

Mountain Worship

From Prehistoric Alpine Cults to Mythical Cosmologies

Local history may remain confined to its own province and reveal little in and of itself, but when viewed in a larger context, given adequate time-and-frame comparisons, it may open up windows of insight into a world vision where that situation belongs as part of the whole picture, revealing a constellation which, together with others, makes up a universe.

Historical criteria have long since overcome the dichotomy between the official history laid out by the upper classes and based on major events, and a history of the lowly, the folks whose only voice was an unwritten code that got lost in time or is vaguely traceable in oral reports from indirect sources.

When comparison among signs or reports from a particular place is continuous and matches the lines of the great events, when the microcosmos meet with a broader vision, then we can read history in a coherent way.

For this reason a number of minor signs found in and near Val Savioere must be considered parts of a much larger and complex trend that may be linked to the study of other epochs, sometimes very ancient, and places of like morphology, though geographically far away.

The latest book by Umberto Sansoni, with a contribution by Silvana Gavaldo, titled *La sacralità della montagna* [Mountain Worship] – Val Savioere, the Alps, the Mountains of the Gods – (published by Edizioni del Centro-Cleto e Faenna) studies the expressions of the sacred, as manifested in mountain areas, starting with our nearby case and continuing on throughout the Alpine range, moving to the Mediterranean areas and as far as to other continents. This article outlines the main features of the text, with no preten-



Fig. 1. Val Savioere from a map by Abraham Ortelio of 1500, detail

sion to substitute the reading of the book, indispensable for a thorough investigation of the topic.

Val Savioere

The town of Savioere dell'Adamello has actively promoted researches and initiatives for years to increase knowledge of its own territory.

The finds reveal this valley was an ancient passageway for the exploitation of resources, but also – and this is what interests us – a number of signs evince traces of rituals that took place over the millennia. Such traces, varying at places and from time to time, are definitely related to other occurrences

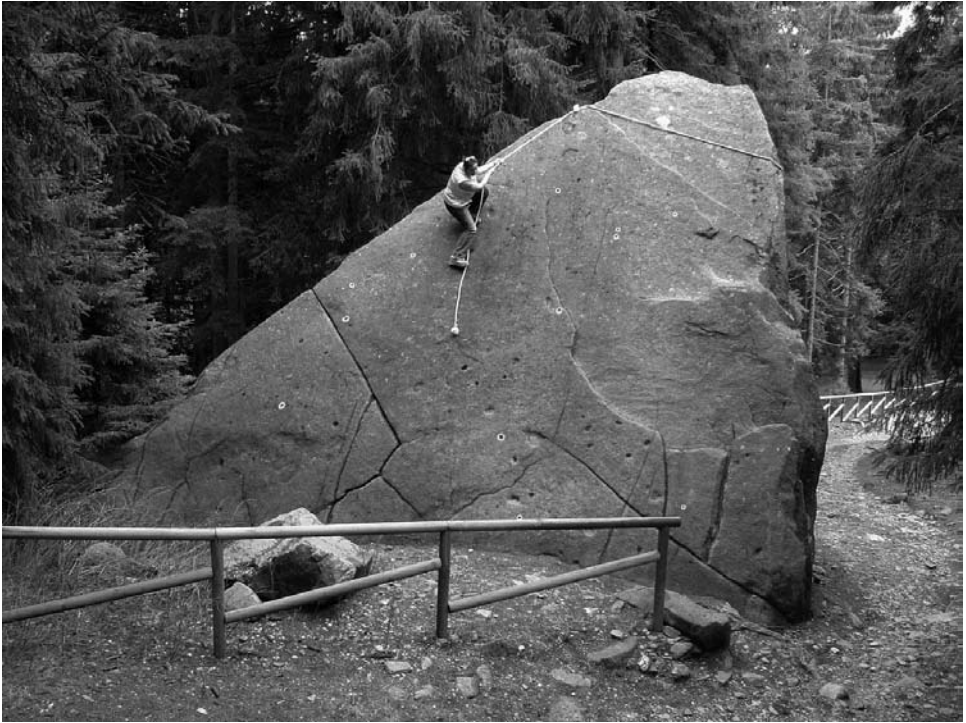


Fig. 2. Plot Campana site. The big pyramid rock standing out

in broader cultural contexts in the Alpine area (Fig. 1).

