

# Rock Art in Valcamonica: the last four years of research and discoveries

In 1982 Professor Anati wrote that the rock carvings of Valcamonica were an almost inexhaustible heritage<sup>1</sup>. Since then, the discoveries have been many, new areas have been investigated, known ones have been published. Today, although there are new discoveries every year, we know the rock art heritage of Valcamonica in great detail and even the different features of different sites: nevertheless, much is still waiting to be properly recorded, studied, understood. That is why our *Department of Research and Education of the Centro Camuno di Studi Preistorici* during the last four years focused mainly on integrating and analyzing the documentation concerning well known sites, such as Campanine, Foppe di Nadro or other areas on the eastern slope, surrounding the Naquane National Park<sup>2</sup>. Here the environment still bears the clues of traditional economic activities, as paths, stone huts and ancient stone walls: the recovery and valuation of these signs, both naturalistic and folkloric, is now the commitment of the "Natural Reserve of Rock Engravings of Ceto, Cimbergo, Paspardo"; the land-use framework that is thus outlined, including rock carvings, extends from prehistory to the fully historic age.

During the seasons of research, however, some interesting findings, even unexpected, were discovered also in other sites of Valcamonica<sup>3</sup>.

This paper is aimed to give a brief overview on the most recent discoveries, which cover almost the entire Camunnian cycle, from the late Neolithic and Chalcolithic to the full Roman Age.

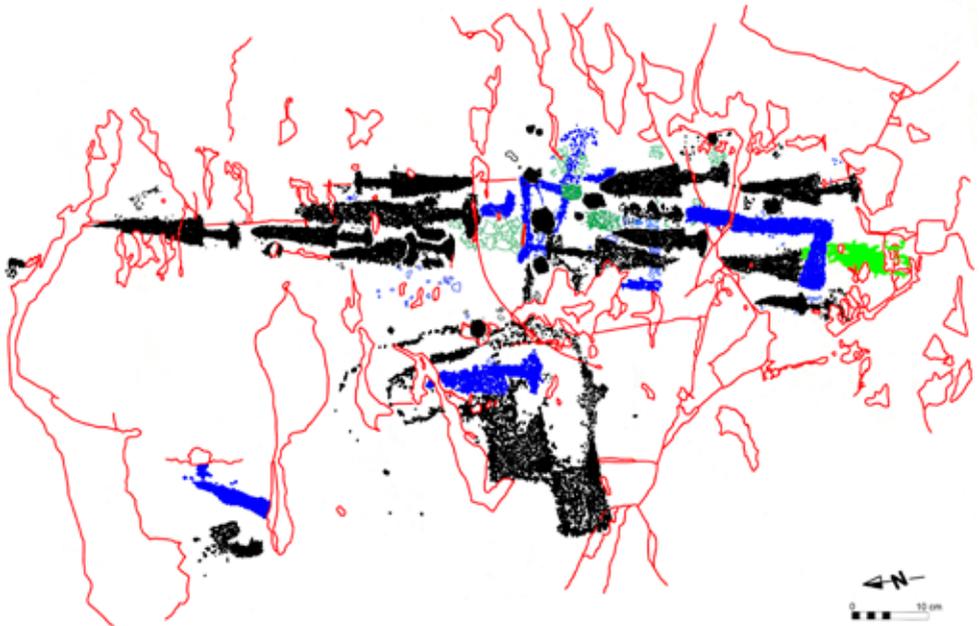
## **The early phase: late Neolithic – Chalcolithic Age (IV-III mill. B.C.)**

The most ancient rock carvings of Valcamonica were found in the site of Luine (southern Valcamonica) and date back from Epipalaeolithic. The presence of man in the Valley is confirmed by archaeology also in other sites (as Cividate, Breno, Foppe di Nadro), but no other rock carving is yet known. So, regarding the rock art in the middle and northern Valcamonica, the first phase dates from the late Neolithic and is related with more stable settlements.

During the analysis of the engravings in the site of Campanine, that were published in 2009, some recurrent combinations emerged as significant, forming a kind of "set of the phase": praying anthropomorphic figures (s.c. *orants*, worshipers), cup marks, topographic elements, ploughing scenes and schematic ox skulls (s.c. *boucrania*). This "set" is widespread in all the sites of the eastern slope, although not in the same percentage, and it always constitutes the first phase of the engravings.

Surfaces carved with *orants* and cup marks are found in each of the investigated areas. At Dos del Pater, Boscatelle and Pagherina panels with cup marks and *orants* are engraved on the flat surface of jutting rocks. Schematic praying figures are a typical pattern of the eastern slope, whereas they are seldom engraved on the western side of the valley. The oldest types, together with cup marks, can easily be found on the topmost part of huge emerging rocks, such as the large rock n. 26-27 in Foppe di Nadro.

