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THE APENNINE SIBYL

A MYSTERY AND A LEGEND

FROM EARTHQUAKES TO AN APENNINE SIBYL AND
A LAKE OF PONTIUS PILATE:
A NEW CONJECTURE ON THE ORIGIN OF THE
LEGENDARY TRADITION OF THE SIBILLINI MOUNTAIN
RANGE IN ITALY¹



¹ Released on November 15th 2021 on <https://www.researchgate.net/> and <https://www.academia.edu/>

1. Seismic land and generation of legends

Earthquakes and ancient legendary tales: could it be that the peculiar seismic character of a territory may have inspired attempts by antique local populations to develop prescientific accounts on the origin of shocks and tremblors, involving the elaboration of oral narratives aimed at providing a mythical explanation as to the generation of earthquakes?

This is what possibly occurred, in times as ancient as the Iron Age, at the very center of pre-Roman Italy: the elaboration by Sabines and Picenes of a complex legendary structure, unfolding across many centuries, which was shaped to deal with tremblor-induced terror and involved the definition of rituals aimed at protecting local settlements from recurrent seismic destruction. A legendary structure which is now totally lost to us, but whose faint remnants are still visible and readable in later unexplained legendary narratives, whose original meaning is to be unveiled according to this new original, conjectural scenario.

The seismic land which has repeatedly been struck by earthquakes over the millennia is the Sibillini Mountain Range, a portion of the Italian Apennines; and the renowned, unexplained legendary narratives which have inhabited the same region for many centuries, possibly shielding from view an earlier legendary framework connected to earthquakes, are the ancient tales concerning the Sibyl's Cave and the Pilate's Lake.



Fig. 1 - Sibillini Mountain Range, Italy

This new, unprecedented conjecture was set forth by Italian physicist and writer Michele Sanvico in a series of papers released on Academia.edu and Researchgate.net from 2017 to 2020. A reasoned, consistent research which casts a new light on the illustrious legendary framework which lives amid the peaks of the Sibillini Mountains and was once widely known throughout Europe.

As fully highlighted by the researcher, the fifteenth-century tales which are retrieved in Andrea da Barberino's romance *Guerrino the Wretch*, connected to the presence of an Apennine Sibyl concealed beneath the cliffs of the Sibillini Mountain Range, and Antoine de la Sale's account *The Paradise of Queen Sibyl*, which narrates of both a sibilline subterranean kingdom and a demonic Lake which allegedly houses the burial place of Pontius Pilate, are not of local origin: they both came from distant lands and settled in a specific location in central Italy where possibly older legends were present already.

Both are to be considered as literary layers which seem to have been superimposed to a basic mythical core connected to the presence of a sinister Cave and Lake on what is known today as Mount Sibyl and Mount Vettore.

2. *The Sibyl that wasn't there*

A main starting point in the investigation of the origin of the legendary tale of an Apennine Sibyl set on Mount Sibyl, in the Italian mountainous region set between the provinces of Umbria and Marche, is the fact that, before the fifteenth century, we cannot retrieve any previous literary reference about an oracular Sibyl who allegedly lived in that area of the central Apennines².

Nothing is reported about the presence of a Sibyl in the *Reductorium Morale* written by Petrus Berchorius, a French monk and abbot, at the mid of the fourteenth century, a work in which he mentions the sinister renown of a magical Lake of Norcia, yet no words are spent on a sibilline abode laying in the same area; and no reference to any Sibyls is contained in the verses written in fourteenth-century *Dittamondo* by Fazio degli Uberti, a

2 Sanvico M., *The Apennine Sibyl: a journey into history in search of the oracle*, 2018, doi: 10.5281/zenodo.4007820

poet from Tuscany, on a gloomy mount and Lake of Pilatus. And no Sibyl is mentioned, either, in the *Charters of the Municipality and People of the Land of Norcia* (*Statuti del Comune et Populo della Terra di Norcia*), a collection of laws and rules dating to the same century.

If we push ourselves further back, we jump straight (owing to the lack of any other relevant references) to the fourth century, with Lucius Caecilius Firmianus Lactantius and his *De divinis institutionibus adversus gentes*, in which the Latin author enumerates a list of ten Sibyls, considered by scholars as a classical standard catalogue: however, only three are the Sibyls connected to Italy (the Cumaean, the Cimmerian and the Tiburtine). And it can be easily determined, from a number of well-known literary references, that no one of them features any relation to the Sibillini Mountain Range.

Even the Tabula Peutingeriana, which comes to us from the times when the Roman Empire was a ruling power, makes available no information on a possible sibilline site in the region set between the ancient provinces of Picenum and the river Tiber. The specific area in the Tabula where the Sibillini Mountain Range raises its peaks appears to be empty.



Fig. 2 - The area of today's Sibillini Mountain Range in the Tabula Peutingeriana (Codex Vindobonensis no. 324, Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek, Wien)

So the legendary tale which concerns a Sibyl of the Apennines seems to pop up from a sort of literary void at the beginning of the fifteenth century: a sign that the investigation into the tale's origin must take a different course, if we really want to fill that void.

3. *The Apennine Sibyl as an extraneous legend*

The Sibyl who, according to Andrea da Barberino and Antoine de la Sale, allegedly found an abode in the Sibillini Mountains, Italy, actually originates from a most illustrious literary lineage, as she is connected to the characters of Morgan le Fay and her companion Sebile, who both belong to the Matter of Britain; this is a connection that can be fully retraced across an extended collection of medieval romances and poems staging the two necromancers and their magical, concealed realms³.

As a matter of fact, 'Sibyl' is a traditional character that is often present within the romances and poems belonging to the Matter of Britain and the Arthurian cycle. Her first appearance in written literature as a powerful necromancer, just as powerful as Morgan le Fay, King Arthur's half-sister, and with a potential reference to Vergil's Cumaean Sibyl, dates back to 1185 and the poem *Erec*, written by German poet Hartmann von Aue. From that time on, in many medieval works Sibyl began to be staged as Morgan's companion and best friend, with an increasing confusion and mix-up between the figures of the two enchantresses.

Lechery, captivity of knights, and magical dwellings set beneath castles and mountains, in one case raising even in Italy, were all characters attached to Morgan across a number of works, including *Li Hauz Livres di Graal*, *Parzival*, *Lestoire de Merlin*, *Le Livre d'Artus*, *Claris et Laris*, *Floriant et Florète*, *Ly Myreur des Histors*. Following von Aue's *Erec* and an incessant flow of oral narratives, the same traits were also conferred to Morgan's companion, Sebile, staged jointly with her fellow-enchantress as in *Le Livre de Lancelot del Lac*, *Prophécies de Merlin* and *La Chanson d'Esclarmonde*, or even as a principal character as in *Wartburgkrieg* and *Perceforest*: an unrelenting journey across the centuries, which also includes *Huon de Bordeaux*, in which a lady called Sebile lives in a

3 Sanvico M., *Birth of a Sibyl: the medieval connection*, 2019, doi: 10.5281/zenodo.4007828, 4007836

magical castle guarded by metal contrivances similar to the enchanted doors mentioned by Antoine de la Sale, and *Huon d'Auvergne*, featuring a necromantic dame who lives under a mountain.



Fig. 3 - The passage on «Sebile l'enchanteresse» from the *Prophécies de Merlin* (manuscript Additional MS 25434, British Library, folium 173r)

A complete list of literary references including a significant number of mentions of the character and deeds of 'Sebile', the powerful enchantress staged in many chivalric poems and romances which are part of the Matter of Britain, is presented in the dedicated paper *Birth of a Sibyl: the medieval connection*, fully supporting the inference that the narrative which concerns an Apennine Sibyl is not original of the Sibillini Mountain Range, as it has to be considered as an offspring of this illustrious, extraneous, northern-European literary tradition.

The above scenario seems to point straight to a transplant of a version of the story of Morgan and Sebile into the remote peaks of the Sibillini Mountain Range: a mountainous chain which seemed fit enough, for some unspecified reasons, to host a legendary narrative centered on a necromantic Sibyl housed in a Cave set beneath a rocky crest. A Sibyl that was not born there, as it is now clear that she belongs to a different mythical tradition coming from northern, far-off countries.

The Sibyl of the Apennines as an offspring of the negromantic character of 'Sebile' widely present in the Matter of Britain: though overlooked by most of the researchers who across the decades have confronted with the specific issue concerning Mount Sibyl, this relationship was already highlighted in the past by illustrious academics (Lucy Ann Paton, Ferdinando Neri, Roger S. Loomis) without turning into the principal focus of their investigations. Time has come now to fully address this fascinating topic and push the enquiry further ahead along a path that will lead to significant findings.

4. Pontius Pilate as an extraneous legend

In the Sibillini Mountain Range, a few miles away from Mount Sibyl and the alleged abode of an apennine oracle, lies another arcane geographical setting: a Lake set within the glacial cirque of Mount Vettore, whose name was connected to the figure of Pontius Pilate, the fifth prefect of Judaea from 26 A.D. to 36 A.D., an official of the Roman Empire who played a key role in the Passion of Jesus Christ. The Lake is considered by tradition as the prefect's cursed resting place, as attested by Antoine de la Sale in his work, with his lively and ghastly description of a chariot drawn by buffaloes rushing straight into the icy waters of the Lake together with the prefect's body.

However, as it is fully known to scholars, the tradition concerning the legendary fate of Pontius Pilate was not born here: a vast number of literary witnesses exist, across Europe and over many centuries, which tell the tale of the ultimate resting place of the Roman prefect, a tale which has no connection with the Italian Apennines⁴.

After reading the words that were written on Pilate by classical authors such as Flavius Josephus and Philo of Alexandria, and, of course, the passages which mention Pilate in the canonical Gospels, the main line of investigation follows the works of the Fathers of the Church who, since the earliest centuries of Christianity, addressed a tricky issue: did Pilate actually make substantial efforts to set Jesus free from the accusations that were made against him by the Jews? Or, did he eventually leave the Son of God to his doom of death on the Cross? Across the centuries, different

⁴ Sanvico M., *A legend for a Roman prefect: the Lakes of Pontius Pilate* (2019), doi: 10.5281/zenodo.4008243, 4008248, 4008254

answers were pronounced which led to consider the Roman prefect either as a saint or a servant to the Evil.

During the centuries of the Middle Ages many apocryphal works on Pontius Pilate, including the *Epistola Pilati*, the *Gesta Pilati*, the *De Vita Pilati*, the *Anaphora Pilati*, the *Paradosis Pilati*, the *Legenda Aurea* and others), used to circulate throughout Europe, certainly arising from a mesh of oral tales which were narrated before fascinated audiences belonging to all social classes, and attracting ever-growing legendary accounts on his life, deeds, final prosecution by an almost Christianised Emperor, be it Tiberius or Vespasian, and final death.

This collection of tales on Pilate also provided many details on his ultimate resting place as well. Actually, there was more than one single resting place. And all such places were infested by demons. Be it the Tiber in Rome, or the river Rhône by the French town of Vienne, or a marsh or a pit in the Swiss Alps, the fiendish corpse of Pontius Pilate was not to find any rest: demons awaited his arrival and rejoiced in his company, arousing storms and tempests at the very spot of the prefect's burial.



Fig. 4 - The corpse of Pilate is finally thrown into an abyss amid the mountains (the words 'pit' and 'montibus' are highlighted) in the *Legenda Aurea* from manuscript NAL 1747, preserved at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (folium 93v)

This is no different from what Antoine de la Sale narrated in his *The Paradise of Queen Sibyl*, dating to the first half of the fifteenth century: in the vicinity of Mount Sibyl, a Lake of Pilate housed exactly the same story, with the addition of a chariot and buffaloes, a canonical image of the Triumph of Death. And his story portrays the same sort of tempests.

However, not a single manuscripted work belonging to the medieval tradition on the cursed burial place of Pilate ever mentions the Apennines or the region around Mount Sibyl as one of Pontius Pilate's haunted resting places.

The legendary narration is certainly the same, but the Lakes of Pilate and the Sibillini Mountain Range do not seem to be part of it. Especially when we consider that the earliest retrievable mention about our Italian Lake, as found in Petrus Berchorius' *Reductorium Morale*, does report about the presence of demons, but at the same time does not provide any mention of the name of Pilate.

Therefore, it is easily inferred that the legend was not born here: as a matter of fact, it was transplanted to this place, deeply set within the glacial cirque of Mount Vettore, as an extraneous mythical material. And the myth was possibly transferred to this location around the beginning of the second half of the fourteenth century, a date which is pointed to by the peculiar presence of the chariot and buffaloes, a possible iconographic reference to the plague that ravaged Italy and Europe after the year 1347, with the chariots being used for the transportation of corpses.

5. A fundamental question: why right here?

As a result of the preceding investigation, we find ourselves with a complex of legendary tales which lives amid the peaks of the Sibillini Mountain Range, a portion of the Italian Apennines at the center of the peninsula. The tales are connected to a Cave (an Apennine Sibyl on the top of Mount Sibyl) and a Lake (the resting place of Pontius Pilate on the top of Mount Vettore).

However, we are now certain that the two tales, mutually independent though living a few miles away from each other, were not born here.

The Sibyl of the Apennines comes down from a similar character fully belonging to the Matter of Britain: Sebile, the necromancer, friend and alterego of Morgana. And Pontius Pilate, with his demonic burial place, is

rooted in the well-known medieval tradition concerning the fate of the Roman prefect and the many graves for his cursed corpse.

The two independent, mutually unrelated tales appear to have both settled in the same area, the Sibillini Mountain Range. They colonized a Cave and a Lake set only a few miles away from each other, and began to enjoy a significant renown from the fifteenth century onwards, with visitors coming to the two sites from all over Europe, looking for the hidden realm of a sensual Sibyl and in search of a demonic place for the consecration of spellbooks, as attested by many literary witnesses across the subsequent centuries.

Philological research, which started on the subject at the end of the nineteenth century, soon had to confront with questions which seemed to be unanswerable. Nobody, amid the many scholars who have been dealing with the Sibillini Mountain Range's legendary heritage, could figure out the possible reasons that led so illustrious, extraneous tales, which were born elsewhere, to settle down amid these remote fastnesses, certainly not a prominent location in Italy.

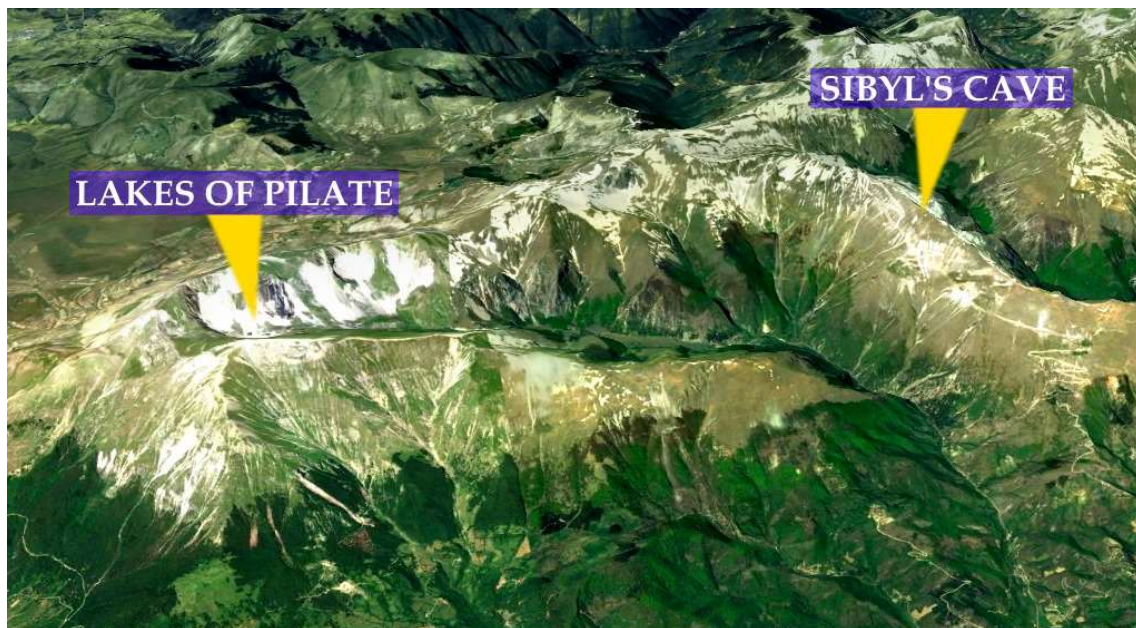


Fig. 5 - A vision of the Sibillini Mountain Range showing the positions of the Lake of Pilate and the Sibyl's Cave

Why did a Sibyl and a Roman prefect, belonging to heterogeneous, unrelated legendary traditions, come and deposit themselves right into the position marked by these distant Italian mountains, like balls spinning on a roulette wheel? What sort of unidentified local factor, possibly linked to any peculiar nature of this region, was so remarkable as to generate a powerful mythical attraction for highly-emotional legendary narratives coming from foreign territories and traditions?

Can we provide any answer to such questions? Yes, because if we proceed further into our investigation and lift the fog cast on the whole matter by the presence of medieval, extraneous layers we may get a glimpse of what lies beyond.

And what lies beyond appears to be an older, almost-forgotten, original legendary tale.

6. A legend before the legends

If we remove the two literary layers concerning an Apennine Sibyl and Pontius Pilate, which are to be considered as additional legendary overlays, and we start to look attentively into the underlying characters of the legends which mark the two sites, the Cave and the Lake in the Sibillini Mountain Range, we get glimpses of some sort of different narrative: a narrative that was already there; a narrative that had nothing to do with Sibyls and antique Roman prefects. Something that seems to preexist the two additional, extraneous legendary layers.

Some older legend, lying underneath, seems to have attracted the two illustrious tales of Sebile/Morgan and Pilate to the Sibillini Mountains; and traces of it can be found in certain common features which can be retrieved within the Cave's and Lake's traditions, just below the visible layers which stage a Sibyl of the Apennines and a first-century Roman prefect.

A thorough investigation of the available sources shows that common, original traits can be highlighted with relation to the two distinct tales which concern the Sibyl's Cave and the Lake of Pilate: both legends feature a number of shared aspects, namely the performance of necromantic rituals

at the two sites, the presence of legendary demons at the Cave and Lake, and devastation and tempests oddly arising from both places when necromancy is performed, as reported by many authors from the fourteenth century onwards. All listed aspects are thoroughly highlighted in literature and analysed in a specific, dedicated paper⁵.

The first and second shared aspects both point to some sort of magical, supernatural, legendary presences which may have found an abode under the Lake's icy waters and in the inner recesses of the Cave; the third trait, which relates to an odd, puzzling phenomenon originating from the Cave and Lake, i.e. the raising of tempests that would allegedly sweep and ravage the surrounding land, is a feature that has always been completely overlooked by scholars; on the contrary, it makes up a most significant piece of information when considered in the light of a comprehensive enquiry into the true origin of the legendary narratives which live in the Sibillini Mountain Range, as we will see later in this same paper.

Necromancy, demonic presence, raising of tempests; and a fourth common element is also extant: the marks of the presence of some sort of otherworldly passageway.



Fig. 6 - A miniature from a *Les Visions du chevalier Tondal*, a French manuscripted version of the *Vision of Tnugdalus* dating to 1475 and preserved at the Getty Museum

5 Sanvico M., *Sibillini Mountain Range: the legend before the legends* (2019), doi:10.5281/zenodo.4008256

Amid the most remarkable elements that the Sibillini Mountain's tradition received from earlier otherworldly accounts we find the magical 'test bridge'⁶, narrow as a razor's edge but widening itself when trodden by a true, righteous soul, a narrative item which is part of a most renowned literary tradition spanning through Europe across a thousand years, and throughout the Middle Ages; and the magical ever-slamming doors⁷, a metal device which is retrieved in a number of different forms in many chivalric romances and poems: a narrative legacy which comes from very antique times, and can ultimately be traced in Vergil's *Aeneid* (the gates of Tartarus) and Apollonius of Rhodes' *Argonautica* (the Symplegades).



Fig. 7 - A seventeenth-century print showing the ship Argo as it passes through the clashing rocks of Symplegades, preserved at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

6 Sanvico M., *Antoine de la Sale and the magical bridge concealed beneath Mount Sibyl* (2018), doi: 10.5281/zenodo.4007737

7 Sanvico M., *The literary truth about the magical doors in "The Paradise of Queen Sibyl"* (2018), doi: 10.5281/zenodo.4007743

These are literary items which seem to mark the presence of an otherwordly narrative. Has the Sibillini Mountain Range ever been considered as a possible passageway to some sort of Otherworld in a remote past?

The answer might be in the affirmative, because as we proceed further into our investigation we find a number of patent narrative links to other renowned tales concerning classical and medieval journeys into the Otherworld, including Vergil's *Aeneid*, with the Cumaean Hades; St. Patrick's Purgatory at Lough Derg, Ireland; and various early-Christian and medieval visions accounting for legendary visits to a realm of the dead or a demonic Hell, as we will see in the next paragraph.

7. *The Lake and Cave: entryways to an otherwordly realm*

We believe that the correct path we need to tread if we want to unveil the true core of the legends of the Sibillini Mountain Range leads to a specific, and somewhat unexpected, keyword: Otherworld⁸.

Otherworld: a most ancient dream that men have been dreaming since the earliest antiquity when confronting with life and death, mortality and the divine, and, after the rise of the Christian era, the ultimate truths of salvation and punishment.

At a closer scrutiny, the legendary tales of the Sibyl's Cave and the Lake of Pilate appear to be marked by a number of otherwordly narrative elements. In the account written by Antoine de la Sale, a test bridge of supernatural narrowness crosses a frightful abyss, but it gets wider as you tread on it, a typical contrivance dating back to Pope Gregory the Great's *Dialogues* and then present in a number of medieval visionary writings. Metal doors are also present, magically slamming day and night with a ceaseless crushing motion, a sort of device which is found in earlier chivalric works and is connected to otherwordly descriptions contained in the *Aeneid* and in the Greek myth of the Symplegades. Crystal rooms await the visitors in the Sibyl's Cave, the clear sign of an afterlife setting. And the Lake is openly

⁸ Sanvico M., *Sibillini Mountain Range, a cave and lake to the Otherworld* (2020), doi: 10.5281/zenodo.4008259, 4008261

indicated as an entrance to Hell in an excerpt drawn from Petrus Berchorius, written in the fourteenth century. The Lake itself is called 'Lake Avernus' in a manuscripted diagram dating to the sixteenth century, thus marking a remarkable narrative correspondance with the famous, classical entryway to the House of Hades set in Cumae.



Fig. 8 - The Lakes set in the Sibillini Mountain Range as depicted in the sixteenth-century diagram found in manuscript Vat Lat 5241 (folium 9v)

An entryway to the Otherworld: since time immemorial this has been an impious craving housed in the soul of men. A dream, a desire for a vision of the afterlife, a longing for prohibited communications with the dead, a quest for obtaining forbidden wishes. And the search for an ultimate truth.

A well-established Western tradition narrates the ghastly journeys performed by visionary heros in otherworldly realms. In classical antiquity, Ulysses and his visit to Hades, then Aeneas and his journey into the Avernus, with the Cumaean Sibyl as a guide. And subsequently, the visions of early Christianity: St. Paul and his visionary dreams of Hell, Pope St. Gregory I the Great with his soldier, the first in a series of knights travelling to the Otherworld. And, then again, Ireland, with its medieval descriptions of appalling journeys into the excruciating torments and punishments inflicted to the sinners: the *Vision of St. Adamnán*, the *Vision of Tnugdalus*, and the *Purgatory of St. Patrick*.

But only two are the journeys that are utterly special, the travels into the Otherworld par excellence: these are travels that are performed not in a mere vision, but in actual reality. With a man's physical body.

In the Western literary tradition, two are the most renowned places on Earth where to initiate such a horrifying travel. Two 'hot spots'. Two crevices pierced in the continuity of our ordinary world. Two fissures, dreadfully opened to legendary physical visions of a subterranean, chthonian Hell.

The first is at Cumae, by the Lake Avernus, in southern Italy. And the second is at the Purgatory of St. Patrick, Lough Derg, Co. Donegal, in northern Ireland.

At those two sites, living men could be so fool as to make an attempt at crossing the gates which must never be crossed. Two passageways to the Otherworld. Two entryways to an afterlife inhabited by legendary demonic powers.

The two traditional entrances were widely known throughout the Middle Ages and across the entire Europe. They had been the subjects of many literary works, from the *Aeneid* to the *Tractatus de Purgatorio Sancti Patricii* and the *Legenda Aurea*. People engaged themselves in difficult journeys as far as the two listed locations with the aim to see, and cross, the contact points between two worlds, which are normally separated: the world of the living, and the realm of the dead.



Fig. 9 - The Lake of Avernus, Cumae, Italy

By an odd chance, not due to any specific, traceable reason, both sites were indicated by the same pair of landmarks: a lake and a cave for both, two landforms which fully identified the two sites on the surface of Earth, and were known as such.

Why Cumae and Lough Derg? Why did passageways to the Otherworld happen to settle exactly in those two locations? Caves were in the volcanic soil of Cumae, that were filled to the vaulted ceilings with mephitic gases, which induced dreams, and sometimes a horrible death. A cave was also to be found at Lough Derg: on entering, sleep overwhelmed the already exhausted pilgrims, who then dreamt and had nightmares, possibly out of the lack of breathable air, and, maybe, owing to the presence of poisonous gases arising from the marshy ground.



Fig. 10 - Lough Derg, Co. Donegal, Ireland

Lake Avernus and its cave at Cumae. Lough Derg and its cave in Ireland. But a third set of landmarks, similarly made up by a Lake and a Cave, was possibly present in central Italy as well. It was the Sibyl's Cave and the Lake of Pilate in the Sibillini Mountain Range. Set only a few miles away from each other.

The same geographical configuration, as at Cumae and Lough Derg. A demonic presence registered and necromantic rituals being performed at this third Italian site, too. Otherworldly traits, which marked the two landforms amid the Apennines, too.

Many narrative resonances can be traced between the legendary tradition which lives amid the peaks of the Sibillini Mountain Range and Cumae on one side, and between the mountains of the Sibyl and Lough Derg on the other side.

In the fifteenth-century romance *Guerrino the Wretch*, it is the Apennine Sibyl herself, endowed with oracular powers as the Cumaean prophetess, who proclaims her identification with the Cumaean Sibyl in front of the valiant knight Guerrino: «I want you to know my name. I was called 'Cumaean' by the Romans for I was born in a town in the countryside whose name is Cumae». And this legendary link to the Cumaean Sibyl remains visible through the subsequent centuries: less than a hundred years later, the Cumaean origin of the Apennine Sibyl is mentioned by Ludovico Ariosto as well, with the following words included in his poem *Orlando Furioso*: «[...] the Cumæan Sibyl [...] who fled, in antiquity, to a Cavern in the territory of Norcia», with a further connection referenced in the same poetical work («... be it at the Lake Avernus, or at the caves by Norcia...»). A further, unequivocal links can be retrieved in the sixteenth-century diagram found in manuscript Vat Lat 5241, in which the Lake set in the Sibillini Mountain Range is called 'Lake Avernus'.

As to Lough Derg, narrative affinities can be manifestly found between Henry of Saltrey's *Tractatus de Purgatorio Sancti Patricii*, Jacobus de Varagine's *Legenda Aurea*, which its account of a descent into the Purgatory of St. Patrick, and *Guerrino the Wretch* with its visit to the Sibyl's abode, with the same invocations raised by the respective heroes to ask for divine protection, the same 'test bridge' staged by all three authors (and by Antoine de la Sale as well) in the subterranean regions, and a full section devoted by Andrea da Barberino to a journey into St. Patrick's Purgatory made by his knight Guerrino, immediately following his successful escape from the Sibyl's Cave. And another ghastly connection can be found, as we read the words contained in Gerald of Wales' *Topographia Hibernica* which describe the demons at the lake of St. Patrick's Purgatory ravaging the bodies of the unwary visitors: the same

treatment that awaits the men that are cast into the Lake of Norcia as depicted by Petrus Berchorius in his *Reductorium morale*.

Thus the many similarities which are manifestly found among the three sites, Cumae, Lough Derg and the Sibillini Mountain Range, all including a lake and a cave and a local otherworldly tradition, appear to have fostered many narrative contaminations, mainly from the two most famous ones to the less known Apennine site. Across many centuries, local residents, wayfarers, oral storytellers and men of letters spread the word about this amazing Lake and Cave concealed amid the ridges of the central Apennines, in Italy, by adding to their wondrous accounts a number of narrative elements taken from the famed legendary tales of the Cumaean Sibyl and St. Patrick's Purgatory, also marked by lakes and caves.

The nature of this connection between the three sites is merely narrative, as no actual, specific historical link has ever existed between the Sibyl's Cave and the Lake of Pilate, on one side, and the legendary tales concerning Cumae and the Purgatory of St. Patrick, on the other. The three locations were too far from each other to develop any common, coordinated legendary framework. Their respective lores were totally independent from one another. Just an overall affinity, though patently manifest, linked the three places together: presence of a lake, presence of a cave, and the existence of a legendary physical passageway to an Otherworld, which attracted visitors, be they pilgrims or necromancers.

So all the clues seem to indicate that in this third, specific location of Europe, amid the Sibillini Mountain Range, by a Lake and a Cave, mortal beings like Aeneas, like Owein, may have made actual attempts to access a different world, normally forbidden to the living: a realm of dead souls, a kingdom which was set under the rule of non-human entities, of a divine, terrifying nature. A chthonian, subterranean Otherworld.

In this promising research framework, a number of questions can be stated: why should this Apennine site have been considered as a further entryway to the Otherworld? If the above assumption were true, what kind of Otherworld was this? What sort of dreadful dreams did men conceive by the Lake and Cave set on the mountains of the Apennines, in central Italy?

A passageway to some sort of demonic presence. An access that was to be unlocked by means of necromantic rituals. A point of contact with a subterranean Otherworld. A 'hot spot', a crevice drilled into the mountains to establish an appalling communication with the chthonian powers beneath. A break in the continuum of our ordinary world, providing an access to a forbidden, inhuman realm.

«Descendunt in infernum viventes»: «they descend alive into Hell», so wrote Petrus Berchorius in his fourteenth-century *Reductorium Morale*, quoting from the Book of Psalms. He was writing about the Lake of Norcia, in the Sibillini Mountain Range⁹.



Fig. 11 - A descent into Hell, the Lake of Norcia, as taken from the *Reductorium Morale* by Petrus Berchorius (manuscript Latin 16786, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, folium 301v)

So, the resulting, far-reaching assumption which arises from our research is that a legendary passageway to some sort of Otherworld might have been possibly situated, by an antique tradition that left faint traces in the known literature, among the peaks of central Apennines.

This is the basis of our new supposition: the possible existence of a legendary credence concerning an entryway to a mythical Otherworld in central Italy. One of a most terrific, dreadful sort. A crevice in our world, opened in the mountainous ridges out of sheer terror. Terror for one own's life. Terror for the fate of one's family. Terror for the ruin of one's land.

Because according to the new conjecture proposed by the author of the present paper, the nature of this sibilline Otherworld is closely linked to the intrinsic nature of this Apennine territory, and to a very specific, blood-curdling word. A word which has always unleashed the deepest fears of human soul, since the earliest antiquity.

And this word is earthquake.

⁹ Sanvico M., *The Lake of Pilatus in an antique manuscript: Pierre Bersuire and the fourteenth-century dark renown of Norcia's lake* (2018), doi: 10.5281/zenodo.4007806

8. Earthquakes as the key to legends

Following a thorough perusal of the available literary sources, a significant connection can be established between earthquakes and the local legendary tradition which inhabits the Sibillini Mountains, in the Italian Apennines¹⁰.



Fig. 12 - The hamlet of Castelluccio di Norcia sitting on hill before Mount Vettore, wrecked by the earthquakes in 2016

The Sibillini Mountain Range is a land of mighty earthquakes. Its peculiar seismic character, marked by the presence of active, colliding fault lines, is prominent when compared to other areas in Italy. The region was struck by destructive earthquakes in 2016; seismic devastations occurred in 1979, 1859, 1730, 1703 (one of the most powerful tremblors ever occurred in Italy), 1328; references to earlier frightful blows are retrieved in Roman literature. The effects of historical earthquakes can be seen today on the very face of the Sibillini mountains, including the large scar that runs

¹⁰ Sanvico M., *Sibillini Mountain Range, the chthonian legend* (2020), doi: 10.5281/zenodo.4008263, 4008265

across the western side of Mount Vettore. And several physical effects were produced on the land and patently made visible by the 2016 seismic shocks, with the appearance of fractures, holes, displacements across the versants and valleys. In addition, seismic tremors always accompany local people's everyday life, with small shocks and short sequences of faint tremblors occurring all year long, easily perceived in the stillness of the night. And the acoustic effects of the most powerful earthquakes, like the one that occurred in 2016, are utterly hair-raising: according to local witnesses, the very mountains appear to scream and yell as a wounded, demonic beast.



Fig. 13 - The giant fault line which runs across Mount Vettore

In modern times scientific knowledge supports us in controlling our fears of men living in the twenty-first century. On the contrary, across the Iron Age, no rational knowledge, no scientific explanation was available to the local populations of Sabines and Picenes to account for earthquakes and the terror unleashed by land shaking. They could only resort to myth, with the generation of appropriate legendary narratives. So a conjecture can be put forth that some rituals might have been performed at the two geographical landmarks, the Cave on the top of Mount Sibyl and the Lake set within the glacial cirque of Mount Vettore, not far from one another, in a tentative — and actually hopeless — effort carried out by local populations to establish a dreadful communication link with the mighty chthonian potencies, of a demonic nature, who were concealed beneath the ground: fiendish beings who supposedly lived under the mountains and, in people's opinion, possibly presided over the earthquakes.

Archeological campaigns carried out in the Italian provinces of Umbria, Marche and Latium during the last thirty years have shown that Sabines and Picenes used to dedicate highland shrines — small sites marked by the presence of votive deposits and placed in selected locations on hilltops, mountain-sides, water springs and along main trails — to the worship of local deities: a specific mark of the culture and territorial presence of the populations which inhabited the Apennines during the Iron Age.



Fig. 14 - Small bronze statues of warriors dating to the fifth century B.C. found in the votive deposit at the highland shrine of Ancarano of Norcia (Vatican Museums)

So it can be conjecturally envisaged that highland shrines might have been established at the Lake and Cave too, on the elevated locations where Mount Sibyl and Mount Vettore raise their cliffs. Offerings and other rituals could have been performed at both sites in ancient times.



Fig. 15 - The crowned peak of Mount Sibyl

It can be imagined that the elderly in local communities possibly used to bequeath to the younger generations a collection of tales about their forefathers, who had been struck by the earthquakes in earlier times and had seen the mountains yell and rupture. They had ascended the cliffs to implore the mercy of the mountains themselves, the abode where the demons lived. They knew that some sort of fiendish being or beings resided under the rocky peaks. And the Lake and Cave, both being impressive landmarks set amid elevated crests, were possibly considered as suitable points of access to the demonic Otherworld: locations where a supernatural communication between human beings and vicious deities was reputed to be conceivable.

The whole set of religious credences concerning the earthquakes was possibly wiped out from the region by the subsequent Roman conquest (third century B.C.). Romans basically embraced Aristotle's prescientific explanation on the origin of earthquakes, an antique vision that established a connection between subterranean winds, storms and seismic waves.

According to Aristotles, and then Lucretius, Seneca and Pliny, winds circulated in the hidden hollows of the earth. Sometimes, winds exerted a mighty pressure on their subterranean abodes, and their oscillating motion generated seismic effects on the surface; sometimes, they even succeeded

in escaping their underground prisons, so giving way to powerful storms which contributed to the overall destruction of the land above.



Fig. 16 - Eerie scenery at today's Lakes of Pilate

So while the men of the Iron Age who lived amid the Apennines had confronted with the frightful seismic waves which recurrently struck their territory by possibly imagining a ghastly dream of demonic gods lurking beneath their mountains, the Greeks and Romans followed an utterly different path, impervious as it was in the lack of any solid scientific foundations, and yet based on fully natural, worldly considerations, with no need to introduce any god or demon: a path that will eventually lead the culture of the Western world to modern science as we know it today. A path that also led, in Roman and medieval times, to the total abandonment of any previous mythical explanation of tremblors as possibly caused by demonic gods supposedly living beneath the ground.



Fig. 17 - Earthquakes and winds from Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis historia* (from the first printed edition, Venice, 1469), p. 20

Memory of all conjectural Sabine and Picene traditions got lost; however, the mythical might of the Sibillini Mountains, fuelled by recursive earthquakes, seems to have persisted across the centuries, attracting extraneous legendary tales with a demonic penchant (Sibyl, Pilate) to these remote peaks. And magical tempests, the classical explanation for earthquakes as found in classical authors, and still associated with both the Cave and the Lake in the renowned medieval legendary complex, might be just the faint legacy of an Iron Age legendary structure which has gone totally lost: the vanishing smoke of a gun that is no longer there.

9. Sibillini Mountain Range: through the narrative layers to the legend's core

The final outcome of our investigation of the legendary tradition which lives amid the cliffs of the Sibillini Mountain Range, a remote, craggy territory

set in the Italian central Apennines, is the identification of a potential sedimentation of many different narrative layers.

Our primary starting point was the legendary tale about an Apennine Sibyl. We saw that this Sibyl of the Apennines seems to have come out at the beginning of the fifteenth century, as a shining, lonely star, from a sort of echoing void, an impenetrable mist, from which she began her successful travel into the subsequent ages. No mention of her dwelling amid the Sibillini Mountain Range can be retrieved in earlier centuries.

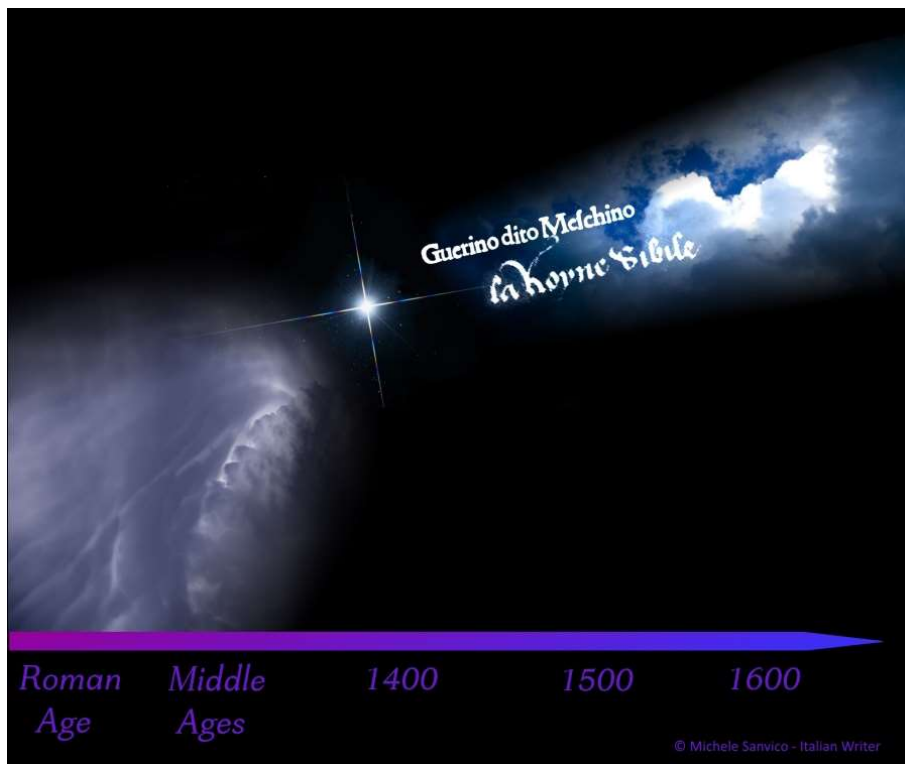


Fig. 18 - The image we presented in the final paragraph of our previous article *The Apennine Sibyl: a journey into history in search of the oracle*, with the Sibyl emerging from the mists of time at the beginning of the fifteenth century (composite image by the author)

So the question was: has that Sibyl really journeyed a long way across the centuries and through that inscrutable fog, after having started her travel in ancient times and having remained unseen until she emerged in the fifteenth century? Or, was she the more recent product of some strange condensation of that thick, whirling mist, in which her myth took form not in antiquity, but just very close to the beginning of the fifteenth century?

Did the Apennine Sibyl arise from the condensation of any sort of peculiar nature of that place, the Sibillini Mountain Range, having been subsequently clad with additional mythical themes taken from other tales and stories?

As our research progressed, we found out that we were on the right track. In the light of a closer scrutiny, the true lineage of the Apennine Sibyl started to appear: a Sibyl that comes out from a long, antique tradition concerning Morgan le Fay and the chivalric tales which are part of the Matter of Britain, with the character of 'Sebile', friend and companion to Morgan, filling the void in the centuries which precede the fourteenth.

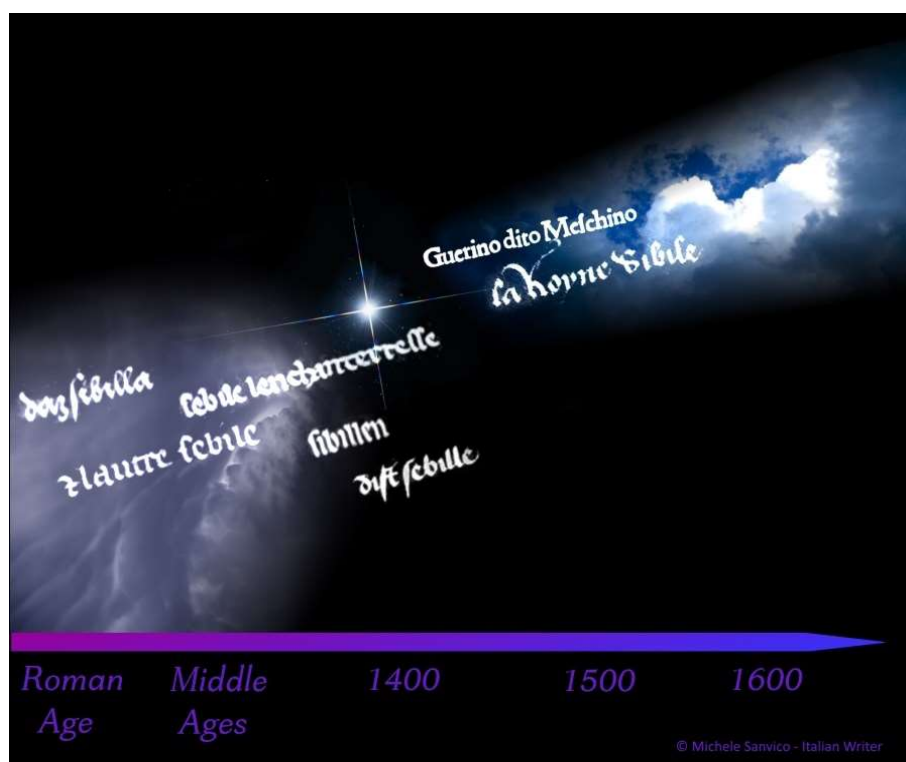


Fig. 19 - The previous image now completed with the footsteps left by the Sibyl as Morgan's companion (composite image by the author)

So the methodology to be applied in the unfolding of the mysterious origin of the Sibillini Mountain Range's legendary tradition became clear: all literary additions conferred to Cave's and Lake's legendary tales throughout the centuries were to be identified and removed, so as to take

off all the concentric layers and sheltering leaves that encircle and suffocate the true mythical nucleus, with the aim of cleaning the original mythical core by wiping out the narrative elements that have been added with time to the real story: narrative elements that were borrowed from several different mythical tales across the centuries and the millennia.

In the following diagram, we set out the amazing, fascinating superposition of narrative layers that insists on the original legendary core which seems to live in the Sibillini Mountain Range, a core which in our research is conjecturally connected to the peculiar seismic character of this territory.

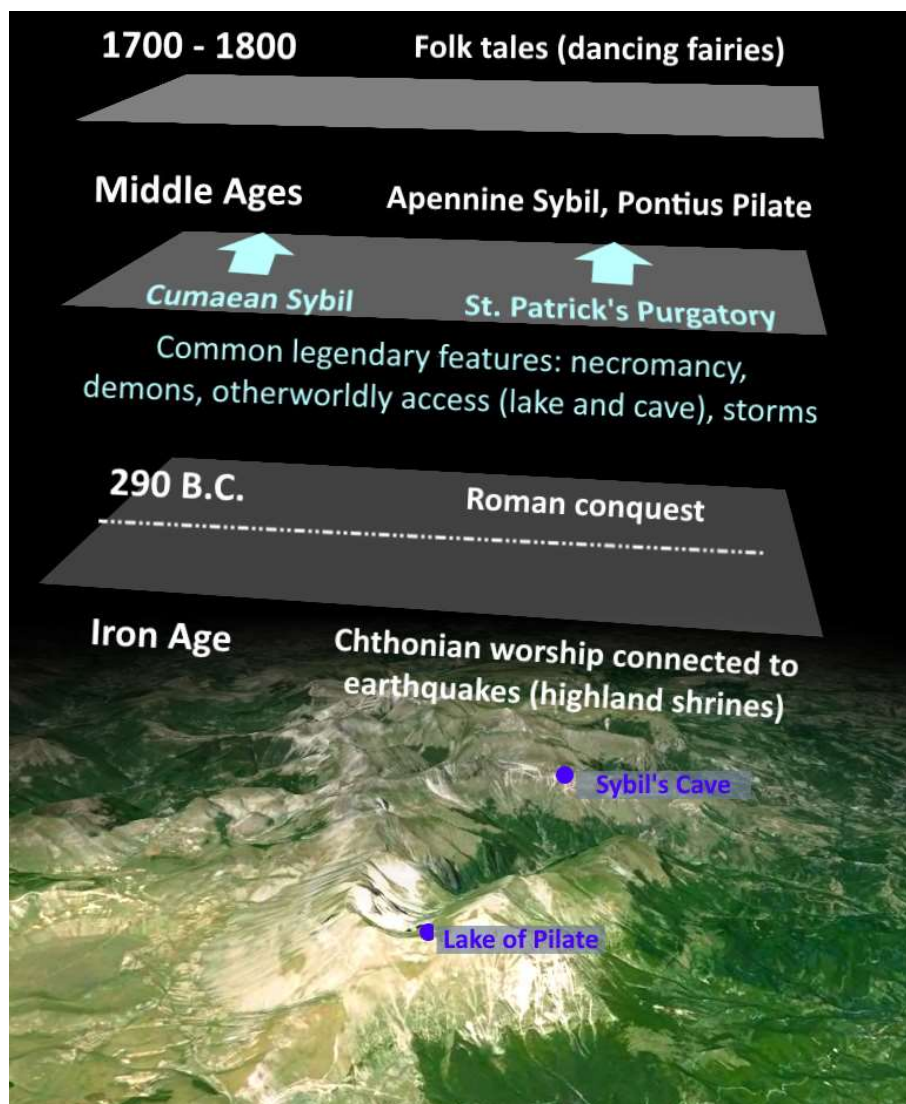


Fig. 20 - Sibillini Mountain Range, the superposition of legendary layers as identified and conjectured in the research elaborated by Michele Sanvico in recent years

In our exploration of the legends of the Sibillini Mountain Range, we have stumbled upon layers and layers of additional material: literary elements pertaining to different legendary traditions and tales which seem to have been superimposed to a basic mythical core connected to the presence of a sinister Cave and Lake in the area of the Sibillini Mountains.

The first, top-level layer pertains to the local, naive folk tales concerning dancing fairies with goat-like legs who used to dance at night with the local peasants and shepherds: simple tales, not dissimilar from many other narratives which can be found in the Italian Alps or other areas of the Apennine ridge, and were reported to philologists Gaston Paris and Pio Rajna during their visit to the Sibillini Mountain Range by the poor inhabitants of Castelluccio di Norcia and Pretare in 1897.

Beneath this very simple sort of local tales, of more recent origin and known to local residents even in our present age, we find the medieval legendary layers concerning the presence of a dwelling for an Apennine Sibyl and a burial place for Roman prefect Pontius Pilate.

As we could see earlier in this same papers, the presence of a medieval legendary layer enshrouding the narratives about the Sibyl's Cave and the Lake of Pilate just cannot be denied: the touch of the characters belonging to the Matter of Britain, Morgan le Fay and Sebile, is manifest on the Sibyl's hidden realm, making it a superimposed narrative which is derived from a northern-European legendary tradition concerning magical castles and mountains, and featuring as main characters the necromantic figures of King Arthur's half-sister and her companion Sebile; and, in a same way, the main elements of Pontius Pilate's medieval tale are patently visible, being manifestly this second legend an Italian version of the well-known medieval narrative on Pontius Pilate and his cursed corpse, a tale which has established an abode into a small Lake nested within the crests of Mount Vettore. Both tales are to be considered as extraneous, overlaid legends of foreign origin which found, for reasons connected to the necromantic traits of the place, a suitable abode in this specific area.

When we stop focusing on the figures of the Apennine Sibyl and Pontius Pilate, both belonging to a lore which is extraneous to this portion of the Italian territory, we begin to be able to consider different aspects of the legends of the Cave and Lake. Aspects that they have in common. Specific

traits that both of them seem to share. Following the identification of the listed additional legendary layers, we could easily spot the subsequent layer: a layer which seems to point to the original traits that, according to the available sources, mark the tales of the Sibyl's Cave and Pilate's Lake. Both legends feature a number of common aspects, including the performance of necromantic rituals, the presence of legendary fiendish beings, and devastations arising from both sites.

And another common trait marks both sites sitting in the middle of the Sibillini Mountain Range: an otherworldly character, which is found in literature when passageways to the a realm of dead or demons are described, from Vergil's *Aeneid* to the *Visio Sancti Pauli Apostoli*, the *Dialogues* written by Pope St. Gregory the Great, and up to the visits to the Christian Hell elaborated by the Irish tradition, with the legend of St. Patrick's Purgatory as the culminating point of a narrative path which has lasted for more than a thousand years.

What is to be retrieved beneath this ghastly, obscure layer?



Fig. 21 - Italy and the Sibillini Mountain Range, a portion of the Apennine ridge

According to the original conjecture set out by Michele Sanvico, we possibly find the primeval layer, the legendary core which was so powerful as to attract to the peaks of the Sibillini Mountain Range a number of different tales from various sources across Europe. As we explained earlier

in the present paper, this mighty core might be connected to the peculiar seismic character of this portion of land, and with the conjectural presence, in times as far in the past as the Iron Age, of a demonic worship linked to earthquakes and the way to placate them. A founding layer that got lost already in Roman times, with their prescientific explanations for the tremblings of the earth, which were reputed to be caused by the pressure exerted by subterranean winds, sometimes erupting on the surface in the form of storms.

Layer by layer, leave by leave, we have unfolded the antique literary envelope which for centuries has concealed the true likeness of the Apennine Sibyl. A disentanglement process that started from the additional layers of medieval origin which narrate of a Sibyl and a Roman prefect, and then proceeded back in time, to the real, deepest core of the legend.

In the above framework, the goal to uncover the true essence of the myth of the Apennine Sibyl, the inner core of her ancient legend, seems to have been possibly achieved. We have removed all literary additions conferred to her legendary tale across the centuries. We have taken off all the concentric layers that encircle and suffocate her true mythical nucleus, the way a rose is deprived of the outer petals which shelter the fragrant redolence of its central heart. We have cleaned her figure by wiping out the narrative elements that have been added with time to her story, borrowed from several different mythical tales. We have stripped all her disguises off so as to be able to see her true, antique semblance.

For the first time after centuries, through a cloudy and apparently inscrutable fog, consisting of foreign tales which tell stories of Sibyls and Roman prefects, we have started to get glimpses of the true, common core of both legends. A core that is possibly connected to the deepest fears of human soul: the fear of death, the fear of chthonian potencies, the fear of earthquakes.

In 2019, three years after a most destructive seismic wave which struck the Sibillini Mountain Range and its inhabitants, a man was interviewed by ANSA Italian news agency. He was an elderly man who used to live in Castelluccio di Norcia, a settlement that was entirely demolished by the terrific earthquakes.

And the words he uttered, though spoken by contemporary lips, were thoroughly impressive:

«... Suddenly, a Fiend arrives from underneath», he said, «and tears down everything» (in the original Italian words: «... poi arriva il Diavolo sotto, e sfascia tutto»).

A Fiend arrives, from beneath. And devastates the whole land.

The Iron Age, in the Sibillini Mountain Range, suddenly seems to reach out to us through an unfathomable span of time: on the eerie, divine, terrifying waves of earthquakes.

Michele Sanvico

MICHELE SANVICO

THE APENNINE SIBYL

A MYSTERY AND A LEGEND

SIBILLINI MOUNTAIN RANGE, THE CHTHONIAN LEGEND¹



PART 1

1. Unveiling the true origin of the myth

Italy, the Apennines. The Sibillini Mountain Range, a portion of the long mountainous chain which extends across the entire peninsula. Mount Sibyl and a Cave on its mountaintop. Mount Vettore and a Lake nested in the great mountain's glacial cirque. Two legendary tales, the Sibyl's Cave and the Lake of Pilate. Centuries and centuries of visits, literary narratives and explorations.

