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ARCÀ A., FOSSATI A.E. 2020. *Quadruped animals and spirals. Croveo, Balma del Capretto, prehistoric rock paintings*, TRACCE Online Rock Art Bulletin, 46, October 2020, <online <http://www.rupestre.net/tracce/?p=13551>>

Quadruped animals and spirals Croveo, *Balma del Capretto*, prehistoric rock paintings

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The *Balma dei Cervi* in Crodo is not the only prehistoric painted shelter within the Ossola valleys: not far away, is the *Balma del Capretto* (the *Shelter of the Baby Goat*) in Croveo (Baceno) in which interesting figures painted in red are found, now almost invisible. The name, *Balma del Capretto*, is recent, as well as that of the *Balma dei Cervi*: it was influenced by the presence, inside the shelter, of a baby goat, at the time of its discovery, which stood out from the other goats in the herd due to it having two pairs of horns. Among the figures are two small schematic quadrupeds (four legged animals), probably a dog attacking an ibex, also a large interweaving figure and a spiral, unique among the rock paintings across the Alps.

The prehistoric rock paintings in the area of the Ossola valleys are among the richest in the Alps. In addition to the *Balma dei Cervi* in Crodo, we may find the *Balma del Capretto* shelter in Croveo (Baceno) and the *Balm 'dla Vardaiola* shelter in the Alpe Veglia (Varzo), close to the border with Switzerland.

The painted wall of the *Balma del Capretto*, unpublished until 2020, was discovered in 2013 by the hiking guides Sonia Vella and Filippo Pirazzi and reported to the Archaeology Superintendence by Elena Poletti Ecclesia, director of the *Civic Archaeological Museum of Mergozzo*.

The shelter lies on a rocky and particularly steep mountain slope of the Devero valley (Lepontine Alps); it is located at a very pano-

ramic point, which overhangs the valley floor, with views to the south-south-east. The shelter is wide and located at the base of a jutting out vertical cliff; the dripping water is constant and copious. The rock is gneiss, locally named *serizzo*, pertaining to the Antigorio Unit.



Balma del Capretto, virtual tour



Balma del Capretto rock paintings, natural and colour manipulated (DStretch) picture

The rocky surface hosting the paintings is covered by a limestone crust – with wavy white, yellowish-white and light brown vertical veins – which can be classified as travertines of meteoric origin, sedimented thanks to the precipitation of calcium carbonate from the spring waters. The paintings were made along the encrusted surface, which offers a lighter and more regular background, and are absent – having missing sections – along the areas that have flaked off over time.

The archaeological context is unknown; if we consider its proximity we may cite the occasional find in the Pontigei Alp – a hamlet located on a facing slope about 2.5 km away in line of site – of a fragment of a fighting axe made of green stone with a hole in it. The axe dates from the Middle Copper Age and is currently displayed at the *Archaeological Museum of Mergozzo*.

DOCUMENTATION

The documentation project was carried out on behalf of the SABAP-NO, *Superintendence of Archeology, Fine Arts and Landscape for the Provinces of Biella, Novara, Verbano-Cusio-Ossola and Vercelli* (I), with the scientific coordination of Francesco Rubat Borel.

As well as for the *Balma dei Cervi* at Crodo, the painted wall of the *Balma del Capretto* at Croveo has been carefully documented by the rock art archaeologists of the *Footsteps of Man* archaeological society, combining the tracing of the painted images in a scale of 1: 1 with the data obtained from close-up photographic images, that were subjected to digital filters to increase the contrast, through the use of chromatic decorrelation adjustments (DStretch software), to highlight otherwise invisible details.

High-resolution zenith panoramic photo processes have been used to create a 360-degree photomosaic panoramic shot and three-dimensional digital models. The geomorphological and petrographic analysis was conducted by Dario Varrone and Miro Picatto, while the pigment analyses were carried out by Maria Nicoli, of the Physics and Earth Sciences Department of the Ferrara University; six crust samples, with and without pigments, were taken, then subjected to RAMAN, XRF, EM-EDS spectroscopy and electron microscope analysis.

