Intangible Heritage, fairy tales and myths:

a structure for a research concerning the underground popular imagination and its relationship with architecture and archaeology

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Abstract: The legends and the myths from the popular culture are quite a common element everywhere in the world. But when they come to be combined to ruins and ancient buildings there is often some kind of special mix. This mix brings the imagination beyond the works and the ventures of paladins and architects, it brings the imagination to discover the “underground world”.
So it may happen to hear stories about tunnels, caves, hidden rooms where fabulous treasures are hidden. The size and the possibility to see the place is simply secondary. Most of the time, if no one is able to find those places that is considered the demonstration of how it is difficult to discover them.
There are many meaningful examples of these phenomena: from places seen, but only partially explored, to places that have lost the consistence of the myth and are then recognized in their real function, to the places only existing in the collective imagination.
The research structure proposed here will present an approach to this subject, linking together strategies for documentation, digital survey solutions and techniques for cataloguing the intangible elements from the popular culture. It will propose some important and clear samples like the “Buca di San Rocco” in Sasso Pisano, Tuscany (a cave crossing the rock where a fortress was raised); the Cryptoporticus of the Hadrian’s Villa in Tivoli (where the legend places the rooms for Hadrian’s expiation); the mysterious tunnel in San Marco Argentano in Calabria, imagined as crossing the land from the local castle to a nearby monastery.
These samples (and others) will allow to structure a proposal for documenting and interpreting the reasons of this specific fascination, creating not a simple catalogue of strange places and mysteries, but a tool for interpreting the relationship between suggestion and strength of the architectural and archaeological remains in the popular culture.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage, Intangible Heritage, Caves, Legends, Documentation

Concerning Intangible Heritage

First of all, we give a brief explanation of what we mean by “Intangible Heritage”. When we talk about “Intangible Heritage” we address to that huge portion of our culture which is not tangible or palpable: songs, music, theatre and many other cultural components are naturally included in this enormous patrimony. A set of artistic expressions with which is impossible to interact, though they are completely and widely recorded. A bizarre consideration is that even architecture, at first glance one of the most tangible and palpable form of art, can sometimes be considered as another example of “Intangible Heritage”. We do note that this immaterial patrimony is often passed down orally, within small or large communities, tending to emphasize

the figures of men who feel themselves as promoters and bearers of local traditions. Even since the ancient times, people always felt the necessity of passing on to future generations something that could appraise the origin of that community or at least a simple tale singing the praises of a common hero or narrating stories and facts full of details. And when we face the content of a popular tale or a myth, it could happen to find anecdotes regarding hidden architectures and their wondrous histories. Obviously, coming across a form of intangible patrimony we will use a completely different set of tools and strategies in order to analyse something lacking of dimensions, shapes and – sometimes – location too. Sometimes it is absolutely impossible to interact with those architectural objects: for this reason we have to plan a divergent approach, we want to follow a path going far from the traditional analysis used for a tangible element. The canonic survey usually characterized by photographic sets, outlines and evaluations turns into a proper "search" for true evidences needed to confirm the existence of the investigated object. And just because we rarely have the certainty of the existence of what we are looking for, a good way to get prepared for a journey towards a remote village can be using primary literature. Once checked the information on the web and selected a list of real destinations, it would be premature not to verify offline information with a crossed comparison too. A simple Google search using "luoghi misteriosi" (Italian words for "mysterious places") gives back 602.000 results, using the English words, the results go up over 12 million results. This testifies how the subject of a fantastic underground world is part of the popular culture in Italy as well all around the world. In our time this particular context can be even more interesting if brought to the digital age. If we consider the occasions offered by local traditions and the "weigh" that a legend or appropriate story telling can give to the choice for a destination, it comes out how important can be the documentation of places in their "intangible" aspects. At the same time the concepts and the ideas linked to neogeography, online communities and augmented reality, can create the conditions for some rethinking about the way a place and the story of a town (but also of a castle, a cave, a specific building, a square, etc...) can be brought to the attention of the others. The first step, presented here, is the individuation of a set of environment expressing in different ways a particular relationship between the real subject and its "myth" or "legend", creating the very first condition for organizing the idea about an overlapping between the value of tradition and the methods of digital research and dissemination.

