

Places of worship in Valcamonica from Prehistory to the Christianization of the area

The Valcamonica (Brescia) belongs in a special way to the Italian and European archaeological landscape in consideration of its amazing wealth of ancient remains, as witnessed by its most known and much studied petroglyphs. In recent years the discovery and excavation of several sites led to considerably extend the framework of knowledge on the population of the territory between prehistoric and Roman times. Among the most interesting situations lie some places of worship, which reveal an extraordinary continuity of attendance that, in some cases, goes so far as to the modern age.

Specific of the Chalcolithic are ceremonial centres characterized by vast open areas, monumentally organized through large carved monoliths, usually ordered and aligned. In recent years, a series of excavations carried out in middle Valcamonica brought to light some of these contexts, contributing to the knowledge of the rituals that took place there and clarifying timing and mode of attendance.

At Cemmo Capo di Ponte, in the Pian delle Greppe location, the ceremonial centre hub was in the two large boulders engraved during the Copper Age (Cemmo 1 and 2), which, early in the twentieth century, provided first elements of knowledge on the *Camuni* rock art. This large glacial basin area in the past was delimited by a semicircular wall that probably defined a sacred *temenos* space, encircling the two boulders and other *stelae* originally inserted vertically in the ground, which the excavation found in a large pit, possible relation to the decommissioning of the area during the High Middle Ages. The place of worship was attended, it is not clear if without interruption, even in the Iron Age and Roman times, when they made new arrangements and renovation

of sacred space. However it is certain that during the Roman Age some *stelae* were still in the ground and visible, thus committing the sacredness of the place. The deactivation, which occurred through the destruction of the engraved boulders and the resulting burying in a pit, took place around the sixth century A.D., coinciding with the Christianization of the area, when a rural baptistery church was built nearby¹.

The same surprising continuity of attendance was recorded at Ossimo, in the Pat location, where the Copper Age ceremonial centre extended on a natural terrace, not far from contemporary places of worship at Anvòia and Passagròp, located at a distance of about 400 meters between them and in a visual relationship. The chalcolithic site of Pat included *stelae* alignments and *menhir*-like stones (about twenty), placed at the centre of two areas with *tumuli*. The area was also frequented in the Iron Age (between IX-VIII and II-I century B.C.), when not far away a village consisting of half-buried alpine houses was active and small votive fires were lit in front of the remaining standing *stelae*².

In addition to ceremonial centres with engraved *stelae*, we suppose that several other different forms of worship found expression in the valley.

At Capo di Ponte, at a key point of the territory controlling the mandatory passage towards the upper valley, the site of Dos dell'Arca was probably a sacred place: an excavation conducted there in the 1960's by the Centro Camuno di Studi Preistorici unearthed structures and equipment dating from the Bronze Age to the Roman times. On the site, situated on a hill not far from a stream, there

are among several rocks with engravings, some in which we recognize the word DIEU (= god) inside a circle. At the highest point of the hill several jugs with pre-Roman inscriptions and a burial with skeletons remains of a number of individuals were found, surrounded by a sort of "sacred walk"³.

Not far from the hill of Dos dell'Arca, at the location known as "Le Sante", stands the church dedicated to Sante Faustina e Liberata and San Marcello, who according to popular devotion saved the village from an avalanche, stopping with their hands a large rock falling onto the hamlet. Perhaps in everlasting memory of the miracle six hands are imprinted on a large boulder leaning against the church which was built in the early centuries after year 1000 A.D. in a place of ancient sacred attendance at the foot of the resort of Naquane, the main area of rock art in the territory.

The archaeological site of "Le Sante", excavated in 1976 by the Centro Camuno di Studi Preistorici and initially interpreted as a necropolis, was characterized by a great area for burnt offerings, surrounded by a stone fence in the kind of *Alpine Brandopferplatz* active between the second Iron Age and the late Roman period (III century B.C. - IV A.D.). The excavation resulted in the recovery of abundant ceramic, glass and metal wares, especially jugs and bowls made in fine Roman ceramics (terra sigillata and thin walls). The skeletal analysis also enabled to find out how the site was used in a funerary cult, where ceremonies in honour of ancestor-heroes were probably held⁴.

The earliest antecedents of such a cult can be traced to the ceremonial centres of the Copper Age. In the megalithic sanctuary at Ossimo-Anvòia, over an artificial pile of stones (*cairn*), human skeletal remains were found belonging to at least two individuals, imported from a distant burial place and deposited with a ritual that involved the use of fire, in a sort of homage to ancestors raised to the level of deity or hero⁵.

