

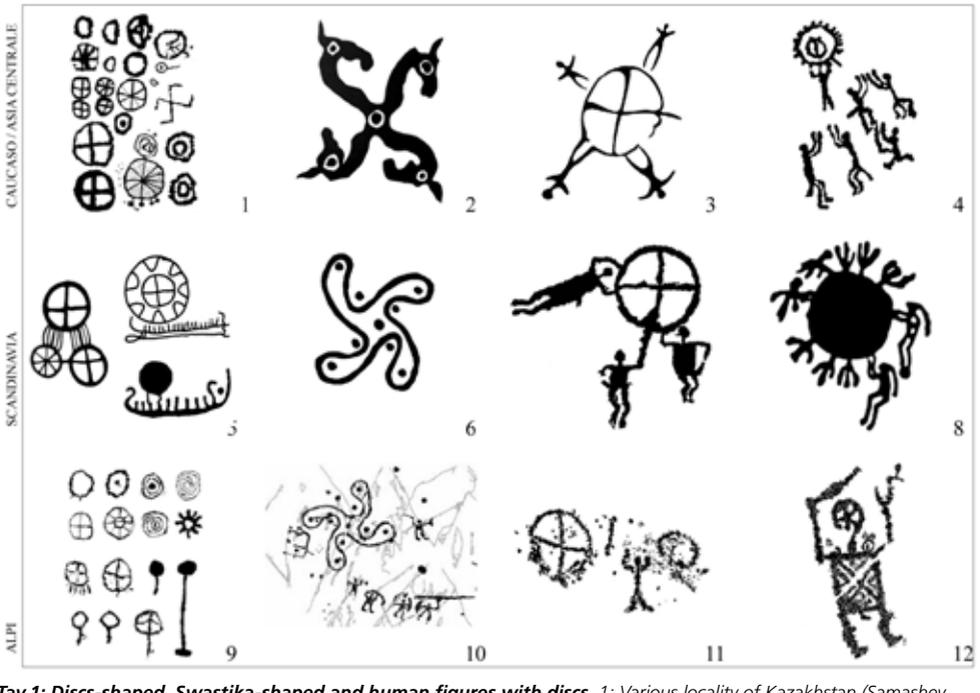
# Reflection on European and Central Asian rock art in the Indo-European framework

## Abstract

The updated intersection of linguistic, genetic, mythographic and especially archaeological data is recently erasing any remaining doubt about the origin from the steppes of the original ethnic and cultural nucleus of the Indo-europeans. It is therefore possible to link the gradual thematic and symbolic evolution of rock art and draw a parallel with the indo-europeization of the different areas involved. The Euro-asian contexts, from the III to the early II millennium BC., in fact, show undeniable convergences, with the growing focus on weapons and warriors, circular shapes, some zoomorphic figures and carts, tools and structures. With all the necessary caution, these thematic characters seem to compose an extensive ideological set which occurs throughout the same time-stages and in the same areas of the great Indo-European expansion. A set that converges with what is revealed by ritual, essentially funeral, costumes of the corresponding archaeological cultures. This paper exemplifies such premises taking into consideration the symbolic value of some major rock art themes in Alpine, Nordic and Caucasian-Central Asian areas during the Bronze and Iron Age.

The European rock art extends over three great cycles: the Paleolithic-Mesolithic, the Neolithic and the protohistoric. Though with shifted chronology, they cover all the major continental regions and the surrounding areas from the shores of Africa, to the Near East and central Asia. The epicenters, the origin and formation centers seem purely European in the first case, with the fulcrum in the Franco-Cantabrian Paleolithic, then circummediterranean and nordic during the Epipaleolithic, Anatolian-Balkan in the Neolithic with a wide Mediterranean and Atlantic spread, and finally in the North-Pontic area of the steppes, in the early Chalcolithic. This latter is a crucial turning point that leads into protohistory, determining the basic characteristics of modern Europe during the Bronze and Iron Ages.