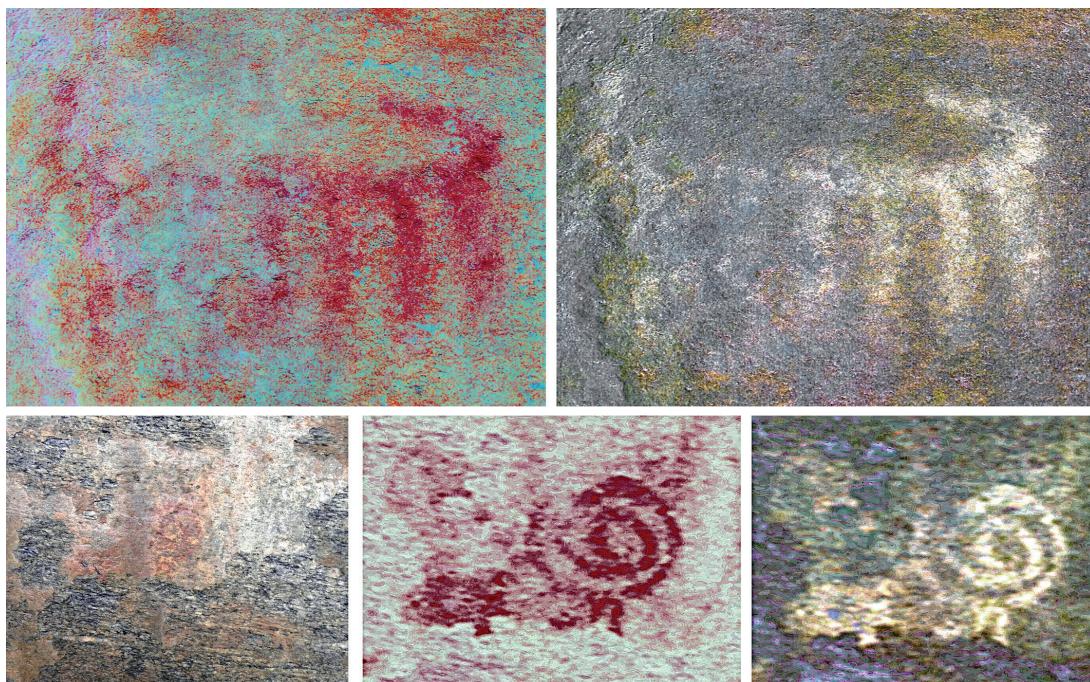
WHAT IS DEPICTED?

Two painted areas are present: sector A and B. The first one is populated by 19 painted and by 2

