

The Mountain of Gargano Where the Sacred Dwells in the Forms of the Earth

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Abstract

The Gargano promontory in southern Italy constitutes a sacred landscape where archaic, arcane, sacred, and daimonic dimensions converge within a living geography of pilgrimage and revelation. This study examines key sanctuaries as spatial archetypes that articulate the dialogue between architecture, ritual, and terrain. Through archival research, cartographic analysis, and field surveys, it explores how sacralisation has shaped both physical forms and cultural practices. The sanctuaries emerge as infrastructures of meaning, sustaining territorial identity while facing challenges such as environmental degradation and overtourism. The paper proposes an integrated strategy of active conservation; where walking, ritual, and silence reactivate sacred presence. Ultimately, the sacred mountain is presented as a regenerative palimpsest: a landscape where spiritual heritage and ecological care entwine in a dynamic equilibrium between memory and transformation.

The Archaic, the Arcane, the Sacred, the Daimonic

"And he said, Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground"¹

A fruitful path toward a conscious and profound appropriation of architecture and place restores meaning to its condition of necessity, refocusing on the generative elements of place by drawing on multiple, mutually enriching modes of thought. This stance, simultaneously hermeneutic and metaphorical, celebrates rootedness, continuity, resistance, and persistence. It nurtures a vital tension: a disposition and aspiration that reach beyond form, uncover the root embedded in things, and invite continual renewal.

Grasping the richness of this critical posture requires a transdisciplinary itinerary that honours the term in its most precise sense while exploring the diverse meanings it gathers across the fields in which the concept finds application. Archaic, Arcane, Sacred, and Daimonic flow through mythic imagination as four interlaced forces. In the pages that follow, each lemma reveals its linguistic root at the moment of emergence, allowing word history and conceptual movement to rise together, like breath animating meaning.

The pulse of the archaic refers to a primordial layer of human experience and culture – the ancient, foundational mode of thought and world creation. In a philosophical sense, it evokes the original archê or "beginning", the creative depth from which later symbols and institutions emerge. Mythically, the archaic resonates with ancestral gods and the primal Cosmos: it is the time of gods and heroes when the structures of reality were first cast in archetypal form. In this view, natural phenomena and social norms are not mere accidents but sacred patterns inherited from the "time before time." As Mircea Eliade observed, "for archaic man, reality is a function of the imitation of a celestial archetype²": to know a thing's origin is to grasp its essence. Thus, the archaic dimension emphasises origin and power in beginnings – a world where knowing the origin of a river, a ritual, or a clan name confers magical competence.

Practically, the archaic resides in cultural memory; it endures in myths, symbols, and landscape names that connect us to a mythic past. Hesiod invokes Gaia and Ouranos. It also underpins a mythopoetic mode of thinking in which ancestral spirits animate the world, linking one's existence to primordial mysteries. In Aboriginal Australian traditions, sacred landscapes are crossed by "songlines"³—paths sung by ancestral beings that shape the land and its meaning. In Japan, Mount Fuji is a sacred presence, honoured as a living spirit or kami. In symbolic geography, an archaic sensibility may emerge in reverence for prehistoric sites or in the concept of "deep time," whereby a sacred mountain or river is perceived as an unbroken thread linking present-day people to primordial events. The Ganges River, for instance, is both a river and a goddess. It connects today's people with ancient, divine origins. Mountains carry this weight of memory. Mount Sinai is the place of divine law in Jewish tradition,

- 1 Ex 3:5
- 2 (Eliade, 1949)
- 3 (Chatwin, 1988)

and Mount Hira in Islam is where the Prophet received the first revelation. These places remain spiritually active, not merely historical. By turning to the archaic, cultures affirm a link to a sacred beginning⁴. The Palatine Hill in Rome, where Romulus is said to have founded the city, has retained its sacred role even in later centuries. These spaces hold meaning because they are seen not just as old but as originating—they give shape to time and belief.

The arcane denotes the mysterious and hidden aspects of reality – secret knowledge, esoteric practices, and the concealed logic of the cosmos. Its root, from Latin *arcanus* (hidden), suggests what is closed or kept from ordinary sight. In intellectual terms, the arcane refers to wisdom or traditions accessible only to initiates, such as the hidden symbolism of temple rites, alchemical formulas, or secret texts. Culturally, arcane knowledge is often woven into rituals, mysteries, or mythic lore, promising insights, or powers beyond the common understanding.

The arcane dimension imbues certain landscapes and rituals with a potent sense of enigma. It neither conceals arbitrarily nor mystifies for effect; instead, it withholds meaning in a manner that demands interpretative patience, symbolic literacy, and spiritual receptivity. In this way, it stands in contrast to profane clarity: the arcane is not merely hidden—it is hidden to be revealed, but only to those adequately prepared to receive it. Landscape features such as caves, labyrinths, or remote peaks frequently become vessels of arcane power precisely because they defy immediacy; they necessitate passage, descent, or ritualised approach. A case in point is the adyton of the Delphic temple⁵, where the Pythia, seated above a chasm, pronounced her ambiguous oracles under the influence of sacred vapours. The oracular cave functions as both a literal fissure and a metaphysical one—a breach in rational knowing through which divine utterance filters. Similarly, the Buddhist monument of Borobudur in Java presents a mandalic labyrinth that encodes spiritual ascent in stone. Pilgrims progress through levels of iconography and architectural symbolism, not towards spectacle, but towards a central void—a *sunyata* that is both physical and ontological. The arcane is not confined to architecture.

The ritual of the whirling dervishes, for example, exemplifies an embodied arcane practice. Their movement traces a cosmology of inward return, where the body becomes a compass and gesture a theological glyph. This arcane grammar of movement mirrors another site of veiled revelation: Plato's cave, whose darkness shelters not ignorance but latency. The shadow-world requires a conversion of vision, not the abandonment of place but its transfiguration through ascent. Initiatory traditions heighten the arcane by codifying silence. The difficulty of access, the echoing darkness, and the visceral imagery combine to form a space where myth, matter, and motion converge. Here, the arcane is not a category of thought but a mode of presence: an atmosphere wherein the visible and the invisible coil around one another.

In each case, the arcane enriches cultural geography not through abstraction, but through embodied difficulty: meaning is earned. This mode of symbolic withholding opens up space for imagination, mythic elaboration, and sacred secrecy to function as formative forces. The landscape becomes not merely a backdrop, but an interlocutor—silent, yes, but suggestive; opaque, but resonant. In this tension between what is shown and what is withheld, the arcane offers not obscurity, but depth.

