

# An excursion to Mount Gragno and the cave of Cascaltendine

P. Magri, Barga 1880

Translated from the Italian on the occasion  
of the 125th anniversary of its publication

by

M.D. Towler

## TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

My interest in the history of the *Tana di Cascaltendine* began in late 2004 when Delma Flori, who is a neighbour of ours in the Tuscan mountain village of Vallico Sotto in the Apuan Alps, showed me an old and battered little book that she kept in a drawer in her living room table. This turned out to be Pietro Magri's 1880 account of an expedition he and some associates had made from the town of Barga to a remote cave a few miles from Vallico. My wife Samantha and I had in fact visited this *Tana* some months previously while attempting to follow a brief reference in a local guidebook. We hadn't dared to go very far inside - no torches, high-heeled shoes (probably), and a soon to be born baby daughter put paid to that idea - and so I was curious to learn what we had missed. Almost 125 years after its publication however, the book was a little fragile and I decided to scan a couple of good reading copies of it, one for our monastery and one for Delma. As soon as I could find the time I settled down to see what I could make of Magri's prose.

In translating the book I have been surprised by the details that apparently unobservant people like me can miss when not paying attention. Even though Sam and I had made a further badly-equipped visit with the recently-arrived Saska (now fast asleep in a pouch) and then a relatively well-equipped one with the participants of our Institute's first scientific conference, it was apparent that we had completely failed to notice the Palace of Ismeno, the Cave of Cauliflowers, the Pillar of Hercules, the Cave of Extreme Fear, the House of Vampires, the great wall with its ruined gate, the lichens, the bat (if he or his descendants are still there) and much more. Right now I'm wondering if the initials and date that Francesco Diversi and others chiselled into the wall in the inaccessible upper cave all those years ago are still there. Now there's a challenge - I think I feel a new photographic expedition coming on..

Anyway, for those interested in such things it seems that, long after Magri's visit and well before ours, the cave was subjected to a series of archaeological excavations beginning in the 1970s. At the end of this little book Magri describes digging up a couple of handfuls of earth in order to find a keepsake and finding what he thought was a human bone. If only he had kept on digging he might have found quite a bit more. The excavations apparently revealed that the cave has been in use over long periods for at least 5000 years, often in ways associated with cult worship. It was used intensely in the 5th century BC period by the Etruscans; the excavators found over thirty of their characteristic bronze figurines like the one shown here. They also found bronze daggers, coins, Attic drinking cups, fine Roman pottery and a great number of other items from various periods. Many of these can now be found in the Villa Giunigi Museum in Lucca.



I am far from being a professional translator and this is not a professional translation.. It is in fact my first attempt at such a thing and I found I had to look up rather more words in the dictionary than I would have liked. I also found myself wishing that dictionary compilers employed more geologists - what is *dentrite* anyway? - and that the English language had as many words for 'cave' as Italian does. The Italian habit of prepending job titles in references to people such as 'Lawyer Magri' and 'Engineer Salvi' is difficult to shape into a sensible English equivalent, and so these people have been rudely stripped of their professions. Finally, my decision to mix my own footnotes with those of Magri is probably not quite the thing in translation circles, but what the hell. Magri's own concluding words work here too : *In the meantime if our observations might be of some use to those who study such matters and if our work encourages them to make their own explorations, we would declare ourselves for now content, convinced that others will make a better job of things we have not known how to do ourselves.*

My wife Samantha hates damp caves and our last visit to the *Tana di Cascaltendine* had to be curtailed because she couldn't bear to be near it any longer. Nevertheless, this poor translation is dedicated to her.

Not quite Christmas Eve,  
MDT, Cambridge, December 2005.

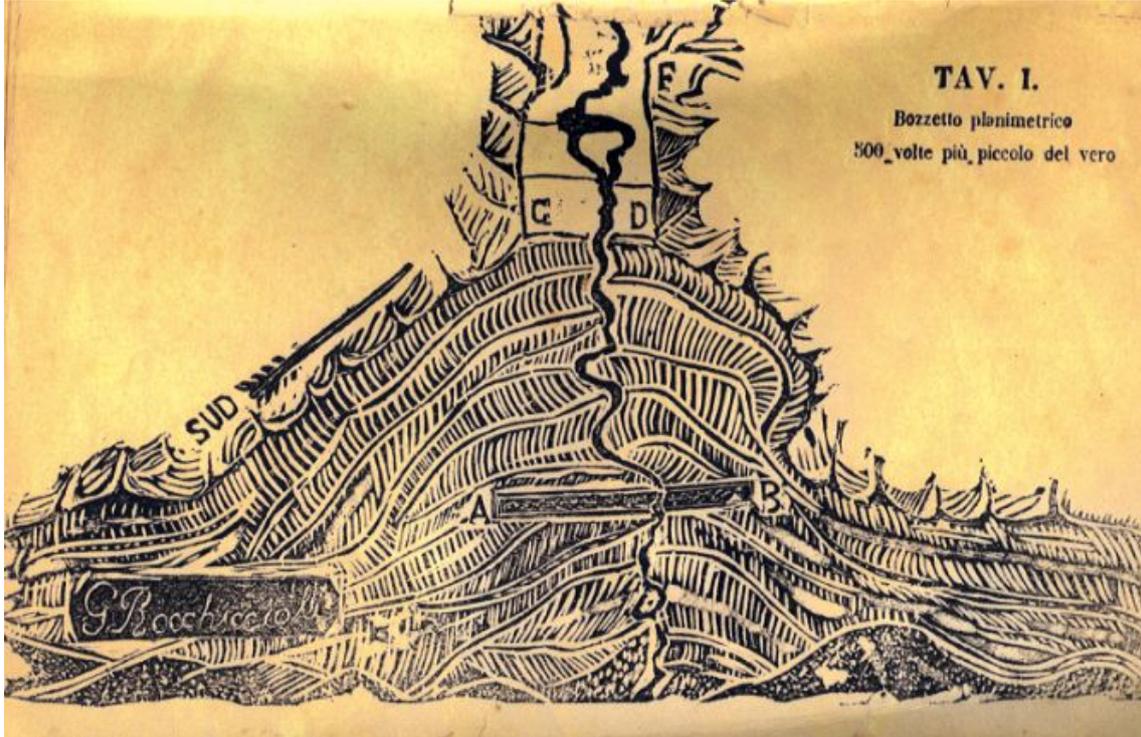
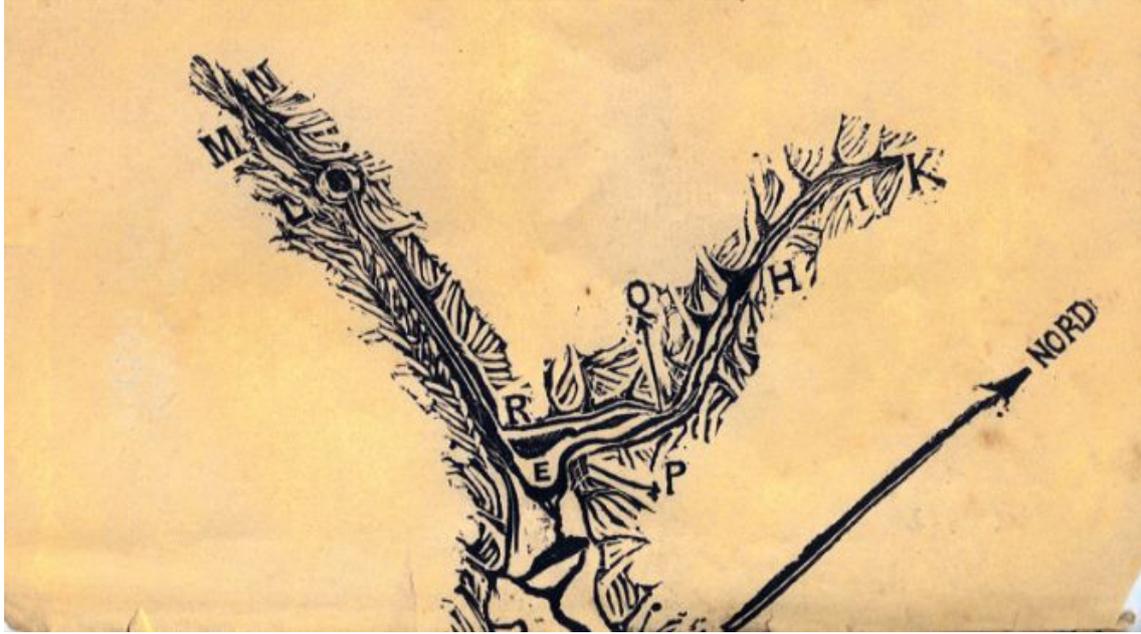
**To my little nephew Luigi Magri**

