

# SANCTUARIES AND ANIMALS IN SOUTHERN ITALY. INSIGHTS INTO «RURAL DEVOTIONS»

## SANTUARIOS Y ANIMALES EN EL SUR DE ITALIA. PERCEPCIONES SOBRE LAS «DEVOCIONES RURALES»

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«Places do not have locations, but histories»<sup>1</sup>.

### ABSTRACT

This contribution aims, first of all, at investigating historical and religious patterns of a sanctuary located within a peripheral spatial framework in Southern Italy and marked by devotional features related to animals: the sanctuary of St. Matthew the Apostle in the rural area of the Gargano (northern Apulia). Furthermore, some of these patterns will be compared and contrasted with those related to another small «rural» sacred place, located in the central zone of the Italian Region of Abruzzi: the sanctuary of St. Dominic of Cocullo.

KEY WORDS: sanctuaries, animals, rural culture, dental relics.

### RESUMEN

Esta contribución tiene como objetivo, en primer lugar, investigar los patrones históricos y religiosos de un santuario ubicado dentro de un marco espacial periférico en el sur de Italia y marcado por características devocionales relacionadas con los animales: el santuario de San Mateo Apóstol en la zona rural del Gargano (norte de Apulia). Además, algunos de estos patrones serán comparados y contrastados con los relacionados con otro pequeño lugar sagrado «rural», ubicado en la zona central de la Región italiana de Abruzzi: el santuario de Santo Domingo de Cocullo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: santuarios, animales, cultura rural, reliquias odontológicas.

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1 Ingold (2000: 219).



Fig. 1. The sanctuary of St. Matthew and the Valley of Stignano (archive of the sanctuary).

## 1.

The sanctuary of St. Matthew the Apostle (Fig. 1), currently a Franciscan convent, overlooks the Valley of Stignano, within a highly suggestive landscape at the feet of the Mount Celano, in the marginal area of the small municipality of San Marco in Lamis (province of Foggia).

The resilient and multifaceted history of this sanctuary is intertwined with several religious institutions, as well as with the countless shepherds, animals, pilgrims, and peasants that contributed to imbue the place with its sacred meaning. All of them played a significant role, not only in constructing the identity of the place, but also in shaping the whole natural and built environment around it.

Initially, this place was neither named after St. Matthew, nor a Franciscan convent. It was a Benedictine abbey dedicated to St. John the Baptist (named *San Giovanni de Lama*), whose origins are still unclear<sup>2</sup>. As far as we know, the first mention of its exis-

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2 Drawing from previous investigations (see Scaramuzzi 1933; Forte 1978; Aa.Vv. 1981; Soccio 1982), a cross-disciplinary research into this sacred place has been conducted by the scholars involved in the National Italian Project «FIRB» (2012–2017) *Sacred Spaces and Identity Paths. Foundation Texts, Iconography, Religion and Traditions in Italian Christian Sanctuaries in Late Antiquity and Middle Ages*, which included four Universities, bridging the North with the South of the Italian Peninsula: Bari Aldo Moro, Sapienza-Rome, Padua, and «Kore»-Enna. Some results of this specific research have been published, e.g., in Villani (2014); Carnevale, ed. (2017); Olivieri (2017).