The sacred designates that which is elevated and set apart, a domain marked by divine or numinous presence. It evokes notions of sanctity, reverence, and ultimate significance. In religious traditions, the sacred emerges in specific spaces—such as temples, groves, and mountains—as well as in designated times, including festivals and mythic epochs, and in beings that carry a transcendent dimension, including gods and saints. Rudolf Otto's seminal analysis defines the core of sacred experience as the numinous, an encounter with the Holy that transcends rational comprehension. He characterises this experience as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*: a wholly other mystery that provokes awe and trembling while simultaneously drawing the individual into a state of wonder. The *tremendum* evokes a majestic dread and overwhelming intensity, while the *fascinans* conveys grace, attraction, and the marvellous (*mirum*), which together generate a condition of profound spiritual receptivity.⁶

Mircea Eliade advances this phenomenological understanding through the concept of hierophany, the manifestation of the sacred within the fabric of the ordinary. For Eliade, the sacred serves as the ontological foundation of meaning in space, time, and human orientation. In *The Sacred and the Profane*, he affirms that the sacred

4 (Ravasi, 2001)
5 (Kerényi, 2015)
6 (Otto, 2020)

"manifests itself as a reality of a wholly different order from 'natural' realities"⁷. Such a manifestation opens a fissure in the continuity of profane space and introduces an axis around which experience may be ordered. Stones, rivers, trees, or mountains can emerge as axis mundi, vertical connectors through which the divine engages and reconfigures the human world.

Rather than inventing sacred space⁸, homo religiosus⁹ identifies it—recognising its pre-existing power and ritually reaffirming its role as a cosmic centre. Sacred geography takes shape through the resonance of mythic origin. The mountain summit, for instance, assumes meaning not only through its elevation but also by its symbolic link between heaven and earth. It replays the act of creation, becoming a condensed image of cosmogony. The sacred mountain thus functions both as a symbol and as a generative medium of revelation. While the profane may unfold as a dispersed or disoriented field, sacred space concentrates presence, renews orientation, and intensifies awareness. The sacred affirms an experience of the real that remains deeply rooted in the origin and animated by presence.

Eliade emphasises the significance of ritual repetition and reactualisation in religious life. Rites do not merely refer back to a mythic past; they re-enact the original event, collapsing ordinary chronology into the primordial illud tempus—the time of beginnings. This cyclical orientation revitalises the sense of the mirum, enabling lived experiences of sacred time. Religious festivals, pilgrimages, and architectural structures contribute to this rhythm. They offer not representation, but the incarnation of sacred presence. As Eliade puts it, "religious man feels the need to live in a sacred time and in a sacred space," thereby re-establishing contact with origins and reinforcing his existential stability.

The sacred affirms a condition that both elevates and deepens human experience. It inspires reverence for divine majesty and reveals the gracious allure of the Holy. Sacred places—mountains, temples, sanctuaries—draw their power from this dual intensity: they awaken awe and cultivate devotion. Their atmosphere unites proximity and transcendence in a manner that roots human presence while opening it towards the beyond. This convergence endows sacred geography with formative power, enabling it to organise perception and facilitate transformation.

Every sacred encounter manifests as an event of revelation, a moment when the world becomes transparent to a deeper order. When a pilgrim ascends a mountain and feels a surge of sanctity, this experience signifies more than emotional elevation—it initiates a hierophanic breakthrough. The mountain transforms into a liturgical site, where presence deepens and silence speaks. Otto's mirum captures the aesthetic wonder of such encounters¹⁰, where the divine does not merely overwhelm but also radiates beauty in strangeness. Eliade reinforces this vision by affirming that this beauty belongs intrinsically to the sacred order itself: "the sacred is saturated with Being"

To witness it is to enter a field where meaning is unveiled rather than invented, and where reality becomes luminous with presence.

What Socrates himself said about his daimonion, the "inner voice" that gave him advice, we do not know¹¹. The daimonic pertains to the realm of daimons or spirits—beings that bridge the human and divine, inspiring, or compelling us. In Greek thought, a daimon (as Plato taught) is a guiding spirit or intermediary; modern psychology (via Jung) redefined it as a numinous psychic force. Jung described the daimon as an "autonomous psychic content"—a kind of inner presence that has its own momentum, "something alien from the unconscious... an archetype or numinous imperative" with authority beyond our intellect. He likened it to a god within us, giving creative energy or demanding action: "There lives a creative being inside all of us," he noted, that will give no peace unless he is obeyed. This daimonic influence is neutral: it can drive outstanding achievements or cause inner turmoil, depending on its alignment with the conscious will.

7 (Eliade, 2013)

8 (Dematteis, 1994, p. 31)

9 (Eliade, 2013)

10 (Otto, 2020, p. 40)

11 (Luck, 2006, p. 233)

Mythologically, the daimonic finds vivid expression in figures like Pan – the horned, goat-legged god of rustic nature – and in angels or celestial messengers. Pan embodies the wild, instinctual side of the daimonic. He is “the goat-God,” a personification of untamed nature with “hairy, phallic, roaming and goatish” energy. Modern interpreters (Hillman among them) point out that Pan was demonised as the Christian Devil, but originally he symbolised the raw, life-affirming force of nature. In this way, Pan represents the earthy daimonic – the instinctual libido, creativity, and passion that possess us if we neglect them. Conversely, the angelic side of the daimonic represents the luminous guiding spirit – the Platonic “daemon” of destiny or the guardian angel of some traditions. Angels, angels’ apparitions, and other bright daemons signify the daimonic as inspiration and moral illumination.

Thus, we may say that the daimonic is the mediating breath between the mortal and the immortal: it can manifest in dark, bestial form (Pan, daemonic possession) or angelic, visionary form. In both cases, it works beneath or within the self to call forth transformations. Jung and Hillman emphasise that personal destiny or creative vocation is guided by such a daimonic presence – an unconscious genius or archetype urging one towards fulfilment. In every age, the daimonic has been illustrated by figures who hover at the boundary of the human and the divine, reminding us that the psyche is enlivened by spiritual forces beyond ordinary reasoning.

According to the opening words of the chronography of being, God “created the heavens and the earth”¹², and this division of all of creation has always been regarded as foundational. Likewise, in the profession of faith, we call upon God as “the Creator of all things visible and invisible”¹³, the maker of what can be seen and, equally, of what cannot. These two realms—the visible and the invisible—indeed touch, yet their difference is so profound that one cannot help but question the nature of the boundary where they meet: a threshold that both separates and unites them. How should this be understood?¹⁴ It may be that the sacred mountain softens the threshold, offering a place where distance gives way to nearness, and the intangible begins to take form—where the mystery of the unseen quietly emerges within the contours of the world.

A sacred mountain is an archetypal locus where the archaic, arcane, sacred, and daimonic converge. Mountains have been universally regarded as natural pillars or axis mundi, connecting Earth and sky¹⁵. (fig.1) As Edwin Bernbaum notes, the highest sites “form natural links between heaven and earth, the sacred and the profane.” In other words, peaks serve as natural thrones for the gods and stages for revelation. When the transcendent momentarily touches our world (“hierophany”), it often occurs on a mountain that acts as “an absolute fixed point, a centre” in the homogeneous expanse of profane space. At such sites, all four dimensions can unfold: the archaic echoes in the primaeval rock and legendary origins of the place; the arcane dwells in hidden grottoes or concealed pathways; the sacred manifests in visions of the divine; and the daimonic appears through spirit-figures or the mountain’s own numinous presence.

