

Academic Research Paper

Sustainability and Cultural Identity: A Textual Analysis of Perceptions of the Zungri Rupestrian Site

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Abstract: Cultural tourism is currently positioned at the intersection of experiential consumption, identity construction, and territorial governance processes. This study contributes to this debate by analysing the role of cultural heritage as a lever for sustainable development in complex and peripheral territorial contexts, typical of Italian Mezzogiorno. To this end, the Zungri rupestrian complex (“*Città di pietra*”, Stone City) in Calabria is examined: a medieval site of exceptional archaeological interest (8th-12th cent.) which, despite its inestimable potential, operates as an emerging destination characterised by significant infrastructural and geological vulnerabilities. The primary objective of this research is to analyse how the identity and historical memory of the site are perceived, interpreted, and co-created by stakeholders and visitors. Methodologically, the study employs qualitative textual analysis applied to a corpus of online data relating to perceptions of the site. The results highlight a strong discrepancy between the high perceived symbolic and emotional value (linked to authenticity and spirituality) and the critical issues related to site accessibility and management. The Zungri case thus configures itself as a heritage-making laboratory, underlining the urgent need for integrated strategies of protection, accessibility, and participatory governance, necessary to transform the rupestrian heritage into a credible resource for deseasonalisation and sustainable local development.

Keywords: cultural tourism; sustainability; rupestrian heritage; territorial identity; textual analysis.

JEL Codes: Z32; R11; C839

1. Introduction

1.1. *Cultural tourism and the international debate*

Cultural tourism is now a consolidated field of tourism research and practice. Over the last fifty years, the concept has evolved from the simple fruition of monuments and museums to a complex experience that includes intangible, identity-related, and community dimensions (Richards, 2018). MacCannell (1973) had already emphasised the tension between lived authenticity and staged authenticity, while Urry (1990) demonstrated how the tourist gaze is socially constructed and influenced by collective imaginaries.

The turning point of the 2000s saw the integration of cultural tourism with the experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1999), leading to growing attention towards interaction, participation, and value co-creation by visitors (Smith & Richards, 2013). Today, cultural tourism is positioned at the crossroads of experiential consumption, identity construction, and territorial governance processes (Timothy, 2011; 2018). This conceptual evolution highlights how the tourist experience is no longer merely aesthetic fruition but also a process of meaning-making and belonging. From this perspective, cultural tourism becomes a meeting ground between sustainability and identity, central themes of this study.

Significant differences emerge at the international level. In Europe, the conservation of material heritage prevails, whilst in Asia (e.g., Japan and China) the experiential and spiritual component is emphasised. In Latin America, conversely, cultural tourism is often linked to processes of community empowerment and identity assertion (Van den Berghe, 1992, 2000). These comparisons demonstrate that cultural tourism is not a universal category but a plural field reflecting historical, political, and cultural contexts. In the case of rupestrian sites and karst tourism, such conceptualisations find particularly significant expressions. Recent research, based on qualitative analysis of user-generated content, has identified five key dimensions of the tourist experience in caves: educational, aesthetic, escapism, entertainment, and perceived benefits. Simultaneously, systematic reviews of karst geotourism highlight the crucial importance of safety and enjoyment factors in defining destination image and tourist loyalty. This perspective adds a fundamental dimension of risk management and marketing, particularly relevant for fragile sites such as Zungri, where qualitative studies have already highlighted the tension between resource exploitation and sustainable tourism. In light of these theoretical and operational developments, cultural tourism emerges as a space for negotiation between authenticity, participation, and sustainability, where the value of heritage resides not only in its material conservation but also in its capacity to generate shared identities and inclusive development processes.

1.2. *Sustainability as a cardinal principle*

In contemporary debate on cultural tourism, sustainability has become not merely an ethical and managerial principle but an essential condition for guaranteeing the balance between heritage valorisation and protection. As early as the 1980s, Richard Butler (1980), with his innovative Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) model, anticipated the risks of decline for tourist destinations if their development were not managed and led to resource over-exploitation. Subsequently, Butler himself (2007) consolidated this perspective, positioning sustainability as a crucial response to such dynamics. More recent literature (Buckley, 2012; Hall, 2019) has highlighted the persistent gap between ambitious sustainability principles and their actual implementation, often limited by managerial approaches or superficial rhetoric. In the context of cultural heritage, sustainability is defined through the coexistence of three fundamental and

interdependent dimensions: the physical conservation of assets, the protection of the vitality and continuity of cultural practices, and the promotion of equitable and inclusive distribution of derived economic and social benefits (Aas et al., 2005; Bramwell & Lane, 2011). From this perspective, sustainability becomes a transformative principle capable of orienting heritage valorisation practices towards inclusive, identity-based, and long-term mode.

