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## CHRONOLOGY AND INTERPRETATION OF THE “PRAYING FIGURES” IN VALCAMONICA ROCK ART

### DEFINITION

The “praying figures” or “prayers” (in Italian *oranti*) in Valcamonica - Valtellina Rock Art and generally in the Alpine RA have been so called because they seem to pray raising upwards the arms. The act of praying has been the most featured interpretation, not excluding the representation of a sort of dance. The definition of “prayer” is best applied when two characteristics occur:

1. the schematic representation of the body, when body, arms and legs have been represented by a line in a sort of “stick” figure;
2. the depiction of the upraised arms, often symmetrically opposed to the legs.

Taking a look over the category of the praying figures we can find different morphologies. The most important are:

1. praying figures with symmetrically opposed arms and legs in a curved “U” shape;
2. praying figures with symmetrically opposed arms and legs in an orthogonal “L” shape (fig. 1E);
3. praying figures with legs in a triangular shape (fig. 1B);
4. mixed kinds.

Other categories can be defined looking at:

- the sexual representation. It is possible to find male figures (sex represented by a stick), female figures (sex represented by a dot and sometimes by two other dots near the bust to indicate the breasts) and no sex-marked figures;
- the presence-absence-position of hands and feet;
- the relations with other similar figures (couples-groups);
- the weaponry (figg. 8, 10).

### DIFFUSION

“Prayers” show a large diffusion in the Alpine area rocks only in Valcamonica<sup>1</sup> and Valtellina<sup>2</sup>. Few figures of “prayers” can be found in the Garda Lake

eastern coast<sup>3</sup>, at Sion Chemin des Collines (CH)<sup>4</sup>, at St. Léonard Crête des Barmes (CH, fig. 11) and in the Mt. Bego area (F)<sup>5</sup>. The very limited presence of “prayers” in Mt. Bego<sup>6</sup> is very meaningful in order to focus their chronology. Real “prayers” figures (with both the upraised arms and the “stick” style) can be found only at Fontanalba, associated with some lightning or snake-like figures<sup>7</sup>. They have anyway only the extremities pecked in a stick way, while the body is often largely pecked. Other figures are only apparent, being the result of a joint between two opposed horned (oxen) figures, or they are raising the arms while holding a plough, an axe or a halberd. Isolated and mostly questioned figures of “prayer” can be found in the western Alps<sup>8</sup>. Male and female “prayers” with lowered arms are present in a Valgrana rock<sup>9</sup>.

Outside the Alps it is possible to cite Sweden and the Store-Dal Mellom I rock, which shows “U” shaped “prayers” and cup-marks, probably in association (Bronze Age dated). One of the most important areas of diffusion of the “prayers” is surely Sardinia<sup>10</sup>, with many figures engraved in graves (Oniféri-*Sas Concas*, Cherémule-*Tomba Branca*), caves (Dorgàli-Grotta del Bue Marino), shelters (Ozieri-riparo Luzzanas) and decorated menhirs (Làconi).

### CURRENT CHRONOLOGY

The most important definition of the Valcamonica RA chronology was proposed by E. Anati in the Sixties<sup>11</sup> and fixed in the Seventies<sup>12</sup>. This chronology enlarged the period of engraving activity and postulated the existence of different phases or layers over the engraved rocks. Style I and II were placed during

3 I - *Pietra delle Griselle*, GAGGIA 1986.

4 *Le Valais* 1986

5 DE LUMLEY *et al.* 1995. All anthropomorphic figures represent the 2.1% of significant engravings. Among them almost no prayers.

6 F - Fontanalba Z XIX, “Rock of the little characters associated with lightning”.

7 DE LUMLEY, ECHASSOUX, SERRES 1997.

8 I - *Bec Renon*, Navetta rock, ROSSI 1989.

9 ARCA 1995; MARCHI, TOGNONI 1995; SANTACROCE 1995.

10 TANDA 1985.

11 ANATI 1960.

12 ANATI 1975.

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1 I - Campanine, Coren del Valento, *Costa Peta, Dos Cui*, Foppe di Nadro, Luine, Naquane, Vite, Zurla.

2 I - *Rupe Magna*, Dosso Giroldo, Castione.

the Neolithic, style III during the Copper Age and Bronze Age, style IV from the end of the Bronze Age to the end of the Iron Age. Previous phases (proto-camunian style) showed the existence of few animals depicted in a naturalistic way (supposed palaeolithic or epipalaeolithic), while subsequent phases (historical engravings) were positioned at the end of the Camunian Cycle.

A partial revision has been established by the studies of R. C. De Marinis (Copper Age and Iron Age<sup>13</sup>, and of A. Fossati (Iron Age)<sup>14</sup>. A better definition of the Copper age phases has been identified<sup>15</sup>, while the first phase of style IV (Iron Age, style IV 1) has been shifted from the final Bronze Age to the first Iron Age, relating the figures of riders only to the Iron Age. The Iron Age has been divided into five phases (from IV 1 to IV 5). Comparisons among engraved objects (mostly metal weapons) and real objects (archaeological findings) demonstrated the relations among the camunian RA styles and the proposed chronology.

“Prayers” have been placed by E. Anati at the base of the Camunian styles I and II. Style I corresponds to the 5th millennium BC - part of the 4th (5000-3800 BC) and style II to the 4th (3800-3000 BC). Simple or coupled “prayers” belong to style I. Isolated figures of dogs and cup-marks have also been assigned to this style. The same occurs with tools and weapons like axes, spears, clubs, bows and arrows. The characteristic of style I is to show “extremely schematic figures [...] lacking attention to realistic details”. In period II A the same “figures become more elaborate and their number in each assemblage grows [...] one also notes a greater interest in details and anthropomorphic figures are prevalently of an angular type”. In period II B “prayers” show the legs in a triangular shape, “new figurative elements were added [...] and the praying figure gradually lost its dominant position”. In periods II B and C a new repertoire of symbols appears: “mazes, spirals, zigzag motifs, reticulated motifs, concentric discs, rectangles filled with parallel lines, idoliforms and oculi-faces [...] with stylistic and conceptual analogies to the megalithic art”<sup>16</sup>. Shovels also begin to take part in this phase.