After more than two centuries of debate on Indo-Europeans, on the same truth of their existence, their origin and history, today we are at a relatively stationary point: the updated intersection of linguistic, genetic, mythographic and especially archaeological data is recently erasing any remaining doubt about the origin from the steppes of the ethnic and cultural nucleus of the Indo-Europeans. Most of the specialists, even among *excepta* of all sorts, consider ascertained this thesis. Among the others, the recent, rigorous *status quaestionis* of Lebedynsky (2011) and Haudry (2001), the genetic analysis of the Cavalli-Sforza group (Cavalli-Sforza *et al.* 2001, on R1a haplogroup of Y chromosome), the progress in archeology and comparative linguistics (Haudry cit., Martinet 1987, Villar 1997) disprove Renfrew's (1988) Balkan-Anatolian



**Tab. 1: Discs-shaped, Swastika-shaped and human figures with discs.** 1: Various locality of Kazakhstan (Samashev 1992); 2: Aimag of Zavkhan, Mongolia (Novgorodowa 1980); 3 Gegamskiy Khrebet, Armenia (Martirosyan Israelyan 1971); 4: Saimaly-Tach, Kazakhstan (Martynov Mariachev Abetekov 1992); 5(l): Backa Brastad, Bohuslän, Sweden (Abelin 2000); 5(r): Tossene, Bohuslän, Sweden (Bengtsson ed. 2002); 6: Askum Raå, Boushlän, Sweden (Bengtsson ed. 2002); 7: Kalleby, Bohuslän, Sweden (tracing by Dip-Valcamonica CCSP); 8: Asperberget, Bohuslän, Sweden (Milstreu Prohl ed. 1996); 9: Mont Bego, France (De Lumley 1996); 10: Carpene di Sello, Valcamonica, Italy (Sansoni 1987); 11: Luine, Valcamonica, Italy (Anati 1982b); 12: Paspardo, Valcamonica, Italy (tracing by Le Orme dell'uomo).

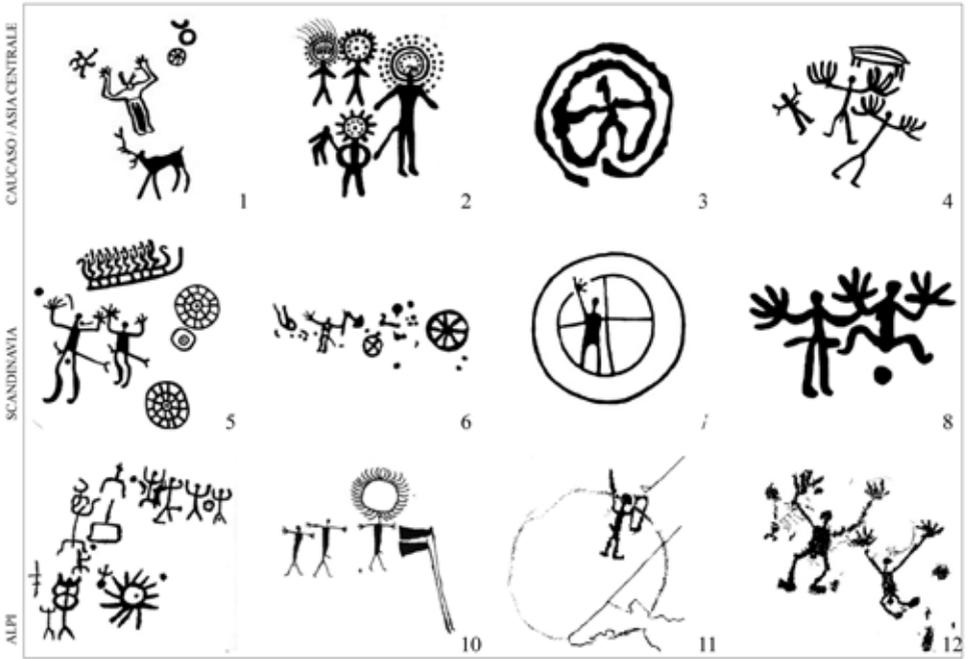
thesis, or the most fanciful Middle-Eastern, Northern, Paleolithic or Indian ones.

Basically the great lines traced by Gimbutas (1980) and, although to recalibrate, by Mallory (1989, 1997) and Dexter (et al. 1997) are confirmed, as well as at least some of those drawn by Dumézil: their work, too quickly and ideologically black-listed, in the view of the current data looks now more than pioneering. The result is the historical presence of a culture, or better a unitary cultural sequence, which holds the key features of Indo-Europeanism, a matrix which, with varying degrees of development, impairment and cultural assemblage, replicates in a three-millennial winning process in every direction.

