

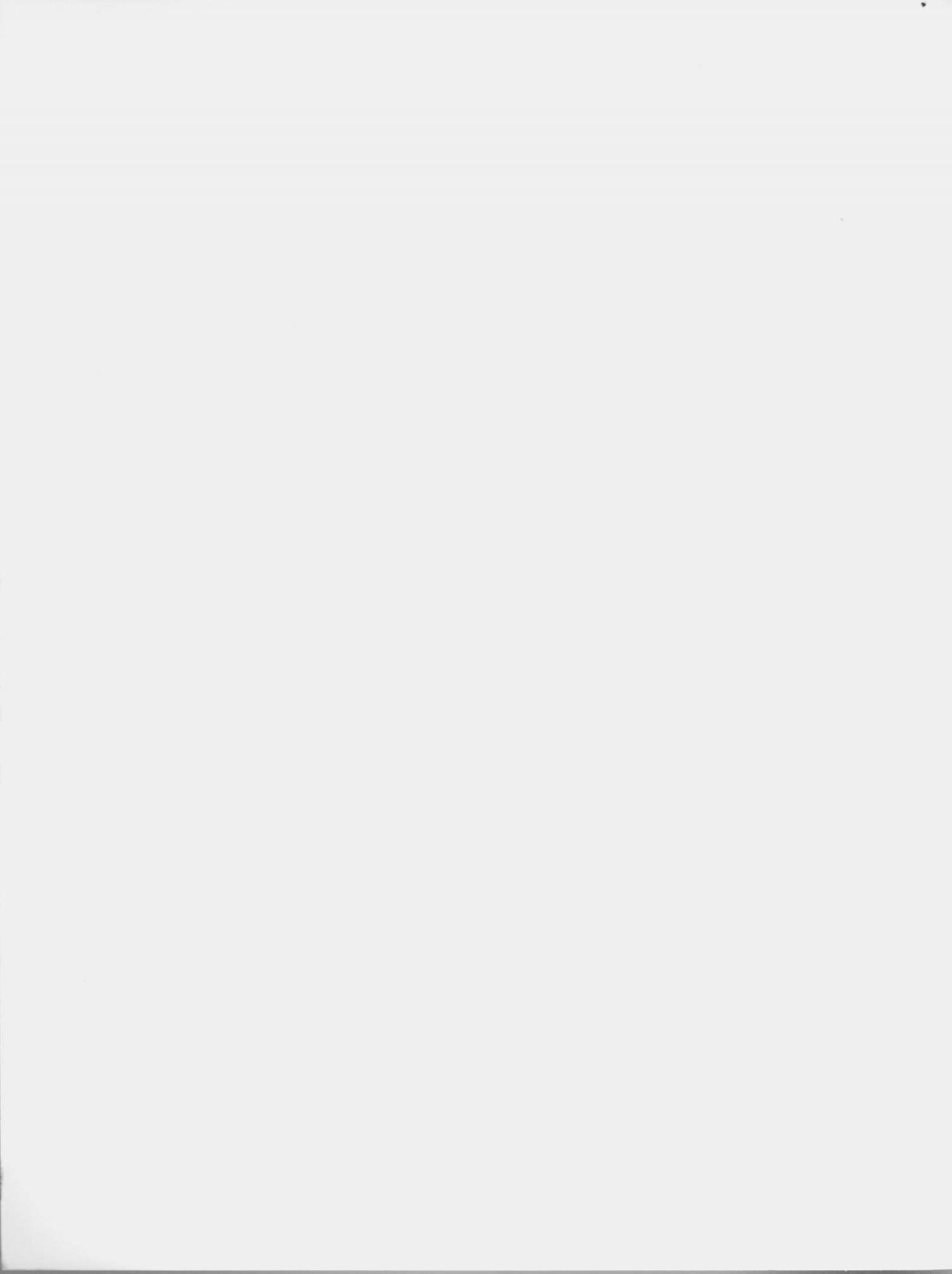
Hendrik DEY & Elizabeth FENTRESS  
eds

WESTERN MONASTICISM  
*ANTE LITTERAM*

THE SPACES OF MONASTIC OBSERVANCE  
IN LATE ANTIQUITY  
AND THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

— EXTRAIT —

2011  
BREPOLS



EREMITIC SETTLEMENTS  
AND POLITICAL AND MILITARY CONTINGENCIES  
IN THE SIXTH CENTURY : THE CASE OF THE  
*ALTO GARDA BRESCIANO*  
(LAKE GARDA, N. ITALY)

G. P. BROGIOLO AND M. IBSEN\*

*Preface*

The archaeological studies conducted since the end of the 1990s in the *Alto Garda bresciano* (the mountainous terrain along the western shores of Lake Garda in Lombardy) have uncovered, in addition to evidence for settlement patterns, ecclesiastical organization and centers of production, the remains of three upland eremitic sites in the township of Tignale. One of them is datable, on the basis of a written source, to around the middle of the sixth century, a date closely compatible with the chronology given for the remaining two sites by archaeological evidence. These hermitages should be seen in the context of a more general proliferation of ascetic retreats around the rest of the periphery of Lake Garda (in the modern provinces of Verona and Trento) and on the slopes of Mount Baldo, which deserves more systematic archaeological exploration, the more so because intensive surveys executed over the past ten years in the same areas have documented numerous fortresses and guard posts which belonged to a complex, multi-phased defensive system between the Val d'Adige, Lake Garda and the Giudicarie, one of the most delicate strategic sectors in northern Italy. While the occasional presence of troops is attested in the area from the end of the third century through the fourth, when the neighboring cities of Verona and Trento were being refortified, the fifth century witnessed a concerted effort to construct numerous *castra*, watchtowers and barriers along the alpine valleys near the lake, situated with an eye to protecting the principal lines of communication in the region. This integrated defensive system was completed in the sixth century, when the Garda – Val d'Adige sector was at the center of numerous military campaigns which brought successive waves of conflict between various Goths, Rugians, Byzantines, Alamanni, Franks and Lombards. It is to precisely this period between the 540s and 590s that the majority of the finds from the recent archaeo-

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(\*) The preface, section 1, and the conclusion of the following contribution are by G. P. Brogiolo; sections 2 and 3 are the work of M. Ibsen. The presence of the other scholars present at the conference at the American Academy in Rome contributed much to the composition of this study: warm thanks to Elizabeth Fentress and Hendrik Dey for having facilitated an ongoing and productive forum for dialogue. We are thankful to Vittorio Berti for his valuable clarifications on the Churches of the east, and for his generosity in showing us the text of his soon-to-be-published study.

logical explorations can be dated.<sup>1</sup> The largest fortified centers (Sirmione, Garda, Sant'Andrea di Loppio, San Martino di Campi, San Martino di Lundo) remained active even after the Lombard conquest of Trento in 569; and it is probable that those sites which defended the lines of communication between the Val di Non and the Valtellina remained under the control of the Byzantines and/or their allies, the Franks, at least until 590.<sup>2</sup>

We will proceed in the following contribution to explore the connection between eremitic settlements of eastern inspiration and the Byzantine military presence, not only in the surroundings of Lake Garda, but also in other regions of Italy. The better to determine whether the apparent connection be casual or intentional, we will seek to combine the archaeological data, which do not reveal pronounced changes in the parameters of eremitic practice, with the written sources, which do in fact explicitly document the arrival in Italy of eastern hermits.

### 1. *Eremitic settlements on the western side of Lake Garda* (fig. 1)

In the continuous cliff-face (fig. 2) which dominates the small promontory of Campione del Garda (the township of Tignale until the 1920s), there are two caves closed off by walls, which a local tradition attested beginning in the fifteenth century attributes respectively to Saint Herculianus, bishop of Brescia shortly after the middle of the sixth century, and one of his disciples (figs. 3-6).<sup>3</sup> According to the Life of the saint, the nucleus of which dates to the seventh century,<sup>4</sup> the bishop retired to a cave, following the example of a Constantinopolitan deacon who had come to him, while he still held the episcopate, to ask permission to lead an eremitic life in the territory of Brescia. Probably written in the eleventh century by the monks of the abbey of Leno, at the time of its installation on the shores of Lake Garda, alongside many competing monastic foundations, the *passio* tells us nothing of the ideological weight or the social implications of this Herculianus' ascetic experience. Further, there is little to be gained from the material record, since the church at the foot of the cave which housed the saint's grave was destroyed in the last century. It is nonetheless plausible that the other two eremitic sites documented in the same area took their inspiration from this initial anachoritic impulse.

The second eremitic settlement, at San Giorgio di Varolo on the coast of Tignale, is composed of a two-story chamber (fig. 7), (this common space may even have been the original chapel) and five tiny cells carved sequentially into the crevices of a large cave, situated at the level of the lake and enclosed by a massive wall (figs. 8 and 9). In the Romanesque period, this wall was doubled in width to support a stairway leading to a

(1) Brogiolo 2006.

(2) Brogiolo 1999.

(3) On the structures (two caves enclosed by walls along the cliff-face), see Brogiolo and Ibsen 2003, 151-54.

(4) For the text of the *passio* (Padova, Biblioteca Universitaria, ms 1622) and analysis, see Brogiolo and Ibsen 2003, 151-53, 167-71.



Fig. 1 – The *Alto Garda bresciano*: late antique cave settlements.

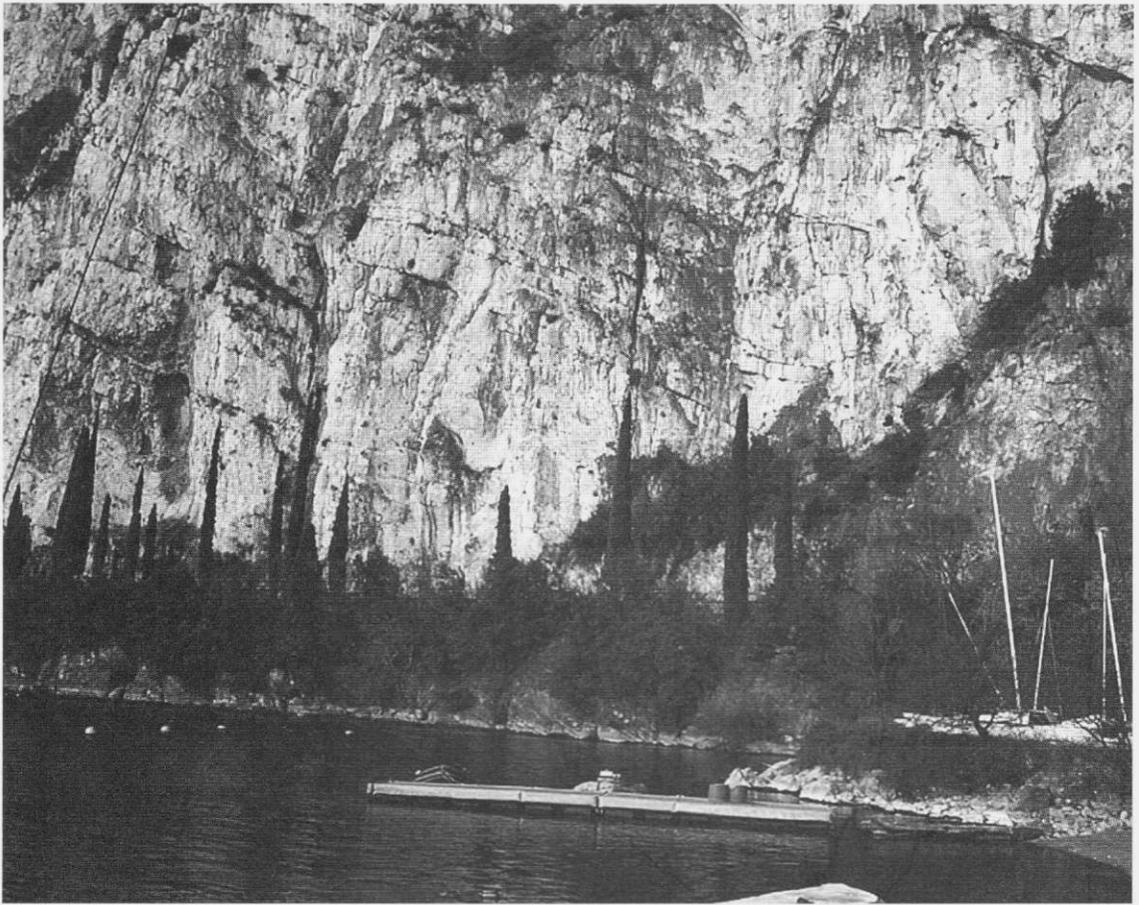


Fig. 2 – Campione, general view of the cliff.

small chapel carved into a little cave situated twenty meters higher up (fig. 10).<sup>5</sup> The surviving frescoes, datable to the eleventh century, provide a *terminus ante quem* for the hermitage, which at the moment cannot itself be dated more precisely, due to the fact that no archaeological stratigraphy is preserved in its chambers, which continued to be occupied until the eighteenth century.

