

# Filiform figures in the rock art of Valcamonica from Prehistory to Roman age

Umberto SANSONI, Cinzia BETTINESCHI, Silvana GAVALDO

Dipartimento Valcamonica e Lombardia, Centro Camuno di Studi Preistorici (CCSP)

dip.ccsp@gmail.com

## Abstract

*The report examines pre or proto-historic rock art from Valcamonica made with the both the filiform (scratched) and the polissoir techniques.*

*The study herewith presented considered the entire corpus of incised engravings of Valcamonica and their complex relationship with pecked figures. It was thus possible to draw up a specific typology for incised rock art, which shows undeniable parallels with what is known for pecked rock art; moreover we were able to provide a dating for some of the analyzed filiform figures through the analysis of superimpositions and associations.*

*The analysis of scenes and contexts also identified many panels with a ritual or symbolic value, which allow us to consider the technique of filiform engraving anything but secondary.*

**Keywords:** *incised rock art, filiform figures, Valcamonica*

## Résumé

*Ce rapport examine l'art rupestre pré ou protohistorique de Valcamonica réalisée avec les techniques du filiforme et du polissoir.*

*L'étude présentée ici a examiné l'ensemble du corpus de gravures incisées de Valcamonica et leur complexe relation avec les figures piquetées. Il a été donc possible d'établir une typologie spécifique pour l'art rupestre gravée, qui montre des parallèles incontestables avec ce qui est connu pour l'art rupestre picotée; en outre, nous avons pu fournir une datation pour certaines figures filiformes en étude par l'analyse des superpositions et des associations.*

*L'analyse des scènes et des contextes a aussi identifiée de nombreux panneaux avec une valeur rituelle ou symbolique, confirmant que la technique d'incision filiforme ne peut en aucun cas être considérée comme secondaire.*

**Mots clés:** *art rupestre incise, figures filiformes, Valcamonica*

## 1. Introduction

Incised rock art consists in schematic or figurative representations scratched on the rocks with a lithic or metallic tool and can be characterized by thin (*filiform* or *graffito*) or thicker (*polissoir*) grooves. The *graffiti* are usually not very deep and can be hardly visible to the naked eye, if not in proper lighting conditions. Incised rock art is a minority within the expressive framework of Valcamonica (Fig. 1a-b), which is usually characterized by pecked figures. Nevertheless incised representations can be conceptually significant, with peculiarities which show, in certain periods and areas, an original semantic value.

## 2. Methodology

The chronology of Valcamonica rock art, whether scratched or pecked, is still subject to extensive discussion (Anati 1963, 1975; De Marinis 1992; Sansoni, Gavaldo 1999; Arcà 2001 and related bibliography). Thus, hereinafter, we will synthesize the methodologies used during this work for the purpose of dating the camunian filiforms.