Local findings include a Neolithic axe at Berzo Demo and a series of rock art sites, both figurative and schematic, especially at Androla and Loa. Schematic art is also found in other areas, for example at Plot Campana, where legends tell of apparitions, such as the devil, or of babies being born beneath a rock (Fig. 2). This may evoke fertility rites of ancient pagan origin, which were often protracted in time. And near the adjacent hill, where a fortified structure was possibly founded in the Bronze Age, there is a well called *Pozzo delle Zane*, whose name betrays the memory of feminine mythological figures linked to the waters, widely known in the Alpine range (Aguane, Naquane, Gane). Silvana Galvaldo, writing the chapter about the researches carried out in Val Savio, also points out the possible derivation from *Puteum Dianae*, and in any case puts the worshipping of water in relation to the

feminine sphere. More schematic engravings exist around Lake Arno, Dos Curù, Pian della Regina, and Brata. Outstanding are the protohistoric inscriptions in North-Etruscan or Rhaetian alphabet at Loa and Dos Curù, at an elevation of 2,000 m, where an erratic boulder shows the longest written sequence ever found in the area, and where the digs led by the Archaeological Superintendence of Lombardy have spotted a settlement, at the moment of uncertain dating.

The Findings at Lake Arno (Fig. 3)

A priceless find occurred on occasion of the work done here in the early 20th century for the Lake Arno power station: an axe and two bronze bodkins were brought to light. But alas, as often happened at that time, when finds were accidental, we have no precise data about the overall context, nor details that would be useful to understand the objects and their significance (Fig. 4 and 5).



Fig. 3. View of Lake Arno

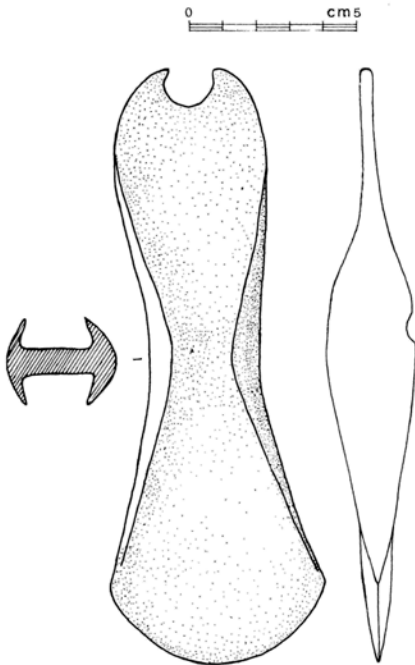


Fig. 4. and 5. Tracing and photo of the axe and the two bodkins from the Bronze Age found in 1911 in the Lake Arno bed (tracing by De Marinis 1972, photo tracing by Sgabussi 1997)

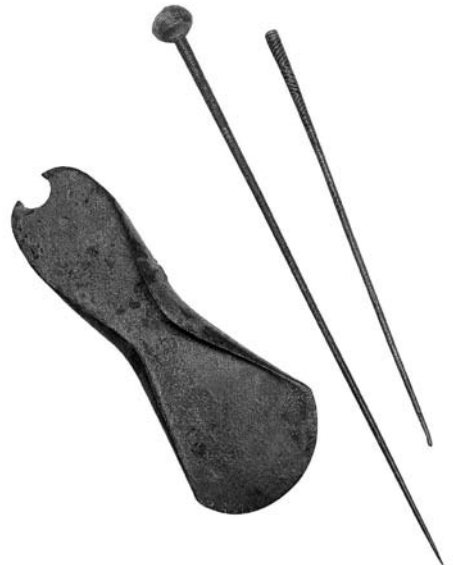




Fig. 6. Images of the Sciliar (Mt. Castello) with the votive pyre site on the summit (Gleirscher 1991)

The axe is datable to the 16th or 15th century B.C. and the two bodkins come from closer times, the 13th and 13th-12th centuries B.C., that is to say a phase between the Middle and the Late Bronze Age. In this period, behaviours of this kind, with depositions in water, near mountain passes and at high elevation, do occur over a vast section of the Alpine range. A flourishing number of recent archaeological acquisitions give us a fairly broad picture of such ritual acts in a scenery of mountains, peaks, ridges.

