

Mount Bego prehistoric rock carvings

There are approximately 4106 prehistoric rock carvings in the vicinity of mount Bego – in the southern French Alps – listed so far, in which we can count 35,814 signs made by pecking. These rocks are situated in the high valleys of what is now the Mercantour National Park, at altitudes of over 2000 metres and located

Fig. 1. Map of the mount Bego region showing the sectors and the zones of rock carvings. (Picture: Laboratoire du Lazaret)



within 1,400 hectares subdivided into seven main sectors, of which Marvels and Fontanalba are the most remarkable because of the great number of engravings (fig. 1). The division into sectors, zones and groups was established between 1927 and 1942 by Carlo Conti, who was put in charge of a systematic fixing and copying of the engravings of the region by Piero Barocelli, Superintendent of Antiquities for Liguria, Piemonte and Val d'Aosta. Henry de Lumley followed Conti's repartition and rock numbering, when, in 1967, he restarted the research on the site and today his team still base their work on the same spatial organisation. Finally we need to say that the mount Bego region's present landscape is the result of the presence of quaternary glaciers and most of the relief forms are strictly connected to the glacial morphology (fig. 2).

The engraving in mount Bego goes on till 1989, when the site was classified a historical monument with the consequent ban on carving on the rocks : prehistoric rock engravings coexist consequently with more modern carvings, made by shepherds, soldiers, visitors and tourists from the roman period to nowadays. How do we distinguish, therefore, prehistoric engravings from more recent ones?

We know that pecked carvings can be dated to prehistory essentially because of the presence of different kinds of engraved weapons (figg. 3, 4) – daggers, halberds and axes – which can be compared with some examples found in prehistoric digs. Furthermore, the human occupation of the site during prehistory is confirmed by archaeological excavations and



Fig. 2. The glacial valleys of the mount Bego region (Photo: E. Dellepiane)

Fig. 3. Carved halberds in valley of Marvels (Tracing: Laboratoire du Lazaret)



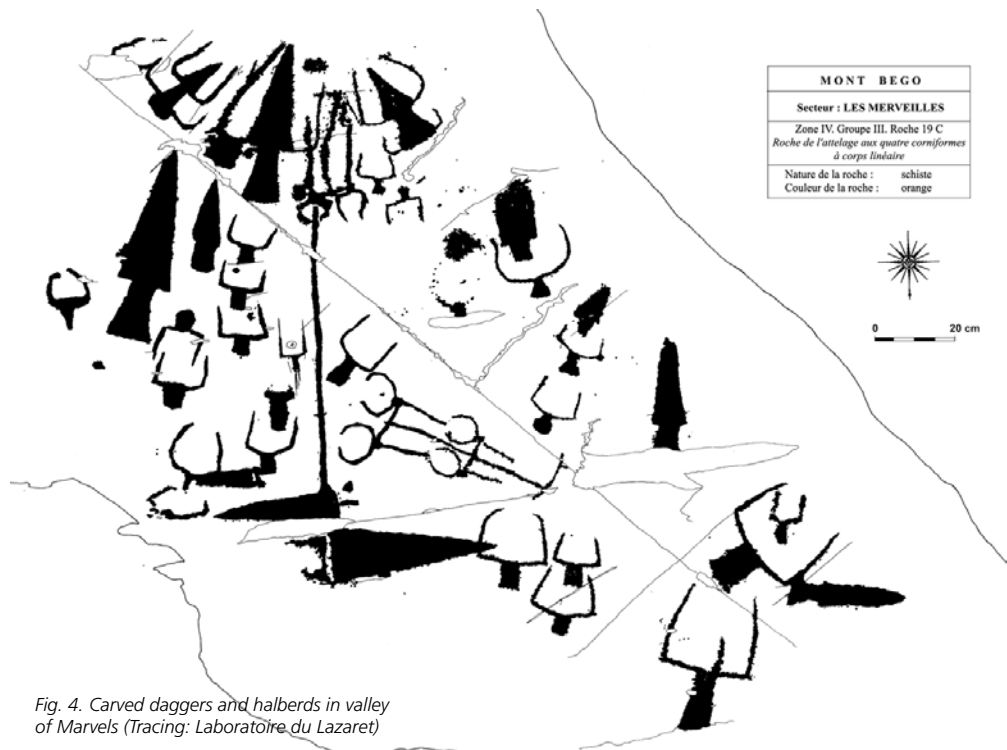


Fig. 4. Carved daggers and halberds in valley of Marvels (Tracing: Laboratoire du Lazaret)

these data have shown that mount Bego was occupied during several phases of prehistory. Today, research into the prehistoric chronological context of mount Bego is essentially based on the review of the material found during archaeological excavations on the site, and on the dating of pecked weapons carved into the rocks.