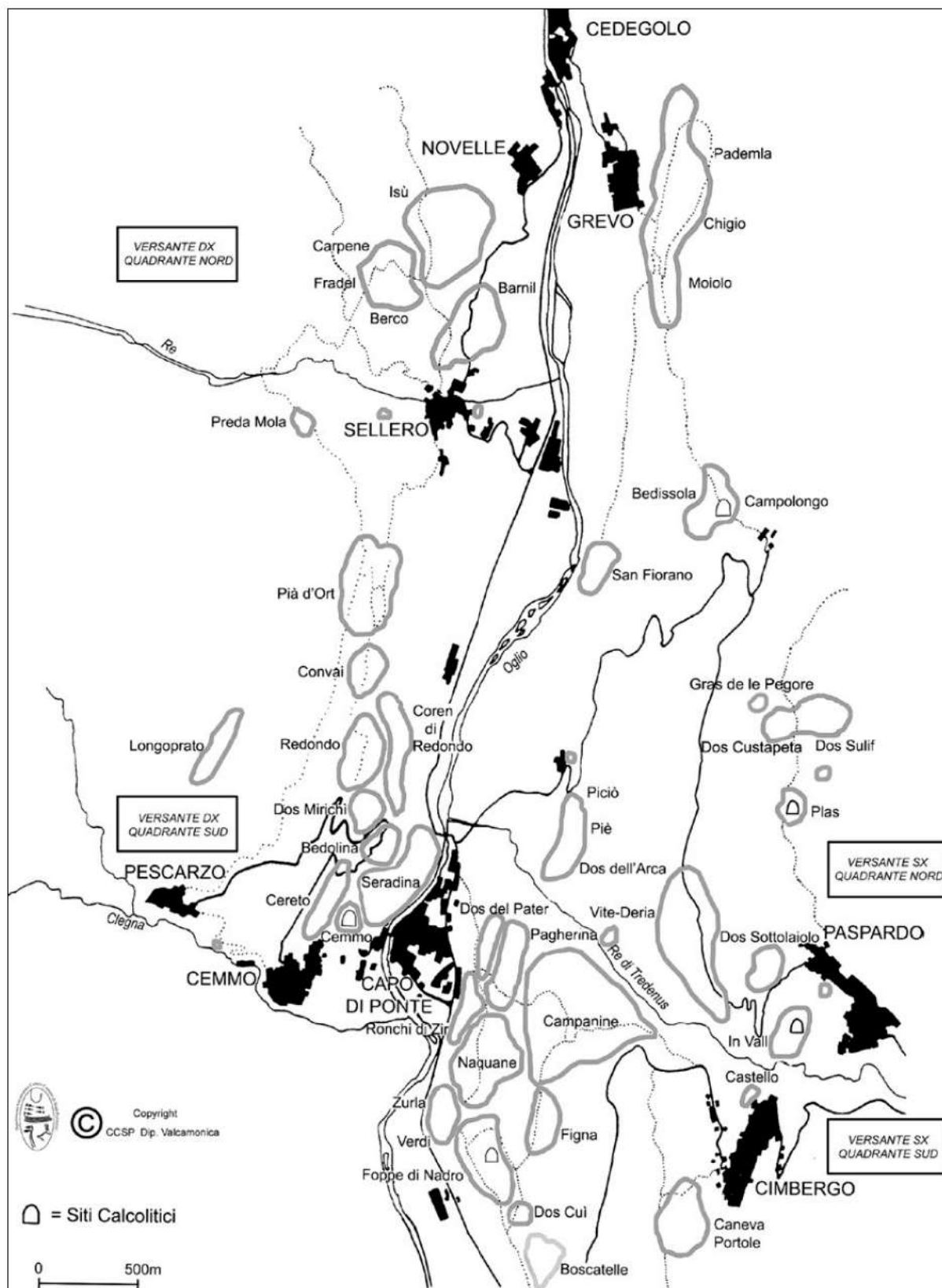


FIGURE 1A. MAP OF THE ROCK ART AREAS IN THE MIDDLE VALCAMONICA.

In particular, we considered: 1) stylistic classification and identification of distinctive typological markers; 2) systematic analysis of superimpositions; 3) analysis of context, associations and