*It is Christmas Eve and the Lord knows how many times you must have thought of the present that your uncle promised you a few days ago. And truly I had not forgotten it, but I wanted to send you some small thing which would give you pleasure. I know that you love toys like all other little boys who are lucky enough to be five years old, but I also know that you willingly go to school and that you are eager to learn. So for your present here then is a little book which I've hurried to write and get printed in time to dedicate it to you on an occasion such as this. Read it, my dear Gigetto, and if others don't find anything good in it, you will always find some profit there, and that will be in learning to read well. Just that will suffice to make your dear uncle happy.*

Barga December 1880

Your affectionate uncle

P. Magri



In the last century our esteemed fellow citizen Francesco Bertacchi made a survey of that marvellous underground cavern known as the *Tana di Cascaltendine* which, from the perspective of our town of Barga, is to be found on the extreme left of the peak of Mount Gragno<sup>1</sup>. He subsequently left us a manuscript describing it whose advice has been of considerable use to me.

Although from Barga one sees it only from the side this mountain, which ends so abruptly in a high steep cliff, has the appearance of having suffered some great cataclysm during which a chunk of it suddenly detached and plunged into the Turrtecava river. The entrance to the great cavern which is the subject of this little book is at the foot of this precipice.

Now in these times of *alpinismo* it is somewhat surprising that the cave, which is in fact little known despite its many visitors, has not been properly described like others of lesser merit which nevertheless have held the attention of serious natural philosophers and have stirred the mellifluous lyres of poets. But such is the case, and although our cave has no need of rhetorical artifice to put on a good show, things have remained as they are because no-one willing to devote himself to this task has yet come forward.

Such observations were circulating amongst a group of friends assembled at a café in Barga on the evening of September 26th of the current year.

'And yet,' they said, 'he would need to go there.. he would need to write a description of it..' Just so, I replied, but we lack only one thing and that is precisely someone who is actually willing to go there. 'Well I am!', came the sudden exclamation of one of the friends, 'Come now, do you have the courage to follow me?' Everybody affirmed that they did. 'Then all you need do is meet me here tomorrow morning at four o'clock.'

With matters thus arranged the friends bade each other good night and I'm sure they must have slept well but I, to whom had fallen the task of writing the description, found it impossible to close my eyes. And so I got up and set to writing, almost as preparation for the forthcoming trip, the following notes on the *Grotta della Tana*.

If someone in former times had proposed visiting the *Tana* to the lower orders of our town he would have heard himself declared to be out of his mind, so extreme were the things that were said of it. The immense dangers encountered there, the eternal noise and deep terrifying rumble of the great waters, the inextricable labyrinths which led to the edge of dreadful precipices, the landslips crumbling underfoot, the winds which extinguished all lights, the witches, and so on, were spoken of in a way that made one shiver. There were those filled with such ideas who would certainly never have gone near the cave for all the gold in the world but who nevertheless, in order to demonstrate the superiority of their souls over those of others, asserted all these things to be the sacred truth as witnessed by their own frightened eyes. Our mothers, partly believing in good faith, and partly to diminish the curiosity of their sons for visiting the terrible cave, contributed admirably in the maintainance of such silly superstitions. They described these caverns to their little boys as dens of fairies and ogres, and of witches, who were wrinkled crones with two protruding fangs and clawed fingers with which they choked and strangled and then threw into the bottomless abysses all those they hated, even transforming themselves into vampires and giant ants and other ferocious beasts who took pleasure in drinking the blood and feeding on the flesh of their prey.

But let us set aside the past; today it is a fact that the exploration of caves and underground chambers, the appreciation of the more picturesque aspects of nature exemplified by the incredible variety of flowstones and stalactites, and the question of whether these simultaneously marvellous and frightening places were once inhabited by men or whether they served as their refuges in dangerous times, are no longer absurd eccentricities or mythical ideas. They are all part of the great range of modern explorations of the learned, who through their profound studies of nature have brought the natural sciences to a high state of perfection. Most certainly in visiting this cavern we have no pretension to making singular discoveries, but our curiosity and our ardent desire to see the marvels of these dark recesses made the compulsion to undertake the long walk irresistible.