1.3. *Geoheritage and rupestrian sites: the geographical context*

1.3.1. Tourism in marginal territories and sustainable valorisation

The application of sustainability principles in cultural tourism in Italy represents a significant challenge, as the unparalleled concentration of UNESCO sites coexists with a profound imbalance in the distribution of tourist flows. Major art cities are subject to overtourism phenomena (Bertocchi & Visentin, 2019), which threaten the environmental and social sustainability of destinations, whilst vast peripheral and inland areas, especially in the Mezzogiorno, remain marginal despite the presence of widespread cultural heritage, including rupestrian settlements and minor archaeological sites. The failed valorisation of these contexts is often attributed to infrastructural deficiencies and weak promotional networks (Di Maio & Gaeta, 2019; Destefanis et al., 2020).

In this context, the promotion of minor destinations assumes a strategic role for the sustainability of the national tourism system, as it enables the redistribution of flows, preservation of more vulnerable historic centres, and stimulation of socio-economic regeneration processes. Numerous studies emphasise how cultural tourism in villages, rural landscapes, and marginal territories can constitute a lever for identity valorisation and the construction of new forms of place branding (Della Lucia & Trunfio, 2018). In such circumstances, cultural heritage is not merely a collection of material assets but a system of values and social practices contributing to community cohesion and local resilience. The participatory approach, also promoted by European policies on smart villages and community-led local development, strengthens this relational dimension of sustainability, combining innovation, tradition, and territorial identity and transforming villages into veritable laboratories of territorial innovation.

In international literature, concrete examples of this approach can be found in the valorisation of the *pueblos blancos* in Spain (Periáñez, 2017), rural tourism projects in the Greek islands (Karampela S. & Kizos T., 2018; Vythoulka et al., 2024), and the *Aldeias Históricas* program in Portugal (Natário et al., 2019; Luque & Alves, 2024). These experiences demonstrate that a holistic approach integrating conservation, marketing and community engagement, can transform peripheral contexts into recognised and sustainable destinations, favouring a rebalancing in the geographies of cultural tourism.

1.3.2. Geoheritage and the management of rupestrian sites

Within this scenario, the concept of geoheritage offers a particularly useful interpretative key for understanding the connection between environmental conservation, historical memory, and experiential tourism. The term, introduced into geographical debate in the 1990s, indicates the ensemble of geological and geomorphological elements of scientific, educational, cultural, or aesthetic value worthy of protection and valorisation (Gray, 2013). UNESCO, with the establishment of Global Geoparks (2004), contributed to recognising the potential of geological landscapes as cultural resources and instruments of sustainable development, founded upon local participation and

environmental education, as demonstrated by success cases in China (Zhangjiajie Global Geopark), Australia (Kanawinka Geopark), and Brazil (Araripe Geopark) (Dowling & Newsome, 2018, 2026). In Europe, and particularly in the Mediterranean area, tourism linked to geoheritage has often intertwined with the valorisation of rupestrian sites, caves, and settlements carved into rock, where natural and cultural values merge indissolubly. Management experiences in emblematic places such as Matera in Italy (Gribaudo et al., 2017), the settlements of Cappadocia in Turkey (Öztürk, 2023), the ancient city of Petra in Jordan (Khater et al., 2024), and the Buddhist caves of Mogao in China (Demas et al., 2015) demonstrate how integrated geo-cultural heritage management can produce extraordinary socio-economic benefits but also potential risks of degradation if not accompanied by rigorous protection policies.

On a global scale, geotourism has established itself as a tourist approach capable of uniting knowledge and respect for territory. It is not limited to landscape contemplation but invites visitors to understand the natural processes that generated them and to recognise the value of their conservation. In recent years, however, the growing attraction exerted by caves, karst formations, and rupestrian settlements has brought new challenges: the need to guarantee visitor safety, preserve delicate ecosystems, and manage tourist flows in a balanced manner. These experiences demonstrate how urgent it is to develop strategies capable of balancing protection and valorisation, especially in small-scale places or those strongly linked to local identity. It is within this perspective that the case of Zungri is positioned, where rupestrian heritage is not merely a legacy of the past but also a living resource for the future, capable of fuelling sustainable development processes and strengthening the sense of community belonging.