Consider Mount Sinai, where Moses received the Law. In Exodus, the peak is enveloped by storm, fire, and cloud – theophany at its most dramatic. Smoke and flame streak across Sinai’s summit as the divine hierofany unveils itself. Here, the sacred is explicit: the trembling, silent presence of God is both “terrifying and wonderful,” matching Otto’s *tremendum et fascinans*. Sinai also embodies the archaic (it is perceived as ancient earth consecrated by God’s words) and the daimonic (the divine commandment is delivered by a transcendent spirit in the storm). Its height and isolation designate it as a liminal centre of the world, fulfilling Eliade’s notion of sacred space as a fixed point in the cosmos.

Mount Olympus in Greek imagination embodies a profound convergence. As the legendary abode of Zeus and the gods, Olympus represents sacred geography. Heroes and mortals who ascended or glimpsed Olympus confronted both the divine and the daemonic: gods in council, nymphs, and Pan in hidden woods, oracles in caves. A mortal’s journey up Olympus would carry the archaic aura of Homeric myth (the age of heroes) and the arcane mystery of pagan ritual (sacred groves and unknown rites). Even today, climbers on Olympus can discover wild, uncanny places (e.g., the Cave of the Sleeping Nymphs) that preserve a sense of secret power.

¹² Gn, 1, 1

¹³ Col, 1, 16

¹⁴ [Trad. by Author] (Florenskij, 2024, p. 1)

¹⁵ Cfr. (Daumal, 2020)

In the Christian East, Mount Athos – literally “Holy Mountain” – exemplifies these dimensions through monastic life. Athos has been continuously inhabited by monks since the Byzantine era, making it a lasting channel of sacred tradition. The archaic reverence is found in the strict traditions and ancient chants still preserved; the arcane in the disciplined, hermetic practices of hesychasm (inner prayer) and its cloistered terrain. Pilgrims who ascend its slopes speak of an intense presence, as though the entire mountain is imbued with the prayer and asceticism of centuries. Athos serves as both a geographic promontory and an imaginal high point where earth and heaven converge in liturgy.

On the Italian side of the Adriatic, Monte Sant’Angelo (Mount Gargano) epitomises the convergence of the daimonic and the sacred (fig.2). In late antiquity, the Archangel Michael appeared repeatedly on this mountain’s wind-swept summit, instructing that a grotto there be a place of Christian worship. These angelic visions made the site a significant pilgrimage centre. The rocky cave beneath the peak became a physical symbol of arcane depth – the hidden cave of revelation – while the archangel’s fiery sword rendered the peak itself the axis mundi of Western Christendom for a time. It stands today as a reminder that even in the Christian era, the daimonic (angels, visions) and archaic magic (mountain cult, sanctuary) coexist in the sacred landscape.

Sacred mountains are both geological forms and living symbols. Climbing a mountain has always represented a symbolic ascent – a movement from the human realm toward the divine. As one ascends, the four dimensions interact with each other. One might find oneself re-enacting an archaic myth (hearing echoes of the hero’s journey), decoding arcane omens (unfamiliar flora, mysterious lights), and experiencing a cleansing of the profane through awe. The summit ceremony – whether a priest’s liturgy, a tribal dance, or a solitary prayer – becomes a theophany in miniature, a moment when the sacred cleaves through space. In that instant, Pan and angel alike seem near: the wild life-force of Earth and the luminous grace of heaven unite.

Thus, in the mythopoetic geography of the sacred mountain, the archaic endurance of Earth’s origins, the arcane secrets hidden in stone and sky, the overwhelming sacred presence of the divine, and the daimonic guardians of fate all converge. On such peaks, earth and heaven kiss, and the four dimensions – archaic, arcane, sacred, and daimonic – are felt as one.

The Geographies of Hierophany in the Sacred Landscape of the Gargano

The Gargano massif, in Apulia, emerges as a geographical structure of extraordinary symbolic intensity, whose relationship with the plain – understood both as the land of the Capitanata and the Adriatic Sea – expresses a profound spatial dichotomy, reflecting the opposition between two domains of differing ontological order. Here, hierophany – literally “manifestation of the sacred” – is embodied in caves, on summits, in forests and across liminal thresholds, delineating a topography that articulates a hierarchy of places capable of transcending the horizontal continuity of plains and waters (fig.3). While the plain and the sea appear as open and undifferentiated spaces, the mountain rises with vertical force, dominating the landscape through a system of reciprocal visibility and positioning itself to be recognised as an axis mundi, a symbolic and spiritual pivot of the world. Within this scenario, Mircea Eliade’s distinction between the sacred and the profane becomes manifest: the sacred bursts into the fabric of the landscape, punctuates it, interrupts it, leaving signs and revelations that alter its continuity. Similarly, Rudolf Otto’s concept of the numinous conveys the emotional ambivalence these places evoke: trembling and wonder, distance, and desire. One of the earliest ways in which human beings began to understand the relationship between the sphere in which they moved and far more extended horizons was, in fact, through an essentially visual approach to geography¹⁶. In the Gargano, as in many Mediterranean landscapes, pilgrimage routes – including the Via Francigena – trace a rhythm of sacred manifestations, structuring space through deeply significant places. Such places are elective, sites chosen by culture and faith to host the presence of the divine.

In the Mediterranean, the richness of rocky outcrops and hydrographic channels along the coastline – that is, the morphological fragmentation of geographic contexts – has favoured the formation of perceptual fields, punc-

16 [Trad. by Author] The reference here is to the “chain of fires” bridging the physical and symbolic distance between Troy and Mycenae in Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon*, as studied by Tracy and cited in (Horden & Purcell, 2000, pp. 119-120)

tuated by visual and symbolic landmarks. This condition has fostered a diffuse character of visibility¹⁷, grounded in both the forms of the land and a network of reciprocal observation, which constitutes one of the fundamental traits of sacred manifestations and settlement patterns in the Gargano.

Indeed, starting from the natural condition, humans progressively visualised¹⁸ these elective places, commenting on and reinterpreting the physical forms of the landscape through the construction of increasingly complex artificial structures. Earth metaphors and archaic imagery reveal the sacred dimension of sites such as Santa Maria di Stignano, San Matteo, San Michele Arcangelo at Monte Sant'Angelo, the Santissima Trinità on Monte Sacro, and Santa Maria di Pulsano, interpreted through mythopoetic spatial categories such as the cave, the summit, the forest, and liminal landscapes.

These sacred places embody archetypal meanings and foster a profound dialogue with the natural and cultural context that surrounds them. Within them, one encounters a deep-seated tension between panoramic elevation and primordial terror, between vision and vertigo, between "panorama" and "panic" — a contrast that becomes inscribed in the very body of the sacred mountain, shaping its most intimate and enduring symbolic experience. Otherwise, Nature has no language or signs but simply 'is'. Nature is an essence to which we attribute feelings that exist solely within us. Architecture, on the other hand, is language; it is a convention of signs. However, Cave Architecture imposes linguistic connotations on Nature; geological formations and landforms are selected as existing forms of Architecture and become part of a project. The material: spatial continuity between the cavern and its lithic matrix thus proposes the ambiguity between inside and outside, between Architecture and non-architecture, between Nature and artefacts, between language and essence. Hermitic monasteries are an extraordinary example of how Architecture can create relationships with the forms of the land on which it is grafted. In these places, the discrepancy is attenuated, leaving free space for communication and interpretation of forms. The relationship between interior and exterior becomes the focal point of this dichotomy, which confronts Architecture with a dilemma: to oppose the land or conform to its form, adapting to it. The Nature-Architecture theme develops in the monastic context in three distinct variants: development orthogonal to the terrain; polar development of secondary modules; development parallel to the ground. This image refers to an "uninterrupted body of myths"¹⁹.