The time has come now to address the most important, most critical issue connected to the fastnesses of sheer rock which raise at the center of Italy,

¹ Released on March 25th 2020 on <https://www.researchgate.net/> and <https://www.academia.edu/>

between the provinces of Umbria and Marche. An issue that concerns the origin of the legends which inhabit the Sibillini Mountain Range.

We are about to unveil an astounding, unprecedented conjecture which will foster a new and ground-breaking understanding of the legendary structure which established itself in the very middle of these mountainous ridges, and gave origin to the myths of the Apennine Sibyl and the burial place of Pontius Pilate, which were subsequently included and elaborated in the fifteenth-century works written by Andrea da Barberino and Antoine de la Sale: *Guerrino the Wretch* and *The Paradise of Queen Sibyl*.

The momentous result we are going to illustrate in the present work is the outcome of a long research effort which has lasted more than two years. The first papers on the Sibillini Mountain Range's legendary heritage (*The cave of the Apennine Sibyl: what we know*, *World of the Sibyl: the Italian Apennines and the Sibillini Mountain Range*, *Apennine Sibyl: the bright side and the dark side*) were released in the last quarter of 2017. With the subsequent papers (*The Knights of the Sibyl - Guerrino and his forefathers: Huon of Bordeaux*, *The Knights of the Sibyl - Guerrino and his forefathers: Huon d'Auvergne*, *St. Patrick's Purgatory, a source for Guerrino and Antoine de La Sale*), we began to investigate the first clues which appeared to point to the potential sources for various themes and topics which are contained in Andrea da Barberino's romance and Antoine de la Sale's account.

Then we identified two specific items which were patently drawn from earlier legendary traditions: the 'test bridge', as detailed in a further paper (*Antoine de La Sale and the magical bridge concealed beneath Mount Sibyl*) and the ever-slamming magical doors, whose lineage was traced in a subsequent article (*The literary truth about the magical doors in 'The Paradise of Queen Sibyl'*).

From then on, the way was open to a new approach to the philological research into the whole legendary heritage which inhabited the Sibillini Mountain Range. It was becoming clear that the place was marked by an ancient necromantic hue (*Pope Pius II Piccolomini's original letter on the Sibyl's cave published*, *The Lake of Pilatus in an antique manuscript: Pierre Bersuire*), and that no tradition dating to classical antiquity had ever established any connection between one of the ancient Sibyls and the more

recent Apennine Sibyl (*A mysterious quote from «Bishop Primus Cambilunensis» unveiled, A Sibyl called Cimmerian: exploring the potential link to the Apennine Sibyl, The Apennine Sibyl: a journey into history in search of the oracle*).

But the chasm was finally filled up in the course of the year 2019. With two landmark papers (*Birth of a Sibyl: the medieval connection* and *A legend for a Roman prefect: the Lakes of Pontius Pilate*) we showed that the Apennine Sibyl was a descendant of two literary characters which belonged to the Matter of Britain and the Arthurian cycle: Morgan le Fay and her necromantic companion Sebile, who both appear in many chivalric romances and poems, written well ahead of the fifteenth century; in addition to that, we fully retraced the legendary tale concerning the fate of Pontius Pilate, the Roman prefect who plays a major part in the Gospels, and we proved that the myth that narrates of his many burial places, scattered across various sites in Europe, has never had nothing to do with the Sibillini Mountain Range.

Following the identification of the listed additional legendary layers, in a further paper (*Sibillini Mountain Range: the legend before the legends*) we were able to focus on the original traits that, according to the available sources, mark the tales of the Sibyl's Cave and Pilate's Lake: both legends feature a number of common aspects, including the performance of necromantic rituals, the presence of legendary fiendish beings, and devastations arising from both sites.

But a fourth shared aspect could be highlighted, too: that was a common otherworldly character, which we investigated in detail in the paper we recently published (*Sibillini Mountain Range, a cave and lake to the Otherworld*). In this article, we pointed to the presence of specific narrative elements that are usually found in literary works that depict visionary travels to otherworldly regions. We then retraced the main literary instances of the visionary narratives on the Otherworld in the Western culture, from Homer's *Odyssey* to Vergil's *Aeneid* and then from Pope St. Gregory the Great to the visionary dreams originated in medieval Ireland, and up to the legend of the Purgatory of St. Patrick.

In that same paper, we highlighted the strong literary links which can be retrieved between the legendary tales of the Sibyl's Cave and the Lake of

Pilate, in the Sibillini Mountain Range, and two most famous and successful narratives which depict two specific journeys to otherworldly regions: the legend of the Cumaean Sibyl, with the Lake of Avernus and the gloomy cave providing an access to the realm of the dead, and the legend of St. Patrick's Purgatory, featuring another lake, Lough Derg, and another sinister cave. We noted that recurrent contaminations of narrative themes are present, which link the three different, and substantially unrelated, legends, in the form of a visible transfer of narrative topics and situations from the illustrious and widely-known Cumaean and Irish tales, to an Italian tale which appears to feature some narrative and geographical traits in common, though in a different setting and despite its total independence from the legendary narratives of Lough Derg and Cumae.

The resulting, far-reaching assumption which arised from that research work was that a legendary passageway to some sort of Otherworld might have been possibly situated, by an antique tradition that left some faint traces in the known literature, among the peaks of the central Apennines. And the landmarks to this mythical entryway would be associated, just like in Cumae and Lough Derg, to the same kind of landforms, a lake and a cave: they both would mark a sort of legendary 'hot spot' on the surface of Earth, where the mythical passageway would be located.

In this promising research framework, a number of questions were still left unanswered: why should this Apennine site have been considered as a further entryway to the Otherworld? If our assumption was true, what kind of Otherworld was this? What sort of dreadful dreams did men conceive by the Lake and Cave set on the mountains of the Apennines, in central Italy?

What legend did live in this area before the medieval legendary tales about a Sibyl and Pontius Pilate settled themselves there?

In the present, conclusive research paper, we are going to outline the character of the Otherworld that, according to our literary, philological and scientific investigation, was possibly believed to exist beneath the elevated ridges of the Sibillini Mountain Range.

We want to strongly stress the fact that the conjecture we are about to state on the legendary tale concerning the Sibillini Mountain Range is to be considered as a supposition founded on scientific considerations and based

on as fully scientific approach, as it is not tainted by any whimsical, exotic assumptions (like aliens from outer space, Templar conspiracies, esoterism, astrology, alchemy, star alignments, geomagnetics, rhabdomancy and other arcane and/or pseudoscientific concepts).

Nonetheless, the hypothesis we are going to set down in the present research paper is basically a conjecture, scientific as it claims to be: it is to be considered as a proposed solution to the legendary riddle connected to the presence of amazing myths set amid the Sibillini Mountain Range. As such, our conjecture can certainly be the subject of critical analysis for a thorough evaluation of its reasonableness and plausibility, and should undergo a further, qualified assessment on its actual validity, an assessment to be carried out by interested scholars and researchers.

So let's start to build our solution to the riddle: a legendary Otherworld imagined by men in antiquity, a chthonian realm housed beneath the fastnesses of the Sibillini Mountain Range, in central Italy.



Fig. 1 - Italy and the Sibillini Mountain Range, a portion of the Apennine ridge

However, before illustrating our conclusions, we want to present the reader with a summary of the conjectures that have been elaborated, across more than one hundred fifty years, by philologists, researchers and even novelists and essayists on the potential origin of the legendary tales connected to the Sibyl's Cave and the Lake of Pilate. We will see that we will be going

through the most variegated hypotheses, speculations and surmises, in a deliberate and somewhat frantic effort to unveil the true reason for the peculiar character that these mountains seem to manifest across the centuries, with a remarkable presence of astounding legendary narratives whose origin seems to shun all attempts at gaining any further understanding of them.

An understanding that we will finally reach by setting down our own conjecture on the presence of a legendary Otherworld.

But first, let's start our travel into the many suppositions that have already been proposed in the past centuries and decades.

2. The long hunt for the truth

2.1 Nineteenth-century scholars in search of the origin of the myth

After the French Revolution and with the advent of an era of technical and scientific advancement, the Sibillini Mountain Range and its weird legends were not at the centre of any widespread attention anymore. Yet, despite the scarce renown of both the remote Italian mountains and the bizarre tales which lived in them, a handful of academics and scholars, especially of Italian origin or established in Italy, still retained an interest for these curious narratives.

The earliest attempt at confronting with the possible origin of the legendary tale about the Sibyl's Cave on philological grounds was made by a German diplomat and scholar, Alfred von Reumont, Secretary of the Prussian Legation in Florence and Rome at the middle of the nineteenth century. In 1880 he published his *Essays on history and literature*, written in Italian (*Saggi di storia e letteratura*), in which he reported the text of a speech delivered in Florence nine years earlier, whose title was *The Mount of Venus in Italy (Il Monte di Venere in Italia)*. For the first time, after more than two centuries of neglect, the Apennine Sibyl was the subject of a scientifically-oriented analysis:

«The valley of the river Nera, whose main settlement is Norcia, lies on the northern portion of the plateau where Rieti is found [...] To no avail one may ask from where this necromantic fame, still partly alive, was attached to this remote town hidden amid these remote mountains. [...] Neither can I find the origin of the name of Mount Sibyl [...] The locations portrayed by Vergil [...] have nothing to do with these places».

[In the original Italian text: «La Valle della Nera, il cui capoluogo è Norcia, giace a settentrione dell'altopiano reatino [...] Invano si chiede donde a quel paese solitario e tra' monti nascosto [...] sia venuta questa fama di negromanzia, nemmeno oggi spenta. [...] Non trovo nemmeno donde derivi il nome di Monte della Sibilla [...] I luoghi di Virgilio [...] non hanno a che fare con queste località»].

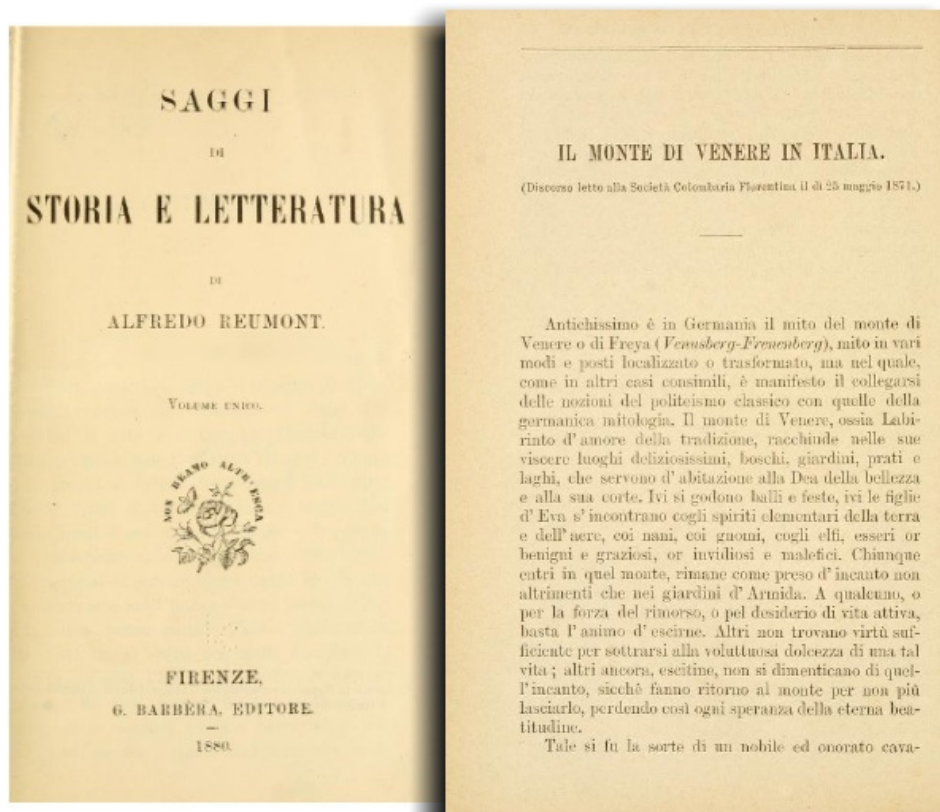


Fig. 2 - Alfred von Reumont's essay on Mount Sibyl, from his volume *Saggi di storia e letteratura* (Florence, 1880), p. 378-394

Reumont adds that in the territory of Norcia also lies a Lake, which «the local people names after Pilate. It is believe to be bottomless, thus providing an access to the netherworld» («presso il popolo gli è rimasto il

nome di Pilato, e la credenza di non aver fondo, ma di dar adito al mondo sotterraneo»): a first hint to the chthonian and otherworldly character of the Lake, a topic that we are addressing in this very paper.

But German-born Reumont, who in his article did not miss to mention the many literary references to the Sibyl's Cave and the Pilate's Lake, including in his list *Guerrino the Wretch*, Antoine de la Sale, Leandro Alberti, Arnold of Harff and many others we already know, could not but conclude his speech with a warm exhortation addressed to all scholars of Italy:

«I now end my brief remarks. I will be glad if my words will prove capable to invite an Italian scholar to confront with this topic, which still needs a thorough insight of the local lore and traditions».

[In the original Italian text: «Con questo pongo fine ai presenti cenni. Sarò lieto se ad essi toccherà la sorte d'invitare un erudito Italiano ad occuparsi di un argomento, il quale non si potrà pienamente illustrare se non col diligente confronto delle tradizioni locali»].

More than twenty years later, his invitation will be finally accepted. In 1893, Arturo Graf, an Italian man of letters and professor at the University of Turin, published his *Miti, leggende e superstizioni del medioevo* (*Myths, legends and superstitions of Middle Ages*), in which he included an essay on *A mountain of Pilate in Italy*.

What does Arturo Graf say about the Sibillini Mountain Range? In his article, he briefly recounts the legendary setting which enshrouded that portion of the Apennines; however, he cannot but state his inability to propose any reasonable conjecture about the origin for the two almost-forgotten legends:

«The mounts and the lake of Norcia had an ancient fiendish and magical reputation known throughout Italy. Here was a Sibyl's cave, which gave rise to legends that are very similar to those originated in Germany about the Mount of Venus; in addition to that, here also arrived the legend of Pilate [...] When the legend of Pilate in Norcia was born, I cannot tell; neither would I affirm that some elements or suggestions may have come from beyond the Alps. This legend has now lost all of its former renown, and only scarce remnants of it can be traced among the local people [...]

Very few men now know of the presence of a mount and lake of Pilate set amid the Apennines, in the very heart of Italy».

[In the original Italian text: «I monti e il lago di Norcia avevano un'antica riputazione diabolica e magica diffusa per tutta l'Italia. Quivi ponevasi un antro della Sibilla, che diè luogo a leggende molto simili a quelle sorte in Germania intorno al Monte di Venere; quivi ancora si raccolse la leggenda di Pilato [...] Quando la leggenda norcina di Pilato sia nata io non so, né vorrei affermare che qualche concorso di elementi o qualche suggestione non le sieno venuti d'oltr'alpe. Essa ha perduto ormai ogni celebrità, e appena ne rimase qualche vestigio tra il popolo di quella provincia [...] sono ben pochi coloro che conoscano l'esistenza di un monte e di un lago di Pilato fra gli Apennini, nel cuore d'Italia»].

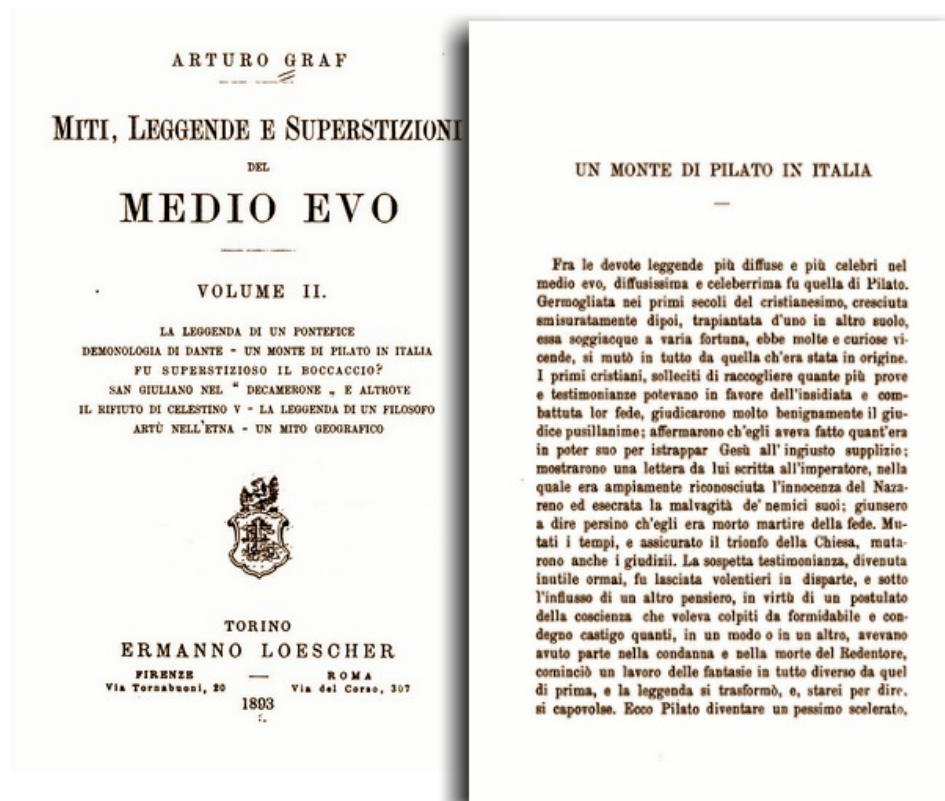


Fig. 3 - Arturo Graf's article on the Lake of Pilate, from his book *Miti, leggende e superstizioni del medioevo* (Turin, 1893), p. 143-166

Arturo Graf cannot but register the fact that the legends concerning the presence of Pontius Pilate and a Sibyl in this mountainous region of Italy are just a pale shadow of what they used to be in past centuries. In the

additional notes to his article, he reports the words written to him in a letter by Vincenzo Ghinassi, a local scholar and teacher at the Regio Liceo in Spoletium:

«The fanciful and sinister legends of ancient times are losing their colors and vividness, they are progressively being forgotten by the populace, and they are leaving their ultimate abode, which used to be in the most secluded valleys [...] Amid the people the recollection of the ancient legend has gone lost, and as an explanation to that name [Pilate] a new fancy arose, though rather awkward in my opinion».

[In the original Italian text: «Le immaginose e paurose leggende di altri tempi si vanno scolorando, attenuando e perdendo anche tra i volghi, e nelle più recondite vallate, loro ultimo asilo [...] Tra il popolo s'è perduto il ricordo della leggenda antica, e che a spiegar quel nome un'altra immaginazione si produsse, assai poco acconcia, a dire vero»].

1865, p. 593. Da una lettera, con cui il prof. Vincenzo Ghinassi del R. Liceo di Spoleto gentilmente rispondeva ad alcune mie domande, rilevo che un picciolo stagno presso Norcia serba ancora il nome di Lago di Pilato, ma che tra il popolo s'è perduto il ricordo della leggenda antica, e che a spiegar quel nome un'altra immaginazione si produsse, assai poco acconcia, a dir vero. " Quando accadde in Giudea „, così il prof. Ghinassi, " il grande avvenimento della crocifissione di Cristo, i montanari che passavano per quel luogo vedevano deserta la grotta della Sibilla, l'acqua del lago rosseggiante come per sangue, ed inoltre intorno al laghetto, da allora in poi, germogliò una pianticella, le cui foglie hanno sembianza di due mani riunite per il dosso, laonde la fantasia del volgo vede raffigurate in esse le mani del Redentore, congiunte insieme

Fig. 4 - The information provided by a local scholar on the faint traces of the legend which were still present amid the populace at the end of the nineteenth century, as reported by Arturo Graf in his *Miti, leggende e superstizioni del medioevo* (Turin, 1893), p. 165

Ghinassi, as quoted by Arturo Graf, reports that the simple minds of the inhabitants of that region were just naively impressed by a number of evocative factors: the deserted Cave of the Sibyl; the reddish waters of the Lake at sunset; the presence of an unspecified weed in the form of human hands, like the nailed hands of Jesus Christ; and the Lake itself being inhabited by «fish of an odd shape» («pesci di forme stranissime»),

possibly an early observation of the famous *Chirocephalus Marchesonii*, the tiny shrimp that lives in it, «a faint recollection of the antique demons» («una reminiscenza affievolita degli antichi demonii»).

So the first efforts carried out by a handful of scholars to explain the origin of the legends inhabiting the Sibillini Mountain Range could only lead to a tentative, preliminary conclusion: nothing was known about those myths, because no scientific study had ever addressed this once-known and now-neglected legendary topics.

A new research effort was needed, and based on an a new scientific methodology. Time had come for illustrious, celebrated philologists to climb the sheer slopes of Mount Vettore and Mount Sibyl, in the Sibillini Mountain Range.

2.2 *Two prominent philologists amid the Apennines*

«One of the peaks of the central Apennines still today is called Mount Sibyl, and the whole massif encircling it received the name of Sibillini Mountain Range [...] Not far from there you also find the 'Lake of Pilate'».

[In the original French text: «On appelle encore aujourd'hui Monte della Sibilla un des sommets de l'Apennin central, et tout le petit groupe qui l'entoure [...] en a reçu le nom de Monti Sibillini. [...] Non loin de là se trouve également le 'lac de Pilate'...»].

This is the opening of the essay *The Paradise of Queen Sibyl (Le Paradis de la Reine Sibylle)* which is contained in the volume *Legends of the Middle Ages (Légendes du Moyen Age)* published in 1903 by a great French philologist, Bruno Paulin Gaston Paris, a professor of German and Romance philology, a prominent researcher in medieval studies, and an outstanding member of the Académie Française.

In his article, Gaston Paris analysed the life and work of Antoine de la Sale, with specific reference to his fifteenth-century description of the Sibyl's realm set beneath a cave on Mount Sibyl.

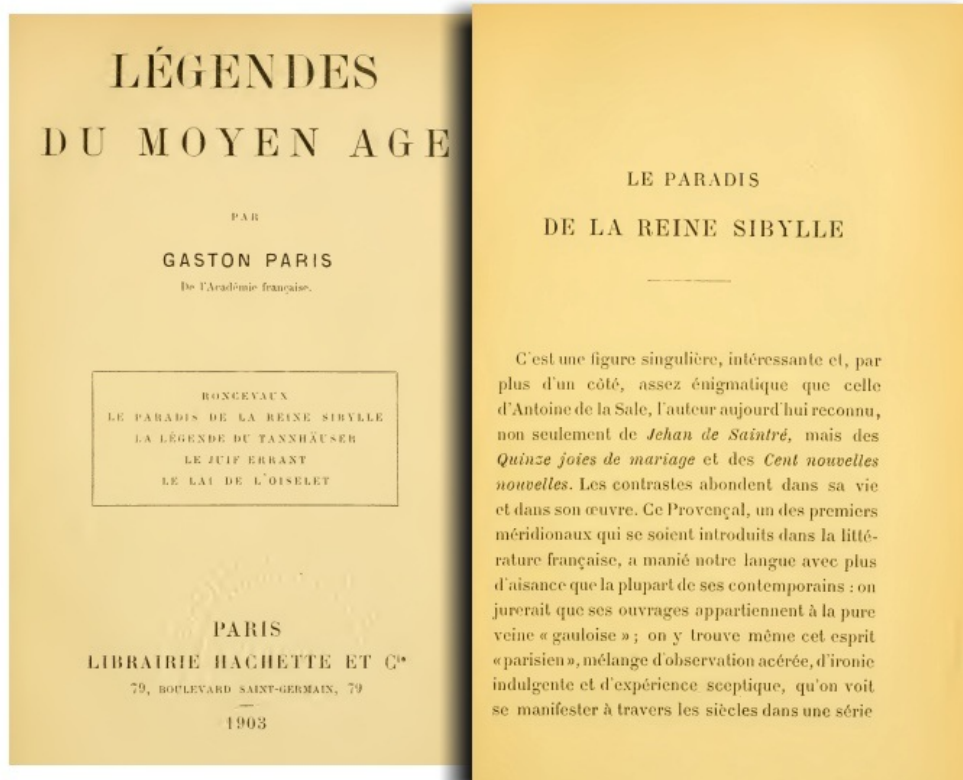


Fig. 5 - The article written by Gaston Paris on Mount Sibyl included in his volume *Légendes du Moyen Âge* (Paris, 1903), p. 79-109

Was the work of Gaston Paris just a dispassionate philological study of a manuscripted account which reported on a curious journey to central Italy carried out during the late Middle Ages? Not at all.

Because thirty years earlier a young Gaston Paris had already been captured by the magical spell of the Apennine Sibyl. And, just before the turn of the century, he had the chance to make his dream come true: he personally travelled to Italy to explore the places in which Antoine de la Sale had set his wondrous tale:

«Actually the Sibyl has recently greeted a few pilgrims. [...] I had promised to myself since that time that I would visit that mysterious cave [...] I carried out my project in June 1897; but, unfortunately, [...] I was [...] 'rebuffed by the wind'. The Sibyl, certainly fearing too nosy an investigation, enshrouded herself in mist and covered herself with icy gusts».

[In the original French text: «La Sibylle a pourtant récemment revu des pèlerins. [...] Je m'étais promis dès lors d'aller visiter la grotte mystérieuse [...] J'ai réalisé ce projet en juin 1897; mais, hélas! [...] j'ai été [...] 'repoussé par le vent'. La Sibylle, craignant sans doute une investigation indiscreète, s'est enveloppée de brume et s'est défendue par un souffle glacé»].

In his venturesome journey, he was accompanied by another renowned Italian philologist, Pio Rajna, whom we will soon come to know. Gaston Paris, the older member of the scholarly party, could not reach the Sibyl's mountaintop; however, his presence in central Italy, amid remote peaks of the central Apennines, is a witness to an upcoming era of renewed attention and fame that the legends of the Sibillini Mountain Range were about to experience.

However, in this occurrence Gaston Paris could not identify any specific reason as to the presence of such legend in that isolated portion of Italy. Only naive tales about fairies and fairy dances were reported to him by the poor inhabitants of Castelluccio di Norcia:

«Often [...] they could see the fairies dancing on the grasslands, and such magical sights, charming as they were, cast in their soul an indefinite terror [...] Sometimes - but this is not certain at all - they had seen the fairies join the country dances that the villagers used to stage in the evening with the accompaniment of bagpipes. [...] This fable is all I could gather in the land that may bring to mind the antique legend, and, as everybody can see, only scantily: the tale is rather connected to the ancient traditions on dancing nymphs, and we can find it, almost identical, in many other countries where no lore on subterranean paradises is known».

[In the original French text: «Souvent [...] on voyait les fées danser sur les prairies, et ces apparitions, toutes gracieuses qu'elles fussent, jetaient dans l'âme une vague terreur [...] Parfois même - mais cela était douteux - on avait vu les fées se mêler aux salterelli que les villageois des montagnes mènent le soir aux sons des 'zampogne'. [...] Cette croyance est tout ce que j'ai recueilli dans le pays qui puisse rappeler l'ancienne légende, et, comme on voit, elle ne la rappelle que de très loin: elle se rattache plutôt aux traditions antiques sur les danses des nymphes et se retrouve telle quelle

dans beaucoup de pays où l'on ne connaît pas d'histoire de paradis souterrain»].

fées de sortir. Souvent, en effet, surtout par les belles matinées ou soirées d'été, quand le soleil levant ou la lune éclairent dans les vallons les vapeurs légères et mouvantes, on voyait les fées danser sur les prairies, et ces apparitions, toutes gracieuses qu'elles fussent, jetaient dans l'âme

LE PARADIS DE LA REINE SIBYLLE 105

une vague terreur ; parfois même, — mais cela était douteux, — on avait vu les fées se mêler aux *salterelli* que les villageois des montagnes mènent le soir aux sons des *zampogne*. On avait donc

Fig. 6 - The passage on the dancing fairies from the essay written by Gaston Paris (p. 104 and 105)

Gaston Paris died in 1903, only six years after his visit to the Sibillini Mountain Range. So it was his Italian friend and colleague, Pio Rajna, who took in charge the fascinating quest that the French philologist had begun.

Pio Rajna, born in northern Italy, was an eminent philologist and scholar, a professor at the Universities of Milan and Florence, a member of the illustrious Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei and a senator of the Kingdom of Italy. He was a proficient mountain climber, too, a skill he had acquired during his long treks amid his native Alps. So, on 23 June 1897, while his friend Gaston Paris was waiting in Castelluccio, Pio Rajna faced an arduous and unsuccessful climb to the peak of Mount Sibyl, immersed in a cloudy fog which almost blinded him and his local guide. A second, easier ascent was effected by Rajna on August, 13th, starting from the hamlet of Montemonaco. This climb was followed by other journeys, that same year and in the subsequent year 1898.

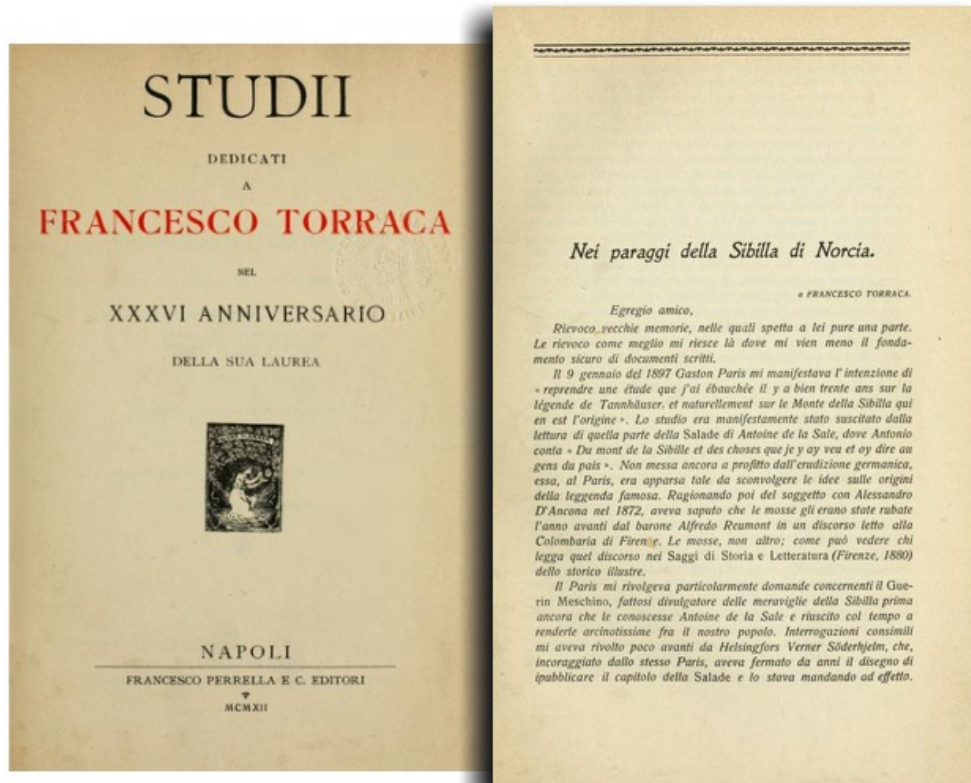


Fig. 7 - Pio Rajna's account of his journey to the Sibillini Mountain Range as reported in *Studii dedicati a Francesco Torraca nel XXXVI anniversario della sua laurea* (Napoli, 1912), p. 233-253

Of the exciting adventure experienced by Pio Rajna in that remote region of the Apennines, he himself left a lively, most fascinating account in *In the territory of the Sibyl of Norcia (Nei paraggi della Sibilla di Norcia)*, an article that was included in the volume *Studii dedicati a Francesco Torraca nel XXXVI anniversario della sua laurea* (1912). But the passionate philologist, in search of a truth that unfortunately had already gone lost many centuries earlier, could only retrieve the same useless, naive tales that Gaston Paris, too, had heard among the local villagers:

«In Pretara [a small hamlet set beneath Mount Vettore], they believe that at the time of their ancestors the fairies, pouring out from the cave, came amid the residents to dance with them; they could not be recognised but from one aspect: their knees creaked, like those of goats. [...] In St. Leonard [a ruined hermitage] they say that the fairies used to come and do their laundry. [...] When Pilate appears, he washes his hands in the lake's waters».

[In the original Italian text: «A Pretara [...] si crede che al tempo dei vecchi le fate, uscite dalla grotta, venissero tra gli abitanti a ballare, non distinguibili da altro segno, che per uno scricchiolare delle ginocchia, pari a quello delle capre. [...] Di S. Leonardo si dice che le fate ci venissero a stendere i panni. [...] Pilato nelle sue apparizioni al lago si lava le mani nel lago stesso»].

The ghosts of the Sibillini Mountain Range haunted Pio Rajna until he died in 1930, when he still was in touch with Domenico Falzetti, Fernand Desonay and Giuseppe Moretti, all involved in new excavation activities on the Sibyl's mountaintop. He was also writing a «troublesome book dedicated to the Sibyl» («un problematico libro sulla Sibilla»), a work that he never completed.

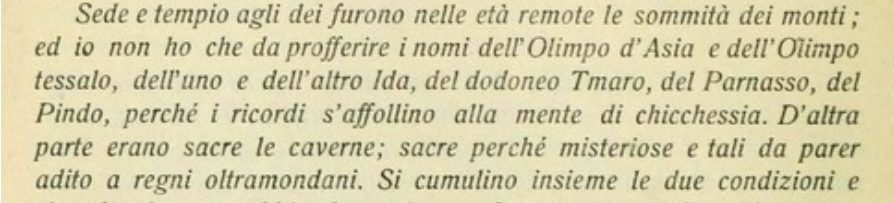
What could Rajna retrieve or fancy about the possible origin of the legend of the Sibyl's Cave?

Unfortunately, his investigation was unproductive. However, Pio Rajna, fully captured by the enchantment of the place and by its legends, wrote words that are not so far from the truth we are going to put down, tough in the form of a conjecture, in the present paper:

«See and shrine to the gods were considered the mountaintops since time immemorial [...] On the other hand, hallowed were the caverns, too; they were hallowed because they were mysterious, and seemed to hint to a possible entrance to otherworldly realms. If you add up the two occurrences, you cannot fail to spot promising potential outcomes. [...] The Sibyl's cave is peculiarly set on the very mountaintop. And that peak, at an elevation of more than six thousand five hundred feet, is marked by an aspect which is even more significant: it is encircled by a crown, a most significant symbol in the history of mankind. And you can also see in it a priestly sash, a token of holiness».

[In the original Italian text: «Sede e tempio agli dèi furono nelle età remote le sommità dei monti [...] D'altra parte erano sacre le caverne; sacre perché misteriose e tali da parer adito a regni oltramondani. Si cumulino insieme le due condizioni e si veda che cosa abbia da risultarne. [...] La grotta della Sibilla ha la prerogativa singolarissima d'essere situata propriamente alla cima. E quella cima, rispettabile già per l'altezza sua di oltre due migliaia di

metri, ha la caratteristica ancor più singolare di parer cinta da una corona, ossia da un simbolo significativo in grado sommo in tutta la storia dell'umanità. Ed anche una benda sacerdotale, un simbolo di santità, ben si poteva vedere nella fascia di roccia»].



Sede e tempio agli dei furono nelle età remote le sommità dei monti ; ed io non ho che da profferire i nomi dell' Olimpo d' Asia e dell' Olimpo tessalo, dell'uno e dell'altro Ida, del dodoneo Tmaro, del Parnasso, del Pindo, perché i ricordi s'affollino alla mente di chicchessia. D'altra parte erano sacre le caverne; sacre perché misteriose e tali da parer adito a regni oltramondani. Si cumulino insieme le due condizioni e

Fig. 8 - The excerpt on the potential origin of the legend of Mount Sibyl from the article written by Pio Rajna (p. 252)

An entryway to otherworldly realms. A passage to an Otherworld. Pio Rajna, though unlucky in his investigation, begins to catch a glimpse of a possible solution to the riddle which inhabits the Sibillini Mountain Range. Because, he adds, he cannot avoid to hold in his heart «the idea that the Sibyl's cave may have been a site of worship well before Rome established its rule over that region» («il pensiero che la caverna della Sibilla sia stata un luogo di culto ben prima che Roma distendesse su quella regione il suo dominio»).

In this important excerpt, the Italian philologist never mentions Pontius Pilate and his Lake. Still, in the minds of both Gaston Paris and Pio Rajna the Lake of Pilate seems to be just a sort of anomaly, a bizarre and unconnected tale overshadowed by the presence of the most illustrious sibilline narrative, as it clearly appears from the words written by Gaston Paris:

«The name of this lake [Pilate's] is connected to an odd legend, yet utterly unrelated to the one I am addressing here [...] Neither Pilat nor the necromancers have nothing to do with their neighbour, the Sibyl. It is of her only that I want to write here».

[In the original French text: «Le nom de ce lac se rattache aussi à une légende curieuse, mais entièrement étrangère à celle dont je m'occupe ici. [...] Ni Pilate ni les nécromants n'ont rien à faire avec leur voisine la Sibylle. C'est d'elle seule que je veux présentement parler»].

So the two philologists still miss an important point, linked to the manifest otherworldly character of the Lake of Pilate, not different from the same character which is featured by the Cave.

Nonetheless, at the end of the nineteenth century the two scientists, with their daring visit to the Sibillini Mountain Range, opened the way to a fresh new interest towards the legendary tales which inhabited that remote territory.

«Time will tell» («Chi vivrà vedrà»), wrote Pio Rajna in concluding his article.

And the time has now actually come.

But our travel into the studies and researches conducted in the past on the origin the Sibillini Mountain Range's legendary tale is not over.

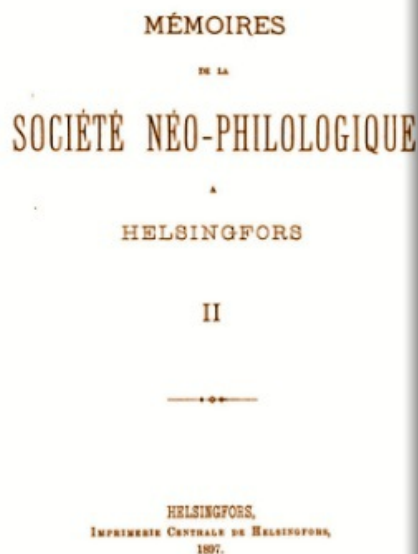
Because other scholars were at work, in that same period, on Mount Sibyl and its cave. They wanted to investigate another link. And the link's name was 'Tannhäuser'.

2.3 A passionate quarrel over Tannhäuser

In that same year 1897, while Gaston Paris and Pio Rajna were jointly exploring the Sibillini Mountain Range in search of an ancient legend, that secluded portion of the Apennines, after a long period of neglect, was being made the object of further attention. An attention which was turning into a sort of scholarly quarrel. And at the very center of the quarrel was an ancient German knight: Tannhäuser.

The legend of Tannhäuser, with its knights imprisoned within the magic realm of 'Venusberg', the mountain of Venus, showed manifest similarities to the narrative of a sensual Apennine Sibyl concealed beneath a peak in central Italy. That year Werner Söderhjelm, a Finnish linguist, published an article on this very subject, *Antoine de La Sale et la légende de Tannhäuser*. The northern-European scholar intended to highlight the common literary

themes present in both narratives, so patent but also so overlooked, as they «have not been signalled but incidentally in literary studies» («mais qui n'a encore été signalée qu'en passant dans la littérature»), a reference to the works of Alfred von Reumont and Arturo Graf.



Antoine de La Sale et la légende de
Tannhäuser.

I.

Ce n'est que dans les derniers temps que l'histoire littéraire est arrivée à déterminer à peu près la place d'Antoine de La Sale dans la littérature française du quinzième siècle. Dès qu'on a pu, à l'aide de quelques indices extérieurs et d'ingénieuses combinaisons, mettre hors de doute qu'il est l'auteur non seulement des *Quinze joies du mariage* mais aussi des *Cent nouvelles nouvelles*, si longtemps attribués à Louis XI, ces deux œuvres de haute valeur historique et esthétique sont venues ajouter à la gloire de leur auteur, déjà très célèbre par son charmant roman du *Petit Jehan de Saintré*, une splendeur qui le fait briller maintenant comme une des premières étoiles au ciel littéraire de son époque. Mais tout cela, à peu près, a été ébauché à grands traits seulement: les recherches minutieuses qui serviraient à élucider chaque question relative à ces œuvres font encore défaut. Et pourtant, il y aurait là la matière de plus d'une dissertation savante et dont le résultat pourrait être d'une très grande importance pour l'histoire littéraire. Il est vrai que la biographie

Fig. 9 - The article written by Werner Söderhjelm on Mount Sibyl and Tannhäuser included in *Mémoires de la Société Néo-philologique à Helsingfors* (Helsingfors, 1897), Vol. II, p. 101-167

After a close scrutiny of the two legends, partly based on the article published four years earlier by Arturo Graf, Söderhjelm concluded that Antoine de la Sale's description of knights visiting the Sibyl in Italy «contains elements which are not found in any Italian version [of the legend] and are, on the other hand, typically found in the German legend» («contient des choses qui ne se retrouvent dans aucune version italienne mais qui sont, au contraire, caractéristiques de la légende allemande»).

So, in Söderhjelm's view, the Apennine Sibyl, Mount Sibyl and the largest portion of the Italian legend were of German derivation, with Tannhäuser as the main source.

We know today, from the detailed analysis conducted in our previous paper *Birth of a Sibyl: the medieval connection*, that the literary theme of a hidden realm ruled by a sensual queen originates from chivalric elements contained in the Matter of Britain and the Arthurian cycle, with Morgan le Fay and Sebile as main characters: in this framework, we may assume that both Mount Sibyl and Tannhäuser's Venusberg received in their respective narratives the same basic elements, from a common source which is to be identified with the Matter of Britain, with a subsequent mix-up of the tales concerning the two different mountains. They were so similar because they arose from a same legendary stem.

But at the end of the nineteenth century, the controversy about a sort of supremacy between an Italian legend and a German myth was arousing a series of scholarly disputes. And Mount Sibyl could place itself at the very center of a quarrelsome attention involving many illustrious scholars.

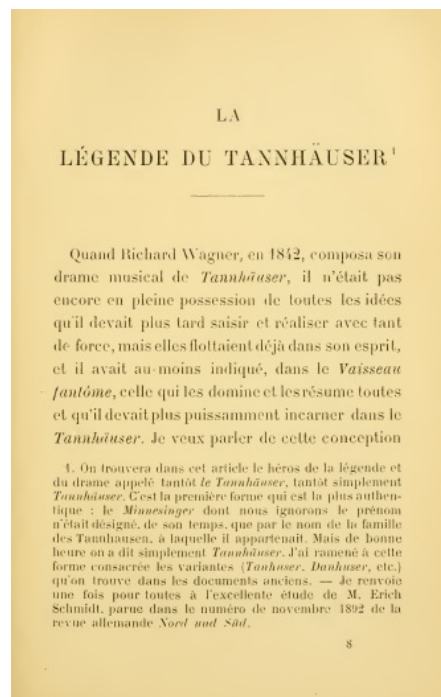


Fig. 10 - The article written by Gaston Paris on Tannhäuser, from *Légendes du Moyen Age* (Paris, 1903), p. 113-145

Gaston Paris replied to Söderhjelm's position with an article, *La légende du Tannhäuser*, included in his *Legends of the Middle Ages* published in 1903. In his paper, the French philologist supported the opposite idea that the tale of Tannhäuser was a German adaptation of the Italian sibilline legend, as the reverse vision proposed by the Finnish scholar «raised many difficulties» («cette hypothèse soulève de grandes difficultés»):

«So the Tannhäuser's legend, as it appeared in Germany during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, it is not of German origin; its roots are linked to the legend of 'Mount Sibyl', which dates to a remoter age».

[In the original French text: «La légende de Tannhäuser, telle qu'elle apparaît en Allemagne au quinzième et au seizième siècles, n'est donc pas d'origine allemande; elle remonte à la légende du 'Monte della Sibilla', dont nous pouvons constater l'existence à une époque bien plus ancienne»].

The philological scene was heating up. Another scholar entered the arena, Heinrich Dübi, a Swiss philologist and mountain climber. In 1907 he writes a long paper on *Three legends of the High Middle Ages in their journey from Italy to Germany through Switzerland* (*Drei spätmittelalterliche Legenden in ihrer Wanderung aus Italien durch die Schweiz nach Deutschland*). And, incredibly enough, two out of the three legendary tales addressed by Dübi are linked to the Sibillini Mountain Range.

In the first section of his article, *From prefect Pilate (Vom Landpfleger Pilatus)*, Dübi retraces the medieval legend connected with the many burial places of the cursed corpse of Pontius Pilate, including a comprehensive mention of the Lake of Pilate in the Sibillini Mountain Range, with a full reference to Mount Sibyl and the tale reported by Antoine de la Sale, often quoting from the article written by Arturo Graf in 1893.

The third section of Dübi's article is dedicated, once more, to Mount Sibyl and its connection to the legend of Tannhäuser. As a most significant and unprecedented observation, he quotes from a most famous excerpt written by a Swiss cleric, Felix Hemmerlin, who in his work *De Nobilitate et Rusticitate Dialogus*, written in 1444, established a direct, unmistakable link between Mount Sibyl and the German Venusberg, claiming that the information was acquired during his stay in Italy:

«I begin with the cleric from Zurich, Felix Hemmerlin, also known as 'Malleolus', his words the most ancient, as he hints clearly to the link between the two legends. Actually [...] he refers [...], in his dialogue between a nobleman and a peasant, to the similarities with the Venusberg. The passage he wrote is as follows: 'Not far from the town of Norcia and the castle of Montefortino lies Mount Sibyl' [...] As Hemmerlin could ascertain from the words referred to him by those who knew the region, those cliffs are riddled with hollows and caves, which pierce the rock deep into the hidden core of the mountains through impracticable passages. this mount is known as Venusberg, because Venus, Vulcan's wife, makes it conjoined to fire. These subterranean chambers harbour evil beings, fiendish spirits and demons, taking the shape of graceful maidens who beguile the men coming from foreign lands».

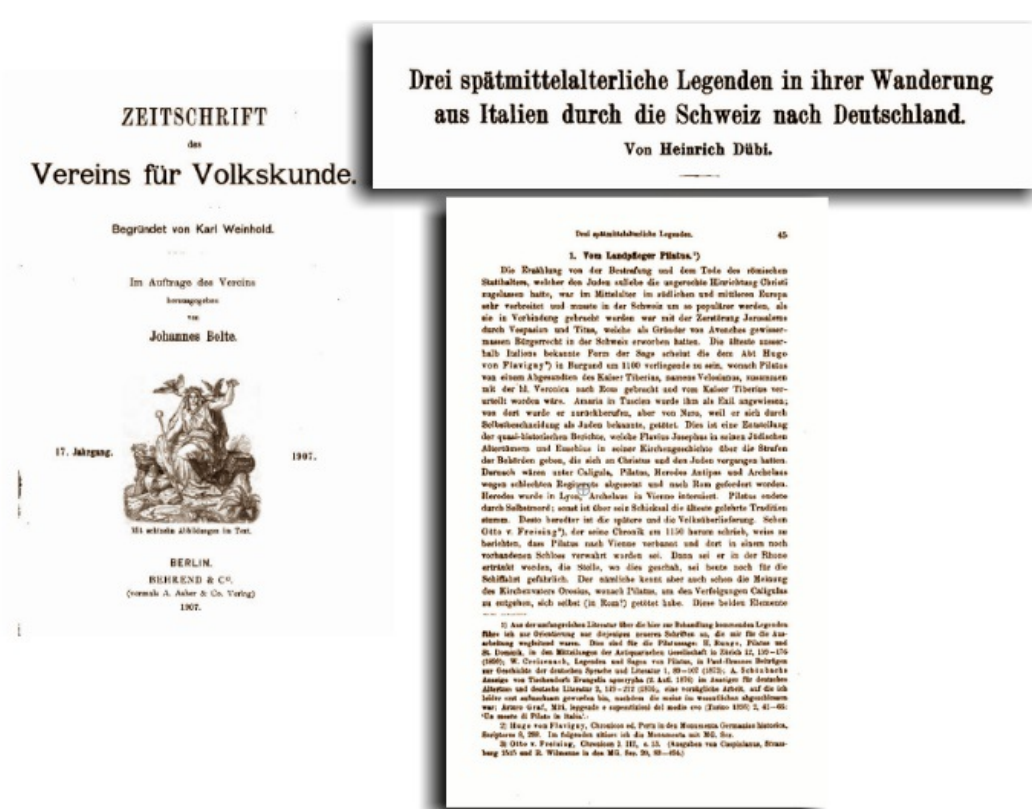


Fig. 11 - Heinrich Dübi's article *Vom Landpfleger Pilatus* from his essay *Drei spätmittelalterliche Legenden in ihrer Wanderung aus Italien durch die Schweiz nach Deutschland* included in *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Volkskunde* (Berlin, 1907), p. 42 and 45-65

[In the original German text: «Ich beginne mit dem Züricher Chorherrn Felix Hemmerlin oder Malleolus, weil sein Zeugnis das älteste ist und er am deutlichsten den Zusammenhang beider Sagen zu ahnen scheint. In der Tat verweist [...] seines Dialogs zwischen dem Edelmann und dem Bauern über die ähnlichen Erscheinungen am Venusberg berichtet habe. Dieser in ziemlich barbarischem Latein abgefasste Bericht lautet in Kürze folgendermassen: 'Nahe bei der Stadt Norcia und dem Kastell 'Montifortino' liegt der Sibyllenberg. [...] Wie Hemmerlin deutlich gesehen und von Ortskundigen erfahren hat, sind diese Berge voll von Höhlen und Grotten, die bis ins Innere des Berges reichen, und unpassierbaren Gängen. Der Berg heisst gemeiniglich Venusberg, weil Venus, die Gattin des Vulcan, hier ihr vom Feuer unzertrennliches Wesen treibt. In diesen Grotten sind dämonische Wesen, Incubi und Succubi, in der Gestalt schöner Weiber, die von irgendwoher gekommene Männer betören»].

Drei spätmittelalterliche Legenden in ihrer Wanderung aus Italien durch die Schweiz nach Deutschland.

Von Heinrich Dübi.

(Vgl. S. 42—65. 143—160.)

3. Frau Vrene und der Tannhäuser.¹⁾

Man nimmt gewöhnlich an, dass die durch Wagners Oper so bekannt gewordene Legende von dem Ritter, der im Venusberge gewesen war und dafür vom Papste verflucht wurde, wie sie an einen deutschen Namen anknüpft, so auch deutschen Ursprunges und an irgend einem Berg in deutschen Landen einheimisch sei. Der Hörsselberg in Thüringen freilich

Fig. 12 - Heinrich Dübi's article *Frau Vrene und der Tannhäuser* from his essay *Drei spätmittelalterliche Legenden in ihrer Wanderung aus Italien durch die Schweiz nach Deutschland* included in *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Volkskunde* (Berlin, 1907), p. 249-264

With this passage in his essay, Dübi enrolls the less-known legendary tradition of Mount Sibyl in the most famous, illustrious poetical lore concerning the German legend of Tannhäuser. But he goes even further, as the Swiss philologist chooses to endorse the theory of an Italian origin for the German tale:

«I think that this passage, almost neglected up to now and dating to the years 1410-13, may show in a very clear way that the legend of Tannhäuser

in the Venusberg [...] was developed in Italy at the beginning of the fourteenth century and, from there and through Switzerland, it came to Germany».

[In the original German text: «Diese bisher fast unbeachtete Erzählung, welche auf die Jahre 1410 - 13 zurückgeht, scheint mir auf das allerdeutlichste zu beweisen, dass die Sage von Tannhäuser im Venusberg [...] um die Wende des 14. Jahrhunderts in Italien ausgebildet war und von dort durch Vermittlung der Schweiz nach Deutschland gelangte»].

Now the Apennine Sibyl and her Italian mountain are fully at the center of a literary debate involving scholars from all over Europe.

In 1908, it is the turn of Friedrich Klüge, another philologist, this time from Germany. In his essay *Der Venusberg* he firmly rejects the assumption of a possible Italian origin for the Tannhäuser's legend:

BUNTE BLÄTTER

Kulturgeschichtliche

Vorträge und Aufsätze

von

FRIEDRICH KLÜGE



Freiburg (Baden)
J. Bielefelds Verlag
1908

Der Venusberg*.

