

Exploration and researches in the Holy Cave of Altura (Castellón, Spain)

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Abstract

The Holy Cave of Altura is a Catholic Sanctuary dedicated to the Virgin Maria, which since the beginning of the XVI century has been a relevant religious center in the East region of Spain, receiving regularly peregrinations from eighteen villages and cities up to 50 km from the Holy Cave.

Today the Sanctuary consists in a baroque chapel erected inside a great cave. This structure is the result of a deep reform of the cave and sanctuary performed around 1640.

Linked with the celebration of the 500 anniversary of the Sanctuary, we were authorized to explore parts of the cave closed to the public access. In this exploration part of the original Sanctuary of the XVI century was rediscovered, including an area named as "Vicars' Room", where graffiti dated from 1516 to 1634 are the testimony of the habit of the new Vicars of the Sanctuary of signing in this room's walls. Some of the signatures have been identified and its contents and typology studied.

Keywords

Holy Cave; Sanctuary; graffiti.

1. INTRODUCTION

The history of the Sanctuary of the Holy Cave (la Cueva Santa) is quite different to that of other Sanctuaries dedicated to the Virgin Maria, frequent in Spain and in other Catholic countries.

The origin of the Sanctuary is linked with the Monastery of de Valldecris. In the beginning of the XVth century priests from this monastery have the habit of manufacturing very simple plaster images of the Holy Virgin, and distribute among shepherds and farmers of the area to reinforce the Catholic faith in a population that, at that time, included a relevant proportion of Muslims.

One of these priests was Frater Bonifacio Ferrer, brother of Saint Vincent Ferrer, who worked in the manufacture of these plaster images, using wooden molds, and according to the tradition, he was who crafted the image of this sanctuary.

One century later, one of these images was discovered in the cave, and according to the tradition, all the attempts to move the image away from the cave ended with the image re-appearing in the cave. Finally it was interpreted as a

message to establish a Sanctuary dedicated to the Virgin Maria in this cave.

In 1640, the Sanctuary was re-organized and the present chapel was built in the center of the main cave. In this work, part of the original cave was closed by the construction of the stairs and accessory rooms, and remain closed to access up today.

We were asked to explore and study these parts of the cave. The surprise was the finding of an area that was certainly part of the original Sanctuary, with a relevant number of graffiti dated since 1516 to 1634, that is of the first century of the Sanctuary's history starting only few years after the discovery of the image of the Virgin, and ending in the time of the construction of the new Sanctuary.

2. THE HOLY CAVE OF ALTURA

Originally the cave was named Cueva del Latonero (Hackberry Cave) and was used by local shepherds to protect their livestock.

Today the cave accessible to the public is a great room, approximately 30 m long, 25 m wide and up to 15 m high, almost rectangular (Figure 1, 2 and 3). The access is descending 18 m using the stairs constructed in the XVIIth century. In the center of this room is placed the chapel. In the NW corner of the room, a modern gallery exits to the surface (this gallery was constructed during the Spanish Civil War, when the cave was used for different purposes).



Figure 1. Plan of the public area of the Holy Cave.

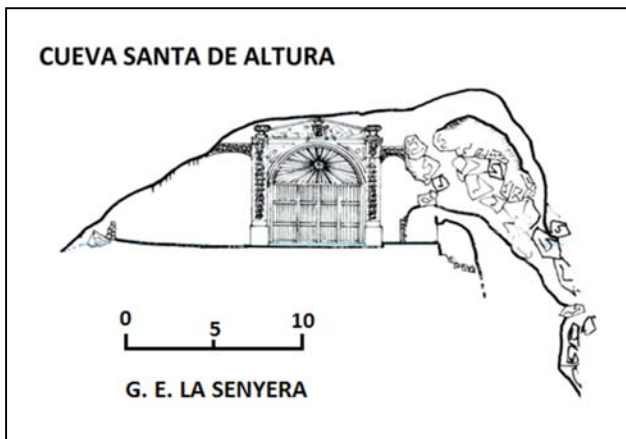


Figure 2. Section of the Holy Cave with the Chapel.

Before arriving the main room, as we are descending the first steps of the stairs, we find on the left the Chapel of the Communion, where the supposed author of the image of the Virgin (Frater Bonifacio Ferrer) was buried and another room that during long time was used as hall of the votive offerings. This room, today without use, is important for our study because by a hole in the south wall of this room we access, going behind the mother rock and the Chapel of the Communion's walls, to the main area of exploration.