“Prayers” have been attributed by Anati to the Neolithic in comparison with various elements. Regarding the material culture, they are very similar to the anthropomorphic figures of the decorated pot-

tery of the Middle and Late Neolithic<sup>17</sup> in the Carpathic and Danubian area (Vinca, Cucuteni, 4000 bc.). Regarding RA it is possible to find at Sion Chemin des Collines one “L” shaped figure of “prayer” on menhir n. 9 (another half figure is also present), related to a Neolithic cemetery<sup>18</sup> with Chamblandes kind burials and one other “L” shaped on an open air rock at Crête des Barmes (fig. 11), related to the Neolithic site Sur-Le Grand Pré<sup>19</sup>. Finally many similar figures have been engraved in the Sardinian *Domus de Janas*<sup>20</sup>, supposed Neolithic<sup>21</sup>. In 1973 R. De Marinis supports a Neolithic chronology for the “prayers” presenting various comparisons, particularly with a figure engraved in a bone handle from Riparo Gaban<sup>22</sup>. In 1989 M. Rossi, after a careful dissertation on the Neolithic “prayer”<sup>23</sup>, dates to the Neolithic (before 4000 BC) the “prayer” of the Navetta rock, proposing a funerary interpretation.

### Problems

This chronological attribution has been already questioned. In the '30-'50 period, scholars considered the Valcamonica engravings as completely Iron Age. In 1968 Cornaggia Castiglioni<sup>24</sup> rejected Anati's chronological attribution of styles I, II and III, refusing the archaeological comparisons with Remedello daggers for style II and III and pointing to the lack of any “palethnological support” for the style I. P. Graziosi in his work on prehistoric art in Italy<sup>25</sup> expressed doubts about the Neolithic phases of Valcamonica chronology.

In 1983 E. Schumacher<sup>26</sup> outlined some methodological shortages in Valcamonica style seriation and suggested a comparison between schematic “prayers” and figures of the Protovillanovian hut-urns (X-IX cent. BC). In 1985 A. Priuli<sup>27</sup> while admitting schematic human figures in the Neolithic, pointed the attention to *Costa Peta* (fig. 7) superimposition, where a “prayer” superimposes metal spear points.

C. Ferrario obtained her Doctoral thesis<sup>28</sup> in 1990 with

13 De Marinis 1988, 1994a, 1994b.

14 FOSSATI 1991.

15 Style III A1 and III A2, respectively linked to the Remedello Culture (2800-2400 BC) and to the Bell-Beaker Culture (2400-2200 BC).

16 ANATI 1975.

17 As we will see below, it is possible to find archaeological comparisons for stick-style anthropomorphic figures also in the Copper Age, in the Bronze Age and in the Iron Age

18 Middle Neolithic II, Cortaillod.

19 Middle Neolithic II, Chassey-Cortaillod-Lagozza, 3900-3200 BC.

20 *Branca* (white) grave at the Cherèmule and Onifèri grave.

21 Ozieri Culture, 3500-2700 BC.

22 I - First Neolithic, 6000 BP.

23 ROSSI 1989.

24 CORNAGGIA CASTIGLIONI 1968.

25 GRAZIOSI 1973.

26 SCHUMACHER 1893.

27 PRIULI A., 1985, p. 49.

28 FERRARIO 1989-1990.

a huge work on the “prayers” in Valcamonica RA. She demonstrated how the “prayers” are always superimposed by style IV (Iron Age) figures, and never by style III (Copper and Bronze Age) figures. After a complete examination of relations and superimpositions<sup>29</sup>, she concluded that the major part of the “prayers” belongs to the Middle-Recent Bronze Age, while admitting some Neolithic isolated cases.

Recently A. Fossati demonstrated that many “prayers” are indeed weaponed (Naquane and Foppe di Nadro)<sup>30</sup>. He cites eighteen cases: eleven of them show a spear, ten a round shield, ten a crested helmet very similar to the Villanovian one, six a sword or a club. By the comparison with archaeological weapons, he correctly suggests for them a Final Bronze Age chronology, being impossible such a large number of fakes. Weaponed “prayers” show symmetrical opposite and orthogonal arms and legs. The important case of rock 54 of Vite (fig. 8), one of the most richly engraved rocks of the Paspardo area and of the entire Valcamonica, recently discovered and traced by *Footsteps of Man* archaeological society (*Le Orme dell’Uomo*), must be added. A “prayer” in sector A, with the classic stick body and opposite orthogonal arms and legs, clearly holds a sword. The body is decorated with a series of outgoing parallel lines, exactly like the famous rider of Naquane Rock 50 (Middle Iron Age), probably representing a costume. In sector D we can find various cases of weaponed “prayers” (always handling a sword) with triangular legs.

In 1994 R. De Marinis<sup>31</sup> undertakes a precise revision of the “prayers” chronology, focusing over the *Costa Peta* superimpositions (fig. 7), the associations with Bronze Age figures (radiated wheels), and the presence of weaponed “prayers”. He suggests the attribution of the “static prayers” (“L” shaped, without head or with the head as the continuation of the stick body) to the Neolithic and of the “dynamic” “prayers” (“U” shaped, sometimes asymmetric) to the Bronze Age. Weaponed “prayers” are distinguishable by the clear indication of hands and feet.

In 1994 the author of this paper<sup>32</sup> suggests that the first phase of the camunian (post-palaeolithic) rock art is not constituted of “prayers” but by topographical figures, the only ones overlapped by Copper Age compositions.

In 1995 the work of documentation conducted by *Footsteps of Man* in the *Rupe Magna* (Grosio) demonstrated how the “prayers” are connected with

the Late Bronze Age and First Iron Age figures, mostly warriors. E. Tognoni<sup>33</sup> divides the *Rupe Magna* “prayers” in six typologies, assigns to the Middle-Recent Bronze Age “prayers” n. 1 (“U” shaped and symmetrical arms and legs), to the Final Bronze Age-First Iron Age range “prayers” n. 2 (orthogonal shaped and symmetrical arms and legs), to the first Iron Age (IV 1 style) “prayers” n. 3-6 (triangular legs). The E. Marchi<sup>34</sup> first kind of weaponed anthropomorphs is represented by “prayers” with “L” shaped and symmetrical arms and legs. The six best known figures of *Rupe Magna*, the so-called “jumping prayers” (fig. 10), belong indeed to this category. The three couples, as big as the weaponed “prayer” of Naquane rock 35, show clearly a little shield and a sword or a club. In the same work I’ve outlined the cup-marks as belonging to the last phase (Iron Age), as they cover all the other figures. All the *Rupe Magna* anthropomorphic figures indeed show a great schematic homogeneity and mixed kinds which let one conjecture a very close seriation, thus articulated in various phases.

