

THE YOUNGER SISTER OF FINGAL'S CAVE

The volcanic coast north of Acireale hides a place of rare beauty; imposing columns of coloured basalt rise from the waters of Ionian Sea, reminding us of the romantic landscape of the island of Staffa. And like the most famous Scottish island, this Sicilian place was famous in the past for a cave that opened between the columns, overlooking the sea: the "Grotta delle Palombe" (woodpigeons cave).

The evocative atmosphere of the place has always aroused wonder in visitors who have drawn fantastic descriptions and legends such as the one that says that the nymph Ionia made it as the shelter for love between the humble shepherd Aci and the beautiful Galatea, until when the cyclops Polyphemus, jealous of Galatea, destroyed the cave with the lovers inside.

As a matter of fact the "Grotta delle Palombe" no longer exists today because it was destroyed by the continuous work of the waves but it is still possible to see the fantastic columnar basalt pillars that remain.

But let's work our way through the testimonies that scholars have left us on this cave.

During the V century BC a massive lava flow coming from the Etna crater called Mt. Gorna, reached the sea between the villages of Santa Tecla and Santa Maria La Scala. The hydro-explosive phase, generated when this 30 meters thick flow encountered the sea, made this lovely columns of basalt and the wonderful cave called "Grotta delle Palombe".

The volcanologist Carlo Gemmellaro, within the book "La Vulcanologia dell'Etna", printed in 1858, gives us an interesting description of the cave:

"A' fianchi del piccolo scalo di Aci, una lava che non è delle più antiche, offre alla sponda del mare, una grotta di lave prismatiche, detta delle Colombe, che per basalti si prenderebbero a prima giunta; e dà una idea, in miniatura, della grotta di Fingal."

"On the sides of the small port of Aci, a lava flow that is not of that ancient, left on the shore of the sea, a cave of prismatic lavas at first glance taken for basalts, called "delle Colombe" which gives an idea, in miniature, of Fingal's cave. "

Gemmellaro, in his description, defined this cave "a small Fingal's cave", for its similarities with the most famous Scottish cave. The first printed drawing of this cave bearing the signature of *Camille Saglio* (picture 1) was included in the book *Le Tour Du Monde, nouveau journal des voyages*, printed in 1866. It resembled a previous sketch of Sartorius de Waltershausen.



At the beginning of the XX Century, Gaetano Ponte, volcanology professor at the Catania University and Chairman of the local section of Club Alpino Italiano, took a picture of the “Grotta delle Palombe” area. In that picture we can see that the vault of the cave had collapsed and only a pillar of basalt rising from the sea remains (picture 2).



A few years later, in the year 1972, the pillar was destroyed during a storm; today it is possible to see only the fantastic basalt's columns along the sea side (picture 3).



It will be possible to visit this wonderful site on the occasion of the 19th volcano speleology symposium in Catania which will also host a large exhibition of ancient books and documents on Fingal's Cave.

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