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The Great Rock of the Aquane (book review)

A masterpiece of Valcamonica recounted (and made consultable) with 21st-century tools

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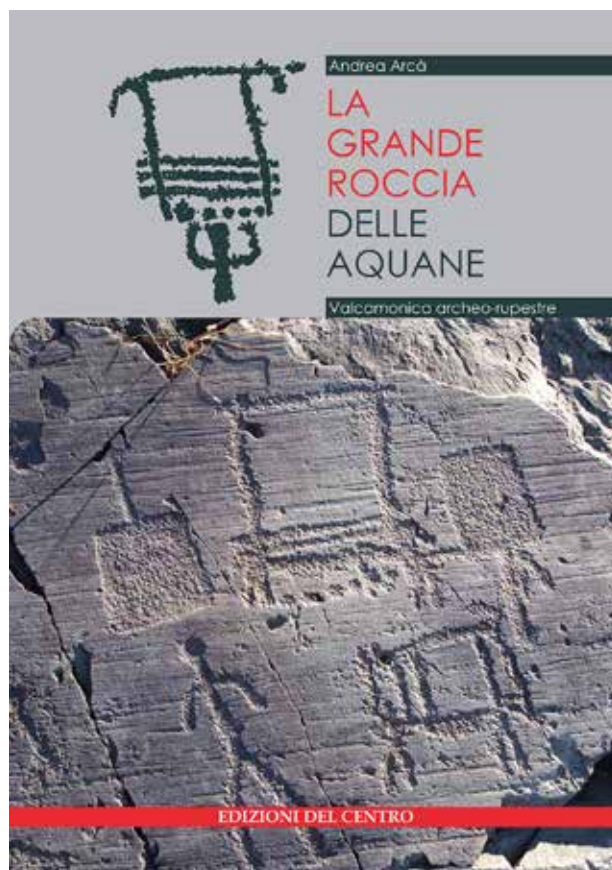
There are books that simply describe a monument, and books that reconstruct it, making it consultable, verifiable, even “navigable”. *The Great Rock of the Aquane* (*La Grande Roccia delle Aquane, Valcamonica archeo-rupestre*) by Andrea Arcà belongs to the second category. It does not merely describe Naquane’s Rock 1 (NAQ1); it turns it into a total object of study, weaving together tracing, photoplans, 3D, databases and interpretation. Because the Great Rock cannot be reduced to a single image: it is a layered archive, often overlapping and complex. The real challenge, therefore, is not only to ask “what does it represent?”, but how to read it properly.

Arcà proposes an editorial and scientific project capable of accommodating – within a book (and its digital tools) – an immense iconographic palimpsest without losing the detail.

The starting point is spectacular in its own right: the *Great Rock* in the Rock Engravings National Park of Naquane (Valcamonica – I), a true “monument” of Alpine protohistory. A vast engraved surface – over 34 metres in length and more than 8 metres in height in the engraved portion – divided into 22 sectors, where thousands of engraved figures cluster, unevenly distributed, stratified over time and often superimposed like a palimpsest.

Arcà meets the challenge with a choice that is as simple as it is disruptive: moving part of the work beyond the page, integrating the monograph with a virtual tour that allows the viewer to “fly over” the surface of the *Great Rock*, switch between tracing and photography (including grazing light), zoom into details, check superimpositions, and compare figures through the zoom of a camera. The author explicitly presents the virtual tour (www.europe-art.net/NAQ1) as an integral part of the volume: a tool for consultation and verification, with a direct invitation to navigate online.

Making a virtual tour of the *Great Rock* and its iconographic tracing accessible is not a promotional gimmick: it answers a methodological need. It is the most effective response to a real problem: how



ARCÀ A. 2025. *La Grande Roccia delle Aquane, Valcamonica archeo-rupestre*, the cover

to make such a complex document consultable without reducing it to a selection of images, an anthology of photographs.

At the heart of the book, however, lies an out-of-scale documentation effort. The complete iconographic tracing of the *Great Rock* is generated from a huge vector file – exportable to PDF with specific precautions – built from thousands of graphic objects and millions of nodes: an “atlas” that, by its extent and definition, cannot be printed in a traditional way and finds its natural solution precisely in the virtual.

The volume is not “just technology”: it is also – and above all – a reflection on method. Arcà insists on a point well known to anyone working in



La Grande Rocca delle Aquane, pages 158 and 159, recording methods

rupestrian archaeology: a tracing is never neutral. Quality depends on the operator, on choices made, and on the transparency with which interpretative steps are declared. And indeed, the documentation here is designed to be verifiable: from photographic and 3D bases to the construction of a large vector tracing, through to data management with dedicated software (RARO-Rock Art RecOrder), designed to link figures, contexts, comparisons and records coherently, up to the generation of HTML catalogues and the practical workflow of images and cut-outs useful for cataloguing.

It is precisely this “laboratory” solidity that makes the interpretative section more convincing, when the volume attempts to recombine the overall meaning of the “monument”. In terms of results, the monograph does not stop at taxonomy; in places it takes the discussion to a broader interpretative level, with argued prudence and restraint.

The most suggestive proposal is the one that gives the book its title: reading the *Great Rock of Naquane* as the “Rock of the Aquane”, weaving together iconographic clues that are extremely rare in Europe – scenes of weaving, with loom figures – with a contextual datum, namely the toponym Naquane, which may be connected to the Anguane/Enguane of Alpine folklore. From this emerges

a fascinating hypothesis – advanced with caution – linking weaving to deep themes such as destiny, triadic figures (Moirai/Fates/Norns), and ultimately to the powerful idea of the rock as a liminal place marking passages in existence. An interpretation that does not claim to “close” the discussion, but rather reopens it on finally very robust documentary foundations. In support, the documentation is meticulous: in sector P alone, seven loom figures are catalogued, presented not as isolated signs but as articulated weaving scenes, one of the rare “syntactic compositions” of NAQ1.

Another example of the volume’s ability to weave together data and meaning is its reading of the labyrinth and associated figures (duellists, a bird), with comparisons to the Etruscan world (the Tragliatella oinochoe) and references to the *lusus Troiae* and to symbols of regeneration: a case in which the rock appears not as a simple accumulation of motifs, but as an intentional construction of meaning. Here the book shows well how, in Valcamonica, certain motifs are not mere “decorations” but narrative nodes, in dialogue with images and symbols from the Italic and Etruscan worlds.

The final result is a work that achieves a difficult balance: updating a classic (NAQ1 is among the best-known and most-studied engraved monumen-

ts in Valcamonica and the Alps) without flattening it through interpretation. A volume that positions itself consciously within a long history of scholarship (from Anati onwards), yet offers a revision that is both philological and technological, arriving at a more precise reading of superimpositions and comparisons with Italic, Etruscan and Venetic contexts. Arcà's great strength is precisely his constant anchoring to context: comparisons with material culture and with the major Alpine and Po-Valley networks, which transform the Alps from a barrier into a space of connections.

And it is no small detail that this publication appears in a symbolic year for Naquane and for heritage protection: important anniversaries and a renewed reminder of research as a pillar of cultural enhancement.

For those who love Valcamonica; for those who study prehistoric and protohistoric imagery; but also, for anyone looking for concrete examples of how archaeology can unite protection, research and public communication.

References

Arcà A. 2025. [La Grande Roccia delle Aquane, Valcamonica arceo-rupestre, Edizioni del Centro, Capo di Ponte.](#)