Tremosine, the third site, studied between 1997 and 2005,<sup>6</sup> is located in the Val Tignalga, a valley that is narrow and impassable in its lower sections, where it takes on the aspect of a real canyon, at the bottom of which the river Tignalga proceeds towards its meeting with Lake Garda at Campione, near the two caves associated with Bishop Herculanus. It comprises at least four distinct cells, carved into crevices and rocky ledges, and enclosed by a wall or fence in wood positioned in the vertical walls of the canyon some

(5) Brogiolo and Ibsen 2003, 144-51; for the picture cycle in particular see Gheroldi 2002; Gheroldi 2003, 101-8.

(6) Brogiolo 2005.

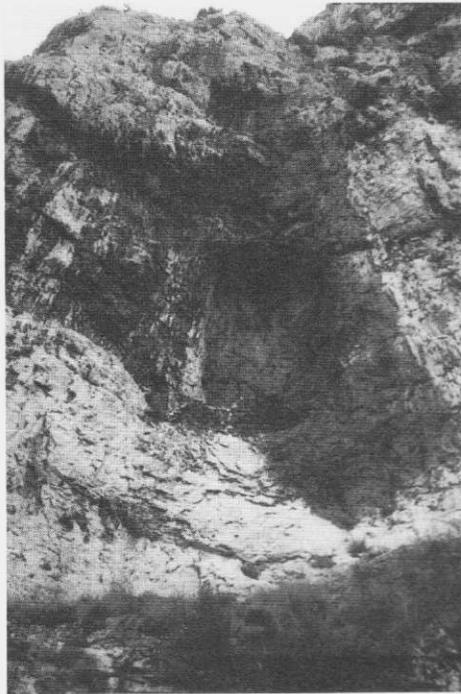


Fig. 3 – Campione, “cave of Herculianus.”



Fig. 4 – Campione, “cave of the disciple.”

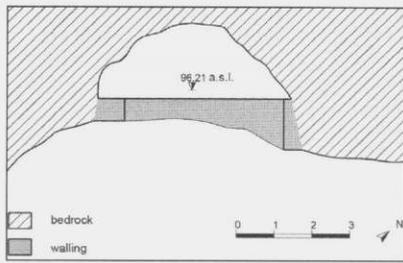


Fig. 5 – Campione, “cave of Herculianus,” plan.

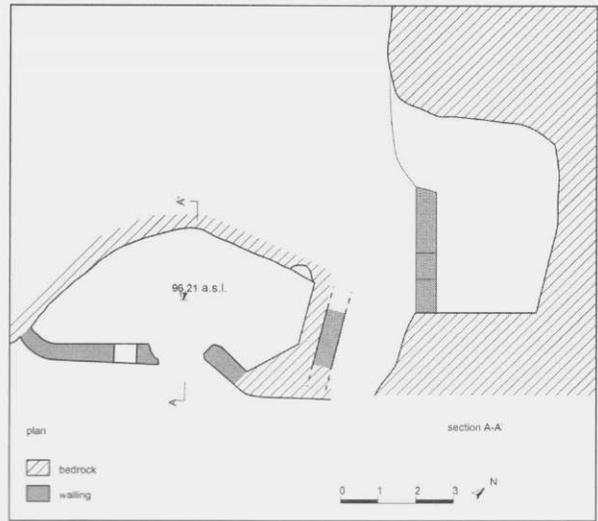


Fig. 6 – Campione, “cave of the disciple,” plan.

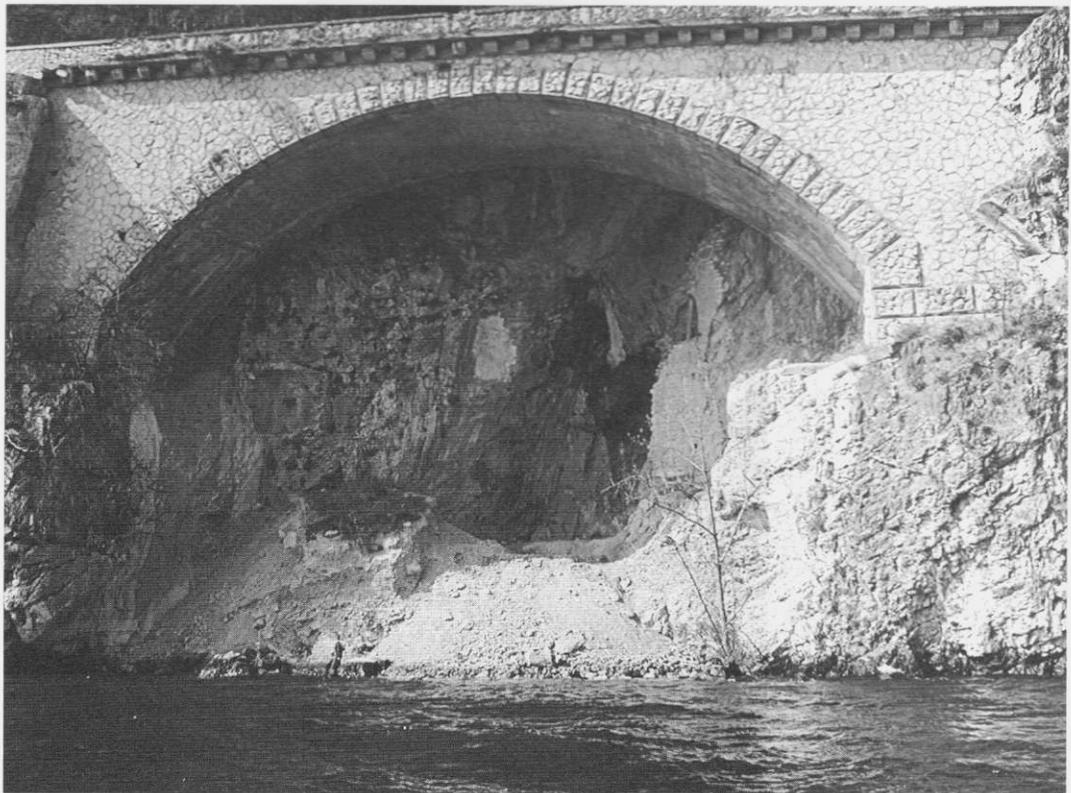


Fig. 7 – Tignale, San Giorgio di Varolo, general view.

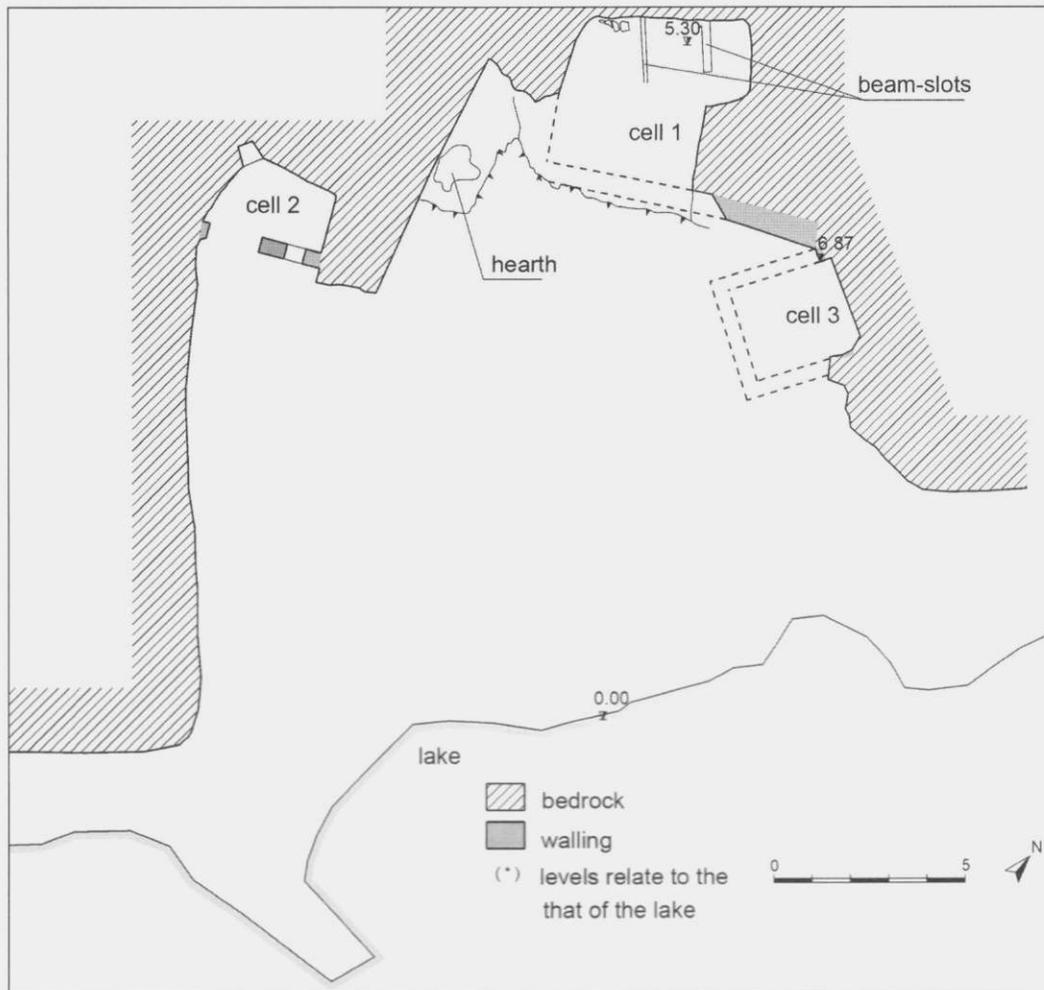


Fig. 8 – Tignale, San Giorgio di Varolo, plan of the first level.

80 m above ground level (fig. 11-12). This last has been dated by two C14 dates, as well as by finds of coarsewares, to a period between the mid-sixth and the mid-seventh century.<sup>7</sup> Not a single textual reference to the site is known, and its current name, “Witches’ Lairs,” suggests a break in the transmission of memories regarding the original foundation, which we would nonetheless count amongst the eremitic sites of the region, both for its physical characteristics and its chronology.

At this point in the archaeological survey, which has been suspended because of the difficulty of access to the site (the cells can only be reached by scaling the vertical face of

(7) With calibration, the first sample gives a broad date-range that falls with 95.4% probability between 430 and 660, and two narrower ranges, with 64.4% between 555 and 640, and 3.8% between 540 and 550. The second sample gives 95.4% between 430 and 670; 64.9% between 560 and 645; and 3.3% between 540 and 550.