1.4. Study objectives

The rupestrian complex of Zungri fits into the global scenario as a minor yet highly relevant case study. Despite its historical and identity-based relevance, the site still suffers from limited visibility, weak accessibility, and infrastructural deficiencies. However, it presents strong potential for sustainable tourism development capable of integrating history, landscape, and local community (Solano, 1998). This work therefore aims to:

- Analyse the perceptions of privileged witnesses regarding the identity value, opportunities, and critical issues of the site.
- Compare these perceptions with international models of sustainable cultural tourism and geoheritage.
- Develop operational recommendations for future site and surrounding territory management.
- The research questions guiding the analysis are:
 - What value representations and barriers emerge regarding the Zungri site?
 - To what extent do such representations connect to international literature on heritage sustainability?
 - What governance strategies can support balanced and long-term development?

1.5. The case study: The rupestrian complex of the Zungri caves

The ancient rupestrian settlement of Zungri, also known as “*Città di Pietra*” (Stone City) or “*Le Grotte degli Sbariati*”, constitutes one of the most extensive and significant medieval troglodytic complexes

in Calabria. It configures itself as an emblematic case study for analysing the dynamics between cultural identity, emerging heritage, and tourist potential in the typical context of inland and marginal areas of the Italian Mezzogiorno. The very etymology of the name, probably derived from Greek *zugrion* or *tsougkri* (height, hill, or also rock, tuff), underlines its geographical and morphological identity. The site, traceable to the Byzantine and medieval period, developed between the 8th-12th centuries (Solano, 1998), is located at approximately 490 metres above sea level and extends over more than 8,000 square metres, of which approximately 3,000 are currently visitable. It comprises a system of over one hundred cavities (caves) carved into sandstone and constructed through scraping action, distributed across multiple levels. These caves configure themselves as a veritable village: some were used for residential purposes, others for sheltering domestic animals, for wine and lime production, and still others for grain storage; some small cavities have been catalogued as burial sites (Osso et al., 2020).

Studies on its origins are still ongoing. Several hypotheses are most credited: founded by a population from the East, the “*sbariati*”; others hypothesise its origin from the will of Basilian monks who found refuge there to escape the iconoclastic persecutions of which they were victims. The predominant presence of the latter is attested by numerous findings in the extensive area of the ancient settlement of relics traceable to religious activity and an evident presence of mono-cavities carved into the tuff rock. According to Cuteri, Zungri represents testimony to humanity’s capacity to create residential and productive spaces in full harmony with nature, a principle of ante litteram sustainability. The site’s valorisation, initiated with the establishment in 2003 of the Museum of Peasant Civilisation which houses approximately three thousand artefacts, has produced in recent years a steady increase in tourist flows, although still largely dependent upon reflection tourism from the nearby *Costa degli Dei* (Cugno & Piserà, 2021). This growth highlights the site’s potential as an autonomous cultural attractor but simultaneously reveals significant critical issues (including the geological and erosive fragility of the cliff, limited accessibility of many cavities, and absence of adequate infrastructural connections), requiring integrated strategies of protection, fruition, and governance (Dematteis & Governa, 2005). At the theoretical level, Zungri therefore lends itself to interpretation as a heritage-making laboratory in line with recent geosite assessment approaches (Marescotti et al., 2022), demonstrating how rupestrian heritage can be transformed into a sustainable territorial development resource capable of holding together identity, memory, and innovation in a Mezzogiorno where cultural tourism represents a credible alternative to the dominant seaside model.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

The research adopts a qualitative design with the objective of investigating in depth the perceptions and social representations of the rupestrian site of Zungri by privileged witnesses. The choice of a qualitative approach is fundamental as it allows moving beyond the mere measurement of flows, focusing on the meanings attributed to places, valorisation practices, and local governance processes (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

The research design adopts the case study methodological approach (Yin, 2018; White & Cooper, 2022), particularly effective when analysing complex phenomena, as it permits an in-depth investigation of a specific case or group of cases in their real context (social, historical, and cultural).

