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Age of the Heroes

a brief overview of Valcamonica rock-art during the Iron Age (I millennium BC) Valcamonica World Heritage

Introduction

Despite the long-lasting tradition of carving the rocks—an activity that, according to many scholars (Anati 2004, 1975, 1982; De Marinis 1994; Priuli 1985), probably spanned thousands of years—, Valcamonica rock-art reached its production peak during the Iron Age, thus offering a possible dating between the 9th cent. BC and the Roman times of mostly 80% of the whole existing rock-art of the valley. The images of this period show on the other hand a huge range of styles, categories and combinations that still defy any definitive and convincing explication. Who made this images, in which occasions and for which reasons are in fact the main issues under discussions by scholars, especially because there are not yet consistent data from settlements, burials or other sites of the Iron Age that could be undeniable related to the rock-art of this period (Poggiani Keller 2004).

Seeking a unique interpretation of the whole rock-art creation process is probably not the correct way to approach the problem as well, because the incredible variety of carved images can be likely explained only considering the combined action of time, space, individual and motivation. The Iron Age was in fact an era of great transformations for Northern Italy, which in one thousand years changed according to the impact of powerful socio-cultural phenomena coming especially from the Mediterranean: the arrival and diffusion of a new strong metal; the Greek colonization in Southern Italy; the cultural and economical hegemony of the Etruscans on the Italian peninsula; the formation of the ethnic entities of Northern Italy later known by the Classic sources as Veneti, Raeti, Camunni, Leponti; the spread of the alphabet; the impact of the urbanization; the penetration and settling of the Gaulish tribes in the Po plain during the V century BC; and, finally, the rise and expansion of the Roman power (1st cent. BC).

Regarding the Iron Age rock-art production we can nonetheless outline some broad trend: a constant association between what we define as "figurative" images, i.e. representation of things we can still identify today as such - a warrior, a deer, a wagon, a house, etc. - and "not figurative" ones - lines, dots, unrecognizable shapes, etc.; a dialectic alternation between local unique features and exotic elements, a fact that points towards a lively interaction among the people living in the Alps, Northern Italy and Central Europe during the I millennium BC (De Marinis 1999; Marzatico *et al*. 2011; Marzatico & Gleirscher 2004; Verger 2007); a deliberate and coherent selection of signs and symbols to be used (or not) across the sites and the centuries (human and animals, houses, footprints, shovels, etc.); a distribution pattern that shows a constant presence or absence, in specific rock art sites, of certain elements (such as shovels, footprints, etc.), particular themes (ploughing scenes, birds, etc.) or well-defined human styles (Alexander 2011; Marretta 2007a); the definite formulation and widespread usage of those

specific graphic rules characterizing all the images on the rocks, like the multiple point of views or the avoiding of foreshortening (Chippindale & Baker 2012); a strong relationship between image, position on the rock surface and landscape placement; (Alexander 2011) (Fig. 1, 2); the incorporation into rock-art of short inscriptions in a local variant of the Etruscan alphabet (Solano & Marretta 2009).

A question remain unanswered: are we looking to depictions of a real warrior class, with its set of symbolic paraphernalia, or just to images of legendary heroes and myths celebrated on the rocks by local small communities lacking an actual "aristocratic" leading class?

The triumph of armed figures: a warrior mythology on the rocks

The human figure more represented during the Iron Age is without doubt the warrior,

Figure 1. Foppe di Nadro, Ceto, R.4. A small human figure carved in a natural hollow of the rock where the rain gathers. Middle Iron Age.