Rock art, even being the main iconographic source of cycle, has been little considered so far even by its own researchers,

since they are on hold on the whole Indo-European *quaestio*. It should however be recognized to Anati the early intuition of the Indo-Europeanism of the stelae phenomenon (Anati 1986) and to central Asian colleagues a constant, I would say natural, tendency to link the prehistoric rock art of the area to the Indo-Europeanisation, including interesting parallels with what is testified by the oldest sources (Veda, Avesta) and by the local shamanic tradition (Samašev 1992; Martinov *et al.* 1992; Rozwadowsky 2004). I think it is time to fill this gap with wide synthesis assessments on Euro-Asian contexts, which, starting from the beginning of III - early II millennium BC, show indubitable thematic and symbolic convergences.

The prehistoric rock art, from the Chalcolithic to the Iron Age, in fact, shows a progressive and changing focus on weapons



**Tav.2: Human figures with discs and big-hands human figures.** 1: Yazyly, Gobustan, Azerbaijan (Dzhafarzade 1973); 2: Various locality of Kazakhstan (Marikovskii 1999); 3: Moynak, Kazakhstan (Samashev 1992); 4: Gegamskiy Khrebet, Armenia (Martirosyan 1981); 5: Askum Raä, Bohuslän, Sweden (Bengtsson ed.1998); 6: Flyhov, Boushlän, Sweden (Bertilsson ed.1989); 7: Backa Brastad, Bohuslän, Sweden (Abelin 2000); 8: Askum Raä, Bohuslän, Sweden (Abelin 2000); 9: Coren del Valento, Valcamonica, Italy (Anati 1982a); 10: Ossimo IX, Valcamonica, Italy (tracing by Le Orme dell'uomo); 11: Pagh-erina, Valcamonica, Italy (tracing by Dip-Valcamonica CCSP); 12: Cereto, Valcamonica, Italy (Anati 1982a).

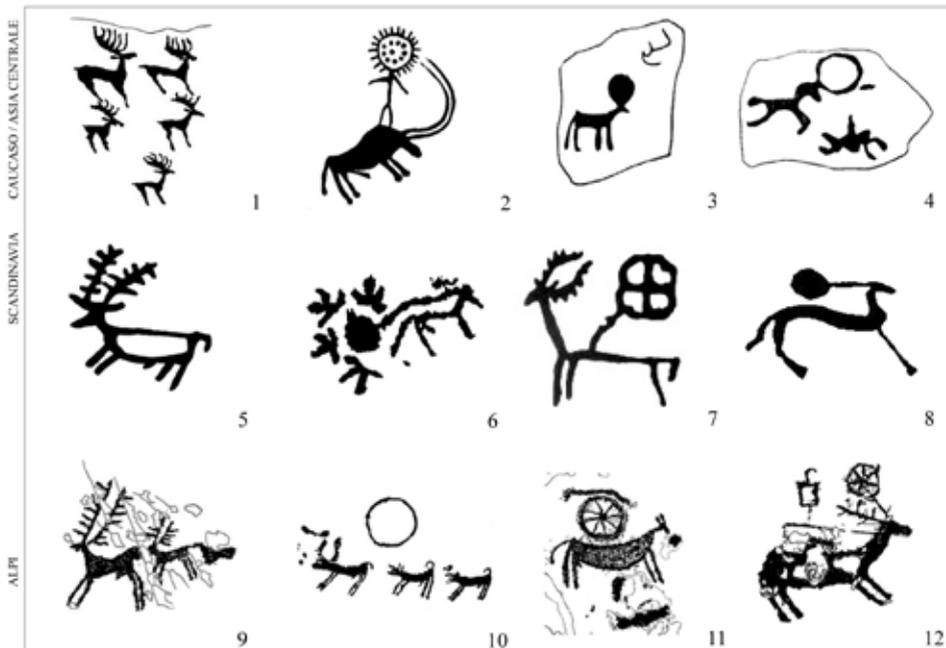
and warriors, circular shapes, some zoomorphic figures and carts, tools and structures; anywhere the proceed towards a proportional, realistic representation, with an individualistic and personalizing tone becomes more and more evident.

And while man (often ithyphallic) and his role are widespread, wherever the female figure, when recognizable, is progressively marginalized, confined to a few areas, such as the scenes of coupling (*topos* of the importance of a male role) or "worship" and the feminine itself seems at most transposed in particular symbolic elements. Instead the disarmed male figures, especially of orant-type, have at the same time a strong ritual emphasis.