Intangible Heritage's examples

Among the copious results of Intangible Heritage, in Italy three examples have been picked because of their particular interests related to our research. We will propose some important and clear samples like the "Buca di San Rocco" in Sasso Pisano, Tuscany, the Cryptoporticus of the Hadrian's Villa in Tivoli and the mysterious tunnel in San Marco Argentano in Calabria. These three examples share the peculiarity of a numerous series of information required to advance with the analysis and the research. The last of them, San Marco Argentano in Calabria, is completely based on oral information gathered from many local inhabitants, since we do not have proofs or physical remains about its existence. This is the point where our research touches its borderline: we arrive to a sort of subtle margin through which, starting from popular tales, a risky hypothesis of interpretation is given. A hypothesis that – unluckily – cannot be supported or rejected by solid and tangible elements. But all across these three examples, there is the occasion for a sort of screening of different levels of relationship real/imaginary: in Sasso Pisano, the subject of the legend is

there, slightly altered in front of its original aspect and condition, but accepted as an element combined with legend. In Tivoli, the legend is feeble and almost forgotten, it has been proven not to be real by historical studies, but it can be a meaningful note about the way ancient people were used to treat the mysterious system of tunnels they saw in the country around the Hadrian's Villa. In San Marco Argentano the strength of the "dream" overcomes the consistency of the reality, for who believe in this story. The impossibility of finding the mysterious tunnel it is just because the search was not done correctly.

Castel del Sasso and the "Buca di San Rocco"

"Castel del Sasso" probably owes its name to the rocky spur on which its fundamental has been raised. Originally subdued to the Bishop's will, "Castel del Sasso" definitely went under Volterra's domination in 1210, when the inhabitants swore their loyalty to that town. Literally the name of the natural cavity at the base of this peak means "San Rocco's Hole". At the foot of the rocky hill, where the castle and later the town were erected since the medieval age, there is this particular cave, which extends from the spur of the hill to an exit along the perimeter of the ancient castle where now a square is located. This cave is now interrupted and no longer viable due to the rocks deposits caused by collapse, but also because of the choice of some policeman in the past century who decided to wall up the exit. They said it was done to avoid people from the risk of falling in or from the risk of climbing from the lower access in search of an adventure to be told. Originally this cave came to connect the valley with the culmination of the rocky outcrop, creating a connection with the town. The walk takes the name of St. Rocco because it is said that, in 1315, during one of his pilgrimages, the Saint arrived in Sasso Pisano, where he stopped, and, through the connection, he helped the citizens of the town during one of the many epidemics of plague that hit the area and to heal the lesions with the sulphur water coming from the "Troscia", the lagoon surrounding Castello del Sasso (which was the ancient name of Sasso Pisano). The memory of these events and the presence of the legend is well testified by a sign placed in front of the cave entrance, and telling a short piece from a poetry of Alberto Bertini: "...e tra boracei vapori e sulfuree acque bollenti, irti si ergon in sulla nuda roccana roccia, imponenti i fasti resti di ciò che fu del medioevo basso lo storico etruriaco "castel del Sasso"...". The interest in the place and the limited access create all the condition to foreseen the possibility to extend the communication about this place. A digital survey, the redesign of the nearby area, the implementation of the location with some simple augmented reality solution, maybe even using "virtual characters", can be a way to enhance the perception of the place and preserve in our time this particular myth.

Hadrian's Villa and its cryptoporticus Network

After the imperial proclamation of Hadrian, in 118 BC the Villa began to be built up. Hadrian's Villa is just one of the numerous examples of marvelous imperial residences that started to flourish during the rule of Tiberius (27 BC). Nowadays the location is composed by 30 buildings regrouped in many wings, occupying a surface of nearly 300 hectares. Within the Villa we can find different architectural styles, mostly Grecian and Egyptian, well representing the huge knowledge that Hadrian had about the world due to his frequent imperial journeys. 20 years of continuous works have not been enough to complete the Villa: with Hadrian's death (138 BC) the works have been interrupted. Anyway, this did not prevent Hadrian's successors from

