SACRALIZATION OF LANDSCAPE AND SACRED PLACES IN APULIA: THE CASE OF "HERMITAGE OF SAN NICOLA"

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ABSTRACT

In the context of the relationship between humans and space, sacred spaces offer a unique insight into the social and cultural history of a region. This study examines the sacralization of landscapes in Apulia, with a particular focus on the Hermitage of San Nicola, located on the Gargano promontory. The Hermitage is a notable case study of the intersection of natural elements, religious practices, and cultural identity. Through a combination of historical analysis, archival research, archaeological surveys and community engagement, the study examines how the Hermitage transformed from a monastic church into a site of pilgrimage. The study uncovers architectural features such as a rectangular nave, circular apse and ancillary rooms, which suggest that the site was primarily used for religious purposes and contained few domestic artefacts. The Hermitage's integration with its natural surroundings reflects early medieval Christian practices of situating sacred sites in remote areas to foster spiritual reflection. Additionally, the study emphasizes the Hermitage's role in the wider Gargano pilgrimage network, highlighting its connection to other significant sanctuaries. Interviews with local people reveal the site's ongoing spiritual and cultural significance, showcasing its role in regional identity and continuity. The study concludes by emphasizing the importance of preserving such sacred spaces, as they provide valuable insights into the region's religious, cultural and architectural heritage.

Keyword: Sacred spaces, Medieval Archaeology, Landscape Archaeology, pilgrimage, sacralization.

INTRODUCTION

Sacred spaces play a pivotal role in our understanding of the relationship between humans and their environment [1]. Not only are they physical markers of religious devotion, they are also cultural and symbolic representations of community values and practices [2]. During the medieval period, the concept of the sacred was evident in the organization of space, frequently taking the form of a landscape of power [3]. The concept of physical spaces being perceived as sacred has become firmly established, as exemplified by their continued use across periods and cultures [4]. Sacred spaces are defined by their role as signs and markers in the perception of physical, symbolic, and cultural space. Consequently, a comprehensive analysis of local contexts is imperative, encompassing the spatial distribution of holy places within the global history of 'Landscape Archaeology' [5]. In territorial organization, places of worship can be seen as a cultural construction interacting with heritage communities. An example is the

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