The objective is to grasp the complexity and profound interconnections of the phenomenon under examination. From this perspective, the present research fits within the context of case studies to analyse the processes of cultural and tourism valorisation of small destinations or emerging heritage (Cucari et al., 2019; Selmi et al., 2019; Marescotti et al., 2022). The thematic synthesis approach considering multiple information sources has been chosen, ideal for summarising the evidence necessary to define interventions and obtain a rich and multifaceted vision of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Snilstveit, 2012). The Zungri site was chosen as a revelatory case for its nature as an emerging tourism destination. Its uniqueness lies in the combination of significant historical and geological heritage and a valorisation process still in evolution, offering an ideal ground for observing development dynamics and local governance challenges.

The investigation focused on the perceptions of privileged witnesses with the objective of understanding how these actors interpret and influence the site's valorisation path. Through their narratives, it is possible to reconstruct not only how the heritage is perceived but also the tensions, opportunities, and collective meanings accompanying its tourism development.

The study, whilst focused on a single case, aspires to produce broader reflections on sustainable management practices of rupestrian and geo-cultural heritage, offering useful insights for analogous contexts as well. The expected results indeed aim to contribute to the methodological and applicative debate on participatory governance of emerging tourism (Hyett et al., 2014; Khater et al., 2024; Hanbal & Çamlıca, 2025), providing operational indications to favour shared, inclusive, and resilient valorisation models.

2.2. Data collection tools and participatory approach

In coherence with the research objectives, a participatory qualitative approach has been adopted, aimed at directly involving territorial stakeholders (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This orientation allows returning a more authentic and articulated vision of the phenomenon, overcoming the purely external perspective of analysis to include the viewpoints of those who live and work daily in the local context. The fundamental idea is that shared knowledge and collaboration are essential elements for building sustainable and territory-rooted valorisation strategies (Yin, 2018; White & Cooper, 2022). Within this framework, data collection was conducted through a semi-structured qualitative questionnaire, composed of open questions and articulated into five main thematic areas:

1. Historical and cultural identity of the site.
2. Tourist attractiveness and quality of experience.
3. Sustainability and conservation.
4. Promotion and governance.
5. Future development prospects.

This instrument, halfway between interview and questionnaire, allowed balancing data comparability with interviewees' freedom of expression, favouring the collection of narratives, perceptions, and personal evaluations (Anubha, 2024; Horton et al., 2004).

Participants were selected through purposive sampling (Thetsane R. M., 2019; Campbell, 2020), with the objective of including privileged witnesses capable of offering informed perspectives on the rupestrian site of Zungri. The sample involved public administrators, cultural operators, tourist guides, scholars, and local community members, representative of three stakeholder categories: internal, connected, and external. This distinction was useful for strategically planning the degree of

involvement of each group, balancing the need for inclusivity with that of effectiveness in decision-making processes. From this perspective, the work also draws inspiration from the Stakeholder Perception (SP) approach, a structured methodology which, whilst having origins in the field of decision sciences, offers useful insights also for qualitative analysis of local contexts. It aims to place the public and community at the centre of development and management processes, thus increasing perceived value and the likelihood of initiative success.

Numerous studies on heritage tourism emphasise how the active involvement of residents and local economic operators is crucial for achieving sustainability objectives and for consolidating the legitimacy of governance strategies. However, despite the theoretical solidity of these approaches, traditional cultural heritage management has often shown itself slow in fully adopting them in practice (Aas et al., 2005; Zorn & Farthing, 2007; Farsani et al., 2011).

The research also draws inspiration from the quadruple helix model, which promotes collaboration between public authorities, universities, enterprises, and communities. Such a framework allows integrating different competences, resources, and visions, strengthening the collective capacity to govern valorisation and cultural heritage management processes. This type of approach is now recognised as a fundamental lever for constructing resilient and shared tourism policies, capable of generating trust, reducing conflicts, and favouring a widespread sense of belonging.

To support involvement analysis, consolidated models have also been considered such as Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation (1969), the participation wheel, and the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum. These theoretical instruments permitted evaluating the level of effective participation of different actors, from simple information to co-decision, offering a useful interpretative key for understanding local governance dynamics.

Finally, recourse to qualitative and participatory instruments is positioned in continuity with other international heritage management experiences, such as the cases of UNESCO sites in Laos, community tourism in Latin America, and geoparks in Iran and Portugal. These examples show how stakeholder participation represents a decisive element for guaranteeing valorisation process sustainability and coherence between cultural, economic, and social objectives.