The possibility of identifying places with a strong symbolic value - true topoi of the sacred landscape - depends on an intense interpretative operation, activated in the representation and design, of the multiple units that make up the mountain landscape. In this process, iconemes²⁰, elementary signs of spatial perception, play a key role. they orient the gaze, structure the vision and allow an overall cognitive grasp of an intrinsically hybrid and heterogeneous environment, such as that of the mountains. in this sense: the anacrusis, the meander, the daimon, the echo and the counterpoint, (fig.4) help to describe the forms and metaphors of the interactions between Architectures and Earth.

Anacrusis and Meander

The pilgrim's journey to the mountain begins in the valleys below - the liminal, in-between land where the earth constricts and guides the way. Two convents near San Marco in Lamis exemplify this anacrusis and meander before the ascent of the mountain.

The origin of the magnificent Church of Saint Mary in the Valley of Stignano is recorded in the divine book of God, aimed at the salvation of humanity, who should seek Him through the Blessed Virgin Mary, His glorious Mother. A 19th-century manuscript on the sanctuary's history starts with these words, and similarly, I would like to clarify that this is not meant to be an anonymous historical account. Instead, it serves as a journey through the events and devotions of the men and women who have traversed this valley for centuries, where the Supreme and Good God, alongside His Mother, narrates the "History of Salvation."

The Gargano's history is marked by the lack of historical documents, leading to the rise of many sacred and profane legends over the centuries. These tales include stories of kings and queens, sailors and pirates, disreputable

17 (Horden & Purcell, 2000, pp. 118-134)

18 (Norberg-Schulz, 1981, p. 17)

19 [Trad. by Autor] (Hillman, 1972)

20 (Turri, 2023, p. 19)

women, dragons, devils, brigands, witches, sorcerers, hidden treasures, hermits, monks, wandering shepherds, sprites, and various other figures from the rich imagination of the people. However, among the “creators” of these legends are some pseudo-scholars who, from the slightest evidence, think they can discern “lu trajòne”²¹ oblivious to the fact that illusions and mirages can mislead them. With these fantasies, they seek to reconstruct history as if it were merely about “the deeds of men.”

The Valley of Stignano is among the most legend-filled and evocative places in the Gargano. One such tale holds that Saint Francis of Assisi, en route to the cave of the Archangel Michael, passed through the Valley of Stignano and was enraptured by the beauty of the landscape and the kindness of its people. It is said that, in gratitude for the charity he received from the inhabitants—and even from the animals, who brought him food—he blessed the fruits of this valley. Though clearly a legend, it is important to recall that Stignano is a land of blessings as well as of legends, and also of sorrowful and dramatic events.

The convent of Stignano (fig.5) is located at the entrance to the broad valley that opens to the north-east of the great Tavoliere plain, where the road begins to climb; the sanctuary stands as the northern gateway to the sacred territory of the Gargano. Some have proposed that this was the path of the Via Sacra Langobardorum, or the Way of the Angel, or more precisely, the Via Francesca or Via Peregrinorum. However, I shall not dwell on the route of the road, leaving to future studies the investigation of the possible pilgrim paths to the Gargano.

From this natural threshold, one enters the Gargano Sanctuary, the very heart of the sacred mountain, making a stop at this sanctuary imbued with the deepest Marian and Franciscan spirituality.

The entire Tavoliere plain and the mountainous zone of the Gargano have been inhabited since prehistoric times. There is extensive evidence of human presence dating back to the Palaeolithic and Neolithic periods. The whole piedmont and lowland area was cultivated in the ancient Daunian period, throughout the era of Magna Graecia, and during the Roman age. The numerous archaeological sites, settlements, and tombs provide ample confirmation of this.

The Valley of Stignano is a vital part of the enduring human journey. Serving as a prelude (anacrusis) to the sacred path, it represents the instant when pilgrims bid farewell to the ordinary plains: the land constricts, and the soul is urged to look within.

The valley stretches from San Matteo to Stignano is known as Valle la lana.

“This name appears as such in the Tavolario Pugliese... and in the public land registries, it is still referred to as Ponte di lana, or, more precisely, as Ponte di Giano (Bridge of Janus)...”²²

Ciavarella, meanwhile, notes:

Via lana, which branches from Vico della Pace and leads to Via Lungo lana, is a street name that originated in 1907, formerly known as Vico 1 Santa Chiara. Via Lungo lana (which runs from Via Roma to Piazza Gramsci) also received its name in 1907. The name is thought to be derived from Giano (Janus), leading to the entire ravine of San Marco, situated between the convents of San Matteo and Stignano, being referred to as Valle la lana; Torrente lana, the small stream that flows down from the cliffs of the Difesa di San Matteo into the settlement below; and Ponte di lana, the bridge that was once built at the location where the road Ponte le Grazie would later be constructed.”²³

Thus, the valley begins not with a declaration but with a constriction — a folding of the land that draws the pilgrim inward. It's not a threshold one crosses but rather a space into which one is gradually received, as the plains recede and the earth's contours tighten into significance. The Valle la lana, named in honour of Janus, the god of dual faces and sacred passages, stretches between Stignano and San Matteo like an antechamber shaped by time and reverence. The earth does not immediately reveal its sacredness; it demands approach, attunement — a descent that, in reality, prepares one to ascend.

21 F. P. Borazio, Lu trajòne, poem in the Sammarche vernacular

22 [trad. by author] (Giuliani, 1846, p. 6)

23 [trad. by author] (Ciavarella, 1982)

The sacred begins softly, in quietude. The Stignano sanctuary, nestled against the valley's side, does not elevate but instead envelops. Its flatness signifies not a lack of height, but a liturgical calm — a gesture of gathering, a maternal embrace. The church remains still, surrounded by trees, as if the forest itself has learned to pray. There is no grand reveal here; the sacred surfaces through the earth's natural rhythm, where the land curves to create space for worship. The structure wraps around, its energy centripetal — a basin of memory, shelter, and blessing.

The Sanctuary of St. Matteo (fig.6) is perched on its small peak at the foot of Monte Celano (871 m). The first Benedictine foundations were developed here in the 11th century, becoming a centre for pilgrims on their way to the Gargano²⁴. Topographically, San Matteo is located on a knoll emerging from a mixed oak and hornbeam forest (the Bosco Difesa). The meandering condition alludes to the winding pilgrimage path leading there, or perhaps to the meandering river shape of the valley. To arrive at St Matthew's is to follow the bend in the valley: to stop on a ledge of land that, at the same time, offers a view of the town and the passage. The sanctuary of St Matthew is a ledge, marking the passage. St Matthew's could be said to be the first 'peak' of the Gargano pilgrimage, albeit on a modest scale: a promontory reflecting the pilgrim's path from below. a constructed 'peak' that completes the natural knoll.