This imperfect summary, deliberately beyond the regional peculiarities and the related continuation or addition of traditional

lines, gives us the picture of a very different world from what we see in Neolithic's iconography. A world ideologically ruled by masculine values in all of its aspects: we see the warrior, the hunter, the conductor of carts and ships, the plowman, the shepherd, the craftsman in the products of his art, the procreator in the act of fertilizing, the orant, the priest or the god that connects every aspect of creation.

Alongside, we see wild animals in the mythical world of the hunter, with a widespread emphasis on male deer, and among the domestics the horse, of purely male connotation, then the birds (typical of the Western regions) that are related to the celestial and probably funerary symbolic dimension. At the top we can find rounded, pointed or cruciate discs in close connection to male figures in uranian aspect. Further-



**Tav.3: Stags and animals with discs.** 1: Nikitinka, Kazakhstan (Samashev 1992); 2: Tamgaly, Kazakhstan (Jacobson 1993); 3-4: Chankyr-Kelya, Yelangash, Altay, Russia (Okladnikov 1981); 5: Asperberget, Bohuslän, Sweden (Milstreu Pröhl ed. 1996); 6: Kalleby, Bohuslän, Sweden (Sansoni Gavaldo Gastaldi 1999); 7: Kalleby, Bohuslän, Sweden (Sansoni Gavaldo Gastaldi 1999); 8: Fossumtorp, Bohuslän, Sweden (Milstreu Pröhl ed. 1999); 9: Zurla, Valcamonica, Italy (tracing by Dip-Valcamonica CCSP); 10: Seradina I, Valcamonica, Italy (tracing by Dip-Valcamonica CCSP); 11: Zurla, Valcamonica, Italy (tracing by Dip-Valcamonica CCSP); 12: Ronchi di Zir, Valcamonica, Italy (tracing by Dip-Valcamonica CCSP).

more, the scenes insist on the typically Chalcolithic frontal, vertical, ascending view of the stelae, which also possibly possesses a phallic symbology.

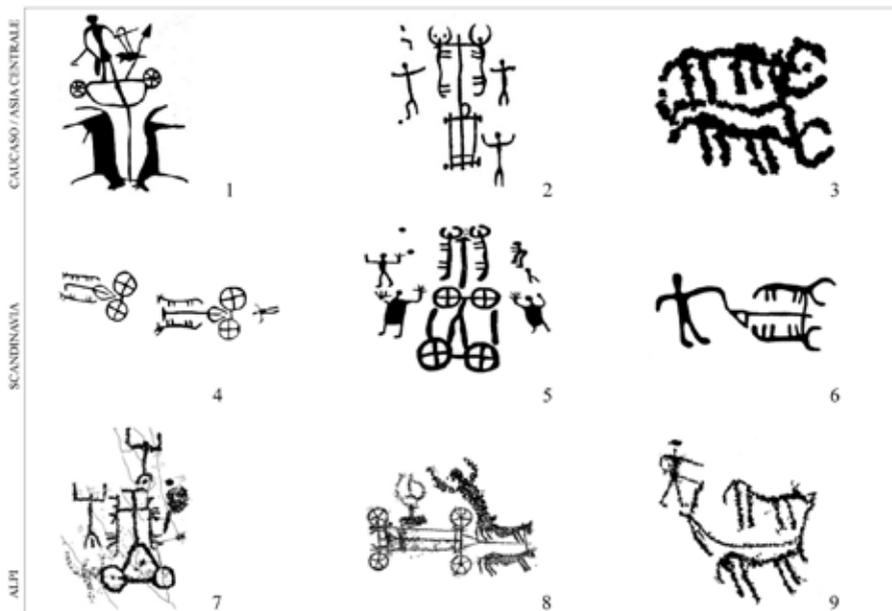
With all the necessary caution, these thematic characters seem to compose an extensive ideological set which occurs throughout the same time-stages and in the same areas of the great Indo-European expansion. A set that converges with what is revealed by ritual, essentially funeral, costumes of the corresponding archaeological cultures.

It follows a logical parallelism with what is highlighted by linguistic, symbolic-religious and paleogenetic researches, including, first and foremost, the macroscopic phenomenon of hybridization and regional particularization in the dynamics of the phases, which occurs in all the considered areas. And it happens so clearly, which

eventually leads to miss the phylogenetic dynamic that joins them all.

