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Following Arianna's Thread: Symbolic Figures at Female Rock Art Sites at Naquane and In Valle, Valcamonica, Italy¹

Angelo Fossati

Abstract

A labyrinth figure, possible ancient initiation game, lies on rock 1 of the National Park of the Rock Engravings of Naquane, Capo di Ponte, just in the centre of a site that once was simply known as Aquane (fig. 3.1²). This probably was one of the most important areas of cultural activities related to the rock art tradition in Valcamonica. Looking at this rock with the eyes of a non-expert visitor, the surface will appear as a confused set of figures: men and dogs are hunting deer, while women are working on looms, duellists are fighting while warriors follow a horseman fully armed, probably a chief (fig. 3.2). Most of the figures appear connected to other engravings: cup marks, shovels, footprints, huts. All this imagery, depicted on the rock all around the labyrinth, is the witness of the last prehistoric rock art phase on this surface: that of the Iron Age, a period where rock art appears as the production of the male warrior class of the Camunnian society (De Marinis 1988; Fossati 1991). Women are not present within this art. Scholars think that almost 80% of the 300,000 engravings of the Valcamonica rock art tradition belongs to this period, the first millennium BC. However, is the entire rock art tradition a construction of the male classes or is it possible to define themes and figures related to female activities? The basis for this idea is, in fact, what would be still possible today:

- to go back to the origins of specific rock art activities in some Valcamonica sites, such as Naquane, Foppe di Nadro, Luine, In Valle and other sites
- to correlate these activities to a special group, the women of the local aristocracy
- to create a reading key useful to understanding the modality of engravings on the rocks at the sites

Valcamonica rock art tradition: a short introduction

At the beginning of the 20th century, only the Cemmo boulders were known in Valcamonica, a long valley north of the city of Brescia in Lombardy, popularly called “the rocks of the puppets”, discovered by the geographer Walther Laeng at the beginning of the 20th century

¹ This paper develops ideas presented in the paper *Nymphs, Waterfowls and Saints: the Role of Ethnography in the Interpretation of the Rupestrian Tradition of Valcamonica, Italy*, in the Seminar *Ethnography and rock art*, organized by the Oregon Archaeological Society, Portland 3-6 September 2002.

² All figures, where made by the author or “Le Orme dell’Uomo”



Figure 3.1. The labyrinth on rock 1 of Naquane.



Figure 3.2. Figures of various ages on rock 1 of Naquane, Capo di Ponte.

(Laeng 1914). Most discoveries were made during the 1930s thanks to the archaeologist Raffaello Battaglia and the anthropologist Giovanni Marro (Battaglia 1934; Marro 1930). A more scientific comprehension of the different phases was reached during the 1960s and the 1970s, with the works of Emmanuel Anati (Anati 1976) and his Centro Camuno di Studi Preistorici and of other scholars, among them especially Raffaele De Marinis (De Marinis 1988; 1995) (Milan University) and our group of Footsteps of Man Archaeological Society. After the Garda Lake (1964) and Valtellina (1966) discoveries the central-eastern Alps zone can be considered a unique area with common stylistic, thematic and chronological characteristics. The core remains Valcamonica: an archaeological, artistic and historical patrimony of inestimable value, inscribed by UNESCO in its World Heritage List, - the first rock art site together with the French painted caves of the Vezere Valley to be included since 1979.³

The art is mainly located on flat open air rocks, heavily polished and moulded by the glaciers during the last Ice Ages (fig. 3.3). From Pisogne on the Iseo lake, south of Valcamonica, to the sites of Sello - Grevo in the middle valley, the rock used is sandstone, only occasionally limestone (Piancogno). In the upper part of the valley rock engravings have been made on schist. Almost all are engravings, only seven paintings have been discovered to date (Fossati 2001a) (Fig. 3.4). The discovery of pieces of red ochre allows us to consider that the engravings were also coloured or that other figures only painted were added to the carvings. The engravers used hammering (the most common) and scratching techniques, with the help of quartz tools: it is common to find them abandoned near the rocks.

Rock art covers four fundamental periods, from the Neolithic to the arrival of the Romans (Anati 1976; De Marinis 1988; Fossati 1991, 1993b) (fig. 3.5). In the first phase, from the end of the Neolithic to the first Copper Age (4th Millennium BC, 1st/2nd styles of the Valcamonica rock art), topographical figures constitute the most diffused pattern. They are the first representations of the territory, probably tied to a real division of agricultural lands sanctioned by the ritual engraving practice (Arcà 1999, Fossati 1993a, 2002). Other figures attributed to this phase are spirals and necklaces.

Most scholars think that this first phase is preceded by a more ancient period, perhaps going back to the end of the

Palaeolithic (Anati 1974). Figures are very few, all representing animals, especially elk and deer (fig. 3.6). This phase, called Proto Camunnian, is tied to the Ice Age art style, which is no longer limited to caves in Europe but also present on open air rocks, as testified by the recent findings in Spain and Portugal (Abreu, Arcà & Fossati 1995) and old discoveries in Gobustan, Azerbaijan, on the southern Caucasian slopes (Rustamov 2000).

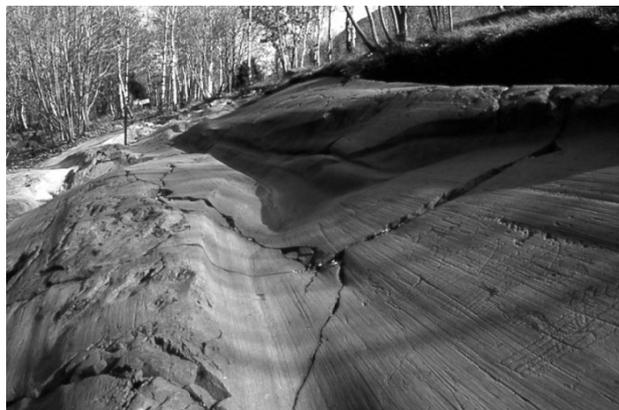


Figure 3.3. Rock 35 of Naquane mounted and eroded by the prehistoric glacier, Capo di Ponte.



