The rock art tradition of Valcamonica-Valtellina, Northern Italy: A World Heritage View

by Angelo Eugenio Fossati

The rock art tradition of Valcamonica-Valtellina consists of about three hundred thousand engraved figures. However, at the beginning of the 20th century, only the Cemmo boulders in Valcamonica were known. These discoveries were made by the geographer Walther Laeng who published information about the boulders that local people used to call “the rocks of the puppets” (le prede dei pitoti in local dialect) (Laeng 1914). In fact, most discoveries in Valcamonica were made during the 1930s thanks to the archaeologist Raffaello Battaglia (Battaglia 1934) and the anthropologist Giovanni Marro (Marro 1930). A more scientific comprehension of the different phases appeared during the 1960s and the 1970s with the work of Emmanuel Anati (Anati 1962; 1976; 1982) and other scholars, among them especially Raffaele De Marinis (De Marinis 1988; 1995). With the discovery of rock art also on the eastern side of the Garda Lake in 1964 (Pasotti 1965) and in Valtellina, a border valley to the north of Valcamonica, in 1966 (Pace 1968), we know today that this zone of the central-eastern Alps, from Valtellina to the Garda Lake can be considered a single petroglyph area which has common stylistic, thematic and chronological characteristics. However, the principal area remains Valcamonica, which constitutes an archaeological, artistic, ethnographic and historical patrimony of inestimable value (from 1979 inscribed in the UNESCO World Heritage List), not only for its antiquity but above all, for its thematic and iconographic wealth (Anati 1982; De Marinis 1988; Arcà et al. 1995). In the present paper I will deal with the original Valcamonica area, but I will also cite some other alpine sites.

From a geological point of view, the valleys were formed and polished by glaciers during the last hundred thousand years, and the art is mainly located in the open air on flat rocks. From Pioso on the Iseo Lake, south of Valcamonica, to the sites of Sellero - Grevo in the middle valley, the rocks are composed of sandstone, while in the upper part of the valley and in the entire Valtellina they consist of schist. On the Garda Lake the rocks are constituted of limestone. These rocks, sandstone, schist or limestone are very polished and molded. In these areas one finds mainly engravings, as only 7 paintings have been discovered to date (Fossati 2001a). The engravers used hammering and scratching techniques, with hammering being the most common. To hammer the rocks they used quartz tools, in fact it is possible to find these artefacts as they have been abandoned near the rocks (Fossati 1993a).

The most ancient phases

In this area, at present, the rock art is distributed across four main periods: from the Neolithic to the arrival of the Romans in the valleys (Fig. 1; Anati 1976; De Marinis 1988; Fossati 1991). Obviously the rupestrian tradition does not always assume in these phases the same meaning for the populations that produced it, but in every period the value of the rock art activity appears to be different.

The first phase dates between the end of Neolithic and the Copper Age (4th Millennium BC; 1st/2nd - beginning of the 3rd A styles of the Camunnian rock art, Fig. 1) where topographic figures are found, the first representations of the territory. The execution of this type of rock art on cliffs is perhaps tied to an actual division of agricultural lands. The division of landscape becomes ritualized and sanctioned through the practice of rock art
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**Figure 1** Themes and Chronology in Valcamonica-Valtellina rock art tradition (*by A. Fossati-Le Orme dell’Uomo*)
(Arcà 2005; Fossati 1993a; 1994; 2002). I will summarise only the main types occurring in Valcamonica and Valtellina starting from the earliest:

- **Spots**, these are represented by sub-rectangular pecked areas which appear both on flat rocks and on boulders. This motif appears to be the oldest;
- **Double rectangle**, which sometimes may appear as only a simple rectangle. These figures have mostly been drawn in contour, but sometimes with a dot in the centre, or they may be completely pecked;
- **Groups of dots**, or lengthened dots (also called "macaroni");
- **Oval shapes**, sometimes associated with other forms, as spots and rectangles, often connected with lines;
- **"Mushrooms"**, a composition of different motives: double rectangles, oval shapes, rectangles, dots;
- **“Bandoleer”** or shoulder-belt figure: this is a circular figure, with one or double lines of contour. Two or more semicircular lines, sometimes cut in the middle, occur inside or outside the circle. It is one of the more strange figures in the repertoire of topographical representations.