In 1997 C. Pause finds scarce comprehensibility in Valcamonica chronology<sup>35</sup>. The first periods are particularly problematic. Consequentially, Pause proposes situating “prayers” into the Urn-field and the Hallstatt figurative tradition. He offers comparisons with some tinplate belts of the recent Hallstatt (Ha D) in South-west Germany, ceramics from the Kalenderberg-group in the eastern Alps (beginning of the Hallstatt period) or dog representations on the Bronze cysts of the Kröll-Schmiedkogels of Kleinklein (Ha D1).

In 1999 U. Sansoni dates to the Middle Bronze Age<sup>36</sup> weaponed and unweaponed “prayers” with triangular legs of the Castione rock (SO) and hypothesises a continuous line of the “prayers”. In this case they could represent, like some Cycladic or Danubian figures continuing from the Neolithic till the Bronze Age, “a never disappeared module”.

### SUPERIMPOSITIONS

In this paper I would like to present a further contribution. As already outlined by many authors it is not possible to find “prayers” covered by III style figures. On the contrary it is possible to underline at least ten cases where “prayers” superimpose. Each case has been attentively observed and testified under grazing light and with the help of high resolution (2700 optical) picture scanning. Mainly:

29 Mainly at *Costa Peta*, where superimpositions demonstrate a Middle-Recent Bronze Age *post quem* and Final Bronze Age *ante quem terminus*.

30 FOSSATI 1992.

31 DE MARINIS 1994a.

32 ARCÀ 1994.

33 ARCÀ, FOSSATI, MARCHI, TOGNONI 1995.

34 ARCÀ, FOSSATI, MARCHI, TOGNONI 1995.

35 PAUSE 1997.

36 SANSONI 1999.

1. At Foppe di Nadro rock 23, a “prayer” covers a geometric representation (fig. 1A, 2). Its legs clearly cut the left part of a rectangle, a topographical representation of the first phase. A similar case occurs on the same rock with an uncompleted “prayer”. Topographical figures are probably the most ancient figures in Valcamonica (Neolithic-First Copper Age)<sup>37</sup>, as they are superimposed by Copper Age figures (IIIA1 and IIIA2 styles).
2. At In Valle rock 9 a “prayer” with triangular legs and “U” shaped arms covers a topographical representation (fig. 1B).
3. At In Valle rock 4 a “prayer” with “U” shaped legs and orthogonal arms covers a spiral (fig. 6). Spirals are generally dated to the Neolithic<sup>38</sup>, or, in the western Alps, to the Final Bronze Age<sup>39</sup>.
4. At Grosio *Rupe Magna*, a “prayer” with triangular legs and “L” shaped arms covers a spiral. This spiral pertains to the first phases of the *Rupe Magna* engravings (Neolithic or first Copper Age).
5. At *Dos Cui* in two cases, “prayers” cover ploughing scenes (fig. 1C, 1D, 3). In the first case the horns of the ox have been clearly cut and superimposed by the left arm of a “prayer” with arms “U” shaped and legs “L” shaped. In the second case the ploughman is completely cancelled by a not complete figure of “prayer”, which shows only the upper part of his body. In both cases the ploughing scenes have been pecked in profile. They are very similar, thus more schematic, to the Remedellian Copper age (IIIA1) ploughing scenes of the Bagnolo II boulder or Foppe di Nadro rock 23.
6. At Foppe di Nadro rock 23 a male “prayer” with symmetrical opposite arms and legs cancels with the left leg an outlined oval-shaped blade (fig. 1F). A second identical blade is present few cm left. The shape of the blade and of the handle allows a generic Bronze Age chronological attribution.
7. At Foppe di Nadro rock 24 a “prayer” with symmetrical opposite and orthogonal arms and legs superimposes a dagger with triangular blade (fig. 1E, 4), rounded point and rounded handle. The fact that the handle of the dagger is flatter than the half-moon shaped Copper Age ones allows an Ancient or generic Bronze Age chronological attribution.
8. At *Dos Costa Peta*, two “prayers” with symmetrical opposite arms and legs superimpose a bay-

leaf spear point and are superimposed by a flamed spear point<sup>40</sup>. The “prayers” have been engraved with the pecking technique and the spears with the *polissoir* technique (repeated scratching). The bay-leaf spear points are dated through archaeological comparison to the Middle-Recent Bronze Age (XVII-XIII cent. BC), while the flamed spear points are dated to the Final Bronze Age<sup>41</sup>.

9. At Grosio *Rupe Magna*, sector F, a couple of “prayers” with symmetrical opposite and orthogonal arms and legs covers two boxers pecked in profile. The boxer figures, symmetrically opposed, stick body, are typical of the first phases (style IV 1) of Iron Age RA.
10. At Campanine rock 16, a “prayer” with symmetrical opposite and orthogonal arms and legs cuts with its leg, pelvis and male sex the roof of an architectural representation (fig. 5). Architectural representations, like huts or granaries, belong entirely to an Iron Age chronology.

All the examples demonstrate how “prayers” cover the Neolithic, Copper Age, Bronze Age and in some cases first Iron Age figures.

All this fits very well with the work of C. Ferrario. Counting the superimpositions cited by C. Ferrario, we can find 22 cases of “prayers” under IV2 stile and only 2 under IV1 style. The anterior time with respect to the Iron Age is well demonstrated, but also the possibility of some delay till the first Iron Age, as the absolute majority of the underpositions is related not to the IV1 but to the IV2 style. The work of Ferrario continues with a vast examination of the relations. Among them she cites 40 associations among “prayers” themselves and 10 with dogs. Other cases demonstrate a relation with Bronze Age figures (carts, radiated wheels, shovels).

