

Article

The Flight of Saint Mary Magdalene—A Case Study of the Dismantling, Repositioning and Restoration of a Votive Aedicule and Wall Painting in Nardò, Lecce, Italy

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Abstract: The work carried out as part of construction on a ring road around Nardò (Lecce, South Italy) involved a votive aedicule attached to the perimeter wall of a rural building that had been scheduled for demolition. Provision was made for the movement and relocation of the building, dedicated to St. Mary Magdalene, to an adjacent area, in addition to the restoration of the pictorial decoration itself. The intervention was designed to conserve the building as testimony of its use for future generations, given its value and sense of identity for the local community. The project was largely conservatory, thus guaranteeing the continuity of its still active devotional function. In this sense, the restoration of the building was also associated with an educational aim of raising awareness of the importance of eco-compatible care of the landscape. So, this project highlights the importance of social, as much as environmental, sustainability.

Keywords: restoration; heritage; rural landscape; aedicule; wall paintings; St. Mary Magdalene



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1. Introduction

Work was carried out during the construction works of a ring road that involved a votive aedicule leaning against the perimeter wall of a rural building that had been scheduled for demolition (the works were carried out in 2019 by Nicoli S.p.A Company). The project was organized by the Province of Lecce (Dario Corsini, engineer, manager of the Public Works Sector; Anna Maria Riccio, engineer, Responsible for the Procedure), in collaboration with the Superintendence of Archaeology, Fine Arts and Landscape for the provinces of Brindisi and Lecce (Luisa Rosato, conservator restorer; Antonio Zunno, architect official) and the Municipality of Nardò (Nicola D'Alessandro, engineer, Executive; Gianluca Manieri, engineer, technical instructor; Cosimo Pellegrino, engineer, functional area manager).

1.1. The Rural Building and the Aedicule

The small rural building, devoid of architectural value that housed the Magdalene aedicule (Figure 1) in the countryside around Nardò, northwest of the ancient village was at the crossroads of a historic road system. The road connects the town to the sea, close to Sant'Isidoro (Figure 2) [1–7], passing through the town's San Francesco gate to the Castle of Agnano, on to Masseria Corsari and Villaggio Resta. Even though the area is now besieged by the expansion of the urban periphery, the building and its aedicule still retains its rural characteristics and retains the toponym La Maddalena, referring directly to Saint Mary Magdalene (Figure 3).



Figure 1. The rural building, from the southeast; on the left, the Magdalene aedicule.



Figure 2. Satellite image of the intervention area (in red).