2.3. Data analysis

Participants' responses were transcribed in full and organised into a textual corpus. Analysis was conducted following content analysis principles (Krippendorff, 2019; Harwood & Garry, 2003), integrated with elements of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The coding phase was conducted with NVivo software support, which enabled systematic and traceable management of textual data, facilitating the identification of thematic nodes and subsequent categorisation. The analysis process was articulated into three main phases:

1. Open coding: identification of concepts and keywords in responses.
2. Thematic grouping: aggregation of codes into categories corresponding to the five macro-areas of the questionnaire.
3. Comparative analysis: comparison of categories among the different interviewees to detect convergences and divergences.

This approach permitted bringing to light not only prevalent contents but also tensions and interpretative conflicts, fundamental aspects in cultural heritage study. Similar methodologies have been adopted in the study of tourist perceptions at Petra (Alhasanat & Hyasat, 2011), in community

tourism projects in Peru (Zorn & Farthing, 2007), and in sustainability analyses of UNESCO sites in China (Su & Wall, 2014).

2.4. Validity and reliability: operationalising of methodological rigor

To guarantee research validity and credibility, rigorous methodological strategies have been adopted, including data triangulation and peer debriefing. The objective was to move from simple enunciation of methodological principles to their effective application, ensuring transparency and interpretative solidity.

Triangulation was used to strengthen results credibility through the integration of different sources and perspectives. Data collected from semi-structured interviews were cross-referenced with materials from secondary sources (such as previous studies, institutional planning documents, and promotional materials) and with direct observations conducted in the field.

This approach permitted comparing stakeholder perceptions with official site valorisation strategies and with communication practices actually adopted. For example, themes emerged regarding fragmented site promotion were verified through analysis of regional tourism plans and existing marketing materials. Any discrepancies or dissonant results were noted and discussed, becoming starting points for further investigation and contributing to a more articulated and robust data interpretation.

To mitigate potential researcher bias and guarantee greater interpretative reliability, a formal peer debriefing process was also conducted (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Spall, 1998). This procedure involved discussing results with two experts (one specialised in qualitative tourism research and the other in Italian cultural heritage) with the purpose of stimulating critical reflection, bringing to light any implicit assumptions, and testing preliminary interpretations.

Two structured sessions were organised: the first after the initial coding phase, to review the emerging thematic scheme; the second after results analysis, to verify the coherence and solidity of conclusions. During this process, a reflective diary was maintained, in which reviewers' observations and subsequent analytical adjustments were noted, creating a transparent trace of interpretative evolution. Overall, the combined use of triangulation and peer debriefing contributed to strengthening analysis quality and depth, guaranteeing that results faithfully reflected the complexity of stakeholder perceptions and governance dynamics of the Zungri site.

3. Results

Qualitative analysis of interviews with privileged witnesses brought to light a complex picture of perceptions of the rupestrian settlement of Zungri. Responses are organised around five main dimensions, which polarise the debate on heritage valorisation in peripheral contexts: historical-cultural value and uniqueness, tourist attractiveness and visitor experience, conservation and sustainable development, promotion and territorial integration, and future development perspectives.

3.1. Historical and cultural identity

All respondents attribute to the Zungri settlement an extremely strong value as a unicum in the Calabrian rupestrian panorama, defining it as a symbol of collective memory that has redefined the

paradigm of medieval settlements in the region since its discovery in the 1980s. The caves are perceived as “living roots” and an integral part of the community’s history. However, a discrepancy emerges between identity perception and historical knowledge. One respondent (Int. 2) highlights a crucial and under-valorised historical aspect: the site’s original function in the Byzantine age as a very large granary destined for agricultural surplus conservation. The failed valorisation of this scientific function prevents full understanding of the place’s complex social organisation. Witnesses report that foreign visitors appreciate the site more, even going so far as to compare Zungri to iconic contexts such as Petra and Cappadocia, highlighting the site’s high iconic and landscape potential.