High Altitude Offerings in Waters

High elevation depositions, occurring mostly in the Central Alpine area, and depositions in water common to other areas as well, result from voluntary offers of various objects, often valuable and with votive purport, in selected sites where precise rituals took place. There are also cases of simultaneous depositions in water and at high elevation, or in the presence of caves, and in every case, even when they belong in different contexts, they are evidently linked to the elements

of nature and to a countryside defining a “geography of worshipping” according to standards that current research is now close to recognising.

The ceremonial procedures that took place in these sites may be difficult to reconstruct and may have varied in time, changing from place to place and relative to the referential cultures, but a bottom line can be traced in shared actions and meanings.

The cultural substrate of the people that in various ways and degrees experienced mountain territories so intensely takes us back to remote times, when Copper Age Europe (4th-3rd millennia B.C.) identified itself with the conceptions of the bearers of metal technologies, the wheel and the plough. Fire is one of the main elements in the ideological-religious aspects of this phase and onwards.

Speaking of fire, one of the most extraordinary discoveries in Val Camonica occurred at the site where the shrine dedicated to the goddess Minerva was built in magnificent style in the second half of the 1st century

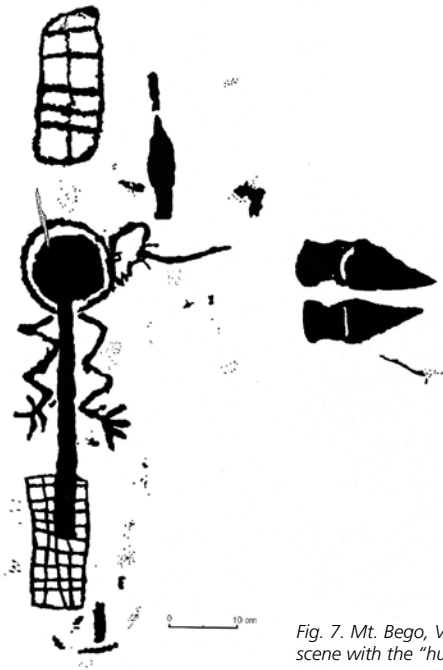


Fig. 7. Mt. Bego, Valley of the Marvels (Maritime Alps). Detail with a tracing of the scene with the "human figure with zigzagging arms"



Fig. 8. Bronze plaque (5th century B.C.) from the votive pyre in front of the Minerva shrine, Breno (revised photo Rossi 2005)

A.D. at the Spinera site near Breno. Recent digs have brought to light a pre-existing cult place used by the Camunians since the 6th century B.C. with similar behaviour patterns to those ascribable to the various contexts of the Central-Eastern Alpine areas. We are witnessing a well-defined typology of stone-made altars or embankments used for votive pyres, where fires were lit and offerings were left, so much so that the sites still show heaps of burnt objects, among which remains of sacrificed animal bones, cereals, pottery, decorative articles, little statues, weapons. These structures, in general, originated from the Bronze Age, to proceed in the Iron and were still used until the early Roman phase in this particular area.

Some pyres are placed in very high spots, even above 2,500 metres in the Sciliar massif, while others, like the one at Breno, are next to caves and spring waters that were bestowed with beneficial properties. (Fig. 6 and 7).

In this latter site, the finding of a bronze plaque of fine make, datable to the 5th century B.C., reveals references to vast cultural

models from Central Italy and the Adriatic coast that permeated Val Camonica. This artefact contains schematic elements in its upper part, an anthropomorphic figure with raised arms, as well as elements of marked naturalism, as in the lower part which is made up of a vessel with bird-like winged ends. The indigenous deity revered here is probably feminine and closely linked to the cult of waters. This figure was absorbed into the next historical phase by the goddess Minerva, according to the well-known manner of Roman *interpretatio* (Fig. 8). This process was supported by an "Italic spirituality of Mediterranean imprint" as Filli Rossi rightly observes. In this situation two elements can be considered parts of a customary pattern in the broad cultural sphere: grottoes with the presence of waters were deemed sacred, and the cult site was still used as such with continuity in the event of changing or overlapping but different religious reference. The characteristics of the previous deity were not suppressed, but the new figure generally took up where the other one left off, to avoid a cultural loss that would have been