Figure 3. Developed projection of the public area of the Holy Cave.

3. EXPLORATIONS

Except a series of explorations in 1954-55, no remarkable speleological research have been made in this cave until the start of our researches. The complete exploration, study, topography and analysis took about four years.

As result of these explorations, two unexplored parts of the cave were located and surveyed. In the North of the main room and accessing directly from this, a series of rooms and wells reach more than 100 m deep. A complex area was located in the SE sector, accessing from the hall of the offerings, including a well of 80 m deep.

In a chaotic sector, massive rock blocks have formed a room that seems to have been accessible in times before the works of 1640. In any case access probably wasn't easy, as we found rope remains (fig. 4) and one of the graffiti includes the date 1600, the name Jaime Cabas and after the name, the adjective 'valiente' (brave). This room has been named as Vicars' Room and is the main result of this research, together with an adjacent well named as Well of the Engravings.



Figure 4. Rope remains in the Vicars' Room.

4. THE VICARS' ROOM AND THE WELL OF THE ENGRAVINGS.

The Vicars' Room is 6 m long and 2,5 m wide, defining a space of 15 m² between the mother rock (north side of the room) and the massive blocks result of clastic processes.

The Vicars' Room allows access, through a narrow passage on the bottom to the Well of the Engravings. This well is formed by two staggered wells followed by a large gallery, main fracture of the underground complex in this part of the cavity.

Graffiti and engravings in the Holy Cave have been made with techniques of painting and engraving, the latter being the majority. As for the painted elements, they have been made with pigments of red and black color. The first, prepared with ocher, have been applied with a brush and represent exclusively crosses. The second, of black color, are crosses and epigraphic motifs made directly with charcoal.



Figure 5. Calvary with three crosses

More frequent are the engravings. Among them we have documented different techniques such as thin incisions, scraping and chipping. The technique more used is the metal engraving, drawn by a knife, razor or punch that generates thin lines with sections in "V" of less than 2 mm wide. This same technique has also been applied by using an improvised lytic instrument, consisting of a small slab or angled stone, that produces more than an incision, a scraping thicker and, in most cases, stroke "intermittent". Finally, we have documented the pricking with a lytic element, which generates slightly rough bas-relief motifs.

The graffiti of the Holy Cave can be classified in two different typological groups, depending on their character: symbolic or epigraphic.

4.1 Symbolic Graffiti

Table 1 summarizes the religious symbolic graffiti. It has to be enhanced the important number of this type of graffiti: more than five hundred.

We find graffiti of different types of crosses (see Table 1), stars of five, six or eight points, two *ictus* (fishes) and one ladder.

Of special interest is the number of crosses of different type present in the cave. During the time lapse covered by the graffiti, religion was a question of conflict, with a Muslim population compelled under pressure to adopt the Christian religion. Figure 6 shows examples of graded crosses and crosses with *imago mundi*.

There are also non-religious symbolic graffiti, including flags and geometric forms. Only 29 of this type of graffiti are present, according to the religious character of this sanctuary-cave.