The entire valley serves as an anacrusis — it's not yet the mountain's peak, but already hints at it. The pilgrim cannot yet see the sanctuary of the Archangel, yet the mountain is weaving its language into the landscape's gestures. A fold, a rise, a ledge, a curve: these are the expressions the earth communicates through stone and shadow, and the pilgrim learns to interpret them with their steps.

Sound quiets in this place. The bells do not chime but float away. Silence is not merely an absence; it takes form, resembling the pause before a prayer, like the instant when a breath is held right before it transforms into a chant. This is not mere location; it is a liturgy made of stone. The landscape is not merely traversed but engaged with as a text. The sacred does not come from above; it lies dormant in the earth, waiting to be stirred by the one who walks through it. There exists a particular geography of silence in this place: as one steps into the valley's confined walls, sound ceases.

Cave and Daimon

At the summit of the promontory rests Monte Sant'Angelo, crowned by the Sanctuary of San Michele. This Romanesque basilica encloses the renowned Grotta di San Michele, a natural cave long revered as a sacred site (fig.7). According to legend, around the year 490, Bishop Lorenzo of Sipontum witnessed flaming apparitions of the Archangel Michael on this very rock²⁵, commanding that the grotto be consecrated to Christ and Michael. Yet the rocky cave and its subsequent chapels do not invite vertical ascent but rather a descent—a stooping of the body and spirit—as pilgrims enter the womb of the mountain. This subterranean space functions simultaneously as womb and tomb, a threshold between realms, charged with symbolic ambivalence and eschatological weight. The tangible darkness, the dripping stone, the echoing ventilation: all contribute to a vastness that overwhelms the senses—a felt tremendum. And yet, locals say that no winter storm ever disturbs its entrance, suggesting a protective, even maternal, aura. It is here, in this mineral hollow, that the Gargano daimon resides: not only the Archangel Michael, but also the latent spirits and healing forces that animated the mountain long before Christianity.

Indeed, the cave, one of the most ancient and sacred forms of natural architecture, embodies dual principles of concealment and emergence, evoking powerful imagery across cultures and cosmogonies. Functioning as both womb, symbolising genesis and gestation, and tomb, marking withdrawal and finality, it serves as a primordial site for transformation—where birth and death, vision, and silence, converge. In Greek mythology, caves were revered as the cradles of gods: sites of incubation, refuge, and revelation. In Eastern traditions, they function as thresholds towards inner enlightenment. Described by some as “a uterine space of regeneration,” the cave

²⁴ (Villani, 2023)

²⁵ AA.VV., *Il Santuario di San Michele sul Gargano dal VI al IX secolo. Contributo alla storia della Langobardia meridionale*, edited by C. Cadetti and G. Otranto, Bari 1980; hereinafter referred to as 'Atti Monte Santangelo'. The volume contains essays by a group of scholars from the Institute of Ancient Christian Literature of the University of Bari (C. Colafemmina, C. D'Angela and M. Salvatore, in addition to the editors) who worked on the monument in close collaboration with scholars from other universities: M.G. Arcamone, M. Cagiano de Azevedo, C.A. Mastrelli, A. Quacquarelli.

offers a distinct spatial condition: rather than raising the gaze upwards toward celestial light, it draws the self downwards, into the hidden depths of being.

At Monte Sant'Angelo, this archetype finds its fullest theological expression. The sanctuary is believed to have been revealed rather than built, underscoring the precedence of divine presence over human intervention. Bishop Maiorano, upon witnessing the miracle, chose not to consecrate the grotto, deeming it already sanctified by the Archangel's epiphany. This refusal articulates a profound conception of non-mediated sacredness: a holiness that emerges from the land, not from ecclesiastical rites. Here, sanctity is inherent—ontological—rather than conferred. The descent into the cave becomes a katabatic liturgy, a ritual of immersion into the earth's psyche and one's own unconscious, evoking what Mircea Eliade called "the chthonic mode of the sacred": a form of holiness rooted in instinct, earth, and the raw vitality of life.

This sensibility finds symbolic resonance in the figure of Pan, the archaic nature-daemon whose presence intensifies the perception of the landscape, transforming it from a neutral background into a psychological mirror of human desire, terror, and wonder. The grotto becomes not only a setting for religious action but also a topography of the soul, wherein the sacred does not descend from above but erupts from within—from rock, root, and echo. "The sacred," Eliade writes, "reveals itself as *phainesthai*": a coming-into-appearance that precedes rational understanding, causing a trembling of perception, a reverence for being itself.

The *Apparitio Sancti Michaelis*²⁶ in Monte Gargano, the foundational text of the site's cult, situates the sanctuary within its topographical and spiritual context. After anchoring the city of Siponto within its landscape, it recounts three emblematic apparitions of the Archangel, including the vision in which Michael prophesies the victory of the Beneventans and Sipontines—Lombard groups—over the Byzantine Neapolitans. The text subsequently shifts from visionary narration to a detailed natural description, portraying the rocky sanctuary, its surrounding environment, and the early practices of pilgrimage, devotion, and miracle-working (fig.8).

At the time of its historical emergence, the cult of Michael showcased a fundamentally therapeutic and naturalistic character. The *Apparitio* recalls that the Archangel healed fevers through a miraculous water (*stilla*) that sprang directly from the rock within the cave²⁷. This healing force, inseparable from the materiality of the place, resonates with earlier mythological traditions: the site was previously linked to iatric-divinatory figures such as Calchas and Podalirius, whose presence prefigures Michael's functions. Thus, the sanctuary inherited not only its physical location but also a deeper archetypal role as a site of visionary incubation and bodily healing.

The presence of elemental forces—water, stone, forest, altitude—converges to create a landscape infused with sacral density. These features define the symbolic grammar of sacred space in the Gargano throughout the Middle Ages, shaping liturgical imagination and practices. The cave, referred to in medieval sources as both *crypta* and *domus angulosa*, remains irregular and tactile: walls protrude with jagged edges; the ceiling varies dramatically in height; the floor descends in stages, guiding the body through spatial modulation. Outside, the dogwood forest (*cornea silva*) encircles the summit, sheltering the sanctuary before it opens onto a vast plateau.

For the medieval pilgrim, the experience is not only topographical but also existential. The act of entering the cave serves as an initiation. In Greek, *daimon* refers to a guiding spirit²⁸ or *genius loci*²⁹. Michael, in this context, becomes both guardian and revealer, governing not from above but from within. Inscriptions within the cave suggest a practice of *incubatio*—sleeping in the sacred space to receive dreams and prophecies—echoing ancient rites that were later reinterpreted in Christian terms. The votive tablets and banners preserved in the sanctuary reflect centuries of pilgrimage and protection, extending from battlefields to the thresholds of death.

Within the grotto, even sound behaves differently: footsteps echo like liturgical bells; prayers are absorbed into the stone with muted resonance. As one moves inward, the light grows dimmer, and silence acquires texture.

26 La Memoria agiografica di san Michele sul Gargano. Testo critico, traduzione e commento a cura di A. Lagioia, prefazione di G. Otranto, Bari 2017.