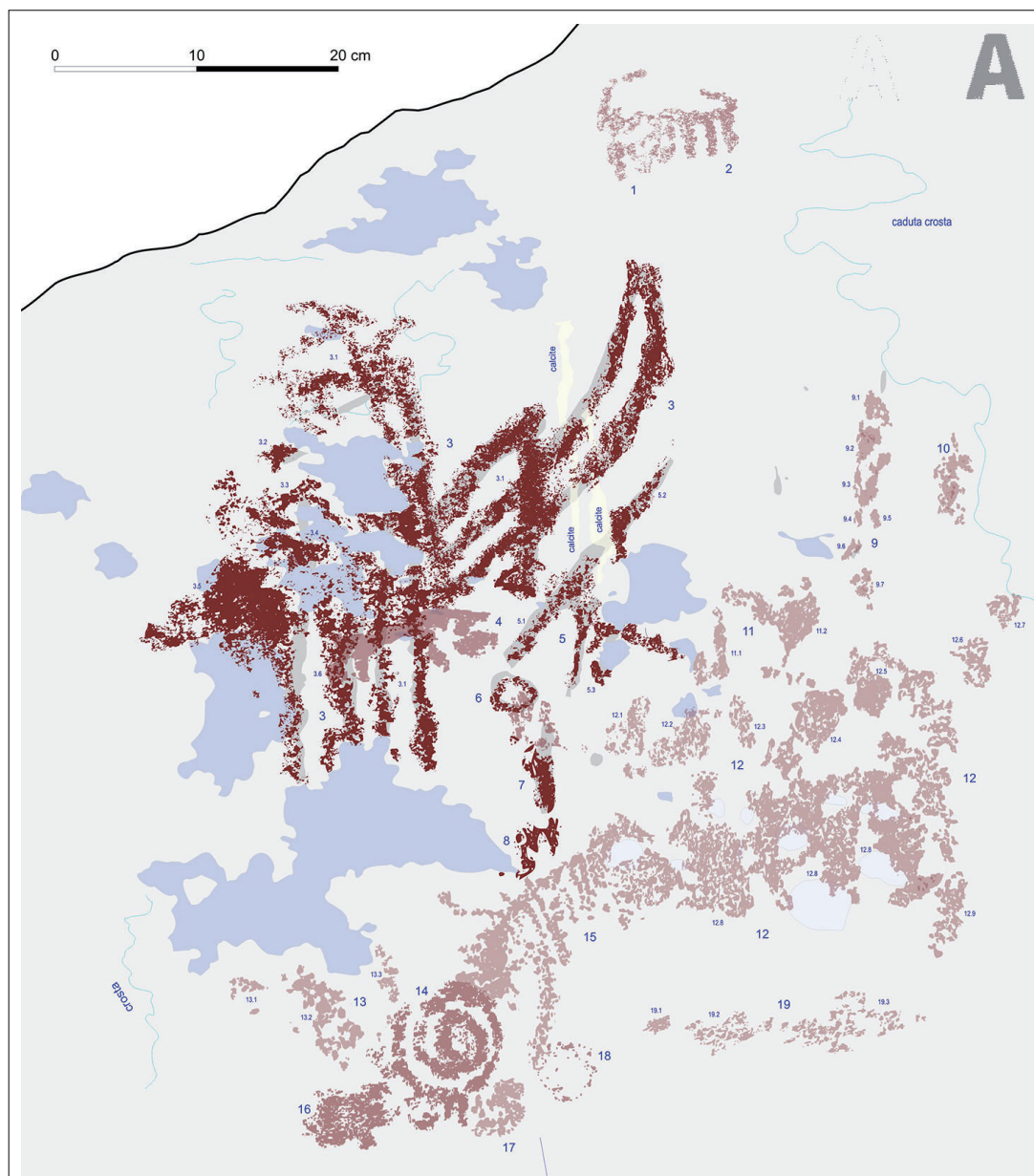


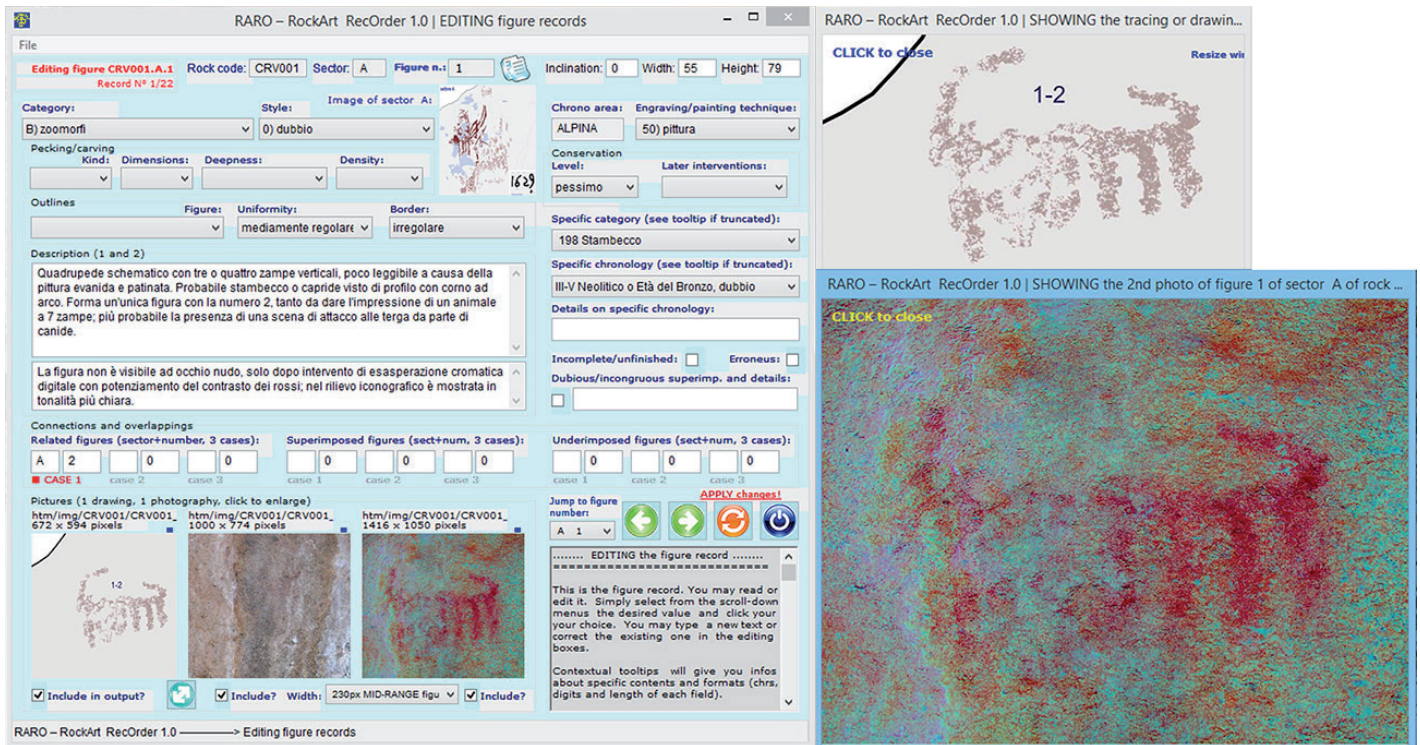
Shelter of the Baby Goat, general view

*Balma
del Capretto*
rock paintings,
four legged
animals and spiral
(decorrelation
stretching
applied)



*Balma
del Capretto*
rock paintings,
tracing
of sector A
(tracing AA-AEF,
Footsteps of Man)