Figure 3.4. Wheel with internal rays painted in red, Campanine, Cimbergo, Bronze Age.

The second phase, which corresponds to the full Copper Age (4th-3rd millennium BC, the so-called 3rd A Valcamonica style), is characterised by stele and menhirs, boulders that represent the first anthropomorphic divinities of the alpine people (Casini & Fossati 1994). The most important depiction is the Sun, sometimes represented as a man crowned by a solar circle with beams (fig. 3.7), and often associated with weapons. Two other personages are represented: one feminine, adorned with numerous jewels (eye pendants, necklaces, combs), and another male divinity, symbolised by a cloak provided with fringes. The repertoire is very rich, including animals such as deer, dogs, foxes, wolves, chamois, ibex, boar, bovines and weapons, such as axes, halberds and daggers. The chronology is well established

³ This inclusion is not accompanied by a real conservation of the Valcamonica rock art. The problems for the art arise from the want or the lack of the management of the engraved areas. In addition there is not a complete corpus published of the rock engravings and the visual context of the nature, where the rock art is inserted, is strongly affected by electric lines, industrial constructions, roads and wood works. These problems are discussed in my recent paper *Le ultime ricerche e i problemi di gestione dell'arte rupestre della Valcamonica*, in Atti del Convegno: 2° Congresso Internazionale "Ricerche paleontologiche nelle Alpi Occidentali", Pinerolo (TO), 17-19 Ottobre 2003, Centro Studi e Museo di Arte Preistorica di Pinerolo (CESMAP) in the press.

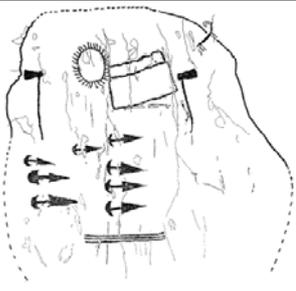
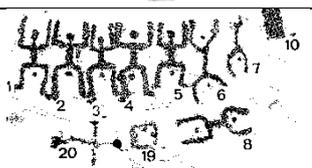
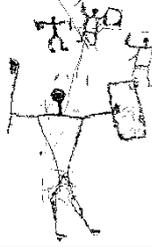
Style	Themes	Chronology
Protocamunnian		13 th -6 th millennium cal. BC
1 st -2 nd		5 th -4 th millennium cal. BC
3 rd A		4 th -3 rd millennium cal. BC
3 rd B-C-D		2 nd millennium cal. BC
4 th		1 st millennium cal. BC
Postcamunnian		Roman - Mediaeval – Recent

Figure 3.5. Themes and Chronology of Valcamonica rock art.



Figure 3.6. Deer with turned head, Luine, Boario Terme, Palaeolithic Age.

thanks to depicted weapons, especially the so-called Remedello type dagger, which has a very well defined triangular blade and a half moon shaped pommel. It is testified in contemporary tombs at Remedello (2,900-2,400 cal. BC), and moreover on the Copper Age stelae in the Alpine Range, like in the beautiful compositions of Aosta, Sion, Arco or Lunigiana (De Marinis 1994).

The third phase (the 3rd B-C-D Valcamonica styles) is dated to the 2nd millennium BC and corresponds to the Bronze Age (De Marinis 1995). The repertoire is more reduced, but not less important: numerous weapons (no longer associated with divinities), ploughing scenes, ritual scenes formed by praying anthropomorphs, symbols (solar signs and shovels), charts. The chronology is ensured by the presence of well recognisable weapons:

Early Bronze Age halberds (fig. 3.8), Middle Bronze Age axes and Recent-Final Bronze Age spearheads. In the Final Bronze Age (12th -9th century BC) the first warrior figures appear, a prelude to the immense repertoire of the Iron Age, the 1st Millennium BC (Fossati 1992).

This last prehistoric phase (the so-called 4th style) is the richest and the best dated (Fossati 1991). It is probably tied to the initiation rites of young people of the local warrior aristocracy, not excluding a relation with sport-like activities during common meetings or games. We can find hunting scenes, ritual duels, races and armed dances, constructions, wagons, weapons, musical instruments, agricultural scenes, figures with a strong symbolic value (such as footprints, cup marks, swastikas, stars), divinities and topographical representations. Engravings took on greater realism, like a descriptive naturalism (De Marinis 1988). Warriors emerge with great strength: war scenes however and warriors in combat are relatively rare. Heavily armed warriors are often shown with their weapons raised in exaltation. In duelling scenes the contenders face each other lightly armed, as if for a sporting event (fig. 3.9).

Duellists and onlookers are placed side by side, the former with a smaller size, leading one to assume they are teenagers. Footprints or footwear with laces also appear to belong to boys (Fossati 1998). This constant reference suggests that Iron Age rock art should be interpreted as votive images engraved on the occasion of initiation rites or feasts through which young men of the local aristocracy gained access to adult society. As well as duelling, horse-riding, balancing feats, racing and dancing fully armed and deer hunting were probably part of the trial. Cup marks grouped in eight and the so-called “Camunnian Rose” (a symbol originated from the swastika) probably constituted other initiation symbols. Social differences are also shown by scenes where riders are escorted by their attendants.

The chronology of the Iron Age rock art, divided in five different sub-phases, is linked not only to the study of the superimpositions, which assures relative chronology, but also to the depiction of weapons. These arms are very well characterised, like shields, constantly circular in the first Iron Age, and quadrangular-oval during the second Iron Age, due to the influences exercised firstly by the Etruscans and then by the Celts. Particular weapons appear in the Late Iron Age, such as the halberd-axe, a half moon blade shaped axe, a typical weapon of the Central-Eastern Alps population, or the Introbio knives, with the characteristic anchor-shaped point savor: both these weapons are found in contemporary tombs or settlements (Fossati 1991).