And so it was that at precisely four o'clock in the morning, the engineer Ferruccio Salvi, the lawyer Giovanni Magri, Don Carlo Nanni, Francesco Diversi, Guiseppe Guidi, Guiseppe Biagi

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<sup>1</sup>Translator's note: which for some reason seems now to be known as Monte Penna, with Monte Gragno being the next one along..

- otherwise known as *Il Diori* - and I were all reunited at the *Locanda di Pietrino* awaiting the instructions of our leader - Signore Ferruccio Salvi.

As it turned out he had arranged things so well that we did not have to do without anything that I would deem necessary but there were also some surprises, and the first of these was the arrival of a carriage.

To be perfectly honest the luxury of a carriage was hardly a great start for us would-be mountaineers, but our leader well understood that none of us was a Nembrotti<sup>2</sup> or a hardened backwoodsman and after a mere few hours of sleep the carriage seemed at first like a grace from God. So we boarded this wooden conveyance, which appeared to be a kind of omnibus, a great carriage belonging to some mediaeval prelate - but my goodness! - we had to stand so tightly packed together that it was more of a torment than a comfort. And not only that but the din from the rattling window panes and the wheels and the woodwork was so great that from Barga to Ponte all'Ania we were unable to exchange half a word. There, fortunately, it was time to get off.

As the dawn began to lighten the sky we refreshed ourselves with a little glass of *rinfresco di Modena* at Pier Giuliano's shop, and we then set off down a path along the left bank of the Ania making for the boat on which we were to cross the Serchio.

A whitish smoke very like a light fog was rising from the limpid waters of the Serchio which, according to Diori's forecast, was the sign of a beautiful day to come. The ferry boat had been made fast to the opposite bank, however, and not a living soul was apparent who might untie it. A piercing whistle from our leader, too impatient to wait, followed by another from Diversi, and then the ear-splitting yell of our Diori, penetrated into the humble, modest hut of the boatman, who with just as many shouts on his part informed us that he had understood. 'Not so bad!' said Diori, and he began to pace up and down humming to himself. Of course we were expecting to see some dark muscular Charon, likely sporting a sulky expression as the mass of whistles and shouts could have been considered rude. And yet presently we saw a small whitish figure arriving from the direction of the little hill of Turrtecava - that could not be the boatman! - but it continued to approach the river, came down the slope, jumped in the boat and in no time at all arrived at the landing stage on our bank.

It proved to be a gracious young girl around twelve or thirteen years old, whose eyes were still heavy with sleep, and that drowsy but lively little face had the good fortune to inspire Diori to sing the following song to us as we crossed:

*Bright shines the sun, serene is the tide,  
Sounds the hour of love  
Oh! She takes me to the other side,  
My little rowing dove.*

Once we had disembarked on the opposite bank, Diori the poet began to load himself up with a bundle of ropes that must have weighted forty or fifty kilograms. But no matter! It should take more than such a miserable weight to buckle those hulking great shoulders. He went off in front, indicating to everyone through his example the road we were to take, laughing to himself at the dismay we exhibited despite being noticeably free of similar heavy burdens. 'We'll see each other later, dear Diori!', we said, 'He who laughs last laughs longest'. But the road which leads to Cardoso is not the ordeal which it at first appears to be: it goes up, certainly, but in the end for a mountain mule trail it is remarkably well-kept and smooth.

'What do you think of it, Diori, compared with our tracks going up to Renaio and Montebuono, and also to Tiglio and to Sommocolonia? Wouldn't you call this a road fit for a king? And yet, you know, perhaps some king or prince once dreamed of walking down this road, and..'

'Beh! I've never heard such rot..' Diori interrupted. 'Kings must have come to see the beautiful city of Cardoso..! Oh yes, certainly they must have..'

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<sup>2</sup>Translator's note : As far as I can surmise, Nembrotti must have been a sturdy gentleman who in 1880 was famed for his toughness. Unfortunately history, or at least that part of it accessible to me, seems to have forgotten the reason for this.

The city of Cardoso, as you call it, may have its merits and I don't want to deny any of them but, dear Diori, my words have now been uttered and I don't see any point in retracting them. I said that perhaps some king or prince once dreamed of walking down this road, not just because he had a taste for strolling round the countryside, nor even perhaps because he wanted to see the treasures of Cardoso. Around these parts there was something more important that you're ignoring, just as there are many other things which nobody around Barga thinks about any more. See, this ground we're tramping over was at one time inhabited by an heroic people who, in order to defend their liberty and independence and despite being reduced in number to just a handful, dared to oppose that nation which had conquered the entire world. Perhaps the little castles of Cardoso, of Valico, of Fabbriche and many others were the first bulwarks against the invaders, and this area may have been the theatre of great battles. History doesn't tell us, but one can surmise it. It makes us realize the tremendous difficulties that the Romans had to overcome in order to defeat the Apuan Liguers when they had to assault them in these places which due to their position and their nature are essentially impregnable. Today you think you're coming with us on a romantic walk, but perhaps you might see in the Mount Gragno cave one of those unassailable sites where the Apuan Liguers lived. Obviously I wouldn't dare state this as a fact, for in order to confirm historical matters you need documents and we lack them. But if at this distance in time I might be allowed to form a conjecture, you will understand that it is not completely unreasonable to suppose that this cave could very well have been a shelter for those Apuan Liguers who, coming down from the peaks of Versilia and following the course of the Turritecava descended into the Serchio valley and joining the other Liguers marched towards Lucca and Pisa. The word *Valico*, left to us subsequently in the name of the eponymous village close to the cave, suggests as much.<sup>3</sup>

But, moving on from the Liguers, you're also ignoring the importance that Mount Gragno has had more recently from mediaeval times up to the present day. And there's no need to resort to scholarly arguments to prove this to you; one need only look at the long-running impassioned disputes between the citizens of Barga and those of Cardoso, Bolognana and Gallicano, forever trying to snatch ownership of the mountain from each other. You see it in the attention paid by the Grand Duchy of Tuscany and the Republic of Lucca to keeping their mutual rights. You see it in the sentences of the more celebrated jurists, like the lawyer Colonna, the Duke of Savoy and its President Tesauro, and in the sentences of the popes Pio V and Leone X, and in the Decree of the Emperor Massimiliano I. Finally it's quite evident from the vast expense sustained by the governments in these struggles. I need only tell you of the most recent case. There was a question of widening by a few yards a little stretch of road on Monte di Gragno going towards Bolognana; on this account a struggle began in 1749 that lasted the best part of 23 years, that is until 1772, and do you want to know how much all this cost the Lucca Republic? No less than the trifling sum of 67,3415.9 scudi or 377,109.60 Italian lire.