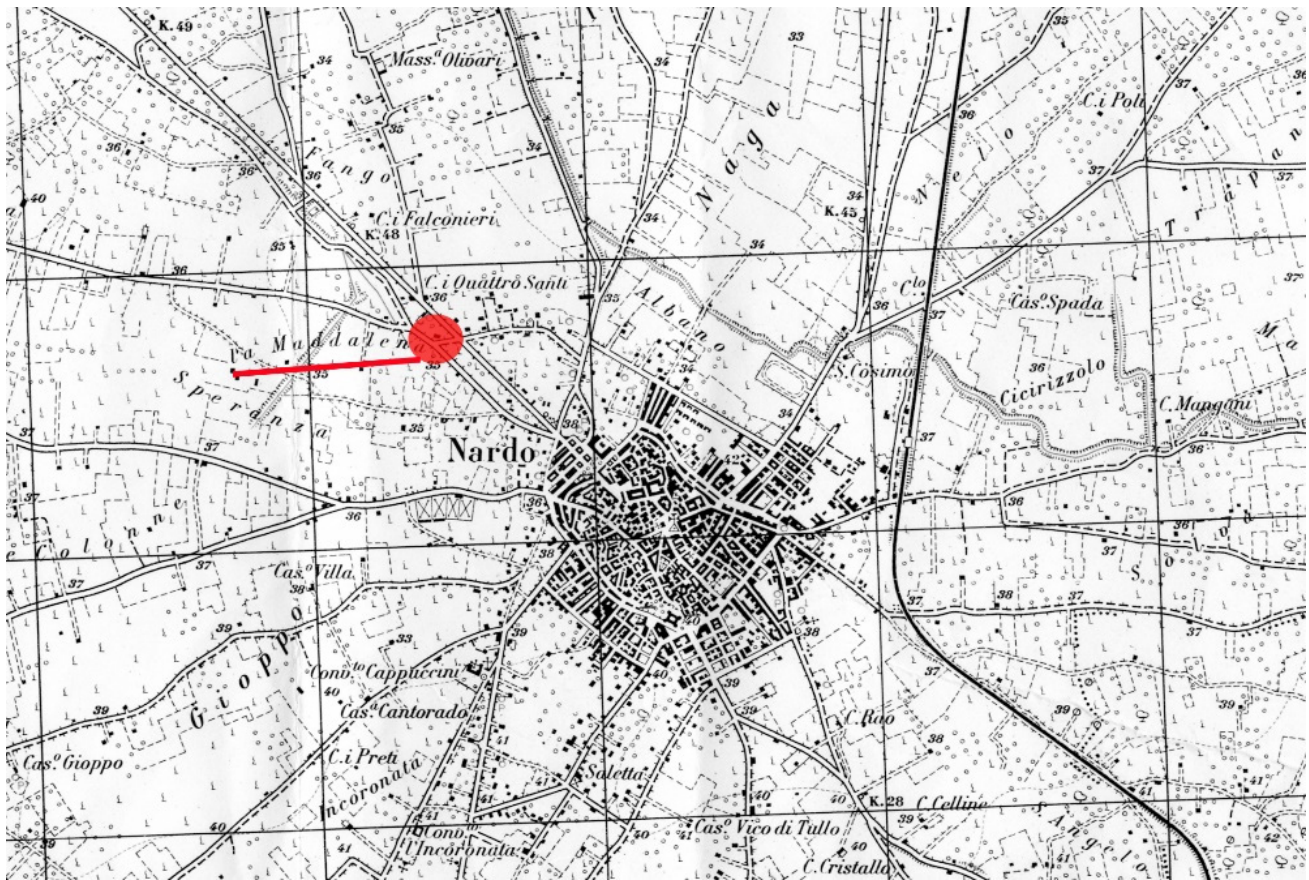


Figure 3. The intervention area (in red) on the IGM map, 1:25.000 scale (F 214IV SW—Nardò), 1947.

The aedicule, entirely stuccoed and decorated, sits on a base resembling an altar table finished at the top with a moulded cornice. On the front are fragmentary traces of a now illegible epigraph. Flanked by two lateral jambs, it ends at the top with an arch surmounted by a further cornice protected by a short roofing overhang made with opus signinum (Figure 4). It leans against a plastered curtain wall framed by two pilasters (the one on the left rounded to accommodate passing vehicles), delimited at the top by a cornice surmounted by a parapet protected by a layer of Lecce stone paving.

This type of aedicule (*cuneddhra* or *conella* in the local dialect) is a common sight in the Salento countryside. It is a votive aedicule, meaning, as the Latin origin of the term suggests, “house of the god” (*aedicula*, diminutive of *aedes*). However simple, these constructions signal the widespread need to mark religious devotion and to “adopt” a superior entity that would in confidence listen, protect and overcome moments of difficulty. These votive constructions come in many shapes and sizes but always retain the original function of small chapels, whether they are to be found in the countryside, in town or inside residential or religious buildings.

In the countryside, they constitute points of reference or resting places for pilgrims and wayfarers. They host pictorial or sculptural representations, evocative expressions of popular art and devotion free from imposed canons. These constructions will usually be built by local, and unnamed, artisans. It is precisely this widespread humble tradition both of construction and devotion that gives these aedicules their value. They create a strong identifying aspect of the local landscape that has been heavily affected by the continuous presence of man. This centuries-old relationship with the environment has produced a classic cultural landscape. However, over the last few decades, it has lost its vitality following the crisis in the agricultural economy and has led to a progressive degradation of the rural landscape [8–10].



Figure 4. Votive aedicule.

1.2. The Pictorial Decoration

The “pregnant Mary Magdalene” takes center stage on a high relief of the southern portal—attributed to Placido Boffelli and decorated with panels of religious and mythological subjects—of the seventeenth-century Church of the Crucifix (*Chiesa del Crocifisso*) just outside Muro Leccese (Figure 5a,b) [11,12]. She is clearly identifiable by the soft drapery of her dress, which highlights the roundness of the maternal womb, the result of a carnal as well as a spiritual relationship with Christ. As the local Salentine saying has it: “The Magdalene went to the Holy vineyard and came back pregnant” (*A Maddalena sciu alla vigna e turnau prena*). This typology of representation is also associated with the being patron of the “*pulandre*” (Greek dialect, for women, such as prostitutes, who have had many men in their lives). The theme of the pregnant Magdalene can also be found in a number of popular Christian legends of the French tradition.



