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### **Understanding the Continuous Sustainable Nature of Cultural and Sacred Heritage - The Cultural and Sacred Sites of the Majella National Park in Abruzzo**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

Since time immemorial there have been places that held a special meaning and were perceived to be endowed with special powers or of special spiritual or cultural significance.

It is surprising to discover that many cultural and sacred sites have a long history reaching back hundreds of thousands of years (Mallarach & Papayannis, 2010). While some cultural traditions have their source in civilisations that have long since disappeared (Hamilton, 2006), many of their beliefs are still alive and their sacred sites have continued to be used for millennia, like in the Apennine, the old traditional Italian mountain.

These sites, a true example of study, provide some understanding of how societies evolve, how the histories of people, their legends, their traditions, their beliefs, their laws, their rituals and religions play out in the evolution of human cultures to bring us to where we stand today: a composite of the past that survived through geographical and cultural diversification (Frascaroli & Verschuuren, 2016).

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**Keywords:** Majella National Park; Paleolithic; Sacred Sites; Cultural Traditions; Beliefs

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## Introduction

The abundance and the great diversity of sites at the Majella National Park<sup>1</sup> in the Abruzzo region of Italy is truly amazing, ranging from the Palaeolithic era to the present day; however, these sites need to be set against the historical, cultural and geographical background of the Abruzzo region (Agnoletti, 2014). Situated in the centre of the Italian peninsula, this region is considered "the greenest region in Europe" (Di Lorenzo et al., 2015; Corona et al., 2012) as over one third of its territory, the largest in Europe, is protected. Within its territory can be found the Majella National Park, the Gran Sasso-Laga National Park, the Abruzzo National Park and the Regional Park of Sirente-Velino and a further 38 nature reserves; the Abruzzo is also home to the *Calderone*, Europe's southernmost glacier. These ensure the survival of 75% of Europe's living species including rare species. It is often said that areas rich in biodiversity are also rich in cultural diversity, and when taken over the ages, this can certainly be said about the Abruzzo region.

The author presents a very important and unfamiliar traditional Italian mountain, the Abruzzo Apennine, just the Majella mountain as case study, a methodology providing tools for researchers to study complex phenomena within their contexts. This research tries to testify the sustainability of these cultural and religious sites on the basis of the persistent territorial permanence (Da Silveira Bueno, 2017).

### 1. The Majella National Park

The Majella mountain (Barron, 2006; Frascaroli, 2013) is in reality a cluster of 61 peaks and most of its territory falls within the boundaries of the Parco Nazionale della Majella (Bosetti, Locatelli, 2006; Brogiolo, Colecchia, 2017). The Park is located in central Italy covers an area of 74.095 hectares in the Abruzzo Region and spans the provinces of Pescara, L'Aquila and Chieti, with the special characteristic that 55% of its territory is situated above 2000 m (6562 ft). It has IUCN Cat II classification and PAN Parks certification.

The Majella National Park, founded in 1993 and at only two hours from Rome, contains a wealth of sites that testify to migratory cycles dating back to the mists of time<sup>2</sup>. It contains Palaeolithic sites (Domenico, 2002), caves used extensively since Early Neolithic times, pagan, Italic, Roman and Christian sanctuaries and temples, habitats going all the way back to Neolithic times, rock burial chambers, necropolis, hermitages, coenobites, churches and abbeys and tholoi, dry-stone huts used for transhumant shelter. The Abruzzo region also holds some of Italy's best-preserved fortified medieval hill towns.

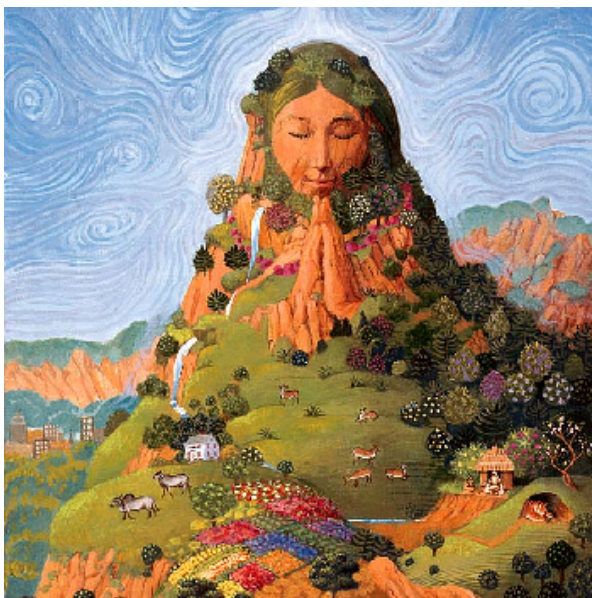
What sets the Abruzzo, their National Parks, e.g. the Majella National Park apart from many other regions is the fact that it contains diverse and intriguing sites spanning at least 700'000 years. It is a case study that will present specialists with an example in which many archaeological, cultural, spiritual and historic contexts converge with

