The Alpine region is particularly rich in prehistoric evidence and especially in that one we usually define as “prehistoric art”.

To the great “sanctuaries” of figurative art as Valcamonica, Valtellina, the Asiago Plateau, the slopes of Baldo Mount and Bego Mount, who house thousands or even hundreds of thousands of figures, scenes and symbols, we have to add hundreds of sites characterized by small, medium or sporadic figures and symbols, and especially by “smaller expressions” as cup-marks, graffiti and fusiform engravings made with repeated scratches.

Every day we discover new sites and new engravings, especially in places where the engraving tradition with ritual function was not replaced until the complete coming of Christianity.

One of the latest discoveries, in chronological order, has particular importance because it is not characterized by rock engravings, but by many figurative red paintings, located in a place far away from the big sanctuaries of prehistoric art and which until now had shown almost exclusively cup-marks, and so symbolic expressions, result of the popular piety.

The geographical position
The pictorial group of what we have called “Balma dei Cervi” is located in the middle of Antigorio Valley, one of the valleys oriented northwards of the Ossola Valley that originates north of Domodossola and enters into the Lepontine Alps.

This small valley, crossed by the river Toce, connects with the Formazza Valley that, through the San Giacomo Pass (2313 m. asl), communicates with Switzerland through the Bedretto Valley, while climbing up the Devero Valley and the Arbola Pass (2409 m. asl) we descend into the Valley of Binn, or climbing up Valtendra Pass we reach the Veglia Alp in the Divedro Valley, which in turn leads to the Simplon Pass. There is no doubt that in the course of time it has been an important communicating valley that allowed to communicate with the Rhone Valley in the Valais part.

The archaeological findings in the Antigorio Valley
In the Antigorio Valley a series of archaeological findings were found, mainly from Roman times, some prehistoric and protohistoric ones and boulders with cup-marks.

In the municipality of Crodo, in Arvenolo area, there is a megalithic wall which is

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The Wall Paintings of La Balma Dei Cervi in the Antigorio Valley (Lepontine Alps - Piedmont)
called the “Devil’s Wall”. It was built with large stones cut with the *cugnere* system. The so called *cugnere* are large notches for inserting wooden wedges, which, enlarging because of water, smash the stones. This megalithic complex, whose functions remain until now a mystery, seems to have been built in Roman times.

Between 1969 and 1973 in Molinaccio area grave goods dated back between the first century B.C. and the second century A.D. were found.

At the alpine pasture *Sass di Bar* in Cravegna, in 1935, a tomb of the second century A.D. was found.

At Mozzio other tombs of the first century A.D. and a grave with Campanian ceramic and a Gallic sword, dated back to the second half of first century B.C., were found.

There are Roman remains also in Baceno. They were in tombs dated back to the second century AD, while from the Devero Alp comes a Marcus Aurelius coin (161-180 AD).

At Premia, in the locality of *Prem*, three grave complexes dated back to the Augustan period were found.

The oldest evidence until now discovered in the Antigorio Valley comes from the Pontigei Alp: it is a fragment of a lithic ax, made of serpentine stone, which is dated back to the Copper Age. A kind of axe that seems to have persisted up to the ancient Bronze Age.

At Marani Pass (2510 m asl), near “La Bocchetta dell’Arbola” which connects the Formazza Valley with the Binn Valley and where findings from the Iron Age and from the Roman period were discovered, a bronze dagger blade of the Veruno type (1600 - 1300 BC) which was broken in the upper part was found in a geode of quartz crystals.

So, if the permanent settlements in Roman times were fairly common among the Ossola valleys, only a few sporadic findings allows us to go back to the Copper Age and to the Bronze Age.

For going back further in time we have to go to Veglia Alp, where, at the *Balm della Vardaiola*, some pottery from the Iron Age and the faint trace of a red painting, which is difficult to interpret and to date, were found, while in the Cianciavero area lithic finds dated back to the final phase of the Mesolithic period and consisting of tools, for the most part made of rock crystal and few ones made of flint, were found in a seasonal camp of hunters. These mesolithic findings have typological comparisons with the lithic production found in Mergozzo. One can’t exclude that the Veglia area hunters settled during the winter months in the valley and along the shores of the lakes.