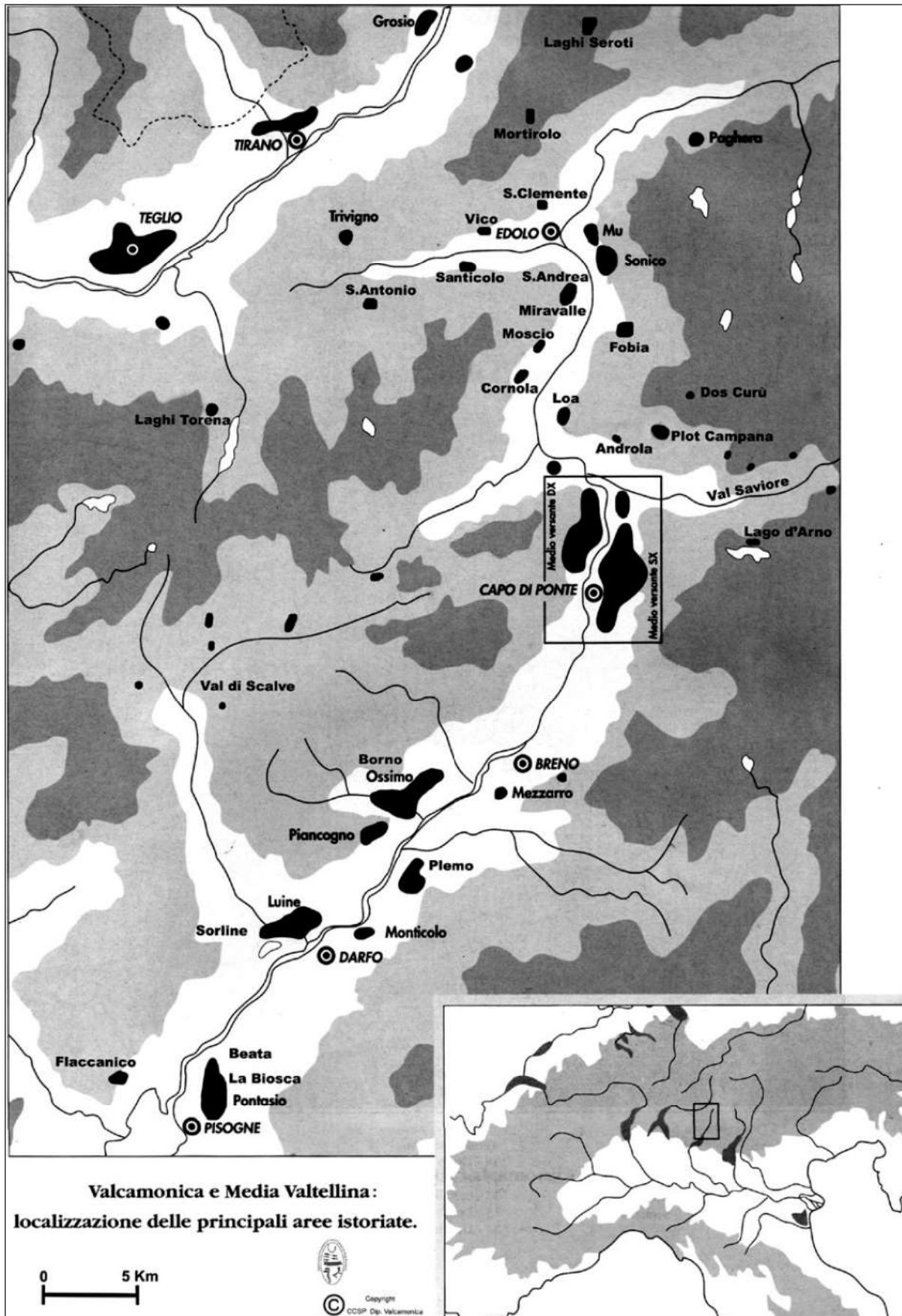


FIGURE 1B. MAP OF THE ROCK ART AREAS IN THE MIDDLE VALCAMONICA.



proximity; 4) similarity with weapons, tools and other equipment found in the archaeological record and therefore provided with a precise stratigraphic and typo-chronological sequence; 5) comparison of the filiform rock art with similar painted or engraved representations that, given their abundance, are often characterized by a more accurate chronology.

It should however be stressed that the possibility of linking rock art and archaeological remains may, in some particular cases, be a difficult tasks to carry out. Tools and weapons, in fact, are rarely depicted with a good deal accuracy and precision. Moreover, the representations do not always respect real-size proportions or lack important details to determine the typology. The only possible reference for comparison is the silhouette of the objects and their profile which, at times, cannot be sufficient for a specific identification.

### 3. Earliest filiform and *polissoir* representations in Valcamonica

The associations and especially the superimpositions between incised and pecked figures show a very wide chronological *excursus* for filiform rock art in Valcamonica, which goes at least from the late Copper Age/early Bronze Age uninterruptedly until the Roman era (and even later, with a real *exploit* from the late Middle Ages to the XXth century). However, except for a few cases, the filiform phenomenon is mainly concentrated in the Iron Age, especially starting from the sixth century BC and until the final stages of full romanization that, in Valcamonica, extends until the early centuries of the Christian era.