traditions and festivals that have their origins thousands of years back and that are still being played out in the 21st Century. As such it can truly be considered a sacred landscape (Bevilacqua, 2013) where rituals still enacted today have their source in eras and civilisations long past<sup>3</sup>.

## 2. Prehistoric Times

It is difficult to imagine today that when prehistoric humans, e.g. Homo erectus groups, roamed the land, they were surrounded by bisons, elephants, rhinoceroses, lions, bears, boars, wolves, wild horses and deer while the marshy areas were populated by hippopotami, water birds, tortoises and amphibians.

During the last glacial period and with a permanent snow line at 1200m, the hunter-gatherers had to move to the coastal plains while many of the animals were forced to migrate southwards to find new habitats; eventually the Pleistocene mega-fauna disappeared from the Italian peninsula.



**Figure 1:** The Mother Mountain  
Source: Abruzzando

The Majella National Park has been peopled since Paleolithic times, and this has allowed for an amazing variety of different peoples and cultures to leave their traces. A Palaeolithic settlement is located on the edge of what was once a lake in the Valle Giumentina (Villa et al., 2015; Nicaud et al., 2016). It is clear from 700.000 years-old artefacts found here that the inhabitants used fire, made stone tools and took care of their infirm and weak companions. It can be gleaned from their burial sites that they had rituals and beliefs related to an after-life. The transition from one era to another did not occur uniformly and for a period Palaeolithic, Neolithic and Bronze age cultures appear side-by-side (Colecchia, 2015).

In contrast, one element that can be found to persist over a long period of time is the special importance given to Maja, the Mother Mountain (**Figure 1**). It is to her that the Majella is dedicated and since time immemorial she is considered a sacred mountain, one of the most revered mountains in Italy (Gobster, 2014). For the Abruzzesi she will

remind them of their ancestry, their culture, their strength and of who they are. A number of sites exist on the Majella from this period. *Grotta della Continenza*<sup>4</sup> (Grifoni Cremonesi et al., 2009; Barra et al., 1990) has been in continuous use since Paleolithic times through to the 19th century, mainly for ritual purposes. The site contains 37 stone-age burials from the Paleo- and Neolithic eras with features that were common to most graves of this period.

In the *Grotta Maritza* (Grifoni Cremonesi, Radmilli, 1964; Mussi, 1986) vases with human remains were found. However, these vases were turned upside-down and their base was shattered. Whereas the body could be contained within the vessel, the practice of *inversion* and the ritual breaking of pots (Grinsel, 1961) allowed for the soul to depart. It was symbolic of life being set free. Such practices persisted for millennia and were still practiced around 1200 BC.

At Fonterossi (near Lama dei Peligni) a crouched female skeleton was discovered 3 m under the foundations of a hut (Grifoni Cremonesi, 2000) of a village of the Neolithic era. Experts concluded that because of the manner that the stones around her were built up, that this was part of a foundation rite, maybe related to an ancestor as protector deity or related to ancestor worship. Oxford University carbon dated both the skeleton and the foundations to the same year, to 6'540 BC. Burials also had a *gender* dimension as women were buried facing the East while men looked towards the West.

The continuity of use of the same sacred sites by different peoples and beliefs is remarkable and the *Grotta del Colle*<sup>5</sup> (AA.VV., 2000) is a good example where a cave-settlement is being used in different epochs. Here artefacts were found from Paleolithic times; in 600 BC, the space was used as an Italic temple dedicated to Cerfia (Galli, 1970); in 300 BC, the Maruccini tribe (Salmon, 1958) used this for sacred gatherings and ritual, while during the Longboard era around 600 CE it was dedicated to St Michael and finally as Santa Maria in Cryptis, also as Ecclesia S. Angeli and Crypta, and used till well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The importance of the *Grotta del Colle* can be understood realising that the Marrucini People (Crawford, 2003) would undertake a 4hr trek each way to come and perform their rituals and celebrations in what they considered their spiritual centre, though their principal settlement was Teate, today's Chieti. It was in this cave that a third century BC small bronze plate inscribed in the Marrucian language was found, the *Tabula Rapinensis* (Mommsen, 1850). The Bronze age also saw the return of the horse lost 11'000 years earlier during the last glacial period, and it is near the Majella, at the Conca di Sulmona, that the horses for the Italic and Roman armies were bred.