(a)



(b)

Figure 5. Muro Leccese, church of the Crucifix. Southern portal (a) and detail of the left jamb (b). Photo by O. Caroppo. <http://naturalizzazioneditalia.altervista.org> (accessed on 18 March 2023).

Indeed, the cult of the Magdalene, particularly venerated in the south of France, was introduced to the Kingdom of Naples at the end of the 13th century by the Angevins. Also, the stories of Mary in Jacopo da Varazze's *Golden Legend* refer to her as settling in Provence.

Artistic evidence [13] of the popular devotion to the Magdalene can be found throughout Salento from the Middle Ages to the modern era. Of note are the cave church in Manduria (*San Pietro Mandurino*); the *Torre di Belloluogo*, Lecce (*Cappella della Maddalena*) [14]; the castle at Copertino (*Cappella della Maddalena*) [15,16]; the cathedral at Nardò; the basilica at Galatina (*Santa Caterina d'Alessandria*) and the cave church (*Sant'Anna*); the church at Soleto (*Santo Stefano*), Melpignano (*Cappella di San Michele Arcangelo*); two churches in Sogliano Cavour (*Santa Maria Annunziata* and *San Lorenzo*); the main church, Uggiano (*chiesa matrice*); Nociglia (*Santa Maria de Itri*); Castiglione di Andrano (*Cappella della Maddalena*) and the main church (*chiesa matrice*) and the cave church at Santa Eufemia Tricase (*Cripta della Madonna del Gonfalone*).

The painting here is enclosed in a minimal architecture. It is a poor and simple reworking of the canons of the local iconographic tradition. Mary is depicted in the center of the aedicule, kneeling with her long hair loose on her shoulders, her head bowed and

her gaze turned to heaven. She holds the Crucifix with her left hand, while her right hand is delicately placed on her abdomen as if to protect it. In addition to the wooden Crucifix, we note the ointment jar and the skull which represent the iconographic attributes of the classical tradition. In the background, we see a sky with clouds enlivened by two cherubs and a cluster of houses, which could refer to the town of Nardò (Figure 6a,b).



Figure 6. Central panel, general (a) and particular (b).

In the intrados of the summit arch, a dove with a radiated crown, a symbol of the Holy Spirit, is depicted (Figure 7); in the left jamb, there is an angelic figure while the one on the right houses the effigy of the patron Saint of Nardò, *San Gregorio Armeno* (Saint Gregory the Armenian), in the robes of a bishop in a gesture of benediction.



Figure 7. The Holy Spirit.

1.3. Analysis of the State of Conservation of the Pictorial Decoration and of the Support [17]

The pictorial decoration appeared in a very bad state of conservation. It is a “mixed” painting, with “dry” parts—lime paint, probably tempera—on single-layer plaster laid on the masonry face in regular ashlars of local tuff (Pliocene biocalcarenite). Execution appears simple and without the canonical rough coat-*arriccio-intonachino* stratification, which would have been typical of better-quality wall paintings, especially when using the *a fresco* or *mezzo fresco* techniques.

Adhesive qualities of the plaster to the masonry support were compromised in several points due to the poor grip qualities of the underlying stone, favoring its detachment with the consequent formation of pockets and visible areas of layer lifting, which entailed the loss of parts of the paintings (lacunas), concentrated above all in the intradossal portion of the vault. The plaster, in addition to a dense network of micro and macro cracks, has suffered widespread biological attack (biological patina) and surface deposits.

Generally abraded due to exposure to atmospheric agents, the pictorial film presented lacunas and was fragile and partially or totally missing, mainly in the lower part of the painting, with the greatest loss in the lower area of the image of Mary Magdalene and *San Gregorio Armeno* (Figure 8a,b).



(a)



(b)

Figure 8. Details highlighting the poor state of conservation: St. Mary Magdalene (a); *San Gregorio Armeno* (b).

Despite the extensive losses, the artifact is legible as a whole, and no evidence of any signature or date was found. Considering the stylistic and architectural style, the quality and the technique, the aedicule that houses it and on the basis of comparison with similar creations, it can be presumed to conform to the local tradition of the 18–19th century.

2. The Intervention

2.1. Methodological Premise

The new road infrastructure was already well underway, and the dilapidated building was close to collapse. So, it was clearly necessary to work on the votive aedicule with immediate effect. Restoration and relocation to the edge of the new road layout was clearly necessary and was carried out at all times following Superintendence procedures [18,19].