using the Villa. Along with the Emperor's decline, the Villa declined too. Its destruction was partially prevented during the Renaissance. This enormous settlement was completely animated by people and goods, thus configuring a precise matter. For this reason, the Villa's architects tried to create an articulated web of connections that could be absolutely independent and almost invisible from the rest of the location. Throughout the Villa we can find many kind of connections partially or totally realized underground with different building techniques, going from a proper excavation (then integrated with walls) to hidden tunnels simply created by digging tuff. This underground web is called Cryptoporticus: an articulated tunnels system roughly extended in five kilometres. This series of connections owes its creation to the necessity of mobility within the Villa. Indeed we can classify the underground paths into some macro areas, based on their function and their architectural structure: Classic Cryptoporticus, ambulatory connection, passable metropolitan ways and hypogeal elements of service. During the Middle Age, Hadrian's Villa became the place of a legend based on a local devotion, the one for "Santa Sinforosa", strictly related to underground connections too. It is quite probable that the long time abandoned Villa and the presence of large underground paths combined gave birth to legends concerning the martyrdom of Santa Sinforosa. According to what is told in the legend, Hadrian, once the Villa was raised, wanted to inaugurate it with a pagan rite. So he consulted an oracle who charged the widow Sinferusa (ancient name of Sinforosa) and her seven sons of worshipping their own God. Then the oracle reassured Hadrian promising the satisfaction of his future wishes in exchange for the sacrifice of the Christian woman and of her seven children. Hadrian captured Sinferusa and the seven sons, urging them to worship the idols. Since they did not bend at this order, after torturing her, Hadrian tied a rock around her neck and threw her into the river. The corpse was then recollected and buried in the suburbs by the Principle of the Curia Tiburtina. The day after, Hadrian placed seven posts around the temple of Victorious Heracles (in Tivoli) and ordered to slay the seven children upon them. At a later stage the Emperor ordered to remove the seven corpses and to throw them into a ditch on the via Tiburtina. As a punishment for his horrible behaviour, after Sinferusa's death, Hadrian was haunted by the woman's ghost. For this reason he decided to descend underground in order to avoid sunlight, thus expiating his sin. It is possible to conceive the birth of this legend as an explanation given by medieval people about the huge underground web lying beneath the Villa. Visiting this enormous "invisible city" it is clear enough where the legend rooted its meaning. This legend is known in our time for what it is, a legend. None of the facts are considered true, but the need to give a reason for the impressive system of tunnels and the wish to see the Emperor involved in some Christian expiation process have created the myth. It is possible to hypothesize the implementation of such a legend in the story telling about the Villa. It is a very interesting legend, while it told us a lot about the "myth" and the fascination of the underground structures and at the same time tell an "unreal" story that connect an important man to the cultural approach of the medieval age. Once again all the elements for imaging some multimedia solution, maybe even at the level of characters taking part to an augmented reality solution can be considered a way to give even more interest in a very special visit.

Underground way in San Marco Argentano

San Marco Argentano is placed in the heart of Calabria, in the province of Cosenza, in Southern Italy, as it is common for a town on the hills, located near a main crossing since the ancient time, with a castle, powerful walls and a meaningful tower. Despite the robust structure of the walls and the still existing defensive system, there is a popular belief about a mysterious underground tunnel, realized from the castle to a nearby convent. The distance between the two structures is five kilometres, and no one has evidences about its existence: it is a sort of urban legend, supported by the stories told by local people. By asking around the town it is quite easy to receive various tales about visits, discovering and hypothesis, none of them supported by any kind of clear indication, but strongly supported by stories and personal ideas. From a military point of view, it would have not been convenient to create a tunnel connecting the castle with the near monastery, because it would have been an easy and direct path to access the castle and it would have allowed the enemy to avoid with no difficulties the defending walls of the castle, thus making the building easily to be conquered. The research of tangible elements that could proof the connection's existence is a really hard work, since we do not know where the entrance should be, or which kind of path it should hypothetically follow, or the precise position where it should be. As a result, we only gather a large amount of variants that only orientate our research and just make it even more complicated. Behind the possibility to demonstrate the existence of this artefact or not, any proposal and suggestion about is fabulous origin is quitted by the conviction of the inhabitants. To preserve such a complex story it can be foreseen the organization of the information around its main subject: the castle. A simple multimedia presentation, viewable in the caste nearby should be the right idea for bringing to any visitors a better perception of this legend. And the fact that many places have similar story can create strong feeling of relationship between people visiting the town and the story of the place.

