FOREWORD

The Salento Peninsula is an area of extreme geological and paleontological interest, known to the national and international scientific community since the 19th century. With a surface of almost 6000 km^2 and over 250 km of coasts enclosed between the Adriatic and Ionian Seas, Salento is home to sedimentary successions that span the last 85 million years of Earth's history. Such successions are often not easy to study due to the almost flat nature of the territory, but when they reveal to the researcher (e.g., along the coasts or in quarry areas), they are able to disclose a unique paleontological heritage: Upper Cretaceous limestones with rudists, bony fishes and terrestrial plants; Paleogene deposits with coral reefs, macroforaminifer and rhodolith facies, as well as nonmarine to brackish facies with mollusks; the Miocene Pietra Leccese, a building material exploited for centuries in the wonders of the Leccese Baroque, from which fossil remains of invertebrates and vertebrates of great value have been extracted, including various holotypes of cetacean species; Plio-Pleistocene marls, calcarenites and clays rich in foraminifers, ostracods, crustaceans, mollusks, brachiopods, bryozoans and red algae, but also bony fishes, cetaceans and other vertebrates; finally, the infilling deposits of the karst cavities (caves and sinkholes, locally called "ventarole"), in which very rich assemblages of continental vertebrates from the end of the Quaternary have been recovered.

The relationship between Salento and the Italian Paleontological Society (SPI) is long and fruitful. In 1993, the SPI held its 12th congress in Lecce, under the presidency of Giulio Pavia. In the introduction to the monumental field-trip guide published on that occasion (Fig. 1), the SPI President underlined the fundamental contribution of the "Gruppo Naturalisti Salentini" for the organization of the congress and, in general, for their tireless work of promoting the Salento paleontological heritage. For decades, passionate researchers such as Livio Ruggiero, Antonio Meleleo and the late Angelo Varola have systematically collected, prepared and exhibited fossils from Salento, laying the foundations for the core collections of the current Museum of the Environment of the University of Salento (MAUS).

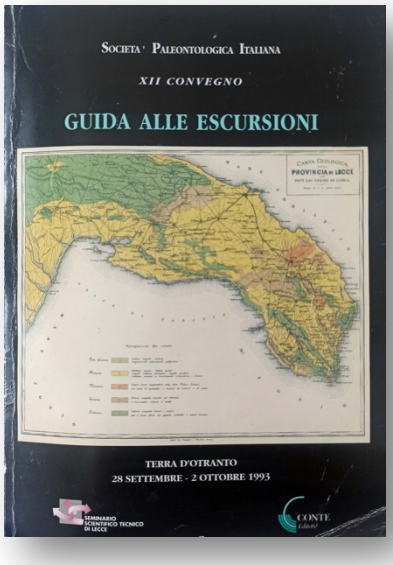

Fig. 1 Cover page of the field-trip guide of the 12th SPI congress; Lecce, 1993.

After 30 years, the time had come to bring the SPI congress, i.e., the XXIII edition of the Paleodays, back to Lecce. We did this to celebrate the opening of the MAUS in its renewed building, which nowadays is shared with the University of Salento Community Library, but also to underline the improved, constructive

relationship between the MAUS and its current director, Piero Lionello, and the Italian paleontological community. This collaboration has led to the recent establishment of a Scientific Committee of the Museum, which coordinated the organization of the Paleodays 2023 and which we hope will coordinate the forthcoming research and outreach activities. In the coming years, all these efforts will converge to unveil the paleontological wonders of the MAUS and of Salento in general.

Marco Cherin

Università degli Studi di Perugia

Alberto Collareta

Università di Pisa