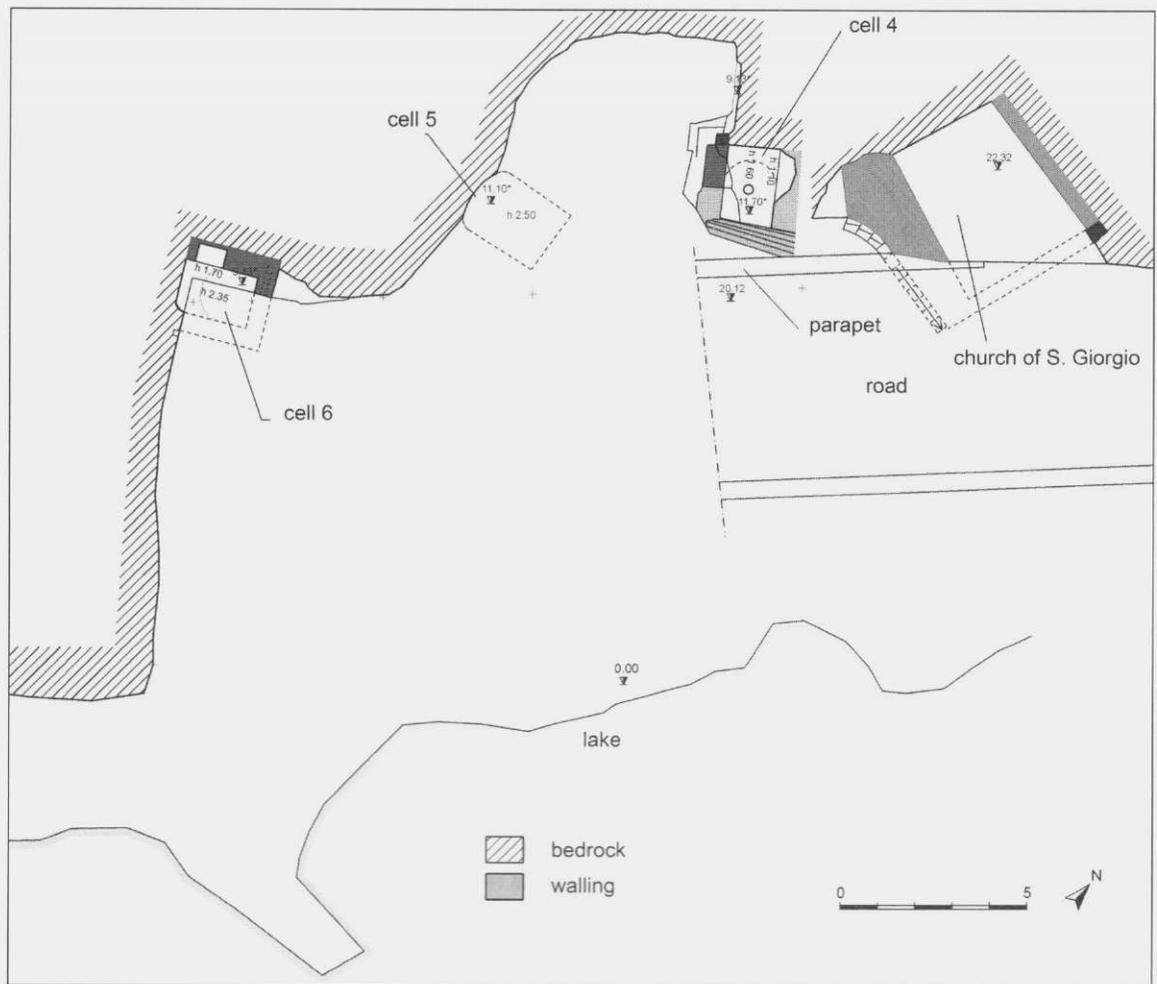


Fig. 9 – Tignale, San Giorgio di Varolo, plan of the second level.

the cliff with climbing gear), four separate caves have been explored, three of which contain two rooms each, in addition to a room with masonry walls built upon a rocky ledge. One might thus imagine that the settlement was used by no less than five hermits, and more probably as many as eight, on the reasonable supposition that each chamber was meant to house one hermit. Yet this estimate may yet be too low, as the lower level of ‘cell 4’ remains to be explored and there are another pair of crevices visible on the opposite side of the valley, each of them reachable only by a laborious ascent requiring a full day of climbing.

With regard to the layout of the individual cells, different configurations have been documented, which vary according to the size and position of the caverns and ledges that house them. In some cases, all available space is under cover, including the area of the hearth. In others, an open space in front of the cell proper was reserved for a hearth.

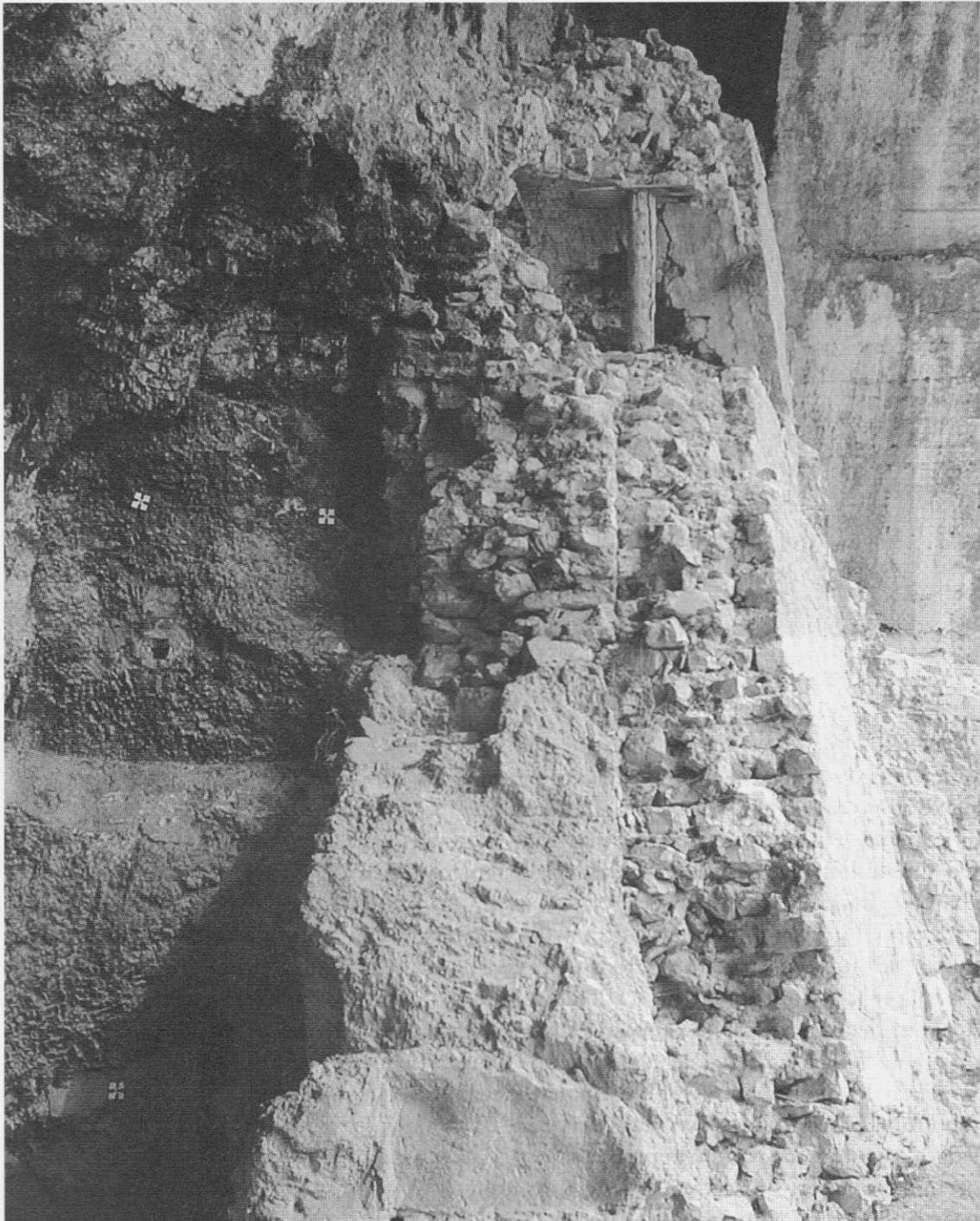


Fig. 10 – Tignale, San Giorgio di Varolo, closure wall with early medieval (internal) and romanesque phases (abutting).



Fig. 11 – Tremosine, “Witches’ shelters,” general view.

‘Cell 1’ is located higher than the rest in a natural cavern, closed off by a masonry wall bonded with excellent mortar, and internally divided into two chambers. ‘Cell 2’ is a single room also closed off by a wall, while ‘Cell 3’, at 480 m above sea level, is composed of two tiny rooms closed off by dry-stone masonry walls on the side facing the valley. On the underlying ledge, 2 m wide and 450 m above sea level, there are the remains of a chamber built up against the rocky wall of the cliff. Quadrangular holes carved into the rock served in part to house beams for the sloping roof and flooring of the building, while others belong to a structure perhaps fronted by a portico located just to the south; still others probably anchored the scaffolding for a system of stairs leading to the cells above. The most complex, ‘Cell 4’, comprises five ledges, none wider than 2 m: the space extends over a width of *c.* 20 m and a height of 16 m above the floor level of the second ledge. Beneath this ledge, however, one should imagine another drop of at least 5 m down to the lip of the cliff-face, which falls vertically 70 m down to the river Tignalga. Of the five ledges, two present readily apparent traces of structures: a cell built in mortared masonry occupied the eastern section of ledge 4b, leaving an open space in front to be used as a hearth; imprints of horizontal beams at floor level towards the east suggest the presence of a wooden floor. On ledge 4c, the cell was also positioned to the east, with an open hearth in front; here, sockets for horizontal beams and vertical supports indicate a structure with both floor and walls of wood. At present, no traces of occupation or human activity have

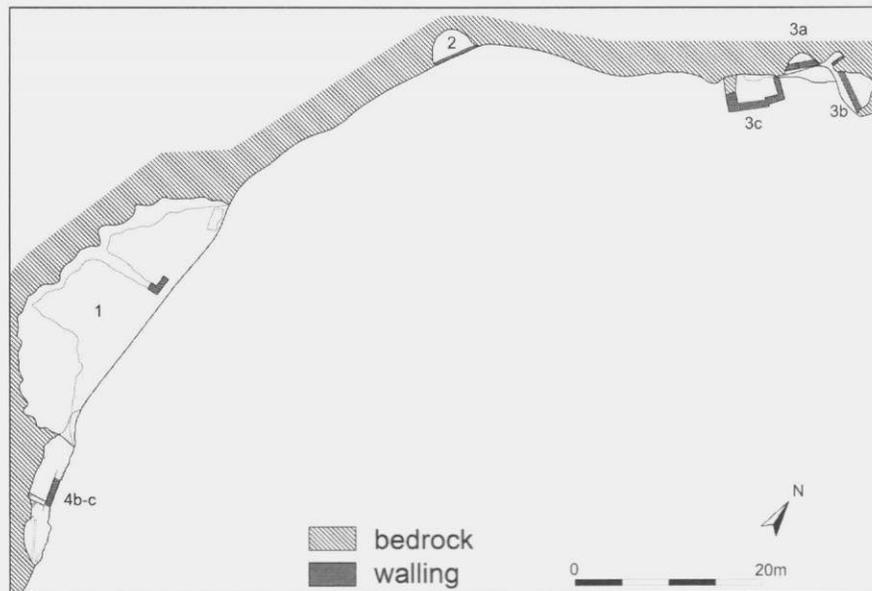


Fig. 12 – Tremosine, “witches’ shelters,” plan.

been discerned on the remaining three ledges. There is, in addition, the problem of the identification of a place of communal worship, which may have been located in a particular cave, or on one of the ledges.

In conclusion, the three sites identified in the area of Tignale, for all that they have their own peculiar characteristics (varying grades of accessibility, separate caves at Cam-pione, while the other two are *laura* in the true sense of the word), are nonetheless similar in their common use of natural crevices and caves, closed off by walls in masonry or wood and divided into tiny cells, each inhabited by a single hermit. This last is a characteristic feature of sixth-century eremitic sites elsewhere, though as we shall see below, there were also other ways to create a hermitage.

## 2. Anchoritic practice in Italy and the West between the fifth and sixth centuries

The cliff-side settlements of Lake Garda recall to some extent the model of the eastern *laura*; they are another face of the complex and extremely differentiated phenomenon of pre-Benedictine asceticism, which bring to the fore the question of the role played in the west by anchorites of eastern Mediterranean origin. Multiplied by the medieval historiographical tradition, which often ‘mixed circles with squares’ by recognizing in such individuals the roots of Christian communities and monastic institutions, these holy Africans and Syrians have since become the object of a rigorous historical reexamination which has radically reduced the presumed extent of the phenomenon.<sup>8</sup> All the same, the archaeolo-

(8) Good examples include the studies conducted on Spoletan collections of saints’ Lives, and on African bishops and hermits in exile in Italy, on which see below.

gical data, which also reflect on political and military developments of the sixth century in addition to the more specific context of cult buildings, are sufficient to prompt a reexamination of the ascetic phenomenon and its eastern influences for the period during which the Italian peninsula was ravaged by the wars between the Byzantines and the Goths, first, and the Lombards thereafter.