The territory also provided evidence of figurative art, which it is certainly not quantitatively and typologically comparable to the great alpine sanctuaries, but at the same time very important for the country.

Here the expressions of the figurative rock art show geometric and schematic patterns or with cup-marks, as for example in the Piano di Crodo or Salecchio Superiore area and elsewhere. We would like to report the recent and unpublished discovery of a stone with cup-marks found at Vova Alp, at 1600 meters above sea level: it has about ten cup-marks, including one filled by a tuft of grass that once emptied appeared very large and deep (diameter 20 cm, depth 10 cm) and on the bottom had a large number of white quartzite fragments, which were certainly deposited for a ritual purpose.

The rock paintings, subject of this preliminary note and discovered and reported in 2011 to the Archaeological Group of Mergozzo and to the writers by Mr. Livio Lanfranchi, were the subject of a 2012 first analysis, but further study and stratigraphic exploration in the site will be the subject of future interventions.

The pictorial group was made along a vertical rock, in a panoramic position overlooking the valley, sheltered by a large and imposing *balma* (a rocky sheet), which has protected and guaranteed the conservation of the paintings for several millennia. In fact, though surely during the winter months the snow blown by the wind and the ice have always occupied the entire shelter, the height and the angle of the *balma* did not allow the rain to drum on
the painted wall causing its erosion or detachment.

Under the long, and in some points, deep rocky ledge there are many collapsed boulders some of which have cup-marks of uncertain execution; at the end of the rocky ledge there is the balma: a natural rock shelter with a projecting and high roof which houses the paintings.

In the light of the traces which indicated the constant presence of ungulates, it came naturally to call the place “Balma dei Cervi” (“Balma of the deer”).

The paintings, made in red ocher and in good condition and very visible, appeared immediately of ancient workmanship. The first sensation was that they were probably works made with a fingertip after being dipped directly into the colored pigment; in addition we have immediately also the feeling that they had been realized in a short lapse of time, if not probably even by the same hand.

Some of the paintings have appeared incomplete because of the detachment of the thin limestone crust on which they were painted.

The images are distributed on a vertical wall about 6 meters long, on a zone little more than 1 meter high. They are oriented South-North and so facing west.

Geological survey of the rock paintings

The rocks on which there are rock paintings belong to the group known in geological literature under the name of mica schists of Baceno: it is a mica schist with many lenses of milky quartz, associated with veins and lenses of various sizes of other fine-grained dark green rocks that are characterized by a basic chemism.

In these leaden gray mica schist, characterized by silvery brightness, there are other characteristic minerals, as wine garnets, rare iron sulphides and millimetric patinas of blue - green copper oxides.

As in our case, sometimes the surfaces have calcareous scales which appear as “natural plastering.”
The water evaporation of these saline solutions along large surfaces causes a chemical deposition of microscopic calcite crystals and of neo-formation aragonite, on which it was possible to paint with natural colors, with excellent adhesion and resistance to the degradation caused by the passing of time.

**Description of the paintings**

For the first time in the Alps, an entire wall of a large under rock shelter homes a set of many images and ideograms associated together and forming, for those who made them, a meaningful speech created for ritual purposes and not by change.

For more than six meters along the rock wall, at the base of the extensive projecting balma" that has protected their conservation and that has preserved them from the erosion of the atmospheric agents, some groups of red ocher figures and symbols are neatly and organizationally arranged, according to the intentions of those who made them.

The group of paintings starts with a red dot at eye-level and ends with another, more or less at the same height, at the opposite end, as if the two points indicated the limits of the space that has to be painted.

The dominant representations of the pictorial complex are schematic anthropomorphic figures made with soft and rounded lines and connected with dot-like ideograms, maybe digital ones, and arranged into lines, double lines, geometric groups and “enclosures”.