'Jesus, Mary and Joseph!', exclaimed Diori, 'Putting the whole mountain up for sale wouldn't cost so much!'

Certainly if you added up all the money thrown away in these struggles and disputes you could buy it not once but three times over. But through all this I just wanted to make you understand that spending money didn't matter to them if it meant they would retain possession of the mountain, and that means they must have attached a great importance to it. Of course this mountain has an innate quality that is both attractive and mysterious, but the governments fought for it because of its position, which in those times was highly strategic, and the people have since made it into a kind of bazaar of myths that has peddled a thousand opinions and a thousand stories. And you know what? There's more! A *saint* also came and hid himself away here, and he..

'What do you mean, a saint?' asked Diori, astonished.

You're priceless - you don't even know about him? And yet we're speaking of a saint venerated so highly nowadays that all our children know his name. Have you never heard anyone speak of Saint Doroteo? Alright then, ancient tradition has it that he arrived in a valley near to the church where today his body is kept, which is around half a mile from the Castle of Cardoso, and he just

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<sup>3</sup>Translator's note : Valico - though nowadays spelt with a double l - is where we live, and if I understand it correctly the word, though not in my dictionary, has the sense of 'a pass leading from one place to another'.

stopped. There, separated from the company of his fellow men, he passed all his life in holy orations and in contemplation. They say that, as the place was devoid of water, he confided in God and then he planted his staff in the earth, whereupon the staff immediately sprang into life and blossomed and at his feet gushed forth a clear spring from which he could quench his thirst. The spring is still there today and they say that many people drinking of these waters have gained the grace of God. They conclude by saying that he died on the 13th of May, and the Oratory where his body lies was built in his honour. The people of Barga, moved by the fame of his miracles, had a particular devotion to him and more than once they saw an intense light over his church which to them seemed to testify to his benevolence. So they gathered together in groups and decided to go there to steal the reliquaries of the saint and bring them back to Barga, but no sooner had they decided this than.. do you know what happened to them? All of a sudden they were struck blind!<sup>4</sup>

‘We’re never going round to the Saint’s place are we?’, added Diori. ‘If he does such mean things to people from Barga..!’

Hush there..! With your miracle it is always the omnipotence of God that intervenes, and he never acts at random. Anyway..

Here perhaps a theological dispute might have broken out but the voice of our leader, announcing our imminent arrival at Cardoso where we were to stop and take breakfast, arrived just in time to interrupt it.

The little village of Cardoso has had tremendous disputes with Barga over the centuries, and with them having quarrelled for so long in order to wrench a hand’s breadth of bare land from each other, you would think, dear reader, that the place would be looked upon somewhat critically by people from Barga? Not in the least. The pleasant position in which it is situated, its interior cleanliness, its fortresses, its exquisitely kind inhabitants instead make it a particularly agreeable place. We needed only to make known our requirements to some of the population, and everything that we asked for was brought to us. Ladders, lanterns, lights, and men to carry all the tools were all ready in a quarter of an hour, and they did this from the good of their hearts rather than for pecuniary reward, declaring that they didn’t want even half a cent.<sup>5</sup> And that was good: times have changed, the races have been run, the divisions have disappeared: on this day brothers recognized their own brothers and could exclaim: ‘Long live the Union, long live progress!’

Everything was ready - ladders, ropes, hawsers, lanterns, candles, hammers, pitons, mattocks; the men with all these implements on their shoulders were already lined up along the road like a train ready to depart. It only remained to give the signal, and the usual whistle meaning that it was time to leave echoed around the deepest recesses of the walls and deafened the company for some considerable period. ‘*Avanti! Avanti!*’ The group began to move. ‘From Cardoso to the Tana, from the Tana..’ On this subject Francesco Bertacchi stated, in the manuscript which I mentioned at the beginning, that the journey from Cardoso to the Tana is rather splendid as one can traverse almost all of it on a pony, as he did, up to a little rivulet of water which issues from the cave. I, who had to do it on Shanks’s pony, now know well that the journey is a damned hard one. Seeing the blessed cave from Cardoso it seems almost that you can touch it with your finger and that it sits right next to the bell-tower, but in reality the string of bends, turns, and switchbacks that lead up to it never seems to come to an end. Luckily Don Carlo at Ponte all’Ania had provided a bottle of *Rinfresco* and an occasional sip of that grace from God seemed to work miracles..

Sweating and breathless we finally arrived at a little stream. I think we’re here, I said, and I was right. So we left the path that led to Valico and climbed up and up the great crag where my poor hands were more than once punctured by sharp thorns. Turning round at one point I could see the great precipice falling away down to the Turrite and, my goodness, I was glad that I had no great fear of heights. But we shall not dwell on it, the worst was over, the *Colle della Nuda* had been conquered, we were at the *Tana di Cascaltendine*, or at least in front of the wall containing it. As the brief but steep climb came to an end we found ourselves in front of a strong, good-sized wall extending from one side to the other of the bosom-shaped section of mountain inside which is the

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<sup>4</sup>This fact is related by the academic Bertini in his *Dissertations on the Ecclesiastical History of Lucca* Vol.4 p.330

<sup>5</sup>Here I must publicly thank the three Vannucci brothers and the Bernardis for all the services they offered us in these circumstances

opening of the cave. Almost halfway along this wall we found what appeared to be the remains of a great door or gate, as on the left was a gatepost inclined to the south which seems to have been built to hold an attached locking mechanism. Indeed some of the locals asserted that there had once been a great iron hinge there which today is no longer apparent. The wall is partly ruined, and that which is now in existence has a height somewhat below that of the cavern entrance; at its base it is 2.40 metres across and it narrows to 1.80 metres at the top. It is 21.60 metres long and appears to be constructed from stones and sand found near the cave.

To get up to the level of the cave floor you have to go up round the right hand side of the wall where the rising ground reduces its effective height. From there one can climb up some little steps formed by protruding seams of stone from the mountain in order to arrive at the cave entrance.