Preliminarily, an accurate and in-depth investigation was conducted. This was not limited to the analysis of the building alone, but took into consideration the wider rural context, in line with the principles of conservation, to enhance the area through redeployment where compatible. Considering the lack of historical documentation regarding the aedicula, the origin and history of the building and its transformations over time were reconstructed through comparisons with what we know about similar structures of the time. In particular, analogies were made regarding locally popular construction systems and techniques, building materials and architectural styles. Analysis was also made of the state of conservation of the materials and the constituent elements [20–24].

The first hypothesis, the detachment of the fresco and its musealisation at the Castromediano museum in Lecce, was discarded, given the inappropriacy of separating the sacred image from its aedicule. Instead, it was important to preserve the entire votive aedicule for its cultural value as evidence of a rooted tradition in the Salento countryside.

The transfer of an artifact or the detachment of a wall painting from its original site was common practice up until the 1970s. It does however involve very complex operations to be carried out only when all other possibilities of intervention are to be excluded and on careful analysis case by case.

Below, we note a number of some removals in the Salento area. In 2015, during the restoration works of the small church of the Assunta in Botrugno, the following were removed: the main altar in Lecce stone (18th century) and a wooden altarpiece with the canvas depicting the Virgin of the Assumption and Saints Carlo Borromeo and Gaetano Thiene. This particular removal allowed new historical–archaeological investigations to be carried out as well as the restoration of the original 14th-century fresco on the apse wall [25].

In 2008, during the restoration work on the crypt of *Santa Maria della Grotta* in Ortelle, following stratigraphic investigations, a portion of a recent and rather amateurish mural painting was detached. The work, depicting the Medici Saints Cosimo and Damiano and two unidentified bishop saints, was located in the lunette of one of the apses. This rough painting was covering an older one attributable to the same 18th-century fresco painter of the other apses, where the subjects are always the Santi Medici Holy Unmercenaries, i.e., medical practitioners who refused (mercenary) payment. In this painting, it is clearly written who the saints are: Nicholas and Liborio [26].

Returning to the aedicule discussed here, the solution proposed was disassembly, anastylosis of the building, and relocation to a bordering area, compatible with safety standards and to the new road layout. In consideration of the inseparable relationship between the aedicule, the historical road system and the desire to maintain an active devotional function, an unused area of municipal property was found a short distance from the original position along Via dei Bernardini (Figure 9a,b).

Reconstruction was limited to ensure minimal visual impact and to conform harmoniously within the rural landscape setting. In this sense, chromatic solutions compatible with the building and its surroundings were adopted, avoiding strong contrasts and favoring the colors in the local area.

The flooring of the area was reduced to the bare minimum and made with draining material (rammed earth and gravel) to avoid further waterlogging of the soil. New planting was introduced including indigenous herbaceous species from local ecotypes to avoid the uprooting of any trees or shrubs.