Also style is a chronological indicator. Until the 4th century BC styles were influenced by Etruscan art: from the linear geometric style (8th century) to the full naturalistic phase (5th century) (De Marinis 1988). The apogee of naturalism is reached at the end of the 6th century when it is possible to recognise artistic schools



Figure 3.7. *The Sun God on Ossimo 9 stele, Copper Age.*

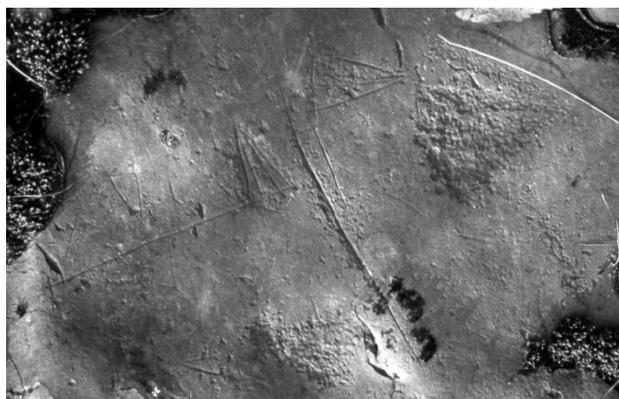


Figure 3.8. *Halberds engraved on a rock near Termen, Ceto, Early Bronze Age.*

and even single artist's hands.⁴ Second Iron Age styles are the direct consequence of the separation from the Etruscan world caused by Celtic invasions in the Po Plain. Styles become decadent and themes poor. It is not possible to speak of a Celtic art phase in the Camunnian rock art, even if the Celts transmitted to the nearby population their preference for a symbolic and almost

⁴ As the so called “Paspardo school” or the “Artist of the *astronauts*” (actually warriors with strange helmets) of Zurla and Foppe di Nadro.



Figure 3.9. Duellists on a rock of Vite-Deria, Paspardo.

an iconic art. Some themes have a chronological value: horse riding is possible only starting from the 8th century BC; North-Etruscan inscriptions are possible only after the 6th century BC. Some Latin letters must be dated to the end of the 1st century BC, due to the Roman arrival in the valley in 16 BC.

Iron Age rock art was made by the *Camunni*, a population associated with the *Euganea gens* by Roman historians (Cato cited by Plinius III, 133-135). The cultural peculiarity of the area is testified, at least from the 5th century BC, by the diffusion from Valtellina to the Giudicarie of same-kind potteries (the wine vessels of Breno/Dos dell'Arca/Lovere type), by the autonomous writing tradition utilising the north-Etruscan alphabet (the Camunnian alphabet) and, last but not least, by the figurative language that we call "rock art" (De Marinis 1988, Fossati 1991). This wide area, even if with strong connections with the Retic world of the Adige Valley, should be unified under the common *ethnos* of the *Euganei*.⁵

⁵ I totally agree with this interpretation proposed by R. De Marinis (1988). Recently few scholars have published papers that link the Camunni to the Celtic world, from the ethnic and linguistic point of view (as V. Mariotti, *The Roman Circus of Cividate Camuno*, schede didattiche, 2003, Cividate Camuno, and A. Morandi, *L'iscrizione di Grevo in Valcamonica*, in S. Solano-A. Marretta, *Grevo. Alla scoperta*

In Valcamonica the rupestrian tradition continued until the arrival of the Romans (16 BC) (Fossati 1991). A legion of about 6,000 soldiers commanded by the consul Publio Silio Nerva subjected in a single fast military campaign *Triumplini*, *Camunni* and *Vennonetes*, the inhabitants of Valtrompia, Valcamonica and Valtellina. This is attested by the registration of these names in the *Tropaeum Alpium*, the monument built by the Emperor Augustus in 6-7 AD at La Turbie (France). The interruption of the rupestrian tradition is perhaps due to the assumption of the Roman culture during the second part of the 1st century AD (Flavian Age). There was a growing economic, cultural and religious attraction caused by the Roman settlements, in particular by the new colony of *Civitas Camunnorum*⁶, which reduced and finally destroyed the power of the aristocratic classes whose traditional themes had constituted, until then, the iconographic patrimony of the rock engravings (Fossati 1991).

Female rock art production at Naquane, In Valle and other sites

If we could erase the Iron Age engravings from the rocks (something that can be easily done on the tracings), the result would be that important sites as Naquane (Capo di Ponte)⁷, In Valle (Paspardo) and a few other sites, clearly and abundantly frequented during the Iron Age by young warriors (as we can see from their engravings), appeared differently (poorly?) engraved during the previous periods. Only some Bronze Age figures are, in fact, engraved on the rocks in Naquane: groups or isolated praying figures on rocks 1, 11, 14, 23, 26, 32, 35, 44, 47, 49, 50, 57, 59, 71, 72, 99; looms on rock 1; shovels (*palette*) on rock 1, 11, 35, 44, 47, 50, 57, 72, 99; Copper Age figures are even less: daggers on the rocks 23 and 100; anthropomorphs on rock 1; ploughing scenes on rock 94; Neolithic/Calcolithic topographic and ploughing scenes on rock 99.

In Valle is not different from Naquane: most of the figures belong to the Iron Age, with abundant scenes of duels and warriors. Groups of Bronze Age figures are present: praying figures, shovels. These figures overlap earlier imagery such as spirals and daggers, probably of Neolithic or Calcolithic date (fig. 3.10).

How was the cultural situation during the Bronze Age in Valcamonica? During this period (that is the phase between the end of the 3rd Millennium BC and the 9th century BC) Valcamonica appears to be included in the area of the Polada culture (Early Bronze Age) and

di un territorio fra archeologia e arte rupestre, 2004, pp. 142-148). These studies are superficial, in my opinion, and do not take into account many aspects of the archaeological and cultural situation in Lombardy during the Iron Age.

⁶ *Civitas Camunnorum* was a city of great importance during the Roman times, not less important than Brescia, Bergamo or Verona: archaeologists have found a circus, a theatre, a spa, and numerous private and public buildings of major size.

⁷ It's the popular name of the National Park of the Rock Engravings at Capo di Ponte (BS).

subsequently, during the Middle-Recent Bronze Age in the Terramare-Benacense Culture, as is confirmed by a series of pottery complexes and of sporadic findings (De Marinis 1988). For the Final Bronze Age, pottery is too rare to permit a better comprehension of the cultural situation, even if the bronze findings suggest a connection with the so-called Luco-Meluno group, a central alpine culture.