Der sagenberühmte Venusberg, der das Zauberreich der Göttin der Liebe birgt, hat nicht bloß im deutschen Volksglauben des ausgehenden Mittelalters gelebt, wir wissen auch von manchen Besuchern desselben, die Kunde von dem Liebesleben in der Venusrotte oder wenigstens von der Lage und Gestalt des Berges und von seinen Höhlen verbreitet haben. Und der Fabeln vom Venusberg war kein Ende. Oft führt uns unsere Literatur an ihn heran, aber nirgends ist sein Zauber in reizvollerem Dämmerlicht, sein Sinneglück bestrickender angedeutet und berührt, als in dem alten Volkslied vom Tannhäuser. Es gehört zu dem kunstvollsten, was der Liederschatz unseres Volkes durch das 16. Jahrhundert besessen hat. Es war zugleich eines der verbreitetsten und beliebtesten Volkslieder. Aber das 17. Jahrhundert hat ihm wie so vielen altdeutschen Sagenstoffen und Volksliedern einen argen Stoß versetzt: die modische Kunstdichtung verdrängte im Interessenbereich der Literaturfreunde das wunderbare Lied, drängte es in entlegene Täler und Berge zurück. In der Schweiz und in Tirol und Oberösterreich hat man es noch durch das 19. Jahrhundert hindurch erklingen hören, nachdem zuvor 'Des

* Beilage zur Allgemeinen Zeitung 1898 Nr. 66/67. Dieser Aufsatz knüpft an die bahnbrechenden Untersuchungen an, die Prof. Gaston Paris 1897 in der 'Revue de Paris' S. 763 ff. (Le Paradis de la Reine Sibylle) und Prof. Söderhjelm in den 'Mémoires de la Société Neo-Philologique à Helsingfors' (1897) II 101 ff. veröffentlicht haben. Der Aufsatz des berühmten französischen Romanisten (gest. 1902) ist mittlerweile neu gedruckt in den 'Légendes du Moyen Age', Paris 1904. Unserm obigen Aufsatz ist eine orientierende Karte am Schluß des Buches beigegeben.

Fig. 13 - Friedrich Klüge's essay *Der Venusberg*, from his work *Bunte blätter* (Freiburg, 1908), p. 28-60

«The legendary tale that we got to know in the romance of Guerino and in the work by Antoine de la Sale was not originated in Montemonaco, where this tale was told. German travellers during their visits to the famed Mount of the Sibyl have carried thither the German Tannhäuser legend. And thanks to the repeated investigations which Germans made in those parts our Tannhäuser legend gradually, although temporarily, became there established. What La Sale heard related there in May 1420 was the German legend, as it actually tells the tale of a knight from Germany».

[In the original German text: «Die Sagengestalt, die wir im Guerino-Roman und in la Sales Werk kennen gelernt haben, ist nicht autochthon in Montemonaco, wo man sie erzählte. Deutsche Reisende haben bei ihren Besuchen auf dem sagenberühmten Monte della Sibilla die deutsche Tannhäusersage dorthin getragen. Und bei den wiederholten Nachforschungen, die Deutsche dort anstellten, bürgerte sich allmählich, wenn auch vorübergehend, unsere Tannhäusersage dort ein. Was la Sale dort im Mai 1420 erzählen hörte, war die deutsche Sage, wie sie ja auch von einem deutschen Ritter handelt»].

But other scholars, too, take their chance and enter the Italy vs. Germany debate. In 1913 Arthur F. J. Remy, a German-born scholar at the Columbia University in New York, published an article which intended to illustrate the state of the art for the whole matter, with the following meaningful title: *The origin of the Tannhäuser-Legend - The present state of the question*. And he strongly embraces the position of a German origin for the Italian legend:

«Surely Kluge was right, when, in view of this evidence, he asserted the German origin of the Tannhäuser legend against Gaston Paris, and claimed that the account in the 'Salade' was but an echo of the German story. [...] From the evidence thus far presented I infer that the legend of Venus and her fabled mountain arose in Germany thru a fusion of the Celtic conception of the amorous fairy-queen with the German traditions of dwarf-kingdoms and imperial courts in the interior of mountains. In Germany faerie would most naturally assume the shape of a hollow-hill paradise. The fay was called Venus because the heathen goddess was thoroughly familiar from the poetry of the Minnesingers and the Goliards. [...] We are therefore perfectly justified in regarding the legend of Tannhäuser as a German legend».

THE JOURNAL OF
ENGLISH AND GERMANIC
PHILOLOGY

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VOLUME XII
1913

PUBLISHED QUARTERLY BY THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS
URBANA, ILL. U. S. A.

JOHNSON REPRINT CORPORATION
111 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10003

JOHNSON REPRINT COMPANY LTD.
Buckley Square House, London, W1X 4BA

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Remy

THE ORIGIN OF THE TANNHAUSER-LEGEND *

THE PRESENT STATE OF THE QUESTION

Since the appearance in 1897 and 1898 of two notable essays by Gaston Paris in the *Revue de Paris*¹ the origin and development of the *Tannhäuser* legend has been the subject of frequent discussion. A legend, the German character of which has been unquestioned since the days of the Romantics and Wagner, was now claimed to be of Italian origin and to have its starting-point in a tradition connected with a mountain-peak in the central Apennine range. The distinctively German features of the story, the name of the hero and the *Venusberg*, were explained as later changes or additions introduced into the legend after it had come to Germany by way of Switzerland. The ultimate source of the legend itself was to be found in Celtic literature, whence the material came to Italy with the rest of the matter of Britain thru French mediation, tho in this case, it had to be admitted, no French version is known.

These views of Gaston Paris gave rise to a fruitful discussion. The *Venusberg* in particular was made the subject of an essay by Friedrich Kluge.² He conceded the Italian provenience for the unholy paradise, but denied it for the other features of the legend, which he regarded as of German development and to have been carried to Italy by German travellers. Erich Schmidt³ is inclined to agree with Kluge and upholds the identification of the legendary *Tannhäuser* with the historical Minnesinger of that name. Reuschel⁴ suggests that

* Victor Junk's book, entitled *Tannhäuser in Sage und Dichtung* (Munich 1912), was not available when this article was sent to press.

¹ *Le Paradis de la Reine Sibylle* Sept. 1897 and *Le Légende du Tannhäuser* March 1898; reprinted in *Légendes du Moyen Age*, Paris 1908, pp. 65-109, 111-145.

² In *Beilage zur Allgemeinen Zeitung* vom 25. und 26. März 1898. Reprinted with some omissions in *Bunte Blätter*, Freiburg, 1910 pp. 28-46.

³ In *Charakteristiken* Berlin 1901, pp. 24-45.

⁴ *Die Tannhäuserlegende* in *Neue Jahrbücher für das Klassische Altertum, Geschichte und deutsche Literatur*, 1904, pp. 653-667.

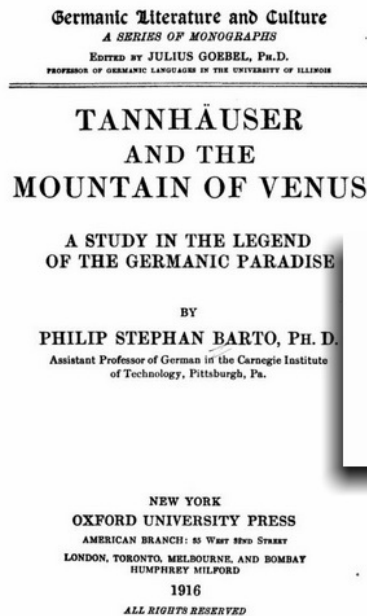
Fig. 14 - Arthur F. J. Remy's *The origin of the Tannhäuser-Legend - The present state of the question*, in *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* (Illinois, 1913), Vol. XII, no. 1, p. 32-77

A tentatively final effort to settle the matter is carried out in 1916 by Philip Stephan Barto, an American scholar, with his complete book *Tannhäuser and the mountain of Venus - A study in the legend of the Germanic paradise*. Barto, too, supports a German origin for the legend of Mount Sibyl:

«The German legend of an amorous Sibyl dwelling within a hollow mountain in a court the splendors of which were maintained by some miraculous agency is the source which the Italian Barbarino used, even at second hand perhaps, in describing the love grotto near Norcia. The *Venusberg* is of German origin and is but a later appellation for the ancient Germanic paradise to which the first name to be attached was that of the 'Gral'».

From Finland to France. From Switzerland to Germany, and then to the United States of America. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the whole world seems to have become aware that a mount in central Italy, a

peak lost in the middle of the almost-unknown Sibillini Mountain Range, was marked by a powerful mythical charge, with strong and undeniable connections with most famous myths, like the German legend of Tannhäuser and the cycle of King Arthur.



Sibyl to connect this mountain with Italy. The German legend of an amorous Sibyl dwelling within a hollow mountain in a court the splendors of which were maintained by some miraculous agency is the source which the Italian Barbarino used, even at second hand perhaps, in describing the love grotto near Norcia. The *Venusberg* is of German origin and is but a later appellation for the ancient Germanic paradise to which the first name to be attached was that of the *Gral*.

Fig. 15 - Philip Stephan Barto's *Tannhäuser and the mountain of Venus - A study in the legend of the Germanic paradise* (New York, 1916)

Mount Sibyl with its Cave and its nearby Lake of Pilate were, again, at the center of the scene, after centuries of substantial neglect.

However, though involved in a lengthy quarrel over the true origin of the Tannhäuser's legend, no scholar was truly addressing the fundamental problem concerning the origin of the legends of the Sibyl's Cave and the Lake of Pilate.

Because the problem was not whether Tannhäuser came before Mount Sibyl, or the other way round.

The real problem, which we are going to solve in the present research paper, was: why did the Sibillini Mountain Range happen to act as a

mythical landmark, an 'hot spot' for all this legendary fuss? The answer will be proposed in the next paragraphs.

And yet, before we start addressing this fascinating topic, we still have to continue with our history of the efforts to study and analyse the legendary narratives which inhabited the central Apennines.

We are getting into the twentieth century, and a few scholars, not directly involved in the Tannhäuser - Mount Sibyl unproductive quarrel, will begin to tread, though with hesitant steps, the path that will lead to the most exciting findings as to those fascinating legends.

2.4 Scholars on the right track

In that same beginning of the twentieth century, there are scholars who are not taking part in the somewhat unprofitable debate on where the origin of the legend on an enchanted mount of love may lay, whether in Germany or Italy.

Instead, they attack the legend from a different side.

In 1903, Lucy Ann Paton, a scholar at the Radcliffe College, Cambridge, Massachusetts, publishes her *Studies in the fairy mythology of Arthurian romance*, in which a specific lineage for the Apennine Sibyl begins to be spotted, though only incidentally in Paton's elaboration, within the Matter of Britain and the literary characters of Morgan le Fay and her companion 'Sebile':

«[In the Arthurian cycle] Sebile has no individual history in the romances that we can trace [...] but as a rule she is merely a shadow of Morgain. There is little question that she is descended from the Sibyl. Antoine de la Sale in 'La Salade' repeats a popular legend that he had learned in a visit to the Mont de la Sibylle, one of the peaks of the Apennines near Norcia. [...] The connection between the Sibyl and the queen Sibylle is shown more clearly by Andrea da Barberino, who in 'Guerrino il Meschino' tells substantially the same story, evidently derived from a common source with the legend reported by Antoine de la Sale. [...] The two sources supplement

each other, Antoine's representing purer Celtic material, Andrea's preserving more distinctly the Sibylline character of the fay [...] Both sources show tendencies that are often displayed in mediaeval fairy lore [...] with] the merging of Celtic and classical tradition in popular story».

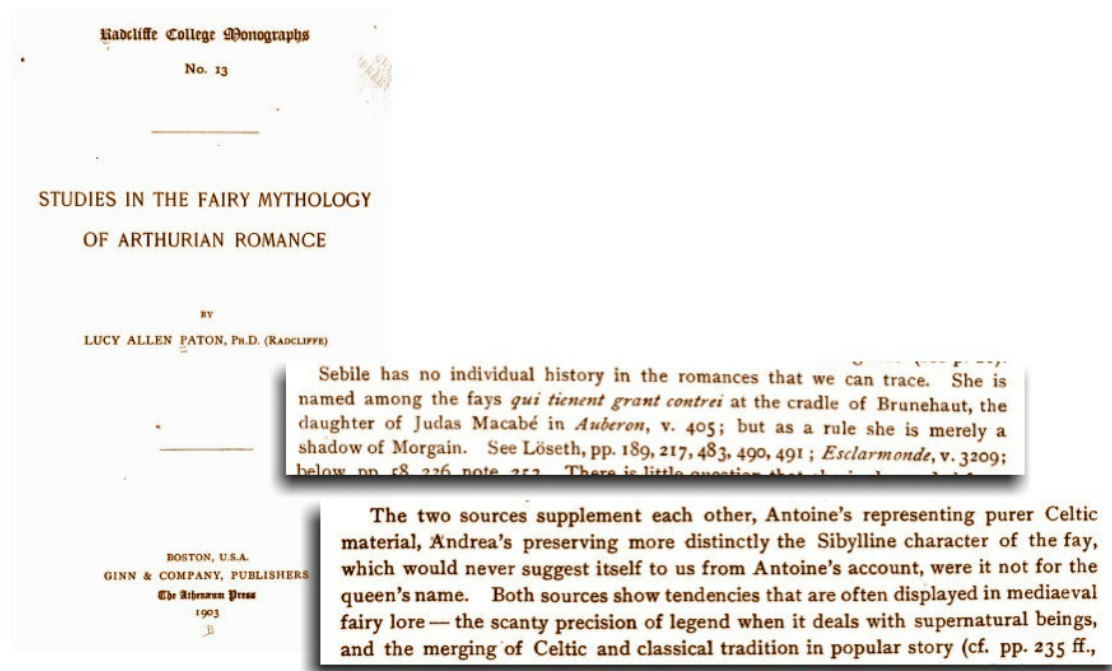


Fig. 16 - Lucy Ann Paton's passage on Sebile contained in *Studies in the fairy mythology of Arthurian romance*, Boston, 1903 (pages 52 and 53, footnote no. 2)

This is the line of research we developed in our previous article *Birth of a Sibyl: the medieval connection*: a first, mandatory step in the investigation of the true origin of the legends of the Sibillini Mountain Range, as it identifies a narrative overlay, of foreign origin, that is to be necessarily removed if we want to unveil the inner, original core of the legend.

Thus, Lucy Ann Paton makes a first move, even though Arthur F. J. Remy, from whom we already quoted, fully involved in the Tannhäuser's philological quarrel as he was, will not agree with Paton's view.

Nonetheless, the way is now open to a new vision of the sibilline lore. The Italian scholar Ferdinando Neri, in his *The Italian traditions of the Sibyl* (*Le tradizioni italiane della Sibilla*, 1913), writes the following word:

«The Sibyl's paradise must be linked to the enchanted lands [...] In chivalric poems, this is the land of fairies, the realm of Morgan, Avalon [...] Sibyl: that was a name of a fairy, always mentioned in conjunction with Morgan [in other chivalric works]».

[In the original Italian text: «Il paradiso della Sibilla deve allora porsi a riscontro delle terre incantate [...] Nella poesia cavalleresca è la terra di féerie, il regno di Morgana, Avalon [...] Sibilla: questo era un nome di fata, e sempre insieme con Morgana appare [in varie opere cavalleresche]»].

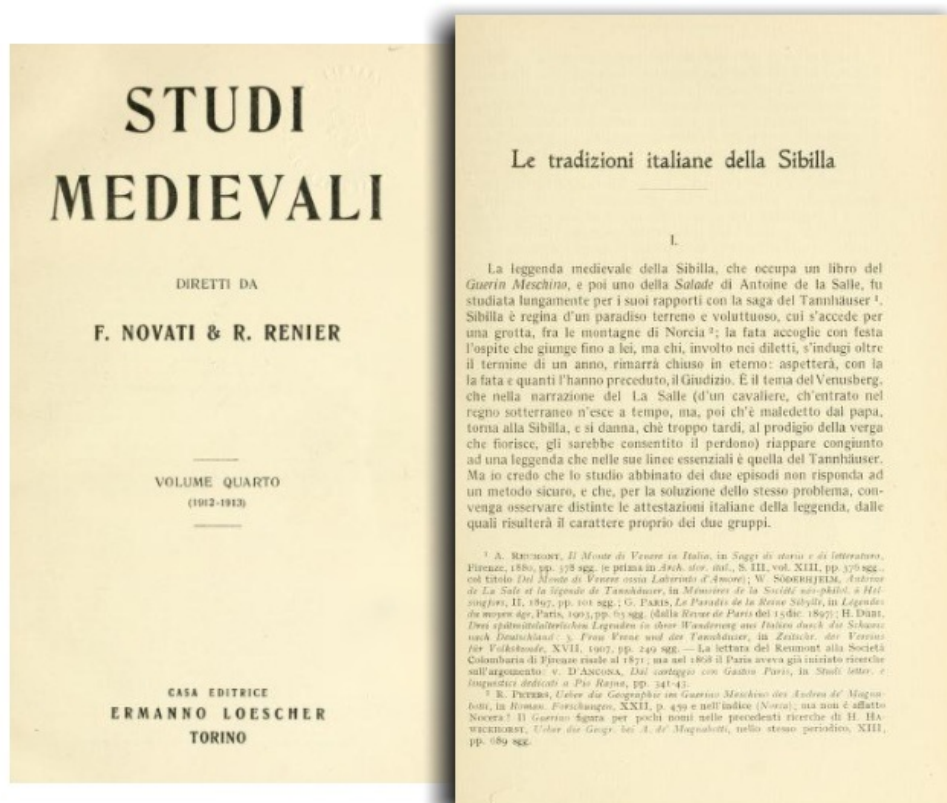


Fig. 17 - The article written by Ferdinando Neri on the popular lore about the Sibyls, included in *Studi Medievali*, Vol. IV (1913), p. 213-230

And to Ferdinando Neri the author of the present research paper also owes a very special expression of gratitude, out of a smart, fundamental hint that the Italian scholar mentions a few lines ahead in his work:

«We may proceed further in the comparison process and note that the traditions of Norcia, portrayed in the *Guerrino*, *la Salade*, [...] are connected to a class of known, popular fairy tales through the topic of the 'netherworld' [...]: the ever-slamming metal doors, guarded by lions or monsters...»].

[In the original Italian text: «Si può procedere nel confronto, ed osservare che le tradizioni di Norcia, seguite nel *Guerino*, *la Salade*, [...] si collegano con un gruppo di fiabe note nel folk-lore per i temi del 'mondo sotterra' [...]: le porte di metallo, che battono continuamente, vigilate da leoni, o da mostri...»].

Si può procedere nel confronto, ed osservare che le tradizioni di Norcia, seguite nel *Guerino*, *la Salade*, *l'Italia liberata da' Goti*, come ripetono la credenza della periodica metamorfosi delle fate in serpi ⁵, così, in altri particolari, si collegano con un gruppo di fiabe note nel folk-lore per i temi del « mondo sotterra » ⁶ e della « bella dei sette « veli » ⁷: le porte di metallo, che battono continuamente, vigilate

da leoni, o da mostri ¹; i cibi rituali che l'eroe deve porgere nel viaggio ², senza voltarsi... Il nome stesso della fata riappare in alcune di queste fiabe: « U cunto d'a bella Sibilla » ³, « Il canto e 'l sono « della Sara Sibilla » ⁴. Ma per questa via si profonda nelle antichità

Fig. 18 - The excerpt on the ever-slamming metal doors written by Ferdinando Neri in his essay (p. 229-230)

This is the very first clue which, connected to the presence of the odd slamming metal doors in Antoine de la Sale's description of the Sibyl's Cave, led the author of this series of articles to the investigation of the magical ever-slamming devices, included in many chivalric romances and poems and featuring an illustrious lineage back to Vergil's *Aeneid* and the Greek myth of the Symplegades, in an setting which is typically linked to descriptions of Otherworlds and magical subterranean realms.

The hypothesis of a lineage of the Apennine Sibyl in Italy from the Matter of Britain was also highlighted by Walter Pabst in his *Venus und die missverstandene Dido: Literarische Ursprünge des Sibyllen- und des Venusberges* (1955). The German philologist conjectured a passage of Arthurian topics and themes to Italy, following the invasion of Sicily by the Normans in the eleventh century and noting the presence of an Arthurian

poem set in southern Italy, a literary occurrence that we fully described in our previous article *Birth of a Sibyl: the medieval connection*:

«The Arthur-Morgan complex, which was transplanted to Sicily under Norman rule, has partly turned its fairytale features there into the devilish. [...] So it is also certain that it was not Italians but Nordic exoticists who transplanted the 'saga' of Morgan to Sicily. In the old French poem 'Floriant el Florete', Etna is [...] referred to as the residence of Morgan, and the 'matière de Bretagne' is transferred to the southern volcano together with King Arthur's sister».

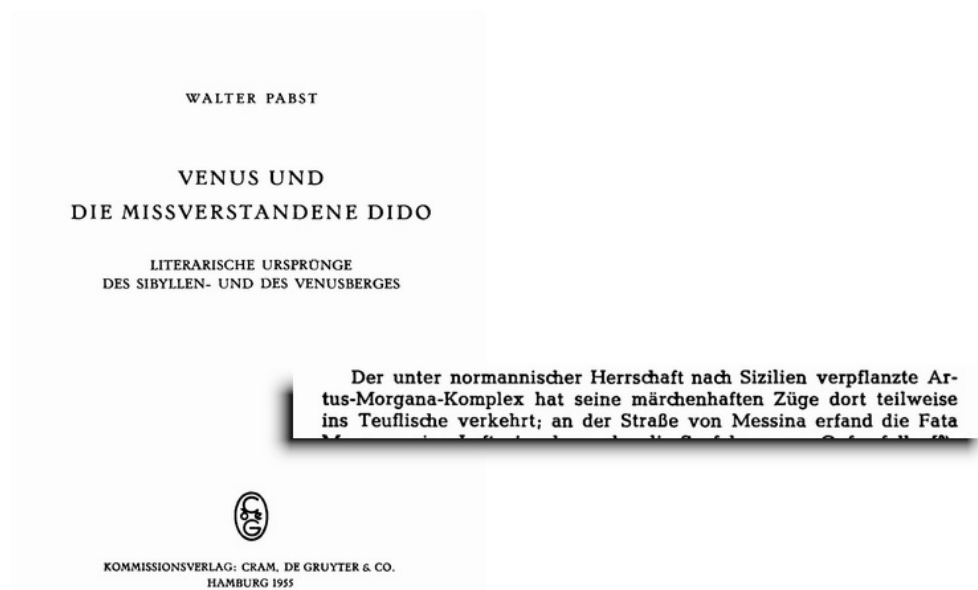


Fig. 19 - Walter Pabst's *Venus und die missverstandene Dido: Literarische Ursprünge des Sibyllen- und des Venusberges* (Hamburg, 1955), with a quote from p. 82

[In the original German text: «Der unter normannischer Herrschaft nach Sizilien verpflanzte Artus-Morgana-Komplex hat seine märchenhaften Züge dort teilweise ins Teuflische verkehrt. [...] So ist es auch sicher, daß nicht Italiener, sondern nordische Exotisten die 'Sage' der Morgana nach Sizilien verpflanzten. In dem altfranzösischen Gedicht 'Floriant el Florete' ist [...] der Ätna als Wohnsitz der Morgana bezeichnet, und mit König Arthurs Schwester wird die 'matière de Bretagne' auf den südlichen Vulkan versetzt»].

However Walter Pabst, as other scholars up to now, missed the fundamental point connected to the presence of a further, powerful legend only a few miles away from the Sibyl's Cave. The myth concerning the Lake of Pilate is dismissed as a secondary, basically unimportant issue:

«Neither the origin of the necromancers, nor that of the Pilate's legend will be examined».

[In the original German text: «Hier können weder die Ursprünge der Nekromanten- noch die der Pilatuslegende untersucht werden»].

Nonetheless, this new, promising line of approach to the Italian Sibyl's Cave, in the framework of the Matter of Britain, though without considering the legendary tale on Pilate's Lake, will be finally summarised by a great scholar and illustrious professor, one of the most prominent authorities in the literary tradition of Middle Ages, the Matter of Britain and the Arthurian cycle: Roger Sherman Loomis, a famed, celebrated member of the Columbia University.

In 1959, as we already detailed in our previous paper *Birth of a Sibyl: the medieval connection*, Roger S. Loomis wrote a fundamental essay, *Morgain la Fée in oral tradition*, in which the illustrious scholar totally supports the vision of a literary transplant of the legend of Morgan le Fay, and the enchantress Sebile, into a specific Italian setting, that of the Sibillini Mountain Range:

«The extraordinary account given early in the fifteenth century by Andrea da Barberino of the visit of Guerino il Meschino to the abode of the fay Alcina [the name replacing the Sibyl in the 1689 edition - editor's note] [...] was actually an elaboration of a visit to the abode of Morgain la Fée. [...] Though the geographical setting on a mountain near Norcia in the central Apennines was described with accuracy, the main theme must have been taken from some version of the visit to Morgain's enchanted palace. [...] In spite of the obvious changes and literary embellishments, the account of Guerino's visit to the Sibyl's sensual Paradise is manifestly derived from some version of Morgain's faery Paradise [...] Alcina's nature is best explained, then, as uniting characteristic features of Morgain and the Sibyl».

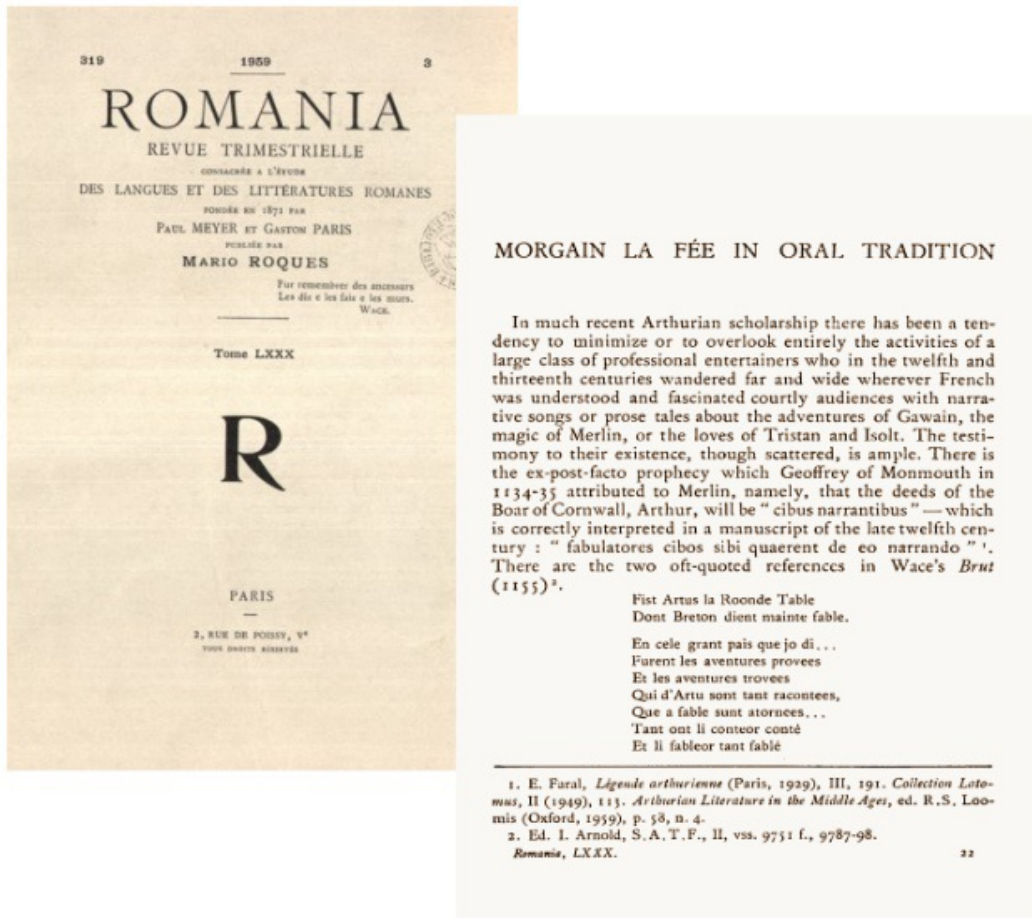


Fig. 20 - Roger S. Loomis' paper on *Morgain la Fée in oral tradition* (from *Romania*, tome LXXX, no. 319, Paris, 1959, pages 337-367)

This key article, a true milestone in research, has remained substantially unknown to the various Italian researchers who have been investigating into the myth of the Apennine Sibyl in the subsequent decades, as it is almost never quoted in the books and papers issued in Italy on the subject since its first date of publication, until it was taken into new consideration by the author of the present paper in the year 2019.

However, before we get to so recent a time, we still have to illustrate the further contributions to the investigation of the sibilline lore as proposed by further passionate researchers at the middle of the twentieth century: a philologist, Fernand Desonay, and a musician and director from Norcia, Domenico Falzetti.

They will try to get to the inner core of the legend. Unfortunately they both will miss their target, because their efforts will lead them on a wrong track. A dead end, after which the research on the Sibillini Mountain Range will get stuck on a same sterile ground for many decades.

2.5 Goddess Cybele, a fallacious trail: Fernand Desonay

It is during the 1920s that the efforts to understand the mystery of the Sibillini Mountain Range turned into a real physical exertion, with the aim to gain a new access to the Sibyl's Cave, whose entranceway was long obstructed and impracticable.

An exertion which proved to be only partially fruitful, with the hard layers of solid rock substantially repelling all attempts to break into the hollows which are possibly lying beneath the ground. It was an exertion that did not involve any activity at the Lake of Pilate, which was considered as a totally different, less fascinating mythical context: an erroneous assumption, fostered by an insufficient analysis of the meaning and internal connections of the whole legendary tradition inhabiting the Sibillini Mountain Range.

Even though it is out of the scope of the present article to retrace the excavation campaigns carried out across that period, we must remember that, in the wake of a renewed attention towards the Sibyl's Cave and its antique enigma, diggers were present on the Sibyl's mountaintop in the years 1920, 1926, 1930, 1945, 1946, 1953, not to mention the many illegal diggers and treasure hunters that plagued the site throughout the same years, and beyond.

Amid the key figures who promoted most of the listed endeavours, we find Fernand Desonay and Domenico Falzetti.

Fernand Desonay was an eminent philologist and professor at the University of Liège, in Belgium. He was an illustrious member the Academie Royale de Langue et de Littérature Françaises de Belgique, and, most of all, he was the leading translator of the critical editions of the fifteenth-century literary works written by Antoine de la Sale. In his passionate fascination for the sibilline myth, he had visited the Sibyl's peak

for the first time in 1929, and had subsequently taken part to digging expeditions in 1930 and 1953, with further visits in 1948 and 1956, nurturing his own dream about a sibilline realm hidden beneath an Italian mountain as described by his beloved medieval author.

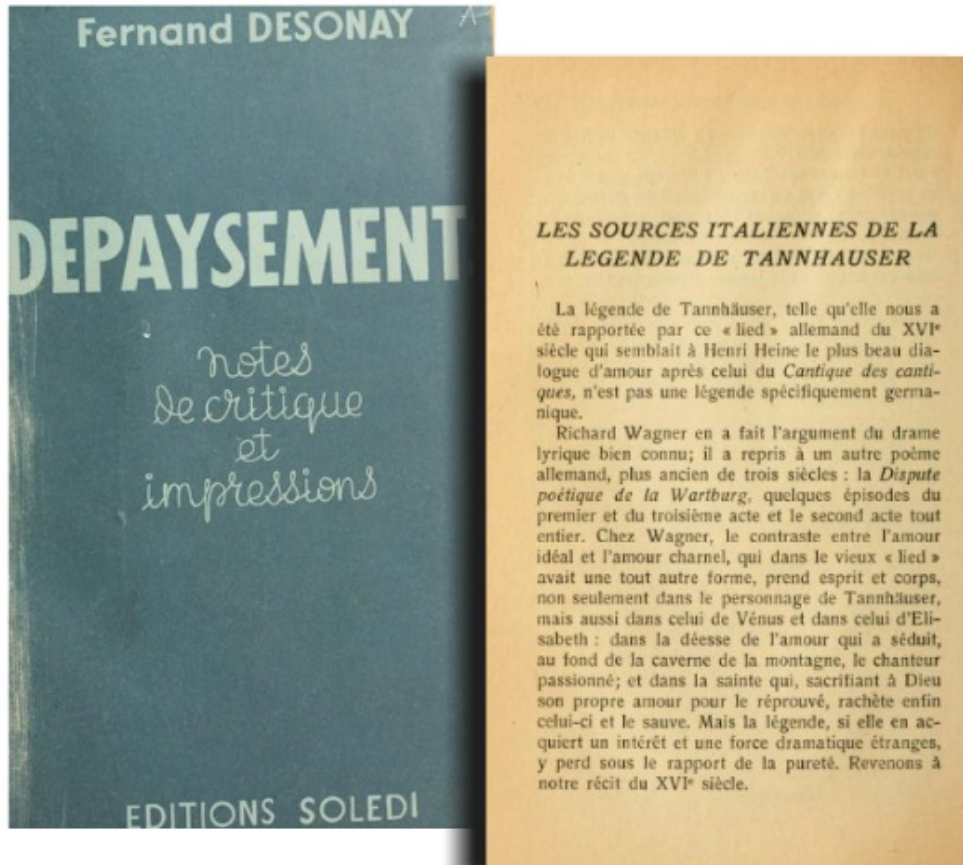


Fig. 21 - Fernand Desonay's article on Mount Sibyl included in his *Depaysement - Notes de critique et impressions* (Liège, 1945), p. 120-146)

Of course, Desonay did not subscribe in the least to the theory of a German origin for the legend of Tannhäuser. In his article *The Italian sources to the Tannhäuser's legend* (*Les sources italiennes de la légende de Tannhäuser*, 1945), after retracing the previous papers released on the subject by Gaston Paris, Heinrich Dübi and Philip Stephan Barto, he proposes his own conjecture on the birth of the mysterious legend of an Apennine Sibyl:

«Taking advantage of the results of my two journeys and the excavations at the cave, I am so bold as to present a new tentative solution. According to

me, the myth of the Sibyl must be traced back to the pagan cult of Cybele, the 'Magna Mater' of ancient Romans, goddess of the mountains, lakes, and fountains, revered through an erotic cult within the ritual cave, under the mountain's symbolic crown».

[In the original French text: «M'aidant des résultats de mon double voyage et des fouilles dans la grotte, je me permets de présenter un essai de solution neuve. A mon sentiment, le mythe de la Sibylle doit remonter au cult païen de Cybèle, la 'Magna Mater' des Romains, déesse des montagnes, des lacs, des fontaines, honorée d'un culte érotique à l'intérieur de la grotte rituelle, sous la couronne symbolique»].

Desonay's position is an evolution of the conjecture already expressed by Pio Rajna in 1912. And actually the Belgian philologist uses, in the subsequent sentences, the very same words used more than thirty years earlier by the Italian scholar and mountain climber.

In Desonay's vision, Cybele represents a good candidate to justify the presence of a possible site of worship at the Cave on the mountain-top:

«The cult of Cybele, introduced from Phrygia to Rome in 204 B.C., had experienced, across the imperial age, a great diffusion through the mountainous regions of the Apennines, and especially at the foot of the Sibillini Mountain Range. [...] Cybele is a crowned deity: Cybele 'with a tower' or 'bearing a tower' [...] Now we know that the Sibyl's cave lies beneath the mountain's 'crown'. Cybele is celebrated as the goddess of the waters, lakes and fountains. Now we know that a lake, which is called 'the lake of Queen Sibyl' in the Chantilly [Antoine de la Sale's] manuscript, lies on the mountain, not far from the cave. [...] In my opinion, the equation is manifest: Cybele is equal to the Sibyl».

[In the original French text: «Le culte de Cybèle, introduit de Phrygie à Rome en l'année 204 avant Jésus-Christ, avait pris, à l'époque impériale, une grande diffusion à travers les régions montagneuses de l'Apennin, et tout particulièrement au pied des Mons Sibyllins. [...] Cybèle est une déesse couronnée: Cybele 'turrita' ou 'turrigera' [...] Or nous savons que la Grotte de la Sibylle s'ouvre sous la 'couronne' de la montagne. Cybèle est honorée comme la déesse des eaux, des lacs et des fontaines. Or nous savons qu'un lac, dit 'le lac de la royne Sibyle' dans le manuscrit de Chantilly, dort sur la

montagne, non loin de la grotte. [...] A mon sentiment, l'équation apparaît évidente: Cybèle égale la Sibylle»].

Subsequently, on this original cult and site a further legendary layer would have established an additional narrative, concerning a visit to a sensual realm:

«The medieval legends were mostly born amid the populations who most love fantastic tales, living amid the fogs as they do, on the shores of Scotland, Ireland or Brittany. [...] It is highly plausible that the Sibyl's legend, too, has a Celtic origin. In the original version, it must have been about the stay of a rejoicing mortal in a goddess' abode, initially on a permanent basis and subsequently temporarily. [...] Such is the form of the legend, which has possibly passed from France to Italy, together with the Matter of Britain».

[In the original French text: «Les légendes médiévales sont nées, pour la plupart, chez les peuples qui aiment davantage le fantastique, habitués qu'ils sont à vivre parmi les brouillards, sur les côtes d'Ecosse, d'Irlande ou de Bretagne. [...] Il est hautement probable que la légende de la Sibylle, elle aussi, a une origine celtique. Dans la version originelle, il doit s'agir du séjour, définitif d'abord, transitoire ensuite, d'un mortel trop heureux chez une déesse. [...] Telle est la forme de la légende, qui aura passé de France en Italie, en même temps que la matière de Bretagne»].

Subsequently, Desonay's conjecture was further developed by René Herval, a French historian, in his paper *From Mount Sibyl in Italy to the German Venusberg (Du Mont italien de la Sibylle au Vénusberg allemand, 1962)*, with the establishment of a link between the Lake of Pilate and the legendary lore on Cybele:

«It is known that, where the cult of Cybele existed, it was celebrated along with that of Attis, her young lover [...] Attis was portrayed with a Phrygian cap on his head, a 'pileus'. So he was called [...] 'pileatus'. From 'pileatus' to 'Pilatus' the difference is but a single word [...] We similarly find traces of the ancient cult in the legend which depicts the body of the alleged Pilate being dragged up to the lake at Mount Vettore by oxen. In Rome [...] a solemn procession accompanied, in a chariot drawn by the same animals, the statue of Cybele to the river Almo, a tributary to the Tiber. When the

procession arrived there, the priest cast the statue into the water and proceeded to the 'lavatio' or purification [...] It is possible that the statue of the 'pileatus' god may have undergone a similar 'lavatio' into the lake at Mount Vettore. Attis and Cybele, respectively turned into Pilate et Sibyl...».

[In the original French text: «On sait que, là où existait le culte de Cybèle, était célébré parallèlement celui d'Attis, son jeune amant [...] Attis était représenté coiffé du bonnet phrygien ou 'pileus'. On disait donc de lui [...] qu'il était 'pileatus'. De 'pileatus' à 'Pilatus' la différence n'est que d'une seule lettre [...] On retrouve également des réminiscences de l'ancien culte dans la légende qui nous montre le corps du prétendu Pilate trainé jusqu'au lac du Vettore par des boeufs. A Rome [...] une procession solennelle conduisait dans un char attelé de ces animaux la statue de Cybèle jusqu'aux rives de la rivière Almo, affluent du Tibre. Lorsque le cortège était parvenu en cet endroit, l'archigalle plongeait cette statue dans l'eau et procédait à la 'lavatio' ou purification [...] il est possible que la statue du dieu 'pileatus' ait subi une 'lavatio' analogue dans le lac du Mont Vettore. Attis et Cybèle, transformés en Pilate et en Sibylle...»].

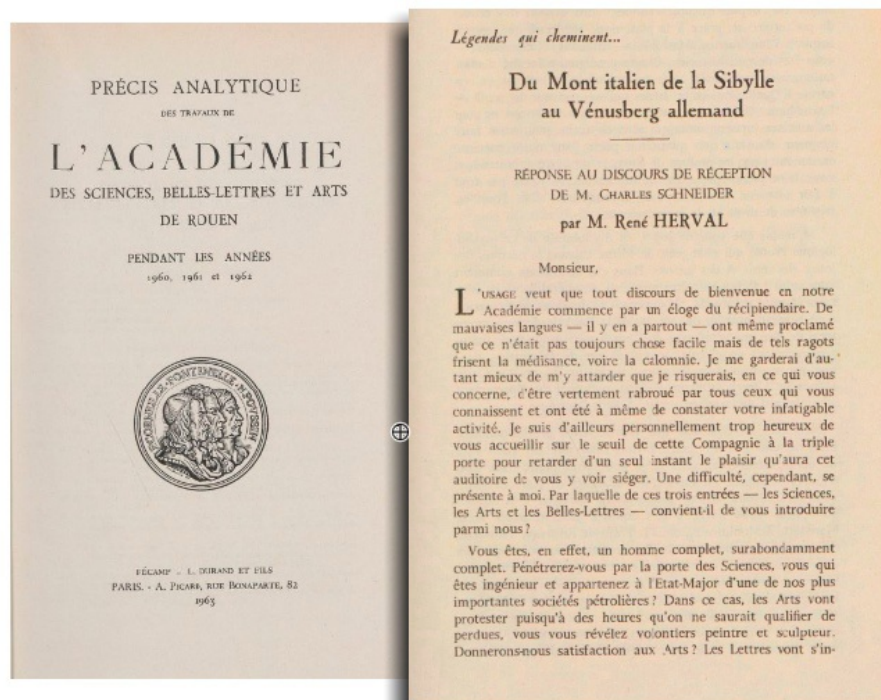


Fig. 22 - The contribution by René Herval on the Sibyl's legend included in *Précis analytique des travaux de l'Académie des Sciences, Belle-Lettres et Arts de Rouen - 1960 1961 1962* (Fécamp, 1962), p. 163-181

Strange enough, Fernand Desonay seems to utterly reject the line of investigation which brings from Antoine de la Sale and *Guerrino the Wretch* back to earlier chivalric romances, as correctly noted by Walter Pabst and Roger S. Loomis, and fully confirmed by the author of the present article in a previous paper (*Birth of a Sibyl: the medieval connection*). In a later Italian revised edition of his *Les sources italiennes de la légende de Tannhäuser* (*Le fonti italiane della leggenda del Tannhäuser*, 1963), he will write explicitly:

«In his [Pabst's] opinion, the tale narrated by Andrea da Barberino must be considered as a mere fable originated from various literary sources: Vergil, Ovid and the entire sibilline tradition of the High Middle Ages [...] I am not convinced of that».

[In the original Italian text: «A parer suo [di Pabst], il racconto di Andrea da Barberino deve essere considerato come una pura finzione derivata da diverse fonti letterarie: Virgilio, Ovidio e tutta la tradizione medioevale delle Sibille [...] Io non sono convinto»].

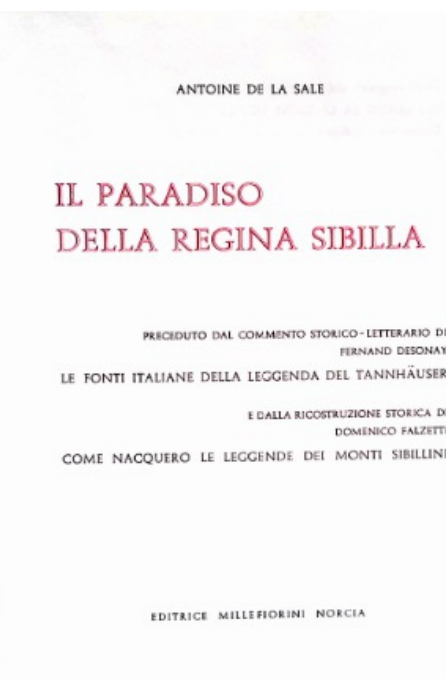


Fig. 23 - *Le fonti italiane della leggenda del Tannhäuser*, Desonay's article included in *Il Paradiso della Regina Sibilla*, a book edited by Fernand Desonay and Domenico Falzetti on the legend of Mount Sibyl (Norcia, 1963), p. 16-58

Why Fernand Desonay is so unwilling to take into consideration a chivalric origin for the tale narrated in the fifteenth century by his beloved author Antoine de la Sale? And why does he jump straight to goddess Cybele, with a leap which is truly awkward?

As we could see in our previous papers, *Birth of a Sibyl: the medieval connection* and *A legend for a Roman prefect: the Lakes of Pontius Pilate*, the presence of a medieval legendary layer enshrouding the narratives about the Sibyl's Cave and the Lake of Pilate just cannot be denied: the touch of the characters belonging to the Matter of Britain, Morgan le Fay and Sebile, is manifest on the Sibyl's hidden realm; and, in a same way, the main elements of Pontius Pilate's medieval tale are patently visible.

But Fernand Desonay wants the account written by Antoine de la Sale to be true.

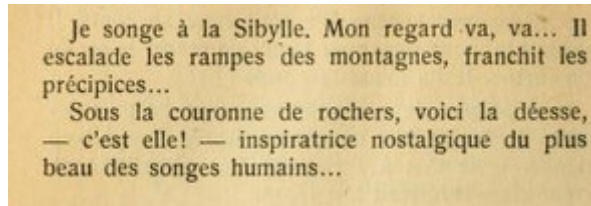
The Sibyl concealed amid the Apennines has turned into his personal dream, a fancy so magical and enthralling as to push his steps up to that far-away mountain for many times across many decades. He is known to local peasants and guides in Norcia and Montemonaco. He is a dreamer. And he wrote the most precious, perfectly beautiful words about his dream in his *Les sources italiennes de la légende de Tannhäuser*:

«I am dreaming of the Sibyl... My eyes travel up and further up... My gaze climbs the crests, jumps across the ravines... Beneath the crown of stone, there I see the goddess - there she is! - she, who inspires my longing for the most ravishing among human dreams...».

[In the original French text: «Je songe à la Sibylle. Mon regard va, va... Il escalade les rampes des montagnes, franchit les précipices... Sous la couronne de rochers, voici la déesse, - c'est elle! - inspiratrice nostalgique du plus beau des songes humains...»].

In the soul of Fernand Desonay, that dream had to be true. He would never concede, in this following the most whimsical recesses of his own heart, that Antoine de la Sale's account might be considered as a mere copy of some foreign fairy tale arrived from Germany or France, which perched

there on a barren peak, devoid of any original, enchanting mythical charge. A vain narrative for dupes.



Je songe à la Sibylle. Mon regard va, va... Il
escalade les rampes des montagnes, franchit les
précipices...
Sous la couronne de rochers, voici la déesse,
— c'est elle! — inspiratrice nostalgique du plus
beau des songes humains...

Fig. 24 - The poetical words written by Fernand Desonay on the Apennine Sibyl in his *Depaysement - Notes de critique et impressions* (Liège, 1945)

So he preferred to deny the very evidence of a patent medieval lineage for his Sibyl, and made an attempt at introducing a more illustrious ancestry, dating back to classical antiquity: Cybele, for whom no trace or mention of any shrine or cult has ever been found in connection to the Sibyl's Cave, in the known literature and at the very site. And with the introduction of a further clumsy explanation proposed by René Herval and involving Attis, Pilate, a phrygian cap and a Roman celebration with oxen, in a unmanageable effort to force Cybele into our Lake, too.

We will see that there is no need to force Cybele into the hollows of the Sibyl's Cave or the waters of the Lake of Pilate to make Desonay's dream come true.

The mythical charge that the Belgian philologist was looking for, and of which he feared the possible absence, is actually present at both sites in the Apennines, the Lake and the Cave. We will see that this mythical charge is to be linked to the presence of a legendary Otherworld, of a type that Fernand Desonay could not imagine, owing to a lack of a full understanding of the peculiar, terrifying nature of that stretch of mountainous land.

Thus, the 'Cybele connection' is to be considered as a fallacious trail: a conjecture that was introduced with the aim to confer a hue of antique 'holiness' to the site of the Sibyl's Cave, but for which no evidence is available. Even though some sort of 'holiness' may actually be assumed for the place, but on a different basis, as we will see later in this same research paper.

However, Cybele is not the only fallacious trail we encounter at the Sibyl's abode. Other trails, even more audacious and unfounded, were proposed by Domenico Falzetti during the same years.

As a passionate and enamoured investigator into the sibilline mystery, like his friend Fernand Desonay, Falzetti will propose his own conjectures as to the gods or goddesses whose names were to be invoked to make the Sibyl's Cave an ancient shrine.

2.6 More gods and more fallacious trails: Domenico Falzetti

«To us it seems we are unlocking a wide-open gate when we say that the remotest origin of the legends of the Sibillini Mountain Range is to be found in the age in which the men of central Italy lived in caverns; and that the basic, fundamental themes of the various legends are derived in turn from naturalism, animistic beliefs, divination, and the rituals of the Greek, Etruscan and Roman religions; such rites had a magical, sinister hue. On the other hand, subordinate themes, typical of the Middle Ages, came from Christianity, the Lombards and the heretical movements active between the provinces of Umbria and Marche in the fourteenth century».

[In the original Italian text: «A noi par di aprire un uscio spalancato dicendo che l'origine più remota delle leggende dei Monti Sibillini va ricercata proprio nel periodo in cui l'uomo del Centro-Italia viveva nelle caverne; e che i temi primari ed essenziali delle varie leggende sono derivati via via dal naturalismo, dall'animismo, dalla divinazione, e dai riti delle religioni greca, etrusca e romana; i quali riti avevano appunto un aspetto deprecatorio e magico. Mentre i temi secondari e prettamente medievali derivano dal cristianesimo, dai Longobardi, e dagli eretici umbro-marchigiani del sec. XIV»].

These are the words written by Domenico Falzetti in his article *How the legends of the Sibillini Mountain Range were born (Come nacquero le leggende dei Monti Sibillini)*, contained in the book *The Paradise of Queen Sibyl* (1963) which also includes a contribution by Fernand Desonay, his friend and fellow-investigator into the sibilline enigma.

Domenico Falzetti was no scholar. In the 1950s he was a celebrated musician, the conductor in Italy of a famous *The One-Thousand-Little-Singer Choir* featuring one-thousand children. He was born in Norcia and, beside music, he housed in his heart another ardent passion: that for the legend of the Apennine Sibyl.



Fig. 25 - *Come nacquero le leggende dei Monti Sibillini*, Domenico Falzetti's article included in *Il Paradiso della Regina Sibilla*, a book edited by Fernand Desonay and Domenico Falzetti on the legend of Mount Sibyl (Norcia, 1963), p. 59-121

Falzetti will ascend the cliff of that mountain, up to its secretive cave, as a member of a number of different digging expeditions: the first time in 1920, then again in 1925 and 1926; subsequently in August 1930, with Fernand Desonay; and finally in 1953, again with the Belgian philologist.

With the volume published in 1963, Domenico Falzetti intended to summarise decades of personal investigations into the legend of the Sibyl's Cave. He felt that that mountain-top, housing so powerful a legend, had a consecrated character, which a remote antiquity had bequeathed to the

Middle Ages: a position to which we fully adhere, as we actually do in the present research paper. However, the methodology applied by Falzetti to justify his point cannot be agreed upon, as he often resorts to unproven allegations and arbitrary, though fascinating, inferences.

Falzetti chooses to tread an impervious path, as he does not subscribe to Fernand Desonay's natural assumption concerning the possible presence, on the Sibyl's cliff, of a shrine dedicated to the goddess Cybele, the most obvious candidate to a divine seat on that mountaintop:

«Our most beloved friend, Professor Fernand Desonay, [...] in proposing substantial, comprehensive details, supports the assumption that the Oracle of the Apennines [...] was possibly dedicated to Cybele, the 'Magna Mater'. [...] Out of the reasons proposed by Desonay, Rajna and others, this is certainly a most valid and fascinating conjecture; but we, drawing from the local sources [...] and history, we are convinced that our own theory will prove closer to actual reality».

[In the original Italian text: «L'amico carissimo il Prof. Fernando Desonay, [...] adducendo ampi e documentati particolari, sostiene la tesi secondo cui l'Oracolo dell'Appennino [...] doveva essere dedicato alla Magna Mater Cibele. [...] Per le ragioni portate dal Desonay, dal Rajna e da altri studiosi, è da ritenere una tesi validissima e piena di fascino; ma noi, traendo spunto dalle fonti locali [...] e dalla storia, riteniamo che sia più vicina alla realtà la nostra teoria»].

And Falzetti really draws from the legendary history of Norcia when he puts forward a series of ancient deities which, according to the scarce archeological evidence available to us, were revered in the area of the Sibillini Mountain Range:

«Nemesis, the greek goddess, presided over the morality of human beings and chastised their faults. [...] An antique find of remarkable significance for our argument, and which proves an established tradition for Nemesis, is a small statue of the goddess that was unearthed at the ancient burial ground of Forca di Ancarano (Norcia). [...] The Etruscan goddess Nortia [...] was revered mainly in Bolsena [...]. In our opinion we can suppose that the bronze figure found at the burial ground in Ancarano and identified by Guardabassi as Nemesis, should be considered instead as Nortia. [...] The

transfer from Nemesis to Nortia must have taken place in the age when the Etruscans increased their strength, perhaps at the time when their commerce spread in the direction of the territory of the Picenes [...], that is in the seventh century B.C.».