## COMPARISONS

### *Alpine arc*

We must notice how all the Neolithic comparisons (except the Riparo Gaban case) in the Alpine range should be differently considered. At Sion Chemin des Collines it is possible that the menhir could be standing in the open air during all the Bronze Age. At

<sup>37</sup> ARCA 1996.

<sup>38</sup> By a stylistic comparison with southern Italian decorated pottery or with Irish passage graves.

<sup>39</sup> Susa Valley (I), Haute Maurienne (F), by the relations with Iron Age meanders and topographical figures.

<sup>40</sup> FERRARIO 1992, 1994; DE MARINIS 1994, fig. 7.

<sup>41</sup> Looking attentively at the pictures, it seems indeed that some dots of the left “prayer” cover both kinds of spear points. Experimental engraving proofs, conducted by the author, scratching before and then pecking, confirm the possibility of the superimposition on both spears, while high definition scanning of the picture shows two series of pecking, the first cut by the scratched lines of the flamed spear and the second, more scattered, superimposed on the spear.

Crête des Barmes<sup>42</sup> (fig. 11) the anthropomorphic figures are accompanied by circled cup-marks, which have been also found at *Rupe Magna* covering first Iron Age engravings<sup>43</sup>, mostly in the sector ZU. The rock itself is not close to the Neolithic site of Sur-Le Grand Pré but 200 m far. The same archaeological site shows Late Bronze Age (HA2-B) and First Iron Age levels.

### Sardinia

Outside the Alpine range, we have many “prayers” in Sardinia (the most important area in Italy after Valcamonica regarding their diffusion), not only in *Domus de Janas*, but also in shelters, caves and on standing stones. *Domus de Janas* (“houses of the fairies”) are underground burial chambers excavated on the rock, mostly during the Ozieri<sup>44</sup> Culture. They were also utilised in the subsequent Filigosa-Abealzu<sup>45</sup>, Monte Claro, Bell-beakers<sup>46</sup> and Bonnanaro<sup>47</sup> Cultures, lasting in some cases till the Roman period, throwing away on each new burial occasion all the previous material. So it is impossible to find a direct archaeological relation with the engravings, which could belong to any of these phases. Only three tombs<sup>48</sup> show engravings with anthropomorphic schematic figures: *Tomba Branca* at Cherèmule (SS)<sup>49</sup> (fig. 14, 15), *Tomba dell’Emiciclo* and *Tomba Nuova Ovest* at Onifèri (NU)<sup>50</sup>. There is no iconographic relation between the stick figures engraved on the tombs and the Ozieri Culture<sup>51</sup>, which shows on the pottery clearly different human shapes (mostly bitriangular). On the contrary stick human figures can be found on a Filigosa Culture (Copper Age) loom weight coming from Conca Illonis (Cabras)<sup>52</sup> (fig. 16). It is also impossible to find a close relation between the praying figures and the common iconography of the burial chambers themselves (oxen heads, horns, spirals, architectural elements, more largely diffused than praying figures), normally carved as a structural and symmetrical element and not as a disorderly and badly

disposed pecking, as stick figures on the contrary are. It is possible then to suggest an engraving practice corresponding to a secondary utilisation phase of the tombs. Another important chronological (and interpretative) point is the similarity with the engraved Laconi<sup>53</sup> menhirs, very clear in the Oniferi case, mostly for the “anchor type” figures of the Tomba Nuova Ovest (fig. 18). The engravings (bas-relief indeed) of the menhirs show “anchor-type” figures (very similar to a “prayer” without legs, but also interpretable like a stylisation of an ox figure, or, better, like a kind of fusion of a dagger figure with a horned figure) associated with metal dagger figures. The menhirs (fig. 17), in some cases re-utilised in Ancient Bronze Age structures, are referred to the full Copper Age, and the dagger-iconography compared with the well-known Remedellian phase of the Alpine statue-stelae and boulders. Passing from burial chambers to caves and shelters, the most important site is the *Grotta del Bue Marino* (the “Sea-ox cave”). Here some 20 figures with up-raised arms (fig. 13) have been engraved in a group<sup>54</sup>, on a sloping rock near the sea at the main entrance of the cave, being in two cases accompanied by a circle with a central dot. Unfortunately there is no association with archaeological material, although in another branch of the cave some Ozieri pottery has been found. Another very interesting situation is presented by the schematic red painted anthropomorphs of the Luzzanas shelter (Ozieri, SS)<sup>55</sup>, all with lowered arms and legs, both rounded or orthogonal, again with no archaeological association. In this case the clear similarity with various “Mediterranean” (Spain, Corse, Sicily, Puglia) situation has already been exposed. A recent trial of digital photo-enhancing<sup>56</sup> revealed some double spiral and zigzagging motifs (fig. 12), very well comparable with the iconography of the Ozieri pottery.

In conclusion, while the case of Luzzanas could demonstrate a (late) Neolithic Chronology, though showing lowered arms figures, the other sites seem to indicate a middle Copper Age chronology (by comparison-relation with archaeological findings). This suggestion is for the moment not suitable for the Valcamonica praying figures, as the Middle Copper Age (Remedellian) anthropomorphic figures are in Valcamonica well-known and totally different,

42 *Le Valais* 1986.

43 ARCA, FOSSATI, MARCHI, TOGNONI 1995, p. 90.

44 Late Neolithic - First Eneolithic, 3200-2700 BC.

45 Middle Eneolithic 2700 - 2500 BC.

46 Late Copper Age 2500-2200 BC.

47 Ancient Bronze Age 2000-1800 BC.

48 The Sos Furrighesos necropolis engraved figures are more likely horned figures than anthropomorphs. Other isolated figures are present at Pontesecco and Anghelu Ruju (DEMARTIS 1992).

49 CONTU 1965; COSSU 1984.

50 SANTONI 1995.

51 D’ARRAGON 1999a; 1999b.

52 D’ARRAGON 1999b.

53 The Laconi menhirs have been found re-utilised in Bonnanaro and nuragic structures and are (recently, ATZENI 1995) referred to Filigosa-Abealzu Copper Age phases.