The linguistic studies are those that, despite the large, complex, open-ended problems, now appear more mature and relevant on the issue. They've identified, so far, a phonology, a lexicon and an inflectional morphology clearly Indo-European, proposing a branched development along three stages (Lebedynsky cit., Haudry cit.): 4) the "classic" version reconstructed on the basis of historical languages; 3) the "mature Indo-European" (West, 2007); 2) the previous version, based on the bifurcation of the Anatolian languages (and perhaps the Tocharian, from the early II millennium BC or older); 1) the original, undivided version of indefinable, but at least Chalcolithic date (IV- early III millennium BC).

The archaeological plan, in worthy, close observation by linguists, comforts and

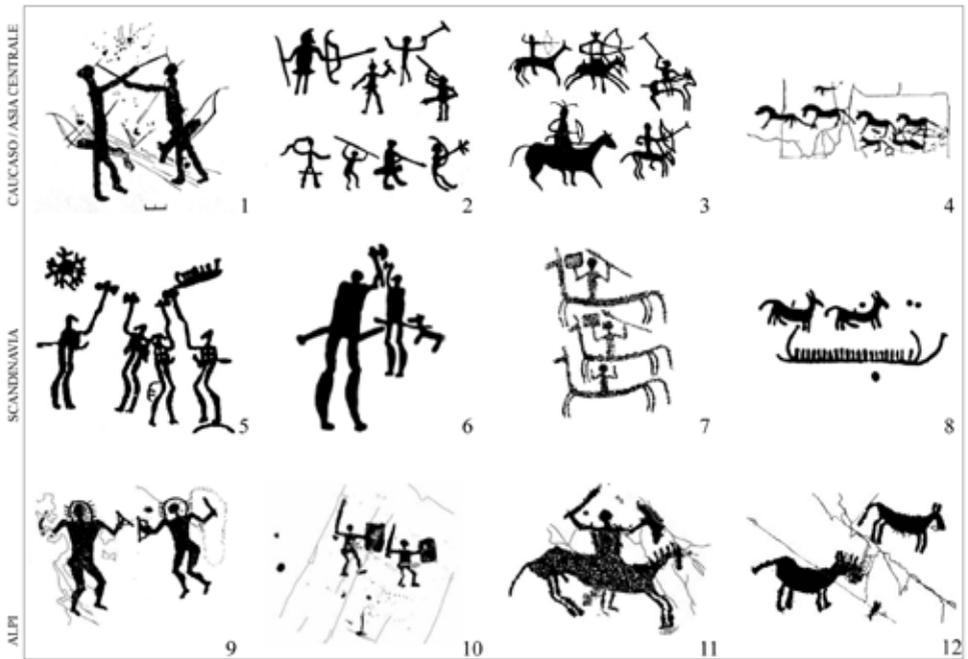


**Tav.4: Two and four wheeled-wagons and ploughing scenes.** 1: Yelangash valley, Altay, Russia (Vasilevskii 1986); 2: Syunik, Armenia (Pjaktin Martynov 1985); 3: Mt.Aragats, Armenia (tracing by Dip-Valcamonica CCSP from a photo by Khechoyan 2007); 4: Askum Raä, Bohuslän, Sweden (Bengtsson ed.2002); 5: Askum Raä, Bohuslän, Sweden (Bengtsson ed.2002); 6: Finnorp, Bohuslän, Sweden (tracing by Bengtsson); 7: Campanine, Valcamonica, Italy (tracing by Dip-Valcamonica CCSP); 8: Coren del Valento, Valcamonica, Italy (Van Berg-Osterrieth 1972); 9: Seradina I, Valcamonica, Italy (Anati 1982a).

directs that vision. Rock art gives similar results: if, borrowing the language method, we try to identify radicals (themes), suffixes (declination of the themes) and basic morphology (joints in the scene), we find well known concordance/similarities which are normally attributed to simple dialectic intercultural and multi-faceted exchange/influence. Reticular dialectic, certainly true, but if the Indo-Europeization is a reality, and it is, these concordances should be read (filtered) in view of an ideological emanator center of Chalcolithic age, which over a period of at least three millennia, with waves always more compromised/differentiated, permeated, winning the entire European continent and the Central Asia. The problem is to understand which are the authentic radical and which the morphology: a complex operation that requires data from parallel disciplines and even more requires

the courage of broad vision, extremely difficult in nowadays' general sectoral-analytical trend.