[In the original Italian text: «Nemesi, divinità greca, vegliava su la vita morale degli uomini e ne puniva le colpe. [...] Un reperto arcaico di notevole importanza per il nostro argomento e che dimostra la fondata tradizione su Nemesi, è una statuetta della dea rinvenuta nella necropoli di Forca di Ancarano (Norcia). [...] La dea etrusca Nortia [...] era principalmente onorata a Bolsena [...]. A noi sembra logico ritenere che la figura in bronzo trovata nella necropoli di Ancarano e dal Guardabassi descritta come Nemesi, debba ritenersi per Nortia. [...] Il passaggio da Nemesi a Nortia si è dovuto verificare nel tempo in cui gli Etruschi vieppiù fecero sentire la loro possanza, e forse nel tempo in cui con i loro commerci dilagarono verso il Piceno [...] e cioè nel VII sec. a. C.»].

Nemesis, Nortia, and the Etruscans, with their reach across the territory of Norcia. Much of this fragmentary information is drawn by Falzetti from Feliciano Patrizi-Forti, a nineteenth-century local historian from Norcia who wrote *Historical Chronicles of Norcia (Memorie Storiche di Norcia)*. In turn, Patrizi-Forti was taking his notes from earlier seventeenth- and sixteenth-century authors, such as Father Fortunato Ciucci and Tommaso Guerrieri.

But almost nothing of what Falzetti wrote can be retrieved in any author who lived during the age of classical antiquity.

Despite the inherent uncertainty of the listed information, Falzetti's theoretical model gets even more complex than that, as he proceeds further in his elaboration:

«Fortuna, for the Romans, was the goddess of fate [...]. So it seems natural to us to assume that the priests of the Oracle of Norcia [...], seeing that the traits and powers of the goddess Nortia were all in all the same as Fortuna, decided, with a new transformation, to assimilate Nortia to Fortuna, also creating a new title: 'Nortia the goddess of Fortune'».

[In the original Italian text: «Fortuna, presso i Romani, era la dea del destino [...]. Ci par quindi naturale supporre che i sacerdoti dell'Oracolo di Nortia [...], constatando che gli attributi e i poteri della dea Nortia erano pressoché gli stessi di quelli della dea Fortuna, abbiano nuovamente concluso convenir loro di assimilare Nortia a Fortuna coniando, per titolo, la frase: 'Nortia dea della Fortuna'»].

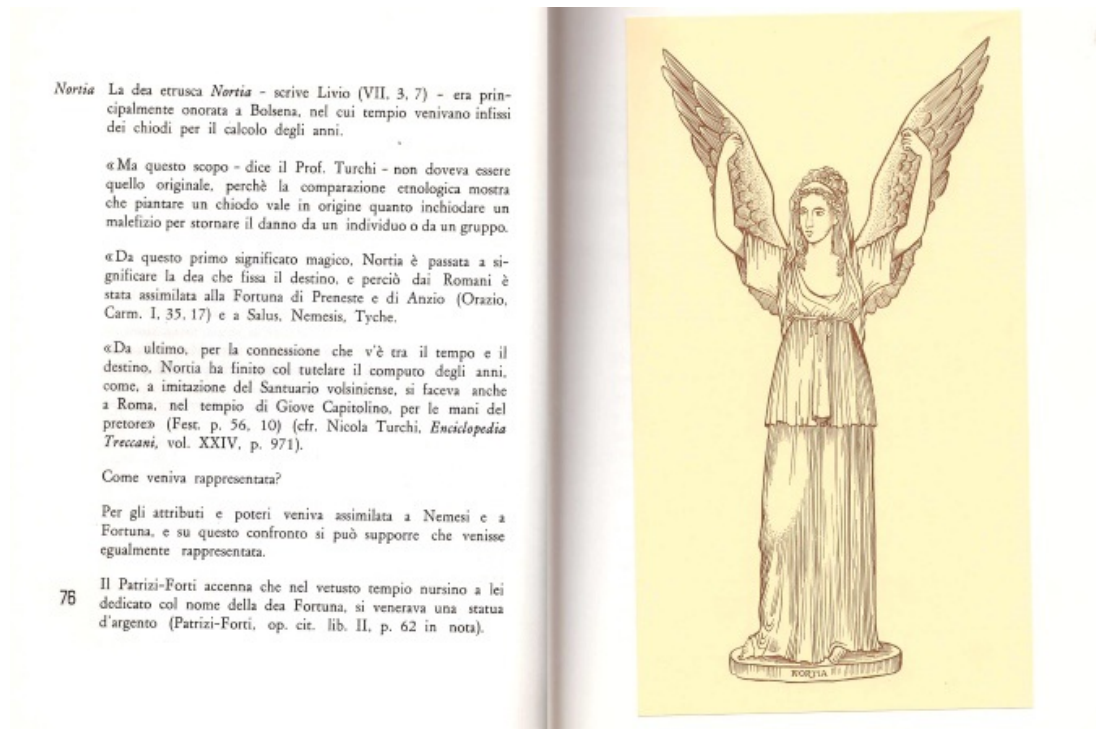


Fig. 26 - A drawing of goddess Nortia as presented in Domenico Falzetti's article *Come nacquero le leggende dei Monti Sibillini*, included in *Il Paradiso della Regina Sibilla*, a book edited by Fernand Desonay and Domenico Falzetti on the legend of Mount Sibyl (Norcia, 1963), p. 76-77

Finally, with an extensive interpretation of an excerpt drawn from the Latin author Trebellio Pollio, which mentions a visit of Emperor Claudius II Gothicus to an undetermined oracle set in the Apennines in the year 268 A.D., Falzetti infers that the Nortia / Fortuna oracle is to be identified with that same 'Oracle of the Apennines'.

The passionate researcher continues with further waves of indemonstrable assumptions, involving the Jewish diaspora and their arrival in central Italy, the clash between paganism and new Christian devotees, the arrival of the

Goths and the Lombards, heretical movements of the Middle Ages with a specific demonic penchant.

However, the whole dissertation is intertwined with numerous paralogsms based on mere suppositions, in the absence of any specific historical support and in the lack of documents which may help to prove the proposed points. Here are a few instances of unproven allegations which are only sustained by the author's intense wish to corroborate his assumptions:

«From the above situation it is easy to understand how unstable had become the reverence towards the cult of the Oracle of Nortia [...] In the countryside and on the Sibillini Mountain Range paganism resisted more than elsewhere owing to the presence of the Oracle on Mount Sibyl [...] A rumour spread (certainly in the course of the fights we described above) that the Cumaean Sibyl, who had left her Cave in Cumae, had moved to the Cave on Mount Sibyl [...] As a consequence we can assume that many of the medieval legendary themes inhabiting the Sibillini Mountain Range, like the love affairs, the handsome maidens, etc., may date to that age, and were inspired by French necromancers».

[In the original Italian text: «Da questo stato di cose è facile capire come fluttuante fosse divenuto l'omaggio al culto dell'Oracolo di Nortia [...] Nella campagna e sui Monti Sibillini il paganesimo resisteva più che altrove per la presenza dell'Oracolo del Monte della Sibilla [...] Si sparse a un tratto la voce (e certamente durante le lotte di cui abbiamo detto sopra) che la Sibilla Cumana, scomparsa dalla Grotta di Cuma, si fosse trasferita nella Grotta del Monte Sibilla [...] Viene quindi di conseguenza supporre che molti temi delle leggende medievali dei Monti Sibillini, quali gli amori, le belle donne, ecc., siano di quel tempo, e ispirate dai negromanti francesi».

The result of this uncertain methodology is a sort of tentative time schedule, which Falzetti sets down to mark the various stages that the Sibyl's Cave would have experienced across the millennia:

«From 3000 to 1500 B.C. [...] the valley of Norcia, the Sibillini Mountain Range and the Cave, too, were inhabited by a population whose name is still unknown, subsequently overruled by the 'Sicilians'. In this period the Cave was the see of a 'Tribal chief' or priest [...] In 1497 B.C., the local

population and the Pelasgians, in an effort to protect themselves from a possible return of the Sicilians, founded the settlement that in later times was called Nortia = Norza = Norsa = Nursia = Norcia [...] The decline of the Etruscans and the development of divination in Rome, particularly in the period which precedes the Empire, were the factors that led to a neglect of the oracle in Norcia [...] Towards the year 500 the Oracle of Norcia, goddess of Fortune, declined; and, following allegations by the Jews and Christians, the old priestly oracle was turned into a sibilline oracle [...] The Lombards added their own rituals, markedly heathenish and based on a stronger cult of natural elements [...] In the period 1320-1330, heretics and rebels active in the provinces of Umbria and Marche [...] brought in the territory of the Sibillini Mountain Range many of the worst arts of French magic».

[In the original Italian text: «Dal 3000 al 1500 a.C. [...] la conca di Norcia, i Monti Sibillini e quindi anche la grotta, furono abitati da una popolazione il cui nome non è ancora noto, e che fu sottomessa dai 'Siculi'. In detto periodo la Grotta fu sede di un 'Capotribù' o sacerdote [...] nel 1497, indigeni e Pelasgi, per difendersi da un eventuale ritorno dei Siculi, fondarono quella città che più tardi fu chiamata Nortia = Norza = Norsa = Nursia = Norcia [...] La decadenza degli Etruschi e il fiorire della divinazione in Roma, specialmente nel periodo che precede l'Impero, furono i fattori che fecero obliare l'oracolo di Norcia [...] Verso il 500 d.C. l'Oracolo di Nortia dea della Fortuna decadde; e su insinuazioni di Ebrei e di cristiani, il vecchio oracolo sacerdotale fu sostituito con un oracolo sibillino [...] I Longobardi vi aggiunsero i loro riti, determinati da un paganesimo basato sul naturalismo più accentuato [...] Nel periodo 1320-1330 d.C., gli eretici e i ribelli umbro-marchigiani [...] importarono nella zona dei Monti Sibillini gran parte delle più trite arti della magia francese»].

Where should we go from here?

Actually we go nowhere.

The whole elaboration set down by Domenico Falzetti, though utterly fascinating, is flawed by the lack of any substantial historical and scientific base, in the almost total absence of archeological evidences and supporting documents dating to the early Middle Ages and classical antiquity.

The idea of a cult which might have been possibly present on the peak of Mount Sibyl is not to be totally dismissed, as we will see later in this very research paper. But any conjecture involving Cybele, Nemesis, Nortia, Fortuna, or any other god or goddess proves to be a mere exercise in nomenclature, if not supported by any evidence, or, in the lack thereof, by any specific reason to assume the presence of a particular divine cult in that definite spot: the Sibyl's Cave, or the Lake of Pilate.

So the enthusiastic essay written by Domenico Falzetti is not to be considered as a scientific contribution to the comprehension of the legendary enigma of the Sibillini Mountain Range; his work is rather to be read as a sincere, unconditional profession of love for the myth of the Apennine Sibyl, a dearly-treasured portion of his very soul. Julia, his daughter, wrote the following tender words about his father:

«A mysterious fascination, an appeal which I have never fully understood nor examined urged my father, Domenico Falzetti, to 'climb the lofty peak of Mount Sibyl more than once' and turn that mount, and the legends which have made it so widely known, into the main object of his work, and entire life».

So, in our opinion, Falzetti's path was following another fallacious trail, not so different from the track that Fernand Desonay had been treading in the direction of another goddess, Cybele.

Are there other fallacious trails we can spot in this long quest for the truth about the Apennine Sibyl?

Yes, there are. Because we are now going to confront with another perplexing interpretation of the myth of the Sibillini Mountain Range. And this time it is about matriarchy, and female empowerment.

2.7 Unfounded theories: a feminist Sibyl

In the history of cultural heritages, there are always occurrences in which a historical fact, element or phenomenon, an offspring of his own age, is read

by later interpreters as they would like it to be: in the light of their own life, time and credences, regardless of a honest scientific approach and despite any common sense.

This is also the case for the legend of the Apennine Sibyl, too, which, during the second half of the twentieth century, had its own chance to undergo such an objectionable mutation process.

The most patent instance of a misrepresented interpretation of the mythical lore which inhabits the Sibillini Mountain Range is provided by the cultural operation carried out by Gioconda Beatrice Salvadori Paleotti, an Italian writer, poet and insurgent fighter against the Nazi troops during World War II, better known as Joyce Lussu.

It is beyond the scope of the present paper to illustrate the heroic, multifaceted figure of Joyce Lussu, who throughout the twentieth century was a protagonist of a long, passionate struggle, conducted in Italy and abroad, to free oppressed populations, like the Kurds, and for women's liberation and empowerment.

Fascinating as her figure may be, Joyce Lussu, whose family originated from the Italian province of Marche, ventured into a questionable cultural manipulation when she happened to confront with the legend of the Apennine Sibyl, a topic she addressed in her late years.

In her *Book of Witches - Twelve stories of extraordinary women: enchantresses, witches and sibyls (Il Libro delle Streghe - Dodici storie di donne straordinarie: maghe, streghe e sibille, 1990)*, Lussu put forward her personal vision of what a 'sibyl' is, so casting a peculiar hue on the Sibyl's legend as well:

«The sibyl is the icon of a wise, amicable woman, who loves life and people, and collects and keeps knowledge so that everybody can pick the flowers and fruits of it; she has no need to make a secret of her science, and turn her mastery into a stronghold to be guarded by weaponry. She is the token of a different choice of advancement and coexistence, the firm memory of a warless society, in which no servants enslaved by terror are present».

[In the original Italian text: «La sibilla è l'immagine di una donna saggia e serena, che ama la vita e la gente, che raccoglie e custodisce la conoscenza affinché tutti possano maturarne i fiori e i frutti, che non ha bisogno di fare della sua scienza un segreto e della sua autorità una fortezza da difendere con le armi, è il simbolo di una scelta diversa di civiltà e di convivenza, memoria tenace di una società senza guerre e senza servi dominati col terrore»].



Fig. 27 - Joyce Lussu's *Il Libro delle Streghe - Dodici storie di donne straordinarie: maghe, streghe e sibille* (Ancona, 1990)

Is this gentle, fanciful, idealized description of a 'sibyl' to be associated to the legendary Sibyl of the Apennines, too? The answer is yes, as the Italian writer openly specifies:

«I live in the countryside, in the southern portion of Marche, in the valley of a river whose name is Tenna [...]; its source is found at Mount Sibyl, not far from the cave in which, as is narrated, a most wise and knowledgeable woman used to dwell, generation after generation; she knew the present and the past, and she made reliable conjectures about the future. In actual reality the cave, refreshed by a subterranean stream and hidden by the snow

for many months throughout the year, was only used for food storage; and the Sibyl, as all her sisters used to do everywhere, lived in a normal house»].

[In the original Italian text: «Io vivo in campagna, nelle Marche meridionali, nella valle di un fiume che si chiama Tenna [...]; le sue sorgenti si trovano sul monte Sibilla, non lontano dalla grotta dove si dice abitasse, generazione dopo generazione, una donna molto saggia e molto colta, che conosceva il presente e il passato e faceva ipotesi attendibili sul futuro. In realtà la grotta, arieggiata da un torrente sotterraneo e coperta di neve per molti mesi, serviva solo come deposito per la conservazione delle scorte, e la Sibilla, come ovunque le sue consorelle, viveva in una casa normale»].

And, in another book (*Il libro perogno - Su donne, streghe e sibille*, 1982), she further explains:

«Each settlement, following the revolution that happened in the Neolithic, had its own sibyl [... with] the task to avoid oblivion, so as to pass on the heritage of peaceful communities being crashed by the effectiveness of weapons; they were secretly waiting for an increased consciousness, on a general, collective basis».

[In the original Italian text: «Ogni insediamento, dopo la rivoluzione del Neolitico, aveva la sua sibilla [... con] il compito di non dimenticare, di tramandare la cultura di comunità pacifiche schiacciate dall'efficienza delle armi; clandestinamente in attesa di più mature prese di coscienza generali e collettive»].

What is real in Lussu's vision about her womanly Sibyl? Is there any match between this Sibyl, with her alleged sisterhood of 'sibyls' scattered among the Neolithic villages, and the philological studies on the Sibyl of the Apennines, as she emerges from Antoine de la Sale, Andrea da Barberino and the manuscripted witnesses that tell of a chivalric lineage from the enchantresses Morgan and Sebile? And is there any connection between this Sibyl and the necromantic descriptions of the Apennine Sibyl which we found in Leandro Alberti, Martino Delrio, Crespetus and others?

No, there is no match at all between Lussu's Sibyl and the documented tradition which narrates of a Sibyl inhabiting the Sibillini Mountain Range.



Fig. 28 - Joyce Lussu's *Il libro perogno - Su donne, streghe e sibille* (Ancona, 1982)

As we illustrated in many preceding articles (*Birth of a Sibyl: the medieval connection, Sibillini Mountain Range: the legend before the legends, Sibillini Mountain Range, a cave and lake to the Otherworld*), the legendary figure of the Apennine Sibyl, and the sites where the Sibyl's Cave and the Lake of Pilate lie, are all marked, since the earliest literary witnesses available to us, by a fully dark hue, with a demonic presence at both places, necromancy being carried out by the Cave and Lake, and a blood-curdling otherworldly character for the two geographical features which are the landmarks for the legend.

In addition to that, in a further paper (*Apennine Sibyl: the bright side and the dark side*) we saw that this sinister renown has crossed many centuries, and has never been replaced by any joyful image of a friendly, pacifist Sibyl dispensing wise counsels to local women.

Joyce Lussu's notion of the Apennine Sibyl, a specific legend with its own literary history, though belonging to her own territory, is remarkably distorted by the social and political inclination of the writer and activist, who devoted herself to manifold battles for women's empowerment and against the destructive culture of war. In Lussu's vision, the Apennine Sibyl becomes a iconic model for all women to achieve their own liberation in a male-dominated world:

«Women have always been deprived of something: self-determination, power, identity. They bear the marks of forced alterations, sacrifice of portions of themselves, centuries of abasement, harrowing disfigurement, and violence; all that generates fear, lies, misery».

[In the original Italian text: «Alle donne hanno sempre tolto qualche cosa: autonomia, autorità, identità. Portano i segni di adattamenti forzosi, di rinuncia a una parte di se stesse, di mortificazioni secolari, di mutilazioni profonde, di violenze subite che generano paure, inganni, meschinità»].

The vision presented by Joyce Lussu is set in the path defined by Marija Gimbutas, the Lithuanian archaeologist and anthropologist, who in her book *The Civilization of the Goddess* (1991) proposed a controversial theory on the alleged, unproven existence of a primigenial gynocentric society, ruled by women and opposed to war, subsequently defeated and replaced throughout Europe by a male-dominated, warlike culture after 3.500 B.C.

But what has all this to do with the legends which inhabit the Sibillini Mountain Range?

The answer is: almost nothing. The documentary tradition which is available to us does not provide the least support to the interpretation of an Apennine Sibyl as a sort of womanly herald of a long-gone era of prosperity and peace. An era whose legendary existence is only supported by Marija Gimbutas, while historians are convinced that in a far past human societies were just as warlike as today, in a usual framework of fights for the appropriation of limited available resources against competing human groups.

Beside Joyce Lussu, other contemporary scholars and authors appear to have more or less intentionally neglected or thoroughly disregarded the demonic marks of the sibilline myth. However, the positive, matriarchal character of a wise Sibyl, in her capacity as a queen and a seer and a teacher of crafts to local communities of women, has never existed.

The Apennine Sibyl has never been a sort of implausible, ahead-of-her-time forerunner of modern feminist instances: such a trait is definitely not retrievable in any of the ancient sources concerning the Sibyl of the Apennines, and has no known philological background nor the least scientific evidence.

Cybele, Nortia, Nemesis, Fortuna, and now a sibilline, almost feminist goddess: all of them are wrong tracks, fallacious trails that actually lead nowhere, providing no sound clue as to what the Apennine Sibyl was.

To tread firmer grounds, we have to address an amazing scholarly figure who, in his early life and by a single, concise research paper, dating to the year 1947, impressed the right direction to the complex investigation concerning the origins of the legendary tale of the Apennine Sibyl.

An utterly outstanding contribution, which we will see in the next paragraph.

2.8 Being on the right track: the amazing lesson of Luigi Paolucci

In 1947, a 22-years-old student from Montemonaco, a small hamlet sitting before the crowned cliff of Mount Sibyl, in the central Italian Apennines, presented his graduation thesis at the Department of Literature of the University of Rome *La Sapienza*. His mentor was Paolo Toschi, an eminent philologist who, in turn, had been a pupil of Pio Rajna.

The young man was Luigi Paolucci. The title of his dissertation was *The Apennine Sibyl (La Sibilla Appenninica)*. And, young as he was, by his brilliant contribution he immediately steered the discussion from a plethora of whimsical assumptions to logical reasoning, and towards the most appropriate, most productive direction:

«What is of interest for us is the fact that the said [classical] Sibyls have no relation at all with our case, and that certainly in antiquity the renowned cave set amid the Apennines was not the abode of any Sibyl. This inference is fully motivated by total lack of any relevant reference [...] Pilate has certainly nothing to do with our mountains».

[In the original Italian text: «Quel che a noi importa considerare è che le suddette Sibille [classiche] non hanno relazione alcuna col nostro caso e che nell'epoca pagana la grotta famosa degli Appennini non è stata assolutamente recesso di una Sibilla. Tale è la deduzione autorizzata dall'assenza completa di qualsiasi testimonianza in proposito [...] Pilato non ha certo nulla a che fare con i nostri monti»].

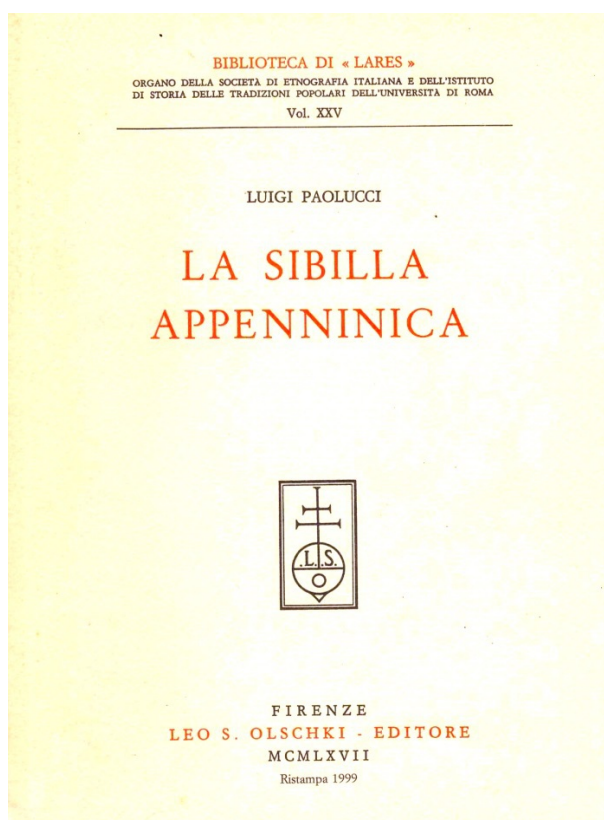


Fig. 29 - Luigi Paolucci's *La Sibilla Appenninica* (Firenze, 1967)

With a few words, a young student dealing with the presentation of his graduation thesis effectively dismantles many illusory beliefs that are held still today by the most passionate lovers of this legend: a task that we

ourselves completed in our previous articles *The Apennine Sibyl: a journey into history in search of the oracle* and *A legend for a Roman prefect: the Lakes of Pontius Pilate* by employing more than 200 pages of elucubrations.

But the talented student went even farther, as he did not flinch from a thorough criticism of the daring conjectures expressed by the most illustrious philologists of his time, like Fernand Desonay and Pio Rajna:

«We briefly note that Desonay, basing on a hasty, cursory analysis of the most ancient local traditions, and under the influence of an obstinate notion he himself had [...] pushes himself as far as to prove the existence, in antiquity, of a cult dedicated to Cybele in the cave. We clarify in advance that we totally disagree with the conjecture proposed by Desonay, even because amid the many arguments he puts forward [...] we repute that no one of them can substantially imply the existence of such a cult».

[In the original Italian text: «Diremo in breve che il Desonay da uno studio sommario e superficiale delle più antiche tradizioni locali, seguendo una sua idea fissa [...] si spinge alla dimostrazione dell'antica esistenza nella grotta di un culto dedicato a Cibele. Premettiamo che dal canto nostro non accettiamo le idee del Desonay, anche perché fra tutti gli argomenti addotti [...] nessuno ci sembra tale da impegnare seriamente l'esistenza di un simile culto»].

Neat and clear. Again, Luigi Paolucci highlights all the inconsistencies and paralogisms that affect the reasoning of Fernand Desonay, Pio Rajna and Domenico Falzetti, all of them so enamoured of the legendary tale of an Apennine Sibyl that they seem to forget the need to constantly rely on historical data and common sense, as we ourselves noted in previous paragraphs in this same research paper.

And when other scholars, supporting the idea of the presence of the ancient goddess, and fancifully claiming that the word 'Cybele' possibly underwent a transformation into the assonant word 'Sibyl', Paolucci replies harshly:

«We briefly remind [...] that the letter 'C' in 'Cybele' is marked by a hard sound, in Latin as well as in Greek [...] so that the said event could never occur».

[In the original Italian text: «ricordiamo brevemente [...] che il C di Cibebe è duro in latino come lo è in greco [...] e che mai può essersi verificato il fenomeno suddetto»].

But Paolucci does not intend to confine the Apennine Sibyl into a mere realm of illusory dreams. He is convinced that the mythical power of the place, nurtured by centuries of popular elaboration, may hide some actual truth, and a possible actual cult, even though Cybele is not the right answer:

«The reader who followed our line of criticism of the conjecture proposed by Desonay, may have noted that we did not mean to condemn his intention to retrace ancient ages and cults, on which more recent myths and legends may have found a support. In our opinion, too, the approach that Pio Rajna handed down to the Belgian philologist is triggered by a deep penetration into the matter. If all scholars agree that legends are commonly the products of earlier traditions, we only want that when the past is retraced, this operation is carried out on a gradual basis and in a subsequent time: in the first place, a preliminary assessment on the legends and traditions of the Middle Ages is needed».

centi, ci sia parsa condannabile. L'indirizzo che il Belga ha ereditato da Pio Rajna anche per noi risponde ad una intuizione profonda.

Noi vogliamo soltanto, se è comune convinzione che qualsiasi leggenda sia sotto qualche aspetto prodotto di una precedente tradizione, vogliamo che, questo risalire al passato, avvenga gradualmente e in un secondo tempo, dopo l'esame preliminare delle leggende e delle tradizioni medievali.

Noi siamo sicuri della fama antica del monte, dove Si-

Fig. 30 - A methodological excerpt contained in Luigi Paolucci's *La Sibilla Appenninica* (Firenze, 1967), p. 15

[In the original Italian text: «Chi ci ha seguito nella breve critica, fatta alla ipotesi del Desonay, avrà notato come non la sua intenzione di risalire ad epoche e culti remoti, su cui fondare miti e leggende più recenti, ci sia parsa condannabile. L'indirizzo che il Belga ha ereditato da Pio Rajna anche per noi risponde ad una intuizione profonda. Noi vogliamo soltanto,

se è comune convinzione che qualsiasi leggenda sia sotto qualche aspetto prodotto di una precedente tradizione, vogliamo che, questo risalire al passato, avvenga gradualmente e in un secondo tempo, dopo l'esame preliminare delle leggende e delle tradizioni medievali»].

Again, in two or three sentences Luigi Paolucci summarises his brilliant vision of a comprehensive research process, the way it should be: first of all, the medieval legendary layers must be determined and analysed; only afterwards the researchers are authorised to address the lower, more antique layer of the legends of the Sibyl's Cave and Pilate's Lake. And this is exactly what we have been doing in the past two years with our previous articles *Antoine de La Sale and the magical bridge concealed beneath Mount Sibyl*, *The literary truth about the magical doors in 'The Paradise of Queen Sibyl'*, *Birth of a Sibyl: the medieval connection* and *A legend for a Roman prefect: the Lakes of Pontius Pilate*; and, then, with the subsequent articles *Sibillini Mountain Range: the legend before the legends* and *Sibillini Mountain Range, a cave and lake to the Otherworld*.

So Paolucci outlines the right track which a truly scientific investigation into the sibilline enigma must follow. The medieval tradition, the more recent layer, connected to the appearance of the name of the Sibyl, must be studied first, without searching for random candidates marked by a divine nature amid the darkness of antiquity:

«We expect the research method to confront with the earliest traditions, as it must be founded mainly on them. Because if the reverse path is trodden, we would stumble into an inconsistency in the reconstructed model, which must necessarily proceed from the present back into the past, from what is certain today to the uncertainty of the past, as we are only provided with [literary] witnesses that are very recent. As a result we would face an inability to ascertain the link between what happened before and what occurred later: precisely what happened to Desonay, who vainly attempted to connect Cybele to the Sibyl».

[In the original Italian text: «Pretendiamo che il metodo di ricerca non prescinda ma si basi anzitutto sullo studio delle tradizioni più recenti, poiché in caso contrario a parte l'incongruenza della ricostruzione che deve svolgersi necessariamente dal presente al passato, dal certo all'incerto dato che le uniche testimonianze sono quelli di tempi recenti; in caso contrario

correremmo il pericolo di non saper più trovare il nesso tra il prima e il poi, precisamente come è accaduto al Desonay che invano ha cercato di ricollegare Cibele alla Sibilla»].

Clearest words have never been written on the subject. Paolucci's astounding intuition was that the key to the solution of the enigma of the Sibillini Mountain Range lies in the careful disentanglement of a «complex of foreign, layered legendary themes» («complesso di motivi estranei e sovrapposti»). A disentanglement process that must start from the additional layers of medieval origin which narrate of a Sibyl and a Roman prefect, and then go back in time, to the true core of the legend.

A true core, as Paolo Toschi wrote in the introductory words to the printed edition of Paolucci's essay, that will provide a final answer to the most fundamental questions of all:

«Why were these very places, and not different ones, inhabited by the Sibyl, and why did necromancers use to come here to consecrate their spellbooks? We are led, almost unintentionally, to go back to the original source, to the birth of the myth».

[In the original Italian text: «Ma perché proprio in questi determinati luoghi e non in altri abitava la Sibilla, e i maghi vengono a consacrare il libro del Comando? Si è portati così quasi insensibilmente, a risalire al problema della fonte prima, alle origini del mito»].

Ma perché proprio in questi determinati luoghi e non in altri abitava la Sibilla, e i maghi vengono a consacrare il libro del Comando? Si è portati così quasi insensibilmente, a risalire al problema della fonte prima, alle origini del mito.

Fig. 31 - The central question in the analysis of the legendary tales of the Sibillini Mountain Range as stated by Paolo Toschi in Luigi Paolucci's *La Sibilla Appenninica* (Firenze, 1967), p. XV

Unfortunately, Luigi Paolucci did not progressed further into the amazing path he himself had traced. He decided to tread a different professional track, until he passed away when he was still a young man. It was the year 1959.

It is an honor, for us, to continue his work by following an intuition which is exactly similar to the penetrating vision he expressed at the middle of the twentieth century. An intuition that we drew, as we explained in a preceding paragraph, from an article of Ferdinando Neri, with his hint to the «ever-slaming metal door» («porte di metallo, che battono continuamente») found in ancient fairy tales concerning the netherworld, which opened the way to a fruitful research into the medieval layer of the legendary tales of the Sibillini Mountain Range; and yet an intuition that Luigi Paolucci had as well, by following a same rationale and fully logical *modus operandi*.

And we repute that we are now ready to make a significant attempt at concluding his unfinished work.

2.9 Twenty-first century, a substantial void in research

When we leave the twentieth century and jump right into the twenty-first, do we find any further investigations or updated researches into the mystery of the legendary tales which live amid the Sibillini Mountain Range?

We find only a small number of research contributions. The limited presence of significant books and papers is blatant. And this scanty presence is only found in Italy, with no scientific production being released by contributors from other countries.

Only a handful of scientific, university-level, research-grade books and papers has been published in recent years, and only in Italy. None of them investigates the origins of the legends of the Sibyl's Cave and the Lake of Pilate, a topic which is only addressed by the series of articles *The Apennine Sibyl - A Mystery and a Legend*, released by the author of the present paper since 2017.

In Italy, Sonia Maura Barillari, a philologist and professor at the University of Genoa, has been in recent years one of the few experienced scholars to confront rewardingly with the legends of the Sibillini Mountain Range, in a masterly philological framework. With her article *Town of dames: female chthonian rule between Ireland and the Sibillini Mountain Range (La città delle dame: la sovranità ctonia declinata al femminile fra l'Irlanda e i*

Monti Sibillini, 2009), Barillari identifies the otherworldly setting in which the narratives written by Andrea da Barberino and Antoine de la Sale must be read by the interpreter. A comparative analysis between *Guerrino the Wretch* and the earlier poem *Huon of Bordeaux* is presented. And the common characters that connect the sibilline tale to the legendary tradition of the Purgatory of St. Patrick are addressed and highlighted. We also mention Barillari's interesting article *Il 'problematico libro sulla sibilla': uno scritto inedito di Pio Rajna e le carte autografe preliminari alla sua ultimazione* (2010) on Pio Rajna and his relation with the sibilline enigma.



Sonia Maura Barillari
 LA CITTÀ DELLE DAME
 LA SOVRANITÀ CTONIA DECLINATA AL FEMMINILE
 FRA L'IRLANDA E I MONTI SIBILLINI

Abstract - This study's subject is the motif of «royal goddess» who dispenses wealth and power to the men if they agree to become her husbands. In this case this motif is analysed through the reading interpretation and the collation of some literary works different as regards language, genre and content: four versions of a *visio* in which a knight named Ludovico goes in Ireland to visit saint Patrick's Purgatory, the poem of *Huon d'Auvergne*, an episode of the Antoine de la Sale's *Salade*, the Andrea da Barberino's *Guerrino Merchioso*. They have in common the peculiarity that they all attribute infernal features to the enchanted kingdom of this fairy queen. The different ways to treat this motif and its transformations in connection with the character of each work can help us to understand on the one hand the reciprocal relationships among these works, on the other hand how this motif has changed its meaning and its functions to be compatible with the description of the Other World given by Dante in his *Comedia*.

1. Le signore del purgatorio

Sul finire dell'Ottocento Ludovico Frati pubblica alcuni stralci del *Purgatorio di Ludovico di Francia*, affiancando la versione latina del ms. Vind. lat. 57 della Biblioteca Nazionale di Napoli¹ (all'epoca ancora patrimonio della Palatina di Vienna) a quella volgare del ms. 1508 della Biblioteca del Museo Correr di Venezia². Il suo interesse –

1. Di cui ho allestito l'edizione critica: «Il *Purgatorio di Ludovico di Sur* (Napoli, Biblioteca Nazionale, Vind. lat. 57, cc. 288-263): un testo a cavallo fra Medioevo e Rinascimento», in *Studi medievali* 3^a serie XLIX (2008), pp. 759-808.
 2. L. Frati, «Tradizioni Storiche del Purgatorio di San Patrizio», *Giornale Storico*

L'immagine riflessa, N.S. Anno XVIII (2009), pp. 87-121.

Fig. 32 - Sonia Maura Barillari's article *La città delle dame: la sovranità ctonia declinata al femminile fra l'Irlanda e i Monti Sibillini*, included in *L'Immagine Riflessa - Testi, società, culture*, special issue on *Medioevo folklorico. Intersezioni di testi e culture*, XVIII (Alessandria, 2009), p. 87-121

Barillari is possibly the only existing scholarly bridge, in Italy and abroad, spanning across either traditions, i.e. the Italian tradition of the Apennine Sibyl and its northern-European literary links, which point to the Matter of Britain and the Purgatory of St. Patrick: without this sort of bridge, the gap between the two cultural traditions cannot be crossed, and the Sibyl of the Apennines seems to stand out in a void that is only caused by the

substantial lack of expertise, in Italy, on topics such as the chivalric romances and the visionary tradition about the Otherworld, typically addressed by scholars from other countries, who, in turn, are not used to cope with the Italian themes connected to the Sibyl's Cave and the Lake of Pilate.

With *The last Sibyl* (*L'ultima Sibilla*, 2012), Maria Luciana Buseghin, an Italian cultural anthropologist, has provided the most complete reference book on the literary tradition connected to the Apennine Sibyl: the only comprehensive guide published in Italy in the last decades on a topic so fascinating and rich of interdisciplinary and intertextual links.



Fig. 33 - Maria Luciana Buseghin's *L'ultima Sibilla* (Pescara, 2012)

Among the most significant books, we mention *Il Paradiso della Regina Sibilla* (2001), a critical edition of the text of Antoine de la Sale as taken from the manuscript preserved in Chantilly, a useful, high-quality work by the Swiss scholar Patrizia Romagnoli; and *Andrea da Barberino, Il Guerrin Meschino, edizione critica secondo l'antica vulgata fiorentina* (2005), a fundamental work elaborated by Mauro Cursietti on the existing

manuscripts, though his conjecture about a localisation of the sibilline mountains in Lucera, in the southern-Italian province of Puglia, cannot be agreed upon out of an entire illustrious literary history which definitely places the Apennine Sibyl in Norcia, and owing to the additional fact that Lucera lies on a plain with no significant elevations in its vicinity.



Fig. 34 - Patrizia Romagnoli's *Il Paradiso della Regina Sibilla* (Verbania, 2001) and Mauro Cursi's *Andrea da Barberino, Il Guerrin Meschino, edizione critica secondo l'antica vulgata fiorentina* (Roma-Padova, 2005)

We also mention the remarkable article released by D. Aringoli, B. Gentili, G. Pambianchi of the University of Macerata and Anna Maria Piscitelli on *The contribution of the 'Sibilla Appenninica' legend to karst knowledge in the Sibillini Mountains* (2007), a scientific account of the geological survey conducted on the peak of Mount Sibyl in the year 2000.

In 2015 Tea Fonzi, a scholar at the University of Macerata, released a significant article on *La Sibilla dell'Appennino: una risorsa dimenticata*, in which the Sibyl of the Apennines is noted as a «forgotten resource» that should undergo a wave of renewed interest in the light of its potential in terms of cultural heritage and touristic attraction.

In this wide-open territory, not still guarded enough by the official research, much space is available for unreliable, nonscientific contributors to publish a series of dubious theories, conjectures and inferences on the origin of the myth of the Apennine Sibyl.

Many local writers and experts have proposed their own views, in fictional books and pseudoscientific essays, on the fascinating legends which live amid the crests of the Sibillini Mountain Range. Giuliana Poli, with her *L'Antro della Sibilla e le sue Sette Sorelle* (2008) sets down a fanciful scheme involving a number of small, ancient churches lying in that territory, in a cosmic liaison with the Sibyl and the constellation of Virgo. Enrico Tassetti begins a travel which starts from the paintings of Guercino, Guido Reni and Nicolas Poussin in search of the Apennine Sibyl in his novel *Il segreto della Sibilla Pastora* (2015). Alessandro Menghini, a professor at the University of Perugia, in his *L'enigma del monte della Sibilla* (2008), retraces the physical steps of Guerrin Meschino and Antoine de la Sale along the very trails allegedly trodden by the fictional hero and the French courtier. Americo Marconi, with *La Sibilla*, carried out a journey of the soul across his own memories of the Sibillini Mountain Range. Giovanni Rocchi, a prolific local author, with his *La Sibilla e i Piceni* (1998) claims that the Apennine Sibyl is to be traced back to the ancient population of Picenes, who lived in antiquity between the Apennines and the Adriatic Sea. Massimo Spagnoli declares his perplexity about the whole myth and its supporters in his *La Sibylla Appenninica - Mitologia e mitomania*, correctly noting that this legend is not original from the place, and many literary links can be spotted.



Fig. 35 - Novels and nonprofessional essays on the Apennine Sibyl

Finally, last but not least, in 2010 the author of the present research paper published a novel, *The Eleventh Sibyl*, in which some of the themes that

have been developed in the research series *The Apennine Sibyl - A Mystery and a Legend* were already referenced at an early stage, with an otherworldly character for the Sibyl and a connection to the peculiar nature of the Sibillini Mountain Range.

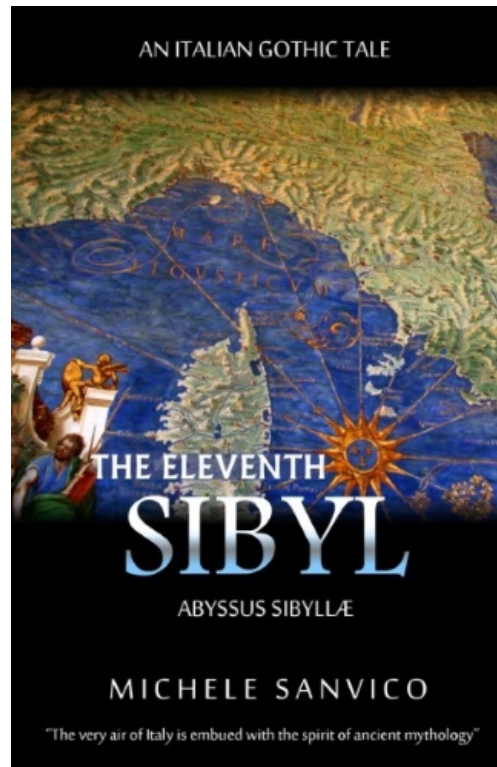


Fig. 36 - Michele Sanvico's novel *The Eleventh Sibyl*

For the sake of human compassion, we will not mention here the babbles spread around by the silly lovers of magical arts or even the friends and foes of the fiendish presences that some still think might inhabit the Sibillini Mountain Range, as if the Middle Ages still weren't over.

So where do we go from here?

We go right ahead. Ahead into the very heart of an antique enigma. The way is now open.

There is nothing left for us to do before we make our final effort to cast light on the true origin of the legendary tales which live amid the Sibillini Mountain Range.

So let's start this ultimate and conclusive travel into the inner core of the mystery of the Apennine Sibyl and the Lake of Pilate.

3. Into the true core of the myth

Finally we got to the very verge of the mystery of the Sibillini Mountain Range.

With *The Apennine Sibyl - A Mystery and a Legend*, we have released a series of research papers since 2017 and throughout the subsequent years. We ascertained the subsistence of medieval legendary overlays which concealed the true mythical nature of the Sibyl's Cave and the Lake of Pilate, with their spurious Sibyl and Roman prefect, both originating from foreign narratives coming from northern Europe. Subsequently, we determined the common, original traits which marked both the Lake and the Cave, with their demons, necromancers, and tempests.

Then, we understood that the Lake and the Cave may have been considered, in antiquity, as entryways to some sort of Otherworld, in the framework of a series of most remarkable visionary tales which are part of the most ancient culture of Western Europe, including Homer's Cimmerians and Vergil's Cumaean Avernus, with numerous medieval offsprings, especially originated in Ireland, among which was the legend of knight Owein and the Purgatory of St. Patrick.

As we wrote in the conclusion to our previous paper *Sibillini Mountain Range, a cave and lake to the Otherworld*, all the clues seem to indicate that in this specific location of Europe, amid the Sibillini Mountain Range, by a Lake and a Cave, mortal beings like Aeneas, like Owein, may have made actual attempts to access a different world, normally forbidden to the living: a realm of dead souls, a kingdom which was set under the rule of non-human entities, apparently of a divine, terrifying nature. A chthonian, subterranean Otherworld.

A passageway to some sort of supposed demonic presence. An access that was to be unlocked by means of necromantic rituals. A point of contact

with a subterranean Otherworld. A 'hot spot', a crevice drilled into the mountains to establish an appalling communication with the chthonian powers beneath. A break in the continuum of our ordinary world.

We are now about to answer two fundamental, hair-raising questions. The hunt for the answers to these questions has lasted many centuries, from the time of Antoine de la Sale up to Fernand Desonay and Luigi Paolucci.

And the questions are:

- 1) why this Apennine site was possibly considered as an entryway to the Otherworld?
- 2) if our assumptions are true, what sort of Otherworld was this? What sort of dreadful dream did men conceive at the Lake and Cave set amid the mountains of the central Apennines?



Fig. 37 - Mount Vettore and the Sibillini Mountain Range flooded by the slant rays of sunset

As we stated at the very beginning of the present article, the hypothesis we are going to set down in the following paragraphs is basically a conjecture, scientific as it claims to be: it is to be considered as a proposed solution to the legendary riddle connected to the presence of amazing myths that live amid the Sibillini Mountain Range. As such, our conjecture can certainly be

the subject of critical analysis for a thorough evaluation of its reasonableness and plausibility. It should certainly undergo a further, qualified assessment on its actual validity, an assessment to be carried out by interested scholars and researchers.

So let's start our final journey into the shaping of a conjecture which concerns the potential reason for which a Lake and a Cave set amid the Sibillini Mountain Range, in Italy, were turned by men in antiquity into a possible, legendary passageway to the Otherworld.

As we wrote in the previous paper we mentioned above, we believe that the conjectured legendary credence concerning an entryway to a mythical Otherworld in central Italy was possibly one of a most terrific, dreadful fabric.

An entryway, a crevice in our world, opened in the mountainous ridges out of sheer terror. Terror for one own's life. Terror for the fate of one's family. Terror for the ruin of one's land.

Because, in our opinion, the nature of this sibilline Otherworld is closely linked to the very nature of this Apennine territory, and to a very specific, blood-curdling word. A word which unchains the deepest fears of human soul.

And this word is earthquake.

4. The land of earthquakes

4.1 A ghastly unheralded visitor

The sky may be clear or cloudy. It may be snowing, or raining, or a warm sun may shine over the land. It may happen during the day, or in the middle of the night, or just before dawn.

You never know when it comes. Yet, one day, it comes.

First, the roar comes. A baleful, fiendish noise, which proceeds from the abysses underneath, growing louder and louder beneath your feet, as an evil titan who announces its terrifying visit.

Then, the shock arrives. The world begins to move, slowly at first, with a dull oscillating motion, up and down, up and down again, so that you cannot keep an upright position anymore, as the roar deepens and turns into a fiendish bellow.

Now the ground starts to sway from right to left, and next from left to right, and once again from right to left, as the first thick fragments of plaster begins to detach from the walls, and frenzied cattle, raising loud, terror-stricken calls, rush about frantically, as if they were bewildered corpses brought back abruptly to life from the realm of the dead.

And, at last, the very surface of the earth surges. The beast screams with enraged might; like a shroud, now its thundering voice covers the horrified wails raised by the human beings. The world is blown up from the inside; the walls open up; the roofs collapse, madly shaken; wrecked stones, broken shingles, ruined beams of wood are all crashing to the ground, burying and crushing flesh and blood and wreckage, while for long, interminable seconds the shock goes on, smashing steadfastly, banging men and earth as a hammer being wielded by the crazy hands of a madman.

Afterwards, all lies still in death, destruction, and silence.

The beast has come and gone. Once again it has drowsed into its dreamful sleep; and many years will elapse before it awakens anew.

But you know, everybody knows that one day, or one night, it will come back again. Right there.

There. In the Sibillini Mountain Range.

Because the Sibillini Mountain Range are a land of earthquakes. From the remotest antiquity. Since time immemorial.

It is in the very area of the Sibillini Mountain Range, in central Italy, that earthquakes are very frequent. And very destructive.

This fact has turned into a manifest evidence on the fateful days of August, 24th and October, 30th 2016. On the first day, at 3.36 in the night, while the whole land was sleeping, a powerful earthquake, totally unheralded, struck the Sibillini Mountain Range from its southern borders. The towns of Amatrice, Accumoli and Arquata were annihilated, and Castelluccio di Norcia, set on a hill in the middle of the mountainous ridge, was partially demolished. Three hundred lives were claimed that night by the mighty power beneath.



Fig. 38 - The town of Arquata, on the southern edge of the Sibillini Mountain Range, demolished by the earthquakes in 2016

Two months later, after a series of subsequent shocks which originated from the northern side of the massif, a second, giant blow hit the whole region, the epicenter laying in the vicinity of the town of Norcia: Castelluccio was entirely wiped out, and Norcia itself was damaged, though substantially spared out of a thorough, far-sighted reconstruction

conducted by Mayor Alberto Novelli more than three decades earlier, following a previous earthquake.



Fig. 39 - The hamlet of Castelluccio di Norcia sitting on hill before Mount Vettore, wrecked by the earthquakes in 2016

Because on September, 19th 1979 another earthquake had struck the eastern side of the Sibillini Mountain Range. And in 1971 other seismic waves hit the same area. In addition to that, if we proceed further backwards in time, we get to the devastating earthquake which occurred on August, 22nd 1859, again in the mountainous ridges set between Mount Vettore and Norcia. That time, the monster underneath claimed nearly a hundred lives:

«The heat was intense and suffocating; the sky was encumbered with large clouds, murky and hideous, agitated and amassed horizontally towards the southwestern horizon [...] A powerful, vigorous bumping shake, accompanied by a deep grave roar, not different from the rumble of a great

thunder [...] preceded six further wavering, horizontal shakes, which ended, as it seems, in the space of six or seven seconds».

[In the original Italian text: «Il calore era stemperato e soffocante: il cielo presentavasi ingombro di nuvoloni bruttamente torbidi, scomposti, ed accampati in aria, segnatamente verso Sud-Ovest, in senso orizzontale. [...] Una validissima e veementissima scossa sussultoria accompagnata da cupo e profondo rombo simile al bombire di un gran tuono [...] precedé altre sei terribili scosse ondulatorie, or orizzontali, compiutesi, come pare, nello spazio di sei, o sette minuti secondi»].

RELAZIONE
DEL TERREMOTO
CHE DESOLÒ NORCIA
IL GIORNO 22 AGOSTO 1859
E DI UN INCENDIO
AVVENUTO IL 6 SETTEMBRE
DELLO STESSO ANNO
SCRITTA
DALL' ABB. LEOPOLDO MANNOCCI

ROMA
TIPOGRAFIA DI ANGELO PLACIDI
Via Sant' Elena N. 71.
1860

Sorse finalmente l' infaustissimo 22 Agosto, giorno di Lunedì del volgente anno 1859 che segnava la totale distruzione di Norcia. Il calore era stemperato e soffocante: il cielo presentavasi ingombro di nuvoloni bruttamente torbidi, scomposti, ed accampati in aria, segnatamente verso Sud-ovest, in senso orizzontale. Nell' attò dunque che batteva un' ora e un quarto

Ma il fermo della cosa è che una validissima e veementissima scossa sussultoria accompagnata da cupo e profondo rombo simile al bombire di un gran tuono, la quale atterrò di colpo molti coloni sparsi per le circostanti campagne, e non pochi cittadini seduti a mensa, precedé altre sei terribili scosse ondulatorie, od orizzontali, compiutesi, come pare, nello spazio di sei, o sette minuti secondi. Tutto questo

Fig. 40 - The earthquake of August, 22nd 1859 from *Relazione del terremoto che desolò Norcia...* written by Abbot Leopoldo Mannocchi (Roma, 1860), p. 9 and 11

Let's travel further back in time, until we meet another ruinous earthquake which devastated Norcia and the Sibillini Mountain Range. It was May, 12th 1730 and the seismic waves caused the death of many hundreds:

«On May, 12th, at 10 in the evening, in Rome a fierce earthquake was perceived which lasted some 6 minutes [...] it demolished almost all the buildings in the small town of Norcia, where many people were buried by the collapsing walls [...] In Norcia there were three shocks, of which the last was so savage that all the buildings in town were disrupted to their roofs»].

[In the original French text: «Le 12. Mai, vers les 10. heures du soir, on sentit à Rome une secousse de tremblement de terre assez violente qui dura environ 6 minutes [...] elle a abbatu presque toutes les Maisons de la petite Ville de Norcia, où plusieurs personnes ont été ensevelies sous les ruines [...] Il y a eu à Norcia trois secousses, dont la dernière a été si violente, que toutes les Maisons de la Ville ont été renversées de fond en comble»].

