consejería de Cultura, Junta de Andalucía, 2016, 553pp., 365 illustr., 339 in colour, 57 tables, pbk, ISBN 978-84-9959-236-7)

The monumental *tholos* of Montelirio, one of the many mortuary features in the 400 ha Copper Age mega-site of Valencina de la Concepción (Seville, Spain), is indisputably a groundbreaking discovery in European prehistoric archaeology.

Montelirio was built sometime between 2875 and 2700 BC. At that point, Valencina had already experienced 300 years of human activity. The *tholos* was placed on a slightly flat knoll, visually dominating the Guadalquivir estuary and