Other figures attributed to this phase are spirals and necklaces. Spirals are a rare motif in Valcamonica, while in Valtellina they are more widely spread: on the Rupe Magna of Grosio five figures are engraved (fig. 3). These engravings appear to be overlapped by other more recent imagery such as praying figures, warriors and cupmarks. Spirals are probably the oldest figures in the Grosio rock art. Spirals and necklaces, in the shape of an upside down 'U' (fig. 4), can to be linked to the contemporaneous megalithic art of Western Europe, as well as Brittany, Ireland and Portugal, not only for the iconographic resemblance but also for possible chronological similarity.

It is more or less accepted that this first phase is preceded by a more ancient period, perhaps going back to the end of the Paleolithic (Anati 1974). The figures of this ancient period therefore are very few only 10 have been recognized so far - and all represent animals, especially elks and deer. This phase, called Proto Camunnian (Fig. 1) for its great antiquity and content, is in some way tied to the style and chronology of Ice Age Art, today also attested outside caves, from the recent findings of Ice Age art on walls and flat rocks in the open air in Spain and Portugal (Aa.Vv. 1997; Abreu et al. 1995). The figures are outlined in contour (fig. 5), usually bigger then the size of the Iron Age zoomorphic figures that reach 20-30 cm at least. Very rarely do the Iron Age figures, in fact, reach or exceed one meter of dimension: 6 warriors in Pasparido, of the end of the 4th 2 style (end of 6th century BC), two horses in Foppe di Nadoro and Naquane, one goat-like figure in Zurla, all
probably belonging to the 4th 3 style (5th century BC).

The second phase, which corresponds to the full Copper Age (4th-3rd Millennium BC, the so-called 3rd A Camunnian style, Fig. 1), is characterised by stele in the form of slabs, boulders, menhirs, and irremovable blocks of landslides (the so-called “Monumental Compositions”). The anthropomorphic attributes are suggested by the distribution of engravings and sometimes by the bevelling of the upper part, schematically representing shoulders (fig. 6). The representation of a single personage is rare and in the majority of cases appears to be a composition of different figures that form, with their deep symbolic value, elements of differentiation compared to the monuments of the other alpine groups of stele, such as the Lunigiana, the Aosta-Sion and the Trentino-Alto Adige monuments. Moreover, in the Valcamonica-Valtellina group there is a lack of unity in the process of engraving, with the addition of new figures that complete or efface the previous, a phenomenon that happens over few centuries or even in few decades. In this style, 3rd A, one can distinguish three different periods of carving: a first phase called 3rd A1 - characterized by symbolic figures - and a second phase called 3rd A2 - marked by anthropomorphic figures. A last phase, called 3rd A3, is very short and it has to be attributed, with every probability, to the Early Bronze Age (end of 3rd Millennium BC) (De Marinis 1994).
The iconographic repertoire of the most ancient phase (the 3rd A1 style) is expressed by the representation of the so-called Remedello dagger, which has a very well defined triangular blade and a half moon shaped pommel (fig. 7). It is testified in contemporary tombs at Remedello (2900-2500 BC), and moreover on the Copper Age stelae in the Alpine Range, as in the beautiful compositions of Aosta, Sion, Arco or Lunigiana. Other figures associated to these daggers, are weapons (axes and halberds of metal or stone), animals such as deer, dogs, foxes, wolves, chamois, ibexes, boars, bovines and few other symbolic figures. Chariots and ploughing scenes may also appear in these compositions. The weapons are always associated with the figure of the sun, an aspect that symbolizes the emergence of a hierarchy, who probably saw themselves as descendants of divinities. Even in the statue-stelae of the other alpine groups, the association between the sun and weapons refers to male personages is always indicated by a dagger (Gallay 1996). The double spiral pendant represents a copper jewel that is symbolically connected with the female figure. Documentation shows that the use of this jewel, whose origin is in the Carpathian Basin, where, during the Neolithic ceramic figurines of the Mother Goddess have been found. It is suggested that the jewel formed an element of ceremony or status (Casini 1994). Other jewels (eye pendants, necklaces, combs) are associated in this feminine representation.

