In churches of Basilicata and across the vast Murge Plateau of Puglia, grottos of sixteenth-century presepi, carved from local stone, echo the area's long-inhabited limestone caves.

Crottaglie Stone Presepe
Stefano da Putignano (c. 1470-1539)
Chiesa del Carmine, Crottaglie

Shepherd, Mary, Presepe, Joseph, Zampogna player
Shepherd: approximately 2' h.
Cassano delle Murge Stone Presepe
Paolo da Cassano, b. 1480 (attributed)
Santa Maria Degli Angeli, Cassano delle Murge

A perspectival sight-line funnels back through the cave mouth, past Mary and Joseph, and past the ox and ass to a rustic doorway framing the cave's inner depths. Above the cave and also adding to its mastery of space and depth, an exuberant mélange of animals and humans in unpainted white stone blend with the cave's piled-up rocks, their camouflage setting off the larger, colorful figures of the Holy Family inside.
Presepe Vivente – Living Nativity
“Recovering the Slow Memory of the Past”
Lama del Trappeto, Pezze di Greco

A rupestrian settlement in an ancient cave complex. At Christmas a *presepe vivente* celebrates both the Nativity and the traditions of rural life.

Photos:

Case i Recotte (the dairy)
Traditional Dancing
Making Orecchiette
Nativity
Lecce—Baroque Jewel of the South

Lecce's 2013 presepe is set within a second-century Roman amphitheater, but the archaic agricultural landscape and dry stonework created for the Nativity echoes the region's traditional farmhouses (masserie). Lecce, surrounded by groves of millenary olive trees, is situated within the oldest man-made arboreal landscape in the world.

Puglia is steeped in the rich traditions of the confraternities, and in the eighteenth-century artists of the region began utilizing cartapesta (papier-mâché) to create life-size sculptures to be carried in religious processions, especially around Holy Week. Today these traditions are very much alive, and Lecce has become a center for cartapesta, with the historic section of town filled with workshops creating religious sculptures, commemoratives, and presepe figures from paper and paste.
Mario Di Donfrancesco's Workshop
Cartapesta Statuary and Restoration
Lecce
Old Couple, 1900s
Cartapesta
Private collection, Rome

OPOPOSITE
Shepherd with Lamb
Antonio Mazzeo (1907-75)
Cartapesta
Private collection, Lecce

Mazzeo's artistry rests on his skill in detail, especially for sculpting faces that are astonishingly realistic and expressive. Mazzeo, who used a magnifying glass for the detail of teeth and eyes, modeled his pastori (nativity figurines) entirely from paper.
It was in the eighteenth century that the Neapolitan presepe assumed its distinctive form as an operatic miniature, with important commissions from royalty and the Bourbon Court. From camels to people from foreign lands, the Neapolitan nativity panorama is a "cabinet of wonder" reflecting the known world of that time.

Vitrine
Contemporary terracotta head with glass eyes and carved wooden legs and hands.