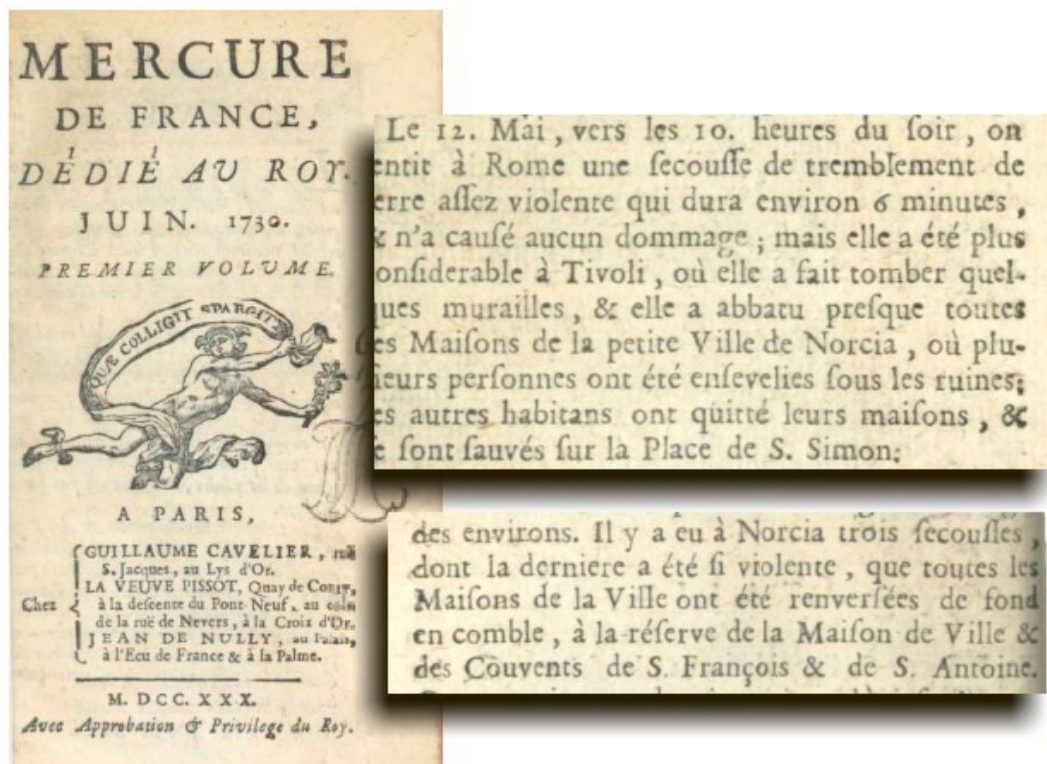


Fig. 41 - A report on the 1730 earthquake which appeared in the *Mercure de France*, Vol. I, June 1730 (Paris, 1730), p. 1223 and 1224

Further back we go, and our journey extends only a handful of decades backwards before we find the most brutal earthquake that ever hit the

Sibillini Mountain Range in recent centuries. On January 14th, 1703 a tremendous event smashed the whole land:

«In the evening of the following 14 January, at 1:45 in the night, while the sky was cloudy and rainy, so frightful an earthquake came that in a single moment Norcia, Cascia, Preci and a number of other neighbouring hamlets were totally destroyed, and more than 800 people died beneath the ruined buildings [...] Many shocks had announced it, so to speak, that had hit a portion of the province of Umbria».

[In the original French text: «Le soir du 14. Janvier suivant, environ à une heure et trois quarts de nuit, par un temps couvert et pluvieux, il survint un Tremblement de Terre si épouvantable, qu'en un moment, Norcia, Cascia, le Preci, et quantité d'autres liex du voisinage, en furent entierement renversez, et plus de 800 personnes y perirent sous les ruines. [...] Il avoit été annoncé, pour ainsi dire, par diverses secousses, qui avoient agité une partie de l'Ombrie»].

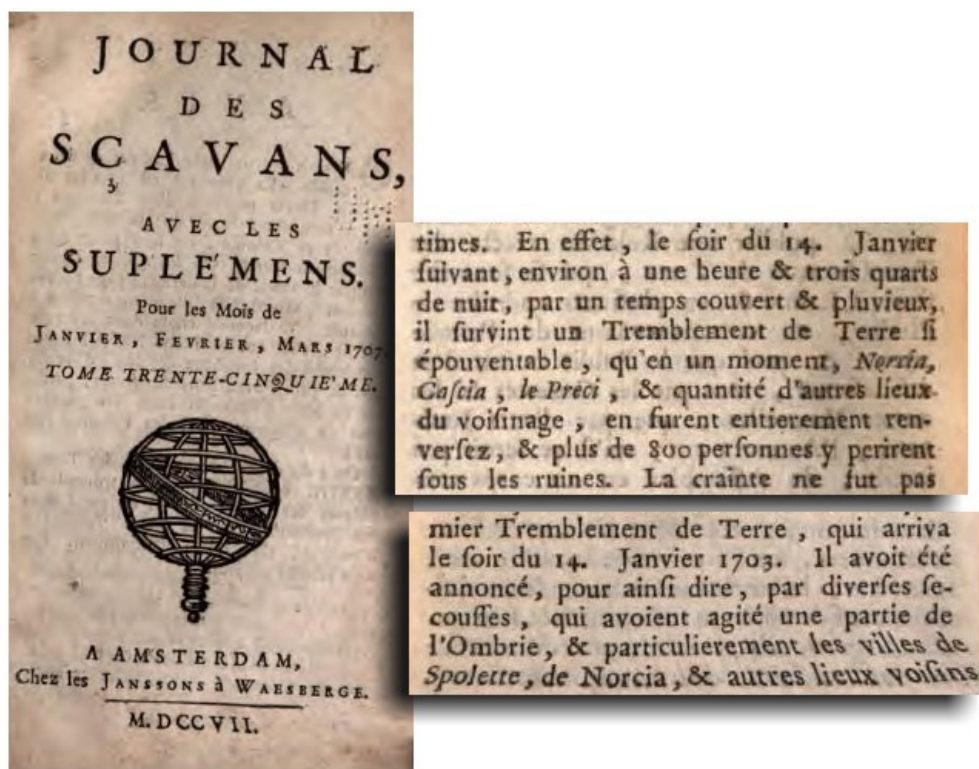
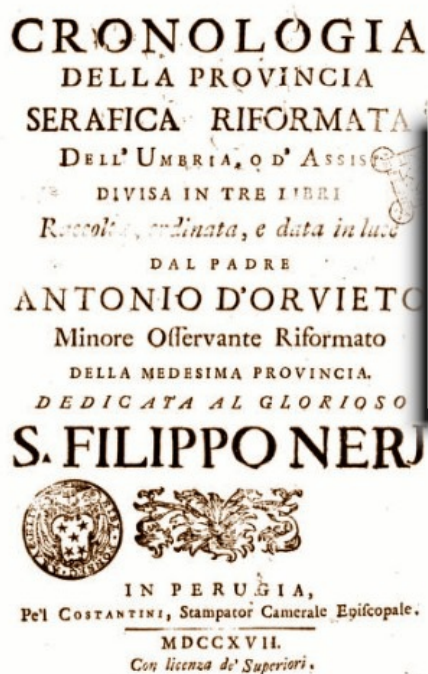


Fig. 42 - The 1703 earthquake described in the *Journal des Sçavans*, Vol. XXXV (Amsterdam 1707), p. 250 and 249

It was a cataclysmic earthquake, as another chronicler noted with appalling words:

«But the most grievous earthquake, which for its extended reach troubled the largest portion of Italy, occurred in 1703. Following a terrifying and ceaseless surge of the earth, in the evening of January, 14th, at 1:45 in the night, not only the whole Province of the Mountain was ruined but it also occurred the utter destruction of half of the wretched town of Norcia, with the remaining, upper part, though not entirely smashed down, which showed its collapsing buildings, all marked by frightful cracks as if they were ghastly mouths, threatening the lives of their miserable inhabitants».



non poco numerosi singolarmente in quel tempo . Ma il più lagrimevole, e che per la sua grand' estensione pose in grandissima costernazione tutta quasi l' Italia , fu nel 1703. al cui spaventoso, e lungo traballar della terra , la sera delli 14. di Gennajo , ad un' ora , e quasi tre quarti di notte , alle rovine di tutta la Provincia della Montagna s' unì la total' everfione della metà della sua povera Norcia, restando l' altra parte superiore , se non interamente atterrata, così maltrattata ne' fuoi Edifizj, che tutti aprendosi in orribili bocche di spaventose fiffure , minacciavano l' imminente pericolo della vita agli Abitatori infelici; sicchè quei , che meritavano di salvarsi in quel gran

Fig. 43 - The 1703 earthquake from *Cronologia della provincia serafica riformata dell'Umbria, o d'Assisi divisa in tre libri raccolta, ordinata, e data in luce dal padre Antonio d'Orvieto* (Perugia, 1717), p. 269

[In the original Italian text: «Ma il più lagrimevole, e che per la sua grand'estensione pose in grandissima costernazione tutta quasi l'Italia, fu nel 1703, al cui spaventoso, e lungo traballar della terra, la sera delli 14. di Gennaio, ad un'ora, e quasi tre quarti di notte, alle rovine di tutta la Provincia della Montagna s'unì la total everfione della metà della sua

povera Norcia, restando l'altra parte superiore, se non interamente atterrata, così maltrattata ne' suoi Edifizj, che tutti aprendosi in orribili bocche di spaventose fisure, minacciavano l'imminente pericolo di vita agli Abitatori infelici»].

If we proceed further backwards, we reach December, 1st 1328, when another terrifying earthquake came upon the land:

«In the said year 1328, in the first day of December, many earthquakes occurred in the province of Marche, in the territory of Norcia, so that the largest part of the said town of Norcia collapsed, and the town walls, and the towers, houses, buildings, churches ruined because of that ruin, and that night more than five thousand people lost their lives».

[In the original Italian text: «Nel detto anno M.cccxxviii. all'entrante di Dicembre furono diversi tremuoti nella Marca, nelle contrade di Norcia, per modo che quasi la maggiore parte della detta città di Norcia subissò, et caddono le mura della città, et le torri, et case, et palazi, et chiese, et della detta rovina perché fue subita, et di notte morirono più di cinque mila persone»].



Fig. 44 - An earthquake occurred in 1328 described by Giovanni Villani in his *Croniche* (Venezia, 1537), p. 196

If we push ourselves back as far as the Roman Age, we find that in the year 268 B.C., when Roman troops were engaging in a war the ancient population of Picenes near the town of Asculum, on the eastern borders of the Sibillini Mountain Range, in the midst of the battle a frightful earthquake occurred («tremente inter proelium campo»), as reported by second-century Latin writer Lucius Annaeus Florus in his *Epitomae de Tito Livio*.

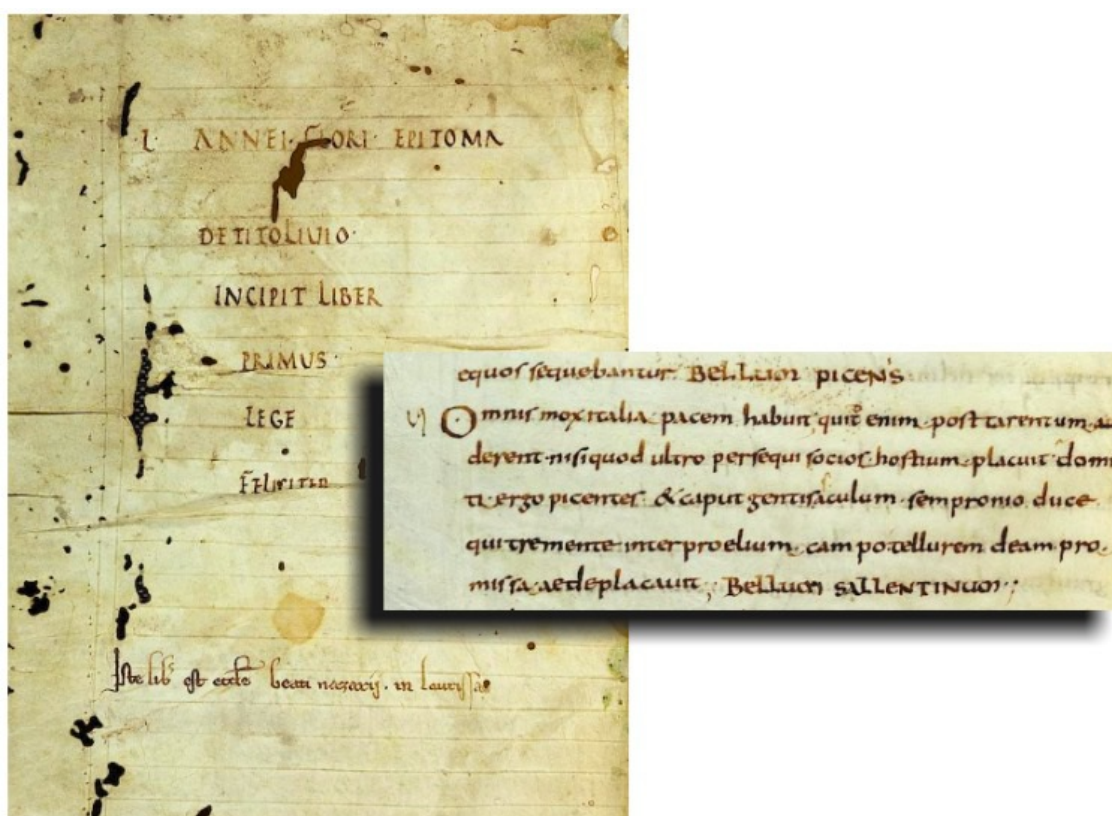


Fig. 45 - The excerpt on an earthquake near Asculum as drawn from Lucius Annaeus Florus' *Epitomae de Tito Livio* (ninth-century manuscript Pal. Lat. 894 preserved at the Universitätsbibliothek in Heidelberg), opening folium and folium 12v

And even farther back, indistinctly perceived through the mists of time, we can have a glimpse of the devastation that ravaged ancient Norcia, its temples being crushed down, «Nursiae aedes sacra terremotu disiecta», as Julius Obsequens, a Latin author, reports in his very short, quite elusive account in the *Prodigiorum Liber*. It was the year 99 B.C., feebly outlined against the fathomless abysses of time.

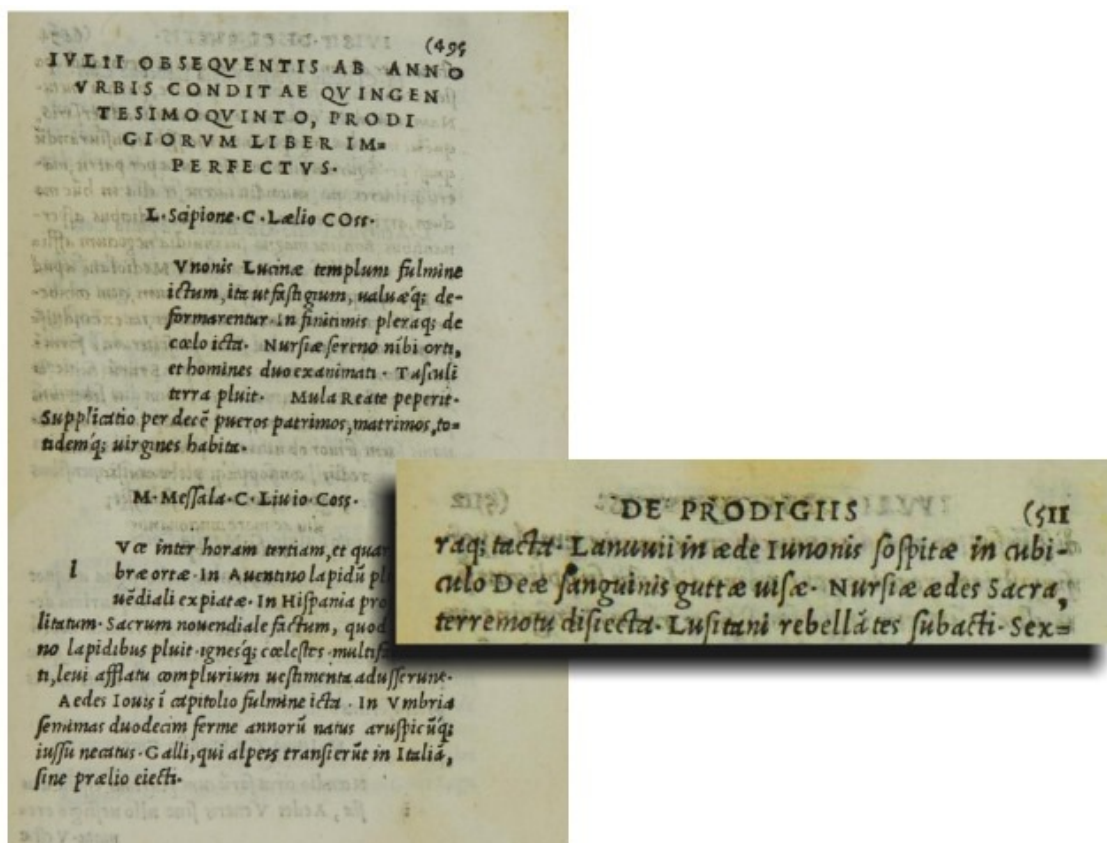


Fig. 46 - The mention of an ancient earthquake in Norcia from Julius Obsequens' *Prodigiorum Liber* (in a precious edition printed in 1508 by Aldus Pius Manutius), p. 495 and 511

Back and back we can go, into a history that is now almost lost, but not completely: by using paleoseismology and trench excavations, which were dug near the town of Norcia (Paolo Galli et al., *Holocene paleoseismology of the Norcia fault system (Central Italy)*, 2018; Fabrizio Galadini et al., *Paleoseismology of silent faults in the Central Apennines (Italy): the Mt. Vettore and Laga Mts. Faults*, 2003), we can explore the fault lines that are concealed beneath the ground. And what we find is appalling: frightful seismic events can be retrieved, frozen in the displaced strata of material, with the marks of earthquakes of formidable intensity dating around the second century B.C., and to some interval of time set between the seventh and the fifth century B.C., with signs of further events near the ninth century B.C. and even thousands of year earlier, in 1600 B.C. and 4/5.000 B.C.

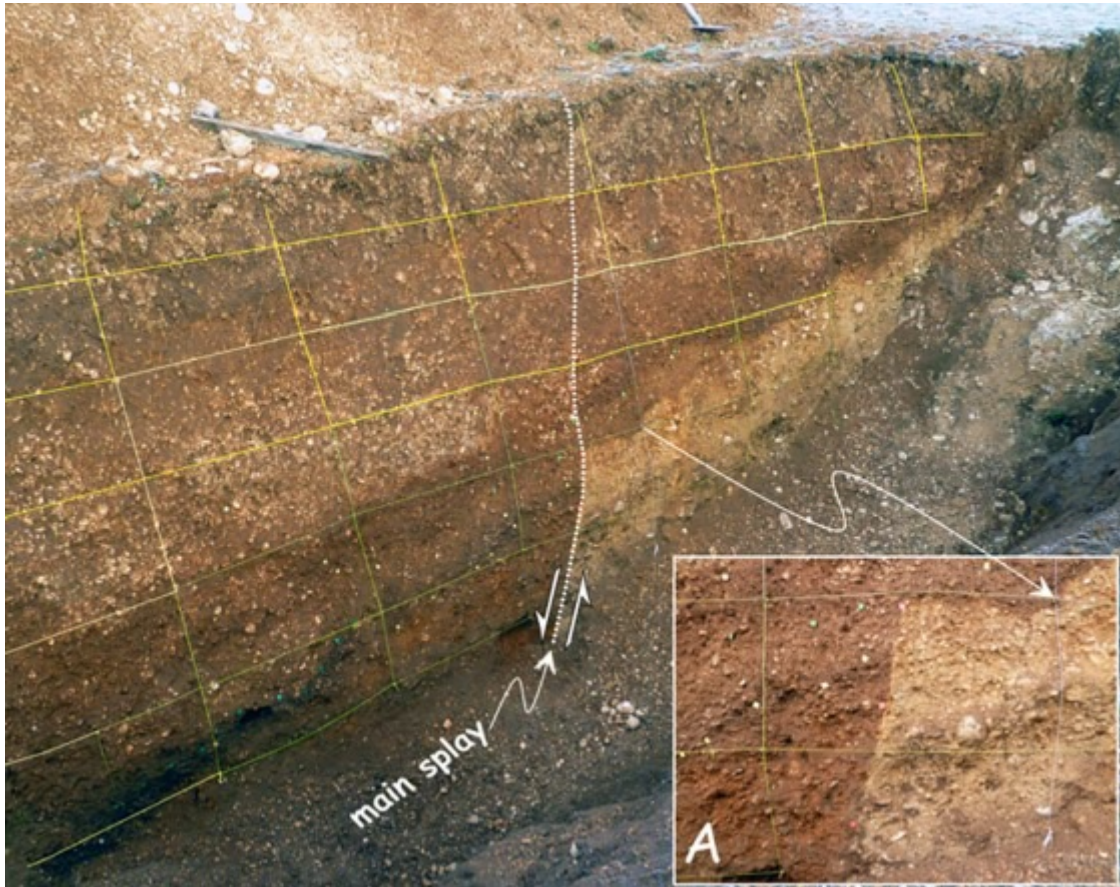


Fig. 47 - A trench dug for paleoseismic investigation north of Norcia showing the effects of earthquakes on the fault line concealed beneath the surface sediments; the displacement shown in the figure was dated by researchers to the eighth century B.C. (Paolo Galli et al., *Holocene paleoseismology of the Norcia fault system (Central Italy)*, in *Tectonophysics*, Vol. 745, 2018, p. 166)

Earthquakes. Seismic waves which repeatedly hit Norcia and the whole massif of the Sibillini Mountain Range. Across many millennia. And the focus, the originating point of those sudden, most destructive shakings of the earth, very often lies right beneath the same mountainous chain. Some six miles underneath.

Because the Sibillini Mountain Range, as the whole Apennine chain in Italy, but with a specific, recurrent susceptibility, is one of the points of fracture between two titanic geological structures.

As we will see in the next paragraph.

4.2 Fractures in the earth from a titanic strain

Seismic Zone 1: this is the ranking of the western side of the Sibillini Mountain Range in the Seismic Classification Chart elaborated by the Department of Civil Protection of Italy. It implies a maximum level of risk owing to high probability of earthquake occurrence, with a medium-to-maximum risk on the eastern versant.

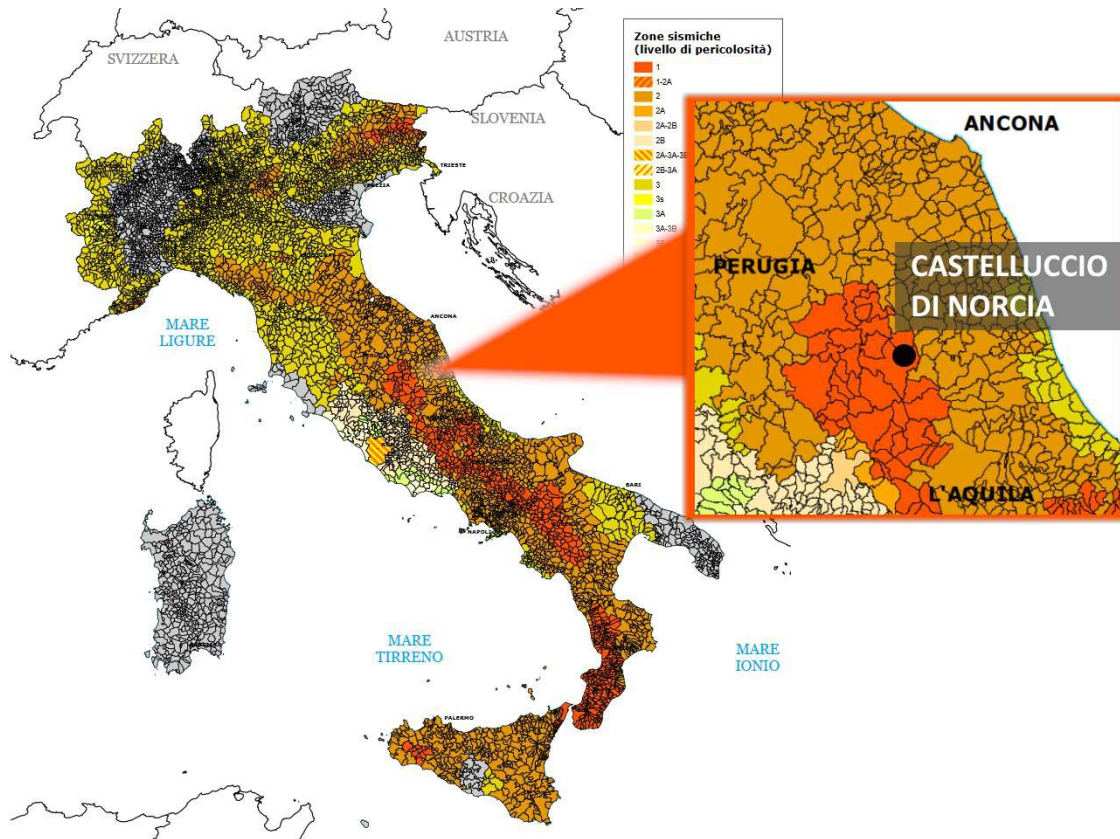


Fig. 48 - Seismic Classification Chart elaborated by the Department of Civil Protection of Italy

The whole of the Apennine chain, in its central and southern sections, is ranked as Zone 1. But the Sibillini Mountain Range is a very special portion of this high-risk ridge: it is positioned at the very northern end of the risk chart; and it is at this specific point that giant faults are hidden beneath the cliffs, with a powerful ability to unleash catastrophic events of

the highest seismic intensity. An intensity which can potentially reach a magnitude of 7.0, the maximum within the entire Italian peninsula.

The Italian peninsula is at the center of a titanic strive between two giant portions of the Earth's crust: the Eurasian and the African plates, which are mutually colliding at a speed of 6 millimeters per year (Paolo Galli et al., *The awakening of the dormant Mount Vettore Fault*, 2018).

But their collision is not an open, face-to-face combat. They challenge each other through the interposition of a third, smaller plate, or an advanced section of the African plate according to some: it is the Adria plate, an elongated portion of crust which lies beneath the Adriatic Sea, with edges which run along the Apennine chain and the coastline of Croatia (Nicola D'Agostino et al., *Active tectonics of the Adriatic region from GPS and earthquake slip vectors*, 2008).



Fig. 49 - An artist's impression of the boundaries between the African and Eurasian plates, with the Adria subplate highlighted

The Adria plate: with its counterclockwise-rotating motion, it produces a reverse effect on the interaction between the two main plates in the Apennine line, the Eurasian and African: the two giant structures, along the Italian mountainous ridge, tend to move away from one another, at an

extension rate estimated between 3 and 5 millimeters per year (Christian Bignami et al., *Volume unbalance on the 2016 Amatrice - Norcia (Central Italy) seismic sequence and insights on normal fault earthquake mechanism*, 2019).

The extension process, which started possibly as early as in late Pliocene, 3 million years ago, takes place along a northeastern-southwestern direction, perpendicular to the Apennine chain. As a result of the mighty strain, the crust cracked and fractured: long faults, parallel to the Apennines, opened in the rock beneath, as if a titanic accordion was pulled by giant hands from both sides, expanding its bellows to the point of rupture.

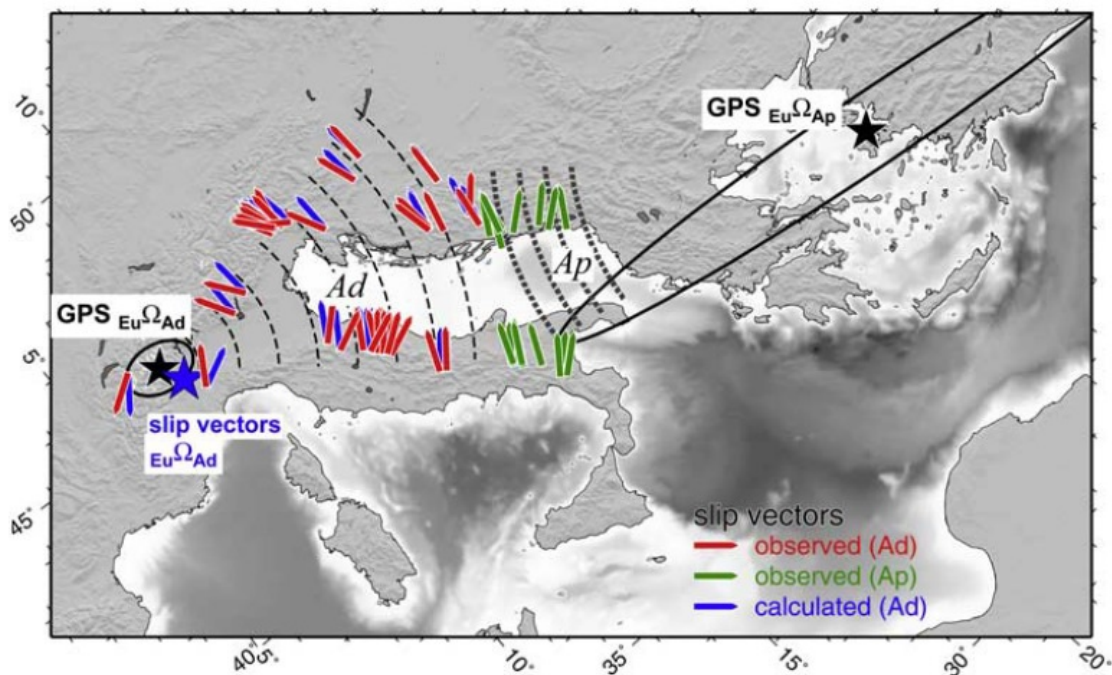


Fig. 50 - Earthquake displacements of the Adria subplate (red arrows) as it moves away from the African plate (on the bottom side of the picture) ((Nicola D'Agostino et al., *Active tectonics of the Adriatic region from GPS and earthquake slip vectors*), in *Journal of Geophysical Research*, Vol. 113, 2008)

The titanic strain acting on the Apennine ridge has led to the opening of huge intermontane basins (Paolo Galli et al., op. cit.). As the two confronting plates exert their pull towards opposite sides, the Apennine tend to subside, and large plateaus and valleys are created in the available space. This is what happened on the western side of the Sibillini Mountain Range, with the presence of two extended expanses of flat land set amid the

impervious ridges: the Plain of Santa Scolastica, where the town of Norcia lies, and the Great Plain (Pian Grande) at the very foot of Mount Vettore.

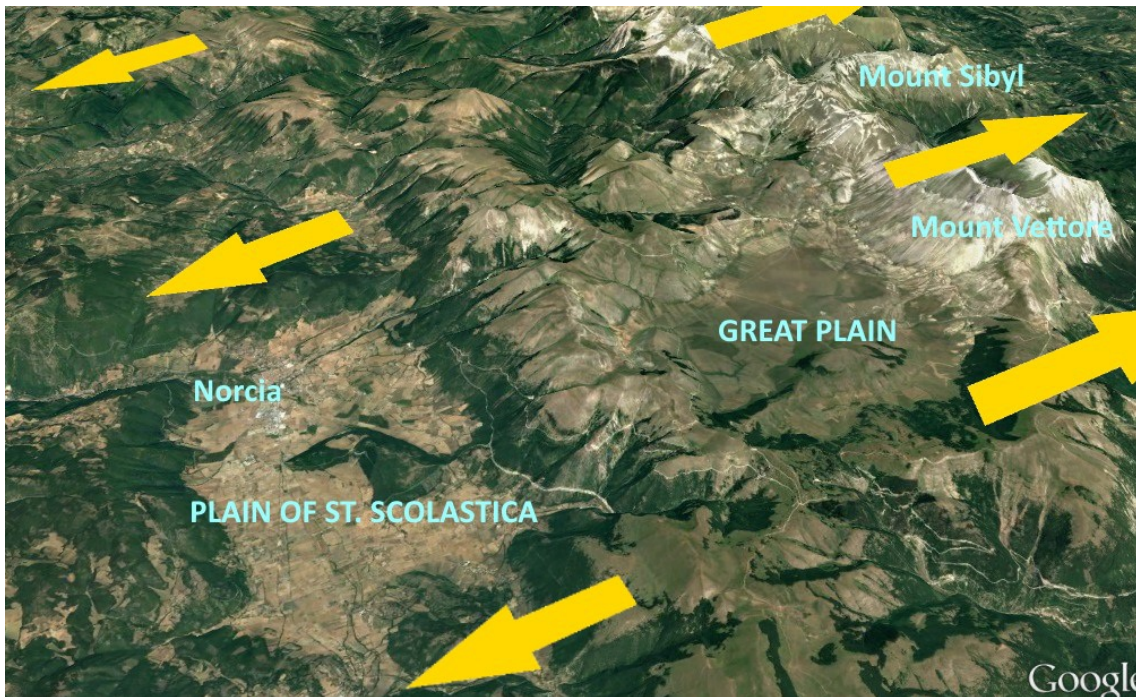


Fig. 51 - The two intermontane basins set on the western side of the Sibillini Mountain Range, with the yellow arrows representing the giant strain exerted by the tectonic plates moving away from each other in the region

Vast, arable, productive plains hidden amid lofty mountains: a sort of unexpected bounty for the ancient inhabitants of this most beautiful region, as well as for contemporary residents.

A bounty. But also a doom, and a curse.

Because the whole area is ceaselessly subject to the mighty strain produced by the clash between the African and Adria plates, as they move away from one another.

For, in that most fertile, apparently welcoming area, the whole land is fractured.

In the Sibillini Mountain Range area, on the western side of Mount Vettore, several fault lines are present. They are arranged in 'en echelon' ranks, each

fracture 1-3 kilometers long, with a whole length for the fault system of 30 kilometers. According to researchers, this range of fault lengths usually develops enough energy to generate earthquakes of magnitude up to 7.0.

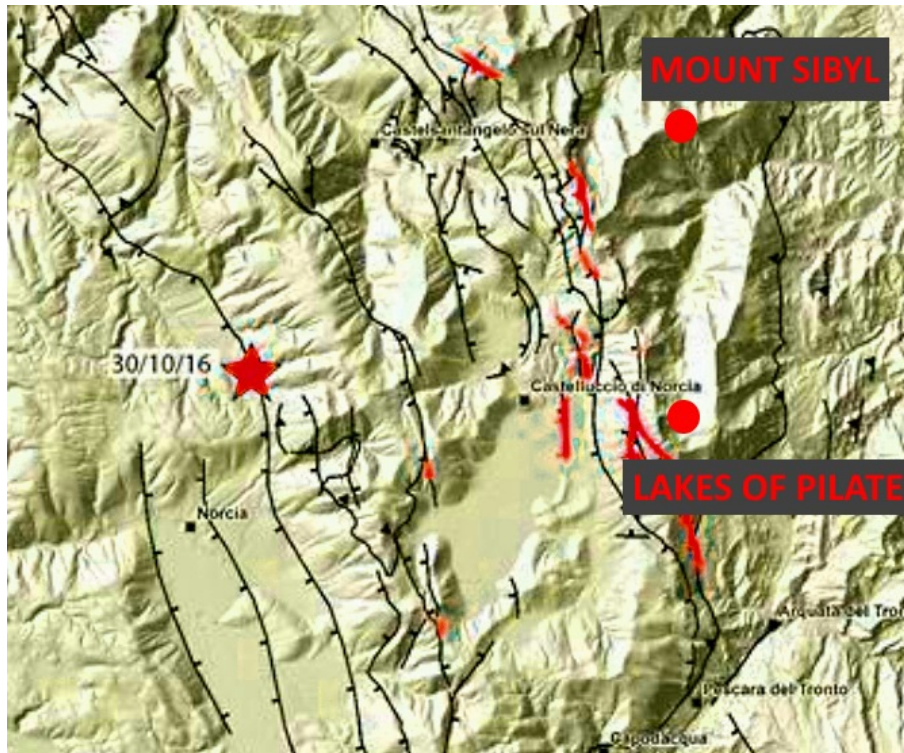


Fig. 52 - The known active fault lines in the area lying on the eastern side of the Sibillini Mountain Range, with in red colour the fault lines involved in the earthquake which occurred on October 30th, 2016 (image processing on a picture included in *Rapporto di sintesi sul terremoto in Centro Italia magnitudo 6.5 del 30 ottobre 2016* released by the National Institute of Geophysics and Vulcanology - Italy (INGV))

And when the faults break, the land above collapses.

4.3 *The scar on the mountain's face*

A collapse. This is exactly what happened on October, 30th 2016, with a destructive earthquake of magnitude 6.5, and possibly happened in previous earthquakes as well (Bignami et al., op. cit.). During the event, the Pian Grande subsided, with a displacement of one meter with respect to its previous position. The whole plain, and half of Mount Vettore with it, went down as the crust collapsed to a new stable condition.

All this happened many, many times, as a recurrent event, across many millennia. The trenches excavated in Norcia and before Mount Vettore in search of paleoseismic displacements, buried deep into the ground, show the actual truth of all that.

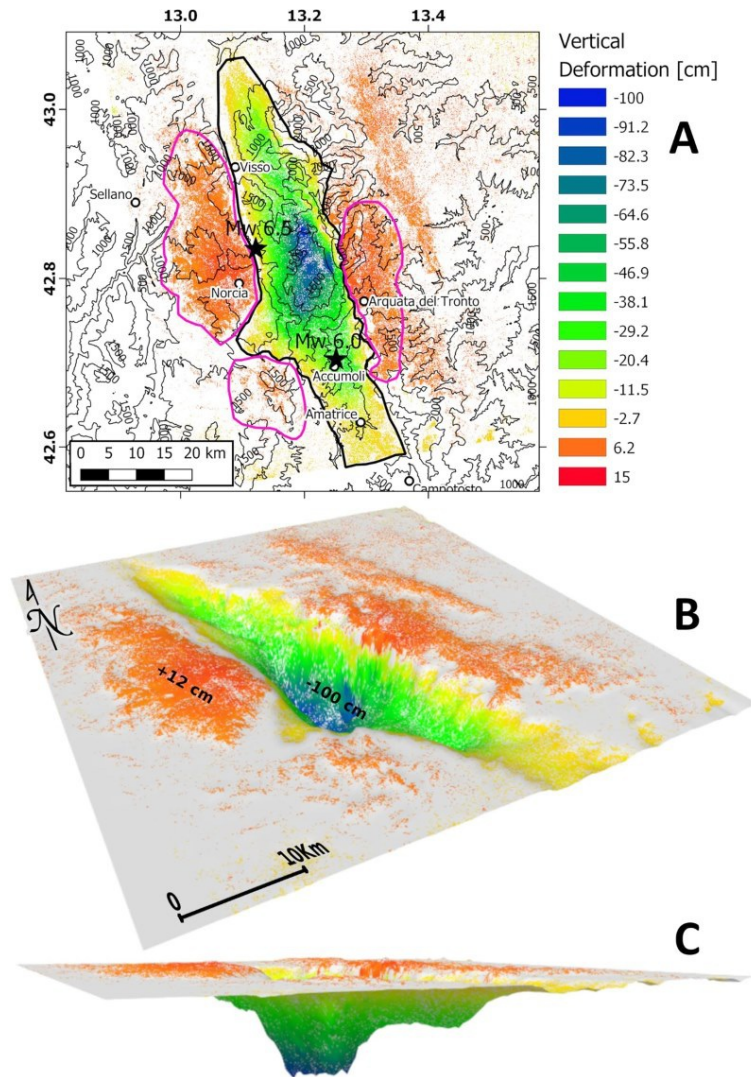


Fig. 53 - The displacement experienced by the western side of the Sibillini Mountain Range following the seismic sequence occurred in 2016, when the Pian Grande subsided and went down for 1 meter (blue zone in the picture) (Christian Bignami et al., *Volume unbalance on the 2016 Amatrice - Norcia (Central Italy) seismic sequence and insights on normal fault earthquake mechanism*, in *Nature - Scientific Reports*, 9:4250, 2019).

But a most appalling, most patent evidence of this same phenomenon is just before everybody's sight.

You just have to stand in the middle of the Pian Grande, and raise your eyes.

When you look towards Mount Vettore, you can see a great streak which marks its western side. A streak of bare rock. Up to 25 meters high at some points.



Fig. 54 - The western side of Mount Vettore with the great fault line called 'Road of Fairies'

The silly populace calls it the 'Road of Fairies' ('Strada delle Fate') and the dumb tale locally connected to it is reported by Paolo Toschi in his foreword to Luigi Paolucci's *The Apennine Sibyl*, which we mentioned in a preceding paragraph:

«One certain evening the fairies, whose queen was the Sibyl, asked for the permission to attend the night dances that were to be held at the Infernaccio (the valley beneath Mount Sibyl, editor's note). You may as well go - the Sibyl said - but do not forget to come back into the cave before sunrise comes [...] Suddenly, the horizon began to gleam with the first glow of dawn. Startled, dismayed and overwhelmed by apprehension and fear, they

rushed into a frantic run towards the cave. [...] They ran desperately [...] with their goat-like feet [...] A whole streak on the mountain, along the side of Mount Vettore, was so trampled with the frenzied hurry of the fairies, that the trail they followed is still visible today. And when the mountain-side stands out in the blue sky, at a certain elevation a brighter strip is easily seen. The local peasants point at it as the 'trail of the fairies'».

[In the original Italian text: «Una sera le fate, di cui la Sibilla era regina, chiesero il permesso di andare al ballo notturno che si teneva all'Infernaccio. Andate pure - disse la Sibilla - ma ricordatevi di ritornare dentro la grotta prima dell'alba [...] Mossero liete le fate alla danza. [...] Ad un tratto, all'orizzonte, s'accenna il primo luore dell'alba. Sorprese, sbigottite, colte dall'ansia e dallo spavento, s'affrettano le fate in folle corsa verso la grotta. [...] Esse corrono disperatamente [...] con i loro] piedi di capra [...] Tutta una striscia della montagna, lungo la costa del Vettore, fu così pesticiata dall'affannoso correre delle fate, che la traccia ne è rimasta tuttora. E quando il dorso montuoso campeggia netto nell'azzurro, a una certa altezza, una striscia più chiara ben si distingue. I contadini del luogo se l'additano: è il cammino delle fate»].

This is the naive tale which is still known amid the residents.

But the true nature of that streak is different altogether. And utterly hair-raising.

Because that streak, running across the side of Mount Vettore at an altitude of some two thousand meters, is the mark of something we know.

Earthquakes. Earthquakes of fiendish might.

The 'Road of Fairies' is no road of no fairies. It is an impressive, gigantic fault line. A fracture, the rupture of the very mountain under the vicious rage of the most devastating seismic waves.

Earthquake after earthquake, across the millennia, the extension pull which affects that portion of the Apennines lowered the entire expanse of the Pian Grande. And the great Mount Vettore, which raises its cliffs in the middle of the fault, was pulled down with it and fractured in the process. Its

western portion followed the Plain in its subsidence; the cliffs and the eastern side held on, striving to maintain their position and elevation.



Fig. 55 - The giant fault line which runs across Mount Vettore

And the mountain, the entire mountain, from north to south, just split. Along the fault line which is known under the silly, picturesque name of 'Road of Fairies'.

Such are the mighty forces that operate within the Sibillini Mountain Range.

And, in the next paragraph, we are about to see more of the extraordinary, superhuman effects of these subterranean forces, carved on the lofty, titanic cliffs of the mountains.

4.4 Fists of an enraged titan

The 'Road of Fairies' is not the only mark left by the terrific might of the earthquakes on the rocky flesh of the Sibillini Mountain Range.

After all large earthquakes, the people inhabiting this mountainous area, be they eighteenth-century shepherds with their cattle or Roman veterans with their assigned fields, could behold the effects of the fist of a titan on the

surrounding mountains. And, certainly, they were awe-stricken. As we are today.

We can imagine that their feeling was not so different from the sensation which contemporary men may experience today in their heart when contemplating the titanic wounds inflicted to the rocky walls and precipices and crests by the seismic waves which smashed the Sibillini Mountain Range first on August, 24th 2016, then on October, 30th 2016.



Fig. 56 - The new fault line which opened on the side of Mount Vettore below the 'Road of Fairies' in 2016

On the first day, on the mountain-side of Mount Vettore, just below the 'Road of Fairies', a brand new crack appeared: miles and miles of a freshly-generated fissure, ancillary to the main fault running at a higher elevation on the same versant. The second earthquake extended and enlarged the fissure, which is still extant on the mountain's slope.

Under the unbelievable force of one of the most powerful earthquakes in the last three centuries, Mount Vettore was ruptured again. And, in a few seconds, miles of solid rock slid against other adjacent miles of rock. They

slid for up to two meters. In a few terrorizing seconds, the entire mountain moved.



Fig. 57 - Fault displacement on Mount Vettore as a result of the seismic sequence occurred in 2016: left, a section of the fault line before the earthquakes; right, the subsidence of the versant as seen at the same spot after the earthquakes (image processing on pictures by A. Notaro and P. Galli)

The 'Road of Fairies', the giant fault line which runs across Mount Vettore, was affected, too: its lower edge subsided as well, with a further crack which is clearly visible on the versant, just above the fresh new rift.



Fig. 58 - The subsidence of the 'Road of Fairies' on Mount Vettore (adapted from Paolo Galli et al., *The awakening of the dormant Mount Vettore Fault*, in *Tectonics*, 38, 2018)

The impression left in the eyes of the beholders living their lives in the twenty-first century by so huge, so catastrophic an event was enormous: a force rising from underneath had split the mountain for its entire length.

The fist of the titan had stricken the Sibillini Mountain Range with its utmost potency. And further appalling effects were visible. From the very peaks of the mountainous ridge to the lower plateaus.

During the seismic sequence of 2016, the arched cliffs of Mount Vettore had engaged a godlike strive with the imperative forces that were dragging the Pian Grande down to a lower level of stability. In the fight, and as a result of the mighty pressures applied to the terminating rocks of the mountain, the cliffs themselves were torn apart, with large fissures cracked in the solid rock of the surmounting ridges: a sign of the might of the inhuman forces at work during the most powerful earthquakes.



Fig. 59 - The crests which surmount the glacial cirque of Mount Vettore ruptured by the thrusts exerted by the earthquakes in 2016

On the Pian Grande, the amazing sea of grassland encircled by the mountains, a great round hole opened in the middle of the green expanse: a black mouth, normally hidden beneath the turf, a sinkhole caused by the sudden collapse of a subterranean cavity carved in the bedrock by the rainfalls. A vision on an underground world concealed beneath the unaware steps trodden by human beings.

And then, a series of frightful marks left by the earthquake on the whole territory of the Sibillini Mountain Range: landslides, disrupted roads, astounding changes in the flow rates of springs and the circulation of subterranean waters.

And, finally, the most abominable effect of all: destruction, and death.

This is what the men and women of our contemporary age could see and experience in the year 2016, in an epoch in which people know what earthquakes are, and science can provide comprehensive answers on their origin and mechanisms, though still it cannot formulate forecasts on their occurrence.



Fig. 60 - The hole in the Pian Grande produced by a collapse of the underlying rock as a result of the action of the seismic waves in 2016

But what about the men and women of the past ages, when no scientific knowledge on the earthquake's nature was available and terror struck with the utmost effectiveness on the souls of the people who lived in the Sibillini Mountain Range?

Before we address this fascinating topic, we need to go deeper into the character of earthquakes as they manifest themselves in this specific area.

As we saw in the present paragraph, earthquakes in the Sibillini Range are a most tangible reality. They can be seen. They can be touched. And they can also be heard.

A blood-curdling voice from Hell. As we will see in the next paragraph.

4.5 The beast which lurks in the abyss

Living in the Sibillini Mountain Range, today as in the Middle Ages or in Roman times, may be an experience of the extraordinary, and the preternatural. A sinister experience.

The natural setting is simply gorgeous and of an astounding beauty. Whether you live on the western side of the mountainous chain, not far from the huge, imposing mass of Mount Vettore, a gigantic ship which emerges from the ocean of grass of the Pian Grande plateau; or, your days are marked by the clouds which rapidly drift over the crowned peak of Mount Sibyl, on the eastern versants, the Sibillini Mountain Range seems to be enshrouded in a spell of quiet, vibrant expectation.

Because you know that it is always there. Sleeping. Waiting. Ready for a new awakening.

In the Sibillini Mountain Range, you can always hear its voice. Coming from all around you, and sometimes right from underneath.

In summer nights or winter evenings, you can feel it first with your body. The sound comes unheralded, striking a deep note, a faint roar, almost

indiscernible at first, but which gradually swells until you can hear it, though it still remains faint enough so as unaccustomed visitors and guests are totally unaware of it. But you know it, and you know that what has just happened, that soft rumble which seems to come from everywhere, across the surrounding countryside, is a slight, soft shock of earthquake.

As a personal experience sensed by the author of the present research paper, who had the chance to live in Norcia for extended periods of time, when your house is silent and the night is still, you can hear the ominous deep, rolling sound of earthquakes as low as magnitude 1.3. They are usually sensed only by seismographic instruments. But a known fault line ran exactly under the area where the house was, and that night it was that very fault line that had signalled its presence.

In addition to that, there are times in the middle of the night when you are sleeping in your bed. You wake up, because the rumble announces its arrival. In a few moments, it is there with you, and your bed begins to quiver, for one second or maybe two. You stand still, as frozen as a statue of salt, asking yourself whether the waves are about to swell to their mightiest potency, or it is just a little shake, a mere warning of things to come. Then, it leaves your bed and your house. Silence returns, and you can have a try at having some sleep again. This was something between magnitude 2 and 3.

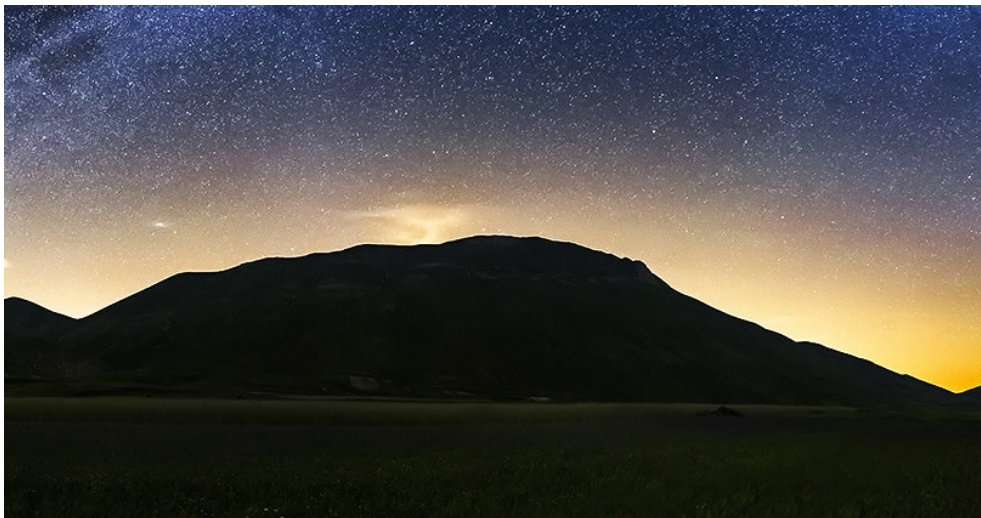


Fig. 61 - The profile of Mount Vettore stands out in the night in apparent stillness, though the geological strain on it secretively continues its work without interruptions

The earthquake, the monster underneath, is always present. Small tremblors hit the Sibillini Mountain Range ceaselessly, throughout the year. Their epicentres lie in the western towns and villages, like Norcia or Preci; or on the eastern side, in Montegallo or Montemonaco; or in Arquata del Tronto, on the southern borders of the massif; or in the area set to the north, in Visso or Ussita. Or even right in the Pian Grande, by the hamlet of Castelluccio, or on the very core of the mountainous ridge, which runs from Mount Vettore to Mount Sibyl.

Wherever the epicentres may lie, the extension process which affects this portion of the Apennines goes on and on, day after day and year after year, producing its ceaseless straining effects on the fault lines which streak the whole territory, along a northwestern-southeastern alignment.

The voice of this process can frequently be heard, often subdued and low-toned. Since time immemorial, since the age of the Romans and even earlier, this voice accompanies the lives of the people who inhabit the Sibillini Mountain Range.

Data e Ora (Italia) 🇮🇹	Magnitudo	Zona	Profondità	Latitudine	Longitudo
2019-09-18 23:53:41	ML 1.2	2 km NE Norcia (PG)	10	42.81	13
2019-09-18 23:17:21	ML 1.9	8 km SE Norcia (PG)	11	42.74	13.
2019-09-18 23:10:04	ML 1.3	8 km SE Norcia (PG)	10	42.74	13.1
2019-09-18 22:57:21	ML 1.6	3 km E Norcia (PG)	10	42.80	13.1
2019-09-18 22:56:24	ML 1.9	3 km E Norcia (PG)	10	42.80	13.14
2019-09-18 22:20:16	ML 0.7	2 km NE Norcia (PG)	11	42.80	13.11
2019-09-18 22:04:13	ML 1.2	3 km E Norcia (PG)	11	42.80	13.13
2019-09-18 22:02:31	ML 0.7	3 km E Norcia (PG)	10	42.81	13.13
2019-09-18 21:55:37	ML 0.8	3 km NE Norcia (PG)	11	42.81	13.12
2019-09-18 21:54:55	ML 0.9	3 km NE Norcia (PG)	10	42.81	13.11
2019-09-18 21:46:15	ML 0.7	3 km NE Norcia (PG)	10	42.81	13.12
2019-09-18 21:44:16	ML 1.1	4 km E Norcia (PG)	10	42.80	13.13
2019-09-18 21:42:00	ML 0.7	3 km E Norcia (PG)	11	42.80	13.14
2019-09-18 21:40:31	ML 1.3	4 km E Norcia (PG)	11	42.81	13.14
2019-09-18 21:39:26	ML 1.2	4 km E Norcia (PG)	11	42.81	13.14

Fig. 62 - A portion of the subdued, ominous seismic sequence which hit the Sibillini Mountain Range and Norcia on September 18th, 2019

A beast is always lurking in the abyss, and the local residents know it well. They can often hear it as it sleeps its uneasy, troubled sleep miles beneath.