irremediable and senseless. Another example of the same trend can be seen on the summit of Mont'Isola, at 600 m, where a Roman sacellum was substituted by the shrine of the *Madonna della Ceriola*, a figure that appeared miraculously in a grotto, according to a legend from the Christian reformation of the site, with a divestiture of the preceding deity. The present shrine overlooks all the surroundings, the vast mountain scenery around the lake and the gentle downgrade toward the moraine hills to the south.

Still in the Alpine area, there are mountains which preserve memory of ancient cults, for instance Mt. Bego, on the Italian-French border (root: Beg and the similar Pen and Bec, peak) with a great display of rock art, in particular from the Copper and the early Bronze Age (3rd and early 2nd millennium B.C.). Here, in a very inspiring setting at high elevations between 2,000 and 2,700 metres, with frequent outbursts of violent thunderstorms with lightning and bolts, among the figures stand out characters with zigzagging arms that may well represent some uranic deities of the thunderbolt (Fig. 7 and 9).

Also in relation to a local mountain cult, consider the word of Livio on the summit of *Sacro Poenino* and the historic devotion to *Juppiter Poeninus*, manifested on the mountain passes of Piccolo and Gran S. Bernardo, where Jupiter absorbs the earlier deity; but several more peaks dedicated to Jupiter are known, to mention one for all Mt. Albano, the seat of *Juppiter Latiaris* and the worshipping reference for the Confederation of Latin peoples. The Greek religion, an indisputable reference for the parallels that we are pointing out, places the seat of the gods on Mt. Olympus, rising to an elevation of 2,917 m, and Zeus himself was believed to be born on Mt. Ida or Lyceum, towering on the island of Crete and on Arcadia. Countless are the mountains dedicated to gods and the shrines built on high grounds. One can see how the masculine, uranic or celestial deities, with powerful attributes such as the thunderbolt and the axe, occupy the highest levels of the Pantheon, both in hierarchical status and in the location of their homes. They rule over the atmosphere and its intense manifestations, while at once they hand



Fig. 9. Mt. Bego

down their beneficial, fecundating power to the Earth.

Eastern Uranic and Mountain Deities

In the Near East we meet ancient cultures that imprinted their matrix onto the development of entire historical civilisations. *Teshup*, the main Hurrian deity, and *Iskur*, a Hittite deity, are, among many others, "gods of the storm" and fecundators, guarantors of covenants, both depicted with thunderbolt and axe or an axe-hammer, setting foot on two mountains, just like the Syrian-Phoenician *Hadad* and *Baal*, which the Greek turned into Zeus.

In Persia, mountain top ceremonies were dedicated to the supreme god *Ahura Mazda*, with the aid of the sacred fire (*Atar*), the earthly manifestation of the god. From the Vedic texts, the foundations of the three religious systems of India – Brahmanism, Buddhism and Hinduism – we can grasp the concepts at the base of the Oriental Indo-European sphere, stemming from the same



Fig. 10. Shiva Nataraja, after defeating a demon, creates the world by dancing on Mt. Kailasa (bronze from the 12th century, revised by Morretta 1982)

roots as the ones of European cultures. From the broad survey of deities intimately related to the mountain tops, this article can only hint at two examples: *Indra*, possessing lightning (*Vairia*) aided by the *Maruts*, warriors armed with axes, spears, lightning, a very ancient version of the "god of the storm"; and *Parvati*, the "goddess of the Mountain", daughter of the Himalayas and closely related to Shiva, himself a "Lord of the Mountain", whose dance on Mt. Kailasa created the cosmos (Fig. 10 and 11). Finally, the god of Israel manifests himself to Moses on Mt. Horeb in the form of a burning shrub to tell him he is the chosen one to lead the Israeli from Egypt to the Promised Land and on Mt. Sinai, where he gives him the tables of the law. The god is announced by a thick cloud, thunders and lightning, the very features that recall those of the uranic deities we have met so far. The encounter with Moses, mediator between God (*Javhé*) and his people, takes place on the peak, which the man must climb, with everything symbolically related to the ascent. Such course

