



The Garden of the Caves of Ara History and Traditions



In an old manuscript, an expert in local history defined the Caves of Ara as follows: "Temple of the fairies, cave of the sirens, favorite place of the sibyls".

These words enclose an ancient tradition that suggests the memories of archaic magical-ritual practices, preserved in the collective memory, also evidenced by the practice of collecting "sass bianc" (white stones in the local dialect), or the quartzites from the bed of the stream Magiaiga, where it flows from the caves, to draw energy and well-being from these stones.

These caves have always exerted a particular charm and attraction, not only as a destination for walks but also as a place of health where frail children were brought to, in summer, to strengthen themselves. The Magiaiga stream crosses the Garden of the Caves, which extends into a basin made entirely of dolomites: a real open-air museum rich in karst forms. It is now property of the Natural Park of Monte Fenera that has cared for its naturalization and the renovation of the existing building. The Natural Park has also preserved, in a niche of the rock, the small statue recovered by the Aresi (the inhabitants of Ara) from the site where the dolomite quarrymen worked, as a testimony of the "sacrum continuum" that is the perpetuation of the religious tradition in an archaic place of worship always present in the collective memory, also as a testimony of the affirmation of Christianization.

Time and erosion have altered the morphology of the karst rock over the centuries. The Magiaiga stream, with its spectacular waterfalls, has changed the environment day after day. The morphology has also been altered in the past by the hand of man who, however, has not substantially modified the inner part of the caves, perhaps unconsciously,

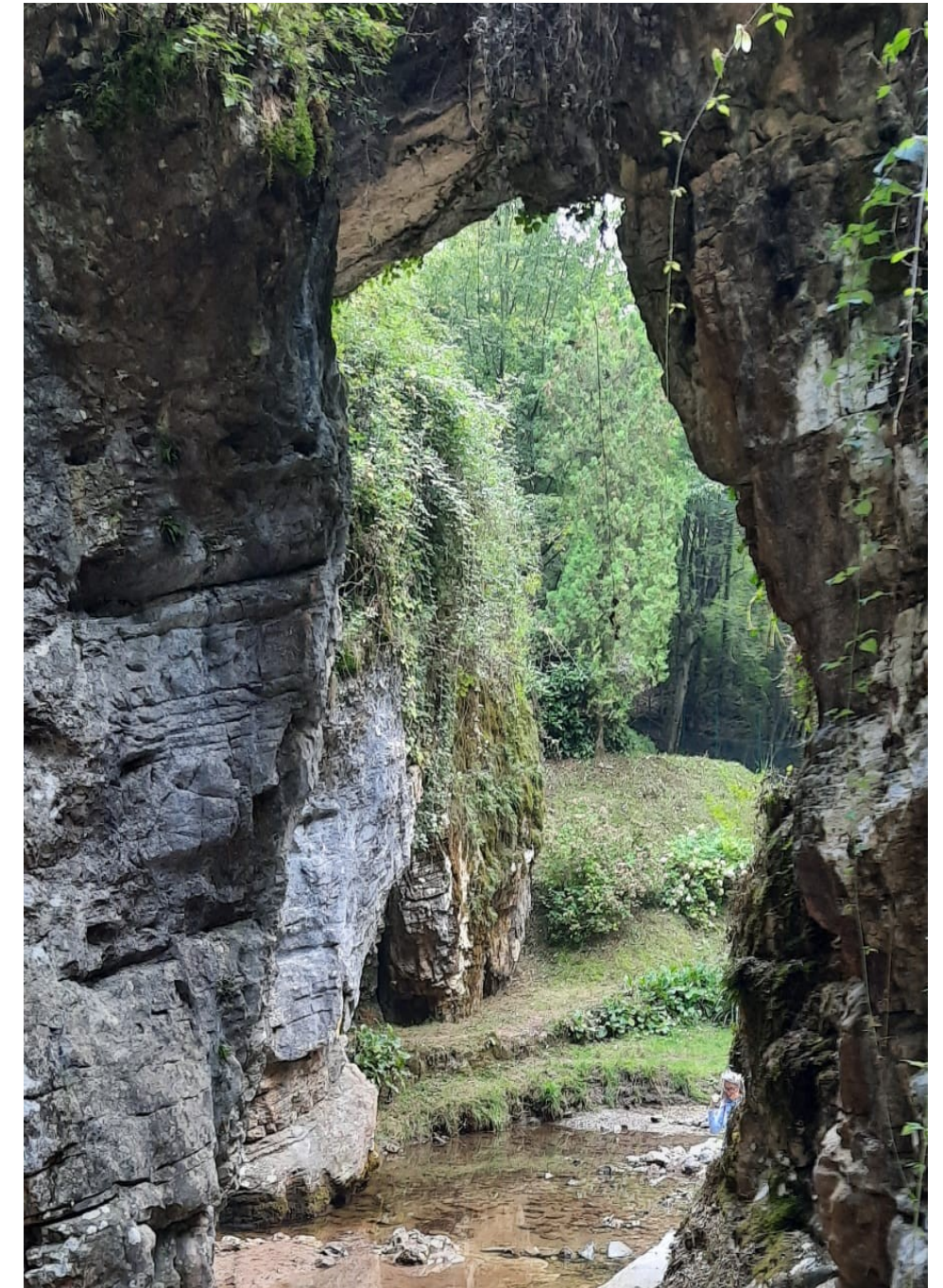
respecting the ancestral memory of arcane rituals. These caves have also attracted the attention of scholars who recovered important paleontological and archaeological findings already at the end of the '800 and in the last century.

In the "osseous breccia" near the caves, in 1871 a mandible was found, although incomplete, of Rhinoceros Mercki (Rhinoceros of Merk) dating back to the interglacial Riss-Wurm. There were also important findings of Pleistocene fauna, again of rhinoceros and Ursus Spelaeus, as well as lithic artefacts "which can be assumed to be more ancient than those typically found in the mustertian caves" (F. Strobino). An important finding is the rather recent discovery of a pink flint blade dating back to the Upper Paleolithic (Aurignacian between 40,000 and 30,000 years ago), right in the most suggestive part of the cave, in the bed of the Magiaiga stream that flows out of a tunnel formed by karst erosion.

Traditions and findings suggest that this place was once a site of hunting activities and exchange of materials and goods.

The cave, originally closed, as evidenced by the large remaining arch, then became most likely a sacred place with all the connotations of a water sanctuary, suggestive hypothesis and prelude to new research.

Probably in pre-Roman and Roman times, in this site - which can be defined as "unicum" in the province of Novara - ritual practices related to the feminine and vital element par excellence - water-took place. In particular in our areas and on Mount Fenera the cult of water and rocks spread mainly in the Middle Bronze Age (about 3,700-3,500 years ago). It should be remembered that even the "Grotta del Laghetto" (The Cave of the Small Lake)



on Mount Fenera shows evident traces of a cult cave connected to the collection of dripping water. Regarding the hydronym Magiaiga, the most probable hypothesis is that it derives from the anthroponym Maghios (transformed in local dialect -aiga and Novara area in -aco) and it would mean "the stream of Maghios", of clear Celtic derivation.