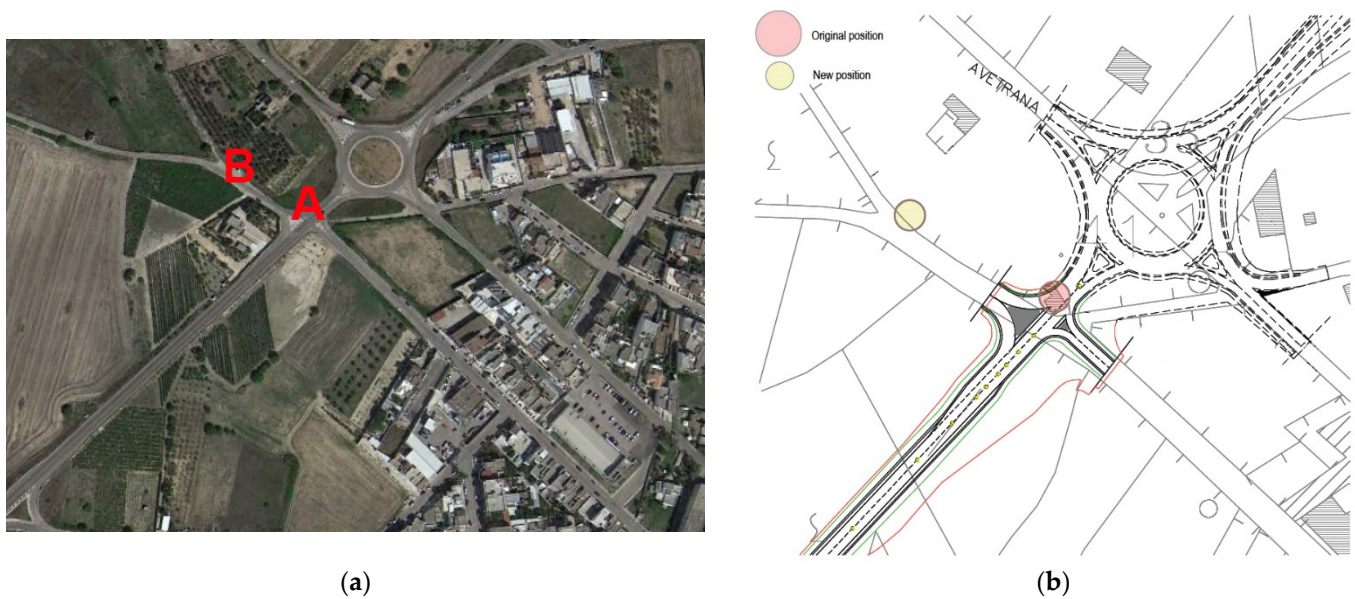


Figure 9. Satellite image (a) of the original location of the building (A) and of the new location (B). Project plan on and aerophotogrammetric map (b).

As mentioned above, the original plan involved disassembly and anastylosis. However, the company engaged for the project suggested removing the entire building in one piece, using a crane for lifting, and a particular vehicle for transport to the new site. This was an innovative solution that significantly reduced execution times and also simplified the degree of intervention.

2.2. The Operational Phases

2.2.1. Preliminary Investigations

To begin with, preliminary diagnostic investigations were carried out [27–32]. These were aimed at identifying and determining the exact microclimatic conditions, stone and restoration techniques and materials for the intervention.

Samples were painstakingly taken from the vault and the walls at points without pictorial decoration. Mineralogical and petrographic analyses of the material were then made to determine the characterization and behavior of the material and its resistance to the action of degradation agents. The soluble salts in these samples were also analyzed to determine the extent of their action on the structure.

Very small stratigraphic pieces were made by hand with a scalpel to verify the existence of previous applications of pictorial decoration below those legible today. None were found.

A further preventive assessment was made to provide further information to help decide how to organize the restoration phases. Tests were conducted to identify the most suitable techniques and products for biological disinfection, to ascertain the application timing of the most appropriate methodologies and products for the neutralization of residues in relation to the state of the paintings and to determine the execution technique as well as the conditions of the plaster and stone support. The tests were carried out in the areas affected by biological attack using numerous application pieces with varying concentrations and times of application of a number of products.

At the end of this investigation of monitoring, data research and testing, it was possible to draw up a project protocol of the work to be carried out, summarized in the following paragraphs.

2.2.2. Scaffolding Work (Figure 10a,b)

Prior to the detachment phase and transport of the aedicule, necessary temporary shoring, cambering and slinging of the entire masonry body of the building was carried

out. This involved both vertical and horizontal wooden shoring to prevent sagging or structural movements, using mainly wooden beams, with bracing and wedging of sections. A scaffolding cage was made of carefully placed scaffolding tubes and wooden planks incorporating the entire masonry body of the votive aedicule ready for transfer to the new location. Prior to this, the entire fresco was protected with support straps and the entire pictorial surface was covered to prevent any danger of detachment of the painted surfaces or of the support plaster during handling and transport. Finally, the entire masonry envelope was protected by an insulating membrane to separate the masonry structure from the scaffolding itself.



Figure 10. (a,b) Scaffolding work.

2.2.3. Detachment and Handling

Prior to the transfer, a portion of the wall the aedicule was leaning against was cut vertically. Disassembly of overhanging portions of the wall was carefully carried out with both electric and manual equipment. The operation of detachment from the entire body of the building also included the assembly of scaffolding and work surfaces and their subsequent disassembly when the operation was completed.

We then proceeded with the handling of the product and transport to the reassembly location using a mobile crane (Figure 11a–c).