Figure 2. Piè, Capo di Ponte, R. 1. Tracing the images on nylon transparent sheets. In the background the Mount Concarena (2450 mt).

although it is the combination with the abstract signs all around it that encompasses the most significant feature of the rock-art of this period. The gender of humans and animals is often markedly masculine, with the figures' virility, even in case of animals, often clearly emphasized (Bevan 2006). The armed man stands sometimes in heroic solitude (Figg. 3, 4), while more often he is showed interacting with other similar warriors (Figg. 5, 6), with a wealth display of offensive and defensive weapons—spear or sword, shield, helmet—and frequently fighting a symmetric "double" of himself (Anati 1982; Fossati 1991). The latter scene constitutes a *topos* which marks the entire Iron Age and which is repeated in several styles, from the very schematic geometric couples common in many sites up to the refined and famous examples from Zurla (Sansoni & Marretta 2002), Foppe di Nadro (Marretta 2007b) and Paspardo (Fossati 2007). They likely represent ritual duels, as it is quite manifest in the Zurla couples

Figure 3. Naquane, Capo di Ponte, R. 50. Warriors with raised weapons (sword and shield). Middle Iron Age.

Figure 4. Coren di Redondo, Capo di Ponte, R. 9. Isolated warrior handling a spear pointing downward and and a big shield. Early Iron Age.

where the fighters have uncommon weapons and clothes and seem to mime a dance. The representation of fighting couples, far from being unknown among the Italic people, has been interpreted as ritual/mythical depictions also for Etruscan cases (Torelli 1997; Verger 2011) and as sporting events for Situla Art occurrences (Zimmermann 2003). On the other hand it must be stressed that unambiguous battle scenes are almost absent from rock-art.

Giant warriors are seldom depicted, but some striking examples exist in specific areas, like Naquane and Paspardo, where the figures, being well over 1 mt tall, evoke mythical ancestors, legendary heroes or perhaps local deities (Fossati & Marchi 2007).

A unique association of elements, clearly reminding themes depicted on the Situla Art (AA.VV. 1961; Lucke & Frey 1962; Schumacher 1966), can be seen on Seradina I R. 12. Fighting couples, deer hunting by horsemen and dogs, ploughing and intercourse scenes are combined on a single rock in a clearly programmatic way (Figg. 8, 14). The imagery found on this exceptional surface connect certain themes found in Valcamonica, particularly during the Ancient and Middle Iron Age (VIII–V centuries BC), to some of the warrior ideology of coeval Italic elites, like the Etruscans, Veneti, Rethic and Golasecca people. These elements suggest that rock-art areas could have served as funerary/commemoration sites, sort of places where the forefather or clan's identity, richness and prestige were celebrated, reaffirmed or simply displayed in connection with ancestral family myths. In this case, the similarity with the Situla Art, like the boxeurs of Foppe di Nadro R. 6 (Fig. 6) could be an evidence of the local adaptation of subjects largely common among Alpine peoples. The obsessive repetition of specific and selected themes like the deer hunting or

Figure 5. Redondo, Capo di Ponte. Fighting couple with sword and shield. Iron Age.

the duel may well evoke local tradition and legends, or even refer to domestic sagas whose founding moment would be placed in the perpetual revival (using the engraving rituality itself) of ancient heroic deeds.

Man and animal: entities without boundaries

In Valcamonica rock-art of the Iron Age animals are frequent companion of human beings, occupying easily the second place in the catalogue of fully documented areas (Marretta 2011; Sansoni & Gavaldo 1995, 2009). They share the action space and participate in building up scenes that convey a new level of narration in respect of the previous Bronze and especially Copper age imagery. Fairly frequent are in fact the combination of deer and dog in hunting scenes, of horses mounted by warriors or linked to wagons or ploughs, of birds interacting with human beings or with inscriptions in local pre-roman alphabet.

One of the most common animal to be found around human figures is the horse,

Figure 6. Foppe di Nadro, Ceto, R. 6. Boxeurs. Middle Iron Age.

Figure 7. Coren di Redondo, Capo di Ponte, R. 1. Panel with animals, footprints and a two-wheeled chariot (tracing 2011). Middle Iron Age.

whose introduction in the Alps as a domestic animal must be traced back to the Middle-Recent Bronze Age. The presence of the horse in Valcamonica is perhaps early depicted on a rock at Campanine, where a two-wheeled chariot pulled by what looks like a pair of very schematic horses is surrounded by praying figures and thus could be attributable, with usual caution due to the well-known problems of dating rock-art (De Marinis & Fossati 2012), to the Final Bronze Age (Sansoni & Gavaldo 2009).