As it happened, for instance, on September 18th, 2019, when a short, sinister sequence made up by around 60 small seismic shakes went on for the whole day, at an average rate of one faint, almost imperceptible shock every twenty minutes. Almost imperceptible. Yet it was there. And both your ears and body could sense it.

And people waited, in apprehension and anxiety.

Because they know that, sometimes, this voice turns into a savage, fiendish yell. As we will see in the next paragraph.

4.6 The yell of the monster

There is a peculiar experience which the men and women who have been inhabiting the Sibillini Mountain Range, in central Italy, have made across the centuries and the millennia.

We are not referring to the harrowing experience of feeling the ground beneath your feet being madly shaken by multiple seismic waves marked by a magnitude of 6.5, like on the fateful date of October, 30th 2016: initially, the primary waves, which come straight from an earthquake focus set 6 miles below, hit the earth's surface with a vertical compression/extension motion, so casting a human body frenzily up and down as if it were flying; and, a few moments later, with the arrival of the secondary, slower waves, men and women and buildings undergo a lateral, horizontal oscillation, which is totally overpowering and compelling, resulting in a total inability to maintain an upright position and flee from one's collapsing house through a door which frantically swings and rolls in all directions around its normal position.

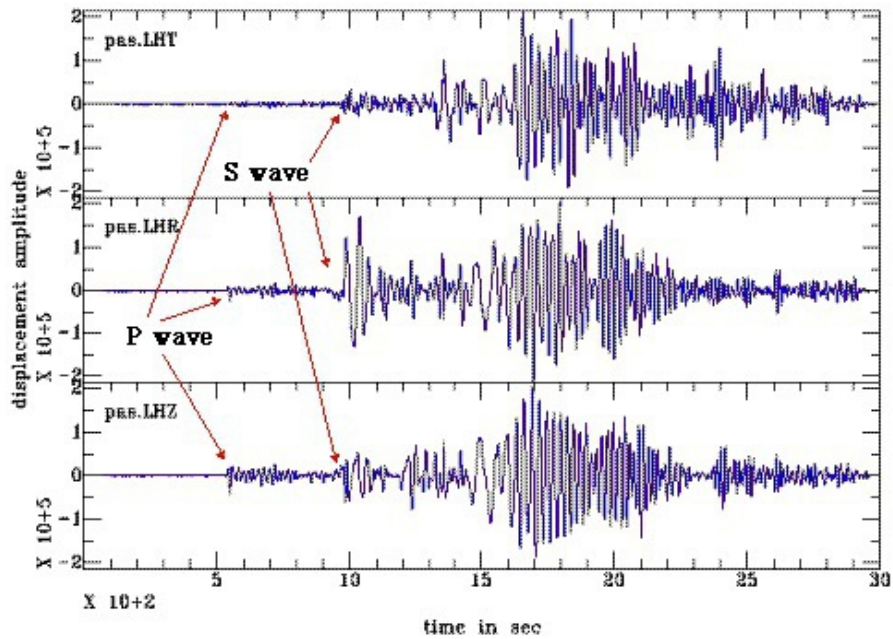


Fig. 63 - A diagram showing the early arrival of the primary waves, closely followed by more powerful secondary waves (source: <https://geol105.sitehost.iu.edu/>)

Furthermore, we are not making a reference to the long, enervating sequence of aftershocks which always follow that first excruciating strike. After the initial main blow, the earthquake continues to discharge the energy accumulated within the subterranean layers of rocks, by sending out shocks after shocks, in a seemingly endless series of events, both small and large, with epicentres which are dispersed all over the land. A phenomenon that was also registered by Leopoldo Mannocchi in 1859 with the words «the ceaseless bellowing and wavering of the ground» («il continuo mugghiare e scuoter della terra», in Italian), and Pietro De Carolis in 1703, who wrote that «for the entire period of my stay here, the shocks of the earthquake could be sensed all the time, and savage» («In tutto il tempo, che mi sono trattenuto in queste parti, le scosse de Terremoti continuamente si sono fatte sentire frequenti, e con violenza»).

But we are not referring to all that, appalling as it all may be, and actually is.

We are considering a different, though thoroughly related, hair-raising experience. Some call it the 'yell of the mountain'.

Because the mountain yells. A blood-curdling scream, which is heard at the very apex of the most powerful earthquakes:

«I rushed out of my house, everything was being shaken awfully, I saw the lawn writhing as if it were an agitated sea; and I heard the yell coming out from the mountains»; «as the house was wavering I looked out of the windows where the versant was, and I could heard the mountain scream».

The listed accounts were rendered to the author of the present article by two women who experienced the earthquake in 2016: the first woman was caught by the seismic waves in Montefortino, on the eastern side of the Sibillini Mountain Range; the second was reached by the quake in Norcia, on the western side. But the two accounts are almost identical.

The mountains scream. The mountains yell. As if they were alive. They seem to yell in pain and rage.

What is the scientific reason for the ghastly sound which is heard by people during the largest earthquakes?

Perhaps, the main trigger does not lie in the primary seismic waves, which generate low-frequency ground motion from the bowels of the earth to the vertically-located epicentre on the surface, making the very land above a sort of giant loudspeaker, which projects the sound upward into the air (Patrizia Tosi, *Earthquake sound perception*, 2012). The resulting noise is a roaring rumble, which is often heard just before the shaking begins, and then acting as a powerful accompaniment across the whole duration of the event.

But the yell, that's another story. When the secondary waves reach the earth's surface and penetrate, with their mighty oscillating thrust, into the mountainous reliefs overhead, the mounts themselves begin to vibrate, with low-frequency quivers and further, additional lower-period interactions with the layers of rock being crossed during their propagation.

The resulting sound is a deep, fiendish roar accompanied by a sort of prolonged, inhuman scream, which seems to arise from the excruciated versants of the mountains.

Bulletin of the
Seismological Society of America

VOL. 28

JULY, 1938

No. 3

EARTHQUAKE SOUNDS*

By CHARLES DAVISON

IN MY STUDIES of British earthquakes during the years 1889-1916, special attention was paid to the sounds that accompanied the shocks. The materials collected were given in answer to the following questions: (a) Was any unusual sound heard at the time of the shock, and, if so, what did it resemble? (b) Did the beginning of the sound precede, coincide with, or follow, the beginning of the shock, and by how many seconds? (c) Did the end of the sound precede, coincide with, or follow, the end of the shock, and by how many seconds? (d) Did the sound become gradually louder, and then die away, and, if so, did the instant when the sound was loudest precede, coincide with, or follow, the instant when the shock was strongest, and by how many seconds? (e) Did the nature of the sound change, and in what way, at or about the time when the shock was strongest?

TYPES OF EARTHQUAKE SOUNDS

The following scale of sound types is based on about twenty thousand records of earthquakes, for the most part of British origin.

1. Wagons, carriages, motor vehicles, steam rollers, traction engines, or trains, passing, as a rule very rapidly, on hard ground or a rough road, over a bridge or through a tunnel; the dragging of heavy boxes or furniture over the floor.

2. Thunder, a loud clap or heavy peal, but very often distant thunder.

* Manuscript received for publication April 25, 1938.

¹ *Geol. Mag.*, 9:208-218 (1892); *Phil. Mag.*, 49:31-70 (1900); *Beitr. Geophys.*, 12:485-527 (1913) *History of British Earthquakes*, pp. 377-382 (1924).

[147]

Fig. 64 - A historical scientific paper by Charles Davison on the sounds of earthquakes (1938)

This is what the people inhabiting the Sibillini Mountain Range heard on October, 30th 2016 and January 14th, 1703 and December, 1st 1328, and again and again backwards into a far, forgotten past, deep into the history of the central Apennines.

The Sibillini Mountain Range. Mountains which move. Mountains that scream. Mountains that cast terror, destruction and death over the whole land and its terrified inhabitants.

Mountains which seem to be alive. Or, seemingly inhabited by some thing which is alive.

A ghastly framework. In which dreams of a forbidden intercourse may have been nurtured by men. In a remote past.

Michele Sanvico

END OF PART 1

**Please refer to Part 2
for the continuation of this research paper**

MICHELE SANVICO

THE APENNINE SIBYL

A MYSTERY AND A LEGEND

SIBILLINI MOUNTAIN RANGE, THE CHTHONIAN LEGEND¹



PART 2

5. Earthquakes: in search of an otherwordly contact

In the preceding paragraphs we have provided an illustration of the close relationship which exists between the Sibillini Mountain Range and its marked seismic character.

Across the last centuries and millennia, most devastating earthquakes have been occurring in the area on a recurrent basis. The very face of the mountain range is affected by the largest events. Smaller earthquakes ceaselessly hit the territory, many of them just above the threshold of human sensitivity. Vibrations and rumbles may be often heard. Everybody

¹ Released on March 25th 2020 on <https://www.researchgate.net/> and <https://www.academia.edu/>

knows that a catastrophic earthquake might happen anytime, announced by sequences of smaller tremors, or even totally unheralded. They all know that sudden death may ensue, and that within the space of a few seconds their own life and the life of their family members may be subject to a dramatic change or even be terminated altogether under the debris of a collapsing roof.

This is what actually happened on August, 24th and October, 30th 2016.

However, we have been discussing the life in the region and the perception of the seismic waves as they are today, in reference to contemporary men and women who live in the twenty-first century, fully surrounded by a framework of culture and science, with comprehensive information being given to them about the true nature of earthquakes as an effect of the mutual displacement of the titanic plates that make up the Earth's crust.

But what about people's credences, beliefs and fears in ages in which Alfred Wegener's theory on continental drift was still to come? What was life in the Sibillini Mountain Range when nobody knew about plate tectonics, fault lines and seismogenic layers?

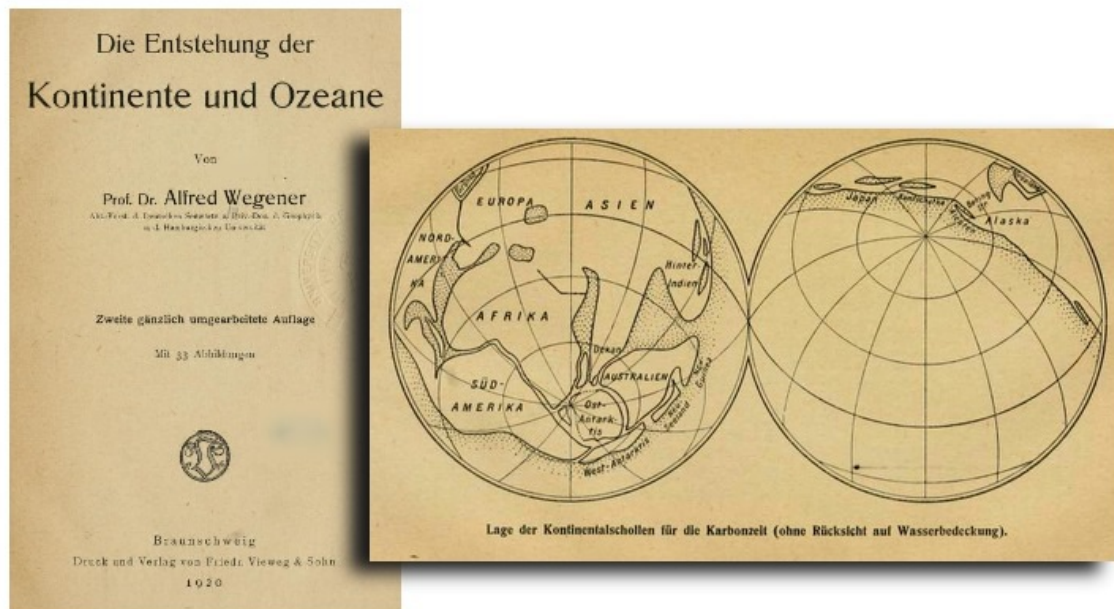


Fig. 65 - Alfred Wegener's *Entstehung der Kontinente und Ozeane* (*The Origin of Continents and Oceans*) published in Braunschweig in 1920, with a diagram showing the drift of continents (p. 61)

What did it mean to live amid the Sibillini Mountain Range in the Middle Ages, or in classical antiquity, or even before the coming of Roman legions?

Earthquakes were there already. Their typical manifestations were the same as in our present days and across the most recent centuries.

How did people react to earthquakes?

We will now examine in more detail the characters and way of life of the populations which inhabited the central Apennines before the Roman conquest. Because they, too, were subject to the devastating effects of earthquakes on their lives, dwellings, and families.

They were frightened, too. And possibly their fear was far more overwhelming than it is in our contemporary age.

5.1 Living amid the mountains in antiquity

In 290 B.C., Roman consul Manius Curius Dentatus entered with his troops the mountainous region of central Apennines and overcame the Sabines, the ancient population which inhabited the region which is known today as the Sibillini Mountain Range:

«After the Latins they [the Romans] attacked the race of the Sabines, who, forgetful of the relationship formed under Titus Tatius, had become as it were infected by the spirit of the Latins and had joined in their wars. During the consulship of Curius Dentatus, the Romans laid waste with fire and sword all the tract of country which is enclosed by the Nera, the Anio and the sources of the Velinus, and bounded by the Adriatic Sea. By this conquest so large a population and so vast a territory was reduced, that even he who had won the victory could not tell which was of the greater importance».

[In the original Latin text: «A Latinis adgressus est gentem Sabinorum, qui immemores factae sub Tito Tatiao adfinitatis quodam contagio belli se Latinis adiunxerant. Sed Curio Dentato consule omnem eum tractum, qua

Nar, Anio, fontesque Velini, Hadriano tenus mari igni ferroque vastavit. Qua victoria tantum hominum, tantum agrorum redactum in potestatem, ut in utro plus esset nec ipse posset aestimare qui vicerat»].

In this excerpt taken from Lucius Annaeus Florus' *Epitomae de Tito Livio*, we see the Romans advance into the territory lying by the Via Salaria, the road which crosses the central Apennines, storming deep into the area set within the course of river Nera and the ancient town of Nursia. From then on, that land will be part of a new 'praefectura' under Roman control.

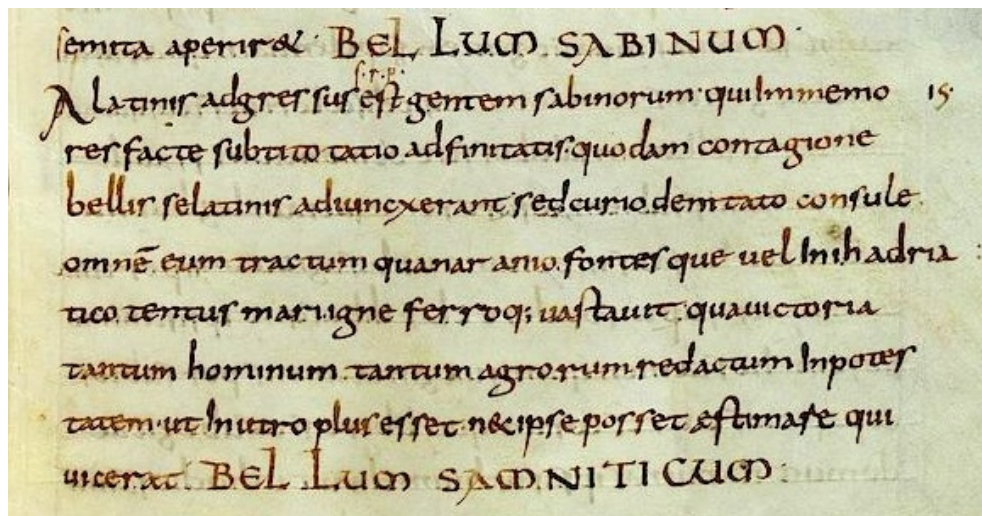


Fig. 66 - The passage on the Roman conquest of Sabine from Lucius Annaeus Florus' *Epitomae de Tito Livio* (manuscript Pal. Lat. 894 preserved at the Universitätsbibliothek in Heidelberg), folium 9r

In antiquity, the Sibillini Mountain Range was known with the name of 'Tetrica rupes', which means 'gloomy, frightful mountain', as mentioned by Vergilius in Book VII of his poem *Aeneid*, in describing the Italian troops that were being sent against Aeneas (vv. 706-713):

«Here comes the great Army of the ancient lineage of the Sabines [...] after Sabines were given a part of Rome [...] and those who live at the dreadful Tetricus cliff».

[In the original Latin text: «Ecce Sabinorum prisco de sanguine magnum Agmen [...] postquam in partem data Roma Sabinis [...] qui Tetricae horrentis rupes»].

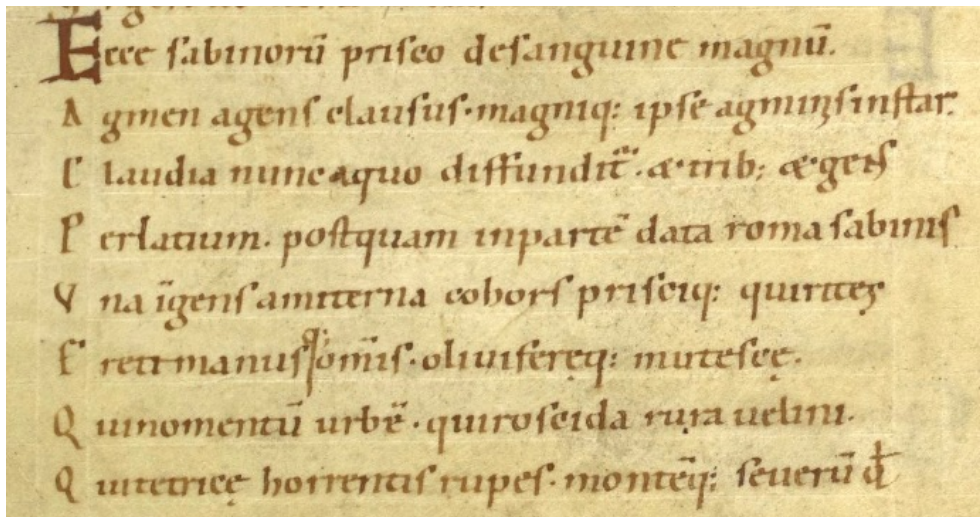


Fig. 67 - The excerpt from Vergilius' *Aeneid* containing the sentence on the 'Tetricae horrentis rupes' (manuscript Harley 2772, British Library, folium 5r)

As detailed in our previous paper *World of the Sibyl: the Italian Apennines and the Sibillini Mountain Range*, this name is further confirmed by fifth-century scholar Servius Marius Honoratus («the Tetricus mountain is a barren, towering mountain, where stern men are said 'tetricos', sullen and gloomy»), first-century consul Silius Italicus («with him come the soldiers of [...] Reate sacred to the great Mother of the Gods, and Nursia the abode of snow, and warriors from the Tetricus cliff»), and Marcus Terentius Varro («even now there are several species of wild cattle in various places. [...] For there are many wild goats in Italy in the vicinity of Mount Fiscellum and Mount Tetrica»).

But the relation between Romans and Sabines dates back to much earlier times, with the legendary tale of 'The Abduction of the Sabine Women' which is part of the myth on the foundation of Rome itself.

On the other side of the 'Tetricus Mons' lived another ancient population, the Picenes. According to an ancient tradition, they were of Sabine origin, having moved to the eastern side of their native territory in search of new land, as reported by many classical authors, including first-century geographer Strabo:

«The Picenes came here from Sabine, led by a woodpecker that showed the way to their forefathers. From this their name is derived: they call this bird

'Picus', and they consider it sacred to Ares. They are settled from the mountains down to the plains and the sea».

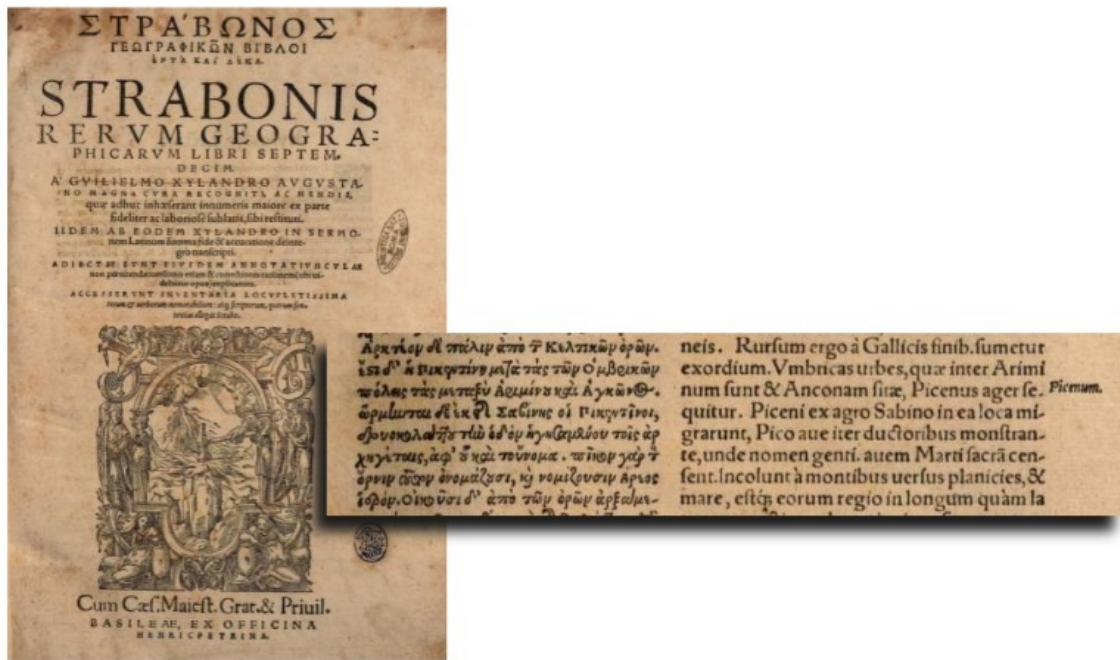


Fig. 68 - The Picenes as mentioned in Strabo's *Rerum Geographarum*, in a printed Greek-Latin version published in Basel in 1771 (p. 263)

The Picenes came under the influence of Rome in the same years as the Sabines, following the third Samnite War (298 - 290 B.C.), in which they fought as allied of the Romans.

It is out of the scope of the present work to illustrate the results and assumptions of modern research as to the origin of both the Sabines and the Picenes, the two populations of interest for our enquiry into the origin of the legends of the Sibillini Mountain Range. It is sufficient to report here that the archeological investigation has ascertained the presence of man-made artifacts in the area since the age of Neolithic, set between 5,000 and 3,000 B.C. In the Iron Age, roughly starting after 1,000 B.C., the Sabines may have possibly moved eastwards, beyond the Sibillini Mountain Range and towards the sea, giving rise to an offspring of Picene settlers in the southern portion of today's Marche.

What sort of men inhabited that remote, isolated territory, before the Romans came? How did they live? And where?

On the western side of the 'Tetrica rupes', the Sabines lived in a territory that was only sparsely inhabited, and strongly marked by the custom of transhumance, which implied the seasonal transfer of livestock from the grazing grounds of southern Italy to the grassy expands set beneath Mount Vettore, in Norcia and on today's Pian Grande: «transhumance and trade were the primary forms of human activities; an almost uninterrupted woodland, including wooded valleys, left some space to vast clearings used for livestock grazing and only limited, essential farming carried out by rivers and streams [...] within the framework of a network of pathways which crossed the Apennines for horizontal and vertical transhumance, the key to a deep, archetypical interpretation of the economic history of this land» (Paolo Camerieri, *La centuriazione dell'ager Nursinus*, in *Nursia e l'ager Nursinus - Un distretto sabino dalla praefectura al municipium*, edited by Simone Sisani, 2013).

The character of the whole place, set by the tallest mountains of the Sibillini Mountain Range, suggests that «livestock management and trade were the main source for production of wealth, especially at the Plains of Castelluccio (Pian Grande, Pian Piccolo, Pian Perduto), marked by cattle breeding on both a local and transhumant basis» (Romano Cordella et al., *La Sabina settentrionale: Norcia, Cascia e Valnerina romane*, 2007).

So it is not a surprise to note that, in this area, no significant urban settlement has ever been established, apart from the town of Norcia, on the westernmost borders of the Sibillini Mountain Range. In antiquity, Norcia itself was no large settlement: according to archeological evidence, simple huts only begin to appear starting from the Iron Age, around ninth century B.C., subsequently replaced, two centuries later, by enclosed walls, accompanied by a burial ground which contains the remains of wealthy male warriors. But the largest portion of the present urban area will be extensively built only after the Roman conquest (Liliana Costamagna, *Dinamiche insediative tra Umbria e Sabina in età preromana*, in *Nursia e l'ager Nursinus - Un distretto sabino dalla praefectura al municipium*, edited by Simone Sisani, 2013).

Even the ancient worship site set at the foot of the mounts which lie just outside Norcia, Forca di Ancarano, seems to have been in operations between the seventh and the fifth century B.C., with a void in the subsequent century until the arrival of the Romans (Simone Sisani, *Da Curio Dentato a Vespasio Pollione: conquista e romanizzazione del distretto nursino*, in *Nursia e l'ager Nursinus - Un distretto sabino dalla praefectura al municipium*, a cura di Simone Sisani, 2013).

Beside Norcia, only scarce traces of settlements can be found in the neighbouring territory. In the adjoining Piana di Santa Scolastica, no remnants of 'villae rusticae' (countryside villas and farms) have been retrieved. Thus it seems reasonable to suppose that «there was alternative settlement scheme based on the presence of a pagus/vicus system [a small administrative district in the countryside including various hamlets, editor's note], a system that has survived up to our present days, as the modern localisation of all tiny villages, set by the antique Roman grid of fields and at constant distance from one another, seems to suggest» (Camerieri, op. cit.). In fact, «we must also note that on the heights which surround the valley of Norcia various significant settlements can be found, that are not to be overlooked if we want to fully understand the settlement process in the area [... at] Monte della Civita, [...] Croce di Norcia, [...] Legogne [... and] Ocrichio». The final impression is that «the many inhabited outposts that marked the points of passage into the valley of Norcia were established not as specific settlements, but as parts of the whole valley, in which the various places, though located at distinct points, made up a single community» (Costamagna, op. cit.).

Beyond that, only «small fortified posts in the highlands were present to oversee the trail of transhumance» (Camerieri, op. cit.).

This distribution of settlements hints to «a most scattered ownership of the land [...] which was certainly supported by the presence of buildings dedicated to the dwelling of families, and the processing and storage of agricultural products and cattle [...] with] autonomous farming units, in a dual agricultural/livestock breeding system which was mainly intended for mere subsistence» (Cordella et al., op. cit.).

On the eastern side of the 'Tetrica rupes', the Picenes experimented a different development path, especially from the seventh century B.C. and

mainly in the northern portion of the present province of Marche: «the region was increasingly opening up to outside contacts: Picene communities were acquiring larger quantities of imported goods as well as the technological know-how for manufacturing sophisticated objects locally, [...] from metal to amber, ivory and bone. As a consequence, these communities became richer and [...] gained the ability to accumulate a hitherto unseen wealth» (Corinna Riva, *The Archaeology of Picenum - The Last Decade*, in *Ancient Italy. Regions without Boundaries*, edited by Guy Jolyon Bradley et al., 2007). In this northern area, groups of Senone Gauls settled at the beginning of the fourth century B.C.

In the southern portion of Marche, by the eastern versants of the Sibillini Mountain Range, where the Sabines had moved, this historical, commercial and artistic development process was certainly less extended, owing to the impervious nature of the mountainous area set in the inland; yet, «from the ninth century B.C. some major central settlements, [...] Ripatransone, Castignano and Rotella, developed on high ground a good ten kilometres distant from one another and each surrounded by a cemetery». These settlements were located just on the eastern slopes of the Sibillini Mountain Range. These «inland centres grew in the subapennine zone, along the river routes and close to the mountain passes where they controlled the flow of goods from the Tyrrhenian region». (Riva, op. cit.).

However, the hamlets of Montefortino, Montegallo and Montemonaco, set by the very slopes of Mount Vettore and Mount Sibyl, seem to be of much later origin, with only the former dating back to the age of Roman Empire, and the other two being established in late antiquity. Insufficient archeological excavations and lack of findings make it impossible to ascertain the nature of the settlements in the area before the Romans came, even though we can suppose that small outposts may have existed for the control of the tracks which led to the high grounds and grasslands of Pian Grande and the land of the Sabines beyond.

This is the overall picture which is provided to us by history and archeology.

Now, let's try to take advantage of the above information, with a view to merging the available data with the scenario we have been sketching in the

preceding paragraphs on the peculiar role that earthquakes have played amid the Sibillini Mountain Range across the millennia.

Earthquakes that have been hitting, repeatedly and savagely, those same antique populations: the Sabines and the Picenes.

5.2 Sabines and Picenes before the potency of earthquakes

Sabines and Picenes. From the Iron Age onwards, and possibly even earlier, they and their ancestors have inhabited a same mountainous relief: the 'Tetrica rupes', as Romans called it, or Sibillini Mountain Range as it is called today.

Why this jagged, secluded, unfriendly mountainous ridge, set between the most inviting hills and plains of Umbria and the welcoming coastline of Marche, has ever been inhabited at all?

Human beings have been living there as they were mainly attracted by the presence of an elevated plateau covered with extended grasslands: the Pian Grande, lying right beneath the western side of the fearsome Mount Vettore. It is a sort of unexpected bounty concealed within this inhospitable, wintry region, a real trove hidden amid the most frightful mountains, fully fit for livestock feeding and transhumance to and from other Italian regions.

And, amid a territory which was marked by elevated mountains and impenetrable woods, there was another area in which men could comfortably settle: it was the the grassy valley of Norcia, today's Plain of St. Scolastica, where water was abundant, extensive space for farming was available, and the high grounds beneath Mount Vettore could be easily access and controlled. There, the first nucleus of the town of Norcia was founded, a small settlement that will undergo significant extension only after the arrival of Rome's rule.

This latter area was equally set on the western side of the Sibillini Mountain Range, as the Pian Grande was, while on the other side of the mountains their eastern versants were not provided with any equivalent

space for the establishment of significant settlements, the wooded hills which rapidly tend to ascend to the steep slopes of the main cliffs.

Thus, a bounty was hidden there. It was not a land of barren mountains, merely. Plains were there. Huge, extended plateaus, especially on the western side of the elevated ridges. Rich, fertile land. Two wide expanses of grasslands which, once deprived of their woods, could feed large numbers of animals, both local cattle and livestock transferred seasonally from distant territories. The people who controlled the generous grazing lands set on the western boundaries of the Sibillini Mountain Range had a remarkable source of subsistence and significant power in their hands.



Fig. 69 - The Sibillini Mountain Range with the bountiful plateaus which are most fit for cattle feeding and farming of selected crops

So, between the Iron Age and the conquests of the Romans, in the centuries which span from 1,000 B.C. to 290 B.C., men inhabited the area: a single main settlement was there, Norcia, though very small with respect to its future urban development under the Romans; a number of hamlets were scattered around this area, and possibly also on the eastern side of the Sibillini Mountain Range, though possibly the latter were not subject to any rule exercised by Norcia; small outposts guarded the trails that led to Pian Grande, perhaps on both the eastern and western sides of Mount Vettore and the high cliffs. In a hard, unfriendly environment, peasants living in

local, scattered communities attended to subsistence farming; they were also shepherds, who used to drive their herds to the grazing grounds in the highlands; trashumance was possibly being carried out in some sort of seminal forms, as it is not known whether this custom was already in place in such early times. Circulation of goods was limited, with no remarkable instance of significant wealth found in burial grounds, apart from single tombs of warriors.

Such were the people who inhabited the Sibillini Mountain Range from the Iron Age onwards: Sabines and Picenes, peasants and shepherds, who in small villages lived a life of hard work in a harsh natural environment, by the slopes of deserted, elevated cliffs of imposing majesty, taking advantage of the large plains which were found in the area.

In this scenario, we must always remember that if the Sibillini Mountain Range conceals a sort of bounty - the extended plateaus of grassy land - for the people who chose to live under their shadow, the same fastnesses, out of their underlying geological structure and the mighty strain exerted by powerful subterranean forces - hid a terrifying curse.

That curse was earthquakes.

Because - as we saw in previous paragraphs - from time to time, a mighty, terrifying earthquake came upon them. Abruptly.

Death and destruction arrived and swept the whole land.

Below their feet, the ground began to shake as if a monster beneath were trying to unchain itself and break into the world of men. Before their very eyes, the mountains screamed and ripped, and portions of them went down. Their wives, their children and they themselves were crushed, and perished under the wrecks of their poor dwellings, being smashed down by the frantic blows struck by the giant fists of a deity.

And it was not only a matter of recurrent devastation, with the annihilation of their houses and families.

They actually lived their whole life under the ceaseless threat of earthquakes. They were immersed in the ghastly vibrations of the seismic

waves, coming unheralded at night. They often happened to hear the roar which surged from the depths of the ground, always fearing whether that blood-curdling noise was about to raise to a fiendish bellow; or, it was going to appease instead to a low murmur, leaving the dreaded destruction for the next time.

Furthermore, after a primary seismic shock, the local population lived long periods of time interspersed with secondary aftershocks, some of them of significant magnitude. And those periods could even last years.



Fig. 70 - A surface crevice on the side of Mount Porche, a peak set between Mount Vettore and Mount Sibyl, caused by the earthquakes occurred in 2016

Sabines and Picenes. They lived amid the Sibillini Mountain Range. And they were terrified.

Across the Iron Age, no rational knowledge, no scientific explanation was available to them. No plate tectonics, no localisation of fault lines, no analysis of seismic data was known to them.

In addition to that, we have also to consider that they had no information at all about the earthquakes which used to occur in other places of the world. They knew nothing of what happened in other seismic areas, in the Italian peninsula or across the Mediterranean Sea. There was no education, no news, no perception of the characteristics and natural unfolding of any other similar events.

They were alone. They were scared. They feared for their own lives. And they possibly thought that the place in which they lived, today's Sibillini Mountain Range, was some sort of very special place.

And so they started to have their own dream. Their own legends.

The mountains moved. The mountains screamed. The mountains were alive. Or, maybe, some thing that was alive lived beneath the mountains.

And their dream possibly was: the earthquake was a monster; the earthquake was an enraged deity; the earthquake was some sort of demonic entity, which was concealed beneath those impressive, precipitous peaks.

In our conjecture, within the model we are currently developing on the origin of the legends which inhabit the Sibillini Mountain Range, this is the assumption we are trying to consider: across the many centuries which are part of the Iron Age, before the arrival of the Roman, local people began to develop some sort of specific dream, a legendary narrative, and a possible cult, with relation to the nature and potential worship of earthquakes, considered a kind of fiendish being.

A fiendish being which they certainly wished to placate. To avoid fear, destruction, and death.

We stress the point that what we are going to propose in the paragraphs that follow is basically a conjecture, which will need to be put under trial through a series of further studies and confirmations, possibly including further on-site excavations; and yet, as we will see later, it is a model that is fully based on reasonable grounds, among which the observation of the actual seismic behaviour of the Sibillini Mountain Range, the legendary tradition on the Sibyl's Cave and Pilate's Lake that we have fully analysed in our previous works, with a particular reference to the papers *Sibillini*

Mountain Range: the legend before the legends and Sibillini Mountain Range, a cave and lake to the Otherworld, and the framework proposed by the historical and archeological research on the local populations which inhabited the area for centuries before the Roman rule.

In our conjectural model, a first issue that the ancient inhabitants of the Sibillini Mountain Range, Sabines and Picenes, had possibly to confront with was how to establish a tentative contact with the mighty powers beneath.

They needed to communicate with them. They needed to talk to them. Because, without the establishment of a communication link, there was no way to ask them to stop the earthquake. An earthquake they were fearing would soon come, or the multiple earthquakes which used to follow a powerful shake.

So, where to address them? Was there any specific site where to go and implore the evil gods beneath to hold their rage and have mercy on them?

Yes, the Sibillini Mountain Range, the land of earthquakes, proposed a most fit site.

Actually, the mountains proposed two of them. Both were utterly frightful, and certainly fully apt to address and worship the divine beings which lived beneath the rock.

They were a Lake and a Cave.

And we know them very well.

5.3 The lake and cave, landmarks to earthquake potencies

As we saw in the previous paragraph, we are conjecturing that the ancient populations of peasants and shepherds which lived amid the Sibillini Mountain Range, the Sabines and Picenes, scattered across small hamlets on both sides of the mountainous ridge, affrighted by the recurrent earthquakes that hit the land, and being ceaselessly reminded of the impending threat by the neverending tremors and rumbles which came

from beneath, had developed their own legendary dream: the earthquake was the sign of some thing that lived under the mountains. For their own safety, they needed to establish a contact with the monster, deity, or demon beneath, so as to ask for its mercy and appease its cyclical rage.

The first issue, for those men, was, of course, how and where to establish such terrifying contact.

A tricky issue, because the dwellings of supernatural, fiendish beings are not easy to find in our ordinary world.

But the Sibillini Mountain Range actually offered a perfect site to the purpose. Indeed, the appropriate sites were two.

We must remember that those men did not live by a peaceful shore by the sea, or on a vast plain run by sleepy, winding rivers.

They lived by appalling mountains, a sort of impregnable fortress standing out from the main Apennine chain, and whose mere sight recalled to the mind ideas of titanic gods and superhuman potencies.

As we described in a previous paper (*A legend for a Roman prefect: the Lakes of Pontius Pilate*), on the southernmost side of this massive ridge raises the titanic shape of Mount Vettore, with its huge, imposing mass, an arched behemoth that overwhelms the whole mountainous region with its elevated top and vertiginous, sinister cliffs.

Deeply enclosed within the precipitous arms of this giant of stone, a small mirror of pure, clear water lay in silence and stillness. A Lake. It waited in its solitary nest, surrounded by looming, overhanging versants of vertical rock.

It was an icy, crystal-like surface, set at the bottom of Mount Vettore's glacial cirque, high up amid sheer walls of rock, quietly reflecting the sky above.

Three millennia ago as today (but in our present days the Lake is split in two owing to the ruinous fall of rocks from the overhanging cliffs and the partial collapse of a portion of its northern shore, as Pio Rajna reports in his

article *Nei paraggi della Sibilla di Norcia*), whoever had the chance to climb the gigantic mountain and visit the place hidden between the cliffs of rock was struck by the feeling of indistinct, dumbfounded awe that seizes a human soul when left alone before this overpowering might, which echoes any step that may be taken, any sound and any word that might be uttered, with hesitant whispers, by the astounded visitor.



Fig. 71 - The Lakes of Pilate as they appear today

The Lake was, and still is, a truly blood-curdling place. A sort of theatrical scenery, ready for some kind of eerie performance. It was a setting where an inexplicable, dreadful event seemed to be about to happen. It was totally desolate, and totally inhabited.

Was that the one and only site where man could have fancied to establish a ghastly contact with the legendary, supernatural powers which they reputed may be concealed beneath the Sibillini Mountain Range?

No, there was a second site.

And it was not far from the Lake. You only needed to look down, from that very Lake, along the valley which followed, and still follows, the displacement route of the antique glacier that once was nested within the rocky arms of Mount Vettore: there, at a distance of 5.2 miles, and in full line of sight, Mount Sibyl raises its crowned peak.

Mount Sibyl, whose the sinister pinnacle could be reached through a long walk which started from the western cliffs of Mount Vettore, heading to Mount Argentella, and up to vertiginous paths running along the crests, which, by cutting through the dizzy peaks of Palazzo Borghese and Mount Porche, led at last - beyond Vallelunga's Peak - to the crowned mountain.



Fig. 72 - The crowned peak of Mount Sibyl

Because beneath the very top of it, there was a ring of solid, barren rock; a sheer wall, rising for a few dozen feet, which encircled the uppermost region of the mount: that was the crown, a crown of overhanging rock. It was like an unassailable wall carved in the mount's body, a sort of token of some sort of kingly dominance. And its ramparts opened the way to the uppermost region of the mount, a realm which seemed to be apparently forbidden to mortal beings, surrounded as it was by sheer ravines and, on the northwestern side, by a precipitous versant, which fell abruptly for thousands of feet down to the grisly and appalling gorge of the Infernaccio, where the river Tenna gurgled, unseen in the distance, among inaccessible cliffs of perpendicular rock.

And, actually, the crown appeared to guard a fateful spot, a place of the greatest significance: on the very top of the mount, a ghastly, baleful Cave opened its gloomy jaws on an unknown maze of secret pits and passages. A barren darkness, an unfriendly, almost tangible obscurity from which a cold breath issued forth: a gaping mouth, which seemed to swallow the bodies of men, as those who had ventured into its hollows and caverns and tunnels, and had never come back. It was a desolate place, and totally uninhabited.

In this place, too, the fanciful dreams of the ancient inhabitants of the Sibillini Mountain Range may have found a suitable place where to make attempts at establishing a contact with the subterranean potencies which, in their legendary narratives, controlled and roused the earthquakes: the Cave as a sort of gateway to address the fiendish being that used to unleash death and destruction over their land.

A Lake and a Cave. Two landmarks, two peculiar geographical features, set within the same territory, the Sibillini Mountain Range, in which earthquakes played a major role in the life of the local people.

Two features that are set within a mountainous range marked by the peculiar presence of a glacial valley, a unique landform in the central Apennines, and an impressive, emotional setting for the staging of legendary tales.

It was at the end of the Pleistocene, during the Würm glaciation, a period extending from 100,000 to 10,000 years ago, that the Ice Age produced the most impressive feature which marks Mount Vettore as we know it today: the glacial cirque, a colossal hemicycle carved in the very matrix of the landform, which gives the mount its fantastic, astounding U-shaped structure, a sort of immense horseshoe. A glacier made all this, eroding and grinding the mount's rock and the subjacent valley by its ceaseless motion under the pull of gravity, for hundreds and hundreds of centuries.

The resulting shape in an enclosed, elongated glen of significant size: a sort of titanic, shady womb or lair made of rock, marked on its northernmost tip by Mount Sibyl, and on the southern edge by the arched cliffs of Mount Vettore.

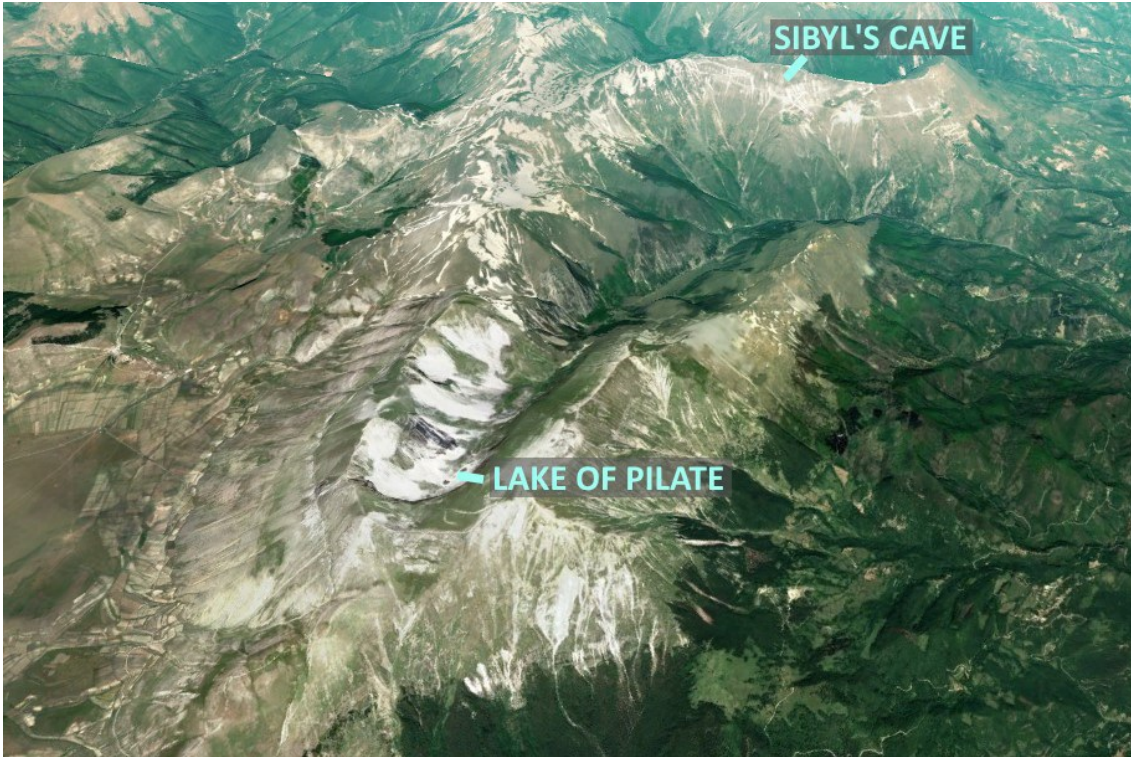


Fig. 73 - The arched shape of Mount Vettore with its enclosed glacial valley running northwards

And, from the Iron Age until the arrival of the Romans, we can suppose that those two features, the Lake and Cave, placed within this giant sheltering den, may have assumed a very specific role.

As points of contact to an appalling, subterranean Otherworld.

5.4 Otherwordly highland shrines

A land recurrently smashed by devastating earthquakes. A territory which lived under the impending threat of ground shaking. The earth itself seemed to be enraged. The very mountains trembled and sometimes even yelled with all their fury. Even in periods when their rage seemed to be appeased, the ground beneath rumbled and warned the men above that some thing was always there, and the time for destruction was only being postponed.

And men's hearts were filled with dread, awe and an urgent alarm.

They needed some kind of action. The leaders of the local communities, scattered on the eastern and western sides of the Sibillini Mountain Range, with a most significant settlement in the area of Norcia, were being put under pressure by the demanding requests of men, women and families which lived in the area, in fear and, from time to time, in sheer terror.



Fig. 74 - The terrifying fault lines activated by the earthquake sequence in 2016 on the western versant of Mount Vettore

For many times, across the Iron Age, the ancient population of peasants and shepherds that lived under the shadows of the mountains had undergone the harrowing trial of a large earthquake. They had experienced the havoc, the loss of lives, the subsequent excruciating sequence of secondary shocks, which had accompanied their grief even for years. In addition to that, throughout their own lives, even in the absence of large earthquakes, they had the chance to sense the vibrations, the roars, the sudden shakings at

night, the hair-raising series of small, ominous tremors that used to come from beneath, all year round.

Throughout the centuries, a legendary narrative on the cause which unleashed the powers of the mountains had certainly been developed. People was asking for it. They wanted to be protected, They wanted to be reassured. They wanted the earthquakes to stop. They wanted the blow not to be struck.

In our conjecture, we imagine that, in the absence of any scientific knowledge, the answer of the leaders, or the most visionary among them, was that the superhuman, otherworldly monster beneath had to be appeased. Men needed to speak to it, somewhere, somehow, and assuage his fury.



Fig. 75 - Fractured ground at the foot of Mount Argentella, 1.5 miles north of Castelluccio di Norcia, as a fearful effect of the earthquakes occurred in 2016

And the only places in the Sibillini Mountain Range in which to establish such a dreadful contact were up there, in the high peaks: at the grim Lake set within the glacial cirque of Mount Vettore; or, at the dark, blood-curdling Cave lying on the crowned mountain, Mount Sibyl.

There lived the fiendish beast. There men should have made their efforts to allay its destructive rage.

We have to consider that we are trying to form a conjecture on a process that lasted many centuries. Here we are not describing a sort of sequence from a movie, in which the ancient villagers gather in fear around their chief priest, as he points up with his raised arm and finger to the fateful cliffs. The elaboration of an oral narrative concerning earthquakes, the reason for their occurrence and the way to avoid destruction certainly was carried out across many hundreds of years, across many generations of men, and with a number of different tales and legendary versions, involving the Lake, the Cave, or both, that today are totally lost to us.

However, in this fragmented framework, we can conjecture that, starting from a remote antiquity, both sites, the Lake and the Cave (today's Lake of Pilate and Sibyl's Cave) began to be considered as highland shrines, sacred to an evil, otherworldly entity connected to earthquake generation.

Highland shrines, small sites dedicated to the worship of a local deity and placed in selected locations on hilltops, mountain-sides, water springs and along main trails, are a specific mark of the culture and territorial presence of the populations which inhabited the Apennines, including the Sabines and the Picenes in the area of the Sibillini Mountain Range: «before the Roman conquest, the Sabines used to position their shrines in sites of strategical significance, mainly on the heights that overlooked the land below and by mountain passes» (Alessandra Romagnoli, *I santuari del distretto nursino durante l'età repubblicana in Nursia e l'ager Nursinus - Un distretto sabino dalla praefectura al municipium*, edited by Simone Sisani, 2013).

Highland shrines were also a sort of natural offspring which arised from the settlement model that those same populations, including the Sabines and Picenes, had been implementing across that same territories for centuries: a scattered pattern of 'vici' and 'pagi', small hamlets with some very limited

level of hierarchy, and a number of even smaller outposts set at significant positions along or by the main communication trails. In the Iron Age, «large number of small and even tiny highland shrines [were present in the area of Norcia], fully part of an economic, administrative and religious pattern which we know that existed in many areas of the Apennines, with relation to what is commonly defined as 'pagus/vicus system'» (Alexandra Stalinski, *Il paesaggio del sacro tra continuità e trasformazione in Nursia e l'ager Nursinus - Un distretto sabino dalla praefectura al municipium*, edited by Simone Sisani, 2013). A significant presence of highland shrines is also retrieved in the territories of the Picenes, a presence which is «closely linked to the non-urban character of the culture of the Picenes and is possibly connected to actual features, as the worship was to be devoted, in the first place, to natural events, among which the available documentation points to water springs and deities linked to livestock and agriculture» (Alessandro Naso, *Piceni - Storia e archeologia delle Marche in epoca preromana*, 2000).



Fig. 76 - Small bronze statues of warriors dating to the fifth century B.C. found in the votive deposit at the highland shrine of Ancarano of Norcia (Vatican Museums)

But highland shrines were also the expression of both the religious feelings and the emotional bond that the ancient populations of the Italian peninsula, especially along the Apennine mountainous ridge, preserved in their hearts for a territory so harsh, and yet so beloved. Religious feelings of piety, of devotion and worship, and of awe.

The territory of Norcia and its surrounding area have provided many instances of highland shrines, from Ancarano di Norcia to Valle Fuino, and then Monte Alvagnano, Forma Cavaliere, Ocosce, Roccaporena, Collegiacone, Civita di Cascia, and many others. In today's Marche, many shrines have been found, though especially in the northern portion of today's province of Marche, in the lack of extensive excavation campaigns in the southern area bordering the Sibillini Mountain Range.

We must also consider that «our knowledge about the sites of worship in the area of Norcia before the arrival of the Romans is significantly partial, owing not only to the mountainous nature of the largest portion of this territory, but also because the available data originates from serendipitous finds [...] on which not even the most recent excavations allowed to cast more light» (Stalinski, op. cit.). And the same applies to the territory once inhabited by the Picenes.

So within the framework of our conjecture, which concerns the narrative origin of the legendary tales which live amid the Sibillini Mountain Range, we are supposing, as a reasonable hypothesis, that the Lake and Cave set on Mount Vettore and Mount Sibyl may have been considered, throughout the Iron Age, as highland shrines, which were possibly dedicated to the worship of some evil entity that was reputed to be in control, or be the cause, of the mighty earthquakes which struck the land on a recurrent basis. Otherworldly shrines, connected to natural landmarks, a Lake and a Cave, and to a very specific event, the fearful shaking of the mountains.

A possible objection to the above conjecture might be posed in the form of an observation of the sites where the two geographical landmarks are placed: if we look at the Lake and Cave set amid the Sibillini Mountain Range, and later known as Pilate's and Sibyl's, as potential highland shrines for the Sabines and Picenes, no remnants or wrecks of any shrine or temple has ever been found. Up there, no archeological evidence of the potential presence of a highland shrine has ever been retrieved.

However, as a matter of fact we can actually expect to find no remnants of any permanent, tangible fabric.

In the land of Sabines, highland shrines «only rarely are marked by fixed structures, that is an actual building for worship» (Stalinski, op. cit.). They «usually cannot be traced through the presence of a temple or small building [as] many sites of worship of the Sabines lack any permanent structures, so they are fated to leave no mark of their former existence. [...] Thus the most ancient sacred sites are not provided with monumental structures, but only with a temporary fabric, as the place in itself, immersed in a natural environment, is a manifestation of the deity which dwells in the nature [...] It is a religious sentiment of remarkable antiquity, in which the heritage of archaic animistic beliefs is visible: the god cannot be parted from the nature of the place where he/she manifests himself and in which he/she dwells; all this does not require the construction of a temple» (Romagnoli, op. cit.). The same happens in the area inhabited by the Picenes, in which «there is no evidence, as to the pre-Roman age, of architectural remains of shrines, but only of votive offerings, which have been found as single items or in troves» (Naso, op. cit.).