And what a beautiful sight! The wide entrance to the cave opens up at the base of an enormous hollow in the mountain which has the general shape of a parabolic curve, though this is somewhat irregular and imperfect lower down on the left-hand side. The upper edge of this great cavity is the edge of the summit plateau of the mountain and is garnished with holm oaks; the width of its base is similar to the length of the wall already described.

The whole mountain is composed of limestone - a kind of marble - and on the surface of some of these stones outside the cave one can see dentrite<sup>6</sup> and upon others inside the cave stalactites have formed from places where water drips, some of them with a quality like white marble and some of them composed of a kind of spar. The dampness has encouraged the growth of a white mould on their surface.

Having examined the situation of the cave, one finds from Bertacchi that it lies almost perfectly aligned with the south-west. The north line cuts the right-hand wall of the cave a few fathoms from the entrance. The south line ends obliquely in the parabolically-curved wall that forms the exterior of the cave on the left side, where one can see a hole of considerable size some way above a wild fig tree. Bertacchi was not able to investigate this hole on account of not having any ladders, but it was visited by members of our party and Ferruccio Salvi has communicated the following description to me.

“The entrance is, when facing outwards, to the right of the principal cavern around 12 metres above the level of its floor. It proved necessary to overcome this difference in height by means of a ladder, as the sloping wall containing the entrance is almost vertical and in consequence inaccessible without the ladder.”

“At its mouth the cave is 2 metres and 20 centimetres in height with a width of 1.80 metres, but 8 metres inside the ceiling has descended to only 0.90 metres and henceforth it is necessary to proceed on all fours to a distance of 23 metres from the entrance. The initial breadth of 1.80 metres reduces, 8 metres along the passage, to just 1.50 metres and stays that way until the 23 metre point mentioned above, where the cave is 2 metres broad and 1.60 metres high. This is a good place to rest since even though one cannot stand up completely, those of limited stature may, by inclining their head slightly, stretch their back and straighten their knees.”

“Beyond that point the cavern divides into two branches. The passage on the right descends rapidly with a gradient of 40 percent; the one on the left has a 30 percent upward gradient.”

“After 4.60 metres the first passage leads to a little lake at which point the cave ceiling descends to within only 60 centimetres of the mirrored surface of the water. This is matched by the depth of the lake and so the total distance from ceiling to cave floor is only one metre and twenty centimetres. Proceeding beyond this point is exceedingly painful, for although the water only comes up to the level of the knees one is obliged to maintain the back bent almost horizontally. Moreover the water is exceedingly cold and indeed almost freezing even in summer. Nonetheless, as we wished to know if new passages existed beyond the lake one of the guides was persuaded to try to pass this obstacle and he succeeded, though not without some fatigue and discomfort. After proceeding another 6 metres and happening upon the other side of the lake, our explorer found a sudden elevation in the ceiling which permitted him to stand up but 1.20 metres beyond this point the chamber came to an end.”

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<sup>6</sup>Translator's note : Whatever that might be..

“Those who enter the left-hand branch may like to know that it is a metre in height with a breadth of 0.90 metres. One must climb, as I said, up a 30 percent slope and 3.10 metres inside the cave bends sharply to the left where unexpectedly we encountered a great abyss in the floor, providentially made visible by the light of our lamps. We threw a stone into it and immediately heard the splash of water.”

“One of the guides undertook to climb down into this sinkhole, where the damp walls - only 0.8 metres apart - allowed him to support himself by pushing against them. As soon as we saw his head disappear and had lowered a lamp to provide him with light, the guide told us that he was touching the water with his feet and immediately afterwards he found the bottom.”

“While the walls of this well were being examined, one of us happened to be still at the edge of the pool in the right-hand passage described above and he observed that he was able to see the light of the lamp held by the man in the hole. In this way we discovered that the two branches of the cavern were in fact connected through an extension of the little lake as far as the sinkhole in the left-hand passage.”

“This whole cavern is clearly undergoing a process of natural enlargement through the action of the waters, which presumably flow into the lake through the vault of the sinkhole and then exit through the cave mouth. Both the floor and the walls which curve down to them show obvious signs of erosion, and this is without doubt produced by the action of the water which in times of heavy rain must infiltrate the little lake, raising it to the level of the highest point of the cavern whereupon it discharges through the entrance.”

“The rock in which the cave has formed is the usual Albarese stone<sup>7</sup> - carbonate, that is, limestone from the Cretaceous epoch perhaps with some Pleistocene character though as we were unable to recognize any traces of fossils there must remain some doubt about this.”

“Before coming down from the cavern we used a chisel to inscribe our initials and the year 1880 on both walls of the passage near the entrance.”

Here ends Signore Salvi's description.

A most curious thing at this point was the sight of people appearing at the mouth of this barren and empty cave at such a considerable height. This was a most astonishing spectacle and we were able to try out the effect at the very moment of Diversi's appearance at the hole. We called out to him as he popped out with a cap on his head, wearing glasses, with a mattock in one hand and a piton in the other, but it no longer seemed to be him; there was something strange, something fantastical, something idealized about him. Magri, who went up there and saw him inscribe our names, painted a verbal picture of him as a kind of wizard. The idea never went away and our friends christened the cave *The Palace of Ismeno*.<sup>8</sup>

The people around these parts say that in former times there was a wild fig tree, rather taller than the one we see today, which the local boys could easily climb in order to get into the upper cave. Now one most certainly cannot reach it without the aid of a ladder. There are others who say that the wall we have described was once of such a prodigious height that people could climb up there, but as we could observe no vestiges of masonry near the cave we cannot really assert anything in this regard.

The entrance to the enormous main cave is around 24 metres from the stone wall, flush with the imposing facade of the curving cliff. The space in between might be likened to a vestibule or entrance hall. From here a chamber of considerable size extends directly into the mountain; it is 10.80 metres wide at the entrance and 5.40 metres in height, with a straight-line length of no less than 39 metres<sup>9</sup>.