The area of Foppe di Nadro (as the nearby Dos Cui and Boscatelle) is character-



Panel with typical weapons of Chalcolithic Age (Boscattelle, Nadro). Dip. Valc.. CCSP

ized by an insistent dialectic between praying figures/topographic elements/ploughing scenes/weapons from the Late Neolithic-Early Chalcolithic Age to the Middle Chalcolithic. Then, in the first half of the third mill. B.C., the carvers seem to prefer some “special” rocks along a small stream that springs just upstream of rock n. 26-27 – an element of the landscape that certainly had a great importance.

The attention to the landscape, as modified and cultivated by man (topographic figures and ploughing scenes), becomes a main theme which refers to a feminine symbology. This is often the first layer in the composition of stelae or carved boulders – the typical monuments of this age, where daggers and halberds are a common pattern and are symbols of masculine strength. Many significant evidences of this set can be found at Foppe di Nadro, Dos Cui and Boscattelle.

At Boscattelle we found our most recent discovery: a panel with a typical set of weapons (10 daggers, one axe and one blade, dating from 2900-2500 B.C.) is en-

graved on a outcropping surface, in a hidden site of the eastern slope. The weapons are aligned and form a triangular shape that resembles a large dagger blade, as in the contemporary funerary monuments in the sites of Sion-Aosta. Topographic elements (that represent cultivated land and/or buildings) and schematic praying figures (probably more ancient – IV mill B.C.) are linked to the weapon set. This panel confirms the great value of weapons in the context of male symbols during the Chalcolithic Age, when a proto Indo-European ideology was expressed for the first time.

### The stele from Cevo

A very important monument has been discovered at Cevo, in Valsaviore, in an area where no evidences of prehistoric figurative rock art were so far recorded. It is a stele, dated from the Chalcolithic Age (III mill. B.C.) and engraved with a dense set of symbols, all referring to the female symbology. The main side shows in the upper part a sketch of the face (s.c. *chapeau*



The new stele from Cevo, Chalcolithic Age (Valsaviore).  
Dip. Valc. CCSP

*du gendarme*), drawn over two concentric disks (that may represent the breasts); in the middle part was engraved a band of curved lines (a womb symbol), double spiral pendants and a comb-shaped sign (that are commonly found as decorations on women's clothing during Chalcolithic Age); finally, the lowest part of the surface was entirely filled by a grid of lines (probably representing plots of cultivated land). On the rear side, the back of the stele, were carved cup marks, a disc and a rectangular fringed shape.

We are still far from convincingly understanding this recurring symbolism; nevertheless this stele shows us some significant detail in defining the cosmological-religious values of the Alpine people during the Chalcolithic Age, as it highlights the role played by female entities, ancestress or goddess.

## The recent phases: Bronze – and Iron Age (late III-I mill. B.C.)

During the Bronze Age the inhabitants of Middle Valcamonica continued to engrave signs and figures on the bedrock surfaces in the eastern slope, but the sites are less widespread and the surfaces are carefully chosen: fewer panels, fewer signs (there are still praying figures, smaller cup marks, some few weapons, in the final phase some armed man). It is thus remarkable that in Foppe di Nadro, on rocks n. 26-27 and 78, we find an important concentration of panels from the middle and late Bronze Age. The carvings on rock n. 26-27 represent in a close combination schematic praying figures, armed men, dogs, small cup marks; towards the end of the period an armed man was engraved in front of a large circular shape, formed by three concentric discs (the latter being very similar to a disc carved on rock n. 3 at Verdi, to which three *orants* are turned). It may represent a kind of sun-

shield, as well testified by contemporary decorative symbols throughout Europe.

On small rock n. 78 a panel with schematic praying women, dogs and circles may suggest a chthonic or lunar female rite.

Finally, during the Iron Age, every space in the surfaces is used for new carvings and the engravings reach even those rocks that were previously ignored. The distribution pattern of the different topics and typologies reveals that specific surfaces were chosen for hosting specific themes. Some examples: a rich combination of tiny miniatures (among which are wheels, axes, animals) were carved on rock n. 4 in Dos del Pater; in Pagherina square-blade axes, warriors and hunting scenes are the main themes on rock n. 5, while a peculiar kind of horse and footprints are specific on rocks n. 2 and 16; at Caneva (near Cimbergo) some inscriptions written in the Raethian (pre-roman) alphabet can be read among figures of acrobatic horsemen and buildings. Some images may represent heroes or mythological characters: a sort of Hercules on rock n. 2 in

*Documentation with tracing technique  
(Val Franchina, Malonno). Dip. Valc. CCSP*



Dos del Pater, warriors armed with peculiar weapons on rocks n. 6 and 10 in Dos del Pater and rock n. 27 in Foppe di Nadro. Very unusual – and therefore notable – is a duel scene carved on rock n. 24 in Pagherina: two men equipped with swords and shields are facing each other and at the same time one of them is struck and defeated. The style is unique and the scene is dated from the Roman era (I - III cent. A.C.), also due to a Latin inscription just above the scene recording the winner's name. This panel represents a small fragment of the Roman Age in Valcamonica, so richly testified by archaeological findings and structures: and don't forget that in Cividate Camuno (the Roman *Civitas Camunnorum*, "town of the Camunnians") the roman amphitheatre is still visible, where gladiator fights were held.