54 LO SCHIAVO 1980.

55 DETTORI CAMPUS 1988.

56 The author of this paper worked on saturation and color substitution in order to obtain software-enhanced digital pictures.

unless we hypothesise a secondary Copper Age style executed on flat rocks contemporary to the engraved vertical boulders. In no case is it possible to identify a Neolithic chronology for up-raising arms Sardinian praying figures. So, believing or not believing in the Neolithic Age of Camunian praying figures, either we must totally deny any relation between Sardinian and Valcamonica stick-figures (relation moreover possible regarding dagger figures), or we can possibly suggest a sort of long-distance long-time range diffusion, with a chronological gap between the two situations. The presence anyway of two distinct and separated (regarding time, space and culture) similar iconographic phases is not so inconceivable, due to the extreme simplicity of the stick figure graphs and to the fact that it is so widely diffused in different prehistoric cultures, from the Neolithic to the Iron Age. The complex (and for the moment not totally clear) relation between anthropomorphic, horned and dagger figures should also be outlined, totally absent in Valcamonica (but present at M. Bego), which generated in Sardinia some kinds of “mixed” figures.

Coming back to the Alpine RA a Final Bronze Age - First Iron Age line of archaeological comparison is also possible. E. Schumacher already outlined many cases of similar schematic anthropomorphic figures in Villanovian hut-urns. A. Fossati also points the attention to the Pergine leg-pads (XI-X cent. BC), where figures with symmetrical opposite and orthogonal arms and legs have been embossed, or over the eastern Hallstatt pottery, like at Sopron (HaC). C. Pause offers comparisons with some belt metal sheets of the recent Hallstatt (Ha D) in South-west Germany. I must add that at the S. Germain en Laye (F) National Archaeological Museum there is exposed a Middle Halstatt (650-550 BC) belt buckle decorated by a schematic anthropomorphic figure (fig. 9), exactly like a “prayer”.

In the Griselle Rock (Garda lake) we can find two schematic figures with raised arms and triangular legs<sup>57</sup>. Feet are indicated. The body indeed is largely pecked. A never published figure, visible only with artificial grazing light, of a male “prayer” with short legs “U” shaped shows a more schematic style. The figures are related to Recent-Final Bronze Age swords depictions.

### CONTIGUITY

Another important feature of the “prayers” is their spatial relation with the Iron Age figures. This relation is particularly self-evident for people experienced in tracing Valcamonica Rock Art. If we look attentively

at the camunian RA *in toto* we can find some well defined patterns, like the topographic “maps”, the Copper Age monumental compositions or the Ancient and Middle Bronze Age “disordered” axes. Each pattern shows peculiar characteristics. We can always find in one or more cases a “pure style” composition. Spatial distribution too is typical: Neolithic or first Copper Age topographical engravings<sup>58</sup> are distributed in well-defined areas (*Le Crus*<sup>59</sup>, *Vite*, *Dos dell’Arca*, engraved menhirs). Copper Age engravings prefer vertical surfaces, Ancient and Middle Bronze Age axes compositions (FDN 23, Luine) choose few well concentrated surfaces and demonstrate a complete identity with panels of other areas (Catelletto rock, VR<sup>60</sup>; Tresivio r. 1, SO<sup>61</sup>; La Barmasse, AO<sup>62</sup>). If we assume that the “prayers” mark the Neolithic Valcamonica RA (styles I and II) we also assume that they represent a very specific pattern. But few of the previously cited peculiarities appear to be linked to the “prayers” compositions: it is hard to find a “pure style” complete panel (while it is very possible for all other patterns). Only partial sectors are evident (one of the purest, Naquane r. 50, is full of Iron age figures all around the “prayers”) and no typical spatial distribution appears, like a sort of a scattered diffusion.

In fact “prayers” are never isolated, but nearly always accompanied by mixed, surrounded, superimposed Iron age figures, in a concrete and real spatial contiguity that could only be statistically interpreted as a chronological contiguity in a close sequence. I must also add as a thematic contiguity. Looking at the presence of the “prayers”, it is possible to count 58<sup>63</sup> rocks in the Valcamonica-Valtellina area (Griselle Rock from Garda Lake was added): 53 (91.4 %) also show Iron Age figures, 4 (6.9%) also Bronze Age figures, 1 (1.7%) is not defined. Admitting that a Neolithic engraving phase for the “prayers” is possible is the same as admitting a statistical improbability: all the “prayers” bearing surfaces should have been pecked during the Neolithic, stood untouched during all the Copper Age and Ancient and Middle Bronze Age, and newly re-engraved with completely different figures in the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age.

A short observation is due about the shovel. In Anati’s chronology it pertains to a I-IV style range. It is the

58 ARCA 1994, 1996.

59 GAVALDO 1995.

60 GAGGIA 1982.

61 SANSONI, GAVALDO, CASTALDI 1999.

62 DAUDRY 1982.

63 After bibliographical research (ANATI 1979; ARCA, FOSSATI, MARCHI, TOGNONI 1995; CITTADINI GUALENI 1991; FUSCO, GALBIATI 1990; FUSCO, MIRABELLA ROBERTI 1977; PACE 1972; SANSONI, GAVALDO 1995).

57 TOGNONI 1995.

longest range. As the most ancient part derives from the relation with the “prayers”, a more appropriate definition of their chronology will consequentially reflect in a more suitable range for shovels themselves.

### STICK STYLE

The representation of the body, arms and legs in a stick way is one of the peculiar features of the “prayers”. We can find the same in the Copper Age figures (IIIA1 style), but never with raised arms and with a different way of representing the sex, and in the first Iron Age (style IV1), where boxers and naked duellists occur. These figures are often accompanied by dogs, again engraved with a stick body and quite identical to the dogs often related with the “prayers” figure, like in Foppe di Nadro rock. N. 27. Hunting scenes also show riders and horses pecked with stick bodies. It seems natural to assign to these figures a contiguous chronology, without dividing “prayers” and other stick figures by more than two millennia. A possible explanation of the stick style could be found in a sort of influence not only of the decorated pottery but also of the wool tissues. Even today the alpine tissues show geometric orthogonal figures, probably due to the weft of the cloth.