2.2.4. Reassembly of the Aedicule (Figure 12a,b)

First, the relocation site was prepared. This involved the construction of special masonry work on the foundation and, for the construction of the foundations, the mechanical excavation of the earth up to the rock bank. The foundation itself was composed of blocks of local stone and mortar, using traditional techniques. Traditional mortar was used to help reposition the aedicule. The new back structure was built following the shape of the original building using the same technique as above. Stone constraint elements were also applied for the rear support of the building to give it solidity and for safety reasons. To top it off, a level in local stone was put in place. Finishing consisted of the comparison and final patination of the building using materials similar to the original (local stone facing, lime-based mortars and plasters, whitewashing and coloring with natural pigments) and applied with traditional techniques.

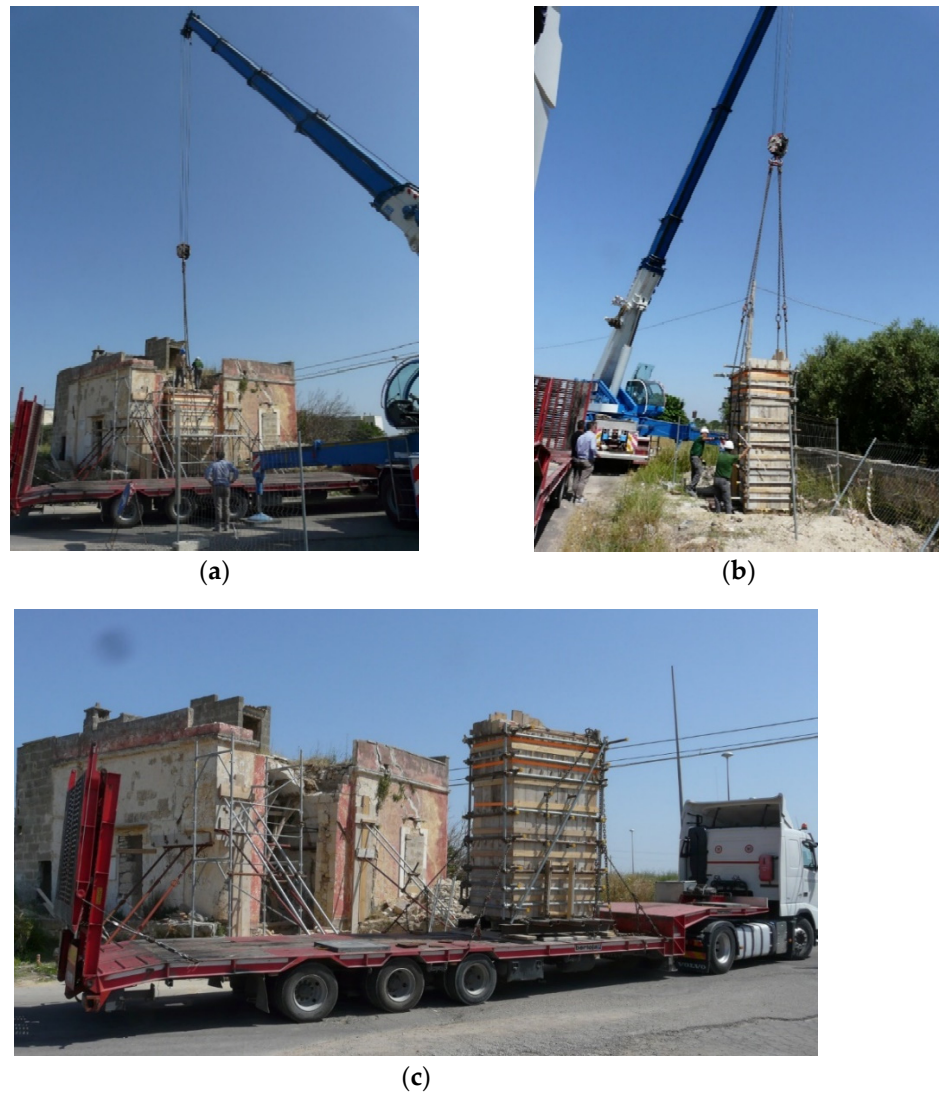


Figure 11. (a–c) Handling.

2.2.5. Restoration of Pictorial Surfaces [33–35]

The first fundamental interventions, prior to the dismantling of the votive aedicule, consisted of ensuring the safety of the portions of the painted plaster at risk of falling. The cracks and gaps were filled with mortar based on hydraulic lime and river sand, while pre-consolidation was performed with injections of PLM premixed mortar. The cohesion defects of the pictorial film were resolved, and surface deposits were removed. Three layers of cotton gauze were then applied with Paraloid B72 acrylic resin diluted with trichloroethane. This operation was aimed at protecting the surface of the painting to prevent parts of the pictorial film and of the preparatory layers or of the support from falling (Figure 13).