### Rock n. 26-27 in Foppe di Nadro

Our *Department's* most recent researches are on rock n. 26-27 in Foppe di Nadro. This is a large surface, located in the highest part of the site, that offers a natural viewpoint; within the Park of Engravings of Foppe di Nadro it has probably the richest rock art panels; the most interesting ones were well known<sup>4</sup> and published since the '70, unfortunately without a real study on the relationships between figures and the overall context. Now all the signs have been recorded and traced during two Summer Campaigns of Fieldwork. The analytical study of the evidences, regarding typology/ chronology and themes, is certainly complex due to the rich set of data and to the many superimpositions among warriors and between warriors/animals/footprints/buildings.

As noted above, carvings have been made on this rock throughout the entire Camunnian cycle, with the only exception during the Chalcolithic Age, when stelae and carved boulders were preferred. In the earliest phase, the topmost and flat part of the surface was chosen for the engraving of cup marks, schematic praying figures and small topographic elements – part of the usual and constant set of this phase. During the Bronze Age other schematic praying



figures, small cup marks (in geometric and numeric pattern), dogs and armed men are engraved in the southern part and in the horizontal sectors of the surface. Finally, during the Iron Age new carvings spread across the whole of the surface, ever respectfully towards the previous evidences. Significant is the recurring engraving of small axes (VII-V cent. B.C.), the lively attitude of some anthropomorphic figures and the particular style of many figures of horses that recalls contemporary decorations on artefacts. Among the new recordings we can notice a small panel with a hunting scene scratched on the surface (in the s.c. "filiform technique"), a big star that suggest some kind of calendar measure-

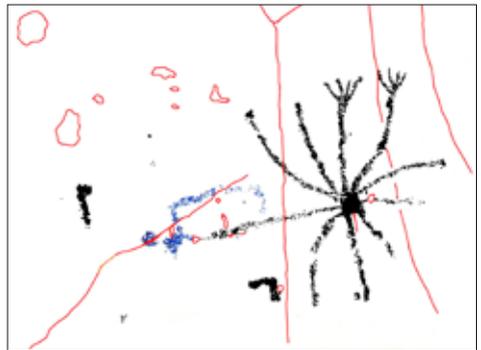
ment and an yet unknown inscription in Raethian alphabet that offers us new clues for defining the influences from the Po Valley in the last centuries of the first millennium B.C.

## Conclusions

We are now collecting data from the areas surrounding the Naquane National Park of Rock Engravings, in order to complete a thematic and distributive analysis and define the mutual links, the peculiarities of each area and the dynamics of frequenting sites with rock art during the prehistory. Thus it becomes clear that during the early

*B - A strange star shape symbol with two terminations in form of hands, Iron Age (Foppe di Nadro R. 27). Dip. Valc. CCSP*

*A - A filiform scene with hunter and deers.*



phases of the Camunian cycle the eastern slope of middle Valcamonica is widely attended, especially in the most southern sites. Surfaces that were important in the early phases seem to keep their main role, throughout the whole Camunian cycle, both in Foppe di Nadro and Naquane or Campanine, whereas the site of Dos Cui during the Iron Age seem to be less considered and in the northern areas (Dos del Pater and Pagherina) the rocks with *orants* and cup marks seem to be almost abandoned up to the Middle and Late Iron Age. Engraved footprints are nearly ubiquitous during the Iron Age; figures of axes and pre-roman inscriptions are important themes, along with warriors and horses. Representations of buildings usually “seal”, as a final layer, many of the carved panels. In some site rock art continues to be engraved up to fully historic time, as in Campanine, Foppe di Nadro and Pagherina.

Many features are shared by the different areas, nevertheless each zone shows some peculiarities, especially regarding themes or typologies of the engravings. Our research is still in progress and we aim to reach an ever increasingly comprehension of the cultures that expressed their religious and social values through rock art.

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## Footnotes

- 1 Anati E., 1982, *I Camuni alle radici della civiltà europea*, Milano, Jaca Book.
- 2 Between 2009 and 2012 the Summer Campaigns Fieldworks have recorded and traced the engravings in Dos del Pater, Ronchi di Zir (Municipality of Capo di Ponte); Boscatelle, Foppe di Nadro (Ceto); Campanine, Castello and Caneva (Cimbergo).
- 3 So happened in Malonno, where schematic and figurative rock art has been found, or in Cevo and Malegno, with the discovering of two stelae from Copper Age.
- 4 The well known panel of the *Butterfly Idol*, the s.c. *Worshipping of Dog* scene, the famous *Sexual Scene*, the representations

of *An horseman with his squire* and of the *Temple of Nadro*: these are the most peculiar and well known panels from rock n. 26-27.

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