27 (Aulisa, 2021)

28 (Richer, 1989)

29 (Norberg-Schulz, 1981)

Then, at the threshold, a sudden opening reveals the Gargano ridge sloping towards the sea, evoking a sacred panorama—not an image, but an event of perception. The cave of Monte Sant'Angelo does not merely contain the sacred. It is the sacred, in its most primordial, unmediated form: an archetypal hierotopy³⁰, a cleft in the world through which the supernatural discloses itself—not in spite of the earth, but through it.

Counterpoint

Opposite the Carbonara Valley, in relation to the Sanctuary of San Michele, lies the Abbey in Monte Sacro (Mattinata), the ruins of which indicate an even older sacred heritage. At its peak are the remnants of a Benedictine abbey dedicated to the Holy Trinity, founded in the 11th century. However, archaeology and legend suggest this was once Monte Dodoneo – a mountain associated with Zeus Dodoneus. Giuseppe Piemontese notes that a temple of "Giove Dodoneo" stood here until the 5th century, echoing the cult of the Dodona oracle. An ancient inscription remarked "to Janus or to the door," but the name Dodoneus truly originates from Dodona in Epirus. Bishop Lorenzo, the same bishop who built the church at Monte Sant'Angelo, is reputed to have diminished the pagan oracle and consecrated the site to the Trinity. From that moment on, it was known as Monte Sacro, "the sacred mountain par excellence" of that area. Ongoing archaeology around the abbey continues to reveal Hellenistic temple foundations (fig.9).

The body of the building itself is entrusted with the task of meeting life and interacting with its manifold forms and infinite expressions. In order to define the meaning of this art of building, Bernard refers to two decisive and precise terms: rigour and dispossession. Building is essential, but not exhibiting, because the true construction must, paradoxically, be invisible. It is no coincidence. At the same time, in the clearing in which it usually stands, the ensemble of the abbey is like the soul of the land, of a body that would have remained dead without the effort of the men that arose it from its torpor. «As in the soul, in fact, maintained by all the humours that flow through the human body – and it, in turn, entrusts to the body warmth and life – in the dwelling – where in an effervescence of light the riches, still dark, that the stimulated earth produces are consumed – resides the motor of every action»; through memory, reason, will.³¹

In Gargano's thematic geography, Santissima Trinità serves as a counterpoint to San Michele. While St. Michael's location is described as "high, fast, glorious" (a soaring beacon), the site of Monte Sacro is more stately, solstitial, and perhaps more connected to the earth. Both locations are significant for gods associated with thunder and sky (Zeus and Michael) on parallel ridges, apparent to each other and to pilgrims traversing the gulf. The ancients were aware of their relationship: Mattinata's carbonate spring (the Altheno river) noted by Strabo in the context of the Podalirius cult, flows from the base of Monte Sacro. Thus, Podalirius's healing waters were located at Monte Sacro's foot, while Calcante's oracle resided atop Monte Sant'Angelo. Christianity intertwined these sites by erecting Michael's church on the summit and the Trinity church (which continues the legacy of Jupiter) on the adjacent peak.

Now a dilapidated convent, Monte Sacro vividly embodies Otto's notion of the numinous. Visitors report feeling "caught up in the mystery" of walls that have become "prey to the assaults of the vegetation." The remaining arches and cells are "gripped by giant ivy," haunted by "the spirits of the forest" – as nature reclaims the sacred space. An unsettling aura pervades the site, as the legend of a treasure-guarding demon "does not seem so unfounded." In these instances, Monte Sacro unmistakably feels "wholly other" and profoundly awe-inspiring – a true "mysterium tremendum et fascinans," both daunting in its power and captivating in its beauty.

The mountain insists on the liveliness of nature: the forest reappropriates stone and altar, allowing ethos and environment to merge. The image takes us back to the original condition, to nature 'within.' Every ivy-covered arch and every fallen pillar resonates with an archaic, numinous quality. In the desolate splendour of Monte Sacro, the sacred, the demonic and the arcane intertwine in the lived landscape, leaving the visitor with a sense of wonder at the ancient mystery of the place. Monte Sacro remains a place of arcane wonder, where the archaic and the numinous converge in tangible form. A place where Homer³² would say the Nymphs live, "personifications of those filaments and banks of mist suspended over the valleys, the mundane walls and springs, veiling

30 (Lidov, 2008, pp. 9-12)

31 Zermani, P. (2018) "La struttura interiore" in Firenze Architettura

32 Odissea, VI, 123.

the waters and dancing above them”³³.

The Echo: Forest Hermitages of Santa Maria di Pulsano

Descending again towards the foothills of the Gargano, the landscape wrinkles - the southern terraces - where silence and echoes of solitude, of the monastic desert, prevail. Perched on a rocky spur dominating the coast between Monte Sant'Angelo and Mattinata is the Abbey of Santa Maria di Pulsano³⁴, founded in the 6th century (according to tradition by Pope St Gregory) and re-established in the 12th century by St John of Pulsano. Here the echo manifests itself both acoustically and spiritually. Rocky spurs envelop the abbey complex; small hermitages cling to the cliffs below, where monks once led a composite life³⁵. Human existence is realised only in the composite life, that is, in the cooperation of the active life with the contemplative life (fig.10). As St. Gregory teaches:

“when a good program of life involves a transition from the active to the contemplative life, then it is often helpful for the soul to return to the contemplative life to the active, causing the flame of contemplation kindled in the heart to give all its perfection to industriousness thus the active life must lead us to contemplation, but contemplation [...] must lead us back to action”³⁶.

The landscape visible from Pulsano is not a passive view but rather a visual architecture that establishes the way of looking at and inhabiting space. The panorama generates orientation, establishing both a vertical and a horizontal axis: the former connects the cave to the vault of heaven, while the latter links the hermitage to the sea and the plain below. The place does not merely open itself to view; it demands a conscious gaze that permits it to be traversed by light and time. Here, what Gernot Böhme calls the “aesthetic atmosphere” is activated—namely, an affective quality of the landscape that shapes perception and establishes an existential dimension.

The landscape extends beyond mere visual observation; it encompasses light, sound, air, and the body's position. The monastic liturgies performed within the abbey found their spatial counterpart in the landscape: every canonical hour and chant coincided with shifts in the coastal light, breezes from the gulf, and a deepening silence. As a result, the landscape is shaped into an expansive liturgical space, where heaven and earth engage in the rite, positioning man not as a mere observer but as an active participant in this sacred tableau.

The expanse of the panorama induces a feeling of internal growth akin to what James Hillman³⁷, a perceptual broadening that links the individual to the entirety. The Gargano landscape, viewed from Pulsano, conjures the essence of Pan not in its frightening aspect, but in its rich, natural, and inherent quality. This vision transforms into a tangible experience, enhancing the connection with the world and granting access to an ancient form of knowledge that integrates humans with their surroundings, creating a unified living web.

Thus incarnates the geography of silence. It contrasts vividly with the grand panorama it overlooks: here is both altar and amphitheatre for contemplation. Modern commentators note how a visitor “stops and gazes at the boundless horizon, moved by the signs of the distant, tenacious Christian tradition of Santa Maria di Pulsano.” It is this echo of history – a thousand years of solitary prayer inscribed on stone – that gives Pulsano its mythopoetic charge. As at Stignano, the site is an “elective place”: not for crowds, but chosen by pilgrims seeking interiority.