The horse is however a typical theme of the Iron Age and is found in many different styles depending on the areas and periods. Yoked to a cart with two and especially four wheel, it appears with particular frequency in the area of Naquane (Van Berg-Osterrieth 1972), although there are examples from other areas, such as Paspardo (Arcà *et al*. 2001) or, on the opposite side of the valley, Pià d'Ort (Sansoni & Gavaldo 1995). Horse and wagon, both symbols of prestige and power, are clearly attributes of wealthy elites and are used as visual embodiment of high social status (Emiliozzi 1999), which has one of his most classic and similar manifestations in the processions with chariots and horsemen than can be found both among the Etruscan—for example in the friezes of archaic *regiae* (Torelli 1997)—and in the decorations of Situla Art diffused in Northern Italy and Eastern Alps (Lucke & Frey 1962).

On the other hand the preference in Valcamonica for the four-wheeled wagon, with a structure that shows strict similarities with the representation of a wagon on the back of the couch of Hochdorf (Biel *et al*. 1985), indicate contacts with the Golasecca and Hallstatt areas. It also symbolically recalls the strong ideological value held by the wagon in Central Europe and the quite common practice of burying it, sometimes with the sacrifice of horses, in princely tomb of the Hallstatt culture (Schönfelder 2007).

A recent exceptional finding enforce the idea that the two-wheeled chariot could well be a fitting symbol for an Early Iron Age heroic ideology. In Coren di Redondo, a freshly uncovered rock-art area (Marretta 2009), a miniaturist image of a chariot pulled by horses has been recorded (Fig. 7). The depiction has very small dimensions (5.3 cm wide and 4.4 cm in length) and it is surrounded by images belonging to the Iron Age, like footprints, horsemen, deer's, birds. The structure of the chariot, comparable to findings from Central and Northern Italy of the Orientalizing period as well as of the La Tene period, reinforce its chronology to the I millennium BC.

Much more widespread are however the figures of horsemen, sometimes flanked or surrounded by other horses missing the rider. Riding the horse, an innovation that spread at the beginning of the Iron Age (De Marinis 1994)—and thus later than the practice of yoking it to the wagon—, mark a clear distinction among the armed figures and perhaps reflects some form of symbolic differentiation in classes of age and/or rank, a phenomenon well known, for example, in classic Greece and Rome. In Seradina, a site belonging to the western side of Middle Valcamonica, horsemen are often engaged in hunting scenes and are armed only with spears, while on the eastern side of the valley the weaponry is much more varied and the rider, often isolated, is rarely involved in the dynamics of the hunt (Abenante & Marretta 2007).

Figure 8. Seradina I, Capo di Ponte, R. 12. Part of the huge concentrations of images (around one thousand) belonging to different phases of the Iron Age.

A peculiar subject is the so-called "acrobatic" horseman, which involve a horse ridden by an armed human figures standing—instead of sitting—on the back of the animal. Classic interpretation of these images regard them as representation of passage rites by the young initiates (Fossati 1991), or perhaps a mythical illustration of a hero with exceptional equestrian skills. A wealth of these standing riders connected with hunting scenes and duels can be clearly seen into newly recorded parts of the big R. 12 in Seradina I (Fig. 8), one of the most important carved surface in Valcamonica finally undergoing a full scientific investigation.

The area of Foppe di Nadro presents an interesting concentration of horses and riders made in a style that denotes clear contacts with the Golasecca area, whose comparable materials come from the decorated vessels from Ca' Morta, Sesto Calende and Trezzo d'Adda, in addition to the friezes on some bronze belts from Canton Ticino (Swiss) and the aforementioned decoration to be found on the bronze couch of Hochdorf, the latter attributed to Golasecca craftsmen (De Marinis 2000).