### 3. Transhumance

The people migrating into the Italian peninsula often came from a more sophisticated cultural background and brought with them their beliefs and rituals, new cultural inputs like metal smelting techniques, agricultural knowledge, plant seeds, domestication of sheep, goats, culinary traditions, songs, dances and a tradition of transhumance that would mark the Abruzzo region for millennia to come (Barker,

1989; Avram, 2009). This aided to transit from mobile hunter-gatherer groups to the development of nascent agricultural settlements, coupled with the seasonal movement of transhumant activity.

Transhumance was practiced in the Abruzzo Region since the Copper Ages till into the 1950s, shaping society, traditions, as well as its tangible and intangible culture. In 1605, and with only a working population of 50 000 people, five million bovines were counted in the Abruzzo region alone to which need to be added millions of sheep and goats. A single shepherd could be moving as many as 10 000 animals along drovers' roads<sup>6</sup> (*tratturi*) that were either 55m or 111.6m<sup>7</sup> wide, depending on whether he was moving cattle or sheep (Meini, 2014). Distances travelled per day would be 40 km for cattle and 10-15 km for sheep and the shepherds had to pay a toll for the use of the tracks and for each animal; the income of these taxes first to the Roman Empire and at a later date to the Aragon crown<sup>8</sup> (Musto, 1964), was considerable. Farmers welcomed the herds as they benefitted from the passage of the animals. Archival records from those times mentioned that wheat yields from fields fertilised by herds were well above average.

The 243km journey from Aquila to Foggia took 2-3 weeks and along the *tratturi* the shepherds would find resting places containing wide open spaces that offered some shadow, watering opportunities for the herds and some shelter or stone huts. Before returning to the summer pastures, the sheep were sheared, bringing in valuable monetary gains for the shepherds returning home. The city of Tarentum, today's Taranto, became famous for the wool trade (Malanima, 1986). These routes were also extensively used by all travelling northwards, e.g. to Ireland or Northern Europe but also by those needing to reach the South of Italy or going to the Via Sacra Langobardorum (Santillo, 2004), to worship Saint Michael at the Monte Sant'Angelo. The Via Sacra Langobardorum (Serafini, Verazzo, 2017), part of the Via Francigena (Almatourism, Vol 8, No 6, 2017; Almatourism, Vol 8, No 16, 2017), was a crowded crossroads not only for pilgrims, but also for warriors during the Crusades as the geographic position of the Gargano made journeys to the Holy Land easier. Today, these highways of the past are once again being used as trekking and pilgrimage routes.

Along these tracks shepherds and pilgrims would build shrines to protector deities or even churches. The tracks and villages became a popular choice for pilgrims travelling to/from the Holy Land. The commercial opportunities transhumance presented allowed the shepherds and people to sell their wares at markets, build taverns and houses and over time lively market villages would come into being, as the most important requirements for making a living existed through the availability of water, roads, and a barter and trade-network with neighbouring regions. This was kept alive through the seasonal migration of shepherds that enabled goods to be transported, exchanged and sold. The bi-annual migrations also created opportunities for shepherds to find wives and in time family bonds were created along the routes that the shepherds moved through (Franciosa, 1951).

On the 8<sup>th</sup> of May the shepherds would return home from their winter pastures in the South to the summer pastures of their own mountains, often joined by their families. The bi-annual migrations also created opportunities for shepherds to find wives and in time family bonds were created along the routes that the shepherds moved through. Such celebrations are still performed today though transhumance is not widely

practiced anymore though there has been a revival as of late with an added “tourist” and educational dimension in that “outsider” now have the possibility of joining the shepherds on part of their journey to experience this very particular lifestyle and to learn not only shepherding skills but also how to transform the milk in products that can be sold during the journey<sup>9</sup>.