33 [Trad. by Autor] (Hillman, 1972, p. 103)

34 (Cavallini, 1999)

35 Human existence is realised only in the composite life, that is, in the cooperation of the active life with the contemplative life. As St. Gregory teaches: “when a good program of life involves a transition from the active to the contemplative life, then it is often helpful for the soul to return to the contemplative life to the active, causing the flame of contemplation kindled in the heart to give all its perfection to industriousness thus the active life must lead us to contemplation, but contemplation [...] must lead us back to action”. [Trad by Autor] (Han, 2023, pp. 113-114)

36 Alois M. Haas, Die Beurteilung der Vita contemplativa und activa in der Dominikenermystik des 14. Jahrhunderts, in B. Vickers (Hrsg.), Arbeit Musse Meditation, Verlag der Fachvereine, Zurich 1985, pp. 109-131

37 “Panic is no longer seen as a physiological defense mechanism or an inadequate reaction or abaissement du niveau mental, but would instead be seen as the right response to the numinous. precipitous flight becomes a breach out of protected safety into the ‘mysterious wild regions of elemental existence.’ Panic will always exist because it is rooted in human nature as such so even to govern it says Brinkmann will need to follow a mythological ritual procedure of gestures and music.” [Trad. by Autor] (Hillman, 1972, pp. 68-69)

Calvino, valuing lightness, would point out how here the world is rendered thin – one is suspended between sky and rock. In Otto's terms, the place is no less tremendous, for the soul feels the scale of eternity in the "smisurato orizzonte" (boundless horizon) and the weight of solitude. In short, Pulsano is the echo chamber of the Gargano, where the sacred reverberates in empty space as much as it did in carved chapel walls (fig.11).

An Active Conservation of the Sacred Landscape

A sacred landscape needs to be reactivated, reinhabited, and maintained through ritual. Its sacredness exists in the stone, gestures, silences, and rhythms. A landscape is considered sacred not when it is merely observed, but when it is practised³⁸.

In this way, conservation is viewed not as an act of immobilisation but as a continuity: a sacred ecology of care. To maintain sacred sites, it is essential to provide attention that rejuvenates gestures, upholds rhythms, and nurtures our presence in relation to the land's shape and time. Monte Sant'Angelo exemplifies this principle by maintaining form alongside liturgical gestures, where structure is inextricably tied to spiritual orientation. Its strength is rooted in the lasting connection between sacred vision and the ritual path. The divine is etched into the physical space and the temporal layers of the land—its accumulated expressions of gesture and devotion.

Central to this valorisation is the practice of walking. Pilgrimage, understood as embodied liturgy, reactivates terrain as a revelation space. The Cammino di San Michele retraces an arc from Mont Saint-Michel to Jerusalem through Monte Sant'Angelo, linking sacred sites across time and geography.³⁹ This gesture aligns with the ethics of slow tourism: decentralisation, ecological awareness, and temporal openness. Micro-sites such as Santa Maria di Pulsano, Santa Maria di Merino, and the eremitic clearings of the Foresta Umbra become nodal points in a sacred network. The landscape re-emerges as a reticulum—an interconnected web of presences held by pilgrimage and prayer.

Valorisation, however, risks degradation when it shifts to consumption. "The sacred cannot be consumed; it demands a pact." The landscape is thus man-made. In the Gargano region, this results from prioritising the infinite over the finite⁴⁰ – While the effects of an urbanised landscape are clear, they require our focus eyes⁴¹. This principle underscores the importance of sacred maintenance through acts of discretion and reverence. Voice, gesture, and rite must be preserved before presenting the artefact. Infrastructures remain discreet, and access flows are ritualised. The grotto is not simply a scenography; it retains its voice.

Equally important is the revitalisation of place through everyday actions. Ancient mule paths are restored, and dry-stone terraces are revitalised using agroecological methods. Forest trails are ceremonially cleared again. These actions do not merely enhance the sacred; they uphold its rhythm. They embody *forma del patto*—acts that reaffirm the bond between the land and those who inhabit it. The Eremo di Pulsano illustrates this approach. Reoccupied by a lay monastic community, it combines ascetic living, spiritual sharing, and landscape care. Pilgrims experience a renewed presence instead of a mere static heritage. Its architecture comes alive. What happens here is not a programme—it is a rite: a commitment to the space and its sacred evolution.

At the core of this philosophy lies a dialectic: the sacred landscape flourishes through responsiveness to rhythm rather than being tethered to rigid form. Sacred landscapes embody layers of time, serving as venues where various durations coalesce. Rather than imposing design, architecture should be attuned to the cycles of seasons, rituals, and the paths taken by pilgrims. Engaging with such an environment invites collaboration in its revelation. Projects ought to resemble liturgies rather than mere products, concentrating on the place instead of superimposing a design. To appreciate Monte Sant'Angelo is to engage in its continual manifestation of the divine—by hearing the whispers of its stones, respecting the patterns of approach, and nurturing the echoes of revelation⁴².

38 Cfr. (Han, 2023, pp. 113-114)

39 Cfr. A. Cardone. Il paesaggio incolto nel Gargano. Un primo esame di contesti in abbandono. In Congresso II patrimonio culturale pugliese. Ricerche, applicazioni e best practices - Bari, 28-30 settembre 2022

40 (Venturi Ferriolo, 2002)