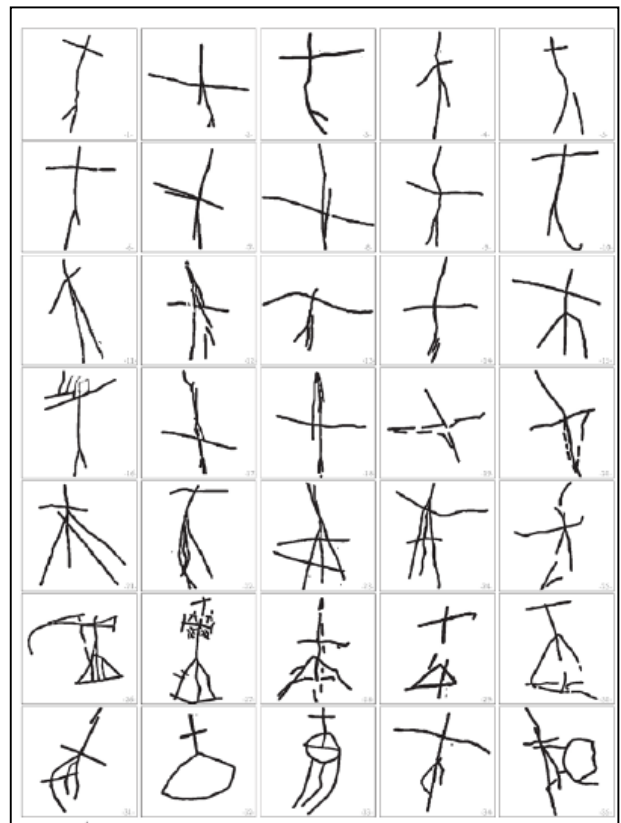


Figure 6. Graded and Imago Mundi Crosses

4.2 Epigraphic Graffiti

In the Holy Cave we have documented an interesting set of epigraphic motifs grouped into 72 units of analysis. Epigraphic signs have been studied as compositions and not

as isolated elements. Similarly, the chronological and *auctoritas* elements accompanying anthroponyms have been analyzed together with the names, but have been recorded in each of the groups to which they belong. The largest number of elements of this type is documented in the Vicars' Room.

There are six types of epigraphic graffiti: Christological epigraphy; Mariological epigraphy; Anthroponim epigraphy, *Auctoritas* epigraphy, Votiv epigraphy and

Chronologic epigraphy. Sometimes two or more of these types of graffiti are combined in one epigraphic element, as in the form name+date+prayer, as in *Santo Deus miserere nobis 1516 Mon Bautis Helimeni*.

Obviously the detailed analysis of these epigraphical elements exceeds the possibilities of this paper. Only some items of special interest will be commented.

Table 1. Religious Symbolic Graffiti

TYPE		TECHNIQUE		NUMBER
Crosses	Simple Crosses	Latin	Incision, chipping, scraping and painting	269
		Greek	Incision, chipping, scraping and painting	24
		St Andrews	Incision	6
	Compound Crosses	Potent	Incision, chipping	6
		Latin framed	Incision	5
		Latin Graded (open)	Incision and painting	21
		Latin Graded (closed)	Incision	5
		Latin with imago mundi	Incision	4
		Multiple Crosses	Over imposed	Incision
	Calvary with three crosses		Incision and painting	30
Stars	Pentalfa	Pentalfa	Incision	3
	Six-pointed star	Six-pointed star	Incision	4
	Eight-pointed star	Eight-pointed star	Incision	13
Zoomorphic	Ichthus or fish	Ichthus or fish	Incision and painting	2
Ladder	Ladder	Ladder	Incision	1
Total				523

"*Santo Deus miserere nobis 1516 Mon Bautis Helimeni*". (Fig. 7) Epigraphic assembly located in the Vicars' Room. This text is distributed in multiple lines. In the first place a litany in two rows in the first written "Santo Deus" (Holy God), with the first letters in uppercase, and in the second "miserere nobis" in lowercase. Below the litany appears the date "1516" - the oldest documented the sanctuary- and under it a name that, with some reservations, has been interpreted as "Mon Bautis Helimeni". Thus, this epigraphic narration could be translated as "Holy God, have mercy on us, 1516, Mon (Bishop) Bautis (Bautista) Helimeni". It is made with fine incision technique.



Figure 7. Santo Deus miserere nobis 1516 Mon Bautis Helimeni

"Jaime Cabas Año 1600 valiente".(Fig. 8) Epigraphic text of the panel placed in the end of the Well of Engravings. It is structured in three lines and adorned with a potent cross in its upper part. The top line says "jaime" (James), in lowercase, below "cabas", also in lowercase, followed by "Year" with the first letter in uppercase and adorned. In the third line is documented a date "1600" followed by "brave" with the first letter in uppercase and the remaining characters to lowercase. The final text says, therefore, "Jaime Cabas Year 1600 courageous". It probably reflects the pride of the author as a sign of courage to reach this deep area of the pit.