### CHRONOLOGICAL CONCLUSIONS

All the previous assertions suggest a clear need for re-defining the chronology of the Camunian “prayers”. This suggestion is motivated by archaeological comparisons, examination of the spatial distribution, associations (and dissociation) and stylistic considerations. It is mainly testified by the analysis of the superimpositions: as “prayers” superimpose Neolithic-Copper Age maps, Copper Age ploughing scenes and Ancient Bronze Age daggers it is impossible to place them in these periods. A similar conclusion is suggested by the fact that “prayers” are never associated with Remedellian and Bell-beaker elements. On the contrary the contiguity and the repeated co-occurrence of “prayers” with Iron Age figures opens the door to a Middle-Recent Bronze Age-Final Bronze Age range, probably reaching in some cases a First Iron Age chronology. This means a XVII-VIII cent. BC theoretical range, which could be restricted by some two-three centuries (XV-VIII BC) by assuming that the bay-leaf spear point (which represents the most ancient superimposition related to an object archaeologically dated) depicted in the *Costa Peta* rock pertains not to the first but to the middle part of its chronological duration. As already outlined, the “U” shaped “prayers” must be placed in the first phase, while “L” shaped “prayers” in the last phase, often covering the “U” shaped ones (Grosio

*Rupe Magna*) and in many cases weaponed. It seems to me that it is not possible to identify more ancient figures. A plausible exception, a “prayer” related to a triangular blade halberd (Foppe di Nadro rock)<sup>64</sup> is for the moment a *unicum*. Another case, an orthogonal “prayer” of Foppe di Nadro rock 1 proposed Neolithic<sup>65</sup>, is related to a circle with a central dot (interpreted as the sun), which also occurs in other cases related to Iron age footprints<sup>66</sup>. Such a long duration would fit badly into the complete absence of “prayers” in Copper Age stelae and boulders and in Ancient and Middle Bronze Age weapon compositions (Aosta valley, Valtellina, Valcamonica, Garda lake) and panels, so clear in the case of the Mt. Bego area, where also the total lack of cup-marks is to be noticed. If not we should admit a double thematic line, one for the monumental panels and the other for the soil level rocks. It is sure, anyway, that a complete re-examination (and retracing) of some Foppe di Nadro rocks (mainly 22-23-24) and *Dos Cui* rocks, where exceptionally not only Iron Age figures, “prayers” and Ancient – Middle Bronze Age figures, but also Copper Age phases occur in soil level surfaces, would deliver new stimulating data.

An important consideration should be added: the suggested chronological “prayers” starting-point curiously follows a period (the Middle Bronze Age) in which Mt. Bego rock art stops and Valcamonica rock art is very limited (Luine - Foppe di Nadro). The same period is marked by one of the strongest Holocenic cold climatic variations<sup>67</sup>. Could this cold phase be interpreted as the cause of the stop of the main engraving practice at Mt. Bego and the “prayers” as the markers of a new re-starting phase of the Valcamonica engravings?

### INTERPRETATION

In my opinion the spatial and chronological contiguity with Iron Age figures bears consequences in the interpretation field too. It is not hard to find parallels. The most diffused figures in Iron Age RA are standing warriors and duellists. Returning back to “prayers” we can find both. The first ones could be recognised in weaponed “prayers”. The second ones in the couples of “prayers”. On the *Rupe Magna* it is possible to count at least 50 couples, including weaponed “prayers”. The same occurs at *Costa Peta*,

64 DE MARINIS 1994a.

65 FERRARIO 1990.

66 The *Great Rock of Paspardo* (VIT 54), under study. Footprints are Iron Age dated.

67 During the Löss variation (XVI cent. BC, *Le Valais* 1986, p. 74, 94) the glaciers reached the limit, never more exceeded, of the recent so called “little alpine glacial era” (1850 AD).

where many couples of “prayers” are engraved. Five couples can be counted on Naquane rock 50. Why not interpret the couples of “prayers”, often very similar to the close couples of weaponed “prayers”, as a representation of a hand-to hand fight? A duel without weapons properly introducing the later Iron Age heavier duels? The same for dogs: stick dogs are present both in First Iron Age and in “prayers” compositions: why not think, like in the Iron Age, of hunting scenes?

An entire culture of feasts and rites seems to be represented on the Valcamonica-Valtellina rocks. A culture probably regarding the entire community in some yearly events, the core of each year. A culture in which proofs of ability, sport and ritual games, inter-tribal tourneys should comply with various goals, like the celebration of the natural cycles, the acknowledgement as a champion (or as a divinity?) of the strongest warrior, the creation and the safeguard of the myth, the recognition of the chiefs, the practice of initiatory games. While these definitions are mostly valid for the Iron Age it is very possible to catch a glimpse of a possible anticipation of some of these themes in the Middle - Final Bronze Age, in a society gradually moving the first steps towards the establishment of the stronger warrior figure.

In this sense the schematic figure (the “prayer”, which now seems to have an improper name) takes a suitable place not only in a chronological sense but also in a thematic way. But what to say about the female figures? We know they are a chronological marker, as there is the absence of female figures in Iron Age RA. I won't obviously sustain a female series of fighting games. I've till this moment expressly ignored any dance-related explanation. We can read in the Homeric tales (particularly in *Odyssey* book VIII) about feasts with games like boxing, run, spear throwing. The *Odyssey*, while written in the VIII cent. BC, tells about events of the XII cent., so of the Recent Bronze Age. It is related to a very distant region, but for this period it is probably the only written document available and we can't ignore the wide web of economic and cultural relationships diffused in all Europe since prehistory. The games described in the *Odyssey* are always crowned by the dance. A ritual dance, a popular dance, we don't know, but this should be the place for the female schematic figures and for the male-female schematic couples (well present). This interpretation could also be reflected in the previously called hand-to-hand fighting scenes. They could depict dances or weaponed dances, always complying with a feast-rite situation. The same schematic way of representing the human body, which anyway seems to show a sort of physical activity with the raised arms and the opposition

arms-legs, could be not a consequence of a stylistic wave but a sense-bearer, the sense of the movement, the movement of the fight and of the dance.

#### *FOCUS POINT: STYLE AND PHASES*

A seriation of the Valcamonica RA, starting from topographical representations, going through Copper Age well disposed compositions, Ancient and Middle Bronze Age “badly” disposed weapons, Middle-Final Bronze age schematic human figures and reaching the Iron Age explosion of the male-related themes, seems to be quite congruent. The agricultural field finds its great place in the Neolithic-first Copper Age maps. The Copper Age ordered compositions seem likely to be related to a ritual-religious function, probably changed or corrupted in the Ancient Bronze Age, while from the Middle-Final Bronze Age starts the heavy line of the individual male proof of strength, pride and ability, made finally possible by the Iron weapons.