The same connection between megalithic shrines and funerary cults of ancestors / heroes has been observed at Ossimo-Pat, where the area with the standing *stelae* and *menhir*-like stones of the Copper Age connects to two areas with *tumuli* and burial arrangements⁶.

Beyond Valcamonica the presence of human bones in worship areas is found in other contexts in the Alps, as confirmed by the oldest level of attendance of Campi Neri di Cles in Val di Non (Trento)⁷. The most interesting case belonging to the Iron Age is represented by the area used for burnt offerings at Rungger Egg (Bolzano), where 80% of the collected bones are human⁸.

A comparable situation has been recorded at the site of Noafer Bühl, above Gries, where piles of stones have been brought to light, along with a drywall, a massive concentration of mostly human calcined bone fragments, and bronze and ceramic materials, fractured and exposed to high temperatures, interpreted as evidence of a "place of funeral worship" frequented during the Iron Age⁹.

Human bones have also been found at Wilten, near Innsbruck, in an incineration area with a massive concentration of ash (*Aschenaltar?*) and burnt and crushed material, and at Kundl (Inntal) where the calcined human remains are amalgamated with ceramic and metal elements¹⁰.

As for the Roman Valcamonica, the correlation with the funerary domain has been recorded also in Borno, in the Calanno location, where close to a Roman necropolis was discovered and partially revealed a sanctuary with Iron Age levels of attendance. Located along the line connecting the Ossimo-Borno plateau to the lower valley, near a water course, this Roman building, consisting of several rooms with plastered and painted walls, replaced during the Augustan time a previous outdoors native local shrine. At the site the object of worship was a female deity, to be identified with Minerva, recorded by two inscriptions, heir to the functions and powers of an earlier water related indigenous entity. In addition to Minerva, the god Mercury was worshipped, as suggested by two dedications to the god recovered reutilized in the main Christian buildings in the area. Mercury, as is common knowledge, in the Greek and Roman world besides being patron of commerce, merchants and travellers, is also a psychopomp deity, guarantor and guide to the journey of the deceased in the afterlife. In the Gallo-Roman world sanctuaries in close proximity to the burial areas are in fact frequently dedicated to

Mercury. The Roman gods thus inherited and continued the use of powers of local deities, responsible for the protection of the rites of passage in all circumstances, procreation, age, life and death¹¹.

The cult of Minerva returns to Valcamonica also at Breno, in the Spinera locality, in what was undoubtedly the most important sacred site in the valley at this time. Built in the Augustan and restored in the Flavian times, the sanctuary was located along the banks of the Oglio river, next to a rocky cliff showing a large number of caves and tunnels dug by the water course and rich in natural springs.

The oldest evidence refers to an open-air cultural complex, organized in the plateau between the tuff cliff and the river, where it expands into a large meander. The nature of the place, with singular landscape features, raised since ancient times a sense of mystery and a strong perception of sacredness in the mid-valley residents.

To the sporadic attending since the beginning of the early Iron Age followed, around the seventh century BC, an initial organization

Fig. 2. The monumental building erected in the Roman Period in Breno-Spinera (Archivio Fotografico Soprintendenza per I Beni Archeologici della Lombardia)



Fig. 1. Bronze pendant-amulet from Breno-Spinera (Archivio Fotografico Soprintendenza per I Beni Archeologici della Lombardia)

of the area with the purpose of worship. The ceremony at this stage resulted in the deposition of a limited number of materials in small



Fig. 3. Cult image of Minerva from the Roman sanctuary of Breno-Spinera (Archivio Fotografico Soprintendenza per I Beni Archeologici della Lombardia)

cavities. Between the late sixth and early fifth century B.C. the Spinera basin was structured with a terrace wall, large altars, different cooking surfaces and a large elliptical enclosure. The ritual involved the repeated lighting of fires, animal sacrifice, offering donations and repetition of libation practices, in which water played obviously an important role, as suggested by the abundance of drinking vessels.