A comparison between the Italian situation of the fifth century and that of the sixth demonstrates elements of continuity, but also substantial peculiarities, which are only in part the product of the types of information furnished by a source, the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great, as exceptional as it is problematic.

### *The fifth century*

In the west, ascetic practice in the fourth and fifth centuries, under the influence of eastern exemplars, turned in particular in the direction of insular asceticism, embraced by leading members of the Latin aristocracy: these are the foundations recorded by Ambrose,<sup>9</sup> Augustine,<sup>10</sup> Orosius,<sup>11</sup> Jerome<sup>12</sup> and Rutilius Namatianus<sup>13</sup> along the coasts of Italy, Dalmatia and Gaul;<sup>14</sup> the site of Lérins enjoys a particularly privileged place in this context, thanks in part to the testimony of Eucherius.

In Gaul and in the area of Trier as well,<sup>15</sup> other ascetic milieux developed in forests and rural areas, always under aristocratic patronage, which evolved rapidly from hermitages into cenobitic foundations: noteworthy examples include the monasteries of Jura founded by Lupicinus and Romanus in the second quarter of the fifth century,<sup>16</sup> as well as the many contemporary sites in the Pyrenees, which were especially concentrated in the least 'Romanized' areas.<sup>17</sup>

Beginning in the fourth century in Italy, monasticism developed as a phenomenon promoted and controlled by episcopal authorities, as a result of which it took on a distinctly more urban, aristocratic and orthodox character than was common elsewhere, particularly with respect to the situation in Roman Gaul and the Merovingian successor kingdoms.<sup>18</sup> The anchoritic experience seems to have been confined to the *chori monachorum* of the Tyr-

(9) Ambrose, *Hexameron*, III, 5, 23.

(10) Augustine, *Epistulae*, 48, in Susi 2000, 12ff.

(11) Orosius, *Historia adversos paganos*, VII, 33; cf. Lanzoni 1927, 694.

(12) Jerome, *Epistulae*, III, 4-6; VII, 3; LXXVII, 6; CXVIII, 5; cf. Delaplace 1992, 982.

(13) Rutilius Namatianus, *De reditu suo*, 440ff., 519ff. On the hermits of Capraia and Gorgona; cf. Delaplace 1992, 982.

(14) See Mazzei and Severini 2000; Biarne 2000.

(15) Augustine, *Confessiones*, VIII, 6, 14-15.

(16) Hubert 1965, 467; for recent archaeological research on the Jura monasteries; see Bully 2009; Bully and Causevic-Bully 2008, with more references. On the aristocratic origins of these founders, see Dubreucq and Lauranson-Rosaz 2003. For a general overview of the phenomenon see Heuclin 1988.

(17) On the phenomenon – defined as a “vero e proprio *limes* missionario” in the first part of the fifth century – and its social implications, see Fernandez-Ardanaz 1992, 322ff., 330ff., 344; developments in the Spanish church would result in the following century in the direct opposition of the bishops of the Visigothic Kingdom to local anchoritic movements, which resulted in their eventual disappearance.

(18) Picasso 1987, 7; Prinz 1987, 242.

hennian islands and the Ligurian coast,<sup>19</sup> whence it would emerge in a distinctly subordinate position relative to the cenobitic life: already in the sixth century, there is the example of the Vivarium, founded c. 554, where Cassiodorus provided an isolated area in which the members of his communal monastery might go to seek seclusion, “like anchorites”: *Habetis Montis Castelli secreta suavia ubi velut anachoritae prestante Domino, feliciter esse possitis*.<sup>20</sup> Only few exceptions appear in the sources: Ennodius relates that at the end of the fifth century, Antonius of Lérins, upon arriving in Italy, encountered the *presbyter* Marius – in all probability a native Latin – who had established himself not far from the sepulcher of Saint Fidelis; Antonius followed his example by retiring to the nearby mountain, where two other old hermits already lived. To the eyes of Ennodius, the chosen place was savage and terrifying (*per prurupta saxorum humani generis admisit, formidine repugnante, vestigium*), though it should be recalled that it actually lay on the main route of communications between Milan and Raetia;<sup>21</sup> a similar path was chosen by Bassus, whom a passing reference in Eugippius places in a remote *monasterium* near Rimini, on Mount Titano, around the year 511.<sup>22</sup>

The ecclesiastical authorities chose ultimately to make a concerted push towards carefully-circumscribed forms of communal life, which resulted in the progressive marginalization of eremitic lifestyles both in reality and in the religious literature of the day, in which the cenobitic life was increasingly exalted. Even if the anchoritic experience was often given pride of place in the hierarchy of ascetic practice, and embraced by the leading lights of western monasticism (e.g. Columbanus and Severinus<sup>23</sup>) as well as the reclusive abbots frequently mentioned by Gregory of Tours,<sup>24</sup> it came in practice to be considered more and more an unreachable and dangerous goal, as western monasticism took on a more stable, communal profile.<sup>25</sup>

In the fifth century, most monks and hermits in both Gaul and Italy seem to have been of local origin, though they were joined by substantial numbers of African refugees.<sup>26</sup>

(19) Jerome, *Epistulae*, LXXVII. Also worthy of mention are the examples of Martin at Gallinaria (on the sources and the controversial archaeological data, see Mazzei and Severini 2000, 623ff.) and the numerous Ligurian cases: the hermit Saint Venerius at Tino in the sixth century, Saint Eugenius at Bergeggi; and Saint Ampelius at Bordighera, all of them described in hagiographic sources, now supported by archaeological indicators which testify at least to the relative antiquity (fifth-sixth century) of small cult sites and settlements in these locations: see Mazzei and Severini 2000; Polonio 2003, 101ff.; Frondoni 2003, 89ff.

(20) Cited in Picasso 1987, 7. The coexistence of eremitic and cenobitic strains in medieval asceticism has justly been strongly emphasized: see in particular Leclercq 1965; Constable 1980.

(21) *De vita Beati Antoni*, 15-20, which clearly distinguishes the *amoenitas* of the place where the priest Marius performed his pastoral duties, and where Antonius initially took refuge, from the terrible solitude of the hermitage near the sepulcher of Saint Felice, presided over by two ancient hermits; cf. Cantino Wataghin and Pani Ermini 1995, 136; Jenal 1995, 20ff.

(22) Jenal 1995, 28.

(23) On Columbanus, see *infra*; for Severinus, see de Vogüé 2003, 572ff.

(24) *Historia Francorum*, II, 37 (Maxentius of Poitiers); VI, 6 (Hospitius of Nice); VI, 8 (Eparchius of Angoulême); VII, 1 (Salvius of Albi). See also the reflections on the subject in Helvétius 2003, 8ff.

(25) Pricoco 1998, 769ff.; see also the profile of Eugenius of Jura in Leonardi 1989, 289. On critical attitudes towards monks who chose to embrace the eremitic life, see de Vogüé 2003.

(26) Among the exceptions, there is the affair of Abraham, who came from Mesopotamia and founded a monastery in Alvernia: see Dubreucq and Lauranson-Rosaz 2003, 279.

Among the latter, who are perhaps even more numerous in the hagiographical sources than they were in reality, the choice of an anchoritic life seems to have been extremely rare. In Italy, the most significant exception appears to have been Mamilianus, a hermit who had become an object of veneration at least as early as the eighth century – a church near Pisa was certainly dedicated to him by 757 – for all that the hagiographic tradition was elaborated at Farfa in the tenth century, with the addition of obvious and very tendentious interpolations aimed at the recovery and affirmation of land-tenure rights in southern Tuscany.<sup>27</sup> According to the *Passio Sentii*, Mamilianus, *religiosissimus vir Dei*, fled with a few companions from the persecutions of the Vandal king Hunneric, coming at last after extensive peregrinations to the island of Monte Giove off the Tuscan coast. From their presence it assumed the name Montecristo. He lived there in ascetic isolation with a few companions, in a settlement which later developed into a monastery documented in a letter written by Gregory the Great in 591.<sup>28</sup> This exception apart, however, the predominant strain of monastic practice appears to have responded to the same spiritual imperatives of worldly separation enumerated by Ambrose and Jerome, and to have been cultivated predominantly by members of the aristocracy, for all that this picture may result in part from the absence of evidence for the lives of members of other social classes, with whom the surviving sources are little concerned.<sup>29</sup>

#### *The sixth century*

With the sixth century, the trends already apparent in the fifth become more accentuated. In the Merovingian sources – *in primis* Gregory of Tours – anachoresis still appears to have been widely-practiced (Christine Delaplace has documented eighteen cases from hagiographic texts no later than the seventh century alone),<sup>30</sup> and generally connected with middle- and upper-class circles, leavened with the occasional presence of ‘barbarian’ elements (a Lombard, a Franco-Thuringian, a Taifali...); evident throughout is a marked propensity for reclusive lifestyles and self-mortification (hairshirts, chains, etc.).<sup>31</sup>

On the opposite end of the spectrum, examples of anchoritic experiences in the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great are wholly marginal in relation to the progress of a monastic phenomenon that was essentially urban and connected to the aristocratic classes of Italy.<sup>32</sup> Gregory expounded on anchoritic practice in Book III of the *Dialogues*, beginning with the affair of Isaac, who had arrived in Rome from Syria and subsequently gone to Spoleto

(27) Susi 2000, 18ff.

(28) Mazzei and Severini 2000, 644-45. No excavations have been undertaken in the grotto of Saint Mamilianus near the eleventh-century monastery, but a series of nineteenth-century drawings suggests an arrangement of noteworthy interest, comparable to the Umbrian examples.

(29) For hints of lower-class participation in Sulpicius Severus’ foundation of Primuliacum, see the contribution of R. Alciati in this volume.

(30) Delaplace 1992.

(31) Delaplace 1992, 989.

(32) I do not think that the complex question of the authenticity of the *Dialogues* need seriously impinge on the value of the information they contain, though of course Clark’s later seventh-century date for their redaction would separate the narrative more in time from the facts it purports to recount; on the question see e.g. Prinz 1989.



Fig. 13 – Monteluco (Spoleto), general view (from Pani Ermini 1994).

during the period of Gothic rule. Isaac, who had rapidly become known for his piety, retired from the city to “a deserted place where he built for himself a humble dwelling” (fig. 13);<sup>33</sup> the subsequent influx of disciples attracted by his example induced him to found a monastery which has been identified with that of San Giuliano on Monteluco, cited in a letter of Pope Pelagius I in 559 (fig. 14).<sup>34</sup> The monastery, which today exists in its Romanesque form, nonetheless contains numerous *spolia* of the sixth century (see below).

The case of Isaac is only the best documented example of the extremely pronounced impact of Syrian influence on the hagiographical tradition of medieval Umbria, a subject on which there is much room for further discussion.<sup>35</sup> Current understanding of the phenomenon is principally linked to the *Passio XII fratrum*, an eighth-century compilation in which innumerable exaggerations and interpolations overlie an historical nucleus built precisely around the hagiographical tradition on Isaac, along with that on the *Vita sancti Iohannis Panariensis*, which recounts the life of John, a Syrian monk (*de provincia Syriae*) who allegedly lived near Spoleto in the sixth century.<sup>36</sup> Alongside these examples we should place the

(33) Gregory the Great, *Dialogi* III, 14, 4: *...desertum locum ibique sibi humile habitaculum construxit*. On Isaac see Paoli 1997, 11ff., with extensive bibliographical references.

(34) Pani Ermini 1994, 154.

(35) For an overview of the problem, see Paoli 1997, 24ff.; emphasis should be placed, in light of the implausibility of the *passio* and the complexity of the issues regarding the exaggeration of the Syrian roots of Umbrian Christianity, on the author’s observations about the link between the missionary activity undertaken by Syrian monks and “an eremitic practice which tends toward stability” (Paoli 1997, 32).