The shifting of the “prayers” chronology from the Neolithic to the Bronze Age involves a modification in the entire Valcamonica style-definition. Periods I and II, dominated until now by the presence of “prayers”, crash dramatically. Why arrange Copper Age figures into Style III, if the only testified previous figures are the topographical ones? I think there are two possible solutions, each one bearing interesting pros. The first consists of leaving any numbered list and referring uniquely to the archaeological period, like Ancient Bronze Age figures, Late Iron Age figures, and so on. It would be a good way of realising an easier “communication” of Valcamonica engraving periods, often tied in phases and sub-phases. The second consists of maintaining the two later styles (III Copper - Bronze Age and IV Iron Age) as they are now by refilling the two earlier ones. Style I (pre-Neolithic) should be represented by the Proto-Camunian figures, while Style II (Neolithic-first Copper Age) by the topographical representations. In this way it would be possible to maintain for the great majority of the Camunian figures the same style number, until now of common use. The debate is open, I hope in a constructive way.

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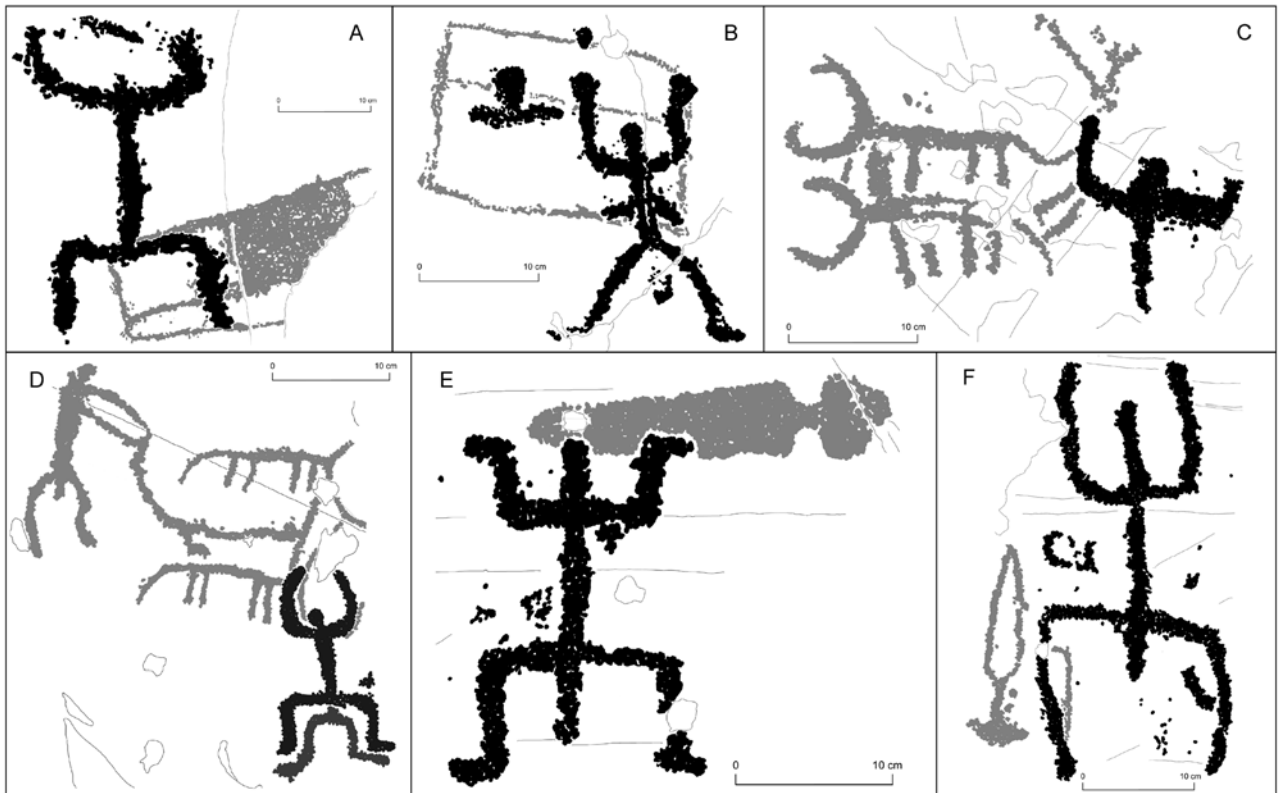
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## RIASSUNTO

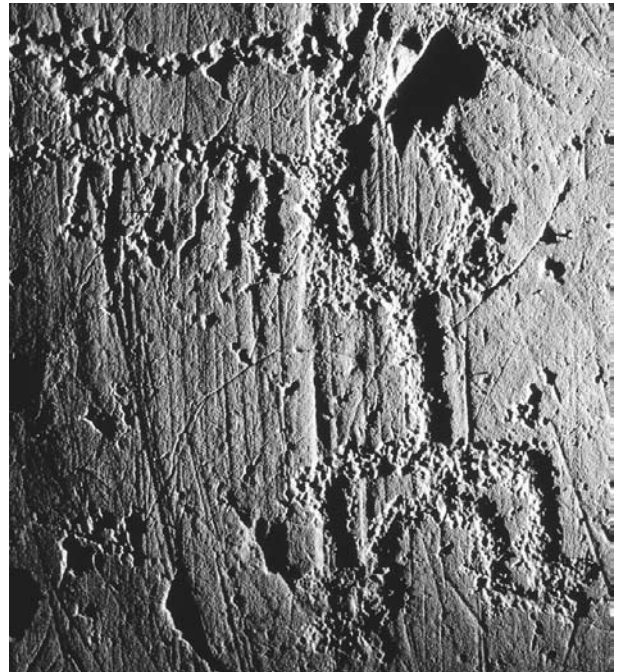
La cronologia degli oranti, attualmente alla base degli stili I e II (Neolitico) della seriazione camuna, viene affrontata partendo dalle revisioni in atto. Viene illustrata una serie di sovrapposizioni di oranti a figure dell'età del Rame, del Bronzo e della prima età del Ferro. Sulla base di tali sovrapposizioni, della ripetuta contiguità spaziale con figure dell'età del Ferro e del studio della *Rupe Magna* di Grosio si ipotizza una cronologia Bronzo Medio-Recente Bronzo Finale, con attardamenti fino alla prima età del Ferro. Nella presenza di coppie di oranti e di oranti armati si riconosce un'anticipazione delle tematiche connesse alle prove di abilità e di forza dell'età del Ferro, con la possibile raffigurazione di lotte a corpo libero e con un aggancio alle scene di danza per quanto riguarda le figure femminili, in un contesto iconografico legato ad eventi di rito-gioco-festa. Si sottolinea la forte problematicità delle prime due fasi della seriazione stilistica camuna e si propone di assegnare allo Stile I il periodo proto-camuno e allo Stile II le incisioni topografiche.