The engravings of the Bronze Age are, certainly, less studied compared with the papers and the corpus of the rocks published regarding other periods, for example the Copper Age and Iron Age (Fossati 2001b).

From the Copper Age onwards, begins the depiction of weapons. During the Chalcolithic period, these compositions of weapons appear as very regular and calligraphic, while in the Bronze Age the arms are positioned in a disorderly way and in heterogeneous groups. These weapons, axes, daggers, halberds, knives, spears and swords, are engraved in different periods on the same rocks, as we understand studying their typology (fig. 3.11). It is often possible, in fact, to compare the engraved weapons with real objects found in settlements, tombs or hoards (Fossati 2001b). This is the case with the halberds, that have a triangular blade with a semicircular base, very similar to the Montemerano, Calvatone and Cotronei types dated to the Early Bronze Age, but also the typical alpine dagger, the Ledro dagger, can be recognised in the rock engravings. The axes are usually of the shovel type, a shape that appears during a passage phase between the end of the Early Bronze Age and the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age. The axes with a bell-shape blade are datable to the Middle and Recent Bronze Age (De Marinis 1995).

It is also possible to compare this occurrence with the votive deposits or hoards typical of the Bronze Age in the whole of Europe. Due to the fact that these deposits have sometimes been found in springs, swamps and lakes, few scholars have spoken of votive activity. It is also clear that some of these hoards have materials that can be considered as “male” objects - e.g. the weapons - and for this reason can perhaps be related to initiation rites of the male youth. If we transfer this idea to rock art, we can consider the execution of figures of weapons as a symbolic substitution of a real act which had a ritual meaning. This idea has sometimes been associated with a sacred attitude of a “poor” population that could offer only substitutions of weapons and not the real objects (Malmer 1991). In any case, it can be assumed that the practice of rock art for these people was a very strong ritual disposition, with the same value that other groups could confer to different ritual acts, including those of the votive hoards.

Moreover the rocks engraved are often related to water - e.g. rocks 4 and the 22-23 of Foppe di Nadro, Valcamonica, follow the course of a stream; the rocks of Luine, Valcamonica, overlook the Boario spa; the Castelletto rock was found few metres from the waters of the Garda lake - and this can be linked to the fact that



Figure 3.10. Praying figures of the Middle Bronze Age overlaps a Neolithic spiral, In Valle rock 4, Paspardo.



Figure 3.11. Groups of Bronze Age weapons, Foppe di Nadro, rock 23, Ceto.

special weapons like swords were found in the waters (often rivers) and suggests a ritual meaning to rock art activity.⁸ Usually the rocks - moulded by the glaciers - appear as petrified waves, giving the impression to the observer of being in front of water.⁹ This connection with the theme of the water became very strong during the following Iron Age rock art, as I will demonstrate later in this paper.

The depiction of weapons proposes the research of rock art areas relating to the presence of imagery having a sexual value. The concentration of such images on certain rocks can represent a special sign indicating that the site can be visited only by males. What to say if the symbol is of female type? The opposite for sure. This is the case of the so called *paletta* figure (fig. 3.12). The *paletta* consists of a quadrangular (rarely circular) engraving with a handle (often also with a pommel).

⁸ As suggested by P. Frontini, *Aspetti rituali delle deposizioni di armi durante l'età del Bronzo in Italia settentrionale: alcuni spunti*, in 2° *Convegno Internazionale di Archeologia Rupestre. "Archeologia e Arte Rupestre. L'Europa. Le Alpi. La Valcamonica."*, Atti del Convegno di Studi, Darfo-Boario Terme 2-5 Ottobre 1997, a cura di A. Fossati-P. Frontini, pp. 105-112, Milano.

⁹ I have touched on this point in my recent paper *Nymphs, Waterfowls and Saints: the Role of Ethnography in the Interpretation of the Rupestrian Tradition of Valcamonica, Italy*, in the Seminar *Ethnography and rock art*, organized by the Oregon Archaeological Society, Portland 3-6 September 2002, the proceedings of which are in the press.



Figure 3.12. Paletta figures from Dos Costapeta, rock 1, Paspardo.



Figure 3.13. Praying figures associated to a paletta, Dos Costapeta, rock 1, Paspardo, Bronze Age.

On the basis of the variation of these elements (body, handle, pommels), 21 different types of shovel are recognizable (Fossati 1987). These shovels are often placed side by side, in couples, set in a horizontal or vertical way. Praying figures are sometimes associated with them (fig. 3.13), at other times groups of five or six shovels are together in horizontal lines. On rock 1 of Naquane, shovels are near looms in at least three cases (fig. 3.14).



Figure 3.14. Looms and palette on rock 1 of Naquane, Capo di Ponte, Bronze Age.



Figure 3.15. Paletta and horseman on rock 1 of Naquane, Capo di Ponte, Iron Age.

The *paletta* figure appears during the Middle Bronze Age, continuing to be present in the iconographic repertoire during the rest of this period, and seems to disappear from the context during the middle part of the Iron Age, at the end of what is called the 4th 2 style (end of the 6th century BC). During the Iron Age, the *paletta* figures are associated with warriors. On rock 1 of Naquane, in a scene published many times, a *paletta* is associated with a labyrinth; in another famous scene accompanies what is called the "procession of the chief" (fig. 3.15).