(36) BHL 4420; *Acta sanctorum martii* III, 30-31; Penco 1965, 272; Paoli 1997, 24ff. (who also accounts for the scholarly critiques of the *passio*); Susi 2001, 596ff.; Jenal 1995, 94. The historical personage corresponds



Fig. 14 – Montelucio (Spoleto), hermitage of Isaac (from Pani Ermini 1994).

geographically proximate and equally historically relevant case of the so-called Laurentius the Illuminator, himself called Syrian in the medieval accounts, whom the literary tradition makes the original founder of Farfa.<sup>37</sup> The shaky hagiographical tradition again in this case finds support in the material record. The eremitic settlement on Monte San Martino near Farfa, long known and occupied into the modern period, was scientifically excavated in the 1990s. The most ancient remains correspond with the crypt of the oratory of San Martino, chiseled into the rock within a space already in use in the Roman period, with associated cisterns and mosaic pavements. The settlement is made up of three rooms installed in a natural grotto, separated by masonry walls datable by associated ceramic and glass finds to the sixth century. The masonry technique is closely paralleled in late antique structures in Rome and the east, and the walls were originally covered by paintings, now destroyed but documented in old excavation photographs, which are particularly significant for their distinctively late antique characteristics; moreover, they included a representation of Saint Evagrius of Antioch, which again suggests eastern influence.<sup>38</sup> For the area of Umbria and the Sabina in northern Lazio, therefore, it seems best to posit the existence of a monastic milieu whose strong eremitic tendencies were rooted in a particular concentration of eastern immigrants in the region, a concentration which is currently without equally well-documented parallels elsewhere in Italy. These eastern roots can also reasonably be connected with the autochthonous developments represented by the monastic foundations of the Val Castoriana (eastern Umbria, near Norcia), datable to the later years of Gothic rule in Italy. Gregory the Great records the effort made by a certain Spes to found a series of monasteries, gravitating around a central nucleus at Campi, a site six miles from Norcia:<sup>39</sup> the *Dialogues* mention the saintly Eutycius, Florentius, and Spes, who lived in ascetic isolation near an oratory, until Eutycius was called away to preside over the nearby monastery of Val Castoriana.<sup>40</sup> The structures of the medieval monastery – in which fragments of an eighth-ninth century chancel screen have turned up – rise at the feet of a rocky cliff perforated by caves that contain traces of eremitic occupation, which are unfortunately too sparse to permit close dating. Alongside the caves in the area currently occupied by the abbey-church, a number of graves have been found clustered around three central burials, now empty, installed in

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to the Saint John who founded a monastery *apud Pinnensem civitatem* in the *Bruttii*, recorded in the *Martyrologium Romanum* (19 Martii): *Apud Pinnensem civitatem natalis beati Joannis, magnae sanctitatis viri; qui de Syria ad Italiam venit, atque ibi, constructo monasterio, multorum servorum Dei per quatuor et quadraginta annos Pater exstitit, et, clarus virtutibus, in pace quievit.*

(37) On Laurentius the Illuminator and his contested hagiography (Spoletan and Sabine versions caused a duplication of the saint), see Paoli 1997, 5ff.; 39-50. The charter of Pope John VII which mentions him in 705 is extremely dubious (*de peregrinis veniens, in fundo qui dicitur Acutianus, territorii Sabinensis, constituit [monasterium]*; Lanzoni 1927, 350); the first secure references to him from Farfa date to the ninth century. For bibliographical references on the abbey see Piazza 2007, 318-19.

(38) Branciani 1999-2000; more recently Piazza 2007, who suggests they were painted no later than the early-seventh century, and connects them to the cultural milieu of Egypt and Syria, and particularly to the aniconic tendencies of Syrian Christianity.

(39) Gregory the Great, *Dialogi*, IV, 11. On the foundation of Eutycius and Spes, see the exhaustive, albeit dated study of Pirri 1960, with the remarks in Pani Ermini 1994, 166ff.

(40) Gregory the Great, *Dialogi*, III, 15.

the sanctuary of the church and carefully preserved throughout the course of subsequent renovations of the building.

The impact of these ascetic retreats on the territory around Norcia is the more significant for the profound influence it would exercise on Benedict, who made an apparently conscious effort in his cave at Subiaco to follow in the footsteps of the Syrians and their Umbrian followers.

Benedict himself would inspire another southern Italian hermit, Martin of Monte Mas-sico, mentioned by Gregory in the *Dialogues*<sup>41</sup> and also by Pope Pelagius II, who would in turn become the model for other anchorites in Campania, like the Menas who also appears in the *Dialogues*.<sup>42</sup> Later figures who belong in the same tradition include Catellus, bishop of Stabia, and the Benedictine monk Antoninus:<sup>43</sup> having taken refuge in Stabia after the Lombard destruction of Montecassino, the latter “sought out the vast solitary reaches of the wilds among the cloud-shrouded mountain peaks befitting of hermits,”<sup>44</sup> establishing himself on the *mons aureus*, now Monte Faito, where he was soon joined by Bishop Catellus. Here, following an apparition, the two are said to have built an oratory in honor of Saint Michael, first in wood and later in stone; attested from the ninth century,<sup>45</sup> the oratory on the site was reconstructed in the twentieth century.

To the examples cited by Gregory the Great should be added further cases known from other written sources, for which there is however no archaeological corroboration as of yet. Very late collections of hagiography contain the stories of Himerius, who is supposed to have lived as a hermit before taking up the episcopal seat at Amelia,<sup>46</sup> and the Irish monk Fredianus, who retired to a hermitage on Monte Pisano between Pisa and Lucca upon his return from a pilgrimage to Rome; thereafter, in 560, he was elected bishop of Lucca, where he would finish his life in 588. While Gregory describes the miracles of Fredianus,<sup>47</sup> he makes no mention his anchoritic experience, which is perhaps a sign of Gregory’s disapproval of the practice. Another episode of potentially great interest involves Saint Rufinus and the site of Sarezzano in Piedmont, though here the physical evidence is sufficient only to give a sixth-century date for the complex, and an indication of its monastic character in the appearance of the term *abbas*; both observations are established by the extant tombstone of the saint, datable on epigraphic evidence to the sixth

(41) *Ibid.* III, 16.

(42) On Martin, see Acconci and Piccirillo 2005, with extensive bibliography. For the story of Mena, a hermit in Samnium who died around 583-84, see *Dialogi* III, 26, with Jenal 1995, 214, who gives him an oriental provenance, and Mongelli 1967, with the references cited there.

(43) *Acta Sanctorum Ianuarii*, II, 227; see Balducci 1963, with further bibliography.

(44) *Acta Sanctorum Ianuarii*, II, 229: *vastas silvarum solitudines inter nubigera montium cacumina eremitis convenientia petiit*. Antonius isolated himself on the summit of the mountain, which afforded him a dominant perspective over the whole of the surrounding territory (including *civitates, oppida et castella, item et marium planities; ibidem*).

(45) Vuolo 1982, 382ff.

(46) On Himerius (BHL 3957), see Lanzoni 1927, 419; Caraffa 1966; Susi 2004.

(47) Gregory the Great, *Dialogi*, III, 9. Fredianus is discussed in Penco 1961, 39; see also the brief profile in Chierotti 1964.

century, as well as by the connection of his memory to an area of strategic importance on the main routes of communication between Liguria and Lombardy.<sup>48</sup>

Relative to the situation in the preceding century, there thus seems to have been a sharp increase in the numbers of foreign-born hermits, whose ranks were joined by a minority of native Italians who sought to imitate their anchoritic lifestyles, and who often gave shape to monastic traditions of displacement and departure and favored a distinctly peripheral geographical distribution of ascetics in frontier territories: the regions of Umbria and the Abruzzo – though the relevant sources permit only a generic connection between the Syrians of Umbria and the ‘Greek’ companions of Elpidius – the Campanian coast, the area of Lake Garda with its Constantinopolitan deacon, and perhaps the surroundings of Vicenza. A further example of eremitic settlement along the Byzantine frontiers is, in fact, the site of San Cassiano di Lumignano in the Colli Berici near Vicenza. The site is not mentioned in the literary record until the late Middle Ages, and the material record does not show signs of contacts with the broader Mediterranean world, leaving only artifact chronologies and the (questionable) dedication of the site to indicate its Byzantine context.<sup>49</sup>

It is a distribution which closely recalls the contours of the eremitic settlement patterns of that part of the Balkans covered by Silviu Anghel in this volume; as it appears too systematic for the correlation between hermitages and frontiers to be purely coincidental, we should think of it as the result of multiple factors: the lives of hermits repeatedly demonstrate a striving for anonymity which resulted in concerted attempts to avoid the reputation of sanctity which threatened their solitude by attracting crowds of the faithful, attempts which likely succeeded best in insecure and inhospitable areas along the contested zones between Byzantine and Germanic forces. Equally apparent, however, is the spiritual and material support which living saints conferred on surrounding populations. It might be wondered whether there was not present amongst the hermits – whose segregation, it is often noted, was by no means characterized by a rejection of human contact – a desire to aid particularly afflicted communities, with the same consolatory motives which underlay the composition of Gregory’s *Dialogues*, accompanied in the case of the hermits by direct thaumaturgic action.

The proximity of hermitages and military outposts should imply relations between ascetics and the Byzantine authorities, upon whom the eastern provenance of the former cannot have been lost. The complexity of the problem, which is intertwined with the equally thorny debate over the missionary activity of eastern monks outlined by G. P. Bonnetti, is compounded by the state of the sources, whose strong emphasis on eastern elements may be suspected to better reflect the origins of the hagiographers themselves and the influence of already fossilized literary *topoi* than the real provenience of the hermits. All

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(48) Tione 2002-3; *ead.* 2005. Nor does it seem possible to connect – on the state of current understanding – the figure of Rufinus with the fragment of the purple evangeliary, written in the sixth century and in use through the eighth, discovered in 1595 in the crypt of the parish-church of Sarezzano, along with the relics of Rufinus and his companion Venantius.

(49) Brogiolo, Simeone, Possenti and Giové Marchioli 1996.

the same, the admittedly spare archaeological data do offer a confirmation of the early origins of the eremitic settlements in Umbria, and of the distinctly eastern influences behind the foundation of Farfa; the indicators relative to Isaac the Syrian are also quite suggestive. The hagiographical literature makes constant reference to the mobility of the Syrians: to the examples already cited one might add, for example, the notice of the three Syrian architects come to Sicily to construct a church contained in a late *Vita* of saints Alfius, Philadelphus and Cirinus;<sup>50</sup> Sicily was also the home of the fifth-century emigré Philip of Agira, another Syrian, according to a late *passio* of the ninth century.<sup>51</sup> These vignettes take their place in a much broader chronological context which saw waves of migrating oriental ascetics arrive in Italy as early as the persecutions of the Emperor Julian (361-63),<sup>52</sup> which only hastened movement along established and enduring routes of communication between east and west.<sup>53</sup>

As far as the possibility of reconstructing the cultural atmosphere and the circumstances which brought so many Syrian holy men to the Italian peninsula is concerned,<sup>54</sup> the information furnished by the Latin sources and the archaeological record is extremely sparse, and complicated by the indifferent application of the terms 'Syrian' and 'Syria' to a vast area, defined by the use of the Syriac language, which stretched from Lebanon and Mesopotamia as far as the Gulf of Arabia. Ecclesiastical affairs in Syria do however offer some grounds for reflection. The secession of the East Syrian or Nestorian Church, which became effectively autonomous from the rest of the Byzantine world in the fifth century and subsequently looked quite exclusively towards the east,<sup>55</sup> makes its direct involvement with the presence of Syrian holy men in Italy improbable, for all that there are hints of a Nisibene monastery in Rome.<sup>56</sup> The ascetics and holy men of the West Syrian Church, however, were peripatetic and had considerably more frequent contacts with the rest of Byzantine society; moreover, the sources for the West Syrian Church (John of Ephesus *in primis*) reveal a monastic ethos with a strong attachment to social action and interaction.<sup>57</sup>

(50) *Acta Sanctorum Maii*, II, 548: the episode is recounted in Pricoco 1989, 335ff.