It goes without saying that the cultural ramifications of transhumance are manifold, from the special dates of the home journey on 8 May and southwards journey on 29 September, both dedicated to St Michael. Still today many festivals are held in May so that the whole community could celebrate the return of their loved ones and families would have time to be together, celebrate, marry, feast, sing and dance and work on the land and with the harvests (Petrocelli, 1999). It was also time to work on crafts and products that could be sold on the journey South. The time with family was precious as for the rest of the year their life was one of hardship and solitude<sup>10</sup>.

The Majella National Park is intrinsically related to Abruzzo’s culture of transhumance. Two of the millennia-old drovers’ roads used by shepherds and their herds for their seasonal migration traverse the Majella National Park and the Abruzzo’s remote, majestic and dramatic landscapes into Apulia while over 1000 tholoi-type shepherd dry stone huts still dot the Majella landscape to this day.

The building of dry-stone huts *was* part of ancestral knowledge but over time this knowledge was lost. The Abruzzo region invited shepherds from Greece to teach tholoi building again to people of the Abruzzo. It is important for such knowledge not to be lost, especially as these constructions have demonstrated their resilience over time. In 2012 a book came out by Marco Miosi “*Tholoi d’Italia*” which was a first overview of such dry-stone buildings in Italy<sup>11</sup> (Miosi, 2012) The Spanish Government in 2017 declared Transhumance an Intangible Cultural Heritage of the country and UNESCO has added transhumance of many countries to their List of Intangible Heritage.

#### **4. Migration and Ancient Tribes**

The Greenland ice-cores have shown that more than 24 *sudden* warm and moist phases occurred during a time-span going from 115.000 to 14.000 years ago, times when the weather was as warm or even warmer than today (Iambek, 1996).

There have been many waves of migration into Italy since times immemorial and it is against this background that the amazing diversity of cultures and beliefs has to be seen. People of pre- and non-Indo-European origin already inhabited the land and by the late Bronze Age, almost half of the Italic peninsula was made up of migrants.

The glacial period ended about 10,000 years ago and the milder weather opened new grassland corridors allowing new migration patterns. Many of these populations today would be called “climate refugees” as in their homelands they were experiencing severe droughts. Around 6000 to 4000 BC the climate was warmer than today, with sea levels 1m above present levels (Mörner, 2015), prompting people from the Levant, Asia Minor, the Aegean areas, the Balkans and Africa to search for new livelihoods and arable lands while around 2500 years ago Celtic tribes moved in from the North.

It goes without saying that all of these peoples brought with them their own beliefs, myths and traditions, many of these persisting to this day and being enacted through local festivals.

The cult of Ercole<sup>12</sup>, introduced to the Sannite people by Greek immigrants, became one of the most worshipped and popular deities among the Italic tribes. Sulmona housed a 4<sup>th</sup> century BC Italic sanctuary dedicated to him. In 1957 a statue was unearthed which strongly resembled the statue of the famous Greek sculptor Lysippos (390-300 BC). Ercole Curino's popularity survived well into Christian times where he can be seen on the facades of cathedrals, e.g. the Cathedral of San Marco in Venice, consecrated in 1094 and the Cathedral of Fidenza, reconstructed after the 1117 earthquake.

To this day the past and the present are still intertwined and the town of Sulmona, where the administrative offices of the Majella National Park are located, stands testimony to past waves of migration. Writers like Ovid and Silionus agree on the antiquity of Sulmo, today's Sulmona, said to be founded by Solymos after the destruction of Troy (around 1250 BC). He was one of the survivors from the fallen city who had banded together under Aeneas after the epic battle.

The Trojans were thought to have landed in an area between today's Anzio and Fiumicino. Julius Caesar himself claimed that the gens Iulia had received their names Iulius from the family's common ancestor, Iulus Ascanius, Aeneas' son. By tracing their descent from Aeneas, the *Iulii* belonged to the so-called "Trojan" families of Rome, who over centuries had assimilated with the local population. The fact that it was a co-fighter and contemporary of Aeneas that founded Sulmona is therefore not too far-fetched.

Ovid (Paratore, 1959), the Latin poet of the Roman Empire and a Sulmona native, was banished in 8 AC from Rome by decree of the emperor Augustus; the reason was never known. Sulmona re-enacted two judicial processes and the sentence of Ovid's acquittal was unanimously accepted by Sulmona's City Council which in 2012 transmitted the judges' decision to the Rome Assembly. The Capitoline Assembly, acting as heirs of the ancient Roman institutions, unanimously revoked the exile (relegatio) from Rome "to repair the grave ancient wrong with immediate effect" And so it came to pass that after 2000 years after his death, in December 2017, Italy and Sulmona "welcomed back" their "son" and one of the greatest Roman poets<sup>13</sup>.