Paletta-shovels are present in the rock art of other areas, as I have already written (Fossati 1987): in particular there many similarities with figures in the rock engravings of the Galician area in Spain, and in Northern Portugal, often associated with swastikas and horse shoes.¹⁰ The chronology proposed for these figures is the final Bronze Age (end of the 2nd millennium BC). The Abbé Breuil published some *paletta* figures painted in the megalithic context of the Iberian Peninsula, noting a certain similarity with laundry shovels still in use in some European areas.¹¹ In Portugal, some warrior funerary stelae (Final Bronze Age) show the typical warrior elements, such as shield, sword, spear and chariot, also a shovel type figure, sometimes interpreted as a mirror or the razor.¹² A similar interpretation has been proposed for the *paletta* of Valcamonica in the past.¹³ The similarity of the *paletta* with the razor of the double blade type or of the window type (and quadrangular body) has been already noted;¹⁴ because these types of razor have sometimes been left in the ashes of funerary urns dated to the Recent-Final Bronze Age, some scholars have thought that razors could have been used to collect the burned bones and ashes during the funerary rituals;¹⁵ other researchers have proposed that the *paletta* could have been used with the same purposes, with a clear funerary meaning.¹⁶ But in what kinds of archaeological contexts are the real *palette* found? From the Late Bronze Age onwards, the *palette* are left as the grave goods in female tombs. This is clear in the Golasecca, Villanovian and Venetic Culture (fig. 3.16). They are made in bronze until the 5th century BC, when they are substituted by *palette* of the same shape but made in iron. This is why R. De Marinis thought that the *paletta* figure could not be interpreted as a mirror.¹⁷ In the ancient Venetic culture, bronze sheet *palette* are present, sometimes found in votive hoards, clearly used for ritual purposes only, as

testified in the deposit of Via Rialto at Padoa, near Venice (fig. 3.17).¹⁸ In a female tomb of the beginning of the 3rd century BC, the so called “Nerca Tomb” at Este, a *paletta* was found among the objects used for the care of the fire, as spits, ladle and so on. The *paletta* could have been used for removing the ashes or to take out the bread from the fire: would we interpret this object as a symbol of the fire or connected to the fire. Is this interpretation working also for the figures in Valcamonica rock art? The connection with female imagery would suggest a positive answer, but we must not forget that we have *paletta* figures also during the Iron Age, often associated with warriors. Is the *paletta* in this case a female symbol engraved in a period in which real female figures are never represented.¹⁹ Or is it a symbol of a ritual activity, practised by the aristocratic classes that want the use of the fire?²⁰ Is this attitude a practice of votive substitution?²¹



Figure 3.16. A bronze palette from the ancient Venetic culture (from Tombolani-De Min 1981).

¹⁰ See: E. Anati, *Arte Rupestre nelle regioni occidentali della Penisola Iberica*, Archivi, 4, 1968; A. Pena Santos-J. M. Vasquez Varela, *Los Petroglifos Gallegos. Grabados rupestres prehistoricos al aire libre en Galicia*, La Coruna, 1979.

¹¹ H. Breuil, *Les peintures rupestres schematiques de la peninsule Iberique*, Lagny, 1933, in particular pp. 67-68, fig. 40.

¹² A.C. Ferreira Da Silva-M. Gomes Varela, *Proto-Historia de Portugal*, Lisboa, 1992.

¹³ The interpretation of the *paletta* as a mirror is suggested in S. Ferri, *Il significato delle palette nell'arte rupestre della Valcamonica*, in *Les Religions de la Préhistoire, Valcamonica Symposium '72*, 1975, pp. 263-269; as a paddle in G. Marro, *Il grandioso monumento paleontologico di Valcamonica*, in *Atti della Reale Accademia di Scienze di Torino*, 1932, p. 79; as a spade or agricultural shovel in G. Forni, *Coppelle, palette, protoerpici*, in *Art and Religion, Valcamonica Symposium '79*, 1983, pp. 405-425; and also in J.P. Maher, *The Palette, pro manuscripto*, 1986; as the schematic representation of a bovid in O. Cornaggia Castiglioni- G. Calegari, *Il bovide a palette ovvero l'estrema schematizzazione di un motivo figurativo del repertorio delle incisioni europee di età olocenica*, in *Natura*, 63, 1972, pp. 87-101.

¹⁴ M. Zuffa, *Le palette rituali di bronzo*, in *Atti e Memorie Deputazione di Storia Patria per le Provincie di Romagna*, VIII, 1956-57, pp. 67-170.

¹⁵ V. Bianco Peroni, *I rasoi nell'Italia Continentale*, PBF, VIII, 1976.

¹⁶ The interpretation of the *palette* as a funerary symbol is suggested in E. Süss, *Le incisioni rupestri di Valcamonica*, Milano, 1958; and is in V. Fusco, *Su alcuni aspetti, di incisioni rupestri camune scoperte ad alta quota*, in *Sibirium*, 11, 1972, pp. 31-51.

¹⁷ Iron is not a reflecting metal, at least in prehistory. R. De Marinis, *Dibattito sulla palette*, in *Les Religions de la Préhistoire, Valcamonica Symposium '72*, 1975.

¹⁸ M. Tombolani-P. De Min, *Stipe di Via Rialto*, in *Padova Preromana*, Catalogo della mostra, 1981, p. 181.

¹⁹ Perhaps due to a ritual ban. The Iron Age rock art seems to be exclusively a male activity.

²⁰ As the practice of the Symposium, the ritual banquet of Greek style.

²¹ I have suggested this in Fossati 1997, p. 58.

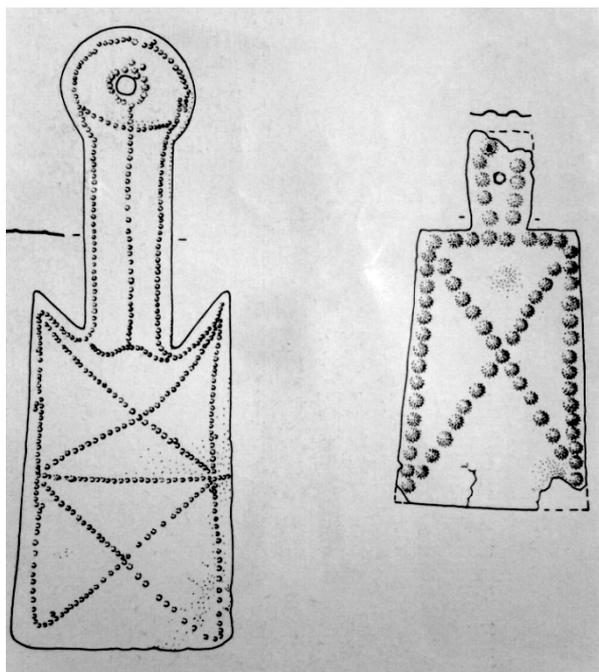


Figure 3.17. Palette realized in bronze sheet from Padoa (from Tombolani-De Min 1981).