The relative dating of the representations of weapons has given us a chronological scale from the Copper Age to the Early Bronze age (Romain 1991, de Lumley *et alii* 2003a, 2003b). Nevertheless the review of the material – mainly pottery and flint – found during archaeological excavations in the *gias del Ciari* (valley of Marvels)¹, as well as in other rock shelters, highlighted human presence on the site from early Neolithic period of Cardial culture – from 5400 B.C. (Binder *et alii* 2009, Bianchi *et alii* 2011) (fig. 5, 1-3). The presence of man continued to the middle Neolithic, period of Chasseen culture – 4250-3550 B.C. (Binder *et alii* 2009, Bianchi *et alii* 2011) (fig. 5, 4-5). However the question remains whether

some engravings can be dated from this period, in the absence of some precisely datable figures – like weapons, for example – for these phases. Previously, Carlo Conti and afterwards Giuseppe Isetti (Conti 1940, 1948, Isetti 1957, 1958, 1965) claimed that the most ancient mount Bego engravings were a specific kind of graffiti carving and they based their hypothesis on the superimposition between pecked and

Fig. 5. *Gias del Ciari* – 1-3 shards of ceramic dated from Cardial culture, 4-5 ceramic and flint from Chasseen culture (Pictures: Laboratoire du Lazaret)

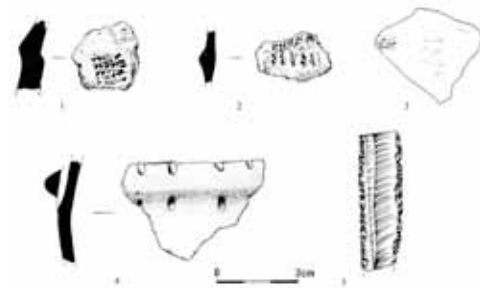


Fig. 6. Valley of Marvels: a graffiti engraving covered by a pecked one. (Photo: G. Isetti).

Fig. 7. (Right) Fontanalba: a graffiti engraving covered by a pecked one. (Photo: G. Isetti)



graffiti engravings (fig 6, 7). In fact, recent works on superimposition – checking Conti and Isetti's results – have shown that in some cases pecked carvings really overlap graffiti and that, consequently, same graffiti pre-date pecked engravings. Could these graffiti figures also date from Early and Middle Neolithic? It needs to be well proved by systematic research into the graffiti engravings. Nevertheless, further hypothesis about carvings dating from the Neolithic period also exist. In Valcamonica – in the central Italian Alps – scholars have established a rigorous chronological sequence of the images based on the superimposition of

the figures² (Arca 2009 for essential bibliography) : in this sequence pecked topographic composition could date from between 5000 and 2900 B.C. (Arcà 2009) (fig. 8). In mount Bego we find exactly the same kind of rock carvings that should date from the same period on the base of a typological comparison with engravings in Valcamonica (fig. 9).

The later period – the Copper age or Final Neolithic in French – in spite of the absence of archaeological material found during digs on the site from Copper age phases 1 and 2

Fig. 8. The chronological sequence of the mount Bego engravings by A. Arcà (Arcà 2009)

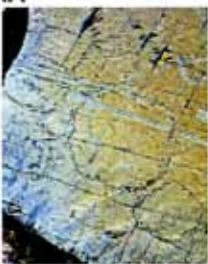

Cronologia	Stili	Fasi	Iconografia	IA	IB
Neolitico	I	A	Composizioni topografiche ad anelli (5000?- 4000? a.C.)		
Neolitico - Rame 1		B	Composizioni topografiche geometriche: rettangoli, perimetri, aree e pallini (3900?-2900 a.C.)		

Fig. 9. A topographic composition in Fontanalba (Tracing: Laboratoire du Lazaret)