The third important symbol is represented by a rectangle filled with vertical lines or a chessboard like formation, adorned by vertical sides with fringes (fig. 8). This motif is often associated with animals: compositions of deer with does (harem), are usually placed below, and a series of wild dogs and chamois, disposed vertically by the sides (Fossati 1993b). The sexual value of this symbol is probably masculine, as shown by the anthropomorphic phase (style 3rd A2) where it is now represented by an anthropomorph with phallic evidence associated to two other gods. The presence of fringes suggests an interpretation of the object as a cloak. This is also confirmed by the statue-stelae of the Trentino-Alto Adige region, where a similar motif is represented on the shoulders of human representations. In this element it is possible to recognize a
particularly significant attribute of a god, that represents him as a pars pro toto. These three main symbols recur singularly or together on the same stone, as if this represents a sort of statue of one single divinity, or of two or three gods (Casini & Fossati 1994). The iconographic repertoire of phase 3rd A2 is not as common as the previous period. In fact the symbols now become anthropomorphic, but some artefacts remain, like the weapons. These are always important for the chronology of the monuments: in particular the dagger of the Ciempozuelos type and the halberd of Villafranca type are now engraved. These are typical weapons of the Bell Beaker period (2,500-2,200 BC) (De Marinis 1994). Animals and human figures are now represented with more realism in a naturalistic way. In general one can witness the development of a cult towards a divine triad (fig. 9) (Casini & Fossati 1994). The 3rd A3 shows only anthropomorphic figures dancing in circles and daggers of the Early Bronze Age (fig. 10) (De Marinis 1994).

The third phase of rock art of Valtellina and Valcamonica (the 3rd B-C-D Camunnian styles, Fig. 1) is generally attributed to the Bronze Age (2,200-900 BC). During this period the Valcamonica area is included in the Polada culture (Early Bronze Age) and subsequently, during the Middle Bronze Age in the Terramare-Benacense culture, as confirmed by a series of pottery complexes and sporadic finds (De Marinis 1988). For the Final Bronze Age, pottery is too rare to permit a better understanding of the cultural situation, even if the bronze findings suggest a connection with the so-called Luco-Meluno group, a central alpine culture. The Bronze Age engravings have been studied less, if one compares the papers and rock studies published regarding other periods, for example the Copper Age (most of the stelae are widely published) and the Iron Age.

From the Copper Age onwards the depiction of weapons begins. During the Chalcolithic time these compositions of weapons appear as very regular and calligraphic, while in the Bronze Age they are positioned in disorderly and heterogeneous groups. These weapons: axes, daggers, halberds, knives, spears and swords, appear to be engraved in different periods on the same rocks, from what one can understand studying the typology. It is often possible, in fact, to compare the engraved weapons with real objects found in settlements, tombs or hoards. This is the case with the halberds, that have a triangular blade with a semicircular base, these are very similar to the Montemerano, Calvatone and Cotronei types of the Ancient Bronze Age (fig. 11); but also the typical alpine dagger, as the Ledro dagger that can be recognized in rock engravings. The axes are usually of the shovel

![Cloak with fringes and group of deer on the Ossimo 5 boulder. Copper Age](photograph by A. Fossati-Le Orme dell'Uomo).
type, a form that appears during a phase between the end of the Ancient Bronze Age and the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age. Axes with a bell-shape blade are datable to the Middle and Recentury Bronze Age (Casini & Fossati 2007).

It is also possible to compare this occurrence with votive deposits or hoards typical of the Bronze Age in the whole Europe. Due to the fact that these deposits have been sometimes found in springs, swamps and lakes, a few scholars have spoken of a 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 be perhaps be related with part of the initiation rites of male youth. If one transfers this idea in rock art one can consider the execution of figures of weapons as a symbolic substitution of a real act which had a ritual meaning. This idea has been associated with a sacred attitude of a “poor” population that could offer only substitutions of weapons and not the real objects. In any case it can be

Figure 9 Ossimo 9 boulder with the representation of the divine triad. Copper Age (photograph by A. Fossati-Le Orme dell’Uomo).