According to Meillet (1922) a term can be considered of IE origin if it appears in at least three distinct branches of the IE languages, which have to be non-contiguous and "isolated", i.e. without the possibility of "horizontal transmission"; applying this approach to rock art would certainly gain valuable information, but also considerable reliability problems, given the very selective (limited) number of rock art themes, the logic of symbolic language, and the sharing over multiple cycles of various ideograms. On the other hand, in certain cases it might happen the same phenomenon for which the Chinese ideogram *hanyu* can be understood in the identical way, but read differently in each of the ten Chinese linguistic/cultural groups. In rock and as-



**Tav.5: Warriors, duelling warriors, horsemen and horses.** 1: Sagyr, Kazakhstan (Samashev 1992); 2-3: Various locality of Altay district, Russia (Vasilevskii 1992); 4: Moynak, Kazakhstan (Samashev 1992); 5: Asperberget, Bohuslän, Sweden (Milstreu Pöhl ed.1996); 6: Fossum, Bohuslän, Sweden (Milstreu Pöhl ed.1999); 7: Tegneby, Bohuslän, Sweden (Milstreu Pöhl ed.2004); 8: Tossene, Bohuslän, Sweden (Bengtsson ed.2009); 9: Zurla, Valcamonica, Italy (tracing by Dip-Valcamonica CCSP); 10: Ronchi di Zir, Valcamonica, Italy (tracing by Dip-Valcamonica CCSP); 11: Ronchi di Zir, Valcamonica, Italy (tracing by Dip-Valcamonica CCSP); 12: Pagherina, Valcamonica, Italy (tracing by Dip-Valcamonica CCSP).

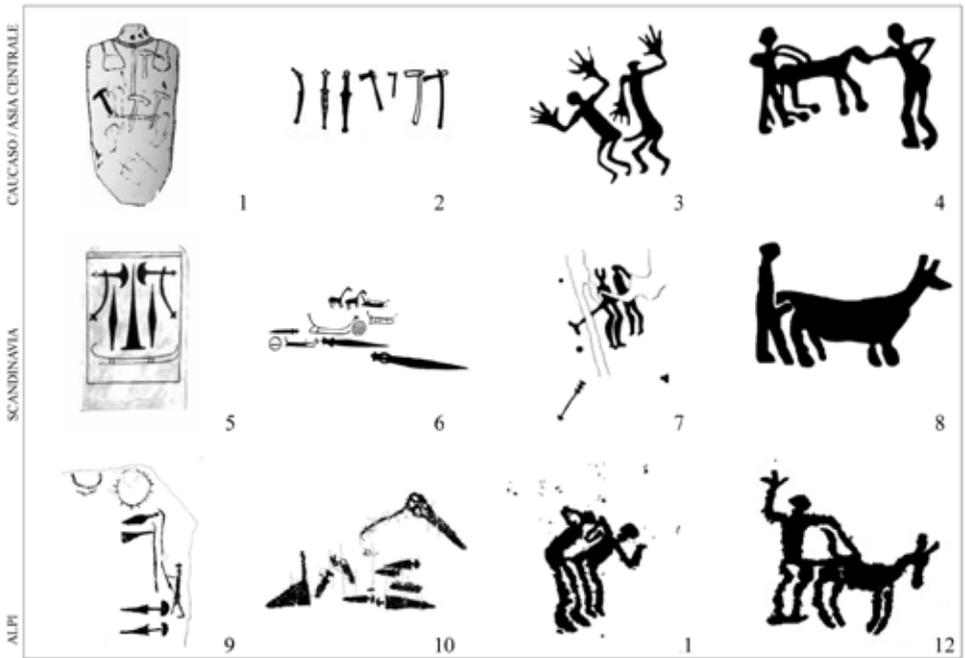
sociated iconography, a broader response is needed. The research should not be limited to the individual subject, but must include the morphologic set and thus the organic, the overall ensemble of different contexts. Tracking down the lowest common denominator can be a solid foundation in reconstructing the original ideological matrix.

The primary phenomenon is that of the stelae/engraved boulders dating to the Chalcolithic (III millennium BC), typical of the central-eastern strip from the Alps to the Ukrainian steppes, the one that shows greater adherence to the symbolism of weapons. This topic is too complex to be fully discussed here, so I'll just mention the rupestrian premises of the late IV millennium BC (Valcamonica, Mount Bego, French Midi, Wartbergkultur area) and the strong presence of an "antagonist" tradition in the Western-Atlantic context (from the late IV

millennium until the Bell-backer culture), albeit with special enclaves (Galicia).