After the reassembly in the new site, the layers of gauze were carefully removed with the aid of brushes and solvent along with the subsequent elimination of PARALOID residues from the entire painted surface with cotton wool and solvent (Figure 14a,b).

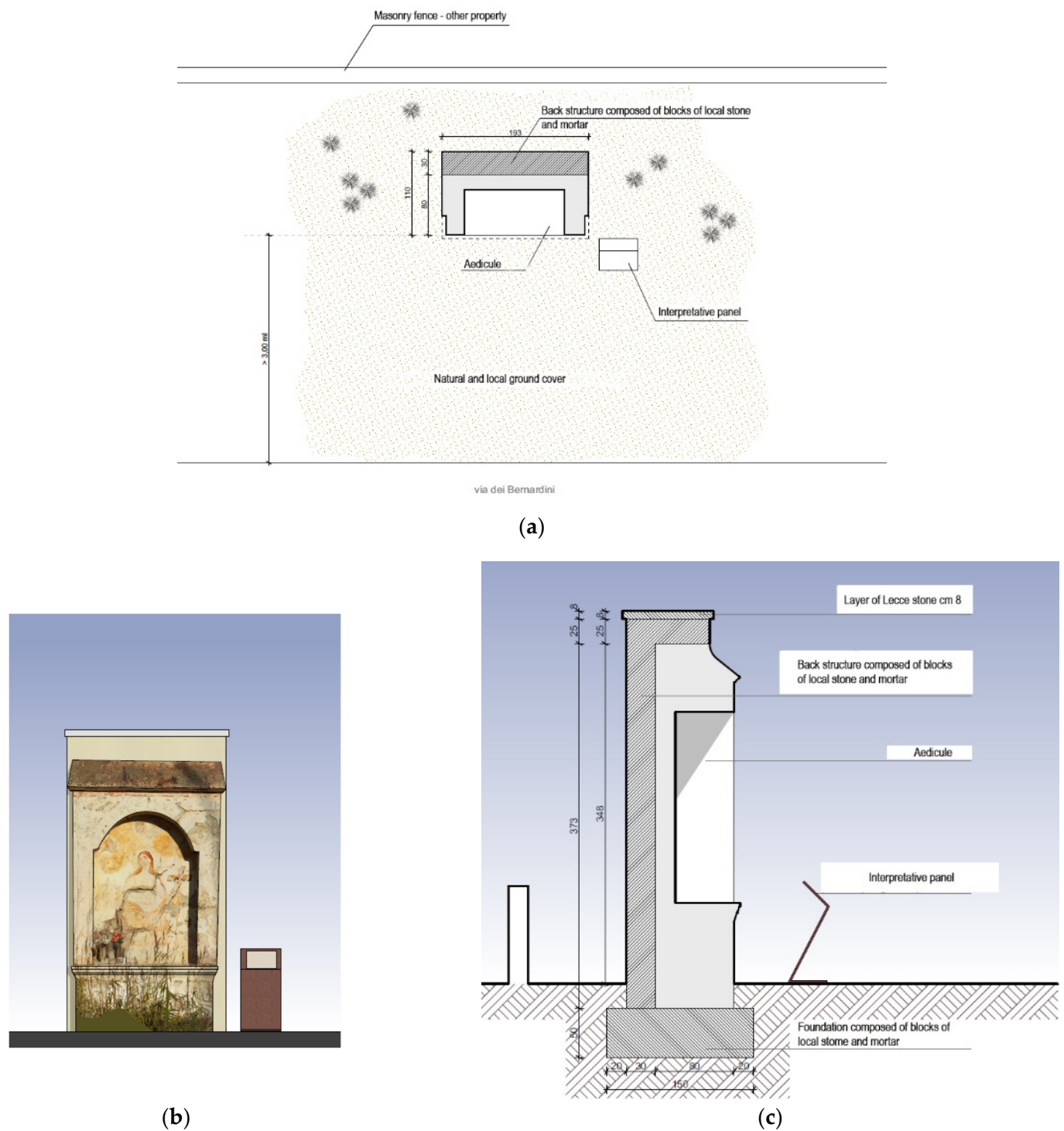


Figure 12. Project drawings: plan (a), elevation (b), section (c).

