

Between Nature and Artifice: Mediterranean Rock Landscapes

As part of its initiatives aimed at the study and promotion of cultural heritage, the Department for the Enhancement of Cultural Heritage, the IC-VEPP, and the Archaeological Park of the Colosseum are organizing an international thematic conference titled “*Between Nature and Artifice: Mediterranean Rock Landscapes*”, to be held on **December 14-15-16, 2026** at the **Curia Iulia**.

In the formation of ancient landscapes, human agency and natural features are inextricably intertwined. Among the latter, rocky landscapes played a fundamental role in shaping settlement patterns and the spatial organization of cities. Archaeological research has long examined specific aspects of these landscapes, including the earliest forms of cave dwelling, caves as sacred spaces, quarries as places of production, and the relationship between fortifications and the morphologies of sites. Less frequently, however, the rocky geological substrate has been approached as a unified analytical category capable of providing a broader interpretative framework for understanding the diverse ways in which ancient Mediterranean landscapes were shaped. In fact, rock should not be regarded merely as a physical substrate, but rather as an element engaged in a dynamic and reciprocal relationship with human action. On the one hand, it influenced urban planning, architectural design, and patterns of settlement; on the other, it was deliberately transformed, reinterpreted, and incorporated into the creation of settlements, monumental architecture and sacred, funerary, and residential landscapes.

Building on this perspective, the conference “*Between Nature and Artifice: Mediterranean Rock Landscapes*” aims to investigate the many ways in which the geological substrate was preserved, transformed, shaped, and integrated into urban and architectural design, playing a decisive role not only in the material configuration of space but also in the definition of formal languages, symbolic meanings, and the perception and experience of places.

Priority will be given to original, innovative, and interdisciplinary contributions that explore these themes across the *longue durée*, from Protohistory to the Early Middle Ages.

The conference will include:

- 20-minute oral presentations, organised into thematic sessions;
- poster presentations, to be displayed during a dedicated poster session;
- Conference languages: Italian and English.

Oral presentations and posters may address Mediterranean rock landscapes through one or more of the following thematic areas:

1) **At the urban scale**, this section explores the role of rocky landscapes as compositional elements in the organization of the city. Hills, rock outcrops, natural terraces, caves, cliffs, and slopes shape the location of settlements, influence the organization of urban space, and determine the distribution of infrastructure and monumental complexes. At the same time, the geological substrate is preserved, transformed, or reshaped through rock-cutting, terracing, levelling, and other interventions designed to enhance specific features of the urban layout, articulate spatial hierarchies, and create both physical and visual pathways.

2) **At the architectural scale**, this section explores the role of rock as a principle of the architectural language. Contributions may develop along three closely interconnected perspectives. The first concerns the **integration of rock** into the architectural fabric, examining the technical solutions and design strategies through which the geological substrate

is preserved, shaped, and incorporated into buildings, thereby blurring the boundary between the natural and the built environment. The second perspective concerns the **imitation of rock** through rusticated masonry, worked surfaces, *non-finito* effects, and other architectural strategies intended to evoke the appearance of natural rock formations. The third examines the **symbolic dimension** of rock in architecture, analyzing how preserved natural outcrops, deliberately framed or staged within architectural compositions, contribute to the construction of cultural and ideological meanings.

3) Rock landscapes as components of **sacred spaces**. Caves, natural cavities, and distinctively shaped rock outcrops may be perceived as privileged places for the manifestation of the sacred and for encounters between the human and the divine, both in the pagan and the Christian worlds. Attention is focused on the ways in which rock is recognized and monumentalized to become a defining component of sacred space and to influence ritual practices, thereby characterizing the experience of the sacred, including its perceptual and sensory dimensions.

4) Rock landscapes as **funerary landscapes**. From isolated rock-cut tombs to monumental necropoleis, this section highlights the relationship between funerary beliefs and practices and the rocky landscape as a central factor in the material and symbolic construction of the funerary world.

5) The **artifice of nature**. The creation of natural landscapes within nymphaea, gardens, sanctuaries, and residential complexes reflects the attempt to imitate ‘spontaneous’ and ‘wild’ elements by controlling them and transferring them into the urban environment. In these contexts, artificial landscapes – often integrated with water and other scenographic devices – reveal new symbolic, aesthetic, and cultural values.

6) Rock landscapes and **images**. Natural rock faces, cavities, and rock outcrops may accommodate inscriptions, paintings, reliefs, and sculptural installations that shape space and guide the experience of these contexts. Rock landscapes thus become active settings of visual communication, in which images and natural features together contribute to the construction of meanings and social experiences.

7) The perception of rock landscapes in ancient **literary sources**.

Within this framework, discussion may draw on case studies from across the ancient Mediterranean, spanning from Protohistoric period to the early Middle Ages, to explore the diverse roles played by rock landscapes in different chronological and geographical contexts.

Particular consideration will be given to contributions that offer broad synthetic perspectives on regions, territorial systems, or cultural contexts, as well as to comparative studies that bring different phenomena across the ancient Mediterranean into dialogue. Wherever possible, proposals that move beyond the individual case study presentations in favour of broader interpretative approaches are especially encouraged.

Those interested in participating shall submit their proposal by email, including an abstract of their presentation, the title, and the name(s) of the author(s), using the attached application form, by **September 15, 2026**, to the following email address: pa-colosseo.convegna@cultura.gov.it

Forms shall be submitted exclusively in .DOC or .DOCX format, using the spaces provided in the attached application form. The abstracts shall not exceed 5,000 characters, including spaces, and will

be published in a brochure to be distributed before the conference, with the aim of fostering informed participation and encouraging scholarly discussion.

The Conference Convenors and the Scientific Committee will select the papers by **October 14, 2026**, considering their relevance to the conference themes, the scholarly merit, and their innovative aspects.

The Conference Convenors

Alfonsina Russo, Roberta Alteri, Luigi Calì, Alessio De Cristofaro, Tommaso Ismaelli

The Scientific Committee

Laura Ambrosini, Gilda Benedettini, Filippo Coarelli, Francesco D'Andria, Elisabetta De Minicis, Gian Michele Gerogiannis, Stefanella Quilici Gigli.

APPLICATION FORM

The applicant/applicants.....
Job title
Institution/Affiliation
Address.....
Phone Mobile.....
E-mail:

Hereby requests to participate in the **CONFERENCE** “Between Nature and Artifice: Mediterranean Rock Landscapes” (curated by Alfonsina Russo, Roberta Alteri, Luigi Calì, Alessio De Cristofaro, Tommaso Ismaelli), to be held at the Archaeological Park of the Colosseum on December 14-16, 2026. The applicant intends to present a paper on the following topic:

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Date

Signature

PROPOSED CONTRIBUTION

Author(s):

Title:

Thematic area: 1. 2. 3....

Type of presentation (paper or poster):

Abstract (3,000 characters, **.DOC/.DOCX** format):