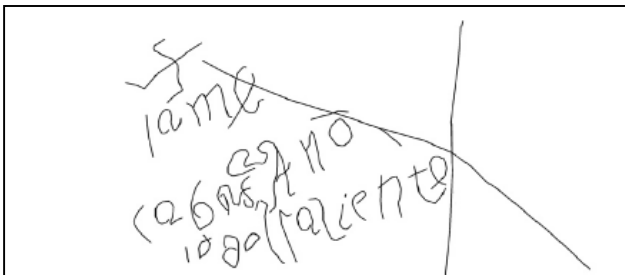


Figure 8. Jaime Cabas Año 1600 valiente

"Gerónimo Decho mosen". (Fig. 9) Epigraphic located on the Vicars' Room that presents a text recorded on four lines. In the first two lines has written "geroni" and "mo", respectively, both in lowercase. In the third line, and with the first letter in uppercase reads "DCHO" and in the fourth, lowercase letters, "ms", an abbreviation of priest. The final text can be interpreted as "Gerónimo Decho priest". The text is done using the fine incision technique.



Figure 9. Gerónimo Decho mosen

Dr. Gerónimo Decho is well documented in the historical sources of last third s. XVI. It was a famous canon, Capitular Vicar before bishops Francisco Soto (1571) and Martin de Salvatierra (1591) (also identified in another graffiti).

Figure 10 presents some examples of this type of graffiti. Among them we can find anthroponims, and *auctoritas*, etc.



Figure 10. Examples of epigraphic elements

We include finally an *Auctoritas* epigraph, as example of this type of elements.



Figure 11. Auctoritas epigraph

The *auctoritas* items majority are those who make reference to the figure of the Perpetual Vicar (reason for the designation of Vicars' Room), and are represented by the abbreviations "V", "VP" and "VPo", all made with cobble and larger than 10 cm. The example presented in Fig 11 includes the year 1626.

The dates recorded in the Cueva Santa in chronological order are: 1516, 1600 (2), 1601, 1606 (2), 1609, 1610 (3 and a dubious) 1611, 1612, 1626 (2), 16-6-1626, 1627 and 1634.

5. CONCLUSIONS.

Holy caves of medieval and modern times are underground areas, located in different territories of the Iberian Peninsula, considered sacred spaces linked to the divinity. This consideration goes back, generically, to prehistory, although in each geographical and chronological context have a different origin and development.

In the specific case of Cueva Santa, does not exist a prior prechristian cult. As noted by the father Iosef Iusticia "The popularity of the cave as Holy is from 1515 by the miracles occurred, but until 1574 was abandoned and use of the shepherds" (Iusticia 1664:15). With the discovery of the image of the Virgin, the Latonero cave would become known as Cueva Santa, "*fundamenta eius in montibus Sanctis*", being consecrated in 1581 with the first official cult.

The conclusions that can be obtained in a first study of these spaces covers several aspects such as the authorship of the graffiti, its chronology and, finally, the functionality of the Vicars' Room and the Well of the Engravings in the context of this Holy Cave.

With regard to the authorship of the graffiti data are quite explicit and allow us to establish the firm hypothesis that they are not merely pilgrims or travelers, but members of the regular and secular clergy - monks, friars, priests, vicars and bishops - responsible and carers of the Sanctuary Cave, people with certain social recognition - teachers - and, exceptionally, intrepid characters that explored the place, as may be the case of Jaime Cabas in the year 1600.

Symbolic representations are mostly of a religious nature (99% of the total graffiti), with a clear predominance of crosses.

Another important fact is the relative abundance of epigraphic graffiti and the existence of writings concerning ecclesiastical offices, religious ceremonial aspects and specific dates that could commemorate certain events.

From the graffiti identified and as result of the research in local ecclesiastical files, we know that Dr. Gerónimo Decho is already Vicar General in 1581 and Vicar to capitulate in 1571, so his signature under the title Mosen must be prior to this date and after his appointment as priest, late 60. Similarly happens with the signing of Gusep Martí, below that of Decho. Dr. Juan Valero had to leave

inscribed his name when he was vicar of the sanctuary, between 1579 and 1589, and already in the 80s, particularly between 1584 and 1589 was due to run the probable signing of Bishop Martín de Salvatierra, since it was at that period when, being Bishop of Segorbe, became interested in the Sanctuary, visiting it and making constructive and cult management reforms. The remaining dates are late and come from the three names that underlie a graffiti dated 1626. This is also the case of the signature that can be read as Aras, whose authorship is likely that of Diego de Aras, notary from Altura who visited the cave in 1629 (Iustitia, 1664: 34).

This research, initially oriented to a mere speleological exploration, was reoriented to multidisciplinary study to allow understanding the cave as a physical space and the history of the Sanctuary, to better interpret the findings of the Vicars' Room.