is, in every religion, a physical and symbolic journey, just like the steps leading towards initiation, or knowledge, or a break-through of the earthly dimension, to reach the level of perfection where spirit prevails over matter. This is the way of the hero and the ascetic, whose seats are located in extreme places, where they, thanks to meditation in solitude, can come near to the Supreme Being. This is masterfully told in the great Indian poem *Mahâbhârata*, where *Aryuna* is said to be climbing to the Himalayas because "only in the heights of the mountain he could have obtained the divine vision".

Cosmic Mountains

Among major cultures, mountains are the real or mythical places central to their world view, the centre or focal point of cosmic geography. In *Edda*, a Germanic poem that unveils the ancient beliefs of the Northern people, Mt. *Himinbjörg* is described as "placed on the sky boundary near the end of the bridge, where *Bifröst* (rainbow) goes toward



Fig. 11. *La Bosca (Val Camonica)*, armed figure with "wheeled" head, another likely representation of a deity equivalent to Jupiter-Taranis (revised by Fossati 1997)

the sky" where the link with the celestial realm takes place through the atmospheric element symbolic of conjunction. In mythology we find the sacred ash tree *Yggdrasil*, whose trunk links the foliage to the roots, representing the sky and the earth: this is a high expression of the cosmic axis along which sky, earth and underworld are joined, where the passage between various regions and the cosmic dimension is possible. The mountain is bestowed with the same kind of value, its apex reaching into the celestial sphere and its terrestrial base often leading to the underworld.

The mountain may be attributed with manifold symbolic systems: in the realm of transcendence, the upper sphere is charged with sacredness and high altitude is linked to the superhuman; in the divine province the mountain is related to the centre, a divine place, the heart of creation; in a cosmologic vision, the mountain is located at the centre

of the world, it is its generative pivot, the navel, *omphalos*, of the world. The Palestinian Mt. *Tabor* may derive its name from *tabb r*, with this meaning, and Mt. *Garizim* is also called "the navel of the Earth" (*tabb r eres*). The central point of creation may be a summit, we've seen it with Shiva on *Kailasa*, and we are familiar with the Christian genesis of Adam on Eden/Golgotha, or with the Buddhist tradition according to which the beginning of the world occurs when the Buddha reaches the cosmic summit.

In China Mt. *Kun-Lun* is the pivot of the quadripartite cosmic space, at the corners of which the four pillar mountains stand out. In Japan the mountain is the axis connecting the sky, the earth and marine waters, *Fuji Yama* being the centre of cults par excellence. Hinduism places the house of the gods on Mt. *Meru*, in alignment with the North Star and a model for Hindu or Buddhist temples, which symbolically reproduce its shape (Fig. 12). The Avesta and other sacred texts of the *Arya* (Persians and Medes) celebrate Mt. *Elburz* as a cosmic tree, the origin of everything, with terrestrial roots and the summit growing like a treetop to reach into the sky, while the planets spin all around. In the Middle East, in the Sumerian-Accadian area, Mt. *Kur* is the seat of the gods and of *Enlil*, the main uranic deity; while the top of Mt. *Kur* reaches the sky and at its base the underworld opens up, according to a dualistic polarity which divides opposite zones. In the Islamic texts the cosmic mountain par excellence is the *Qâf*, supporting the world, the "mountain mother of all mountains", in itself hierophantic, manifestation of the sacred. Finally the Golgotha sums up for the Christians the symbolic values of the centre of the world and of transcendence, shared by all sacred mountains. It is the site of Christ's crucifixion, and the *via dolorosa* ritual reproduces his Passion; the fourteen stations are placed in a countryside that physically recalls the hill of Golgotha and ends at the highest point.