(51) Pricoco 1989, 343.

(52) For Julian's reign there is for example the case of Hilarion, a hermit settled in Sicily whose story is told by Jerome (Rizzo 1988). The missionary vocation of the eastern monks is also frequently attested in East Syrian Church circles: the diffusion of the Nestorian Church in the east, well documented by the affair of the Chinese church of Da Qin in the seventh and eighth centuries, often took the form of eremitic colonies, like the exemplary foundations of the sixth century discovered near Urgut in Sogdiana (modern Uzbekistan): see Nicolini-Zani 2006, 19ff., esp. 37-38 for cliff-side settlements with Syriac graffiti.

(53) Cracco Ruggini 1959, esp. 214ff.; the inscriptions of immigrants – not only of Syriac extraction – follow the capillary distribution of the Roman roads, and become more common in the fifth century; the immigrants were generally well-integrated (they used Latin and not Greek) professionals, clerics (at all levels of the church hierarchy), bureaucrats and above all soldiers, though the percentage of clerics increased over time. On the prevalence of Syrians amongst the clergy of Ravenna, see Agnellus, *Liber pontificalis ecclesiae ravenensis*, 17, 24; and Sidonius Apollinaris, *Epistulae*, 1, 8.

(54) On the connection with the persecutions of Anastasius, see amongst others Pani Ermini 1994, 151.

(55) For a survey of Syriac monasticism see Berti, forthcoming; on the Syriac church of the east see Chialà 2002, 11ff.

(56) Sansterre 1980, 25ff.

(57) Berti, forthcoming; Harvey 1990.

The vacillating imperial attitude toward the Nestorians – at times conciliatory, at others persecutory, especially from the time of Justin I (519-27) – provided good incentive for migrations of monks; of particular interest are the documented forms of collaboration which existed between the imperial authorities and monophysite monks: in the area of Tur Abdin on the eastern *limes* of the empire, the same emperor Anastasius who had promulgated decrees against the monophysites patronized the construction of monasteries for them.<sup>58</sup>

It does not seem much of a stretch to imagine that political conditions in the Italian peninsula, conditioned by the terrible struggles against the Goths first and then the Lombards, could have prompted the Byzantine military authorities or even the government in Constantinople (which had intervened on the eastern frontier at Tur Abdin) to adopt a favorable stance toward eastern monks displaced by persecution, so that these charismatic foreigners might rally the spirits of local populations in afflicted areas.

### 3. *The contours of settlement according to the textual sources*

Sulpicius Severus tells us that when Martin became bishop of Tours, his desire for a place of solitary retreat led him to build a wooden cell (*ex lignis contextam cellulam*) beneath the overhanging cliffs along the Loire River, reachable only by a single, narrow path; his disciples then installed themselves in *receptacula* dug into the caves along the same rocky coast.<sup>59</sup> Continuity of occupation in the area can be deduced from Gregory of Tours, who described the activities of the hermits and their modifications to the caves in the late sixth century.<sup>60</sup>

The layout of the hermitages of the Jura seems to follow the example of Marmoutier,<sup>61</sup> with wooden cells arranged around a central oratory,<sup>62</sup> the same typology revealed by the circular structures in the Breton monasteries of Saint-Maudez (mid-sixth century) and Saint-Budoc. Also in the mid-sixth century, the monk Calupan (Caluppanus) left his monastery at Méallet in the Auvergne to seclude himself on a rocky outcropping near a stream, where he sheltered in a cave used as a refuge in times of war. The grotto, next to which the saint built his little chapel (*oratoriolum*), was outfitted with stone walls and accessed via wooden scaffoldings. Yet in this case there was no severance of ties with the parent monastery, and in fact Calupan was assigned a ration of bread and a monk to serve

(58) See Falla Castelfranchi 1987, 53ff; and Palmer 1990, cited in Berti, forthcoming.

(59) Sulpicius Severus, *De vita beati Martini*, X, 4, 5. Helvétius 2003, 6ff. criticizes the classification of Martin amongst the hermits, preferring to associate his experience with the *cenobium*. Without entering into the undoubtedly relevant question of the distinction made between the two phenomena amongst contemporary observers, much less that of modern scholarly categorizations, I think the description of the settlement of Marmoutier can offer useful indications for less well-documented contemporary examples of hermitages or *laura*.

(60) Gregory of Tours, *Vitae patrum liber*, XX.

(61) Hubert 1965, 468.

(62) *Ibid.* 467.

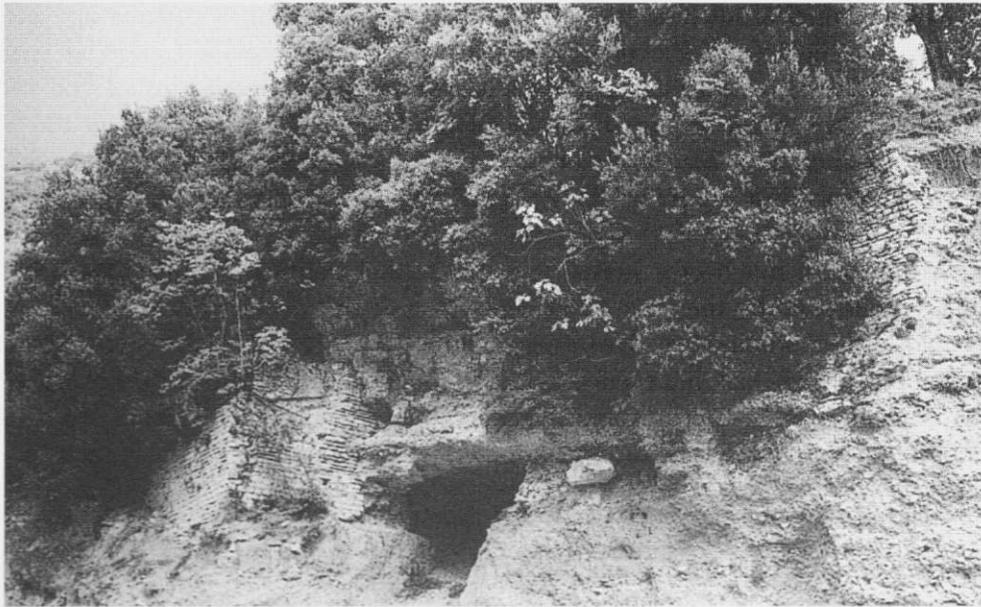


Fig. 15 – Ferentillo (Spoleto), hermitage of Lazarus and John (from Pani Ermini 1994).

him.<sup>63</sup> Cells built into caves also housed the abbot of Clermont, Martius (died *c.* 530) and his companions.<sup>64</sup>

Sources for Italy are scarce. Gregory says of Isaac that he “built for himself a humble *habitaculum*”;<sup>65</sup> and scholars have indeed identified San Giuliano di Montelucio as the center of an eremitic settlement modeled on the eastern *laura*, a paradigm well-known also in the west.<sup>66</sup> The restricted arc of territory around Montelucio in fact contains traces of some fifteen ‘hermitages,’ identified by toponyms which correspond with architectural remains of chapels or monasteries and, more often, natural caves with manmade features. The sites vary in date and have for the most part been transformed beyond the possibility of archaeological inquiry, and even the best-preserved among them do not contain evidence for the chronology of their occupation.<sup>67</sup> An early date is however suggested by the interventions in the rock walls of the hermitages in the cave of Santa Maria Egiziaca and Sant’Antimo, as well as in the so-called cave of Isaac, where the rock-cut walls of two adjoining caves get their *terminus ante quem* from the masonry walls of the thirteenth century which overlie them.<sup>68</sup>

(63) Gregory of Tours, *Vitae Patrum*, X; Hubert 1965, 470.

(64) Gregory of Tours, *Vitae Patrum*, XIV; Hubert 1965, 471.

(65) Gregory the Great, *Dialogi*, III, 14, 9: *sibi umile habitaculum construxit*.

(66) On the cave complex at Montelucio, where the phases of eremitic occupation cannot be precisely dated, see Pani Ermini 1994, 160ff.; on the *laura*-like settlements in Campania, see Vitolo 1987, *passim*; for the situation in the Abruzzi, see Staffa and Pannuzi 1997, 299ff.

(67) Pani Ermini 1983, 546ff.; *ead.* 1994, 163ff.

(68) Pani Ermini 1983, 547ff.

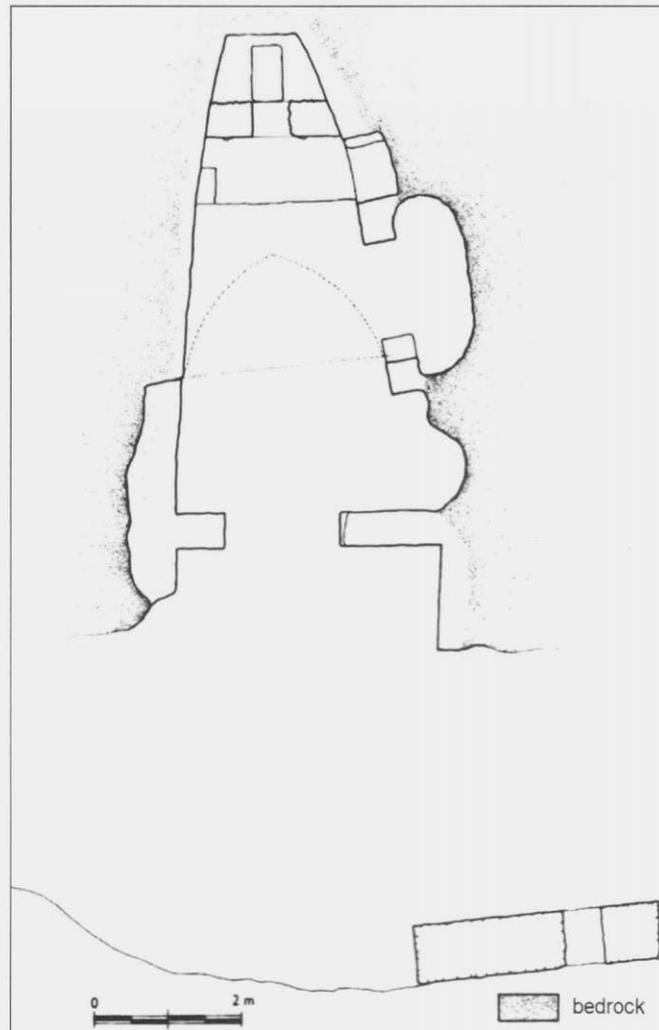


Fig. 16 – Monte Massico (Salerno), cave of Martin, plan (from Acconci, Piccirillo 2005).

At Ferentillo, a tradition attested from the eleventh century, but perhaps drawn from older hagiographic sources, connects two adjacent cells carved into a cave near the monastic foundation with two sixth-century monks (Lazarus and John) recorded in the *Life* of Lawrence the Syrian (fig 15).<sup>69</sup> In the absence of archaeological documentation, it can be said only that the cells feature thirteenth-century masonry comparable to the examples from the hermitage of Isaac on Monteluco.<sup>70</sup> Adjoining the complex there is also a hermitage dedicated to Saint Benedict, known for his pastoral visits in the area, composed of a

(69) Borsellino 1982, 132ff.; Susi 2001, 585.

(70) Pani Ermini 1983, 551.