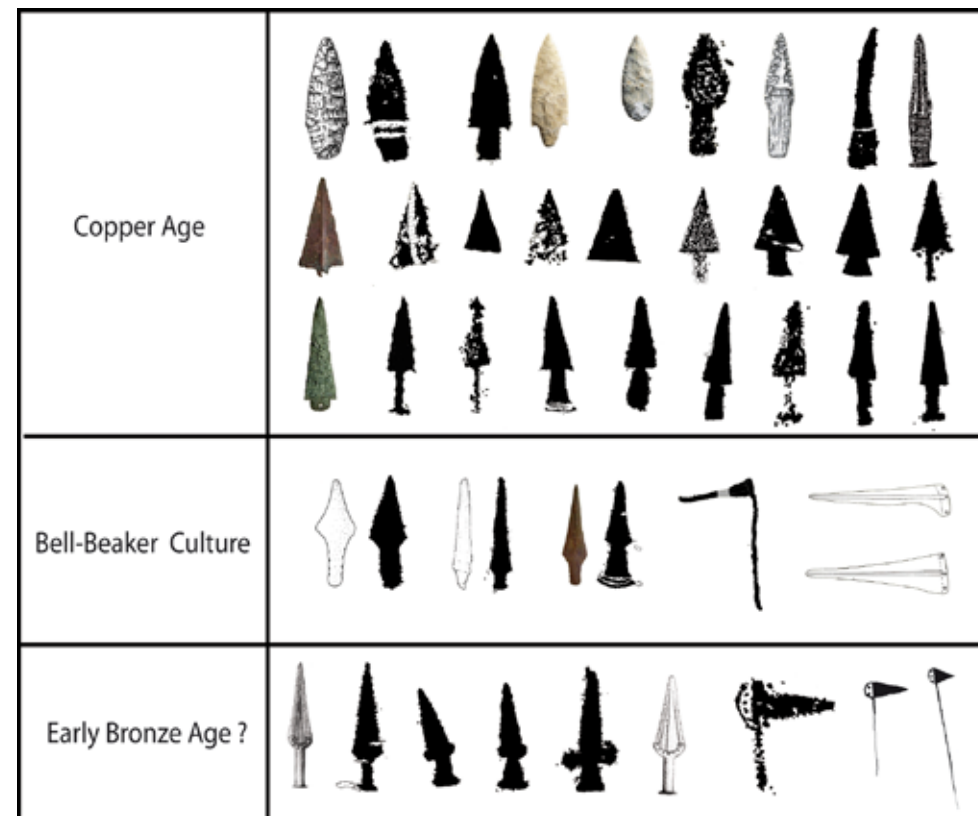


Fig. 10. Comparisons between carved weapons and examples found in prehistoric digs :
 Flint daggers: Lentil – France (Durand 1999); Remedello Sotto – North Italy (Longhi 1994); Remedello Sotto – North Italy (Longhi 1994); Charavines-les-Baigneurs – Swiss (de Lumley et alii 2003b); Neuchâtel – Swiss (de Lumley et alii 2003b).
 Copper daggers: Volongo – North Italy (De Marinis 1994); Remedello Sotto – North Italy (De Marinis 1994); La Balance – South-Est France (Lemerrier 2002); Bounias Hypogeeum – South-Est France (Lemerrier 2002).
 Copper Helberds: S. Cristina di Fiesse – North Italy (De Marinis 1994); Gambara – North Italy (De Marinis 1994); Villafranca Veronese – North Italy (De Marinis 1994)
 Bronze daggers: Bois-de-Vaux – Swiss (de Lumley et alii 2003b); Loreto Aprutino – North Italy (Bianco Peroni 1994)

(Binder et alii 2009, Bianchi et alii 2011), would seem well represented because of the presence on the rocks of a great number of pecked carved weapons dating from this phase. Actually, the most represented daggers seems to be full Copper age ones, especially from Chalcolithic 2 (2900–2500 B.C.) and Chalcolithic 3 - Bell-Beaker culture (2500–2100 B.C.) (fig. 10). We need to say that the Bell-Beaker culture is also probably the most represented in archaeological material found during the digs (fig. 11). The engraved daggers can be compared to knapping stone or metal types.

Stone daggers have, in the majority of cases, convex blade edges³; on the contrary, copper blades from Chalcolithic 2 are triangular – more or less extended – often with an axial rib; lastly, daggers from Bell-Beaker culture have a triangular blade, trapezoidal at the base. Regarding the Chalcolithic 2 phase, we can observe a particular correspondance with Remedello daggers: although the Remedello culture origin is essentially located in the Italian Po valley, the archaeological research also shows a quite important influence beyond the Alpine Arc. Indeed, in the southeast of