## 5. Confluence between Pagan Rites and Religious Beliefs

The Majella itself derives its name from Maja/Maia, the mother of Mercury/Hermes, who came to these shores to find special herbs for her sick son. He died and she stayed on to mourn her beloved child. In her honour, the Mountain was called after her.

Many pre-Christian rituals were linked to elemental forces like earth, rocks, fire, water or animals that will link people to the deeper forces that influence and shape human life and the seasons on earth. Festivals to celebrate these forces and invoke their protection were attended, and still are, by young and old alike, and all participate with equal delight and intensity.

Today such age-old rituals are still being acted out and each town has its own traditions that contribute to the rich tapestry of cultural expressions that make this region unique.

An example of the persistence of earlier rituals that have been merged with Christianity is during the May held Festa dei Serpari (**Figure 2**) at Cocullo<sup>14</sup>, 8 km West of the Majella National Park, when the statue of St Dominic is brought out after mass and paraded through the streets completely covered in snakes (**Figure 3**) followed by the Serpari and others of the faithful, also draped with serpents. In chthonian rites, life and death are seen as part of one and the same cycle. The link between nature, animals and humans plays an important symbolism in this ritual, where the snakes are equally acknowledged and treated well, fed with milk and bran and returned to their habitats after the festival. As so many rituals transposed unto Christian celebrations, this festival has much older roots and is related to a much older pagan rite, that of Angitia (Schmitz, 1870; Smith, 1880; Dench, 1995). Among the Marsi, Peligni and other Oscan-Umbrian peoples Angitia was considered a goddess of miraculous and herbal healing who had great power over snakes and was able to cure snake bites. There are a number of inscriptions dedicated to Angitia of around 410 BC one of which notes that she had a temple and a treasury. Many of today's Serpari consider themselves as part of a brotherhood who considered Agnitia as their ancestor and play a major role in the May festival while being held in high regard. As can be seen from the staff of Asclepius, in antiquity snakes were often associated with healing.

Another such rite can be attended in Rapino where the famous Grotta del Colle is located and where a small statuette of the Goddess Cerfia<sup>15</sup> from 600 BC was found (**Figure 4**). Over 2000 years virgins would make offerings to the goddess. Today, during the May festival, young girls (similarly dressed and adorned as Cerfia) participate in a procession dedicated to the Madonna di Carpineto (**Figure 5**).



**Figure 2:** Festa dei Serpari at Cocullo in May  
Source: Rete 8



**Figure 3:** San Domenico with snakes  
Source: Tiburno TV





**Figure 4:** Cerfia, Goddess of Fertility and Harvest  
Source: Museo Nazionale di Chieti



**Figure 5:** Processione delle Verginelle  
Source: Amici di Rapino 2000



**Figure 6:** Cave used by P. Angeleri  
Source: picture by the author

An age-old ritual that is still being performed today at special magnetised locations in various hermitages and churches around the Majella is the *rubbing* (strofinazione) of areas of the body in need of healing. This is often performed against the wall of a cave (Figure 6) where a Saint lived or stayed in retreat. The rubbing (strofinazione) is a ritual still practiced today. To lay on the stone bed of a Saint or drink water from a source near their cell is also considered beneficial. These examples show how beliefs ‘merge’ and are shaped and accepted over time.

While religions can be a source of destruction and intolerance, there are examples where faiths over a long period of time have peacefully shared the same sacred sites and/or the same area and serve as examples of religious tolerance and harmony. Such peaceful cohabitation has allowed for a continuity of sacred traditions and rites to be passed on to today’s generations (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Context of Monasticism and the Abruzzo