Conclusions

This is an ongoing research still at its beginning, our aim is to create a real database analyzing a significant selection of single instance from this particular intangible heritage. This archive will allow us to match the information coming from similar situations and will enhance the comprehension and the popularization of stories, myths and legends whose fate could otherwise be forgetfulness and oblivion. We also believe that no survey nor gathered documentation will adulterate the belief in a specific certainty. A survey, a digital reconstruction, an investigation about the underground, may reveal important information about the presence or not of a tunnel or about some secret passage, but in the end there are only two possible options. The first is "we have found something and it is possible to trace the presence of some underground structure". The second is "there is no trace of the presence of an underground structure". In the first case the interest raise and the legend/belief is confirmed, even a smaller trace can rise enthusiastic opinions. In the second case the belief will not be afflicted, they will simply define "unsuccessful" the result of the investigation. But the purpose of our entire job is not producing and classifying this specific material in order to promote folklore and vernacular aspect or to impress people with this fabulous matter. We rather strive to connect our culture with an always growing knowledge of our traditions, thanks to a strict link between Cultural Patrimony and Local Culture. The interest in these subject coming from local culture, the efforts spent in trying to find

confirmations or simply to better understand their meanings, can meet in the most positive way the use of digital solution. Comparing, cataloguing, organizing and simulating will allow to increase the value and possibility of dissemination for these stories creating a more rich and more effective occasion to re-read the past and the roots of a culture.

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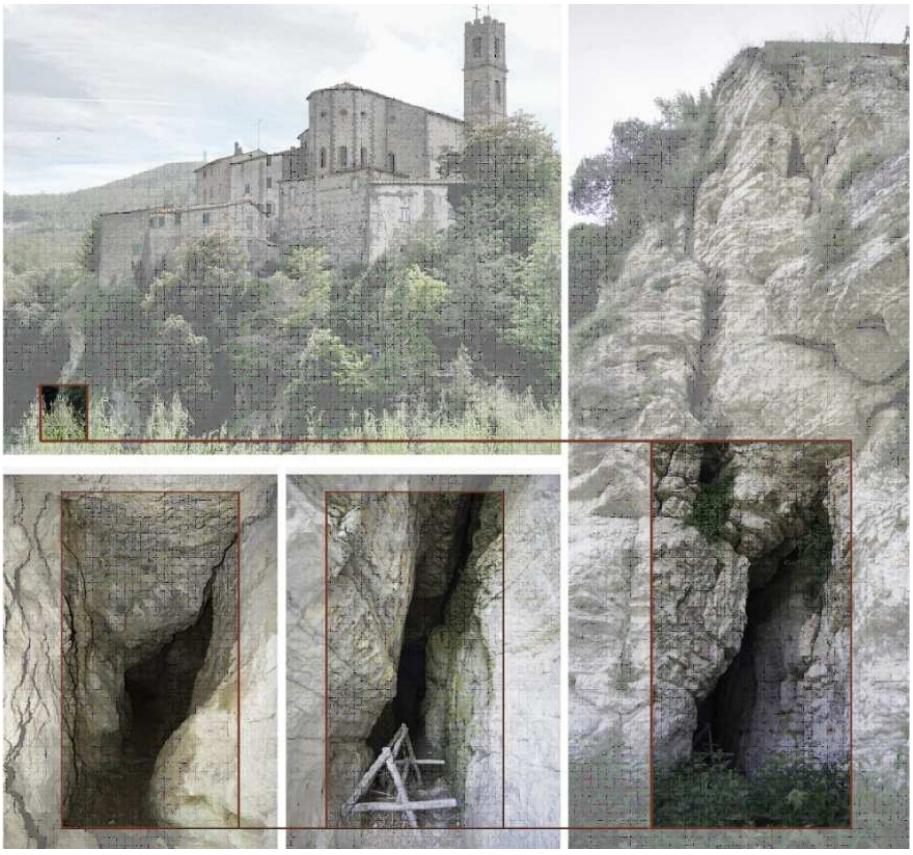

Fig. 1 – Various view along the cave of Saint Rocco in Sasso Pisano (photos by Giorgio Verdiani).

Fig. 2 –View of the castle in San Marco Argentano (photo by Giorgio Verdiani)

Fig. 3 – People explaining the legend abut the mysterious tunnel in San Marco (photos by Giorgio Verdiani)

Fig. 4 – View of an underground space in the Hadrian's Villa, the lower level of the so called "Pescaia" (photo by Giorgio Verdiani)

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