I have already said something about the iconographic context in which the *palette* figures are found in the rock art of Valcamonica. I will now add some notes that can be used for a general interpretation of the phenomenon: in most of the cases lines of five or six *palette* have been positioned at what can be considered the “entrance” of the rock. This is the case with rocks 50 and 35 of Naquane, and rock 4 of In Valle (figs. 3.18 and 3.19). Usually the rocks contain other compositions of praying figures or other shovels; at the end of the rocks other shovels appear; in the case of In Valle rock 4 the rock itself seems closed with the same composition of some *palette* in lines, similar to that appearing at the entrance. What can one say about this phenomenon? In my opinion this is a sort of public art, with a use of figures that are positioned in a clearly visible part of the rock to avoid intrusions of males in the area (fig. 3.20).²² If you consider that the patina of the engravings remains white for two centuries or more, it is clear that the figures should stay very visible from a distance for a considerable time. Looking at the map of the National Park at Capo di Ponte (that is Naquane) designed in 1954 by E. Süss, it is clear that a trail is possible from where the Park (more or less) starts with rock 50 and where it finishes with rock 35: these are the rocks where there are *palette* figures in lines. My idea is that a sort of public language could exist not only confined to a rock but to a complete area. There is also the case of an interesting scene on the rock 32 where a group of female figures is engraved on the border of a little glacial channel observing another female figure lying down (fig. 3.21).

²² Ritual interdictions to special sites (sometimes with rock art) are known in many other part of the world as in Australia, where one of the most famous is the case of the site called Bulajang linked to the God Bula (Gunn 1992).



Figure 3.18. Palette in lines on rock 35 of Naquane, Capo di Ponte, Bronze Age.



Figure 3.19. Palette in lines on rock 4 of In Valle, Paspardo, Bronze Age.



Figure 3.20. Palette in lines and a male observer on rock 35 of Naquane, Capo di Ponte.

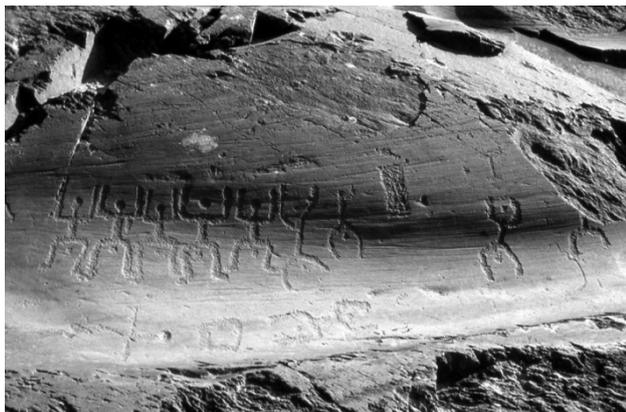


Figure 3.21. Female figures on the rock 32 of Naquane, Capo di Ponte, Bronze Age.

Previous interpretations²³ read these figures as a ritual scene where the woman lying down is interpreted as dead or, vice versa, that it shows a birth or an initiation rite. Another interpretation of this scene is again associated with the theme of the water. The surface was in part dry (the area where the group of women are), in part wet (the area of the lying figure) because the day before it had rained and the soil was still dropping: in fact the waters were floating down the little channel suggesting the idea of a stream where the lying woman was swimming. This scene is considered ritual because it appears not only on rock 32 of Naquane, but also on rock 1 and on rock 44 of the same park, on rock 4 of In Valle and on the rock 51 of Vite at Paspardo.²⁴ Is this the representation of the beautiful siren Aquane, whose name reoccurs in the ancient toponomy of the Park?

The warriors and the Aquane

In 1989, a cadastral map of the *Contrada Aquane* was brought to my attention²⁵ (fig. 3.22): this was the original toponomy of the actual location of Naquane, corresponding to the central area of the National Engravings Park, as the linguist M. Alinei had already proposed (Fossati 1991; Alinei 1984). Alinei was not aware of the cadastral map but had already linked the toponomy of Naquane to that of Aquane, semi-divine beings widely known in the folklore of the central-eastern Alps, especially in the Dolomites where the dominant culture was that of the Ladins (Wolff 1987), by diverse

²³ A few years ago, I wrote explanation of this scene that can be found in the panel near to rock 32 in the National Park, but today I would add also this new hypothesis.

²⁴ But rock 32 is the only case where the woman lying is in a glacial channel.

²⁵ The Map of the *Contrada Aquane* has been brought to my attention by the former owner of the area, Battista Ruggeri, at that time guardian of the National Park. I was explaining to him that M. Alinei thought that the original name of Naquane could come from Aquane, and I agreed with him, but Alinei had no proof of this because "...there is no maps indicating this", I said. "But I have this map and I will show it to you!" said Ruggeri. Dated to the beginning of the 19th century, the map is not the only document that testifies to this name: later I discovered that also the cadastral maps of the area of Foppe di Nadro show the original name of the road that connects Naquane to Nadro. The road is called *Strada delle Aquane* (Road of the Aquane).

names and attributes. A few of the known names are as follows: Aquane, Anquane, Enguane, Eguane, Gane, Guane, Laganas, Sagane, Sguane, Aivane and Vivane. They are known to be referred to also in the classical world: we remember Aganippe, the nymph and the homonymous well on the Elicona in Beozia; the witch by the name of Sagana mentioned by Horace; the Latin *saga*, from *sagus*, means sorceress, or prophetess. Naquane represented, for Alinei, the most western toponomy of the central-eastern alpine area. Due to my research in the last few years, we now know that this is not so: there is a Roman age inscription from Cantù, not far from Como, dedicated to Aquane (*Corpus inscriptionum latinarum* V, 5671), and at Soncino (prov. of Cremona) the toponomy of Aquane is found in close proximity to a spring; this is the more southern toponomy, testifying to the presence of the cult of Aquane in the Po river plain. According to Raffaele De Marinis, also the name of the Euganei, from the same ethnic group to which the Iron Age inhabitants of Camonica valley also belong, would not be too far removed from the form Eguane or Enguane (Fossati 1991).