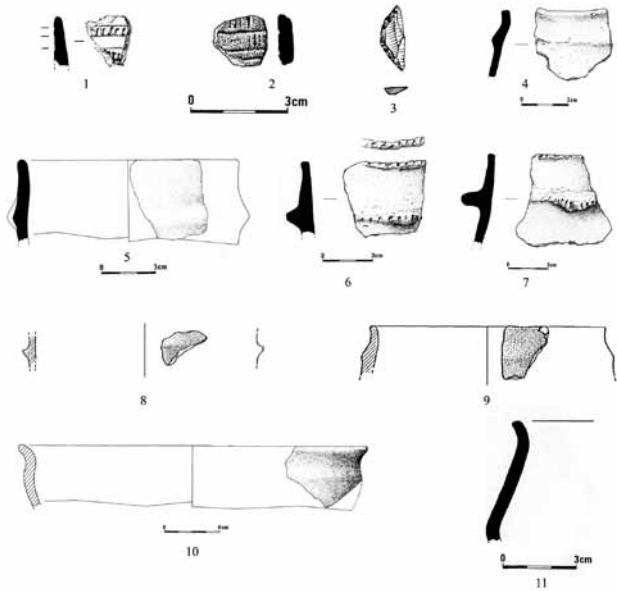


Fig. 11. Gias del Ciari – 1-5 shards of ceramic dated from Bell-Beaker culture, 6-7 ceramic from Bell-Beaker culture/ Early Bronze age 1, 10-11 shards of ceramic dated from Middle-Late Bronze age (Pictures : Laboratoire du Lazaret). Grenouilles lake, Fontanalba – 8-9 Early Bronze age (Pictures: Musée des Merveilles, Tende, Alpes-Maritimes, FR)

France several Remedello daggers were found objects⁴ as well as engraved representations⁵.

This chronological sequence is also confirmed by halberds (fig. 10). As far as we currently know, the halberd is present in Italy at least from the Bell-Beaker culture. The typochronological criteria of identification are the same as for daggers: the blade's rectilinear base is an indicator of the Copper age period, whereas the blade's edges can appear either symmetric or asymmetric.

Other elements support the suggested chronological sequence : actually, on the Fontanalba rocks, several representations (figg. 12) are comparable to the *travois* discovered in Chalain (Chalain 19, Fontenu, Jura, France) which dates from 3100 B.C. (Pétréquin *et alii* 2006), that is full Copper age (fig. 13).

Among archaeological material found in mount Bego, we also have some shards dating from the Early Bronze age and a few ones from the Middle-Late Bronze (Binder *et alii* 2009, Bianchi *et alii* 2011) (fig. 11). Figures of pecked daggers and halberds dating from the Early Bronze age could exist⁶. The typical dagger blade from the Early Bronze age (from 1900 B.C.) has an elongated and a rounded base and a hilt; on rock carvings, in some cases, we have revealed the desire to underline the presence of the hilt, making it protude (fig.

10). In the case of halberds the blade's rounded base could indicate an Early Bronze type; like for daggers, some figures show the blade base particularly marked (Fig. 10).

The dating of pecked weapons seems to cease at Early Bronze age : spatula axes, lances and swords, typical of the following phases of the Bronze age are totally absent (Romain 1991, de Lumley 2003a, 2003b).

It was thought that the cold episode of Lössben that coincides with the end of the Early Bronze age had prevented man from accessing the site because of a considerable drop in temperature, with the consequent interruption of rock carving activity. Nevertheless we have seen that some material dating from later periods were found : Middle-Late Bronze shards, but also Iron age material. Therefore, if the site's human occupation restarts immediately after the cold episode of Lössben, could a change in carving tradition have occurred? In other words, from Middle-Recent Bronze, had the pecked technique been given up to be superseded by the graffiti technique? As we have seen, the existence of graffiti engravings covered by pecked ones or the presence of figures made by both graffiti and pecked techniques points to the use of graffiti technique already in prehistoric periods (figg. 14, 15). Moreover, some graffiti patterns