Figure 10 M14 boulder with the anthropomorphs in lines of the period 3rd A3. Copper Age (photograph by A. Fossati-Le Orme dell’Uomo).
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, included those of votive hoards (Fossati 2001b).

Moreover, the engraved rocks are often related with water - e.g. rock 4 and 22-23 of Foppe di Nadro, Valcamonica, follow the course of a stream; the rocks of Luine, Valcamonica, are looking on to the Boario spa; the Castelletto rock was found few meters from the waters of the Garda Lake - and this can be linked to the fact that special weapons like swords were found in water (often rivers) and suggests a ritual meaning of the rock art activity. Usually the rocks - molded by glaciers - appear as petrified waves, giving the impression to the observer of being in front of water. This connection with the theme of water becomes very strong during the following Iron Age rock art, as one will demonstrate later in this paper (Fossati 2006).

The depiction of weapons suggests a linking of rock art areas with the presence of imagery of a sexual value. The concentration of such images on certain rocks could represent a special sign which indicates to those who frequent the area that the site can be visited only by males. What would be the meaning of a symbol of the female type? The opposite for sure. This is the case of the paletta figure, a form that suggests a shovel but, now is clear, was used for the fire: it is in fact attested in female tombs from the Late Bronze Age onwards, usually associated with other artifacts utilised for cooking or for care of the fire (Fossati 2006).

There are also ploughing scenes dated to this period due to the stylistic realisation of the animals, usually bovids, or for the complex typology of the plough. These scenes are probably to be associated with fertility rituals. From an archaeological point of view it is important to remember that wooden ploughshares have been found during the excavation of lake dwellings at Lavagnone (near Desenzano - BS) at Ledro, and at Fiavè Carera (near Trento) (De Marinis 2000). Ploughing scenes are known also in the rock art of Mont Bego area (Lumley De 1995) and in the megalithic art of the Wartbergkultur in Germany.

Investigations at the Dos Costapeta site, conducted by our Society, have been important for our understanding of the chronology, both of praying figures and of spearheads (fig. 12). In this case, two praying figures have been engraved above a spearhead with a shape of a leaf, a type datable to the Middle Bronze Age, and are covered by a spearhead in the shape of a flame, a type known in archaeological contexts during the Bronze Age, these two human figures and those that are in similar style are thus datable to a period within the Middle and the Final Bronze Age. These figures were previously dated to the Neolithic due to the resemblance of this schematic style with that of the Neolithic Balkanik Potteries, or for the Alps, with the human figure engraved on the deer bone handle found at the Riparo Gaban, near Trento (De Marinis-Bagolini 1973). These anthropomorphes show arms and legs in a U-shape. It is important to emphasise the presence of female figures among the engravings, this fact also has a chronological value: in fact, in the Iron Age rock art of the area there are no female figures, apart from those involved in sexual scenes. Also polianthropomorphes (figures with a duplication of the arms or the legs) appear in this phase (fig. 13).
Figure 12  Female praying figures overlapped by and overlapping spearheads of the Bronze Age. Paspardo, Dos Costapeta, rock 1. (photograph by A. Fossati-Le Orme dell’Uomo).

Figure 13  Anthropomorphic figure with arms duplicated. Capo di Ponte, Naquane National Rock Engravings Park, rock 11. (photograph by A. Fossati-Le Orme dell’Uomo).

Figure 14  Schematic warriors with spear and shield. Naquane National Rock Engravings Park, rock 71. (photograph by A. Fossati-Le Orme dell’Uomo).

Figure 15  Schematic warrior wearing helmet, holding a spear and a round shield. Capo di Ponte, Naquane National Rock Engravings Park, rock 35. End of Bronze Age. (photograph by A. Fossati-Le Orme dell’Uomo).
The Iron Age

During the Final Bronze Age, due to the influence of the protovillanovian culture, the style becomes geometric and static. Among the figures there are many with big-hands, others are real warriors (Fig. 14) holding spears, swords, shields and furnished with crested helmets (Fossati 1992). It is the first time that such figures appear in rock art. The artists want to emphasise a role, that of the warrior, becoming more and more important in these alpine societies. In effect it is from this period onwards that it is possible to find swords or spearheads in grave goods too, representing a symbol of distinction of the local aristocracy.