tence is to be found in a Byzantine legal document, a *sigillion* issued in 1007 by Alessio Xiphias, at that time catepan (*scil.* governor) of Italy, translated into Latin and transmitted in a later text, a *privilegium* issued in 1095 by the Normand Count Enrico da Monte Sant'Angelo<sup>3</sup>. The *sigillion* was intended both at confirming the possessions of St. John's abbey and at providing it with more territorial assets. This could only mean that, at the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the abbey was already a powerful and active feudal institution and, therefore, it should have been founded well beforehand. St. John the Baptist, along with St. Michael the Archangel, was acknowledged as the patron of the Longobards<sup>4</sup>, and such a piece of evidence, in addition to the important role exerted by this population in shaping the history of the sanctuary of St. Michael the Archangel at Gargano (Otranto 2010; Trotta 2012: 95-122) (located only 30 km East from St. Matthew), led many scholars to surmise a Longobard foundation also of St. John's abbey, perhaps around the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, before becoming a powerful Benedictine institution, the place could have been a simple *hospitium*, a sort of stop-off point and temporary accommodation for the pilgrims headed precisely to St. Michael's sanctuary<sup>5</sup>. This is the reason why the pilgrimage routes, connecting in a «sacred chain» for more than 1.500 years the main sanctuaries at Gargano (St. Michael at Monte Sant'Angelo, St. Matthew at San Marco in Lamis and, presently, also St. Pius at San Giovanni Rotondo) –not to mention a large number of hermitages, chapels, etc.– have been labeled by many scholars *Via Sacra Langobardorum*, in spite of the fact that such a name is not recorded in the existing documentary sources (Infante 2009: 33-40; Corsi, ed. 2012; Infante 2020). More correctly, this road network should be considered a branch of the *Via Francesca*, or southern *Via Francigena*<sup>6</sup>. Anyway, as long as no archaeological evidence related to the Longobards has been found in the area of St. Matthew's sanctuary, a connection among them and the origin of this sacred place, although fascinating, still appears to be more legendary than historical.

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3 Petrucci (1960); Corsi (1976). On these specific Byzantin and Normand legal texts, see Becker (2013: 86).

4 This happened from 658 onwards, as soon as the Longobards converted from Arianism to Catholicism.

5 For more detailed information, see Carnevale (2019).

6 On October 18<sup>th</sup>, 2019, the southern *Via Francigena*, leading from Rome to the extreme piece of European Land protruding in the Mediterranean Sea, gained the official recognition by the European Association «Vie Francigene»: see Infante (2009); Stopani (1992); and the website <https://www.viefrancigene.org/it/>.

Turning back to the history: other documents from the Byzantine and Norman Ages (11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries) (Corsi 1979) endorse and enlarge the territorial assets of St. John's abbey, demonstrating its growing power and its political influence, exerted not only on the Gargano, but also on the lowlands at the feet of the promontory (*Tavoliere delle Puglie*) and beyond. In the land under their control, the Benedictine monks fostered the cultivation of cereals, olive trees, vineyards, as well as the raising of cattle. They even started a light commerce with the Eastern Mediterranean countries, counting on the stream of pilgrims, merchants and soldiers who, unceasingly flowing from the shores of the Baltic Sea and the Atlantic Ocean, reached the road network and the chain of sacred places in Gargano directed to St. Michael's sanctuary, and ultimately to the Holy Land (Corsi 1980: 135). Documents show, however, the lack of any positive integration between the local population and the Benedictines, confirmed by the fact that the inhabitants used to make recurrent intrusions into the territories of the abbey. This was due to their poverty and their critical living conditions, but, in a broader sociological perspective, it demonstrated the extent to which the everyday life of these peasants and shepherds was disconnected from the religious and institutional life of the abbey. Correspondingly, the pilgrims did not engage in any substantial social interaction with the inhabitants of the surroundings, being principally focused on the target of their pilgrimage route and on their relationship with the monks – a relationship which carried significant economic implications, alongside the spiritual connotation. Hence, the most important feature of St. John's abbey seems to have been its institutional power, and the control it exerted over its rural environment in a typically feudal way.

The «dark age» of *San Giovanni de Lama* began in the 13<sup>th</sup> century with the Swabian Emperor Frederick II (Corsi 1980: 139–140). In 1311 the abbey was assigned to the Cistercian Order, being lastly given *in commendam* (i.e. being governed by external abbots) in 1327 (Corsi 1980: 150). From that moment on, this sacred place experienced a story of abandonment and decay until the year 1578, when Pope Gregory the 13<sup>th</sup> ascribed it to the Franciscans (*Ordo Fratrum Minorum*). Such an assignment should be counted among the actions fostered by the Roman Church after the Council of Trent, aimed at better integrating the rural areas within Catholicism. The Franciscans started a global process of restoration, which gradually transformed not only the architecture of the building, but above all its identity and its bonds with the landscape and the people, from both a physical and a social perspective (landscape and mindscape). Soon after their arrival (although it is difficult to establish the precise moment when this happened), a precious wooden statue of St. Matthew the Apostle –possibly a former statue of Christ– was positioned in the church of the monastery (Castelli 2012). In the same period a relic, acknowledged as St. Matthew's «molar tooth», was transferred to the convent, probably from Salerno (a town under the patronage of the Apostle) (Galdi 1996). At least two