Finally, and to try to recreate the cave in the time the Vicars' Room was accessible, fig. 12 shows the hypothetical reconstruction of the aspect of the cave, prior to the reform works of 1645. Also the areas where graffiti are located has been indicated.

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7. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We have to thank the Patronate of the Holy Cave of Altura and especially Pater Juan M. Gallent, present Vicar of the Sanctuary.

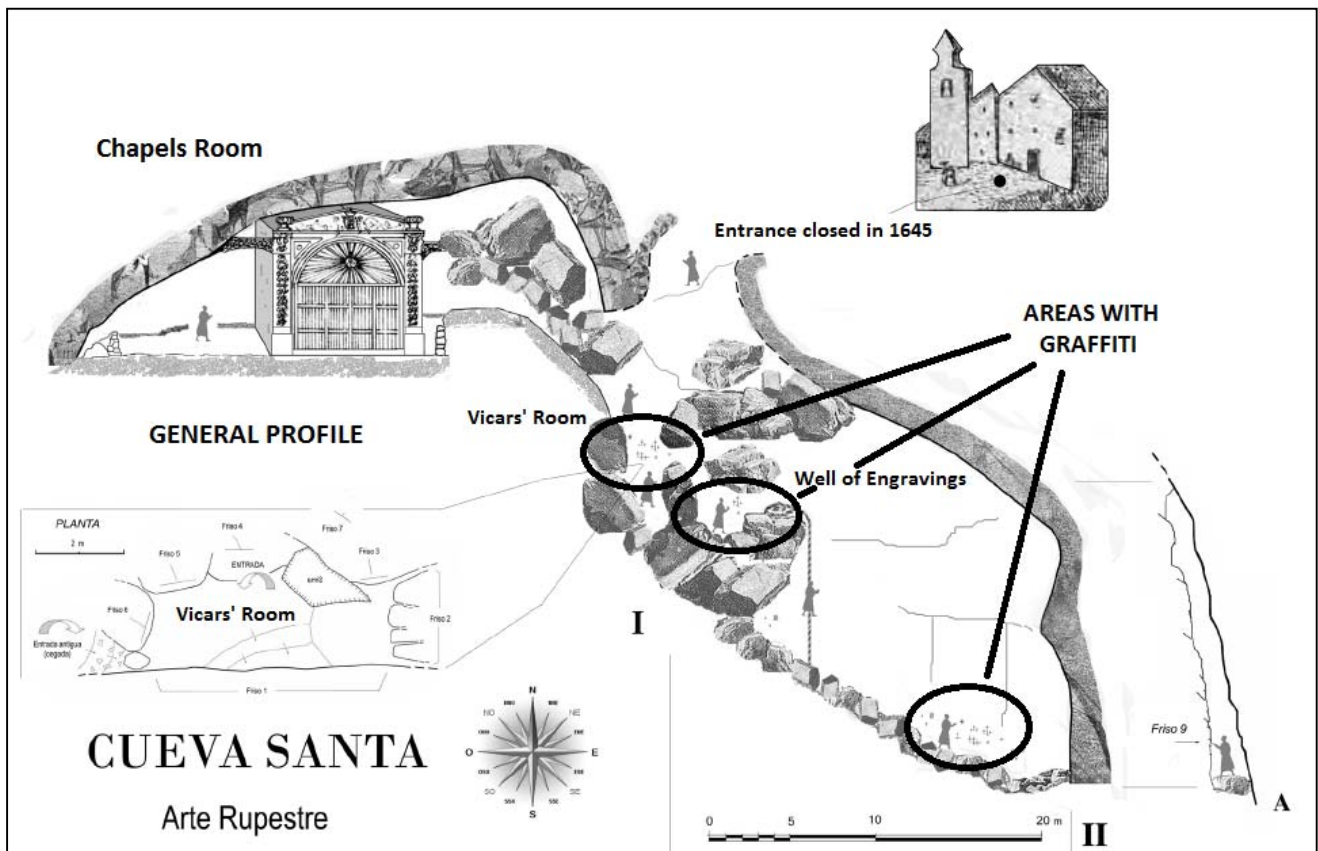


Figure 12: Hypothetic reconstruction of the Cave, with the entrance closed in the XVII century and the location of graffiti areas