But who were the Aquane? Here I will briefly sum up the descriptions collected by Alinei, with the knowledge that the work could be considerably expanded: in the folklore they are remembered as anthropo-zoomorphic beings; the oldest legends describe them as women who can change into otters, or rather beautiful sirens with the hair of water and feet turned backwards, inhabitants of lakes, caves and springs. In more recent legends, clearly influenced by the Christian religion, they have acquired the attributes of the Faun: they have legs and the feet of a goat, as the devil.

The *classic* Aquane (the sirens) in general have the quality of knowing the past and the future, but the present is lost to them. Furthermore they have powers over all types of water present on earth and over the rain itself. They are often defined as fearful. At times, however, they have been said to unite in matrimony with humans, and after a certain time they disappear, never to be seen again. They can sing mysterious dirges or laments and often come to give advice to young men. According to several accounts, it is better to not know the personal names of the Aquane, for fear of being spirited away forever. In some legends, the Aquane are accompanied by waterfowl and weave on the loom, and here it is very interesting that on rock 1 of the National Park of Naquane there are seven looms, and this is the only place where you find looms in the rock art of Valcamonica are found!

Alinei also describes sites what would appear to be evidence connecting them with rock art: in Friuli, near Clauzetto, one hears of the Clap des Aganes (rocks of the Aquane) which bear engraved footprints (most likely cup marks) which are related to the legend of the Aquane. Naquane is therefore not the only prehistoric site connected to the Aquane: also at Lagole de Calalzo, in Cadore, the local inhabitants spoke of the Laganas

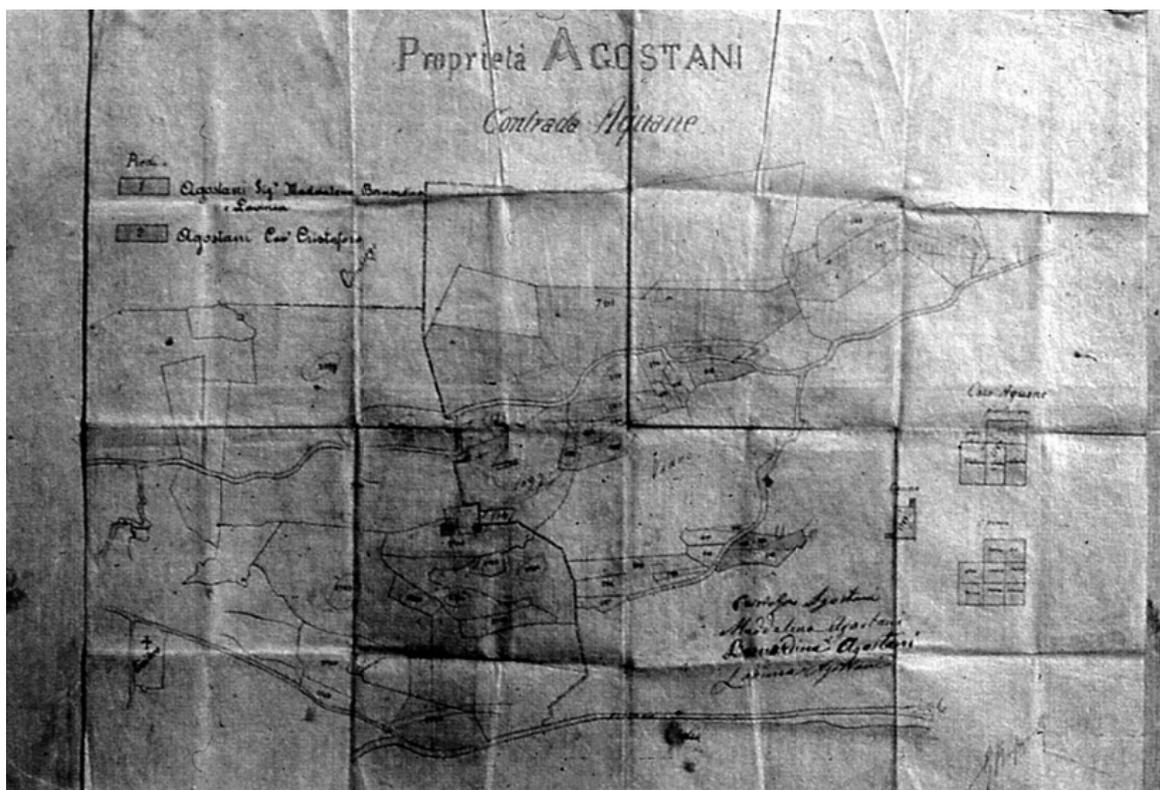


Figure 3.22. Map of the Contrada Aquane, before 1835.

(Aquane) who lived around the sulfur springs, where there was surely a paleo-veneto sanctuary, attested to by numerous ex voto found therein.

Just beyond the borders of Naquane Park in Valcamonica is a small church dedicated to the saints Faustina and Liberata. These two women lived as hermits in small caves in the medieval period and are said to have saved Capo di Ponte from an avalanche, blocking the falling boulders with their own hands. In the crypt of the church, one can still, in fact, find a large rock with the deeply engraved prehistoric figures of hands and cup-marks, which legend would connect with the two saints. The site is also connected to the Christian celebrations which take place in May (the Ascension) and include a long nocturnal vigil with extravagant use of candles. It is quite probable that this ceremony has transplanted an earlier pagan rite of spring, so-called "May", closely related to fertility rites. The nighttime festival, which was abolished after the visit of S. Carlo Borromeo to the valley because he deemed it immoral, was also the occasion for the participants to conclude commercial affairs regarding not only domesticated animals, as still happens today, but also instruments made of iron forged in the local smithies- workshops which were among the most important manufacturing sites in the Valley during the medieval period (Bontempi 1989). Here, one can discern a clear tie between the rite, the theme of fertility and the iron which came to be shaped into weapons. According to those living near the church of the saints, up until the fifties, pilgrims came from all parts of the valley to place their hands in the prints engraved in the boulder to ask for protection and grace.