textual sources describe these events, endorsing their historicity. The first one is a Franciscan chronicle written in 1587 by Franciscus Gonzaga, *ofm* (Malagrino y Villani 1997): he mentions the existence of the statue and hints at a miracle working relic. Moreover, he explicitly states that the convent, at his time, was named not only after St. John the Baptist, but also after St. Matthew, especially among the faithful. The second text is the report of a Canonical Visit written almost a hundred years later (1683) by Egidio Mattielli, *ofm* (Nardella 1976: 82-83): he confirms the presence of the statue on the altar of the church and tells more about St. Matthew's relic. In particular, he emphasizes that both the tooth and the oil of the lamp lighted at the altar were regarded as a shield against the bites of dogs and as a mighty healing device in the case of illnesses involving animals and humans – especially hydrophobia<sup>7</sup>. He recounts that the local community was very fond of this relic and the peasants and the shepherds attended St. Matthew's sanctuary regularly, in search of cures and protection for their cattle. As thanksgiving they presented various types of votive offerings to the convent: votive pictures, liturgical vessels, money, and even their own animals as living offerings. According to Egidio Mattielli, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century the devotion to St. Matthew was spreading throughout Apulia and the reputation of this «marginal» sacred place was growing considerably, mainly within the rural population.

It comes as no surprise that in this period the single-nave church of the convent underwent a significant architectural transformation: it was re-oriented by means of an inversion of the position of its façade. Consequently, the entrance, originally positioned at the East side of the church, was re-located at the Western side, facing the Valley of Stignano directly, over the route coming from the mouth of the valley itself, and was, therefore, more accessible both to the local population and to the travelers (Villani 2012: 360). The Franciscans Friars thus negotiated a «porous» relationship among their religious institution, the sacred place they owned, and the rural community. They acknowledged the needs of the people living there, as well as of their vital bonds with the animals (whether wild or domesticated, whether offensive or offended), recognizing the critical factors, which could always interrupt these bonds and irrupt in their existence. The authoritarian and «closed» Benedictine abbey had been converted into a place with a new identity and a new significance, which started to be considered a material and symbolic «comfort zone» by those attending it, whose social background was shifting

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7 Hydrophobia is an infectious disease caused by a virus (genus *Lyssavirus*) occurring in dogs and in wild animals, especially during warm periods, and leading to a delirious and aggressive state, with symptoms like the foaming of the mouth and the fear of water. If contracted by men, due to a bite of an affected dog, it can even lead to death. The peculiar symptomatology of hydrophobia always facilitated its connection to a condition of savage madness or diabolical possession: see Wasik y Murphy (2012).

significantly. They were no longer soldiers, traders and people coming from far and wide; on the contrary, most of them were peasants struggling for their everyday-life on the local fields, and shepherds breeding their animals in the area or walking on transhumance paths with their cattle.

Since the Roman Age, in fact, Northern Apulia has been a target of the transhumance practice, the seasonal transfer of livestock, along large grassy trails, between the summer pastures and the winter ones (Ingold 2010). This nomadic way of farming the animals has always been widespread –and still is– all over Europe, from Spain to Finland (Santillo Frizell 2010: 11–38). From a general perspective, it can be considered an expression of the deep confidence held between humans and bovines, which is anthropologically rooted in the role of the latter as the main agricultural helpers of humans since the time of sedentarization (7<sup>th</sup> millennium B.C.E., Ancient Near East)<sup>8</sup>. In the Gargano, especially in the *Tavoliere delle Puglie*, «horizontal transhumance» was a common practice: bulls, oxen, cows and sheep were relocated here from the area of modern Regions of Abruzzo and Molise<sup>9</sup>, where the bovines had had a special religious significance since the pre-Roman times<sup>10</sup>.