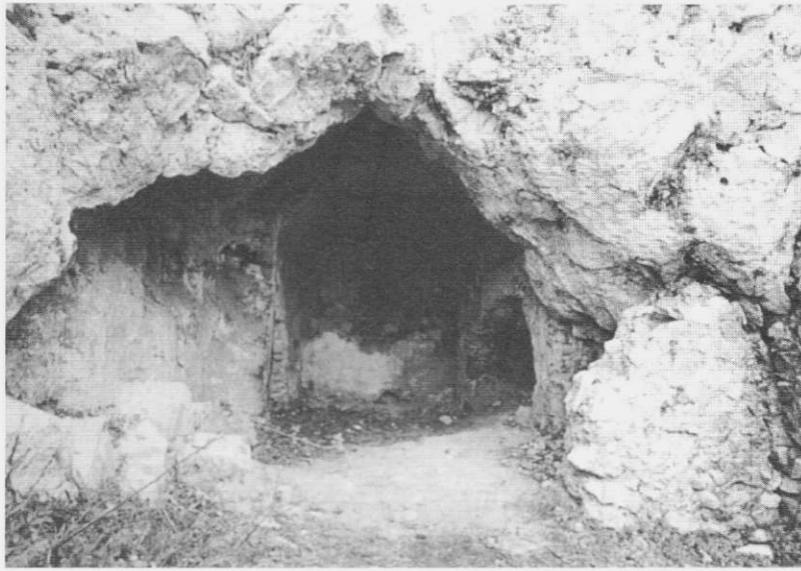


Fig. 17 – Monte Massico (Salerno), cave of Martin (from Acconci, Piccirillo 2005).

large enclosure around a cave with rock-cut walls, flanked by a space open to the sky and an oratory.<sup>71</sup>

In the sixth century, Martin of Monte Massico retreated to a *montis foramine*, a cave on the steep, rocky slope of the mountain accessible only via a narrow trail.<sup>72</sup> The site is located on a peak 813 m high which separates the valley of the Garigliano from the plain of the Terra di Lavoro, not far from the Gulf of Gaeta: the grotto is situated at a height of 522 m above sea level, on the most inaccessible slope of the mountain. Archaeological explorations have revealed walls belonging to the monastic complex which surround the cave of Martin; they are constructed in part in a technique well-attested in the eighth century in the southern Lombard duchies (*Langobardia minor*), in part in *petit appareil* of less certain date (figs. 16 and 17). A substantial eighth-century phase is further attested by wall paintings in the rock-cut chapel.<sup>73</sup>

The eremitic settlements around Farfa are located in a similarly mountainous zone: the earliest nucleus on Monte San Martino, the so-called Site E, sits in the immediate vicinity of a Roman villa of the republican period, whose spoliated remains provided some of the building materials used in the sixth-century walls employed in the architectural elaboration of the cave at Site E (figs. 18, 19 and 20).<sup>74</sup>

Of exceptional interest are the structures of the abbey of Saint Eutycius in the Val Castoriana (Norcia): Gregory records the “monasteries constructed here and there”<sup>75</sup> by

(71) Borsellino 1982, 133ff.

(72) Gregory the Great, *Dialogi*, III, 16, 2, 4, 6.

(73) Acconci and Piccirillo 2005, 14ff.

(74) Branciani 1999-2000, 39-43.

(75) Gregory the Great, *Dialogi*, IV, 11, 3: *monasteriis circumquaque constructis*.



Fig. 18 – Monte Massico (Salerno), cave of Martin: remains of painted decoration (from Acconci, Piccirillo 2005).

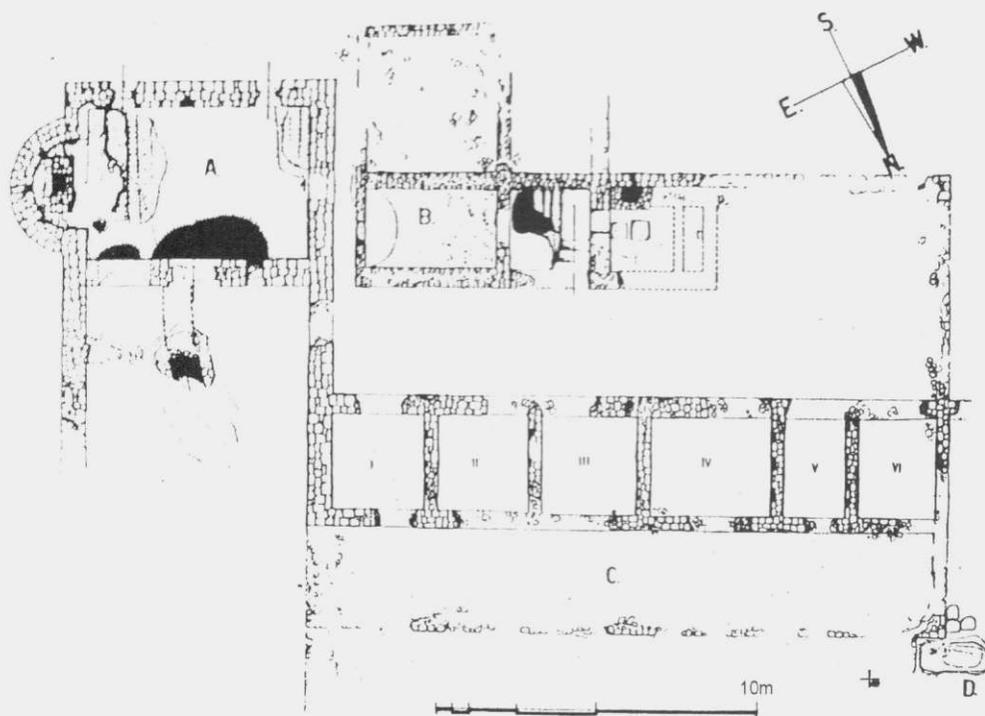


Fig. 19 – Farfa, Monte San Martino, site E, plan of the villa.



Fig. 20 – Farfa, Monte San Martino, the eremitic structures  
(from Branciani 1999-2000).

Spes, which followed an initial settlement in a cave documented by the literary sources and suggested by the surviving structures (see below). The medieval buildings followed a pre-existing settlement, remains of which include sculptural fragments of the Carolingian period and the front of a sarcophagus which we are inclined to date substantially earlier, perhaps to the seventh century; still more important are the three rock-cut sepulchers preserved in the later architectural scheme which might well be connected with Eutycius and Spes themselves.<sup>76</sup>

Alongside the frequent use of mountainous retreats, it is worth mentioning the connection between eremitic settlements – be they temporary retreats or permanent installations – and abandoned buildings of the Roman period, a phenomenon attested already by the precocious example of Martin at Ligugé around the year 360. The “retreat in a deserted place” (*deserti loci secessum*)<sup>77</sup> of Benedict was a cave near the ruins of the Neronian villa of Subiaco, while tradition locates the site of the primitive monastery in the area of the villa near the lake and the *pons marmoreus*, where remains of an apse and various restorations dating no earlier than the fifth century have been found in the structures of the villa.<sup>78</sup> Later, when he founded his monastery in Lazio at Montecassino, Benedict would choose the abandoned acropolis of the ancient town of *Casinum*.<sup>79</sup> These settlements in the

(76) Pani Ermini 1994, 168.

(77) Gregory the Great, *Dialogi* II, 1, 3.

(78) Pani Ermini 1981, 80; *ead.* 1994, 153.

(79) Picasso 1987, 10.

vicinity of abandoned Roman structures are paralleled at Vivarium, where Cassiodorus affirmed that the “pleasant retreats” (*secreta suavia*) of Monte Castello were “enclosed by ancient encircling walls”,<sup>80</sup> and probably also at Ferentillo, where probable traces of a preexisting Roman settlement have been uncovered.<sup>81</sup> An analogous scenario appears to be reflected in the mention made by Gregory of Tours to a priest named Senoch who chose the anchoritic life and “retired to a little cell, which he himself installed amongst ancient walls, and upon the arrival of other monks, repaired an oratory which had long been in ruins.”<sup>82</sup> It is a choice which seems in a way to have anticipated that of Saint Francis, and which fits well with the broader practice of reusing older residential structures so commonly attested in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. The eastern examples of the reuse of Assyrian-period sites with the explicit purpose of deconsecrating or purging them confirm,<sup>83</sup> were such confirmation necessary, that one of the intentions behind the practice – utilitarian considerations aside – was precisely the Christianization of places connected with pagan divinities; the same is at least as true for the ascetic occupation of forests, themselves overshadowed by the presence of demons and ancient pagan divinities.<sup>84</sup>

In any case, the overlap with military structures in the case of Columbanus suggests that several additional considerations were at work, and confirms the complexity of the motivations behind such choices: the Irish saint, in fact, settled first in the *castrum dirutum* of Anagrates (Annegray),<sup>85</sup> and then at Luxeuil, which Jonas of Bobbio described as a “*castrum* outfitted with the firmest defenses” previously inhabited only by wild beasts.<sup>86</sup> Thereafter, he moved to Bregenz, “a ruined town which they call Bricantias.”<sup>87</sup> It is thus possible to hypothesize, at least in the cases of *Cassinum* and the sites chosen by Columbanus, that areas particularly affected by the collapse or abandonment of Roman settlements had been

(80) Cassiodorus, *Institutiones*, I, 29: *Sunt enim remota et emitantia heremi loca, quando muris pristinis ambientibus probantur inclusa*; the reference is taken up in Pani Ermini 1983, 567.

(81) Pani Ermini 1994, 165. Fragmentary evidence from the island of Gorgona – where an eremitic settlement which then became a monastery is mentioned by Jerome and by Gregory the Great – indicates the presence here too of a Roman villa which seems to have been inhabited in one form or another through the seventh century: see Mazzei and Severini 2000, 638 and 649 for a tentative hypothesis to the effect that the preexisting structures were reoccupied by hermits from Gallinaria and Tino, in association with or as an alternative to cave-settlements attested elsewhere). On the basis of these examples, but without any definite proof, an ascetic/eremitic function has been hypothesized for the poor dwellings installed in the seventh century in the remains of Roman villas along the coast of Poggio del Mulino and Poggio San Leonardo in the Gulf of Baratti (Tuscany): see Shepherd 1986-87; Dallai 2004, 437.

(82) Gregory of Tours, *Historia Francorum* V, 10: *cellulam, quam ipse inter parietes antiquos composuerat, se removit, collectisque monachis, oratorium, quod multo tempore dirutum fuerat, reparavit*. On settlement in ruined *castella*, see also the note in Courtois 1957, 62, with additional references.

(83) I owe this information to the courtesy of Vittorio Berti.

(84) See the remarks of Carandini 1994, along with those in Pani Ermini 1999, 642ff.; on the reuse of pagan cult sites, cf. Cantino Wataghin 1999. On pagan holy spaces in the countryside see also Caseau 2001.

(85) Jonas of Bobbio, *Vita Columbani*, I, 6.

(86) Jonas of Bobbio, *Vita Columbani*, I, 17. On the problem of Jonas’ trustworthiness see Wood 1998. Archeological surveys in Luxeuil reveal a rather different landscape surrounding Columbanus’ foundation: see Bully *et al.* 2009.

(87) Jonas of Bobbio, *Vita Columbani*, I, 27. Perhaps also worthy of mention in this context are the religious foundations in abandoned *castra* in Bierzo (Spain) cited in Fernandes-Ardanaz 1992, 309.

incompletely or abortively evangelized, whence they became particularly attractive starting points for missionary activity. With regard to Columbanus, it is also necessary to emphasize the consistently liminal position of the sites he occupied: Annegray and Luxeuil on the border between Austrasia, Alamannia and Burgundy; Bregenz between Burgundy, Suevia and Alamannia, and not far from Slavic territories; and finally, Bobbio, on the frontier between Lombards and Byzantines.

Another episode, this one best interpreted as an attempt at deconsecration of 'pagan' spaces, involves the story of Wulfilaic recounted by Gregory of Tours. A Lombard deacon, Wulfilaic went to the basilica of Saint Martin at Tours, whence he traversed the Limousin before establishing himself in a *habitaculum* built on the summit of a mountain eight miles distant from the *castrum* of Eposium; thereafter, he isolated himself in penitence and prayer on a column near a statue of Diana, and founded a church in honor of Saint Martin. The key element of the story is the intervention of the bishop of Trier, who directed Wulfilaic to abandon the example of Simeon Stylites and to live together with the *fratres* who had gathered around him; the better to ensure the obedience of the deacon, he sent a workman furnished with "planks, hammers and axes" to raze the column.<sup>88</sup> We should not underestimate the apotropaic significance of the choice made by Wulfilaic, who selected a pagan temple for his own foundation; similar motivations may be imagined to lie behind analogous initiatives for which the relevant testimony is less explicit.