3rd Century	Christianity arrives in Abruzzo	Valnerina Hagiographic texts mention Christians escaping from Egypt, Syria and Anatolia arriving in Umbria/Abruzzo/ Calabria introducing the hermitic tradition
501	St Benedict retreats to cave at Subiaco	Subiaco monasteries already exist nearby
	While in retreat	St Benedict creates his Rule based on the writings of St Basil and the early church fathers
7th Century		Monks escape the Persian invasions of Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Armenia and Sicily
		S. Salvatore a Majella Codice states there were hermits on the Majella and Morrone Mountain since 7th century
730		Byzantine Emperor Leo III issues edicts against worship of images. Iconoclasts escape to Southern Italy. In 732 Southern Italy and Greece is transferred from the Pope to the Patriarch of Constantinople. Monks flee north and to Rome.
820		Saracens invade Abruzzo. Since monastics felt the full force of the persecutions, it became difficult for them to form larger communities, and thus they lived either alone or in small groups. Monks retire to remote areas to lead an eremitic and coenobitic way of life. The caves used in prehistoric times offer refuge once again.
1042		Normans claim Apulia & Calabria. The creation of maritime links between South Italy, Syria and Palestine and the advent of the Crusades in 1093 bring more monastics to Italy

Source: personal data

## 7. The Arrival of Christianity

Christianity arrived in this region around the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century. However, even with the advent of Christianity, the people of Abruzzo have kept many of their traditional beliefs

alive and simply incorporated aspects of the new religion and for a time all these cultural and spiritual traditions were interwoven and found expression without conflict. On 27 February 380, with the Edict of Thessalonica (Ehler, Morrall, 1967) put forth under Theodosius I, the Roman Empire officially adopted Christianity as its state religion. Because the New Testament mentions the importance of (maintaining) the correct doctrine and to refute heresies there was a concerted effort to convert pagan sites to Christian ones. The more remote the sites were the longer the pagan rites persisted; the Abruzzo region being considered “very remote” because of its tall, majestic but inaccessible mountains.

During the seventh century, the 'new Christians' were still practising what the Church called 'pagan rituals.' However, just a century later, in 798 CE, the Badia San Liberatore a Majella was founded. In 1053, Desiderius<sup>16</sup> (1026-1087), who became abbot of Monte Cassino and was later elected Pope Victor III, joined the hermits at the Majella. In the next centuries, the Majella would attract so many Christian hermits that the great poet and philosopher Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374) (Bishop, 1963) would describe the Mountain as the *Domus Christis*, “the house of Christian spirituality”. The last hermit to have lived at the Majella died in the 1960s, and with him the hermitage tradition that existed for more than 1200 years on this Mountain came to an end.

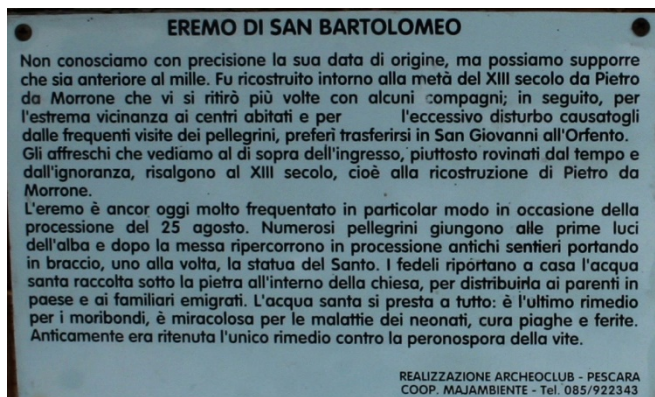
Pietro Angeleri<sup>17</sup> (c1215–1296), also known as Pietro da Morrone, is perhaps the best-known hermit who lived on the Majella, founding and restoring many hermitages. Santo Spirito a Majella (tenth century, still in use) (Santangelo, 2006) is one of the Park's biggest and most famous sites. After staying at Eremo San Giovanni all'Orfento (Micati, 2000). from the age of 69 to 78, Pietro Angeleri went to Eremo Santo Onofrio sul Morrone (Micati, 2000). In 1293, after refusing to accept the Papacy and to succeed Pope Nicholas IV, a delegation of cardinals and bishops, the King of Naples and the King of Hungary, made their way to this hermitage to convince him to accept the Papacy. He agreed and he was crowned in 1294 as Pope Celestine V (Loughlin J. 1908). His final decree as Pope was to declare the right of resignation, which he promptly exercised after five months and eight days in office, thus on 13 December 1294, Celestine V resigned. The next pope to resign of his own accord was Pope Benedict XVI in 2013, 719 years later. Those who came here as hermits could not imagine that one day history would be forever moulded into this landscape by seamlessly weaving happenings of momentous significance that would affect a whole nation and have repercussions to this day.