Transhumance paths intersected pilgrimage paths. Furthermore, the shepherds guarding and guiding the animals during such a fatiguing journey proved to be the most fervent devotees, being often –both they and their animals– in extreme need of the protection of «specialized» saints (Bronzini 1991). Not by coincidence, most of these saints have their Feast Days in autumn and/or in spring (the periods when, respectively, the transhumance begins and ends), and precisely in these times the local communities celebrate their festivals, often involving animals in a more or less active way. St. Matthew's Feast Day, specifically, is on September 21<sup>st</sup>. On that day, St. Matthew's sanctuary

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8 Huge literature on this topic: see, e.g. (Spitilli 2011:11–13).

9 A beautiful description of this practice is to be found in a poem of Gabriele D'Annunzio, *I pastori* (from *Alcyone. Sogni di Terre Lontane*, 1903): «Settembre, Andiamo. È tempo di migrare. /Ora in terra d'Abruzzi i miei pastori /Lascian gli stazzi e vanno verso il mare: /scendono all'Adriatico selvaggio /che verde è come i pascoli dei monti. / [...] /E vanno pel tratturo antico al piano /Quasi per un erbal fiume silente, /su le vestigia degli antichi padri. /O voce di colui che primamente / [...] / Ah perché non son io co' miei pastori?». The transhumance is still practiced nowadays and, since December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2019, it has been also inscribed into the UNESCO Intangible Cultural World Heritage List.

10 The people called *Sabini* and their offspring, the *Samnites*, settled in this area and developed a sacrificial practice called *ver sacrum*, mainly concerning the deduction of colonies, and involving a consecration to Mars of the firstborns among the cattle. See La Regina (1991: 48–53); Santillo Frinzell (2010: 87–90).

converts itself into a melting pot for individuals who, enduring similar troubles, unfold comparable solutions by means of shared devotional practices, like the veneration of the molar tooth and the anointment with the oil of the lamp. The powerful «sacred presence» of the relic leads the faithful to look for a «cure» for themselves and their animals, especially for those affected by symptoms (allegedly?) related to hydrophobia. In this way they are enabled to fix their distressed identities, produce new subjective meanings for their life, and experience new forms of social cohesion (Brown 1981; Di Santo 2015; Cremonesi 2019). Actually, even now the popular celebrations at St. Matthew's sanctuary are focused on rites involving humans and animals, with a noteworthy innovation: the anointment with the sacred oil is extended to the cars, due to the fact that the cars replaced the horses, in modern times, as a means of transportation (Fig. 2; Fig. 3).



Fig. 2. Anointment and benediction of animals (Ph. U. Panipucci, ofm).

Indeed, it is precisely from the time of the arrival of the Franciscans that this sacred place can truly be described as a «sanctuary», even if such a label has never been formally approved from a Catholic official perspective. In fact, St. Matthew's sanctuary still keeps the ancient name of St. John's abbey. This is not surprising at all, just as it is not surprising that even now the Friars, the devotees and the pilgrims do not long for obtaining an official canonization of the sanctuary. They do not need any superimposed authority to imbue the place with the sacred meaning they perceive, which is deeply



Fig. 3. Anointment of a car (Ph. U. Panipucci, ofm).

embedded in their habits, in their rituals, in their votive offerings, in their individual cognitive representations and in their relational disposition when they gather there<sup>11</sup>.