Among the animals represented on the rocks there are also various species of birds (Marretta 2007a). The extreme schematization of the images does not allow precise identification, thus forcing to identify main types only on the basis of certain specific details: highly schematized contour line shapes showing a long neck that bends downward and outstretched legs; birds most immediately recognizable as aquatic species, with distinctive long beak turned upward, fantail, stumpy webbed feet (rarely shown); figures with very long neck and long legs that seem more directly evoke wading birds, perhaps herons or cranes.

The birds connected with water (ducks, herons, etc.), which are also closely comparable in shape to similar representations present on bronze artefacts from the Golasecca area, become sometimes the magical mount of richly dressed warriors, as in the case seen on Campanine R. 62 (Sansoni & Gavaldo 2009)(Fig. 9). An "international" version of this idea exist also in the form of the sun boat with bird heads—common in Europe and Northern Italy from Late Bronze Age (Iaia 2004)—, which in Valcamonica become the vehicle carrying short inscrip-

tions—probably personal names—in local pre-roman alphabet (Fig. 10). The water bird appears here as homologous of the horse, one of the typical companion of the soul during the travel in the afterlife, an idea that originates from the sun boat and the chariot of the sun of Bronze Age Europe (Kristiansen 2010).

A shift from time to space

While the position of figures in time, which is still regarded as the main cause of style changes among images (Anati 2004; De Marinis & Fossati 2012), is still largely hypothetical and depends by interpretation of not uniquely solvable issues—like, for ex., the superimposition analysis, the stylistic categorization of images, the comparison with datable archaeological artefacts (mainly weapons)—the position in space is clearly objective, being not under interpretation at all. And precisely this approach had lead recently to new interesting insights. Patterns of subjects or "styles" distribution across the main rock-art concentration areas are in fact on the verge of coming to light much more clearly as the full recording sites start to convey more and more precious data.

This phenomenon has been partly noticed in recent past (Alexander 2011; Marretta 2007a), but a full assessment has not yet been started due to the lack of published data on the total amount of figures per sites. Nonetheless an empirical overview is enough to outline a general situation for the Iron Age, i.e. specific subjects or styles appear frequently to be used locally in clearly delimited areas or sub-areas (if not single rocks), while a comprehensive super-set of categories seems to be spread everywhere, with a significance distinction in this latter case according to the western or eastern side of the valley.

The available data demonstrate for example that some symbolic subjects, which look like a signature of Valcamonica Iron Age, such as the huts, the footprints and the shovels ("palette"), are much rarer

Figure 9. Campanine, Cimbergo, R. 62. Richly dressed warrior travelling on the back of two water birds. Middle Iron Age.

Figure 10. Foppe di Nadro, Ceto, R. 23. Solitary inscription in local pre-roman alphabet. Late Iron Age.

Figure 11. Seradina I, Capo di Ponte, R. 57. Complex geometric composition ("map"?) based on a big grid motif following the natural undulations of the rock surface. Early Iron Age.

(but not completely absent) in the areas on the western side of the Central Valley. On the opposite the unique concentration of complex geometric compositions in Bedolina (the so called "maps") do not find any comparable examples in the eastern sites (Fig. 11).

The images of huts or other structures represent, without a doubt, one of the peculiar aspects of Iron age rock–art. While it is tempting to simply see these images as representations of actual buildings we must not forget that Valcamonica rock–art has a strongly ideological and symbolic inspiration, a fact that could well make the meaning of the image something other than simply a "building". Indeed, in many cases the images are architecturally unlikely if not downright impossible as "buildings" (Fig. 12). In recent years two main interpretations have developed. The first sees the images as reproductions of real structures probably related to food storage (granaries) of a type seen in the Rhaetic and Central Alpine regions during the Iron Age but not yet documented in Valcamonica (Tognoni 1993). The second sees the architectural impossibility of some of the images as implying that they have instead a symbolic value and, being associated on the rocks with warriors and waterbirds, they are seen as linked to the idea of "houses of the soul" (tombs), such as one finds in the house–like funerary urns from Tuscany and Lazio and, more generally, in the metaphor of the house in the rock as the eternal residence of the departed (Savardi 2007).