*Fig. 1. Prayers overimposed to: Neolithic - first Copper Age maps (A - Foppe di Nadro 23, B - Paspardo In Valle 9); Copper Age ploughing scenes (C, D - Dos Cui); Bronze Age daggers (E - Foppe di Nadro 24, F- Foppe di Nadro 23)*



*Fig. 2. Prayer overimposed to a Neolithic - first Copper Age map: Foppe di Nadro 23*



*Fig. 3. Prayer overimposed to a Copper Age ploughing scene, Dos Cui*



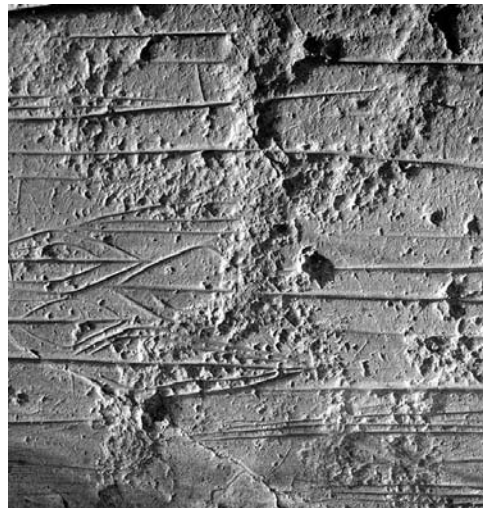
*Fig. 4. Prayer overlaid to a Bronze Age dagger: Foppe di Nadro 24*



*Fig. 5. Prayer overlaid to an Iron Age hut: Campanine*



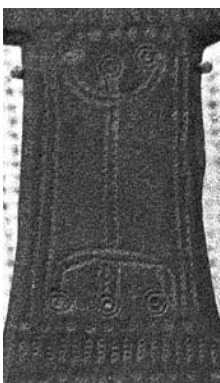
*Fig. 6. Prayer overlaid to a spiral: PIV 4*



*Fig. 7. Prayer lying between Middle-Recent Bronze Age and Final Bronze Age spear points, Costa Peta*



*Fig. 8. Weaponned prayer, Vite 54*



*Fig. 9. Middle Halstatt decorated belt buckle*



*Fig. 10. Couples of weaponned prayers, Rupe Magna sector JA*



*Fig. 11. Crête des Barmes (CH), prayer*



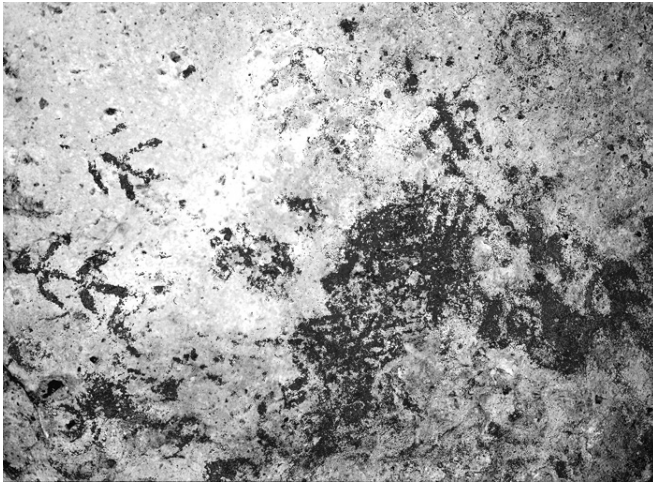


Fig. 12. Ozieri (SS), Luzzanas shelter



Fig. 13. Dorgàli (NU), Bue Marino cave



Fig. 14. Cherèmule (SS), Tomba Branca



Fig. 15. Cherèmule (SS), Tomba Branca



Fig. 16. Conca Illonis, Copper Age loomweight



Fig. 17. Barrili I stele (Laconi Museum)

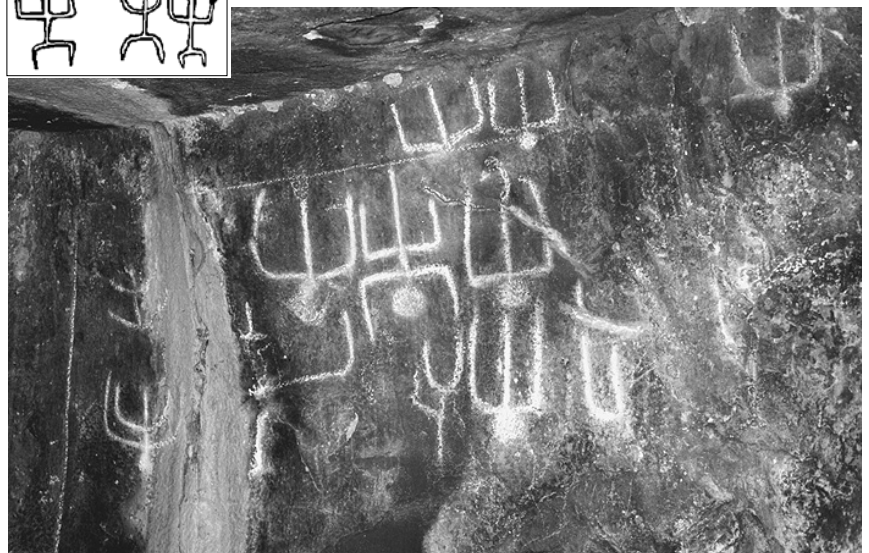


Fig. 18. Onifèri, Emicilo Grave





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