The whole chamber is roofed over with a natural ceiling made of the same kind of rock as the rest of the mountain and consisting of flat slabs inclined to the south-west; the walls are of the same stone, alternately widening and narrowing until the end of the hall where there is a junction that I will presently describe. Here the width reduces to only 4.80 metres and the ceiling is higher in the middle than at the sides, almost in the shape of a pavilion. From this junction to the cave entrance

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<sup>7</sup>Translator's note : an expensive ivory-coloured local limestone used e.g. for the facade of Barga cathedral

<sup>8</sup>Translator's note : Ismeno is the Counsellor and Wizard of the King of Jerusalem in Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

<sup>9</sup>Translator's note : Misprinted as 89 metres in the original text

on the inclined side it is 3 metres high, and on the right side where it rises up more, it is 4.20 metres. These measurements are however not constant for the whole length of the vast hall, given that the ceiling varies in height, but they deviate from the figures stated only by a relatively small amount. The whole of the floor is made of a kind of high hard stalactite-like material, amongst which here and there are indistinct basins or pools made of the same kind of material but covered with moss; on the left side the waters have also deposited some sand and earth.

A plentiful source of water in the form of a small stream crosses the chamber right at the back and then passes along the wall on the right hand side, trickling placidly through the pools, before flowing out of the cave, whereupon it makes a sharp turn and exits through the great wall to create the little river mentioned above.

This water could not have been more clear and fresh, and the bottom of the stream was a pleasant sight, being completely covered with small pebbles, some ruby-coloured, others with the merest hint of emerald. One may observe that the stones exhibit these indistinct but garish colours only from above; from below they are for the most part a sort of yellowish white. Beyond the halfway point of the main cave one finds increasingly few of them and eventually the red colouring is only found on a few of the basin rims. The different colours of these stones in fact stem from the various lichens that form on their surfaces, some of which were examined (it's still Bertacchi talking<sup>10</sup>) under the microscope on our return and were found to be *Lichenis pulmonariis Crustacei substantiae gelatinosae* (Micheli Ordo XVI<sup>11</sup>).

It is hard to deny that in winter especially when the snow melts the water which irrigates this cave must flow through here in such abundance that everything is flooded. Some pretty secure evidence for this lies in the fact that, although the cave is partly dry, the floor is completely covered by a fine gravel presumably carried and deposited here by the water during its greatest inundations.

High up in the right-hand wall around 15.60 metres from the entrance one can see the mouth of a small cave. After some exertion we were able to get inside but the winding passage came to an end after a few tortuous turns.

Such then is the great hall - the most majestic and least unnerving of all the chambers in the cavern. After 39 metres it divides into two branches, one going straight ahead, the other to the left. It is at this point that the natural light gives out; to progress further we must plunge into the darkness..

Candles! Candles! Lanterns! Lights....!

At a simple signal everyone was ready and we set off in single file - there wasn't room to go in pairs - down the right-hand fork. But before going any further I should mention that just after the end of the entrance chamber there is an oval opening in the left-hand wall of this branch a short distance from the floor. Squeezing into this hole one of the company found two low, narrow passages that he was able to crawl into lying almost flat on his face. These led high into the walls of the two main branches. 'Beautiful! It's beautiful!'. Our friend inside was shouting almost at the top of his voice, 'They seem almost real'. What is it? came back the anxious reply. 'A wall of cauliflowers!'. The discovery was too unusual not to be worth recording for posterity, and so we named it *The Cave of the Cauliflowers*.

Back to the right-hand passage: it has a rather large entrance which to begin with is 2.40 metres wide but diminishes continuously thereafter. So little water flows through it that one can pass through large parts of it with dry feet, a fact which made Bertacchi suppose that they were nothing more than puddles formed by water dripping from the roof.

On the way there are many beautiful flowstones that look like great protruding leaves and a thousand other grotesque shapes, some resembling woodland trees, others like the heads and bodies of animals. Once brought out into the open air these flowstones would hardly merit a glance but seen here under the lamplight they present a considerable spectacle.

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<sup>10</sup>Translator's note : I'm not sure when he started talking?

<sup>11</sup>Translator's note : Possibly a reference to *Nova plantarum genera* by Pier' Antonio Micheli (1679-1737) which was the first book to establish mycology as a field in its own right. Micheli was the director of the botanic garden at Florence. I don't know who or what Ordo is.

One can proceed quite some distance without fear of one's head striking the ceiling<sup>12</sup>, around 36 metres from the usual junction according to Bertacchi's measurements. But it's not always like a path through the vegetable garden - let's be quite clear about that - for in many places one can only pass through sideways, and there is one point where, having to squeeze between two rocks that almost fit together, one has to get through almost in a prone position with the risk of dipping one's belly or back in the pool of water underneath, as happened to Magri. However the disgrace was a minor one; we continued and beyond this constriction we found a cramped, low passage where small amounts of water dripped from the ceiling. This led to a great sloping rock which ended high up in a hole, which would have been quite big enough for a person to pass through lying down, if a spiteful stalactite had not formed a column halfway across it such that one could only pass one's head through. Beyond the hole we could see a waterfall cascading into some kind of great abyss to end goodness knows where below. But that column, which prevented us from seeing the full extent of the splendid waterfall, inflamed the irritation of all against it and a unanimous cry burst forth: 'Break it down!' Our courageous and skilful Diversi (the restricted space would admit no more than one) used pitons, chisels, and mattocks against it; he assailed it from in front and behind; he hammered and beat it terribly, obstinately, but the column stayed firm and seemed almost to respond to its desperate would-be destroyer: *In vain do you exert yourself: above it is written 'None May Enter Here!'*.

The friends turned back and left this place, which they named *The Pillar of Hercules*, muttering in exasperation about their lack of fortune. But they had progressed no more than a few steps when they heard the voice of Diversi exclaiming 'Quiet, be quiet! Stop..!' Everyone stepped back astonished as if his voice had released a spring. Diversi was already climbing upwards where he detached a sort of black globe from a rock and hurriedly wrapped it in a handkerchief.. it was a bat!

'Oh..for goodness sake!' cried Diori. 'All that for a bat!'

Soft, dear Diori, he's only a bat so much is true but he is also an inhabitant of this cave and surely he deserves to be examined like all the other things we've encountered. Why must we occupy ourselves with everything other than the flesh and blood things that live here? That would seem to me to be rather a contradiction. It would be as if... do you want to know?...wait, let me give you an analogy.