The so–called "palette" (shovels) are perhaps representations of real bronze objects of a type often found in the tombs of various north Italian cultures (Martinotti 2009). Their importance in the rock–art has given rise to various interpretations: mirrors, razors, a part of a woman's personal equipment etc. The association with looms on the Grande Roccia at Naquane seems to associate the "palette" with female symbolism (Fossati 2008) which is otherwise virtually absent in the great Iron Age repertoire.

Figure 12. Naquane/Ronchi di Zir, Capo di Ponte, R. 82. Hut standing on a single pillar with narrow basement (granary?).

Figure 13. Foppe di Nadro, Ceto, R. 24. Rosa Camuna and warrior with rayed helmet. Middle Iron Age.

Figure 14. Seradina I, Capo di Ponte, R. 12. One of the many ploughing scenes that characterize the rock. Early Iron Age.

Footprint images (Fig. 7), either simple outlines or with internal patterns, are found mostly on the eastern slopes of the Middle Valcamonica. Given that the indication of toes is rare many scholars have come to believe that the images are shoe–prints—the two horizontal lines sometime depicted indicating the laces of the shoe—and not the imprints of bare feet. Still, the highly schematic nature of the images may mean that they are intended to symbolically capture the essentials of a human footprint. Among the interpretations of these images is that they have a votive role associated with the initiation of youth to warrior status, that they are a generic marker of presence or passage, that they are an ex voto connected with experience of a divinity or dead hero–ancestors and the related visit to a designated cult place, or that they are associated with the memory of such supernatural entities (Fossati 1997; Gavaldo 2012).

Among other symbols the rosa camuna (Fig. 13), for example, concentrates on single rocks or group of neighbouring rocks, being specifically common in the symmetric form in Bedolina R.16-17 (more than ten occurrences) and in the swastika form at Paspardo-Dos Sulif R. 1 (14 figures).

The most striking evidence of the parcelization of the territory in terms of subjects and styles is finally visible in the specific distribution of giant warriors in Paspardo, elegant dancers with rayed helmets in Foppe di Nadro and Zurla, specific hut typologies, animals or scene combinations (like, for ex., the unique concentration of ploughing scenes in Seradina I; Fig. 14).

New light on rock-art in Roman times: a decadence or a renaissance?

To approach the subsequent paragraphs we need to bear in mind two things: the first

one is the intrinsic difficulty of dating rock-art, a well-known issue which often limits the chronological statements to time ranges defined by *ante- or post quem termini*; the second one, already expressed in the introductory part, is that there is few evidence of a unique motivation for the whole Valcamonica rock-art production, whereas we can understand the rock carvings as a multi-causal activity made quite modestly on an everyday basis (Alexander 2011) by a specialized class of people on a long period of time (Marretta in press).

The traditional chronology established by Anati (2004, 1982, 1960), only slightly detailed regarding the final phases by later scholars (De Marinis 1988; De Marinis & Fossati 2012; Fossati 1998), states an almost total disappearance of the rock-art in Roman times, visible especially through the "decadent" style of the square-bodied warriors, due to the gradual loss of identity of the local populations by the globalizing Roman power. According to Anati the figures attributable to the Roman phase are foreign to the local tradition of engraving and therefore need to be classified as an appendix, a phase that he defines as "Post-camuno" (Anati 2004). Although his reconstruction is devoid of any reference to the archaeological record, it is important to bear in mind that at the time of his writing the data available from excavations were not comparable to what we have today.

That said, two factors point towards a complete re-evaluation of this interpretation: the first take precisely into consideration the archaeological situation about the Late Iron Age and the Romanization period in Valcamonica, while the second examines new evidences from previously poorly considered rock art areas or subjects.

Archaeological excavations during the last twenty years have shown a substantial social and cultural vitality of the *Camunni* tribe clearly visible during the final centuries of the first millennium BC (Rossi 2010; Solano 2009, 2007). Almost all excavation

Figure 15. Piancogno, R. 26. Detail on an intricate panel with scratched knives (Introbio-Lovere types), inscriptions in pre-roman alphabet, animals, etc. Late Iron Age-Roman phase.