41 Cfr. (Assunto, 1995, pp. 218-221)

42 The paper is part of mine PhD research in Mediterranean Archaeological, Historical, Architectural and Landscapes

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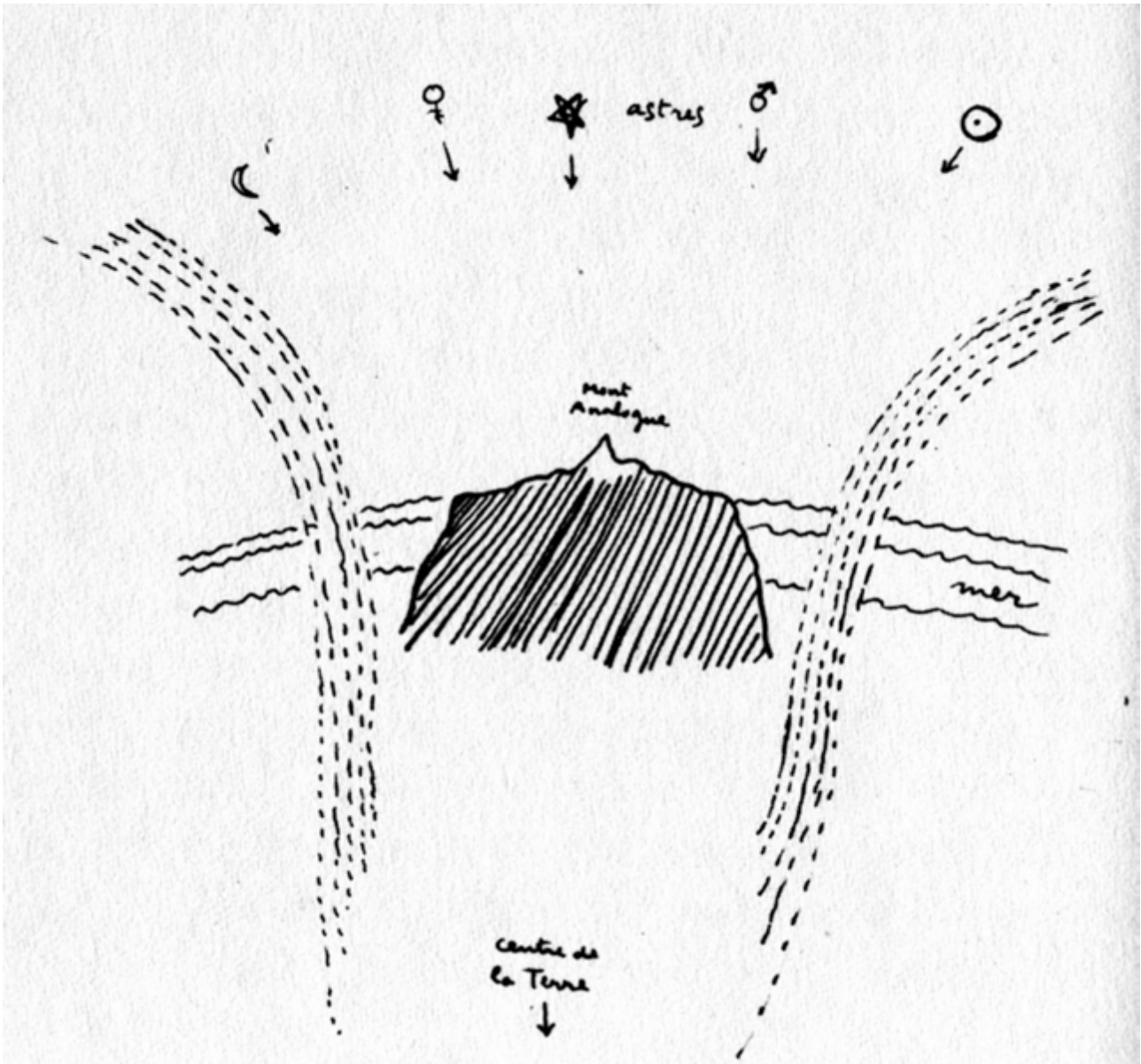


Figura 1 – Illustration by Renè Daumal, The Mount Analogue



Figura 2 - Lucano da Imola, Il monte Gargano e la città di Siponto (1550; Bergamo, San Michele al Pozzo Bianco)



Figura 3 - The Geography of the south Sacred Mountain of Gargano (elaborated by the Author)



Figura 4 – The Via Francigena and sanctuaries across the south sacred Mountain of Gargano (elaborated by the Author)



Figura 5 – sanctuary of Saanta Maria di Stignano before restoration work



Figura 6- Sanctuary of San Matteo

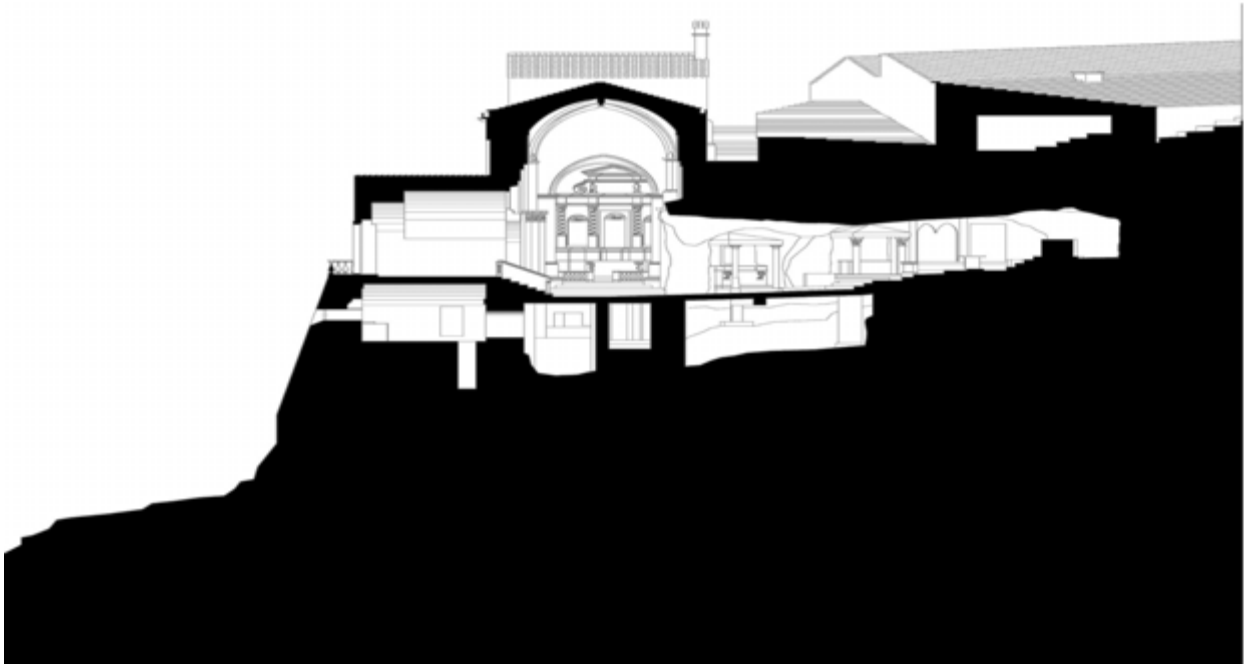




Figura 7 – Cave of Sanctuary of San Michele Arcangelo (drawing by the author)



Figura 8 - the gaze of the contemplator (photos of the author)



Figura 9 – Abbey of SS Trinità in monte Sacro. Photos by Arthur Haseloff, 1907

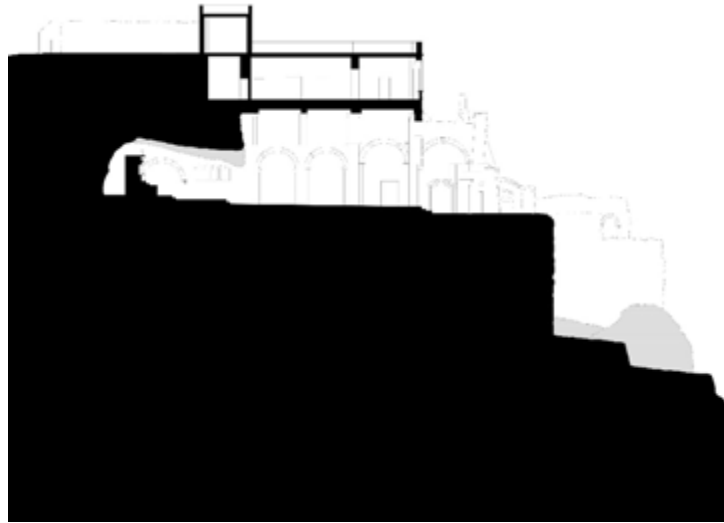


Figura 10 – sanctuary of Santa Maria di Pulsano (drawing and photos by the author)



Figura 11 – Panoramic view by Pulsano