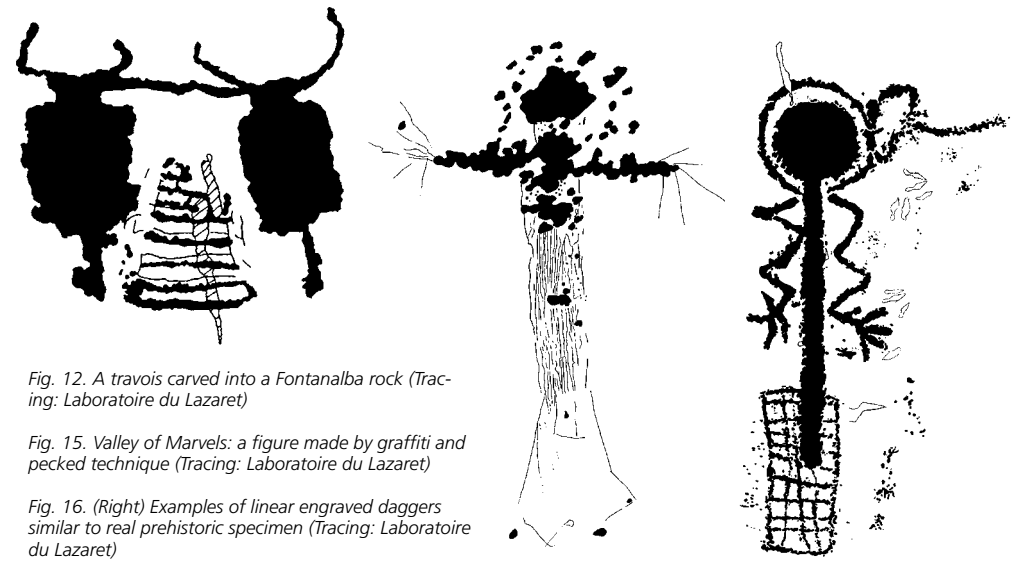


Fig. 12. A travois carved into a Fontanalba rock (Tracing: Laboratoire du Lazaret)

Fig. 15. Valley of Marvels: a figure made by graffiti and pecked technique (Tracing: Laboratoire du Lazaret)

Fig. 16. (Right) Examples of linear engraved daggers similar to real prehistoric specimen (Tracing: Laboratoire du Lazaret)

seem comparable in typology both to objects and to ceramic decorations typical of prehistory: this is the case for several small weapons (figg. 16, 17), for figures representing the same patterns of pecked engravings, for some

zig-zags connected together in large bundles and sometimes also associated with pecked figures (figg. 18, 19). Among these graffiti carvings, some show patterns which could be dated from the later phases of the Bronze

Fig. 13. The Chalain travois (Photo: P. Pétréquin)





Fig. 14. Valley of Marvels: a horned figure with graffiti horns and pecked body (Photo: N. Bianchi)



Fig. 17. Examples of linear engraved daggers similar to real prehistoric specimen (Photo: N. Bianchi)



Fig. 20. The Komevios stone (Spagnolo Garzioli 2009)

age, such as, for example a special engraving carved on ZVIII.GI.R2(5) rock, which could be interpreted as the head of a spear (fig. 17) or another carved spear found during the last field campaign in 2010; as we have already said the spear is a weapon which didn't appear before the Middle Bronze age.

Furthermore, recently, some scholars working in Piemonte – Western Italian Alps – have also proposed that some pecked figures could date from more recent periods than the Early Bronze age. In Dormelletto (Novara), a depicted stone has recently been found: the *Komevios* stone (fig. 20). This stone, dating from the Iron age, seems to bear the same iconography of the *Christ*, one of the most popular rock carvings of mount Bego (fig. 21) (Spagnolo Garzoli 2009). Could it be said, therefore that pecked engravings didn't stop in the Early Bronze age?

To answer to all these questions of chronology about prehistoric engravings, and to know what kind of carvings are really prehistoric, further research is indispensable. A resumption of the digs is necessary today to be able to answer the questions about the period of prehistoric human occupation on the site: is the absence of archaeological material from phases 1 and 2 of Copper age – a pe-

riod however which seems well represented by engraved weapons – a coincidence due to the incomplete nature of the archaeological excavations or did man not go to the site during this period? And, if they didn't go, why?

Equally, a systematic work on graffiti engravings is today necessary to be able to clarify relations between pecked and graffiti carv-

Fig. 21. The Christ (Photo: Laboratoire du Lazaret)



Fig. 18. zig-zags connected together in large bundles and associated with pecked figures (Photo: N. Bianchi)



Fig. 19. zig-zag crossing a dagger (Photo: N. Bianchi)

ings and to try to built as exact a prehistoric engravings sequence – chronological as well as typological – as possible.

Notes

¹ Dug by Carlo Conti in 1942 (Conti 1943 et Conti 1972) and then by Maurice Louis and Jean Segui in 1950 (Louis & Segui 1951), later the *gias del Ciari* was the object of additional researches by Professor Henry de Lumley' team (de Lumley *et alii* 1991, de Lumley *et alii* 1995), who, at the same time, started a drilling campaign of several rock shelters.

² The relative dating made thanks to the study of superimposition is, in the case of mount Bego, more difficult being these ones not in a large number.

³ They can be dated of the most ancient phases of Copper age (Chalcolithic 2 - 2900-2400 B.C. and, sometimes, may be of Chalcolithic 1 - 3350-2900 B.C.).

⁴ Orgon Dolmen, Bouches-du-Rhône (Courtin & Sauzade 1975).

⁵ Chastel-Arnaud, Drôme, Southern Pre-Alps (Morin & Picavet 2005); Ubaye valley, Haute Provence Alps (Arcà & Fossati 1995).

⁶ From the Early Bronze age 2: Rhône culture or Polada Culture.

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