Figure 16. Dos Sottolaiolo, Paspardo, R. 1. Warrior handling an axe with large blade (hellebardenaxt). Late Iron Age.

Figure 17. Coren di Redondo, Capo di Ponte, R. 9. Roman cornu (horn), characterised by the long middle bar and the strong inward bending of the mouthpiece. Roman phase.

data relating to settlements suggest in fact a lively population between III century BC and I-II century AD, with an undisputable continuity between the late Prehistory and the Roman period, a fact that is well demonstrated also by cult sites, such as the Copper Age ceremonial centres from Ossimo-Pat and from Cemmo (Poggiani Keller 2009). Some fundamental chronological markers, like the Introbio-Lovere knives or the inscriptions in local pre-roman alphabet, are well represented both in the archaeological record and in rock-art, a relevant (and so far unique) fact in Valcamonica, where the comparisons between real objects and engraved figures need always to call into question archaeological artefacts found outside the valley. As a final evidence I would like to point out the proximity between the archaeological sites of later phases and some rock-sites that bear images of the same chronological horizon, like the remains of settlements from Pescarzo and Cemmo and the Dos dell'Arca/Le Sante sites (Solano 2009, 2007) for the Capo di Ponte rock-art areas, the Roman necropolis of Borno (Jorio 1986) for the rock-art site of Piancogno and the village of Berzo Demo for the above rock art site of Loa (Solano & Simonotti 2008).

Rock-art shows as well a wealth of evidence for a first Roman period peak of activity. A sort of "graphic identity package", constituted by inscriptions in pre-roman local alphabet, Introbio-Lovere knives, *hellebardenaxt* and spears seems to be in existence at the time. In this complete form we find it only at Piancogno (Priuli 1993)(Fig. 15), a site far from the main rock-art areas around Capo di Ponte that seems to have been initiated only in this period, similarly to what happen at the northern limit of Berzo Demo (Solano & Marretta 2009). A reduced version of this sort of "graphic package" can be found at the edge of the Capo di Ponte area in two key sites: Pià d'Ort at the North and Foppe di Nadro at the South. The predominantly technique used is the scratching on the rock surface, though pecked figures belonging to it can be found

as well in the form of inscriptions in pre-roman alphabet, Introbio-Lovere knives and *hellebardenaxt*. This peculiar kind of weapon, well dated between the II cent. BC and the I cent. AD, is frequently found in Paspardo (Fig. 16) along the new impressive painted panel recently discovered in the same area (Stig Hansen 2009). It must be pointed out that, when present, pecked figures are superimposed to the scratched elements of the "graphic package", a clear evidence of a carving activity sometimes undistinguishable from the older imagery that goes well on into the Roman period.

Images of Roman horns (Fig. 17) widespread distributed across all the western areas of the Capo di Ponte rock-art centre seems a striking evidence of a still complete living of the carving practice during the full Imperial era, a fact that should not surprise if we just consider how many overlapping themes can be found between rock-art and some Roman customs, like the hunting and the duels that could be easily equated to the gladiatorial fights and the *venationes*, two subject well known in friezes and mosaics of the full Roman era that evidently were displayed at the arena in the *Civitas Camunnorum* (Mariotti 2004).

These wealth of evidences lead to the hypothesis that local *elites*—meaning with this term a group of families who founded the legitimacy of their power on the prestige and wealth acquired during the two-three previous centuries—expressed their relationship with the official Roman power at the purposely built monumental "centre" of the *Civitas Camunnorum* (the modern Cividate Camuno), while at the same time kept their homage to the traditions and reinforced their reputation among the local population by reproducing elements of strong ethnic high status—like inscriptions in local pre-Roman alphabet and peculiar knives—along symbols of their ancient warrior identity in the form of axes and spears. It is highly probable that only the full advent of the Christian religion in the IV cent. AD will change this course. The open-air shrines of the ancestors, with their myths and legends of founding heroes, will then be slowly forgotten for millennia, only to be re-discovered in all their majesty, wonder and mystery at the beginning of the XX century.

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