The next phase saw the nebulization of BIOTIN T, a biocidal product, over the entire surface to preserve and protect the surface from microbiological attack (Figure 15). Biodeteriogen residues were removed with soft brushes, and then neutralization was carried out by washing with deionized water.



Figure 13. The aedicule covered by protective gauze.



(a)



(b)

Figure 14. Bandage removal (a,b).



Figure 15. Nebulization of the biocide.

We then proceeded with the reinforcement. For the deep filling of the plaster that had detached from the stone support, we injected a water-based calcium hydroxide mortar, PML 33, with demineralized water injections and alcohol. We then worked on the more superficial detachments between the plaster and the painted plaster, injecting acrylic resin (ACRIL 33) in a 5% aqueous solution (Figure 16a–c).



(a)



(b)



(c)

Figure 16. Consolidation operations and application with a syringe (a–c).

Subsequently, the grouting of the gaps and fractures was carried out, levelled with hydraulic lime mortar, using a variety of grain-sized river sand according to gap depth; yellow *cocciopesto* plaster was added to match the original chromatic tone (Figure 17a–c).



(a)



(b)



(c)

Figure 17. (a–c) Plaster grouting.

The pictorial intervention, aimed at reducing the visual disturbance caused by the evident gaps and abrasions, was strictly limited to the area to be integrated and always in full respect of the original pictorial layout (Figure 18a–c). For the reintegration, carried out with an undertone veiling technique, pure CTS pigments were used, bound with very diluted solutions of acrylic resin to ensure low alterability over time.

As part of the final report, photographic documentation and chronological documentation of the entire work (pre, during and after restoration) was provided (Figure 19a,b).

2.2.6. External Arrangement of the Area

After the spreading of topsoil, to reduce environmental impact to the minimum, native and local ground cover was planted to greenify the area (*Sedum* spp., *Lobularia maritima*, *Cynodon dactylon*).

An interpretative panel was also installed to secure the memory of the site and of the work that had been carried out.



(a)



(b)



(c)

Figure 18. Pictorial integration of *San Gregorio Armeno* (a) of the face of Mary Magdalene (b) and of an angel (c).



Figure 19. The aedicule before (a) and after (b) intervention.

3. Conclusions

A distinctive feature of Puglian “minor” cultural heritage in rural areas consists of constructions, including votive aedicules, where local activities took place, such as craftwork or gatherings for social and spiritual life. Once knowledge of this aspect of rural heritage is lost, conservation is neglected, leading to impairment or irreparable degradation. The same level of degradation can occur through uninformed restoration incompatible with the identity of the structures themselves and/or the landscapes that had originally welcomed them.

The intervention, based on environmental sustainability and socio-cultural compatibility, was therefore designed to restore the building for cultural heritage, to ensure not only its physical and functional survival, but also that of its testimonial value, as a mark of identity for the community in this particular area of Nardò, thus guaranteeing the continuity of its function as an actively used place of devotion. In particular, the work carried out made it possible to preserve the original architectural elements and surface finishes, as well as to restore the landscape in harmony with the rural context. This was made possible through the use of traditional materials and construction techniques, and conserving the morpho-typological, typological-constructive, material and geometric identity of the building.

Specifically, for the recovery of the building and its harmonious insertion in the landscape context, the indications of the current Regional Territorial Landscape Plan were taken into account, especially the detailed *Guidelines for the recovery, maintenance and reuse of buildings and rural goods*. This guide provides information and cognitive support for complex regional rural building heritage sites by directing building recovery, restoration

and restructuring operations, focusing on the problem of reuse and destinations compatible with the architectural and construction characteristics of the artifacts and their landscaped surroundings. All the work done respected the fundamental principles of restoration: recognisability, reversibility, compatibility and minimal intervention, in line with the rules of the 1972 Restoration Charter.

For the intervention, sustainable environmental technologies were used, based on the use of traditional construction techniques. These techniques, the result of working with the area's limited resources, have for centuries provided more than satisfactory results for the inhabitants.

To conclude, the case study appears important, in our opinion, to turn the spotlight on what is ostensibly a minor heritage, humble and locally popular. It is, however, important and worthy of being preserved due to its high testimonial value, which today is particularly threatened through neglect, abandonment, vandalism, urban sprawl and soil erosion. In this sense, the restoration of the building is also associated with a wider educational function of not only raising awareness of local history and traditions, but also of eco-compatible care of the local landscape.

The flight of St. Mary Magdalene: time lapse of the movement.



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