The characteristics of worship closely compare the site to the alpine votive fires (*Alpine Brandopferplätze*), especially characteristic of the Rhaetian area between Bronze Age and Romanization¹². Among the offerings some metal objects stand out, showing decorative motifs very much alike to the rock carvings. The most valuable object is a pendant-amulet dating from the fifth century B.C., consisting of a bronze plaque depicting a schematic figure on a solar boat with heads of waterfowl terminations, repeating motifs popular in the Alps and Italian regions, and recalls at the same

Fig. 4. Altar of the Iron Age sanctuary of Breno-Spinera. (Archivio Fotografico Soprintendenza per I Beni Archeologici della Lombardia).



time images carved on rocks at Campanine di Cimbergo and Naquane di Capo di Ponte. The figure is recognized as the image of the deity worshipped in place¹³.

The sanctuary, strategically located on the road system in the area, was part of a network of systematically arranged places of religious gathering in the valley. In social and cultural terms it is widely recognized the important rallying function performed everywhere by the sanctuaries in the territory, as meeting places, boundaries and communication points for mediating models and interests of different communities, taking shape as "essential operational entities of ancient societies" (Pacciarelli Sassatelli 1997, p. 13).

In Valcamonica the location of the sanctuary of Breno, behind the natural barrier of mount Barberino – Castello di Breno hill and near the connection with Val Trompia and Val Sabbia, together with that of Borno, along the road linking the valley bottom to Val di Scalve, in an area of intense mining, and also that of Capo di Ponte, strategically located, close to the river and the transition between middle and high valley, represent centres with distinctive characters of meeting places and cultural aggregation, as well as forms of demarcation and strategic control of the territory. The Roman overlapping and reinterpretation of these native religious centres was an effective form of granular control of the territory. The importance at the ideological level of the Spinera sanctuary as community sanctuary in the cultural substrate was therefore well understood and skilfully exploited by the Romans, perhaps one of the reasons why they made the decision to found the city as a symbol of authority on the not far away valley, in today's Cividate Camuno plain, and to monumentalize the Spinera basin in compliance with the proto-historic structures, gradually succeeding in transferring the contents of the ancient worship into a new religious code¹⁴.

In the Augustan age, coinciding with the founding of the Roman city of Cividate Camuno, at Spinera a monumental building was erected on a podium, with arcaded wings, a large central courtyard and interior halls (*aulae*) decorated with frescoes and mosaics. The dedication of the site is definitely re-

lated to Minerva, whose cult image, a Pentelic marble statue, copy of the Athena *Hygieia* by Pyrrhus, was found in the central cell of the complex. The goddess inherited and interpreted the characters of the more ancient cult, the underworld dimension and the prerogatives related to nature, water, but also life and fertility. The native sanctuary and the outdoor Roman building lived together until the Flavian age when the ancient structures were dutifully covered and the cult moved permanently into the Roman building. The sanctuary was then active until the end of the fourth century A.D., when with the arrival of Christianization the structures were subjected to systematic destruction¹⁵.

Recollection of the presence of a shrine devoted to Minerva, however, long survived in local memory. The local millennial cult of the female eventually turned into the Christian veneration of the Virgin Mary, which had a church built near the river and the bridge crossing it has always been known as the "Minerva bridge"¹⁶.

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NOTES

¹ Poggiani Keller, 2000, p. 236-239; Poggiani Keller, 2004a, p. 146-147; Poggiani Keller, 2006; Poggiani Keller, 2009.

² Poggiani Keller, 2002, p. 381-387; Poggiani Keller, 2004a, p. 147-149; Poggiani Keller, 2004b; Poggiani Keller, 2006, p. 249-252.

³ Anati, 1968.

⁴ Solano, 2010a.

⁵ Fedele 2007, p. 57-62.

⁶ Poggiani Keller, 2004a, p. 148-149; Poggiani Keller, 2006, p. 249-252.

⁷ Endrizzi, Degasper, Marzatico 2009, p. 275.

⁸ Gleirscher, Nothdurfter, Schubert, 2002, p. 33-35.

⁹ Mahlknecht, 2002.

¹⁰ Höck, Zanier, 2002.

¹¹ Solano, 2010b.

¹² More information on *Alpine Brandpferplätze* in Gleirscher, Nothdurfter, Schubert 2002; Steiner, 2007; Endrizzi, Degasper, Marzatico 2009.

¹³ A complete study about the pendant-amulet of Breno-Spinera is in Rossi (ed.) 2005.

¹⁴ More information on the sanctuary of Breno in the Iron Age in Solano 2010c.

¹⁵ Rossi (ed.) 2010.

¹⁶ Giorgi, 2010.

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