The Final Bronze Age anticipates the most common themes of Iron Age rock art: praying figures, warriors, duellists (fig. 15), and hunting scenes. In these scenes the warriors are depicted as if taking part in a victory parade, often showing off their nudity in heroic fashion, as was also the case in Greece or in Etruria. The engravings of the Iron Age represent the majority of the rock art tradition, probably the 80% of the total. Recent studies have testified that this area was inhabited by the Camunni and the Vennonetes, whose names appears inscribed in the Tropaeum Alpium near Montecarlo, along with the names of alpine populations conquered by the Romans during the war campaign of the 16-15 BC (De Marinis 1988; Fossati 1991).

These populations have been often associated with the Euganea gens, especially by Roman historians (Cato cited by Plinius III, 133-135). More recent researches testify to the cultural uniqueness of a region that extends from Valtellina to the Giudicarie, and where, at least from the 5th century BC, pottery is found with similar features (the jugs of the so-called Breno, Dos dell'Arca and Loveere-type), the development of an autonomous writing tradition that utilizes the north-Etruscan alphabet (the camunian alphabet) and, last but not least, the appearance of the figurative “language” that one can now call “rock art”. This wide area, even if it had strong connections with the “Retic” world of the Adige Valley, was united by cultural links that one could today explain with the presence of a common ethnos, that of the Euganei (De Marinis 2001).

The figures that belong to the Iron Age offer the opportunity of a better understanding of the chronological phases. This period, called 4th Style, has been divided into 5 different sub-phases that here are summarised (Fig. 16; De Marinis 1988; Fossati 1991):

**Phase 1 (8th-7th century BC):** linear-geometric style influenced by the Villanovian art of the period. The weaponry is constituted by: oval-ellipsoidal, circular or skin-oxen shields, crested helmet - probably of the Villanovian type - spears and axes. Swords are rarely represented. Horsemen appear only during the end of this phase;

**Phase 2 (7th-6th century BC):** pre-naturalistic style. The weaponry consists of round shields, crested helmets with lophos (of the Etruscan-Picenian type), spears, swords and axes with quadrangular blades. The proportion of the figures becomes wide and wide until reaches more then one meter of length. It is the phase that is richer in figures and themes;

**Phase 3 (5th-4th century BC):** naturalistic and dynamic style. Weapons represented: crested helmets (probably of the Negau type), spears, swords, axes, round and skin-oxen shields. With the previous style, phase 3 is one of the most interesting for the quantity of the themes and scenes represented;

**Phase 4 (4th -1st century BC):** naturalistic-decadent style. The compositions of weapons, such as axes and knives, appear frequently (recalling the compositions of Copper and Bronze Age). Helmets are hardly ever represented while there appears a new type of shield, introduced by the Celts: the oval-ellipsoidal type. The halberd-axes and Introbio knives are clearly recognizable among the weapons. The themes are now becoming poor;
Phase 5 (1st century BC - 1st century AD): decadent style characterized by thematic and technical poverty. Weaponry: difficult to recognize the types, apart from halberd-axes; spears, swords and knives are represented in a very poor technique; helmets are very rare; shields are of the oval-rectangular types, similar to those of the previous phase. Oxen leather shields are also diffused.

As one can see, the chronology of Iron Age rock art, divided in 5 different sub-phases, is linked not only to the study of the superimpositions, which assures relative chronology, but also to the depiction of weapons, which may suggest an absolute chronology (Fossati 1991). These weapons are very well characterised, such as shields, which are typically circular in the first Iron Age (fig. 17), and quadrangular-oval during the Second Iron Age, due to the influences exercised firstly by the Etruscans and then by the Celts (fig. 18) (Stary 1981). 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 saver: both these

Figure 16  Seriation of the warrior figures in the rock art of Valcamonica (by A. Fossati-Le Orme dell’Uomo)

Figure 17  Warrior with rounded shield, spear and cap helmet. Capo di Ponte, Naquane National Rock Engravings Park, rock. 1. Iron Age (photograph by A. Fossati-Le Orme dell’Uomo).