The *Hermitage of San Bartolomeo in Legio* (Santangelo, 2006; Micati, 2000) still in use today and located next to a prehistoric lithic site, is known to have already existed in the ninth century (**Figure 7**). Pietro Angeleri stayed here and engaged in its restoration and extension. Many miracles are attributed to Pietro Angeleri while here, e.g. once the drought had dried up all the water and people were afraid of dying. Pietro hit a rock on the streambed with his chain and since then water has flown from this place that even the most severe droughts would not stem. On another occasion, a small bridge over the stream collapsed. Days later a huge boulder had detached itself from the mountain and landed in the middle of the stream with a flat part up allowing people to walk over it.

The water flowing from within the San Bartolomeo hermitage is considered blessed and holy and considered to have miraculous powers. However, this water also has a peculiar quality: it is the only remedy against the downy mildew (vine peronospora), a

vine fungus, whose damage can amount to losses of entire yields as well as a severe weakening of the affected vines for several years to come.

Each August 25<sup>th</sup> an annual procession is held after mass when the faithful will walk ancient processional paths and during which each participant gets to carry the statue of the Saint, starting with the oldest person. Miraculous powers are also attributed to the statue of San Bartolomeo (**Figure 8**) which is housed above the altar.



**Figure 7:** The *Hermitage of San Bartolomeo*

Source: picture by the author



**Figure 8:** Statue of San Bartolomeo

Source: picture by the author

In times of need, especially when people were very ill, individuals were allowed to come and get the statue and take it home until the person recovered. However, the rules have changed and instead of the statue, people today can take the knife home that San Bartolomeo holds in his hands.

## 8. Tourism and Heritage

Many locations of the Majella National Park will have snow from October till May as 55% of its territory is situated above 2000 m (6562 ft.), thereby reducing its tourist season to 5 to 6 months per year. However, the big number of visitors testify to the interest people have not only for the nature dimension but also for the cultural and sacred sites. The financial ramifications to the local villages and businesses are very welcome and needed.

The local populations are also keen to retain tourists for longer periods and even for repeat visits and have been good in diversifying their offers. Travellers as well, having little time at their disposal, do not want to be spending long hours on the road but want to have a good time and add value by diversifying their activities. Today people want to engage in educational as well as many leisure activities while still being imbued by the charms of the area. In villages and in the Park, there are a variety of options, e.g. of guided tours, trekking, the harvesting of herbs, cooking classes of local dishes, workshops on how to use local herbs in cooking, cosmetics or therapeutics for home, animals and garden. The *Sentieri dello Spirito*<sup>18</sup>, a 4-day trek visiting each of the sacred

sites, is another favourite activity as are photography and drawing/painting classes that draw their inspiration on the surrounding silence and majestic beauty of nature. Then there are the more active pass-times of learning to build a tholos, of climbing or mountain biking. The Park has a number of museum and each year more activities are available.

The local area has now a number of hotels that cater to those who have been engaged in physical activities by offering spa and massage sessions. The importance of festivals and local events is not to be underestimated as it will encourage visitors to stay longer in the area and connect with the people, engage in music, song and dances while enjoying the uniquely local dishes and wines. The sharing of collective festivals, local traditions and handcrafts, will colour the memories that people will take with them and share when they are back home. Increasingly popular is the Cammino della Transumanza: i cinque regi tratturi<sup>19</sup>.

In settings where economic and environmental values are intertwined, it is important to remember that the reason people have come to this area is for its natural as well as cultural heritage and that it is important not to lose sight of this. The Park is there for the long-term and it will increasingly gain in importance. There will come a time in the not too distant future when the Majella National Park, together with all the other National Parks, the Regional Park and the 38 nature reserves will play a stabilising role in increasingly erratic weather patterns. The Abruzzo will be an important player with contributions to the Italian nation at large when climate considerations are taken into account as well as its contributions to the UN Sustainable Development Goals<sup>20</sup>, the SDGs. These are all areas that can be further developed through educational and leisure and hands-on activities.

Those who had the foresight and recognized the importance of nature and biodiversity and worked to protect their natural and cultural heritage deserve respect not only of the people today but also of those of the generations to come, as they have left a legacy of which they can be proud. It is hoped that the people who are taking decisions today will have the wisdom to look beyond short-term gain and keep in mind all those who have contributed to making the Abruzzo the *greenest region in Europe*. However, the Abruzzo has a further very valuable dimension and that is its people and its cultural and religious heritage.