3.2. Tourist attractiveness and visitor experience

Privileged witnesses recognise the Zungri site’s intrinsic attractiveness, founded on the authenticity and uniqueness of the rupestrian landscape. The visitor experience is described in strongly emotional terms, dominated by feelings of astonishment and wonder at humanity’s constructive capacity and the discovery of an unexpected way of living. Analysis highlights a differentiated reception, with foreign tourists tending to express more positive appreciation compared to Italian tourists, suggesting potential international resonance of the site. The perception is reported that: “It is a magical, unexpected place. It takes your breath away. One does not imagine that such a place exists in Calabria” (Int. 6).

Despite the high symbolic value, respondents agree on a series of structural deficiencies that render the experience “evocative but incomplete”. Such critical issues include physical accessibility problems (the “route is demanding”, Int. 1) and the absence of adequate services. Above all, it was noted that adequate didactic supports are lacking, with a narrative deficit that polarises perception on the generic theme of cave dwelling. As reported: “Arriving here is an undertaking, and once arrived, explanations are poor. The Association does what it can, but a unified direction is lacking” (Int. 3).

3.3. Sustainability, conservation, and financial vulnerability

The sustainability dimension is interpreted by interviewees primarily through the dialectic between site protection and socio-economic development of the community. Although the site is deemed “well conserved”, strong awareness emerges that tourism development must be subordinated to protection. The main perceived risks concern economic fragility and the absence of stable funding, with one interview participant (Int. 1) emphasising how service realisation is “always linked to obtaining funding”. In this sense, financial and managerial sustainability becomes the precondition for environmental sustainability. The strong desire is that the Caves act as a driver to “animate the most ancient nucleus” and counter depopulation.

3.4. Promotion and territorial governance

Analysis highlights a univocal perception of promotion as fragmented and weak, entrusted primarily to “word of mouth” and “social media”. The main critical issue resides in multilevel governance, with witnesses lamenting the absence of a “serious advertising campaign” and a lack of “awareness by higher institutions (region and central government)”. Many interviewees indicated weak cooperation between the local Association managing the site and Territorial Bodies. This weakness is reflected in infrastructural quality (roads, car parks, toilets, and lighting), creating a negative impact on tourist

reception and permanence capacity. Strong consensus emerged on the need for tourism development that is slow and respectful of context. None of the interviewees hoped for mass tourism. Almost all expressed concern about the risk of over-exploitation and trivialisation. The spontaneous proposal to “network” with other minor rupestrian sites was often advanced to create an integrated offer that lightens pressure on the individual site.

3.5. Future development prospects

Witnesses project Zungri as a sustainable tourism laboratory whose success depends on the capacity to translate cultural value into socio-economic benefits. The identified priorities are urban requalification of the historic centre, improvement of accessibility (physical and digital) and, preliminarily, obtaining stable funding. The development vision is strongly oriented towards two pillars: network creation and definition of a distinctive brand. “Circularity exchanges” with other rupestrian settlements are suggested to offer a “tour with truly specific characteristics”, aiming at an integrated and thematic offer.

4. Discussion

Results obtained from interviews permit positioning the Zungri case within international debate on cultural tourism, rupestrian site valorisation, and fruition practice sustainability. Evidence collected shows how privileged witnesses’ perceptions reflect dynamics common to other contexts but also local peculiarities deserving attention. In particular, discussion concentrates on four main axes: identity and memory, attractiveness and accessibility, sustainability and conservation, governance and development perspectives.

4.1. Identity and memory: heritage as social construction and resilience instrument

The interviews highlight a strong identity dimension of the Zungri site. The caves are perceived not only as archaeological artifacts but as spaces of collective memory and identity rooting. This confirms the perspective of Smith (2006) and Waterton et al. (2006) that heritage is not a given, but a social and cultural construction used by communities to define themselves. The Zungri case, however, introduces a peculiarity: a narrative deficit that, by obscuring the site’s historical function as a large granary, reduces the identity perception to a generic “living in caves”.

Three reference cases help contextualize Zungri’s situation within a broader Mediterranean and international landscape: Matera (Italy) represents an emblematic case of territorial re-signification: from “national shame” (as defined by Carlo Levi in *Christ Stopped at Eboli*) to European Capital of Culture and a model of identity and socio-economic regeneration. In this light, the ambition to transform the Calabrian site into a catalyst for territorial renewal is inspired by Matera’s journey, which successfully converted its rupestrian heritage into a resource for collective recognition and pride. Petra (Jordan), meanwhile, shows how heritage can be simultaneously experienced as a community cultural legacy and as a source of strong global visual appeal (Alhasanat & Hyasat, 2011), in line with the comparison visitors spontaneously make with Zungri. Finally, the reference to Cappadocia (Turkey), evoked by some interviewees, places Zungri within a broader Mediterranean koine of rupestrian architecture.