Figure 18  Warrior with La Téne shields. Paspardo, Valcamonica, In Vall rock 4. Iron Age (photograph by A. Fossati-Le Orme dell’Uomo).
weapons are found in contemporary tombs or settlements (Fossati 1991).

Style is also 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). The apogee of naturalism is reached at the end of the 6th century when it is possible to recognise artistic schools and even a single artist's hand (fig. 19). Second Iron Age styles are the consequence of the separation from the Etruscan world caused by Celtic invasions in the Po Plain. Styles become decadent and themes poor. It is impossible to speak of a Celtic style in Camunnian art, even if the Celts transmitted to nearby populations their preference for symbolic art (Fossati 1991).

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

Blue blood in rock art. The Camunnian world in the Iron Age.
During the 1st millennium BC the introduction of metal working coincided almost everywhere in the first Iron age with the emergence of new social aristocratic and warrior class, and a territorial and economic organization that can be seen as a forerunner of urban organization (De Marinis 1988).

Despite the social and political geography being thrown into confusion by the movement of the Celts from the 5th century BC onwards, rock art remained an important social and religious means of expression for the prehistoric inhabitants of the area throughout the millennium.

In this period the engraved figures took on greater realism, to the point where one can speak of descriptive naturalism, inasmuch as it appears that the prehistoric artist wished to recount scenes of life connected to reality. In these scenes the warrior figure emerges with great strength (Fossati 1991). War scenes however, showing warriors actually in combat are relatively rare. The heavily armed warriors are more often than not shown with their weapons often raised in sign of exaltation.

Similarly, in the numerous duelling scenes, contenders face each other lightly armed, as if for a sporting event, their armament being at times no more than a stick and a small leather bag strapped to the protecting arm which acts as a shield. In these scenes, duellists and onlookers are placed side by side, the former are depicted as smaller in size, leading one to assume they are boys (fig. 20). The engravings representing footprints or footwear with laces also appear to belong to boys, being smaller in size than adult feet (Fossati 1991).

This constant reference to boys has in fact led to the formulation of the belief that Iron age rock art in the area should be interpreted as votive images engraved to mark the occasion of initiation rites, through which young men of the local aristocracy gained access to adult society (De Marinis 1988). Social differences are also shown by some rock engravings, where riders are escorted by their attendants. Some images relate to trials the young men
underwent, others symbolize the initiation itself, which must have been very clear to the initiate. As well as duelling, horse-riding, balancing feats, racing, dancing fully armed (Ragazzi 1995), and deer hunting were also probably seen as part of the trial (De Marinis 1988). Cupmarks grouped in eight and the so-called “camunian rose” (a symbol originated from the swastika) probably constituted other initiation symbols (Fossati 1991; Farina 2000).

Among the figures and scenes indicated up to now, for the interpretation of which the reader should refer to recent studies, duelling and deer hunting must have played a special role due to the frequency with which these topics were represented (Camuri, Fossati & Mathpal 1993). The importance of the hunted animal is so great that at times a stag is depicted beside one of the contenders. Hunting must have anyway constituted an important part in initiation rites.

At the beginning of the Iron Age, hunters appear armed with bows and arrows or with spears. In the period following on from that, hunters are only depicted holding spears. Here the work appears to depict a personal expedition involving a hunter, his dog, and a stag, the latter being of reproducing age (between five and nine years old) judging from the number of horns on his antlers. Hunting scenes involving more than one deer are rare. Dogs must have played an important role in hunting, given that, while in many scenes the hunter does not appear, the dog is always present attacking the deer and the fox from behind or, more rarely, from the front (fig. 21).

The image of deer hunting where the dogs try to injure the deer by attacking it from behind, is present in other areas of the alpine region. For example it appears at Lothen (Pustertal, Tyrol), in the decoration of a belt buckle, where a deer that appears to be grazing, is attacked by a dog recognizable as such due to its curly tail and open jaws. The same motif appears again in the Situla at Trezzo on the Adda, close to Milan. The decoration of a belt buckle from Zagorje, in Slovenia, carries a double hunting scene: a dog attacks a stag, while a doe (or more probably a young stag) is speared from behind by a hunter on horseback (Fossati 1991).