If you go to Cardoso and visit the magnificent Toti palace with its beautiful gardens, if after having admired all the beauty which is there, they told you that it is inhabited by a man, would you not be curious to know who it is? Yes.. so why must we do otherwise in our relations with the bat? You will reply to me from the head that it's just a bat and maybe you believe that all bats are alike. However science recognizes that in fact they belong to an immense family, spread in abundance throughout all the regions of the globe, rich in genera, richer still in species, all different in anatomy, character, and habits, and whose natural history is still little known but nonetheless intriguing. In Italy alone there are something like twenty-five species (A. Stoppani *Il Bel paese*, p.341).

But then bats have a particular quality about them. Aristotle and Pliny, fathers of natural history, wrote of the noctule bat as nothing other than a bird of a singular nature; and it really is a very singular bird that has no feathers and no beak, armed with teeth like a tiger, with ears like a donkey, covered with fur like a mouse, and which doesn't lay eggs, doesn't build nests, and which suckles its young.

The ancients seem to have taken bats as the basis of their *harpies*, the half-bird half-woman goddesses of hunger: in the Middle Ages bats were the faithful familiars of witches, and even in our own time similar beliefs are still extant. You want more? We see also in modern art the practice of borrowing feathers from multicoloured little birds to supply the wings of angels, but where can we get devils' wings if not from bats? And a creature of this nature doesn't seem to you to be deserving of a glance?<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Translator's note : Unless you are the translator's friend Marzena Szymanska.

<sup>13</sup>Translator's note : Here Magri presumably omits the moment where Diori punches him in the face for unnecessarily labouring the point.



I believe that he is. Indeed, this bat has qualities to engage everyone's curiosity. Certainly it is not one of the bats that inhabit the attics of our houses in Barga; it isn't half-mouse and half-bird, it is of a different kind. That mouth shaped like a horseshoe, with two rows of fine sharp teeth, and those ridged excrescences that it bears on its nose are enough to betray its nature. They tell us that he is not the fairy or the evil witch that our mammas told us about, he is a *Rhinolophus* or *horseshoe bat*, he is a vampire..!<sup>14</sup>

'A vampire?' said Diori. 'So our mothers were right all along..!'

Certainly. Filtering the facts from the old wives' tales it seems to be true that while we may no longer have fairies or witches we have a genuine living enemy that makes its home hidden in this cave.

Come on, come on! Kill it, it's a witch, a cruel bloodsucker..! Death to the *Rhinolophus*..! Death to the Vampire...! If someone outside the cave had heard this cacophony of voices coming from within he would likely have thought that a little revolution had broken out.

The poor bat! He would say that this great crowd formed around him - already chained up like a galley slave - without him being guilty of the least offence. He would say that he had been condemned to death having committed no crime. And indeed he would have been despatched without mercy had he not had powerful advocates speaking in his favour; he could not however evade the prison that was straightaway prepared for him. And his fate, this prison, was a new agony for the poor banished creature. It was not a dark cell like those where the guilty are ordinarily confined (that would have been more to his taste) but rather a shiny transparent cage where he was exposed to the midday rays of the sun that were to torment him still further; he was shut up in a *lantern*!

Poor bat, those hours must have been very disagreeable for him! But still he didn't lose his purpose, he fought gloriously against the chains that bound him, and in Cardoso he regained his freedom. Probably he returned to his part of the cave, which we named *The House of Vampires*.

The second passage to the left of the fork is initially 1.80 metres across but rapidly becomes narrower. Through it flows a plentiful though not very deep stream of ice-cold water and in order to avoid getting wet one has to proceed with legs wide apart on the rocks that make up the irregular walls on either side.

On the way we encounter the usual grotesque rock formations and proceeding 26.40 metres inside from the junction we find a circular enclosure, rather like the inside of a water barrel, capped above by a dome-shaped roof. To proceed further one must climb up into a deep hole made by a cave on the right, from which an incredibly clear water flows like an artificial fountain into a small bathtub. This passage then bends to the left, descending into a narrow chamber which necessarily marks the end of our journey as the only apparent exit is an extremely small hole from which issues a little water. According to Bertacchi's measurements this is 34.80 metres from the main fork.

We turned back, but once at the bend we happened to raise our lights in the air and observed that high above us there was a great void. Bertacchi, who has given the most precise description of the cave that I am aware of, does not mention this at all and, in the opinion of our leader, this must mean that he never even noticed it. So perhaps we must steel ourselves to climb up there!

<sup>14</sup>*Rhinolophus ferrumequinum* Blasius. *Rhinolophus* means 'the one with the ridged head'. The term is derived from the Greek. [Translator's note : Standard texts list Blasius's horseshoe bat *Rhinolophus blasius* and the Greater Horseshoe bat *Rhinolophus ferrumequinum* as being two distinct species - but what do I know? Maybe they only decided that recently.]

Well that's easy to say, but who on earth is going to scale this wall? Everyone tried but soon found themselves forced to come back down. At such times there is nothing worse than having a burning desire to do something; in order to satisfy it you may end up scorning dangers which can lead to you sacrificing your life.

Therefore we don't have to go any further then? Any half-wit could have got this far. 'We have to get up there,' our leader repeated, 'those of you with any backbone will follow me!' And so it was that he and I detached ourselves from the rest of the company and climbing from rock to rock we eventually made it to the first ceiling. Encouraged by this happy outcome we ascended to the second, then to the third, getting ourselves a good way along without particularly considering where we would end up. Those great cornices, as I will call them, formed short pathways with a very particular aspect. Some came to an end in rough holes, others in small squarish little cells, some were rounded, but most were crumbling or had fallen away. All the walls are decorated with beautiful stalactites, and at one point we saw a large cavity full of grotesque shapes. All of it was outwardly beautiful to look at with one exception, and that was the monstrous void extending below us to where we could see the light of the distant lanterns. Somehow, we had to get down again. And thus we left the realm of fantasy and re-entered the real world where we began to be seriously concerned. If by misfortune a foot were to slip, if we missed a handhold, if one of those rocky projections were to break off, that would be the end for us - there would be no mercy. We understood that our life, hopes, and our future would remain buried with our body smashed to pieces in that horrid cavern, and that was a moment that would have shaken even the bravest.

Those rock shelves and ledges that had greatly assisted our climb seemed to have suddenly disappeared. Not only could we no longer see them, but we were at a loss to make out the route we had taken; from up there everything was different, and we saw nothing but a multitude of dangers with no obvious way to overcome them. But we had of necessity to try. We attempted by turns to encourage each other, but the words were lacking, we needed something beyond words! Our hands, legs, and shoulders were all moving together, from one moment with legs braced wide apart, to the next trusting just to our arms, then sitting above some prominence, willing every part of our body down and down, Not even I know by what miracle we arrived at the bottom but at length we did. Our friends, seeing our ashen expressions, surrounded us in congratulation.