So nothing is left and almost nothing is to be found on Mount Vettore and Mount Sibyl, if any shrines have ever been set at the Lake and Cave, apart from the possible offerings we are going to detail later in the next paragraphs. No masonry, no roof tiles, no carved stones and decorations.

We must also note that any potential remnant would have been entirely wiped out and erased already centuries or even millennia ago: the bottom of the glacial cirque in which the Lake lies has been subject to a recurrent process of elevation, out of the recurrent landslides from the overhanging walls of rock, from which layers over layers of debris were cast into the waters; and the Cave has undergone a number of repeated collapses, partly due to earthquakes and partly to man's activity, in an attempt to close the cavern's mouth to unwanted necromancer and in the subsequent efforts to reopen it.

Therefore, at the present stage of our investigation we can only guess what sort of deity the men of the Iron Age may have intended to worship or summon at the Lake and Cave.

We can only stop ourselves, with humble, awe-stricken steps, at the very threshold of the antique legendary core of the otherworldly myth which lives at the very center of the Sibillini Mountain Range.

But is this true?

Actually, we may try to direct our guess at a more specific direction, by also taking into account our previous papers, *Sibillini Mountain Range: the legend before the legends* and *Sibillini Mountain Range, a cave and lake to the Otherworld*.

So let's make our entrance into the core of a legend: an Otherworld in central Italy, hidden amid the Italian Apennines.

6. *Otherworld: the legend's core*

6.1 *Demons of the earthquakes*

We are now facing the most hidden secret of the legendary tale which lives amid the Sibillini Mountain Range. Not a tale of Sibyls and Roman prefects, but of earthquakes. And terror.

To step further into the original core of the myth, we must go back to our previous papers, *Sibillini Mountain Range: the legend before the legends* and *Sibillini Mountain Range, a cave and lake to the Otherworld*.

In the listed papers, we investigated what we consider as the marks left by the original, native legend that seemed to inhabit the Sibillini Mountain Range: a legend whose true core was concealed by additional legendary layers, including a narrative on an Apennine Sibyl and a story on the cursed body of Pontius Pilate.

We found that the narratives concerning the Lake and the Cave share four remarkable common characters.

First, the two sites were believed to be inhabited by legendary demonic presences. Second, the two of them beheld the performance of necromantic rituals, also involving the summoning of local, mythical demons. Third, at both sites the disturbances stirred by necromancers were such that tempests and storms were raised, with devastating effects on the neighbouring land. Fourth, men seemed to believe that an access to some sort of Otherworld may exist at both the Lake and Cave, in the possible forms of a 'nekyia', the summoning of the shadows of the dead at the entrance of a gloomy realm, or as a 'katabasis', a journey which brings a mortal man through that passageway and into a land of dread.

We are now before the very core of the legend of the Sibillini Mountain Range. The most ancient myth, almost lost in the mists of the Iron Age.

We are about to the step into the hidden nucleus of this fascinating legendary tale, with the help of the conjecture we have proposed in the present paper as to the remarkable seismic nature of the Sibillini Mountain Range and the relation established by the local population with harrowing, devastating events.

We stress, again, the point that what we are now proposing is a conjectural scenario, though fully in line with our preceding research papers: further assumptions which are to be considered as guesses on an evanescent realm of dreams and credences that men and women may have housed in their hearts across the many centuries of the Iron age, before the arrival of the Romans.

We may suppose that the political and religious leaders that lived in the small hamlets which encircled the most elevated peaks of the Sibillini Mountain Range knew about the otherworldly character of both the Lake and Cave. The elderly possibly used to bequeath to the younger generations a collection of tales about their forefathers, who had been struck by the earthquakes and had heard the yell of the mountain. They had ascended the cliffs to implore the mercy of the mountain itself, where the demon lived. They knew that the fiendish being or beings resided in a Lake set amid the sheer walls of what we know today as Mount Vettore, They also knew that others believed that the Lake was not its dwelling, as according to a version of the legendary tradition the demonic presence inhabited the fearful Cave set on the peak of today's Mount Sibyl, not far from the Lake itself.

We may imagine that such were the narratives which were passed on from one generation to another as the centuries rolled by.

And when the earthquake struck again, it was the time to act.

A large, devastating blow hit the whole land, with its subsequent trail of harrowing secondary shocks. Or, smothered rumbles and vibrations began to come up from the ground, an ominous sign that destruction was about to come. In either case, the population in terror asked for protection. They wanted the earthquake to stop. And they asked their leaders to act accordingly.



Fig. 77 - The eastern profile of Mount Vettore ominously looming on the small hamlet of Pretare, in a picture taken before its total destruction following the seismic sequence of 2016

We may imagine that rulers and priests, in smaller or larger company, ascended the steep mountainsides to Mount Vettore or Mount Sibyl, or even both, in accordance to the specific credence being held by the local communities in that specific moment in their history, on the 'effectiveness' of each of the two sites as to the attainment of a standstill in the seismic activity. A preceding failure at the Lake would bring people to look at the Cave as a most successful place where to ask for mercy, while a new

success obtained by the icy waters set beneath the cliffs of Mount Vettore would shift the attention and hopes away from the cavern. At certain times, we may also imagine that the performance of rituals at both places was considered as necessary when pursuing an attempt at stopping the tremors.

What would they do, on their arrival at the Lake or Cave?

In our conjecture, the scope of their visit, which they certainly considered any less than appalling, was to establish a terrifying contact with the otherworldly being or beings that allegedly lived beneath the mountain. They wanted to communicate with them, and speak to them. They wanted to ask them to stop the earthquakes. For the salvation of their own lives and the lives of their families.

What sort of otherworldly beings may they expect to meet?

Of course, we have no idea of the name or names that were possibly attributed to him (or it, or them) across the centuries and by different local communities around the Sibillini Mountain Range. We don't even know how they may have figured them to be, in their mythical dreams. Sure enough, if our model is true, the legendary nature of such superhuman beings was not that of a propitious deity: most probably they were a sort of mythical demons or demonic gods or supernatural monsters, which resided in the very core of the Sibillini Mountain Range, perhaps surrounded by a sort of demonic court of additional, lesser fiends, which possibly, but this is a mere fancy, accounted for the smaller seismic shocks. We repute that a faint trace of all this still persists in the subsequent legendary tradition concerning the Sibillini Mountain Range, for which both the Lake and Cave are inhabited by a demonic presence, as detailed in our previous paper *Sibillini Mountain Range: the legend before the legends*.

So what the representative of the local community would do, on their arrival at the Lake or Cave?

When you get today to the Lake, set within the precipitous glacial cirque of Mount Vettore, or to the Cave, whose collapsed entryway stands on the solitary peak of Mount Sibyl encircled by vertical ravines, you are certainly impressed, and yet your mind and heart are full of the joyful enchantment typical of a tourist or hiker during a most pleasant excursion.

On the contrary, the men of the Iron Age were overwhelmed by sheer terror.



Fig. 78 - Eerie scenery at today's Lakes of Pilate

We must imagine a visit conducted in a most grievous predicament, possibly shortly after an earthquake strike of significant magnitude, with casualties and wrecked dwellings and new cracks torn in the mountains. Or even carried out in the expectancy of a great seismic blow, as the rumbles of a minor seismic sequence continued to frighten the land for days or weeks. In both cases, Mount Vettore and Mount Sibyl would be quivering and resounding as a ceaseless series of quakes proceeded to shake the Sibillini Mountain Range, even at the very moment of that ghastly visit.

Their hearts filled with dread, those men would try to get in touch with the fiendish deity beneath, by staging some kind of ritual.

In the framework of a highland shrine, the first and most probable action they may have been performing at the Lake or Cave is votive offering.

In the Sabine and Picene cultures, as in other ancient Appennine cultures, the highland shrine was mainly a cache, a deposit for ritual offerings presented by the worshipper to the local deity: «in the absence of permanent temples, the presence of a cult is made apparent by the discovery of votive deposits, in which the offered materials are similar to other finds retrieved in the territory of the Umbrians and Samnites, a token of a common culture and the expression of shared religious sentiment which marked the people of the Apennines» (Romagnoli, op. cit.).

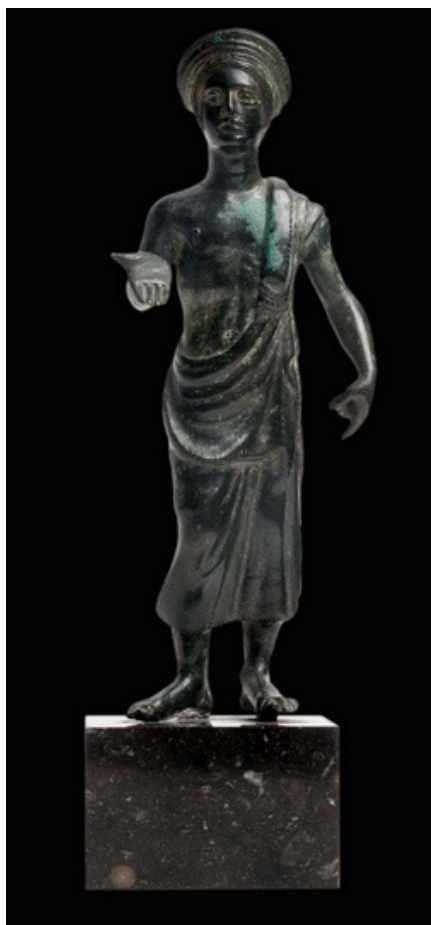


Fig. 79 - Small bronze statues of worshipper dating to the fourth century B.C. found in the votive deposit at the highland shrine of Valle Fuino (National Archeological Museum of Umbria)

Votive offerings, cast into the Lake's water or the Cave's vestibule and inner pits, may have included small bronze statuettes, bronze and iron tools, ceramic vessels, typically found in deposits pertaining to the Sabine and Picene areas (Romagnoli, Riva, Naso, op. cit.).

However, owing to the specific, fiendish nature of the worshipped deity, that would not be enough. The leaders of the community could not just come back to their hamlets having cast a handful of small objects into the Lake or Cave, while the earthquakes continued to shake the whole land.

We can imagine that some additional rituals may have been performed by the two geographical landmark, in a more determined effort to establish a communication link with the merciless chthonian potency.

In the theatrical setting of the glacial cirque of Mount Vettore or the cliff of Mount Sibyl, ancient priests may have developed rituals aimed at the summoning of the legendary demonic entity. We can suppose that words were spoken, accompanied with gestures, in a sort of necromantic play intended to conjure up the demons of the earthquakes, but also designed to satisfy the demand for reassurance strongly expressed by the local communities, which could not be satisfied by the mere deposition of small offerings. Different rituals were possibly staged in different moments during the history of the local communities. Attempts of various sorts may have been put in place, according to the successful or unsuccessful results of the previous versions of the rituals, in terms of observed response in the earthquake's behaviour. We may also suppose that a remnant of this sort of ceremonies may have lingered in the subsequent tradition, with necromancy being performed at the Lake and Cave in later centuries, as illustrated in our previous paper *Sibillini Mountain Range: the legend before the legends*.

The presence of men, up there, was only temporary. Awe-stricken, after the completion of their rituals, they would run downhill with the utmost haste, leaving those sinister place to the shadows of the night. In some cases, they may have held a ritual vigil through the night, in the hope to establish a ghastlier contact with the fiendish entities which lived beneath the mountain.

Of course, the earthquake, as a natural event utterly unheeding of the efforts and hopes of human beings, did not mind at all the rituals being carried out by the fervent representatives of the local communities. In many occurrences, the seismic waves just went on steadily and undisturbed, to the full disappointment of the people who waited in the hamlets below.



Fig. 80 - The ridges leading down from the cliff of Mount Sibyl and to the hamlet of Montemonaco

In predicaments of particular terror, when the earthquake happened to smash the land with a most powerful might, we can also imagine that specific local communities, in a peculiar moment of their history, may have resorted to a much more extreme plea.

Of this, we have no evidence at the two sites, nor this practice has ever been part of the cultural tradition of the ancient populations of Italy, and of the Romans neither.

However, there are hints which seem to suggest that, at least in some rare, exceptional case, a most precious offering may have been presented to the

legendary fiendish demons in a final, almost desperate effort to stop the earthquakes.

It's human sacrifice. As we will see in the next paragraph.

6.2 Resorting to the ultimate sacrifice against the earthquake

We are exploring the fascinating conjecture that the Lake and Cave set amid the Sibillini Mountain Range might have been considered, throughout the Iron Age and up to the Roman conquest of the area, as highland shrines dedicated to some demons or demonic gods of the earthquakes.

We saw that it may be assumed as a reasonable possibility that rituals were performed by the Lake's waters and at the Cave's entrance or vestibule, in an attempt to placate the fury of the chthonian potency.



Fig. 81 - The Lakes of Pilate

However, it is clear to our contemporary understanding of natural events that no earthquake can ever be stopped by throwing small offerings into a lake or cave, or even by performing lively, yet useless, necromantic

performances at the same spots in an effort to summon the subterranean deities which supposedly inhabited the bowels of the Sibillini Mountain Range.

We can also imagine the excitement, the desperate hopes, the many disillusionments, the tragic disappointments, the sense of grievous frustration that might have seized the Sabines and Picenes as they experimented, as centuries rolled by, the effectiveness of the rituals performed by the Lake, or Cave, or both, according to each successful or unsuccessful attempt at obtaining protection for themselves and their families, as earthquakes continued to hit the land across the years, decades and centuries.

And, when the earthquake struck with its utmost might, as in modern times occurred in the years 1703 and 2016, and terror amid the people reached its utmost peak, it is conceivable that the local leaders may have resorted to an ultimate, most desperate chance.

A bargain with the demon. A human life. In exchange for the cessation of the seismic sequence.

Why are we introducing a new hypothesis, perhaps redundant and unnecessary, to a model which is already conjectural?

We must remember that the sacrifice of human lives in religious rituals is not a feature which is manifestly retrieved in the ancient cultures of Italy.

In the history of the ancient Romans, the single instances of human offerings are connected to the ritual killings of a pair of Greeks and a pair of Gauls, which took place in the Forum Boarium in the years 28 B.C., 261 B.C and 113 B.C., when Rome was facing deadly military threats by its enemies, be they Gauls or Carthaginians, and in the wake of the ensuing panic. However, this is a truly peculiar occurrence in Roman history, because «so far as we know [such events were] entirely new to their experience. [...] It was not a] sacrifice in terms of the normal Roman ritual [...] for according to the formal religious rules this killing was not a sacrifice» (Mary Beard et al., *Religions of Rome*, 1998). The sacrifice of human life in religious ceremonies was not part of the cultural horizon of ancient Rome.

As for the Etruscans, scholars are still debating whether that culture ever practiced human sacrifice, in the presence of controversial references in ancient sources and a number of archeological finds still under investigation. For the Sabines and Picenes, no relevant evidence has ever been found on the topic.

So why are we mentioning the possibility, unfrequent as it might have been, of a possible sacrifice of human lives by the Lake and Cave in the Sibillini Mountain Range?



Fig. 82 - Mount Sibyl

The reason is that a sort of literary fossil of it is found in a most famous excerpt which is retrieved in the *Reductorium Morale* by Petrus Berchorius (Pierre Bersuire), a French benedictine monk and abbot, who lived between 1290 and 1362. It is a most significant passage, which we illustrated in our previous papers *The Lake of Pilatus in an antique manuscript: Pierre Bersuire* and *A legend for a Roman prefect: the Lakes of Pontius Pilate*, because it is the most ancient reference ever retrieved in written literature on the Lake of Norcia and its demonic nature.

In this excerpt, Berchorius seems to go straight to the inner nucleus of the Lake's myth. And this nucleus is definitely dark:

«And about that lake the most horrifying thing is what follows: each year that town [Norcia] sends a single man, a living man, beyond the walls that encircle the lake, as an offering to the demons, who immediately and in full view tear apart and slaughter that man; and people say that if the town does not comply, the country would be razed by the storms. Every year the town selects a certain criminal, and sends him there to the demons as a tribute».

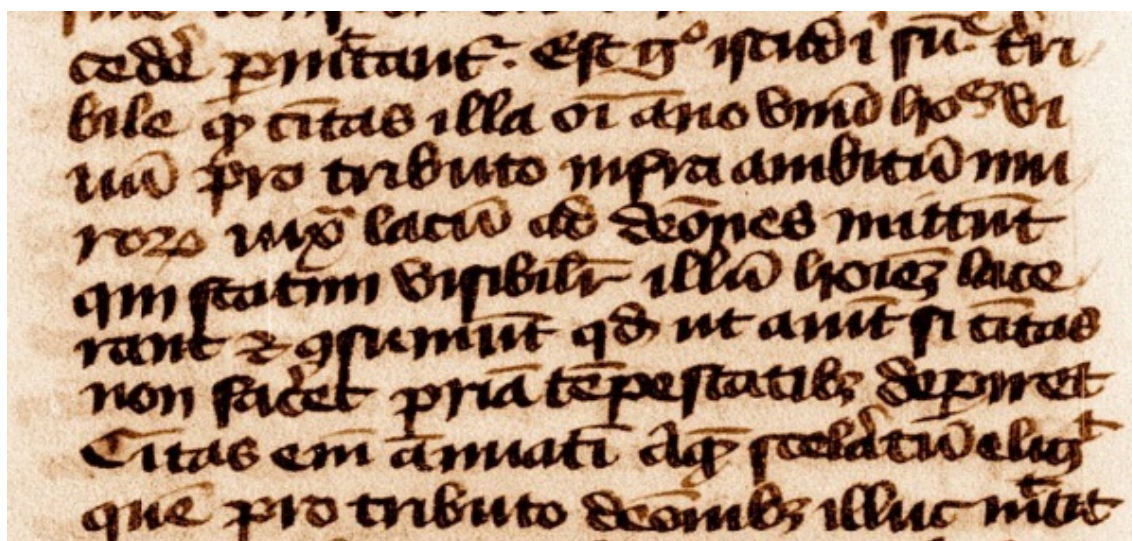


Fig. 83 - Human sacrifice at the Lake of Norcia as it appears in Petrus Berchorius' *Reductorium Morale* (manuscript Latin 16786, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, folium 301v)

[In the original Latin text: «Est ergo istud ibi summe terribile, quia civitas illa omni anno unum hominem vivum pro tributo infra ambitum murorum iuxta lacum ad daemones mittunt, qui statim visibiliter illum hominem lacerant et consumunt, quod (ut aiunt) si civitas non facit, patria tempestatibus deperiret. Civitas ergo annuatim aliquem sceleratum eligit que pro tributo daemonibus illuc mittit»].

According to Berchorius, Norcia had the habit to sacrifice a human life in the lake nested beneath the cliffs of Mount Vettore, to appease some kind of demons which would reside in the lake itself - demons that would ravage the whole region if not annually fed with the soul of a man.

In our previous paper on Pierre Bersuire, we asked ourselves a number of questions. Was this just an unfounded tale? Was this ghastly narrative a mere lie? Did Berchorius have some special, unknown reason to spread around such a heinous rumour?

However, Petrus Berchorius is fully aware that the piece of information he himself is reporting has something odd and shady in it:

«I would never believe in such a tale, for I could not read anything about such a practice in any books, unless I myself hadn't heard so illustrious a bishop firmly report this account».

[In the original Latin text: «Istud autem quia alicubi non legi, nullatenus crederem, nisi a tanto episcopo firmiter asseri audivissem»].

As Berchorius noted, definitely no evidence of such a barbaric and inhuman practice exists at all in any known chronicle reporting details on the ancient history of Norcia, back to the High Middle Ages and even further back to the Roman conquest. Not the slightest trace.

The rumour that Petrus Berchorius reported in his *Reductorium Morale*, written in the fourteenth century, appears to be a sort of evanescent ghost. A ghastly fossil of events that had taken place a great number of centuries earlier. The grim recollection of horrific occurrences possibly dating back to the Iron Age, when terror unleashed its might on the antique populations of the Sibillini Mountain Range, in the form of devastating earthquakes. Before the Romans came, in the early third century B.C.

In the light of the conjecture we are developing in the present paper, Berchorius' passage could be a reference to human sacrifices carried out at the Lake, in a remote past, to appease the local demons of the earthquakes. Because, as Berchorius reports, «if the town [Norcia] does not comply, the country would be razed by the storms».

A grisly, blood-curdling past, which seems to come out from the mists of forgotten centuries to haunt the dreams of contemporary men.

We possibly retrieve another faint trace of such a cruel practice in another literary account, this time referred to the Sibyl's Cave. It is found in a work written by Pierre Crespet, also known as 'Crespetus', a French Celestinian monk (1543 - 1594) who had travelled across Italy to visit the monasteries of the Celestines (possibly including the one in Norcia). In his treatise *De la hayne de Satan et malins esprist contro l'homme*, published in Paris in 1590, he widely speaks about the Sibyl of Norcia, as we extensively reported in our previous article *Apennine Sibyl: the bright side and the dark side*.

Crespetus recounts a sinister occurrence, a criminal trial held in Paris against a self-styled sorcerer, who had been to Mount Sibyl in Italy:

«I don't intend to overlook a remarkable testimony drawn from a criminal trial held against a renowned magician whose name was Domenico Mirabelli, an Italian from Arpino, and his stepmother Marguerite Garnier, who were arrested in Mantua with their spellbooks that they were fetching to the Sibyls, the goddesses of sorcerers, to consecrate them so as to render their books more powerful».

[In the original French text: «Je ne veux obmettre un notable discours tiré d'un procès qui a esté fait d'un insigne magicien nommé Dominique Mirabille Italien natif d'Arpine & à sa belle mere Marguerite Garnier, qui furent apprehendez à Mante avec leur livres de magie qu'ils portoient aux Sibylles deesses des magiciens pour etre consacrez, à fin d'avoir plus d'effet»].

In this excerpt, which narrates of a gloomy necromantic setting, the evil magicians goes as far as to promise the sibilline powers to offer human lives in exchange for their forbidden arts (Livre I, Discours 15):

«For all the services they required, they obliged themselves to honour the Sibyls with the titles of Dames and Princesses, and to offer a soul to them every year, on the very same day of the consecration of their spellbooks, for all the time of their lives».

portassent nuyfance, & s'offroient par toutes
ces courtoisies par obligatiō faictes ausdictes
Sibylles qu'ils honoroient de titre de Dames
& Princeffes, de leur offrir vne ame tous les
ans au mesme iour que leursdits liures au-
roient esté consacrez tant qu'ils viuroient, à

Fig. 84 - Human sacrifice at the Sibyl's Cave as it appears in Pierre Crespet (Crespetus), *De la hayne de Satan et malins esprist contro l'homme* (Paris, 1590), p. 246

[In the original French text: «S'offroient par toutes ces courtoisies par obligation faictes ausdictes Sibylles qu'ils honoroient de titre de Dames & Princeffes, de leur offrir une ame tous les ans au mesme iour que leursdits livres auroient esté consacrez tant qu'ils vivoient»].

Again, a hideous sacrifice of human lives is offered to the demonic beings which live at the Cave in the Sibillini Mountain Range, a further possible trace of a practice dating back to two millennia earlier. And, even though this sort of barbaric gift may also be seen as a demonic bargain typical of black magic as practiced in much later times, like the Middle Ages and Renaissance, nonetheless we must note that the trait of land devastation, a token of earthquakes as we will see later, is fully present in Crespetus' description of the Sibyl's Cave:

«When the Sibyl is addressed, by magicians or others, tempests and lightings are unleashed horribly on the whole territory».

[In the original French text: «Quand on communique avec elle, soyt magicien ou autre, les tempestes & foudres s'esmouvent horriblement par tout le païs»].

So we are possibly before the inner core of the legendary tale which lives amid the Sibillini Mountain Range. A dark core, a narrative of earthquake and terrors and demons, also marked by faint signs of potential human sacrifices effected at the Lake or Cave, in a desperate, ultimate effort by the men of the iron Age to stop the fury of the seismic waves, possibly only in the wake of the most paroxysmal, destructive writhing of the earth.

We stress again the fact that the model we are building up is mainly a conjectural scenario, though based on the available literary tradition, the geographical and physical nature of the territory, and the history and culture of the populations which lived in the area before the Roman conquest.

However, we repute that the track we are treading is the a most interesting one. A track which leads to the otherwordly character of the Sibillini Mountain Range. As we will continue to see in the next paragraph.

6.3 The otherwordly character of the Lake and Cave

In the course of our long journey into the legendary tradition of the Sibillini Mountain Range, we have stumbled upon a significant number of references that seemed to point to an otherwordly character of both the Sibyl's Cave and the Lake of Pilate.

In our previous paper *Sibillini Mountain Range, a cave and lake to the Otherworld* we have fully retraced, across the relevant literature, the many passages which are manifestly drawn from the antique tradition of otherwordly journeys: a test bridge of supernatural narrowness and magical ever-slamming doors as described in the account written by Antoine de la Sale on the Sibyl's Cave; the Lake of Pilate as an entrance to Hell in the excerpt drawn from Petrus Berchorius; the mythical resonances with Cumae, in the province of Campania, Italy, where a cave lying by the Lake Avernus provided a passageway to Hades, the realm of the dead, with the Cumaean Sibyl transplanted amid the Apennines by Andrea da Barberino in his romance *Guerrino the Wretch* and the Lake of Pilate identified as 'Avernus' in a sixteenth-century map; and further mythical affinities with Lough Derg, in County Donegal, Ireland, the abode of the Purgatory of St. Patrick, which opened its gate to the subterranean horrors, with *Guerrino the Wretch* sent by Andrea da Barberino straight into the Purgatory after his visit to the Sibyl, and with Antoine de la Sale's miniature of the entrance to the Cave strikingly similar to the many miniatures portraying the Purgatorial hollow.

In our perusal of the otherwordly literature from the *Odisyssey* to Aeneas, and then to the Christian visions of St. Paul and Pope St. Gregory I the

Great, and finally to the medieval descriptions of demons and fiendish punishments as described in the *Vision of St. Adamnán*, the *Vision of Tnúgdalus*, and the *Tractatus de Purgatorio Sancti Patricii*, we found that the Cumaean Hades and the Irish Purgatory envisaged a category of journeys which can be considered as travels into the Otherworld par excellence: these are travels that are performed not in a mere vision, but in actual reality. With a man's physical body.

Because Cumae and Lough Derg were appalling fissures in the world of the living. Two cracks pierced in the continuity of our ordinary world, the world that God created for human beings. Two 'hot spots', two clefts, dreadfully opened to legendary physical visions of subterranean, chthonian Hells. At those two sites, living men could be so fool as to make an attempt at crossing the gates which must never be crossed. Two passageways to the Otherworld. Two entryways to an afterlife inhabited by legendary demonic powers.

Entryways whose presence was signalled by known landmarks, geographical features which were reputed to mark the presence of the two legendary 'hot spot': lakes and caves, at both sites. Landforms which fully identified the two sites on the surface of Earth, and were known as such. Landmarks to legends.

In the above paper, we conjectured that the Sibyl's Cave and the Lake of Pilate, too, may have been considered, in an antique past, as legendary passageways to an Otherworld: a further entryway, a physical threshold, possibly even as antique as that of Cumae, which is no earlier than the foundation of the city, which took place in the eighth century B.C. (Lough Derg with its Purgatory is surely more recent, as it is basically a legend born in early Christianity).

Now, we are able to expand this conjecture with the further hypothesis we have been illustrating in the present paper: across the Iron Age, the local populations of Sabines and Picenes, stricken by terror under the pressure of recurrent, pervading earthquakes, possibly set highland shrines at both sites, in an attempt to appease the fiendish god which, in their view, certainly lived beneath the Sibillini Mountain Range.

So, the Lake and the Cave lying on Mount Vettore and Mount Sibyl were landmarks: geographical features which marked a point of access to an Otherworld.

An antique legendary tale, possibly dating as far back as the Iron Age. A credence concerning an entryway to a mythical Otherworld in central Italy. One of a most terrific, dreadful sort. A crevice in our world, opened in the mountainous ridges out of sheer terror. Terror for one own's life and for the fate of one's family. Terror for the ruin of one's land. Terror for the devastating might of the earthquakes.



Fig. 85 - The Lakes of Pilate as an otherwordly setting

In the above-mentioned paper, *Sibillini Mountain Range, a cave and lake to the Otherworld*, we asked ourselves the following questions: what sort of dreadful dream did men conceive at the Lake and Cave set amid the mountains of the central Apennines? What sort of Otherworld was this?

We have now provided a conjectural, significant answer to the first question. Possibly the dream that men in a long-gone past dreamt about the Sibillini Mountain Range was about earthquakes and demons.

But what about the second question? What sort of Otherworld was being imagined by those ancient people?

Certainly this otherworldly fancy was different from the afterlives which were reputed to be accessible by men from Cumae and Lough Derg. People did not ascend the steep versants of the Sibillini Mountain Range to penetrate into a Hades or Purgatory, full of the shades of mortals or resounding with the harrowing screams of purgatorial souls.

Down there, beneath the huge, impressive mountainous fastenances, some sort of hellish den housed a great demon or demons, which were able to shake the mounts from their very roots. The house of the fiendish being or beings were hollows and caverns set beneath the rock, unattainable places that no living man would ever wish to visit.



Fig. 86 - The collapsed entrance to the Sibyl's Cave as it is today,

Within the framework of the conjectural model we have been defining in the present paper, we can suppose that the local communities did not consider the Lake and Cave as entryways to such Otherworld, but rather as points of contact with the otherworldly, chthonian powers.

The purpose of the visits to the two 'hot spots' was to establish a communication with the demonic entities which presided over the earthquakes.

They did not intend to physically pass into the Otherworld in which the appalling deities lived their abominable life. They could not have made any successful entrance through the Lake, which of course did not offer any threshold to cross, if not by drowning; some of them, more foolhardy than their companions, might have made attempts at venturing into the darkness of the Cave, but their return would have proven to be utterly uncertain, as the many vertical pits possibly awaiting the visitor in the gloomy cavern were fully able to bestow sudden death to any bold visitor.

Nonetheless, in the envisaged conjecture the Lake and Cave were positively otherworldly sites. There, human beings could stand in front of the dwelling of a demon, within precipitous wall of sheer rock or on an eerie mountain-top, separated by a titanic crown from the world below.

An Otherworld that men faced not in the form of a 'katabasis', a journey which brings a mortal man through that passageway and into a land of gloom, but rather as a 'nekyia', the summoning of otherworldly entities, be they the shadows of the dead or, as in this specific case, a fiendish demon, at the entrance of the gloomy realm.

An otherworldly character that will mark the two sites set amid the Sibillini Mountain Range for the subsequent millennia, so that all the additional legendary narratives that will later settle on the Lake and Cave, with their Sibyls and roman prefects, will bear the faint, indistinct, shadowy stamp of a demonic Otherworld.

6.4 The ancient Otherworld consigned to oblivion

With the arrival of the Romans in the territory of the 'Tetricus Mons' the history of the two otherworldly sites set amid the Sibillini Mountain Range, the Lake and the Cave, changes altogether.

Roman troops led by consul Manius Curius Dentatus sweep through the land in the year 290 B.C. In the subsequent years the Picenes, too, are brought under the political and administrative influence of Rome.

With the advent of a new, different administration of the region and local populations, highland shrines begin to tread an inexorable path leading to decline and extinction:

«With the advent of Rome, at the beginning of the third century B.C., this 'landscape of sacred sites' changes its shape. [...] Many small shrines appear to be subject to neglect. [...] This is certainly in line with the strategy of conquest and 'pacification' of the great city which [...] made use of different methods for the control of the conquered territories, inspired to a 're-shaping of local economy and public life' so as to reduce the level of strategic risk. In addition to the planned improvement of roads, it was of the utmost importance to concentrate the local population, moving the people from the 'dangerous' (in Rome's opinion) settlements in the highlands to the new attractive poles, easier to control, and at the same time proposing the emotional image of wealthy, modern, friendly Rome» (Stalinski, op. cit.).



Fig. 87 - Roman Norcia: votive stones with figures of Dionysus and Bacchae dating to the first century A.D. (Museum of the Criptoportico, Norcia)

It was a deliberate process which led to the «gradual decline of the ancient sites of worship, following the advent of the Roman age. The sites were not immediately abandoned, yet their importance as points for the control of the territory and sites of aggregation ceased altogether, to the advantage of the new sites that were selected by the Romans as administrative poles» (Romagnoli, op. cit.).

So, if any highland shrines have ever been set at our Lake and Cave, as we conjectured in the present article, they slowly vanished from history as the policies and culture of the new conquerors, the Romans, strengthened their hold on the Sabines and Picenes, who underwent a significant process of assimilation, with «a sort of slow 'seduction by Rome's culture and way of life'», so that «we can confidently imagine that the ancient highland shrines, too, were gradually abandoned, in the absence of any dramatic circumstances» (Stalinski, op. cit.).

It has also been noted that «in a landscape substantially deprived of large settlements, as in the territory of Norcia before the arrival of the Romans, it is infrequent the retrieval of structures pertaining to a site of worship, unless it had acquired a new role in the administrative policy of Rome, preserving itself though with a different appearance following Roman assimilation».

The Lake and Cave, with their legendary demons of the earthquakes, had no place in the new cultural, political and administrative system implemented under the rule of Rome.

Any precarious structures that may have been present there, if any, were just washed away by the rains, snows, winds and, finally, the collapses caused by the same earthquakes to which the shrines were dedicated. And certainly the Romans did not add nor build any new structures at the two sites.

So the Sibillini Mountain Range gradually cancelled the very memory of its mythical fiendish presence, heinous demons which an antique legend considered as the originators of the devastating earthquakes who used to hit the area on a recurrent basis.

Throughout the glorious history of Rome, no trace remained of the dreadful myth dating back to the Iron Age. In the Middle Ages, no mention is available on a Lake and a Cave set in the central Apennines, in Italy, with their mythical charge and otherwordly marks.

We must get to the fourteenth century and Petrus Berchorius to catch a new glimpse of the surviving tradition that still seemed to linger amid the Sibillini Mountain Range. This tradition had been running across hidden trails, concealed paths, possible threads of oral narratives, totally unregistered on the parchment of manuscripts, until it exploded again, as a firework in a moonless night, at the beginning of the fifteenth century, with the amazing work written by Andrea da Barberino and Antoine de la Sale.

But, at that time, the legendary narrative was already contaminated by other legendary tales, coming from far-off countries: the Apennine Sibyl, an offspring of the Matter of Britain, and Pontius Pilate, another northern-European legend.

6.5 Storms and devastation over the land

In the legendary tradition of the Lake of Pilate and the Sibyl's Cave, a specific trait is found that has always puzzled scholars and researchers.

In our previous paper *Sibillini Mountain Range: the legend before the legends*, we retraced the presence of a number of references to this peculiar aspect in the vast literary production concerning the Lake and the Cave, and we classified this particular trait as a common, shared feature which appears in both the Apennine Sibyl's and Pilate's legendary narratives, as one of the original traits which seemed to mark the most antique nucleus of the myth which inhabits the Sibillini Mountain Range, just like demons, necromancy, and a general otherwordly character.

With the elaboration of the conjecture we have been setting down in the present article, we have outlined a mythical framework which provides a satisfactory explanation to the three common features listed above: across the Iron Age, rituals were possibly performed at the Lake and Cave in order

to appease legendary demonic entities which were believed to preside over earthquakes.

Time has come now to justify the presence of the fourth common aspect, too: tempests and destruction arising from the Lake and Cave.

We find references to it almost everywhere in the literature which concerns the Lake of Pilate. As we already saw, Petrus Berchorius, in his *Reductorium Morale*, written in the fourteenth century, reports that «each year that town [Norcia] sends a single man, a living man, beyond the walls that encircle the lake, as an offering to the demons, who immediately and in full view tear apart and slaughter that man; and people say that if the town does not comply, the country would be razed by the storms». Antoine de la Sale, in his fifteenth-century *The Paradise of Queen Sibyl*, writes that «that island [a rocky boulder set at the center of the Lake] is strictly guarded and protected by the local people on the ground that when anybody comes to it covertly and performs the art of the Fiend, after the operation is made a storm so violent raises in the region that all crops and goods in the country get spoiled». Fazio degli Uberti, in his fourteenth-century *Dittamondo*, writes that «here [at the Lake] Simon the Sorcerer ascends to consecrate his spellbook - so that troublesome tempests are aroused - according to what local people say». Arnold von Harff, a German knight, reports that «when this happened [necromancy was performed at the Lake] the water of this little lake was swept up into a cloud and descended in a thunderstorm, flooding all the land for three or four miles around, so that that year was no corn there». And, as to the Sibyl's Cave, Pierre Crespet, the French Celestinian monk we already mentioned in a previous paragraph, reported that «when the Sibyl is addressed, by magicians or others, tempests and lightings are unleashed horribly on the whole territory».

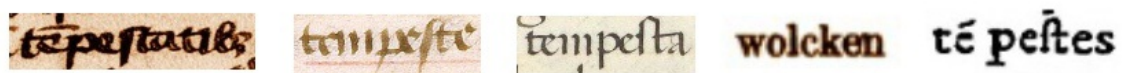


Fig. 88 - The words «tempest» and «stormy clouds» recurrently appearing in the literature concerning the Lake of Pilate and the Sibyl's Cave, from the works by Petrus Berchorius, Antoine de la Sale, Fazio degli Uberti, Arnold von Harff and Pierre Crespet (refer to the paper *Sibillini Mountain Range: the legend before the legends* for a full reference to the relevant manuscripted and printed sources)

The reason and nature of such odd tempests were also matter of puzzled debate amid scholars many centuries ago. A note to the work of Fazio degli Uberti, contained in a fifteenth-century manuscript and added by a scribe, Andrea Morena from Lodi, specifies that «the lake [...] is visited by those who perform the art of necromancy to consecrate their spellbooks, so that for this reason the region is troubled by scourge and famine or other afflictions». In 1550 the dominican friar Leandro Alberti, in his work *Descrittione di tutta l'Italia*, wrote that «... the Lake of Norcia, of which unlearned people believe demons swim in it, for they repeatedly see the waters raise and lower in a way that this vision amazes those who behold the lake, as it appears to be an eerie occurrence, being veiled the reason for this motion [...] It is certainly true that if we diligently look for the reason for the said motion, we clearly see that it is the wind, which unceasingly urges the waters across the small lake surrounded by high cliffs, and owing to this urge the waters are seen to alternatively raise and lower, to the greatest amazement by the beholders». And Antonio Giovanni Magini, an Italian scientist and geographer, in his edition of Ptolemy's "Geography" published in 1617, includes the following remark:

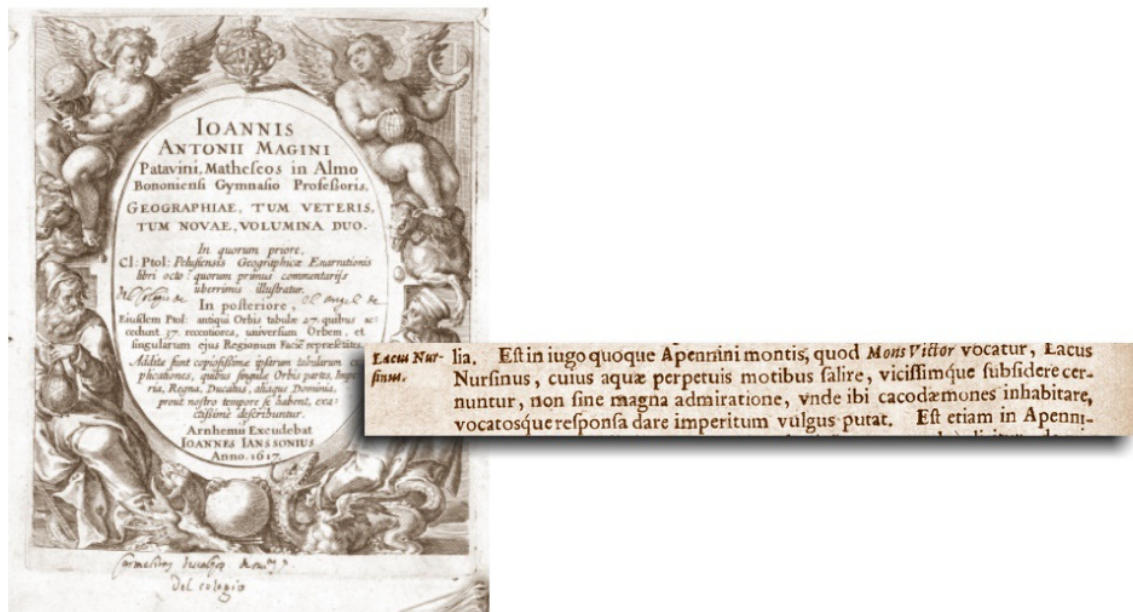


Fig. 89 - The reference to the Lake of Norcia from Antonio Giovanni Magini's edition of Ptolemy's *Geography* (Arnhem, 1617), p. 122

«On a certain mountain of the Apennines, which is called Mount Vettore, the Lake of Norcia stands, whose waters are seen swelling and then subsiding ceaselessly, to the utmost wonder of the beholders, so that naive people believe that there demons dwell and can be queried».

[In the original Latin text: «Est in iugo quoque Apennini montis, quod Mons Victor vocatur, Lacus Nursinus, cuius aquae perpetuis motibus salire, vicissimque subsidere cernuntur, non sine magna admiratione, unde ibi cacodaemones inhabitare vocatosque responsa dare imperitum vulgus putat»].

In 1653, Father Fortunato Ciucci, another Celestinian monk, wrote his *Chronicles of the antique town of Norsia*, in which he reported on the sinister events taking place at the Lake:

«This was ascertained by the people in Norcia, who reported that they many times had found such necromantic items by the Lake [...], and by this reason sometimes large damages used to occur in town out of the hail and thunderbolts which fell from above. [... The] damage caused by storms and hail and thunderbolts which ensued when Wizards came to the lake and performed their abominable arts».

[In the original Italian text: «Questo si verifica dagli uomini di Norcia, i quali testificavano di aver più volte trovato queste ed altre cose simili vicino al Lago [...], per causa de' quali alle volte soleva accadere gran danno alla Città per le molte grandini, e saette che dall'aria piombavano. [...Il] danno dalle tempeste dalle grandini, e folgori che ne succedevano quando qualche Mago ivi si approssimava, e metteva in opra l'esecranda dottrina»].

In the subsequent centuries, this peculiar piece of information continued to be largely disregarded by the scholars as some sort of fairy tale being reported by the local populace, while the attention was mainly directed to the Cave and its legendary Sibyl rather than the nearby Lake with its Roman prefect and troubled waters. Only, Arturo Graf, an Italian man of letter and professor, confronted with the Lake in his comprehensive *Myths, legends and superstitions of Middle Ages*, published in 1893, in which he linked the turmoils to the ancient legendary narratives about Pontius Pilate, whose cursed body, when thrown into the Tiber, the Rhône and other

tentative burial places, was rejected with great agitation of demons (see also our previous papers *Sibillini Mountain Range: the legend before the legends* and *A legend for a Roman prefect: the Lakes of Pontius Pilate*).

There is no doubt on the fact that the Sibillini Mountain Range, as a ridge which separates territories that overlook two different seas, the Adriatic and the Tyrrhenian, is prone to significant weather changes and subject to the action of strong winds and intense storms, as local residents can report. And, certainly, extreme events may occur in the highlands, where the crests of Mount Vettore and the other elevated cliffs, including Mount Sibyl, are fully exposed to the rage of the elements, so that hikers often find themselves endangered in case they are caught on their way along the highland trails during a tempest.

And this was no different in previous centuries. Giovanni Battista Lalli, a poet from Norcia who lived in the seventeenth century, had a first-hand experience of this same occurrence, as he himself wrote in his poem *Gerusalemme Desolata (Ruined Jerusalem)* (Canto II, 48):



Fig. 90 - Tempest over Mount Sibyl from Giovanni Battista Lalli's *Gerusalemme desolata* (Milano, 1630), p. 141

«And if anyone unwelcomed dares to draw too near,
and she chooses to deny herself to him,
in various manners he repels him
from his venturesome design.
Sometimes she fills the sky with gloomy clouds carrying the rain,
so that a horrible storm comes to life;
sometimes with a mortal threat, any mercy dispelled,
she unleashes the savage beasts against the wayfarer».

[in the original Italian text:
E se quivi appressarsi alcun s'accinge,
Ch'à lei no piaccia, e d'introdur no'l degna;
Con diverse maniere il risospinge
Da quell'impresa, che tentar disegna.
D'atre, e gravide nubi hor l'aria cinge,
Che ria tempesta à partorir ne vegna;
Hor minacciosa, ogni pietà sbandita,
Contro di quel l'horrende belve irrita.]

A further example is reported by Marcella Arca Petrucci, a professor at the University of Rome Tre, who quotes from a manuscripted plea written at the end of the seventeenth century by Giuseppe Pasqua, a priest of the small parish of Castelluccio di Norcia (Marcella Arca Petrucci, *La montagna di Norcia tra XVI e XVII secolo e le sue diverse rappresentazioni*, in *Rappresentazioni e pratiche della spazio in una prospettiva storico-geografica*, 1995). In it, Pasqua lamented the wintry, erratic, utterly dangerous weather which was to be experienced under the shadow of Mount Vettore, on the Pian Grande,

«[... Here at Castelluccio we have] hail, snow, fogs, frost and tempests and storms, so unpredictable that nobody can trustfully deem himself safe at a given time and still safe the very next hour; for this reason [...] wayfarers were found dead in the countryside, and big and small cattle as well. [...] In September 1686] a storm so violent hit the land, and it was so full of thunderbolts, lightnings, wind, rain, hail and snow, that the shepherds were forced to abandon their cattles [...] as if the whole world was about to collapse; it lasted a full day and night, and a thousand sheep died. [...] Everybody can see what sort of dangers use to fall on the poor hamlet of Castelluccio [... We can only] raise prayers to God lest this happens again».

[In the original Italian text: «[... Qui hanno luogo] grandini, nevi, nebbie, brine e tempeste de' temporali che niuno può assicurarsene da un'ora all'altra per il che si sono [...] trovati morti nella campagna viandanti e bestiami grossi e minuti. [...] Nel settembre 1686] successe un temporale così fiero di tuoni, lampi, saette, vento, acqua, grandine e neve che fu necessario abbandonare il bestiame [...] che pareva si volesse subissare il mondo e che durò un giorno e una notte e che morissero da un migliaro di pecore. [...] Si veda in che pericoli è sottoposto il povero Castelluccio [... Possiamo solamente] pregare Iddio che mai più succeda»].



Fig. 91 - Stormy weather on the Sibillini Mountain Range as seen from the peak of Mount Sibyl

However, all this is not enough to explain the eerie fame of the Lake and Cave, and the tempests unleashed over Norcia and the whole land. Many other Italian areas, marked by the presence of elevated peaks or ridges, both in the Apennines and the Alps, present the very same behaviour in terms of recurrent, violent storms, with fast-changing weather.

There must be something more to it.

And, in the light of the conjectures we have introduced in the present paper, we repute that the keyword to the true origin of the peculiar tempests connected to the Lake of Pilate and the Sibyl's Cave may possibly be the same: earthquakes.

6.6 The earthquakes which arise from the subterranean winds

In the legendary tradition of the Sibillini Mountain Range, winds and tempests are not just natural winds and tempest.

As we stated in the previous paragraph, there is more to it.

A first hint to the special character of winds in this magical context is provided to us by that same Pierre Crespet from whom we quoted passages about the Sibyl's Cave, drawing from his *De la hayne de Satan et malins esprist contro l'homme*, published in 1590.

As we already noted in our previous article *Sibillini Mountain Range: the legend before the legends*, Crespetus adds an additional reference to the magical, divine quality of such tempests and winds (Livre I, Discours 6):

«Heavenly Gods or maybe the stars themselves send those winds
Often it happens that when a Wizard wants to find treasures hidden beneath
the ground
or consecrate his spellbook
or by a sorcerous ritual subjugate some god to his will,
I heard that winds raise, and sudden storms».

[In the original Latin text:

«Hos ventos vel Dij aerij vel sydera mittunt,
Sepae etenim cum thesauros tellure latentes,
Vult auferre Magus vel consecrare libellum,
Vel magico ritu quemquam sibi subdere divum,
Audiui exortum ventum, subitamque procellam»].

peſtes & foudres ſeſmoũuét horriblemét par
 tout le païs, & afin qu'õ ne péſe cecy eſtre fa- Palyngeni-
 buleux. Palyngenius Poète Italien liu. 11. où il ^{nims.}
 parle de l'Equateur en fait mention quand il
 dit.

*Hos ventos vel Dij ærij vel ſydera mittunt,
 Sepæ erenim cùm theſauros tellure latentes,
 Vult auferre Magus vel conſecrare libellam,
 Vel magico ritu quemquam ſibi ſubdere diuum.*

*Audui exortum ventum, ſubitâque procellam
 Aut ſata ſtrauiſſe aut hærentes vitibus vnas.*

Fig. 92 - Magical winds from Pierre Crespet (Crespetus), *De la hayne de Satan et malins esprist contro l'homme* (Paris, 1590), p. 93

This suggestion, which Crespetus draws from a sixteenth-century work, the *Zodiacus Vitæ*, written by Marcellus Palingenius Stellatus in 1536, confirms a potential interpretation of the storms and ensuing devastations as something different from a mere weather disturbance, though severe as it may be.

And such winds are not related only to necromantic arts, for Palingenius, in his poem, adds the following words (Liber XI, *Aquarius*):

«Know then that innumerable, immense caverns
 lay beneath the earth; and when there fierce winds
 are generated, then they rouse savage
 battles, smite the earth, and with extraordinary fury
 they gather and overturn every town with their ramparts,
 until at some spot they erupt as a multitude, and
 disperse themselves in the air as blows of wind
 which finally vanish in peace [...]

So are the troubled winds, which inhabit the subterranean abodes
 of the shades of the dead, who dwell in the darkness of caves».

[In the original Latin text:

«Scire igitur licet, innumeras vastasque cavernas
 Sub terris esse, atque illic quandoque creari
 Ingentes ventos; qui dum crudelia miscent

Proelia, concutiunt terram, nimioque furore
 Congressi evertunt totas cum moenibus urbes.
 Donec parte aliqua erumpant facto agmine, et auras
 diffusi in vacuas non longa pace quiescant. [...]
 Hos agitant ventos, qui subterranea regna
 Dij manes habitant, caecisque morantur in antris.»].



Fig. 93 - Chthonian winds from *Zodiacus Vitae* by Marcellus Palingenius Stellatus (edition printed in Basel, 1537, p. 362-363)

Because winds are mythically linked to earthquakes.

The connection between storms and seismic waves is not a concept developed in the sixteenth century by Palingenius. Actually, it represents a most antique, prescientific explanation on the origin of earthquakes.

It is around the year 340 B.C. that Aristotle, the great philosopher of ancient Greece, elaborates his comprehensive treatise *Meteorologica*, the first written essay on the parts of the earth and the universe, the elements of

which the world is composed, and the origin of natural events, including earthquakes.

According to Aristotle (*Meteorologica*, Book II, Part VIII), the shaking of the earth is caused by «the wind which we call an earthquake. [...] When the wind is present in sufficient quantity there is an earthquake». For the Greek philosopher, «the earth is spongy and cavernous», so that «the severity of the earthquake is determined by the quantity of wind and the shape of the passages through which it flows. Where it is beaten back and cannot easily find its way out the shocks are most violent, and there it must remain in a cramped space like water that cannot escape». Because when «a great wind is compressed into a smaller space and so gets the upper direction, [...] then breaks out and beats against the earth and shakes it violently».