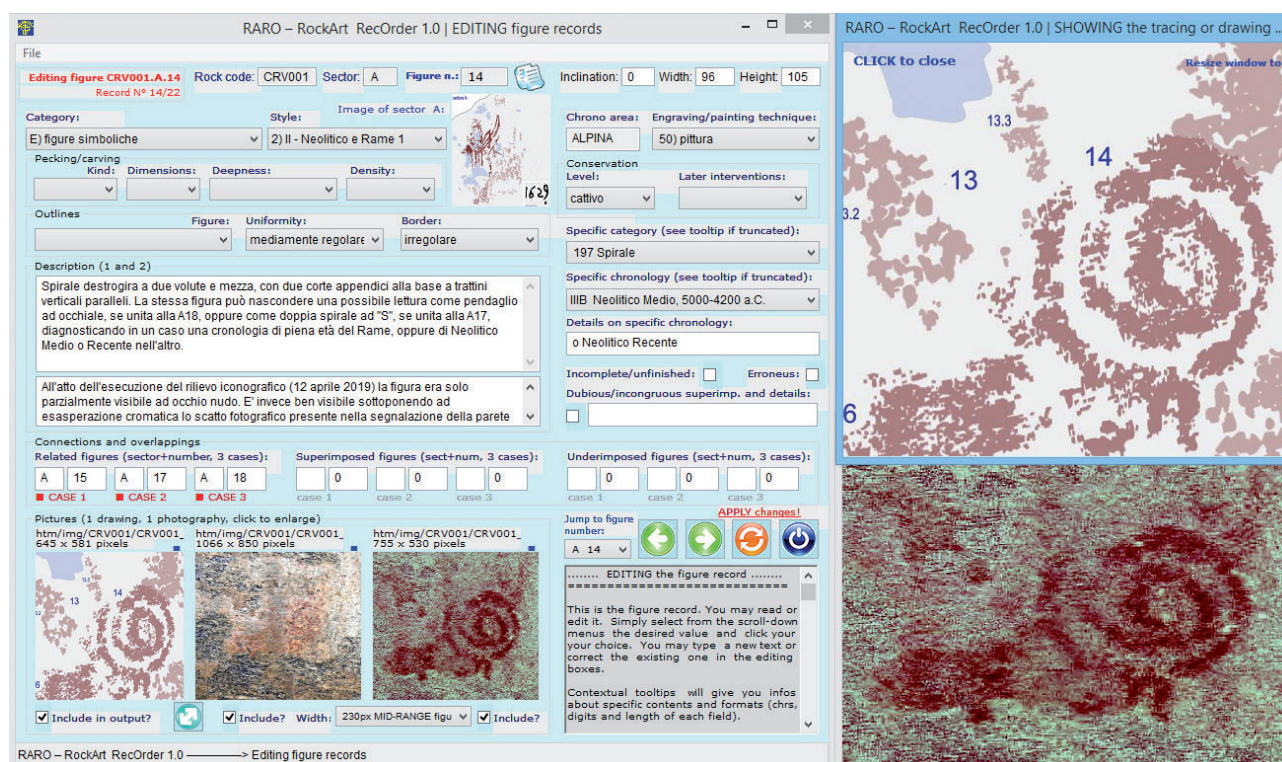




Balma del Capretto, catalogue of the figures, record A1, four legged animals (RARO-RockArtRecOrder database software)



Balma del Capretto, the door to enter the virtual tour (www.balmadeicervi.it)



Balma del Capretto, catalogue of the figures, record A14, spiral (RARO-RockArtRecOrder database software)

engraved figures (the date 1629, the year of famine that preceded the plague of 1630), sector B by a single painted figure, an oval macula.

There are two small schematic quadrupeds with vertical legs depicted like a comb, likely a composition scene with a dog attacking an ibex from the rear, a large interlaced figure of vertical and oblique bands (a topographical grid? Composition of axes? Textile motif, breastplate or necklace?), a possible anthropomorphic figure and a two-and-a-half turns right-handed spiral with two short appendages at the base.

The comb-like zoomorphic figures can be related to the *Abri Faravel* (Freissinières, southern French Alps, *Parc National des Ecrins*) and to the *Balm 'dla Vardaiaola* paintings, where the hunted quadruped, however, is not an ibex but a deer.

The spiral, very rare even among the painted Iberian shelters, is unique in the Alpine rock paintings.

The numerous comparisons that can be made include the schematic rock art of the Iberian peninsula, southern France, the western Alps, and southern Italy (in particular Porto Badisco), as well as megalithic art; the suggested chronology ranges from the Middle Neolithic, 5th millennium BC, to the Middle Copper Age, 3rd millennium BC; a comparison with the engraved schematic quadrupeds of Valcamonica could, on the other hand, suggest a more recent attribution, from the late Bronze Age to the early Iron Age (first centuries of the 1st millennium BC).

VISIT AND VIRTUAL MUSEUM

Due to the extreme fragility of the paintings, the *Balma del Capretto* is not open to visitors. Instead, we have made it accessible inside the *Balma dei Cervi Virtual Museum*, which is open 7 days a week and 24 hours a day, easily accessible both from your computer and from your smartphone.

We invite you to join us on our virtual tour. Please follow the link <http://www.balmadeicervi.it>

(translated by Marisa D. GIORGI
published on April 16, 2020)