Reader, if you find within yourself the desire to climb up there, really, you must arm yourself with a good dose of courage. Our companions, in memory of the terror that we had felt, christened it *The Cave of Extreme Fear*.

And so we turned back after having walked at least seventy-five metres into the bowels of that hollow mountain, and we returned to enjoy the light of the large chamber. There was nothing left to see, but I knew it was bad to go back home without taking with me a memento of the *Tana di Cascaltendine*. I therefore took up a mattock and set myself to digging to see if Fortune would be kind to me, and in fact after excavating perhaps two handfuls of earth I found myself looking at some kind of black object.. I picked it up and examined it; it was.. a bone!

Our Diiori burst out laughing, perhaps with good reason. For my part it seemed that Fortune had in fact been very kind to me, and I treasure it. I still do not know what it is, I cannot decide, but it certainly has the shape of a human bone and perhaps we will be able to say something about it subsequently.

It is not easy to determine, writes Bertacchi, whether or not the entrance to the cave has been deliberately expanded, just as it cannot be asserted that there are visible marks made by tools, for the various grooves that one sees in the rock may just as easily be attributed to ice as to the chisel and hammer. It may also be observed that if it had been desired to enlarge this cave they would have had no need of hammers and chisels, since the stone of which it is composed is of a type made up of various horizontal layers and by levering with iron crowbars or similar instruments some very great rocks would easily have been detached; this is perhaps the principal reason why it remains undecided whether the cave entrance has been artificially enlarged or if it is simply the ravages of time that have shaped it into its present form.

It would remain to investigate what this cave might have been used for but that is uncertain and subject to considerable doubt. If we wanted to make conjectures one could say that, given its

situation not far from an exceedingly narrow little path bordered on the opposite side by a horrid precipice, and seeing it enclosed by a great wall, it could have served in ancient times as a fortress from which to defend that narrow pass that leads to the nearby castle in Valico, the crossing of which might have made it considerably simpler to invade a part of the Garfagnana.

No member of the group found anything to object to in Bertacchi's opinions on these matters. A rather more serious difficulty, raised by Giovanni Magri, lay in defining the epoch during which that great wall had been erected. In truth, observed thus with the naked eye, it all seems to be mediaeval and the material of its construction and its shape seem to be not unlike the walls of Barga and nearby castles which certainly do not go back to ancient times. However Targioni Tozzetti<sup>15</sup>, who inspected this mountain and possibly also this cave, says (vol. 5 p. 229) that he observed *vaults and the remains of an ancient wall* which Pacchi<sup>16</sup>, *without any need to go back to the times of the Apuan Liguers*, believes is in all probability *the remains of the ancient fort that existed therein, or the manufactories made therein subsequently* (Pacchi Diss. XIX).

We do not know if the vaults of which Targioni speaks include our cave or others within this mountain<sup>17</sup>, or even if the ancient wall referred to is this or some other one.

However we know very well that both Pacchi and Targioni are mistaken when they assert that the Castle and the Gragno fortress were on Mount Gragno itself, since they were situated in quite another location.

Nevertheless the importance of this mountain cannot be denied, and it seems sufficiently proven that in ancient times it was inhabited by the Apuan Liguers, and it was perhaps in this area where they had to fight their greatest battles (see Micali<sup>18</sup>). Knowing that in preference the Liguers chose the more rugged and inaccessible places to ensure their security I feel certain that, whatever period we are talking about, the large and majestic caves that exist in this area must have served them as shelters and equally that they must have adapted them as fortresses. And if any doubt remains over this, the sight of our cave enclosed by so great and strong a wall allows one to say for certain that at some time it served as enclosure and refuge for those people. There is simply no plausible reason to think otherwise.

I have already suggested that an inspection of the other two caves known to exist within this mountain might enable us to clarify things a little, but that will have to wait until we have had the chance to visit them. In the meantime if our observations might be of some use to those who study such matters and if our work encourages them to make their own explorations, we would declare ourselves for now content, convinced that others will make a better job of things we have not known how to do ourselves.

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<sup>15</sup>Translator's Note : Giovanni Targioni Tozzetti (1712-83) was a famous Italian botanist and geologist whose enormous mineralogical collection is in the Museum of Natural History of the University of Florence (not to be confused with the 1863-1936 opera librettist of the same name who probably didn't like damp caves). His 12 volume *Collezione lito-mineralogica* (Stone and Mineral Collection) catalogue, which may be what Magri is referring to, is online at [www.imss.fi.it/biblio/ecoltozz.html](http://www.imss.fi.it/biblio/ecoltozz.html).

<sup>16</sup>Translator's Note : Possibly Domenico Pacchi, from Castelnuovo di Garfagnana, who wrote a description of the area for the Dukes of Este - *Ricerche storiche sulla Provincia della Garfagnana*.

<sup>17</sup>Two others caves exist in Mount Gragno above the *Fosso di Bolognana*, one of which was visited by some of our party including Ferruccio Salvi. He has made a sketch plan of it which he has kindly forwarded to me along with the two sketches in this pamphlet, and we hope to publish a description of it in the next summer season. [Translator's note: this seems never to have happened - another opportunity for some modern exploration.]

<sup>18</sup>Translator's note : That would be Giuseppe Micali (1769-1844) author of e.g. *L'Italia avanti il dominio dei romani* (1810), and *La Storia degli antichi popoli italiani* (1832).

## KEY TO FIGURE I.

Planimetric delineation of main cave. Scale reduced 500 times.

A. B. Wall in front of the entrance of the cavern.

C. D. Cavern entrance

E. Junction

F. Mouth of small cave

F.G. The above cave

P.Q. Cave of Cauliflowers

H.I. Small cave

K. Great sloping rock

L. Circular enclosure

L.M. Passage mouth

M.N. Another large enclosure

## KEY TO FIGURE II<sup>19</sup>

Planimetric delineation of upper cave. Scale reduced 200 times.

M. Entrance

N. Place of rest, and division of the cave into two branches.

P.Q. Small lake

R. End of the cave

T.U. Subterranean communication between the two branches through prolongation of small lake until the point T of the left passage.

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<sup>19</sup>Translator's note : This is not in my copy of the book.