It might come as a surprise, but it was only in within the context of the United Nations' International Year for the Rapprochement of Cultures in 2010, that for the first time in the history of the World Heritage Convention, a first major international meeting organized in Kiev<sup>21</sup> (Ukraine) under the patronage of UNESCO on heritage of religious interest<sup>22</sup> was to explore ways to reflect the complexity and importance of developing proper dialogue between all stakeholders for the common goal which is protection of World Heritage properties. It was noted that living religious and sacred sites require specific policies for protection and management that take into account their distinct spiritual nature as a key factor in their conservation and that such policies cannot be sustainable without in-depth consultation with the appropriate stakeholders. Also of note the Anaar / Inari Statement on the Diversity of Sacred Natural Sites in Europe<sup>23</sup>. The main objective was to explore ways to reflect the complexity and importance of developing proper dialogue between all stakeholders for the common goal which is protection of cultural and religious properties. The meeting considered the view that stakeholders need to work together to preserve such heritage while regarding the

modernization and development of society in a culturally and historically sensitive manner, with a view to strengthening identity and social cohesion.

In the case of cultural and religious sites that are within natural settings, natural parks and other protected areas, there are additional challenges that need to be considered, as local, regional and national governmental authorities are involved but also religious communities and not always there is clarity when it comes to protection, maintenance, repair, funding etc. These are challenges that need to be addressed.

## Conclusion

The 2018 has been proclaimed the European Year for Cultural Heritage<sup>24</sup> as a way to value the importance and the contributions of this heritage to the people of Europe and the world. It's important to make sure that sites like those contained in the Majella National Park are not being forgotten and are brought to the attention of national authorities: the fact is that one does not often cultural and religious heritage and sites with national Parks.


There are few places in Italy that like the Majella National Park can claim an almost unbroken cultural and religious heritage that spans from Paleolithic times to the present day, a great potential for sustainability. Over time beliefs and religions prove the unity which underlies all the outward diversity of the many societies and cultures working under different names, yet with so much in common. It shows that spirituality persists throughout time and that sacred sites are inherited and treasured by subsequent civilizations (**Table 2**).

Sacred sites are rarely abandoned and are rarely orphaned. The sites at this National Park are an exquisite example where the natural environment and the landscape were the prime reasons for the establishment of an abundance of sites.

Of equal important is the uniqueness of the experience, the blend of nature, the majesty of the landscape, the awe, the silence, the local imprint, the people, festivals like the Festa dei Serpari and the rituals that are still being played out today and that are linked to the history of places, to their traditions, to tangible and intangible values where the properties of religious interest play a fundamental role of an alive heritage.

It has been the purpose of the author to present the stories and the context inherent *in* sites, *in* landscapes and even *in* regions. Buildings are the expression of an inspiration, an idea. The intangible aspect infuses live into the stones, into the tangible aspect. In today's world shaped by technology and pragmatism, we need story-telling, to set our imagination alight and be inspired to go and visit the place one has just read about. Touching the stone then becomes part of the story, of his-story or her-story, as it was imagined and experienced and then it becomes part of a person.

**Table 2:** Grid showing continuity of use of sites over time



SITES - Used since	800'000 to 20'000 BCE	19'000 to 9'500 BCE	6000 to 4000 BCE bronze age	1'800 BCE to AD italic culture	500 BCE to 476 CE Roman Era	568 to 1017 Lombard Period	Middle Ages 500 - 1400	Renaissance 1500 - 1600	still in use in 19th Century
Eremo Sant'Onofrio sul Morrone							*	*	*
Eremo di San Bartolomeo							*	*	*
Abbazia S.to Spirito al Morrone							*	*	*
Eremo Sant'Onofrio							*	*	*
Badia San Liberatore a Majella						*	*	*	*
Tombe Rupestri San Giuannelle						*	*	*	*
Grotta Sant'Angelo					*	*	*	*	*
Chiesa Madonna Buon Cammino				*	*	*	*	*	*
Drovers Road & Sites			*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Grotta del Colle	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Sanctuary San Michele					*	*	*	*	*
Santo Spirito a Majella							*	*	*
Chiesa Sant'Agata					*	*	*	*	*
Eremo San Giovanni all'Orfento							*	*	*
Grotta della Continenza	*	*	*	*	*				
Sanctuary Ercole Currino				*	*				
Grotta dei Piccioni		*	*	*					
Grotta dei Porci	*	*	*						
Roccamorice lithic site	*	*	*						
Valle Giumentina Site	*	*	*						

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