The theoretical reflection is enriched by Harrison's (2012) perspective, which invites considering heritage as a practice of the present a dynamic process that shapes collective memory and community resilience strategies. In Zungri, identity narratives operate not only as memories of the past but as active resources for resilience, capable of guiding strategies to combat marginality and promote new forms of territorial belonging.

4.2. Tourist attractiveness and accessibility: the paradox of marginal areas and the risk of stagnation (TALC)

Zungri fits perfectly into the so-called paradox of marginal areas (Timothy & Boyd, 2006): it possesses high authenticity and evokes "awe and wonder," but suffers from a marked infrastructural ("challenging path") and interpretive deficit (Cucari et al., 2019). This dichotomy between emotional potential and structural fragility has direct implications for its Tourist Area Life Cycle (TALC) (Butler, 1980). The high level of appreciation and the absence of flow saturation place Zungri in the initial exploration/involvement phases. However, the lack of interpretive mediation (which hinders the construction of meaning) and infrastructural criticalities prevent the transition to a mature and sustainable development phase. If authenticity is not supported by strategic investments, the site risks bypassing growth and arriving prematurely at stagnation—not due to excess demand, but due to the poverty of the structural offer.

Comparison with other contexts highlights the risks and opportunities:

- The need to invest in interpretive services to make complex settlements accessible is reflected in the Mesa Verde (USA) model, where the development of targeted interpretive services has made complex rupestrian settlements accessible (Fine, 1988; Wolverson et al., 2021).
- The balance between access and protection is resolved by cases like Altamira (Spain), where the creation of museum replicas has guaranteed accessibility without compromising the original site (Pérez, 2024; Bayarri et al., 2023).
- Cappadocia and Göreme in Turkey (Öztürk, 2023; Ertürk S. & Kaderli L., 2023) demonstrate the possibility of transforming fragile sites into global destinations through massive infrastructure investments and the use of immersive technologies and augmented reality.

The analysis highlights how authenticity without interpretive mediation risks being sterile. Zungri, lacking such tools, risks remaining a niche destination, difficult to access and understand for an international audience, thereby compromising its ability to generate sustainable long-term flows.

4.3. Sustainability and conservation: between heritage protection and territorial development

The witnesses' concerns about the site's fragility reflect a well-known tension in the literature: that between conservative protection and tourism valorisation (Butler, 1980; Buckley, 2012). In Zungri's case, sustainability is closely linked to economic fragility and the absence of stable funding, making development subordinate to protection only in the presence of resources. Priority is given to using the site as a tool to combat depopulation and ensure the socio-economic vitality of the historic centre.

Comparative cases offer different strategies for managing the tension between flows and conservation:

- The Mogao Caves (China) demonstrated that uncontrolled tourism causes irreversible damage, mitigable only through numerical limits and scientific monitoring systems (Li et al., 2024;

Wang, 2025).

- Lascaux (France) resolved the dilemma by adopting museum replicas that protect the original caves while maintaining the educational experience (Wallis, 2021).
- Wulingyuan (China) introduced a zoning and differentiated ticketing system to balance flows and protection (Wang et al., 2021; Li et al., 2024).

These models show that sustainability in rupestrian sites must combine scientific monitoring (Li et al., 2024), creative fruition solutions (replicas, immersive technologies), and community participation as a tool for shared stewardship (Bramwell & Lane, 2011). For Zungri, economic and technological limitations make community governance (“shared stewardship”) a potential mechanism to supplement institutional deficiencies in maintenance and surveillance.

4.4. Governance and development prospects: from localism to transnational networks

Weakness in governance and promotion represents one of the most critical nodes, with witnesses lamenting institutional fragmentation and the absence of “awareness from higher institutions”. Zungri lacks a strong territorial brand and suffers from institutional weakness, as already highlighted for many areas of the Mezzogiorno (Triglia, 2012).