The first engravings of this type appear in the Caucasus-Kazakh area at least in the III millennium BC, but the phenomenon of rock art is majestic during the Bronze Age. On the heels of the Bell-backer culture, with a peak around the middle of the II millennium BC, all the major European regions are involved in this change (with greater "resistance" in France and the UK).

Between the end of the Ancient - beginning of the Middle Bronze Age (or ABA2-MBA1, in central European terminology around the XVII-XV century BC) we see the first maximum of expansion, with significant rupestrian evidences in South-Scandinavian area, in the Iberian Peninsula, in the Alps and then in Central Asia, with likely influences up to the Central Sahara (early phase of the *Garamantes*, with carts



**Tav.6: Weapons and sexual scenes.** 1: Hamangia, Dobrugia, Romania (Telegin 1987); 2: Various locality of Mongolia (Nowgorodowa 1980); 3: Kernosivka, Ukraine (???); 4: Terekty, Kazakhstan (Medoev 1979); 5: Kivik, Skåne, Sweden (Winter 2001); 6: Ekenberg, Norrköping, Sweden (Burenhult 1973); 7: Tanum, Bohuslän, Sweden (Bengtsson Olsson ed.2000); 8: Kville, Bohuslän, Sweden (tracing by Milstreu); 9: Caven II, Valtellina, Italy (tracing by CCSF); 10: Foppe di Nadro, Valcamonica, Italy (tracing by CCSF); 11: Zurla, Valcamonica, Italy (tracing by Dip-Valcamonica CCSF), 12: Coren del Valento, Valcamonica, Italy (Anati 1982a).

and horses in “flying gallop”). Some of the above-mentioned subjects become dominant and grow continuously, with progressive regional change, up to the second peak, around the Late Bronze Age (from the XII century BC) - beginning of the Iron Age (from the IX century BC) and thus throughout the following period, until historical times. The recent Conference in Tanum (2012) highlighted the common themes and common cultural basis between the Central-Alps and Scandinavia; particularly interesting was the prevalence, in both the considered areas, of the representation of unhold weapons and discs in the early stages of the Nordic Bronze Age and the coeval ABA2-MBA1 in the Central-Alpine area. Moreover, a parallel emphasis on armed men and a related iconographic set have also been identified: two and four wheels carts, plowing, footprints, orants and big-

hands figures, scenes of coupling, schematic signs and so on.

Expanding the dialogue with the third largest rock art area of the Bronze - early Iron Age, i.e. the Central Asian region, we notice even with a brief overview (considering the plurality/diversity of contexts, from the North-Caucasian to the Altai) the emergence of the same main subjects: two and (rarer) four-wheel carts, discs with radial or other type of interior decoration, warriors, orants with raised or orthogonal arms, including many ithyphallic men and big-hand figures, scenes of coupling, schematic signs; huge prominence is given to animal figures, especially deer, horse and wild goat with long, curved horns. Among the warriors there is absolute prevalence of archers, mostly in hunting scenes, but there are also figures with swords, maces and spears; shields and unhold weapons are rare, while

duelists and raiders are well-represented and very significant. As in Alpine and Scandinavian areas, choral scenes are frequent and tend to be associated in standard modules.

These three rupestrian contexts are very clearly characterized, being the result of different histories and environments, but the background, the ideological root is equally similar; this original seed brings the uranic and the warrior/heroic clichés that the archaeological record and the historical-religious data remind us to be the fundamental Indo-European characters. A cultural root that, in line with the most recent acquisitions, coincides very little with the ethnic factor and even with the language: the area of Valcamonica and Valtellina expresses, for example, non-Indo-European languages and the same can presumably be said for the Central Sahara of the first inscriptions.

### Epistemological conclusion

Following Meillet's rule, even with the above limitations, may open new research frontiers; frontiers in fact variously extendable to other continental contexts, first of all the Iberian one: these are few, simple rupestrian radicals, which taken in isolation can find countless of parallels outside the Indo-European space and time but which, if morphologically considered as a whole, as a set of context, certainly offer new insights on the theme.

There is no place here to give other significant details (which study is a work in progress), but only to initialize the problem, so I already take for granted the severe criticism of many colleagues. The call, on such a broad topic, is to open up to a wide-ranging research and not with a single disciplinary perspective, but in a fleet with all the parallel/convergent others. It is a praise of synthesis, the result of a myriad of analysis, which we must have the courage to embrace: not an optional, but a primary task of the historical and human sciences.

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