From time immemorial man has established a profound relationship with his physical and spiritual landscape, and some morphological aspects of the countryside take on special values as places where hierophantic phenomena

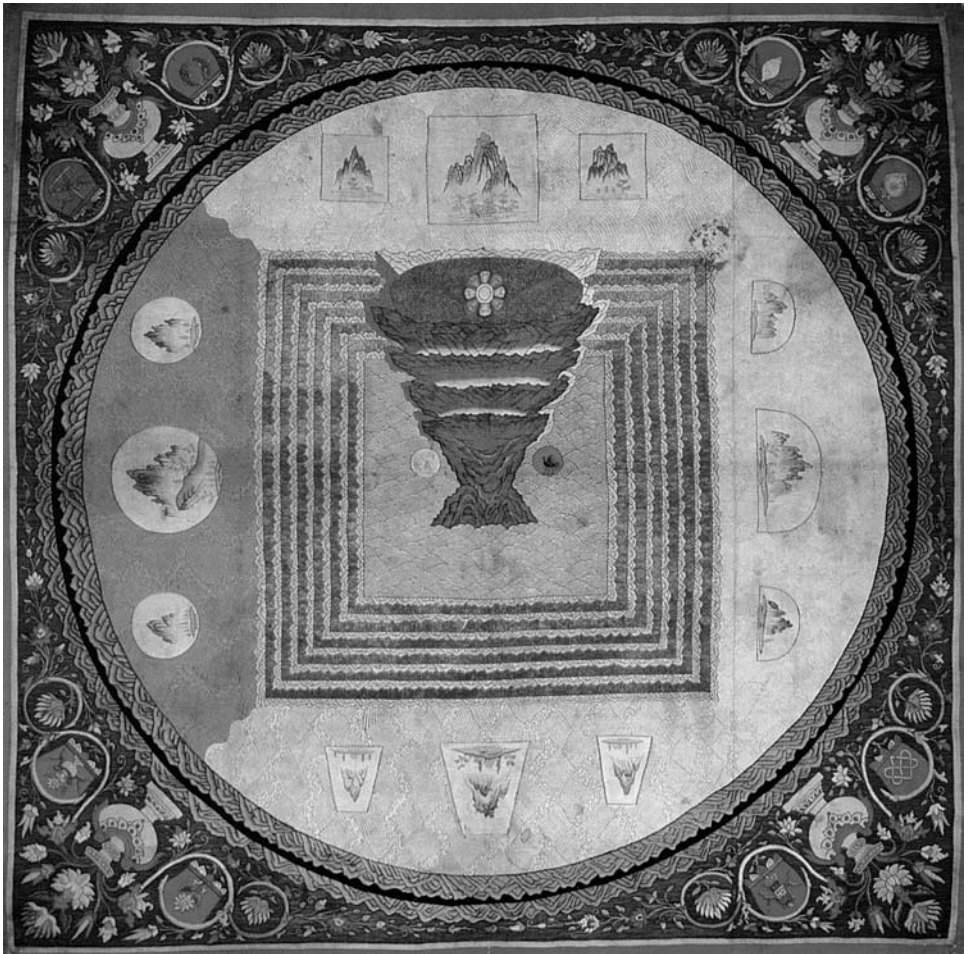


Fig. 12. Chinese cosmologic image with Mt. Meru in the middle: the squares represent the 7 gilded mountain ranges alternating with the 7 oceans, then in the 4 cosmic squares the 12 mountains and the whole is encircled by the iron mountain chain. (cloth from the Yuan dynasty, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)

are possible. Caves, mountains, and deserts represent border zones where the sacred is manifested or man can get in touch with the supernatural in varying forms. We have pointed out the cultic marks that involve mountains and their symbolic relationships with the cosmos generated from this pivotal centre. Divine site or manifestation of divinity according to many religious systems, the mountain displays a complex polysemy, where we can trace archetypal lines which spread out worldwide. The vastness of the subject can hardly be rendered in these few

notes, which are only meant to be food for thought, hoping to rouse some interest in this absorbing, rich and profound theme.

Umberto Sansoni and Liliana Fratti

Umberto Sansoni, *La sacralità della montagna – la Valsaviore, le Alpi, i Monti degli Dei*. It can be ordered at the CCSP, Dipartimento Valcamonica e Lombardia, Via Somnavilla 12, 25050 NIARDO (BS) – Italy. segreteria@simbolisullaroccia.it, www.simbolisullaroccia.it