International comparisons offer relevant insights:

- The *Aldeias Históricas* (Portugal) program created a common brand and multi-level governance that strengthened attractiveness and resilience (Pinto et al., 2022).
- The *Pueblos Blancos* (Spain) achieved international visibility through public-private cooperation and integrated marketing strategies (Abellán F. C. & García Martínez C., 2021).
- The experience of community tourism in Peru (Zorn & Farthing, 2007) shows how social legitimization and the empowerment of local communities can be the engine for sustainable development.

From a theoretical standpoint, these models confirm reflections on collaborative governance (Aas, Ladkin, Fletcher, 2005). For Zungri, the challenge lies in transitioning from a localist approach to a territorial and transnational network, capable of developing a strong thematic brand (“Rupestrian Calabria”) and integrating into Mediterranean networks.

5. Conclusions

5.1. Main theoretical and empirical contributions

This study provides several contributions to the academic debate on heritage management and sustainable tourism. First, the data confirm and enrich the interpretation of heritage as a dynamic social construction (Smith, 2006; Harrison, 2012), highlighting how identity narratives in Zungri are not just traces of the past, but a lever for community resilience in the present. Second, the Zungri case offers a vivid empirical illustration of the paradox of marginal areas (MacCannell, 1973; Timothy & Boyd, 2006), demonstrating that sites with the highest authenticity are often those suffering the greatest accessibility and infrastructural deficits. The analysis also contextualizes the site in the early stages of the Tourist Area Life Cycle (TALC) (Butler, 1980), highlighting the risk of premature stagnation due to the poverty of the structural offer. Third, the study contributes to the literature on integrated sustainability (Buckley, 2012), demonstrating that in contexts with limited economic resources,

community participation and local governance represent a critical success factor for conservation (Li et al., 2024; Wallis, 2021). Finally, by analysing institutional fragmentation, the work confirms the systemic weaknesses already observed in the Mezzogiorno (Trigilia, 2012), emphasizing the decisive role of thematic networks and multi-actor collaborations as a mechanism for long-term valorisation.

5.2. Operational and policy implications

Beyond the theoretical contribution, the results have concrete operational implications for the site's valorisation. It is essential for public policies to focus on creating a strong territorial brand, such as a "Rupestrian Calabria" label, to increase international recognition, following successful models already tested in Portugal and Andalusia. At the managerial level, Zungri should seek integration through the development of thematic networks with other national and Mediterranean rupestrian sites, leveraging the framework of UNESCO Geoparks as platforms for visibility and funding (Dowling & Newsome, 2018, 2026). To bridge the narrative and accessibility gap, innovations in interpretation are necessary, such as the use of digital technologies and multilingual apps. All these actions must be implemented through a participatory governance model, strengthening local community involvement in line with community-based tourism (Scheyvens, 1999).

5.3. Limitations of the study

Despite its strengths, the present work has certain methodological limitations intrinsic to the research design. The interviews focused on a small, qualitative sample of privileged witnesses, excluding the perspectives of tourists and younger residents, who might offer different views. Furthermore, the absence of longitudinal measurements and quantitative data on tourist flows and economic impact limits the ability to draw definitive conclusions on planning for tourist carrying capacity and the effectiveness of development policies.

5.4. Future research directions

The Zungri case opens promising research avenues that can fuel the international debate on rupestrian sites. A systematic comparative analysis between Mediterranean rupestrian sites (such as Matera, Petra) is recommended to identify replicable models of governance and fruition in contexts of fragility. It will be crucial to conduct longitudinal studies on the evolution of community perceptions following regeneration interventions. Finally, interdisciplinary studies are suggested that integrate anthropology and heritage studies with digital humanities tools, such as virtual reconstructions and 3D mapping, for a better scientific understanding and valorisation of the site, and social impact assessments to measure the contribution of cultural tourism to the resilience of internal areas, in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015).

5.5. General conclusion

In conclusion, Zungri emerges as an emblematic case of marginal rupestrian heritage, characterized by an authenticity that generates strong global appeal but is constrained by institutional and infrastructural weakness. The analysis demonstrates that its valorisation cannot be based on models extrapolated from

major UNESCO sites but must be founded on contextualized strategies that integrate conservation, innovation, and community participation. The main contribution of this study lies in showing that peripheral sites like Zungri can become laboratories for sustainable tourism, provided they are interpreted as nodes in broader cultural and territorial networks. This requires a multi-actor approach capable of transforming marginality into a resource and heritage into a lever for local and international development.

Conflict of interest

All authors declare no conflicts of interest in this paper.

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