#### 4. Conclusions

On the basis of the examples cited above, it seems to us that the period between the fifth and sixth centuries witnessed a confirmation of the relationship between anchorites and the ecclesiastical hierarchy on the one hand, and cenobitic monastic foundations on the other: to the cases mentioned previously should be added that of S. Severinus, active in Noricum in the third quarter of the fifth century. He first retired to a remote place where he was "content with a little cell" (*cellula parva contentus*), before subsequently being moved *divina revelatione* to found a monastery in the vicinity of Burgo.<sup>89</sup> It might thus seem an oversimplification to treat the eremitic phenomenon outside the context of a more comprehensive analysis of 'Christianization' for those crucial centuries when the faith spread throughout the countryside. Yet all the same, even if the varieties of experience documented by archaeological and textual sources testify to a remarkable variety and complexity in the prevailing forms of eremitic life, it seems to us possible to recognize a number of characteristics common to the ascetic milieu of several regions in the middle years of the sixth century. Though our analysis has been limited to the Italian peninsula, it might profitably be applied also to the part of the Balkans described by Silviu Anghel in the present volume, and perhaps extended over a still wider geographical arc, where much remains to be said about the relationship between the sequential development of eremitic settlements and the presence of Byzantine military contingents. Such an effort will be

(88) Gregory of Tours, *Historia Francorum*, VIII, 15: *cum scutis, et malleis et securibus*.

(89) *Eugippii Vita Sancti Severini*, IV.

necessary to shed more light on the historical significance of anchoritic settlement over the course of the politically complex period between the Gothic Wars and the partial conquest of Italy by the Lombards. It is a period which witnessed, as we have seen, the affirmation of various strains of eremitic life of foreign provenance, be it Syrian in Umbria and Lazio, or Constantinopolitan in the case of Garda. These strains were in turn flanked by Italian elements which, with very few exceptions, fall either into the tradition of the eastern anchorites who had arrived in Italy, or into that of Benedict, who was himself profoundly influenced by the Syrians of Umbria. There is, finally, an Irish component with Fredianus – for all that his *vita* is rather late – who, after an ascetic experience which followed upon his pilgrimage to Rome (where he may have found the inspiration for his decision), subsequently became bishop of Lucca in 560.

In this context, it seems to us that there is an evident connection between the various territories which assumed particular strategic significance during the Gothic Wars and the Lombard conquest, and the diffusion of anchoritic settlements around Lake Garda, in Umbria, and elsewhere. It is in the light of this geopolitical situation that we should see the settlements of San Cassiano di Lumignano and San Martino on Monte Massico. Both sites were located in an area of the *ager falernus* which assumed notable strategic importance first during the Gothic Wars, and thereafter during the conflict with the Lombards, when it lay on the frontier between the Byzantine strongpoints of Gaeta, Naples, Amalfi and Sorrento, and the Lombard territories in the diocese of *Volturnum* and along the River Volturno, itself a vital connection between the seacoast and the inland Lombard territories of Benevento and Capua.

The diffusion of religious practices of eastern origin also appears to have been closely connected with the Byzantine military presence. Particularly revealing is the superimposition of known eremitic ventures upon certain peculiarities in the hagiographic tradition, like the cult of Bishop Ursus of Ravenna, attested at Narni and connected with a person of eastern extraction, Crescentius son of Theodorada, who is known from an urn bearing his name which was discovered in the excavations at San Cassiano.<sup>90</sup> There is also the capillary diffusion of dedications to Cassian and Apollinaris, likewise cults originating in Ravenna. Belisarius' foundation of the monastery of San Giovenale at Orte on the Via Flaminia, recorded in the Roman *Liber Pontificalis*, also fits well in this context.<sup>91</sup>

Other hagiographic sources likewise reveal connections with Byzantine interventions in the religious organization of various territories: Donald Bullough, for example, has documented the introduction to Naples and Gubbio of the cult of the African martyrs of Lambaesis by Steven the Greek in the sixth century.<sup>92</sup> Further connections are implied for the Gothic period by the excavations in progress in the township of San Giovanni d'Asso (near Siena), where a church 32 m long by 10 m wide with two contemporary facing apses has been found; it has been identified with the *Baptisterium Sancti Petri* of Pava,<sup>93</sup> mentioned

(90) Binazzi 1986-87, 9ff.; Susi 1999, 286ff.

(91) *Liber Pontificalis*, I, 296; Susi 2001, 575.

(92) Bullough 1978, 189. On the African martyrs see also Susi 1999, 275.

(93) Campana, Felici and Marasco 2007.

in the document of 714 stemming from the dispute between the bishops of Arezzo and Siena.<sup>94</sup> The peculiarity of the double-apsed plan directly recalls sites in North Africa,<sup>95</sup> the Byzantine Levant, and the Iberian Peninsula.<sup>96</sup> The church has been dated by the excavators on the basis of a small coin horde discovered in the western apse, composed of six gold and twenty silver coins dating between 537 and 541. The deposition of the coins apparently occurred during or shortly after the construction of the church, perhaps intentionally in conjunction with its founding, or perhaps as the result of an impending emergency, but in either case during the period of the Gothic Wars. A Vandal coin was also recovered, a bronze *nummus* of Gelimer (530-34) which has been connected with “a Byzantine presence in the area during the initial phases of the Gothic Wars,”<sup>97</sup> and thus immediately after the conquest of Africa, whence may have come not only the coin but also the inspiration for an architectural layout otherwise unprecedented in Italy. Yet more indications of Byzantine influence on religious architecture come from the mosaic finds from the monastery of San Marco at Spoleto, which betray their close connection with Justinianic-period workshops at Ravenna.<sup>98</sup>

The correlation between late antique evangelization and the ‘Greeks’ is for the rest rooted in medieval tradition. It can be seen for example in the figure of Elpidius in the account of Sigibert of Gembloux: on the occasion of the translation of his relics into Germany around 970, the bishop of Marsica (Abruzzo), Alberic, told two priests arrived from Metz that the body they had uncovered was that of Elpidius, who had come to Italy in the company of another seventy saints *ex partibus Graeciae*.<sup>99</sup> In Abruzzo too, Byzantines and Lombards faced off in a climate of mutual hostility often visible in the archaeological record,<sup>100</sup> and there are numerous examples of well-documented eremitic settlements. On the one hand, there are many instances of caves accompanied by a written and oral tradition – rarely archaeologically-corroborated – of early eremitic occupation in the first centuries of the early Middle Ages,<sup>101</sup> while on the other, many further episodes of ascetic withdrawal feature prominently in the contemporary sources, among them the eremitic seclusion of Equitius, a Roman senator and contemporary of Benedict.<sup>102</sup>

The predominantly elite character of anchoritic experience in the middle of the sixth century and its central role in the evangelization of the countryside are confirmed by the nature of the relationships between leading church authorities and hermits, which fall broadly into two categories. Some hermits, like Himerius of Amelia and Fredianus of Lucca, were called to the episcopal throne as a result of the fame their ascetic endeavors

(94) Schiaparelli 1929, n. 17.

(95) Duval 1973.

(96) Ulbert 1978; Ripoll and Chavarria 2003, 101-2.

(97) Arslan 2007.

(98) Pani Ermini 1983, 560.

(99) Susi 1998 and 2002.

(100) Staffa 1997.

(101) See the examples cited in Staffa and Pannuzi 1999; see also Micati and Boesch Gajano 1996.

(102) On Equitius: Gregory the Great, *Dialogi* I, 9-21; Jenal 1995, 206-8; on hermits in the Teramano, see Staffa and Pannuzi 1999.

had brought them; for other bishops like Hercolanus of Brescia, Cerbonius of Populonia,<sup>103</sup> Romulus of Genoa and Catellus of Castellamare, the progression was reversed, as they left the sees they already held to embrace an eremitic exile in the wake of the Lombard invasions, often heading toward remaining Byzantine territories.<sup>104</sup>

It is also clear that the socio-economic milieu in which the eremitic impulse developed was unusually flourishing. From the middle of the sixth century into the seventh, the fortified settlements around Lake Garda were inhabited by a civil and military elite with access to a productive surplus far superior to the prevailing norm in other types of settlement: proofs include the coins which continued to circulate until the seventh century, and the imported amphorae and fine *terra sigillata* ceramics which continued to arrive until the end of the sixth century. The social context of the eremitic movement around Lake Garda was hardly marginal and depressed, and seems rather to have benefited from the active support of the central administration (hence coins for cash transactions, and imported commodities perhaps delivered through the apparatus of the *annona*, at least during the period of Byzantine occupation).<sup>105</sup> Other eremitic sites are likewise frequently accompanied by the presence of goods imported from elsewhere in the Mediterranean basin; evidence for such imports exists on the island of Bergeggi off the Ligurian coast,<sup>106</sup> as well as at Farfa, where eastern ceramics and glassware have turned up.

Artistic production too seems to us to confirm the close connection between religious figures and broader economic and political networks: the sixth-century sculptural decoration attributed to the monastic foundation of Isaac the Syrian at Montelucio, and the contemporary sculptural program of Byzantine inspiration at San Cassiano at Narni, testify to a culture closely attached to specialized modes of production, and clearly far from marginal.

It is thus plausible that the reaffirmation of ascetic lifestyles in a number of strategic areas was favored by the Byzantine authorities. While the central government could rely on the support of bishops in cities like Ravenna and Parenzo to establish its authority, it had to count on the social prestige of hermits in the countryside. It is a mechanism of consensus which appears clearly and in detail in the *Vita* of Emilianus, a Spanish hermit

(103) Gregory the Great (*Dialogi* III, 11) first recounts the opposition between the bishop and the Gothic king Totila, and then his retreat to the Island of Elba upon the arrival of rapacious Lombard hordes. On the subsequent hagiographic narratives and the material data, see Mazzei and Severini 2000, 642: an oratory dedicated to the saint with an associated hermitage, located near Monte Capanne on Elba, is traditionally dated to the sixth century, though it has not been archaeologically investigated. It is also worth noting that the seventh- or eighth-century *Vita* of Cerbonius, an African exile, indicates a first phase of ascetic life, which garnered for him the saintly fame which subsequently led to his election as bishop (Mazzei and Severini, *op. cit.*).

(104) A political reading of the ascetic withdrawal of a Romulus, Cerbonius or Hercolanus is supported precisely by the definitive and enduring character of their isolation, which distinguishes it from the temporary retreats, based on the model of e.g. Martin of Tours, frequented by other sixth-century bishops, like Euty chius of Como (died 539; v. Penco 1980, 98), from whose frequent visits a mountain near Como derived its name, or Eulalius of Syracuse, who died at the beginning of the sixth century (Penco 1980, 99).

(105) Brogiolo 2006.

(106) See Mazzei and Severini 2000, 626ff., with mention of the presence of a circular tower, currently unexcavated but commonly dated to the sixth century.

who lived for more than a hundred years between 473 and 574, and thus in precisely the period under examination. The *Vita* describes how Emilianus attracted “multitudes” even to his remote cave, creating a network of social consensus around himself thanks to his magical abilities and the moral authority which ensued from his saintly stature: to him came *senatores*, *artifices*, and *servi*, members of diverse social classes in everyday life, but unanimous in their recognition of his saintly aura.<sup>107</sup> Gregory the Great and Gregory of Tours demonstrate for the Italian peninsula and the Merovingian kindgoms, respectively, the same ascetic capacity to attract crowds and generate consensus in rural areas.

All the same, one might object that western anchoritic practice followed eastern models from its earliest origins in the later fourth century, and that the emigration of eastern ecclesiastics to the west was a constant until the seventh century, and involved not only hermits, but also bishops and popes. Yet the development of eremitic practice along frontiers and in areas of conflict around the middle of the sixth century does not seem to us a matter of pure coincidence. We thus think it plausible that the migration of eastern hermits was not simply a spontaneous corollary to the arrival of troops, officials and provisions; and we would instead advance the hypothesis that in their strategies for territorial control, the Byzantine authorities made use of the hermits as more or less conscious instruments of policy, with the aim of establishing consensus in the areas of greatest social upheaval, where it was necessary to reinforce the hegemony of the central government, first in the face of Arian Goths, and later Lombards, themselves largely Arian or pagan.

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