Groups of stags prior to the mating season (end of summer, beginning of autumn). Here these figures evidently have a symbolic meaning different to that associated with hunting, while the hunt represents a trial, perhaps the most important and the most worthy of being enacted, the groups of male stags would symbolize groups of young initiates. Like the boys coming of age, deer in fact compete with each other in the mating season, taking part in duels that are for the most part bloodless. This can also be seen in the rock art of Valcamonica. The scene engraved at In Valle, at Pasparo,
where two deer are duelling head on while a third animal waits in the wings to engage the victor (fig. 22), is exactly like some duelling scenes involving boys, where a third contender awaits his turn (Camuri, Fossati & Mathpal 1993).

Camunnian rock art offers us what is considered to be the most ancient European version of the God Cernunnos, a divinity that is a cross between a deer and a bird. The God, shown standing and covered with a long tunic, has two deer's horns on his head, clasps a knife in his right hand and wearing an armlet on the same arm (fig. 23). A boat with an ornithomorphic head emerges from his bust, like the throat of a swan. A worshipping figure is placed beside him. The images we have of Cernunnos are mostly from the Celtic world: he appears on the Paris altar (where his name is also written), on the famous Gundestrup Cauldron (Denmark) (Kaul 1991), on some lamina at Waldalgesheim (Germany) (Jakobsthal 1944) and on a number of Irish stelae. In all these representations that span from the 4th century to the mediaeval period, the divinity, who appears with his head crowned by a deer's antlers, sitting cross-legged, clasping torques and knives, is often associated with snakes, wild and domesticated animals - oxen and bulls, wolves and deer (Fossati 1991).

The motif of ornithomorphc protoms is not unknown in rock art and also appears in Valcamonica and in Valtellina (fig. 24). In Camunnian rock art the boat is not associated with the sun, imagery that is common in the decoration of weapons in bronze lamina in central Europe starting from the 13th century BC (Kossack 1954). Shields, breastplates and greaves, some of them found in the area of northern Italy not far from Valcamonica show us the essence of this ancient myth according to which the sun is transported by flying swans, the idea evidently arising from the observation that swans can both fly and swim using their webbed feet as paddles. At the end of first Iron Age the sun boat progressively loses its symbolic meaning in favour of an iconography where horse motifs occur ever more frequently. From the 5th century BC the sun boat virtually disappears from the figurative language of manufactured articles. The ornithomorphic boat and waterfowl, as well as transporting the sun, also transport the souls of the dead warriors to the world beyond. The boat with the ornithomorphic protoms is thus the sun's 'vehicle' according to the idea of prehistoric peoples.

The end of the rock art tradition
The rock art tradition continued until the arrival of the Romans, who reached the area in 16 BC. A legion (about 6,000 soldiers), under the direction of the consul Publio Silio Nerva, subjugated the Triumplini, Camunni and Vennonetes (the inhabitants of Valtrompia, Valcamonica, and Valtellina respectively) in a single rapid military campaign. This is attested
by the registration of these three names in the Tropæum Alpium, the monument constructed by Emperor Augustus in AD 6-7 at La Turbie, France. The interruption of the rupestrian tradition in Valcamonica is perhaps due to a combination of three factors: the process of assumption of Roman culture during the second part of the first century AD (the Flavian Age); the diminution of authority of the social classes that held power until that time; and the increasing economic, cultural and religious attraction caused by the Roman settlements, particularly the new colony of Civitas Camunnorum, today Cividate Camuno (Rossi 1987). These factors reduced and finally destroyed the power of the social aristocracy whose traditional themes had constituted, until then, the iconographic patrimony of the rock engravings (Fossati 1991).

With the arrival of Christianity, artists came back to the rocky areas and engraved new themes taken from Christian symbols: crosses, keys, shears, Solomon's knots (a cabalistic design of a knot without end to the cords), warriors, castles and, dates and inscriptions (fig. 25). This art has nothing to do functionally with the prehistoric art of the previously described periods. At the moment it is not possible to date this phase, called Post Camunnian (Anati 1976) more precisely, since sufficiently detailed studies have yet to be undertaken (Sansoni 1993).
References


Rossi, F. 1987. La Valfcamonica Romana, ricerche e studi, Brescia.