Most of the anthropomorphic figures are of the “praying” figure type, with opposite symmetrical limbs, namely with raised arms; the other ones are those of the type with symmetrical arms and legs pointing downwards; some ones are phallic, other ones seem apparently asexual; many figures are headless. The height of anthropomorphic figures ranging from about 20 to 10 cm.
The most of the anthropomorphic figures is evidently connected with the dots in linear disposition, which are arranged in groups that seem to be the graphic materialization of concepts expressed by the anthropomorphic figures or which are attributes of the same.

Some anthropomorphic figures seem to be related with color “spots”, which, perhaps, are incomplete or unfinished figures. They are still in red color and of the same type used for all the identified expressions.

Looking at the set of paintings from right to left, that is the order in which you enter the balma from the South, we can identify at least six groups of figures, which are separate from each other and arranged following the natural slope of the rocky stratum and the vertical fractures.

The first group contains five schematic anthropomorphic figures, among which there is an incomplete one: three asexual and headless figures with low arms, one with raised arms in the “praying” position with male sex organs and the head in evidence. From the anthropomorphic figures, as if to link them together, start several series of dots simply made impressing the finger and arranged in single or multiple lines.

At short distance from the first composition, on the left, there is another headless, but sexed, anthropomorphic figure with arms and legs bent down. It has two dots symmetrically plotted near the arms and one near the leg. It clearly appears inside a kind of quadrangular enclosure made with a series of dots and connected to a second enclosure, of similar shape, but of smaller dimension, and which is empty.

Moving us to the left, on a rock surface which curves inwards, there is the second group of paintings that has two anthropomorphic schematic and headless figures in which the male sex organs are in evidence and from which a symmetrical double dot line starts. At the top the double line is joined by simple horizontal dots creating a sort of triangle. Not far away, on the left, there is a schematic anthropomorphic male
Fig. 4. The second group of paintings

Fig. 5. A detail of the third group of paintings
figure, headless, with raised and joined arms. Just below some linear graffiti are identifiable.

The third group, painted on a rock stratum above but towards the left, shows a series of pictures which are the most interesting among the paintings, together with other anthropomorphic figures. The first picture, placed in the middle of the pictorial group, is oval in shape and divided into two parts by a large and marked vertical line. The two parts have respectively two dots in a symmetrical position. At the end of the median line, the border become thicker taking a convex shape, while a short appendage seems to stick out in high and on the right side.

Proceeding slightly to the left, a rectangular picture appears. It is realized with color blots presumably made with the use of fingers as all the others that characterize the pictorial group. The rectangular image is divided into two sectors (more or less with the same size) by two parallel lines, still consisting of dots made with the fingers and vertically placed. An anthropomorphic figure, which appears in an overturned position, joins its raised arms above his head and it his feet are clearly in evidence. Next to it there are two long color blots.

The fourth group, which is above the previous one, shows evidence of incomplete anthropomorphic figures and signs which are difficult to read because of the detachment of the calcitic crust containing the color. The best preserved image is a schematic anthropomorphic headless figure which has a rough male sex, with winding legs and arms and apexes indicating hands and feet.

The fifth group, painted down left of the previous one and ending at a striking change in the rock level, has a schematic anthropomorphic figure in poor condition and a series of dots made with the fingers painted in parallel and winding rows, markedly incomplete because of the detachment of large portions of the calcitic layer containing them.

The sixth group is among the richest in the pictorial group, but because of its position more exposed to weathering and to the rubbing of the deer during the molt, it is at the same time the less preserved, especially in the central part.

This group hosts several schematic anthropomorphic figures both with low arms which are symmetric with the legs and with raised arms in the classic “praying” attitude. These figures are different sizes and some ones are seemingly less accurate than those of the first and of the second group. Two of the figures seem extreme schematizations of the human figure and they were reduced to anchor-shape signs.

The same sector has striking color blots and it is crammed with dots which are accumulated in nebula-shape and in parallel lines forming clear geometric shapes.

The anthropomorphic figures arrangement seem to have taken into account the...
natural spatial parts of the rock, characterized by layer cracks and breaks.

At a distance of 15 meters towards north, a isolated trace of a possible schematic anthropomorphic figure has been discovered.

One can’t exclude that further explorations may reveal the presence of other paintings or other evidence of rock engravings, as well as human settlements.

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