This special relationship between humans and animals, facilitated by Saint Matthew, has nothing to do with the traditional character of this Saint. Even if much scholarly energy has been devoted to investigate, from a hagiographical perspective<sup>12</sup>, the shift in the dedication from St. John to St. Matthew and the specific features developed by St. Matthew in this rural area of Apulia, no relevant explanation has been proposed. The history of this sanctuary, however, proves to be a significant example of how an alteration involving religious agents, especially at an institutional level, in a specific spatial context, leads to transformations involving both the built and the natural environment, not to mention the individual and collective perception of it (Giddens 1994: 110). More-

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11 From a juridical perspective, the canonization of a sanctuary has always been a challenging subject in Catholicism: only in 1980 did the *Codex Iuris Canonici* (canon 1230) propose a definition of the sanctuary, stating that «a sanctuary is a church or another sacred place where many of the faithful, for a special reason of piety, go on pilgrimage with the approval of the Ordinary of the place» (*sanctuarii nomine intelleguntur ecclesia vel alius locus sacer ad quos, ob peculiarem pietatis causam, fideles frequentes, approbante Ordinario loci, peregrinantur*).

12 See Talamo Atenolfi (1958); Scardigno (2014–2015).



over, the location in an «old» spatial context of «new» objects collectively recognized as specifically meaningful (the statue, the relic, the votive gifts, etc.) contributes to speed up –and, at the same time, endorse– this process of transformation, stimulating new individual responses and original ritual expressions.

## 2.

It happens quite frequently, indeed, that a Saint changes his/her original patronage and/or develops a specific thaumaturgic competence according to the place and the requests of the faithful, in response to the social, cultural and economic needs related to the space and time in which the devotion itself is embedded. I share the opinion that a comparative way of addressing this topic –though preserving a careful historical attitude– can be of some help in achieving a deeper understanding of it. With regard to the «rural» devotion linked with St. Matthew's sanctuary, it is stimulating to take into account the social history of other Christian sacred places in Southern Italy, often located in rural contexts and dedicated to Saints capable of protecting their devotees from the bites of animals, whether or not by means of a tooth-relic<sup>13</sup>. Here I will expand a bit on one specific case: that of the small village of Cocullo, located at 850 mt. on the sea level in the Region of Abruzzi, area of Majella, province of L'Aquila. The patron of Cocullo, Saint Dominic of Foligno or of Sora (the two villages where he allegedly was born and died), is identified with a hermit who lived in that area during Benedictine times (11<sup>th</sup> century) and founded various hermitages, the most important of which is a cave called *Grotta di San Domenico Abate*, located in the nearby village of Villalago and considered a sanctuary by the people who attend it (di Nola 1976: 119-133; Tripputi 1998). Even if some hagiographical accounts and hagiographical legends are preserved, mainly concerning the power exerted by Dominic of Sora in shielding the local populations from the bites of wild animals and rabid dogs (di Nola 1976: 61-91), the historical

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13 There are many of such Saints, whose aspects and characters have been variously investigated from an ethno-anthropological, hagiographical and historical perspective. Be here sufficient to mention Saint Vitus (celebrated, for instance, at Polignano a Mare, 40 km South from Bari) or Saint Roch (celebrated at Torrepaduli, in the hearth of Salento, the land of «taranta»): see Rivera (1998:248-264); Ianneci (2000); Resta (2010); Scardigno (2014-2015); De Martino (2015: 260). Comparable devotions are also to be found in the Northern Italy: one of them is that of Saint Donnino of Fidenza, in the Region of Emilia Romagna: see di Nola (1976: 134-147); Scardigno (2014-2015). Highly interesting, although not directly comparable to our case studies, are the extreme experiences endured in the congregation of the «Snake Handlers», founded in Cleveland in 1909 by George Hensley and currently widespread among some protestant groups of rural villages in the American South-East (Tennessee, Georgia, North and South Carolina, Florida): see La Barre (1962); Kimbrough (2002).

consistence of this Saint is very thin; furthermore, as we have seen, it is originally not very much related to the distinctive features of the local devotion.

The celebrations in honor of Saint Dominic are held in Cocullo on May, 1<sup>st</sup> (even if his official Feast Day is on January 22<sup>nd</sup>) and involve a particular kind of «snake parade», where the protagonists are a large number of un-poisonous, harmless snakes, which cover Dominic's statue during the procession along the streets of the village (Fig. 4; Fig. 5).