To us, it appears valid to connect the saints with the Aquane, not only due to the proximity of Naquane to the zone in question, but also because the church and engraved stones lie near to a water-course, the stream Serio, which flows by no more than a few metres away. Furthermore, the legend describes the saints just as the Aquane are depicted: they live in caves and act as helpers, a role which the folklore accounts often attribute to the Aquane.²⁶ It is also interesting to note the carvings from the Great Rock of Naquane, where one sees an anthropomorphic figure from the Iron Age, identifiable as masculine by his sexual attributes, who seems to hold his own, spread-apart legs in his hands: this is an extremely rare scene in rock art and one for which a close parallel can be found in the near-by Church of the Monastery of San Salvatore (11th century), where one of the Romanesque capitals carries the motif of the siren who holds her own mermaid-like legs spread apart around the corners of the capital.

This connection between aquatic divinities and the presence of rock engravings seems to have a precedent also in the Copper Age in the locality of Valzel de Undine at Borno, that is The Valley (or the Stream) of the Ondine, where engraved rocks were found. The Ondine are aquatic nymphs, always present in the legends of the Ladin, who bear all the same attributes as the Aquane.

Coming back to Naquane, a very important point of discussion is the fact that it is very well known that, at

²⁶ See also Camuri 1995.

this site, there is no water at all.²⁷ So why is the theme of water is so important in rock art (the waterfowls) and in toponomy? There are two points to underline: one is the morphology of the rocks, that are very polished and mounted by the prehistoric glaciers, in a way that sometimes true waves are shaped into the rock surfaces. I think that, in the prehistoric imagination, were some questions about the origins of this phenomenon. Who did create the waves? Is this petrified water? Is someone living in these petrified waves? Answers are all in the rock art imagery.

The second point is that the glacier has sometimes created hollows, little pools, where the waters can stay for a while. Are these the places where the Aquane can emerge from the petrified waters?

This was for me an interesting hypothesis but it remained a hypothesis until I found in the local tradition any beliefs of spiritual beings living in engraved rocks. This came eventually in 1997 while teaching archaeology to a class at Esine, in Valcamonica. We teach students to draw and record the engravings, so we usually go to local rock art sites of less tourist importance. At that time we were working at a site called Librini at Esine, in the fraction called Plemo. I told the students, as usual, to ask their parents and grandparents if they knew any legends relating to the rock art of the area. The day after, a girl student came to me and, indicating a huge rock with a single cup mark, that had not attracted our attention before, said: “According to my grandparents and to other people in Plemo this rock has an interesting tradition”. I was surprised and asked the student to continue.

“They say that in this area lived a lady called *sciurina dei pé de cavra* [in Camunnian dialect: the young lady with the goat feet] who threading her clog into a cup mark, opened a rock where she used to eat her prey. The legend says that the lady enjoyed scaring people, above all the hunters and the visitors to the wood. When they were passing, she jumped out of the rock kidnapping them. Behind her house, says the legend, there was a well where she threw the skulls of the victims. The story tells us that a group of men captured and chained her to a mountain but she was able to escape and during the full-moon one can still hear the sound of the chains that she is carrying to avenge her capture”.²⁸

This legend was very important for me. It was the proof that the idea of spirit beings living in the rocks really existed, and also gave a sort of interpretation of the cup marks.²⁹ But most important was the fact that the spirit living in the rock is described as the more recent Aquane, a lady with a goat foot. She lost the mermaid attributes to keep those of evil characteristics. The legend suggests

also the presence of human sacrifice (the skulls) with the idea of a votive deposit near by the rocks.

Another legend that suggests that there are spirits living in the rocks regards San Vito, a local christian saint from Valcamonica: in this legend the saint could pass through the rocks and take refuge inside in case of danger (see Ertani s.d.).

At present these are the only legends collected that talk about beings living in rocks. The rock art suggests other figures that are imagined living in the rocks: this is the case of the so-called “bust of praying people”, anthropomorphs engraved only in the upper part of the body, the bust, sometimes only the head is found, sometimes the line of the shoulder with the head (fig. 3.23). Gaudenzio Ragazzi thinks (Ragazzi 1995) that these engravings can be compared with similar figures painted on Greek and Etruscan vases. These are not simply incomplete figures,³⁰ but signs with a special interpretation and meaning. They would be representations of spirits appearing in front of the warriors from the ground, the place where they live. Sometimes they are with weapons, as to say that they are considered males. This is also a suggestion that the Aquane are not the only beings living in another world.



Figure 3.23. Duellists and bust, rock 15, Vite-Deria, Paspardo, Iron Age.

Concluding remarks

Like Theseus in the labyrinth, following Arianna’s thread (the faded traces left on the rocks) we have discovered - at least published for the first time-that Naquane was originally thought of as a female site, by the ancient engravers: it became a male site only during the Iron Age, when the female figures practically disappeared, leaving space for a warrior world. This masculine world in any case did not cancel the idea that the site was a female space in ancient times. And what we were writing before, that Iron Age rock art in the area should be

²⁷ The two fountains available in Naquane take their water from a pool situated quite distant.

²⁸ The legend has been collected by Anna Erculiani, I C Scuola Media Statale “Don A. Sina” Esine.

²⁹ This particular cup mark can be interpreted as a technique to create a contact between two different realities, that of the real world with the world of the spirits.

³⁰ In Valcamonica rock art there are different not finished figures: anthropomorphs, buildings, animals, and various symbols as palette, footprints and camunnian roses. The total number of unfinished figures is so high that it is difficult to think that this could be a case: all the unfinished figures have probably a special meaning.

interpreted as votive images engraved on the occasion of initiation rites through which young men of the local aristocracy gained access to adult society, is true, but we must add that these images were probably dedicated to the Aquane that helped (like in the actual legends of the Dolomites) the young warriors to pass their proves. So... a male rock art made for special women!

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