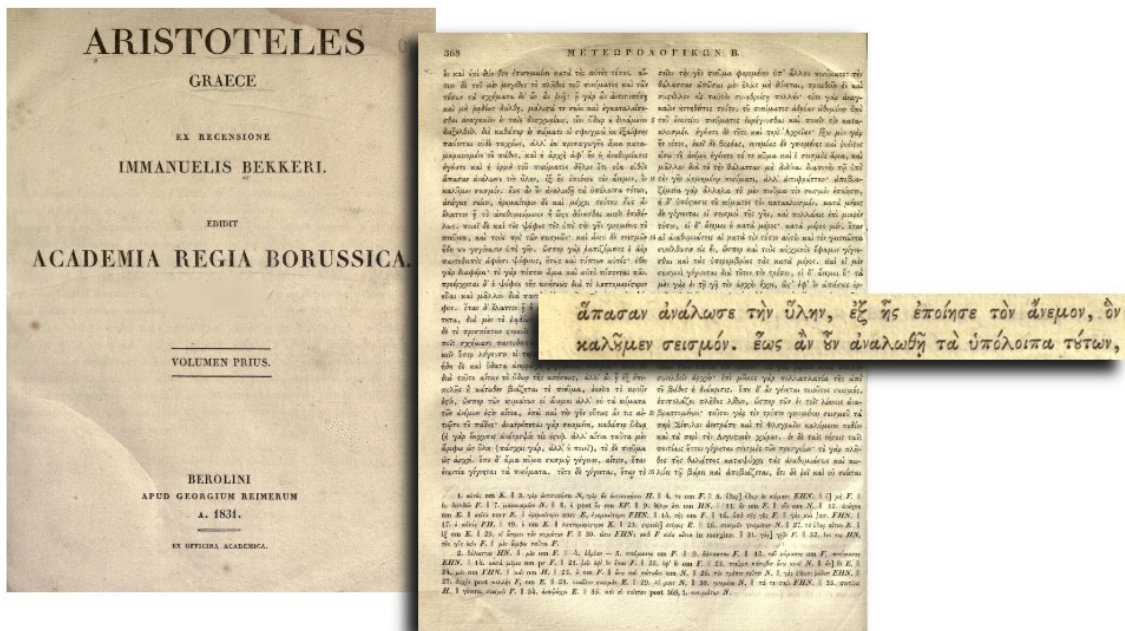


Fig. 94 - The sentence «the wind which we call an earthquake» [«τὸν ἀνεμόν, ὃν καλοῦμεν σεισμόν»] which appears in Aristotle's *Meteorologica*, from *Aristotelis Opera edidit Academia Regia Borussica*, edited by August Immanuel Bekker (Berlin, 1831), Vol. I, p. 368, Bekker numbering 368a10-11

Earthquakes and winds. Winds which circulate beneath the ground, across huge, unseen hollows that pierce the earth underneath. And when the pressure of the winds becomes unbearable, the earth is shaken and beaten and struck. It is an earthquake.

Furthermore, when the underground winds erupt, a devastating storm occurs:

«The countries that are spongy below the surface are exposed to earthquakes because they have room for so much wind. [...] It has been known to happen that an earthquake has continued until the wind that caused it burst through the earth into the air and appeared visibly like a hurricane».

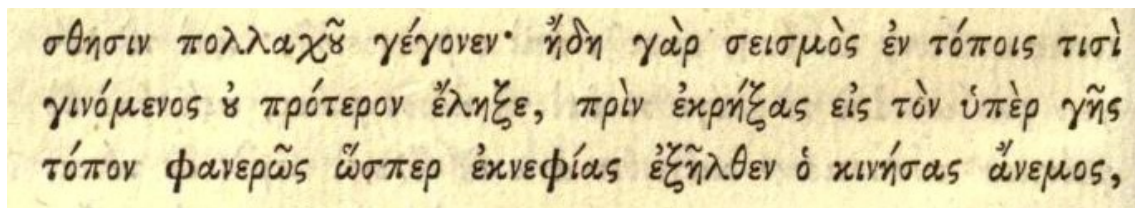


Fig. 95 - The sentence on earthquakes and hurricanes which appears in Aristotle's *Meteorologica*, from *Aristotelis Opera edidit Academia Regia Borussica*, edited by August Immanuel Bekker (Berlin, 1831), Vol. I, p. 366, Bekker numbering 366b31-33

Earthquakes and winds, then turning into storms. Such is the intimate connection which, in antiquity, was believed to exist between seismic events, devastation of the land, and tempests. A connection that will mark the legendary tale of the Sibillini Mountain Range for its whole history.

Aristotle's model will be adopted and extended by Titus Lucretius Carus, the great Roman philosopher and poet, who lived in the first century B.C. In his poem *De rerum natura* (*On the nature of things*), he describes with poetical, fascinating words the hollows which lie beneath the surface of the earth (Book VI, vv. 535-539 and 557-564):

«Now come the Earthquake's causes learn: and first
Conceive the Earth as on its surface seen,
So constituted is in depths below;
Hence, in its bosom holds vast windy caves,
Innumerable lakes, chasms, and pools profound,
With rocks abrupt, and cliffs precipitous [...]
When winds pent up in hollow depths
Bear to one part with shouldering violence,
They forceful heave the cavern's domed roof,

Till Earth gives way where the prone winds impend.
 Then lofty buildings on the surface reared,
 The more toward heaven they lift aspiring heads,
 The more, bulging and forced awry they yield,
 And started beams impend prepared to fall».



De terremotu
 Nunc age que ratio terremotibus extet
 Percipe. & in primis terras fac ut esse rearis
 Subter item & super uentis undiq; plenam.
 Speluncis multosq; lacus multasq; lacunas
 In gremio gerere: & rupes de rupes diruptaq; saxa

Praeterea uentus cum per loca sub caua terrae
 Conlectus parte ex una procumbit: & urgit
 Obnixus magnis speluncas uiribus altas
 Incumbit: quo uenti prona premit uis
 Tum supra terram que sunt extincta domorum
 Ad caelum que magis quanto sunt edita queque.
 Inclinata minent in eadem prodita partem a a i i q.
 Protraesteq; trabes impident ira; paratae

Fig. 96 - The verses on winds and earthquakes from Titus Lucretius Carus' *De rerum natura* (from a precious edition printed in Verona in 1486), p. 174-175

[In the original Latin text:
 «Nunc age, que ratio terremotibus extet
 Percipe. et in primis terram fac ut esse rearis
 Subter item ut super ventis undique plenam.
 Speluncis multosque lacus multasque lacunas
 In gremio gerere et rupes diruptaque saxa; [...]
 Praeterea ventus cum per loca sub cava terrae
 Conlectus parte ex una procumbit et urgit
 Obnixus magnis speluncas viribus altas,

Incumbit quo venti prona premit vis.
Tum supra terram que sunt extincta domorum
Ad caelum que magis quanto sunt edita queque.
Inclinata minent in eadem prodita partem
Protractaeque trabes impendent irae paratae»].

With great dramatic force, Lucretius depicts the terrifying effects of earthquakes, as generated by the subterranean winds, on the artifacts on men (vv. 570-576):

«Now because those winds
Blow back and forth in alternation strong,
And, so to say, rallying charge again,
And then repulsed retreat, on this account
Earth oftener threatens than she brings to pass
Collapses dire. For to one side she leans,
Then back she sways; and after tottering
Forward, recovers then her seats of poise.
Thus, this is why whole houses rock, the roofs
More than the middle stories, middle more
Than lowest, and the lowest least of all».

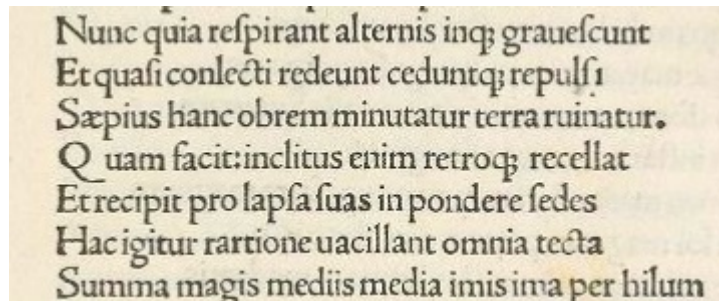


Fig. 97 - The verses on winds and earthquakes from Titus Lucretius Carus' *De rerum natura* (from a precious edition printed in Verona in 1486), p. 175

[In the original Latin text:
«Nunc quia respirant alternis inque gravescunt
Et quasi conlecti redeunt ceduntque repulsi,
Saepius hanc obrem minutatur terra ruinatur.
Quam facit; inclitus enim retroque recellat
Et recipit pro lapsa suas in pondere sedes.

Hac igitur rartione vacillant omnia tecta,
Summa magis mediis, media imis, ima per hilum»].

Again, the earthquakes are mighty commotions of the earth produced by the circulation of winds underneath, in the ghastly caverns concealed beneath the feet of men, and that no men has ever seen.

But earthquakes can become even more destructive when the winds find their way out of the earth, and plague the world above (vv. 577-584 and 591-600):

«Another cause of fearful tremblings is
When some tornado coming from without,
Or sprung in some dark subterranean mine,
Rushes to hollow places of the earth
And with wild tumult raves her caves among;
Till forceful whirling, bursting forth at length
In hideous yawnings, rends the founded Earth. [...]
Even when such prisoned winds fail to burst forth,
They rush through veins of Earth, and tremblings come,
As shudderings oft over shivering members creep.
How then do smitten populations quake
With terrors overhead, terrors beneath
Their feet, lest caverns crumbled up should open
Sudden wide jaws, engulfing ruins round».

[In the original Latin text:

«Est haec eiusdem quoque magni causa tremoris.
ventus ubi atque animae subito vis maxima quedam
aut extrinsecus aut ipsa tellure coorta
in loca se cava terra coniecit ibique
speluncas inter magnas fremit ante tumulto
vesabundaque portatur post incita cum vis
exagitata foras erumpitur et simul altam
diffidens terram magnum concinnat hiatum. [...]
Quod nisi prorumpit tamen impetus ipse animai
et fera vis venti per crebra foramina terrae
disperitur ut horror et incutit inde tremorem.
frigus ut in nostros poenitus qum venit in artus

concutit in viros cogens tremere atque movere.
 ancipiti trepidant igitur terrore per urbis.
 tecta superne timent, inferne [metuunt] cavernas
 terra ne dissolvat natura repente,
 neu distracta suum late dispanat hiatum
 idque suis confusa velit complere ruinis».

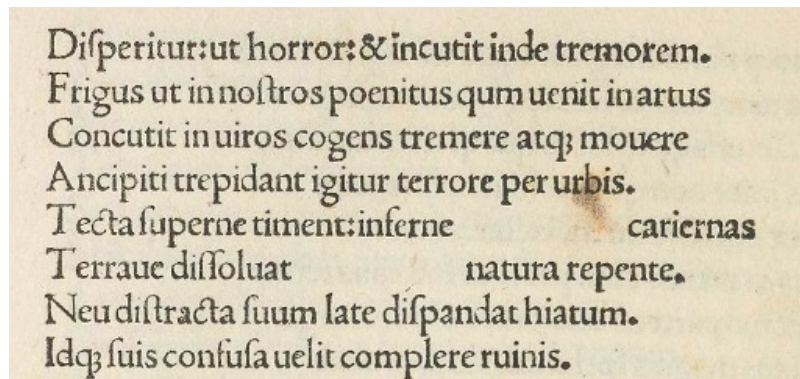


Fig. 98 - The verses on winds and earthquakes from Titus Lucretius Carus' *De rerum natura* (from a precious edition printed in Verona in 1486), p. 175-176

In the year 63 A.D., it is Lucius Annaeus Seneca, the illustrious philosopher who was tutor to Emperor Nero, who further develops the antique theoretical framework on the origin of seismic events. In his *Naturales quaestiones* he dedicates a full, extensive chapter to earthquakes.

After proposing a detailed summary of the opinions held by his Greek and Latin predecessors, Seneca illustrates his own view of the reason for which earthquakes are unleashed (Book VI, Chapter XVIII):

«The chief cause of earthquake, therefore, is air, an element naturally swift and shifting from place to place. As long as it is not stirred, but lurks in a vacant space, it reposes innocently, giving no trouble to objects round it. But when any cause coming upon it from without rouses it, or compresses it, and drives it into a narrow space, in the first instance, to be sure, it merely retires and roams about its enclosure. But when opportunity of escape is cut off, and resistance meets it on all hands, then 'with deep murmur of the mountain - It roars around the barriers' [a verse from vergil's "Aeneid", editor's note] which, after long battering, it dislodges and tosses on high, growing the more fierce, the stronger the obstacle with which it

has contended. By and by, when it has traversed the whole space in which it was enclosed, and has failed to find a way of escape, it recoils from the side on which its impact was greatest. It is then either distributed through the secret openings which the earthquake of itself causes here and there, or escapes through a new rent. So uncontrollable is this mighty power. No bolt can imprison wind».

[In the original Latin text: «Maxima ergo causa est, propter quam terra moveatur, spiritus natura citus, et locum e loco mutans. Hic quamdiu impellitur, et in vacanti spatio latet, iacet innoxius, nec circumiectis molestus est. Ubi illum extrinsecus superveniens causa sollicitat compellitque et in arctum agit, scilicet adhuc, cedit tantum et vagatur. Ubi erepta discedendi facultas est, et undique obsistitur, tunc 'magno cum murmure montis Circum claustra fremit', quae diu pulsata convellit ac iactat; eo acrior quo cum valentiore mora luctatus est. Deinde cum circa perlustravit omne quo tenebatur, nec potuit euadere, inde, quo maxime impactus est, resilit; et aut per occulta dividitur, ipso terraemotu raritate facta, aut per novum vulnus emicuit. Ita eius vis tanta non potest cohiberi, nec ventum tenet ulla compages»].



Fig. 99 - The passage on earthquakes and winds from Lucius Annaeus Seneca's *Naturales quaestiones* (from an edition printed in Venice in 1643), p. 203-204

So, in the opinion expressed by Seneca, earthquakes and winds are closely connected (Book VI, Chapter XXIV and XXV):

«I shall be ready to allow that air is the cause of this calamity. [...] When air has completely filled a large vacant space within the earth, and has begun to struggle and meditate escape, it lashes again and again the sides of the enclosure within which it lurks, and right over which, as it happens, cities are sometimes situated. The shaking is at times so violent that buildings standing above the area of disturbance are thrown down».

[In the original Latin text: «Spiritus esse huius mali causam et ipse consentio. [...] Cum spiritus magna vi in vacuum terrarum locum penitus applicuit, coepitque rixari, et de exitu cogitare, latera ipsa intra quae latet, saepius percutit, supra quae urbes interdum site sunt, haec nonnumquam adeo concutiuntur, ut aedificia superposita procumbant»].

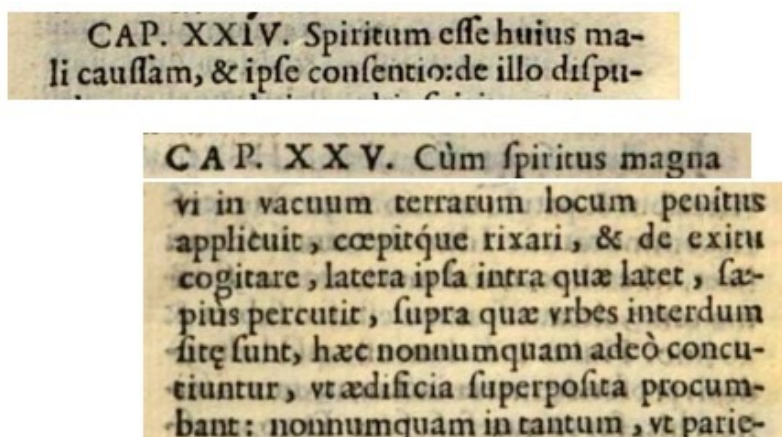


Fig. 100 - Winds as generators of earthquakes from Lucius Annaeus Seneca's *Naturales quaestiones* (from an edition printed in Venice in 1643), p. 211-212

In the second half of the first century, Pliny the Elder, the philosopher and navy commander who died on the shore of Herculaneum during the catastrophic eruption of Mount Vesuvius, adhered to the conjecture that Aristotle, Lucretius and Seneca had endorsed (*Naturalis historia*, Book II, Chapter LXXXI):

«I certainly conceive the winds to be the cause of earthquakes. [...] For the trembling of the earth resembles thunder in the clouds; nor does the yawning of the earth differs from the bursting of the lightning; the enclosed air struggling and striving to escape».

[In the original Latin text: «Ventos in causa esse non dubium reor. [...] neque aliud est in terra tremor quam in nube tonitruum. Nec hyatus aliud quam cum fulmen erumpit incluso spiritu luctante et ad libertatem exire nitente»].



Fig. 101 - Earthquakes and winds from Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis historia* (from the first printed edition, Venice, 1469), p. 20

From his words, it really seems that Pliny may have had a direct experience of the occurrences associated to seismic events, even though he surely conducted his own investigations (Book II, Chapter LXXXII):

«A terrible noise precedes and accompanies the shock; sometimes a murmuring, like the lowing of cattle, or like human voices, or the clashing of arms. This depends on the substance which receives the sound, and the shape of the caverns or crevices through which it issues; it being more

shrill from a narrow opening, more hoarse from one that is curved, producing a loud reverberation from hard bodies, a sound like a boiling fluid from moist substances, fluctuating in stagnant water, and roaring when forced against solid bodies. There is, therefore, often the sound without any motion. Nor is it a simple motion, but one that is tremulous and vibratory. [...] I have found, by my inquiries, that the Alps and the Apennines are frequently shaken».

[In the original Latin text: «Praecedit vero comitaturque terribilis sonus, alias murmur mugitibus similis, aut clamori humano armorumve pulsantium fragori, pro qualitate materiae excipientis formaque vel cavernarum vel cuniculi per quem fit, exitus grassante in angusto eodem rauco in recurvis resultante in duris, fervente in umidis fluctuante in stagnantibus feruente contra solida. Itaque et sine motu saepe editur sonus; nec simplici modo quatitur unquam, sed tremit vibratque. [...] Exploratum est mihi alpes appenninumque tremuisse saepius»].

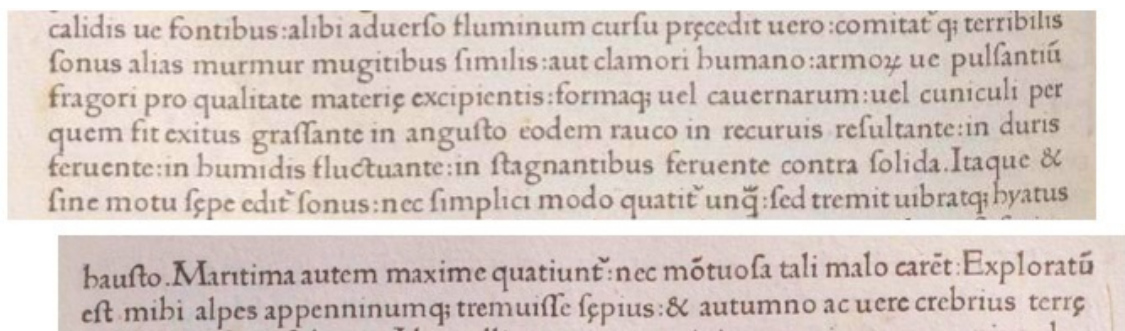
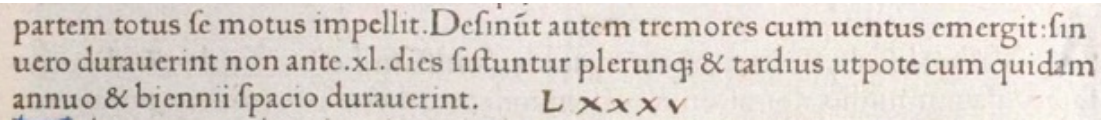


Fig. 102 - The sounds of earthquakes as described by Pliny the Elder in his *Naturalis historia* (from the first printed edition, Venice, 1469), p. 20-21

But wind is the cause, and when the pressure of winds lessens, the earthquake is over (Book II, Chapter LXXXIV)::

«The tremors cease when the vapour bursts out; but if they do not soon cease, they continue for forty days; generally, indeed, for a longer time: some have lasted even for one or two years».

[In the original Latin text: «Desinunt autem tremores cum ventus emergit; sin vero duraverint non ante XL dies sistuntur plerumque et tardius, utpote cum quidam annuo et biennii spacio duraverint»].



partem totus se motus impellit. Desinunt autem tremores cum uentus emergit: fin
uero durauerint non ante .xl. dies sistuntur plerunq; & tardius utpote cum quidam
annuo & biennii spacio durauerint. LXXXV

Fig. 103 - The cessation of earthquakes from Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis historia* (from the first printed edition, Venice, 1469), p. 21

Thus, throughout classical antiquity scholars have tried to explain the reason for the occurrence of earthquakes by adopting a prescientific model, based on winds circulating in the hidden hollows of the earth. Sometimes, winds exert a mighty pressure on their subterranean abodes, and their oscillating motion generates seismic effects on the surface; sometimes, they even succeed in escaping their underground prisons, so giving way to powerful storms which contribute to the overall destruction of the land above.

While the men of the Iron Age who lived amid the Apennines had confronted with the frightful seismic waves which recurrently struck their territory by possibly imagining a dream of demonic gods lurking beneath their mountains, the Greeks and Romans followed an utterly different path, impervious as it was in the lack of any solid scientific foundations, and yet based on fully natural, worldly considerations, with no need to introduce any god or demon: a path that will eventually lead the culture of the Western world to modern science as we know it today.

However, for the time being winds and tempest were the only available explanation to earthquakes. The advent of the Christian age will add substantially nothing to this conceptual framework, and the wind theory will remain undisputed until the Renaissance, as we noted in the *Zodiacus Vitae*, written by Marcellus Palingenius Stellatus in 1536.

And it is not by a mere chance that subterranean winds are also explicitly mentioned by the key authors of the sibilline legendary tradition, Andrea da Barberino and Antoine de la Sale:

In his *Guerrino the Wretch*, Andrea da Barberino sends his knight hero into the Purgatory of St. Patrick, immediately after his forbidden visit to the Apennine Sibyl. There, Guerrino is surrounded by angered demons, who

break in accompanied by a fiendish wind, which Andrea da Barberino openly associates to earthquakes (Chapter CLXVIII):

«The church began to tremble; and the air rumbled, and it seemed to him that the wind was blowing so strong that the earth quivered, as he had already heard and seen out of the winds, which erupt from the ground and are called earthquakes. But these were no earthquakes at all, they were fiendish demons...»

[In the original Italian text: «La giesia comenzò a tremare; e l'aere tonava, e parevali che si grande el vento traesse che la terra tremasse, come certe volte lui havea zia per venti sentito e veduto, che esseno de la terra, che sono chiamati terremoti. Ma questi non erano terremoti, anzi furono demonii infernali...»].

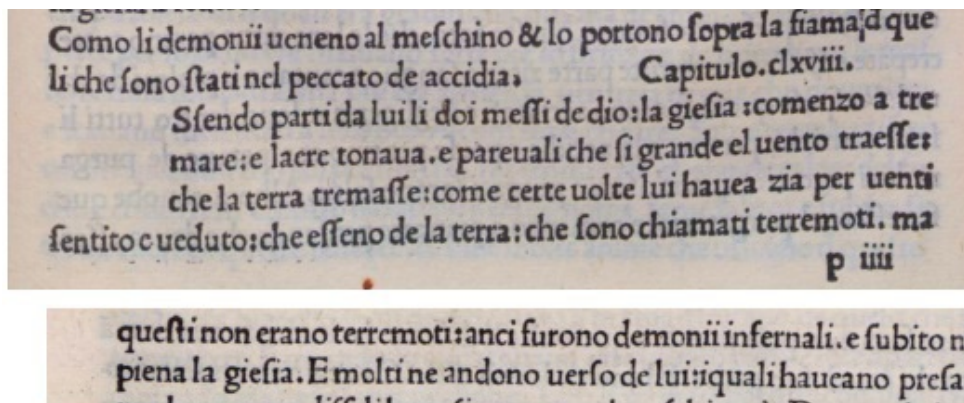


Fig. 104 - Winds and earthquakes as mentioned in Andrea da Barberino's *Guerrino the Wretch* (from the edition printed in Venice in 1480)

And Antoine de la Sale, in his *The Paradise of Queen Sibyl*, lets his characters make an experience of the powerful subterranean winds which circulate beneath the earth, within the bowels of the Sibyl's Cave:

«So they went through that narrower hollow, going ahead for some three miles, as they reckoned. Then they found a crevice which split the cave: a wind issued forth from the crevice, so horrible and astounding that no one of them dared to go ahead of a single step, or even half of it; because, when they tried to get nearer, they felt that the wind was trying to carry them away».

[In the original French text: «Allerent par ceste plus basse cave, tousdiz en avalant, bien l'espace de trois milles a leur advis. Lors trouverent une vaine de terre traversant la cave, dont yssoit un vent si treshideux et merueilleux que ne fut celui qui osast aler pas ne demy plus avant; car, aussi tost qu'ilz approchoient, leur sembloit que le vent les emportast»].

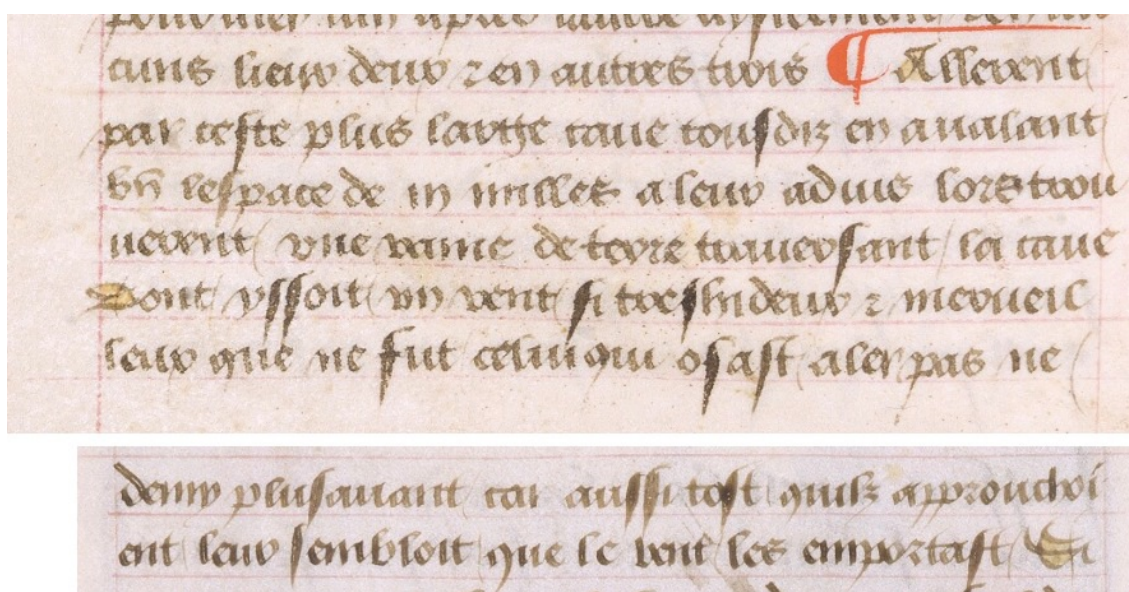


Fig. 105 - Subterranean winds as portrayed by Antoine de la Sale in his *The Paradise of Queen Sibyl* (manuscript no. 0653 (0924), Bibliothèque du Château (Musée Condé), Chantilly, France, folia 10r and 10v)

Winds and earthquakes. Winds which blow through the unseen hollows of the earth. An antique credence which is fully known to authors like Andrea da Barberino and Antoine de la Sale, who include mentions of it in their respective works.

From the Renaissance onwards, a renewed interest on the puzzling issue of the origin of earthquakes will bring scholars and philosophers to the production of additional conjectures, as for instance the theory proposed by Immanuel Kant on the combination of hot gases of sulphur and iron in subterranean caverns and pits.

It will eventually be in the nineteenth century that the physics of waves travelling through the earth will be discovered and studied. A century later

German scientist Alfred Wegener will set down his theory on continental drift and plate tectonics, the fundamental key to a scientific understanding of earthquake's nature and characteristics.

So, for more than seventeenth centuries, from Aristotle, Titus Lucretius Carus, Lucius Annaeus Seneca, Pliny the Elder and up to the late Middle Ages, earthquakes and winds and tempests will be part of a same, homogeneous vision of the mighty powers which conveyed destruction on earth.

And this identity of vision is fully retrievable in the literary tradition which concerns the legendary tales of the Sibillini Mountain Range, in the Italian Apennines.

A further indication that our conjecture, based on earthquakes and their terrifying effects, is bringing us on a promising course.

7. A new interpretation of the meaning of the mythical tale

In the present paper, we have presented a new hypothesis on the potential origin of the legendary tales which are found amid the Sibillini Mountain Range. We conjectured that, during the Iron Age, the local populations of Sabines and Picenes, recurrently struck by devastating earthquakes and ceaselessly exposed to the ominous tremors of the earth, may have established highland shrines at the Lake set on Mount Vettore and the Cave situated on the cliff of Mount Sibyl, which later legendary layers will transform into a Sibyl's Cave and a Lake of Pilate.

The terrifying cohabitation with the seismic shakings may have fostered the production of legendary credences that were possibly related to demonic beings who lived beneath the Sibillini Mountain Range: fiendish demons who presided over the earthquakes, and could be queried for mercy at two specific, emotionally-potent sites: the Lake and the Cave, both placed at eerie, uncanny settings. Two landmarks, two geographical features marking an entryway to a superhuman Otherworld.

Not a Sibyl, nor a Roman prefect. Instead, a personification of earthquakes: a most powerful and devastating might, typically smashing this Apennine land since time immemorial.

Earthquakes as an otherworldly power, deserving worship in search of protection and salvation.

We want to stress the fact that our conjecture, of which we have seen in the present paper a series of supporting considerations, is not foreign to the ancient cultures of Italy, both pre-Roman and Roman.

In our previous paper *Sibillini Mountain Range, a cave and lake to the Otherworld*, we already mentioned a most impressive passage taken from Book VI of the *Aeneid* by Publius Vergilius Maro, written in the first century B.C. When the Cumaean Sibyl, by art of necromancy, opens wide the gate of the frightful cave which is the entryway to Hades, by raising an appeal to Hecate, something absolutely appalling occurs.

It is earthquake:

«See now, at the dawn light of the rising sun,
the ground bellowed under their feet, the wooded hills began
to move, and, at the coming of the Goddess, dogs seemed to howl
in the shadows».

[In the original Latin text (lines 255-258):

«Ecce autem, primi sub lumina solis et ortus,
sub pedibus mugire solum, et iuga coepta moveri
silvarum, visaeque canes ululare per umbram,
adventante dea»].

The bellow of the ground at Cumae. The yell of the ravaged cliffs amid the the Sibillini Mountain Range. The mythical power of earthquakes travels far and wide across different populations and ages. But the terror experienced by human beings remains the same. And necromancy seems to be considered powerful enough to exert some kind of control over the chthonian powers, as shown by Vergil's text with poetical mastery.

Because the Romans, too, were in awe of earthquakes, despite all their efforts at finding prescientific explanations to this baleful phenomenon, as in the works written by Lucretius, Seneca and Pliny.

When the Roman troops swept the land of the Picenes in the year 268 B.C., and a fierce battle was being fought near Asculum, today's town of Ascoli, set on the eastern edge of the Sibillini Mountain Range, a visitors came uninvited amid the slaughter.

Again, it was earthquake.

And second-century Latin writer Lucius Annaeus Florus, in his *Epitomae de Tito Livio*, reports to us all the surprise and fear experienced, during the terrifying event, by the Roman commander, consul Publius Sempronius Sophus:

«The people of Picenum were therefore subdued and their capital Asculum was taken under the leadership of Sempronius, who, when an earthquake occurred in the midst of the battle, appeased the goddess Tellus by the promise of a temple».

[In the original Latin text: «Domiti ergo picentes et caput gentis asculum sempronio duce, qui tremente inter proelium campo tellurem deam promissa aede placavit»].

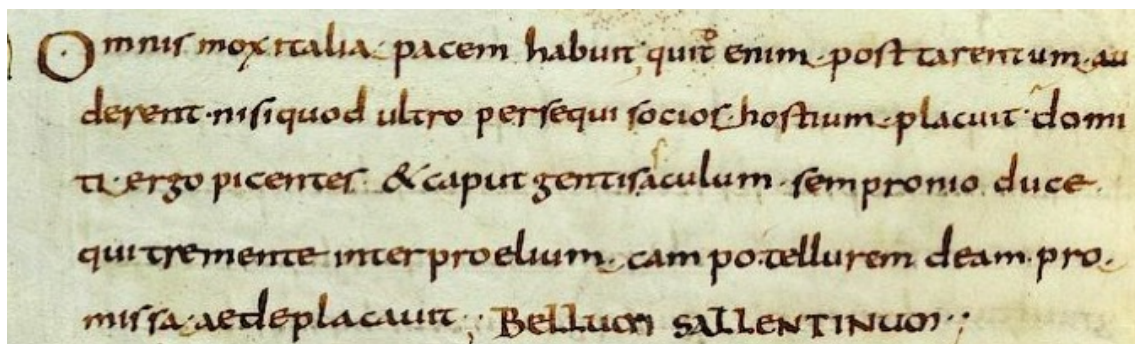


Fig. 106 - The excerpt on an earthquake near Asculum as drawn from Lucius Annaeus Florus' *Epitomae de Tito Livio* (ninth-century manuscript Pal. Lat. 894 preserved at the Universitätsbibliothek in Heidelberg), opening folium and folium 12v

While the appalling earthquake was visiting again the region of the Sibillini Mountain Range, certainly nobody stopped to consider pensively the remarkable winds that, according to the lesson of Aristotle, were seemingly pushing the ground from below: instead, in utter terror, they hastened to implore goddess Tellus, the Roman deity of the earth, for salvation and mercy. And, afterwards, they gratefully built a temple dedicated to the deity in downtown Rome.

When experienced personally, one senses with all one's body that earthquakes are a supernatural affair.

So no Apennine Sibyl has ever existed on the peaks of the Sibillini Mountain Range. Disguised by many extraneous legendary layers added to her semblance, her true features seem to faintly reemerge from the reference provided by Martino Delrio, a sixteenth-century Flemish author from which we already quoted in our previous article *Apennine Sibyl: the bright side and the dark side*. In his *Disquisitionum magicarum libri sex*, published in 1599, he places the Sibyl of Norcia within the ranks of subterranean demons, defined by Johannes Trithemius sixty years earlier.

But Trithemius, in his *Liber octo questionum ad Maximilianum Cesarem*, had written the following words (Quaestio Sexta):

«The fifth kind [of demons] is called subterranean: they are the ones who reside in caverns and caves and hollows placed under remote peaks. The power of such demons is utterly evil [...]. They are most willing to harm human beings. They can cause wind [...] to erupt from holes in the ground. And they can shake the foundations of buildings».

«Quintum genus subterraneum dicitur: quod in speluncis et cavernis montiumque remotis concavitatibus demorant. Et isti daemones affectione sunt pessimi. [...] In perniciose humani generis paratissimi. Hiatus efficiunt terrae, ventosque flammiosos suscitant & fundamenta edificiorum concutiunt».]

The harm mankind. They open cracks in the earth. They raise fiery wind. They shake the foundations of buildings.

This is earthquake.



Fig. 107 - Earth tremors and winds associated to subterranean demons, from Johannes Trithemius' *Liber octo questionum ad Maximilianum Cesarem*

And the Apennine Sibyl, through a mediation which has lasted for millennia, from the Iron Age to Delrio and Trithemius, by this excerpt appears to have come back to her first nature and origin.

8. *A conclusive remark and a farewell*

More than two years ago, in the wake of one of the largest earthquakes ever occurred in the territory of the Sibillini Mountain Range, the author of the present paper began to suppose that the legendary narratives which have been living in the area for centuries may actually be connected to the peculiar, seismic nature of the territory.

With the elaboration of a novel on the legend of the Apennine Sibyl (*The eleventh Sibyl*, 2010), we started to collect a large amount of literary information and data on the historical research on the mythical tales of the Sibillini Mountain Range, including most interesting material on the recurrent earthquakes which had plagued the land in the previous centuries.

However, one patent fact could be noticed: no research information was available on the origin of the legendary tale of the Sibyl of the Apennines, while the narrative concerning the Lake of Pilate was manifestly connected to the known medieval legend of Pontius Pilate.

However, it seemed that the tale of the Apennine Sibyl had emerged from some sort of thick, impenetrable mist, and had manifested itself only in the fifteenth century, in the fascinating works written by Andrea da Barberino and Antoine de la Sale: *Guerrino the Wretch* and *The Paradise of Queen Sibyl*.

Nobody had ever investigated what had happened in earlier times, and whether that Sibyl could be traced across the centuries of the Middle Ages. Only one thing seemed to be clear to scholars: the Apennine Sibyl was not included in the classical list of Sibyls, nor any reference to such a Sibyl had ever been retrieved in Roman or early-Christian literature.

But when, once again, the earthquakes hit the Sibillini Mountain Range in the year 2016, the mighty effects that were visible on the mountainsides and the sheer terror experienced by the local residents under the long sequence of ghastly shocks, suggested a new course of investigation.

A course that no scholar, in the past two centuries, had ever addressed.

The potential of the Sibillini Mountain Range as a generator of mythical tales connected to the nature and origin of the earthquakes was becoming apparent, especially when considered in a context of ancient pre-Roman populations inhabiting the area in a long-gone past.

However, this research topic could not be analysed and developed without addressing, in the first instance, the question of a potential medieval origin and evolution of the legends concerning the Sibyl's Cave and the Lake of Pilate. This was a research step that was mandatorily required to bridge the considerable gap which was patently visible between the fifteenth-century literary witnesses available to us and any potential conjecture on a Roman or even pre-Roman original core of the myth inhabiting the Sibillini Mountain Range.

So in December 2017 we began to investigate the centuries before the fifteenth in further depth, in search of clues that might hint to a presence of our Apennine Sibyl across the medieval age. And the search was instantly rewarding.

We immediately stumbled upon a passage written by Ferdinando Neri, in his *The Italian traditions of the Sibyl (Le tradizioni italiane della Sibilla, 1913)*, in which the Italian scholar mentioned the «ever-slamming metal doors» that are present in the popular lore connected to visits to supernatural 'netherworlds': the same kind of otherworldly device which is depicted by Antoine de la Sale in his description of the Sibyl's Cave.

This opened the way to the first valuable finds of inherited literary themes and narrative topics in earlier chivalric works, such as *Huon of Bordeaux* and *Huon d'Auvergne*, and to preliminary observations concerning a possible link to other otherworldly narratives, like the tale on the Purgatory of St. Patrick and the Cumaen Hades.

Otherworld turned to be one of the main keywords in the legendary framework of the Sibillini Mountain Range: at the beginning of the year 2018, we could release two papers (*Antoine de La Sale and the magical bridge concealed beneath Mount Sibyl* and *The literary truth about the magical doors in 'The Paradise of Queen Sibyl'*) which proved the illustrious literary lineage of the otherworldly devices that Antoine de la Sale had reported as present within the Sibyl's Cave.

Following a successive series of articles, in January 2019 a further landmark paper was released (*Birth of a Sibyl: the medieval connection*), in which the literary character of the Apennine Sibyl was traced back to Morgan le Fay and her companion Sebile, the necromantic figures which fully belong to the medieval tradition of the Matter of Britain and the Arthurian cycle. In May 2019, another paper (*A legend for a Roman prefect: the Lakes of Pontius Pilate*) provided a full, comprehensive summary of the antique legend concerning the burial place of Pontius Pilate, a foreign tale that had possibly deposited itself amid the Sibillini Mountain Range during the fourteenth century, as specific details seemed to suggest.

As a result of the above research, the Sibyl of the Apennines and the Roman prefect could be positively considered as overlays, or additional legendary layers that had established themselves in central Italy during the High Middle Ages.

In September 2019, with the paper *Sibillini Mountain Range: the legend before the legends*, we explored and identified the common legendary traits which appear to lie beneath the mentioned overlays, with reference to both geographical features, the Lake and the Cave: necromancy, a demonic presence, tempests and devastation arising from the two sites.



Fig. 108 - Mount Sibyl at sunset

A fourth, major common aspect was fully detected and analysed in the subsequent paper (*Sibillini Mountain Range, a cave and lake to the Otherworld*): the possible role of both sites as legendary passageways to the Otherworld, an illustrious literary topic which, in the Western world, spans from the *Odyssey* to the *Aeneid*, and then to various early-Christian and medieval visions accounting for legendary visits to a realm of dead or a demonic Hell. Manifest narrative contaminations could be retrieved between the legends of the Sibillini Mountain Range and the otherworldly narratives concerning a classical entryway in Cumae, in southern Italy, and Lough Derg, the Irish entrance to the Purgatory of St. Patrick.

Throughout the whole investigation, it was patent the mighty attractive force exerted by the Lake and Cave set within the Sibillini Mountain Range on different, extraneous legendary material, coming from far-off lands and countries: Morgan and Sebile, Pontius Pilate, the Cumaean Sibyl and the Purgatory of St. Patrick.

With the present, conclusive paper, we investigated, at last, the inner, original core of the legends which inhabit the Sibillini Mountain Range, now finally deprived of all the additional legendary layers that have deposited themselves on this area, under the attraction of a most powerful mythical engine.

And the engine, the legendary dream set at the very base of all this is earthquakes.



Fig. 109 - Mount Vettore and the Lakes of Pilate

We conjectured that the pre-Roman inhabitants of the Sibillini Mountain Range feared the earthquakes the way as we fear them today. However, the tools available to them to understand the appalling phenomenon which

recurrently struck them with the utmost might were markedly different from ours. Our contemporary scientific knowledge helps us in the control of our fears. Instead, the ancient populations of Sabines and Picenes could only resort to myth, with the generation of legendary narratives.

Such narratives are wholly lost to us. Nonetheless, we may try to conjecture what sort of dreams they might have housed in their hearts before the appalling, harrowing potency of the earthquakes. A possible dream of demons, whose abode was beneath the mountain. The need for a contact, perhaps, with a view to ask for mercy and salvation. The eerie, sinister Lake and Cave as the most natural choices where to establish such hypothetical otherworldly contact. Physical points of access to a subterranean Otherworld, inhabited by supernatural, fiendish beings. Two 'hot spots' set amid precipitous mountains. Landmarks to legend.

This is, in our opinion, the wondrous thickness and amazing richness of the legendary framework which marks this most beautiful, most charming, absolutely outstanding land of central Italy: the Sibillini Mountain Range. A mythical abundance and wealth which is rarely achieved by other regions in the world.

As a final remark, we want to stress the fact that, amid the other landmarks to otherworldly passageways that antique legendary traditions have consigned to us, the Sibillini Mountain Range is certainly the less unfounded, the less fairy-like and for sure the most justified and understandable, mythical as it may be.

Because, if the Hades set in the caves of Cumae is merely linked to the volcanic nature of the place and the poisonous gases which filled those hollows, and the Purgatory of St. Patrick was just a sort of cellar for dupes, duly exhausted prior to their visit and then locked up within a small, oxygen-deprived space, the Sibillini Mountain Range was a place where terror actually ruled, and a demonic presence was tangibly clear and present throughout the years and the centuries: a true Otherworld of earthquakes.

It is in this very framework that the true significance of the ancient name of the Sibillini Mountain Range, as reported by Vergil in his *Aeneid*, may become totally apparent to our contemporary perception: «Tetricae

horrentis rupes», writes the great Latin author, «dreadful, sullen, gloomy cliff», a land of eerie mystery. And terror.

However, across the centuries people have only been aware of the renown of Lake Avernus in Cumae and Lough Dergh in Ireland. It is now time to bestow on the Sibillini Mountain Range the fame and merit it deserves, out of the astounding quality and underlying substance of its legend.

Of course, the conjectural scenario presented in this paper will need further confirmations.

We do not know whether future potential excavations at the Lake and Cave might possibly ascertain the presence of any remnants of the hypothetical highland shrines we envisaged, in the forms of votive offerings or even bone remains deposited at the two sites across the centuries of the Iron Age. Sure enough, if any such remnant still exists, it is buried beneath many feet of debris and rubble at the bottom of the Lake, and thick layers of collapsed rocks within the Cave, or even in unreachable pits down in the same Cave. However, we fully subscribe to the reasearch line already envisaged by Pio Rajna, the Italian philologist, in 1912:

«Our considerations suggest that the idea that the Sibyl's cave may have been a site of worship well before Rome established its rule over that region is not a daring assumption [...] If our conjecture is correct, deeper excavations may possibly lead to the unearthing of votive offerings».

[In the original Italian text: «Si dica dopo tutto ciò se sia congettura avventata il pensiero che la caverna della Sibilla sia stata un luogo di culto ben prima che Roma distendesse su quella regione il suo dominio [...] Se la congettura coglie nel segno, scavi non superficiali avrebbero presumibilmente da condurre alla scoperta di oggetti votivi»].

But the major and most significant portion of the future researches on the Sibillini Mountain Range will rest, in our opinion, upon further historical and archeological investigations on the culture and beliefs of the Sabines and Picenes, in connection with the fact that additional, deeper enquiries at many sites across and around the Sibillini Mountain Range are still needed.

simbolo di santità, ben si poteva vedere nella fascia di roccia. Si dica dopo tutto ciò se sia congettura avventata il pensiero che la caverna della Sibilla sia stata un luogo di culto ben prima che Roma distendesse su quella regione il suo dominio, e che dell'interminabile

la leggenda di Tannhäuser. Se la congettura coglie nel segno, scavi non superficiali avrebbero presumibilmente da condurre alla scoperta di oggetti votivi. Basterebbe forse nondimeno che mettessero a nudo

Fig. 110 - The words written by Pio Rajna in his article *Nei paraggi della Sibilla di Norcia*, from *Studi dedicati a Francesco Torraca nel XXXVI anniversario della sua laurea* (Napoli, 1912), p. 252-253

So our long travel through the fascinating legends that are found in the very heart of Italy, immersed in the gorgeous scenery of the Sibillini Mountain Range, is nearing its end.

As in a sort of 'reverse engineering' process, we have unravelled the thorny tangle of different legends which makes up the complex legendary system that lives on the cliffs of central Apennine, in Italy. To perform this challenging, stimulating task we have retraced backwards the legendary, intertwined threads that centuries have been weaving over these amazing mountains.

We are proud to have been part of a long, illustrious chain of scholars who, across one hundred fifty years, have confronted with the enigmatic questions posed by the legendary tales of the Apennine Sibyl and the Lake of Pilate, in search of a truth that was so charming and at the same time so elusive. We had the chance to share the same dreams that other great academics, philologists and men of letters have housed in their hearts: from Alfred von Reumont to Arturo Graf, from Gaston Paris to Pio Rajna, from Lucy Ann Paton to Ferdinando Neri, and then Roger S. Loomis, Fernand Desonay, Domenico Falzetti, and Luigi Paolucci, a brilliant mind who was so keen as to pinpoint, neatly and confidently, the right course that research had to adopt to solve this legendary riddle.

They all were fascinated by the spell which hovers around the lofty peaks of the Sibillini Mountain Range. Many of them had a lifelong dream in their soul: they wanted to find a solution to the enigma. And yet, they did not possess the right key, the very peculiar one that unlocked the door to the inner core of the mystery. A deeper understanding, which can only be

reached by those who know, even by direct experience, what an earthquake is.

And we are sure that, if we had now the chance to speak to them, their eyes would shine with riveted amazement, while listening to a conjecture which provides comprehensive answers to many of the questions they happened to pose to themselves as to the legends of the Sibillini Mountains Range. Because we have provided a possible, motivated answer to the most fundamental question of all, the question that a philologist, Paolo Toschi, and his brilliant pupil, Luigi Paolucci, stated many decades ago:

«Why were these very places, and not different ones, inhabited by the Sibyl, and why did necromancers use to come here to consecrate their spellbooks?».

[In the original Italian text: «Ma perché proprio in questi determinati luoghi e non in altri abitava la Sibilla, e i maghi vengono a consacrare il libro del Comando?»].

This is the very same question we posed to ourselves during our search, when we stated it in our previous papers *Birth of a Sibyl: the medieval connection* and *A legend for a Roman prefect: the Lakes of Pontius Pilate*: what sort of magnetic pull did attract so many magical, estraneous legendary narratives on the peaks of Mount Vettore and Mount Sibyl? For what kind of fated chance did an Apennine Sibyl and a Roman prefect, accompanied by eerie tales about devastating storms, come to rest, like a ball spinning on a roulette wheel, right into the position marked by these remote Italian mountains?

At that time, we had already begun to repute that so mighty a pull might arise from some odd condensation of any peculiar nature of this region, the Sibillini Mountain Range; an effect generated by some unknown local factor, a result of the physical peculiarities of this wondrous territory: peculiarities which rendered it able to generate a powerful mythical attraction for highly-emotional legendary narratives.

And the specific peculiarity of this land, the Sibillini Mountain Range, is earthquakes.

Earthquakes: «the most horrible event that the world we inhabit offers to our sight», as Leopoldo Mannocchi wrote in 1859, «a thoroughly frightful scourge, which many times has struck and ruined this town [Norcia]».

[In the original Italian text: «il più terribile dei fenomeni che sottoponga a' nostri sguardi il pianeta da noi abitato, il paurosissimo flagello del tremuoto, che assai volte avea costernata e concussa questa città»].

Il più terribile dei fenomeni che sottoponga a' nostri sguardi il pianeta da noi abitato, il paurosissimo flagello del tremuoto, che assai volte avea costernata e concussa questa città (1) sembrava essersi

Fig. 111 - A description of earthquakes written by Abbot Leopoldo Mannocchi in his *Relazione del terremoto che desolò Norcia...* (Roma, 1860), p. 7 and 8

An horrifying event, which is so heinous as to give origin to such hair-raising descriptions as we find in the chronicles concerning the devastating earthquake that occurred in the year 1703:

«At 1:45 in the night of the said day, so fierce and terrifying an Earthquake came, followed by many others, as frightful as the first tremblor, across the whole duration of that grievous night, and accompanied by thunderbolts, lightnings, sulphurous smells, and by so many ceaseless shakes of the ground, that in addition to the whole destruction of Norcia, it seemed that it was determined to swallow everything in the land above, now swelling and then subsiding together with all the buildings, and then swaying from one side to the other; this havoc was multiplied by the roaring noise of the collapsing walls, blood-curdling wails, direful outcries, voices coming from beneath the ruins».

[In the original Italian text: «Ad un'ora, e quasi tre quarti di notte del detto giorno venne un così fiero e terribile Terremoto, seguito da molti altri di non minore spavento in tutto lo spazio di quella funestissima notte, ed accompagnato da' tuoni, da' lampi, da fetori bituminosi, e da così continovi tremori della terra, che oltre l'intero eccidio di Norcia, sembrava che assorbir volesse quanto le stava di sopra, or'alzandosi, or'abbassandosi

quasi tutte le fabbriche, e quando agitavansi da una banda, e quando dall'altra; al che si aggiugnevano lo strepitoso fragore delle mura, che rovesciavano, strida spaventose, clamori terribili, e voci sotterranee»].

salvarono da tante, e si spaventevoli rovine; ad un' ora, e quasi tre quarti di notte del detto giorno venne un così fiero e terribile 'Terremoto, seguito da molti altri di non minore spavento in tutto lo spazio di quella funestissima notte, ed accompagnato da' tuoni, da' lampi, da' piogge, da' oscurità tenebrose, da' puzze solfuree, da' fetori bituminosi, e da così continovi tremori della terra, che oltre l'intero eccidio di Norcia, sembrava che assorbir volesse quanto le stava di sopra, or'alzandosi, or'abbassandosi quasi tutte le fabbriche, e quando agitavansi da una banda, e quando dall'altra; al che si aggiugnevano lo strepitoso fragore delle mura, che rovesciavano, strida spaventose, clamori terribili, e voci sotterranee.

Fig. 112 - The dreadful effects of the earthquake occurred in central Italy in 1703 from *Cronologia della provincia serafica riformata dell'Umbria, o d'Assisi divisa in tre libri raccolta, ordinata, e data in luce dal padre Antonio d'Orvieto* (Perugia, 1717), p. 271

Life and death, bodily existence and supernatural powers, mortality and fiendish divinity: the basic hopes and terrors which are housed in the hearts of men and women found a most fit abode at this small portion of Italy and Europe.

So our work is completed. It is now up to scholars and researchers to continue along the path we have traced, or to reject it.

We only want to add one more, and final, consideration.

Maybe the model we set down, involving earthquakes and legendary demons presiding over them, may sound as preposterous, and even somewhat foolhardy, if not utterly foolish.

To this sort of criticism, we do not intend to reply by putting forward, again, the many considerations we already presented in this research paper.

We just intend to provide a different, far more effective answer.

Because, in the year 2016, as we already know, many mighty earthquakes struck the Sibillini Mountain Range.

And on November, 28th 2019, three years later, the Italian news agency ANSA released a number of interviews recorded by a local correspondent, Gianluigi Basilietti, at Castelluccio di Norcia, the small hamlet set in the middle of the region, a settlement that was entirely demolished by the terrific seismic waves.



Fig. 113 - Sibillini Mountain Range: Castelluccio di Norcia ravaged by the fury of the earthquake in 2016

A man was interviewed. An elderly man, who was born in Castelluccio and, though now living in Rome, had resided for most of his life before the precipitous versants of Mount Vettore. He was a man of our present times, so what he said is only a faint shadow of the feelings that the ancient inhabitants of the Sibillini Mountain Range may have housed in their hearts in a far-away antiquity, when the earthquake hit their dwellings and land with its utmost potency.

And yet, his words, though uttered by contemporary lips, were thoroughly impressive:

«... Suddenly, a Fiend arrives from underneath», he said, «and tears down everything» (in the original Italian words: «... poi arriva il Diavolo sotto, e sfascia tutto»).

A Fiend arrives, from beneath. And devastates the whole land.

The Iron Age, in the Sibillini Mountain Range, suddenly seems to reach out to us through an unfathomable span of time: on the eerie, divine, terrifying waves of earthquakes.

Michele Sanvico

END OF PART 2

**Please refer to Part 1
for the first section of this research paper**