Fig. 4. The procession of St. Dominic (Ph P. Malagrino).

The snakes are caught by the local snake-charmers and snake-breeders (called *serpari*) during the month of April, when the reptiles begin to come out of hibernation; subsequently, they are kept in private houses in glassy jars or in cooking pots and duly fed until the Feast Day. The procession currently begins and ends in the small church of St. Mary of Graces (*Santa Maria delle Grazie*), where the statue of St. Dominic is preserved during the whole year, and where a relic too is kept, acknowledged as the molar tooth of the Saint and worshipped by the devotees (in the past years both the statue and the relic were preserved in the so-called «sanctuary of St. Dominic», indeed a church dedicated to St. Egidius). During the procession, the statue is followed by pre-teen girls in traditional laced costumes, who have the task of carrying baskets of a sweet bread colorfully decorated: the «ciambelle» of St. Dominic (Tripputi 1998).

Saint Dominic is perceived both as a mighty guardian saint, protecting against the bites of all the harmful snakes, and as a healer from tooth pain and hydrophobia. Not only that, but all the people who faithfully attend the procession are believed to become

resistant to the poison of reptiles. A certain influence on this idea is surely exerted by two Gospel passages (respectively, Luke 10:19<sup>14</sup> and Mark 16:18<sup>15</sup>), as well as by the story of St. Paul and the snake on the isle of Malta, recounted in Acts of the Apostles 28:1-6<sup>16</sup>. Apart from Christian traditions, this rural devotion appears to be rooted in pre-Roman times, when the cult of the goddess *Angitia* was widespread among the population of *Marsi*, who inhabited this area. *Angitia* was associated with thaumaturgic powers linked to the snakes. And even if, from a sheer historical perspective, we are not allowed to simply state that the cult of St. Dominic «replaced» that of *Angitia*, it is important to notice the striking similarities among the Pagan and the Christian phenomena. What is more, these similarities are strongly perceived by the local residents, whose narratives about their own religious identity and traditions prove to be a peculiar



Fig. 5. The statue of St. Dominic (Ph Malagrino).

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14 «I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you».

15 «They will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well».

16 In many biblical passages, especially in the Old Testament, the tooth and the (poisonous) bite of wild animals serve as a negative metaphor for the punishment of God or the attack of the enemies: see, e.g., Ps. 3:8; Ps. 57:5; Prov. 30:4.

blend of the hagiographical legends regarding Saint Dominic and the ancient history of the *Marsi* people. Some snake-charmers are even persuaded to directly descend from pre-Roman ancestors<sup>17</sup>.

Thus, the devotion to St. Dominic of Cocullo, although apparently showing patterns comparable to the devotion to St. Matthew at Gargano, proves to have a divergent history, not to mention its unparalleled ritual expressions. This devotion, in fact, at least in the individual and collective perception of the local population, seems to have experienced no ruptures during its history. On the contrary, its expressions are apparently devoid of time, while strongly focused on place. This seems to me to be a clear illustration of a famous assertion of Jonathan Z. Smith, when he explained the role of the place as a «fundamental component of ritual: place directs attention»<sup>18</sup>. Indeed, what emerges from the patterns we have investigated is the fact that the cult to St. Dominic, as we have seen in the case of St. Matthew, is deeply rooted in its rural context, where the animals have an essential role in the everyday life of people. This reflection confirms the hypothesis that the environment and the spatial framework plays a noteworthy role in the production of meaning of a sacred place. Moreover, similar needs of the individuals gave birth to parallel religious devices and responses (e.g. the tooth relic; the thaumaturgic specialization of the two Saints) – although differently expressed and articulated according to different times, societal challenges and historical contexts.

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17 See, e.g., Smith (1928), and also di Nola (1976: 106-124); Tripputi (1998).

18 And he also added the well-known statement that «sacrality is, above all, a category of emplacement» (Smith 1987: 104).

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