The most ancient figures that can be dated with some confidence are undoubtedly weapons. In this regard, the halberds identified in Termen area are of particular interest since it was possible to date them to the Ancient Bronze Age thanks to precise comparisons with similar archaeological finds from excavation context (De Marinis, Fossati 2004).

The chronology of the spearheads from Dos di Costapeta (Fig. 2) is quite complex. De Marinis (1992) proposed to classify the representations into three main categories: those with triangular blade



FIGURE 2. SPEARHEADS FROM DOS DI COSTAPETA (PHOTO DIP. CCSP).



and straight base, dating back to the Ancient Bronze Age, those with foliated/ogival blade, related to the Middle and Late phases of the Bronze Age and those with flamboyant blade, which were in turn sub-divided into two variants, the first dating to Final Bronze Age and the second between the Final Bronze Age and the early Iron Age.

The dating of Loa, Zurla and Paspardo spears is even more problematic. From a typological point of view, some of them fall in a rather uniform class with rhomboidal/ogival blade, similar to the one which De Marinis attributes to the Middle and Late Bronze Age. On the contrary, Solano and Marretta (2009, 2014) suggest that, at least for the occurrences of Loa and Zurla, the dating should drop to the second Iron Age. According to the authors, the association of those spears with representations such as inscriptions in camunian alphabet, huts/barns, Introbio knives and Iron Age warriors as well as the use of a technique and a stylistic signature entirely comparable make a chronology to the Bronze Age hardly sustainable.

Casini (2012) dates to the Bronze Age, and especially between the Ancient Bronze Age and Middle-Late Bronze Age, two groups of daggers represented on the rock number 23 of Foppe di Nadro. In particular, the author points out that some occurrences in panels C and F are characterized by a profile incised with the filiform technique, which internal part was subsequently filled by pecking. Two halberds represented on the rock number 4 of the same site seem to have a similar treatment, characterized by a mixed technique: a continuous contour line with blade completely pecked on the inside (Masnata 2004). The chronology proposed for this last representations ranges from the Bell Beaker Culture to the Ancient Bronze Age.

#### 4. From Iron Age to Romanization

The most flourishing period for Valcamonica rock art is undoubtedly Iron Age. Not surprisingly, it is precisely from the middle of this phase that the highest number of figures incised with filiform or *polissoir* techniques emerges. If we exclude the thousands of short, often confused signs that surround the pecked images, three particular categories of filiforms can be defined: a) mixed technique: traces of preparatory sketches and/or signs on completion of pecked figures; b) complex anthropomorphic or zoomorphic figures, weapons, vessels, buildings, symbols and inscriptions; c) geometric shapes such as circles, pentagrams, *trias* or more structured schematic representations.

Being the latest extremely difficult to date, since their long-term and often generic typologies, in this paper we will only discuss what concerns the first two categories mentioned above, postponing the debate on the schematic and/or geometric figures to future insights.

##### 4.a Mixed technique

The use of incised rock art in association with the pecked one is, as mentioned, generally related to guidelines/preliminary sketches or with the representation of the finer details of the figures. Examples of both this types are known in Valcamonica and we will only enumerate here the most representative.

In Zurla (Giarelli, Sansoni 2011) rock number 2, for example, both case studies are well exemplified. The most striking panel is that of a group of four deer, depicted each in a different stage of preparation. This feature gives us the opportunity to investigate some technical and cognitive aspects of the creation process of the camunian rock art. One of the figures clearly shows the preparatory contour lines, but the animal is completed by pecking; legs and part of the antlers, however, remain filiform. A second deer nearby still shows traces of the preparatory sketch, but is completely over-engraved by pecking. The last two animals are completely pecked, but one of them – incomplete – is characterized by very thin pecked lines that define its silhouette, as if it were a first draft too. On the same rock there are also a pecked warrior with a filiform spear and a bird whose feet are represented by incised lines: these elements seem to confirm the hypothesis that, at least in some cases, the filiform technique





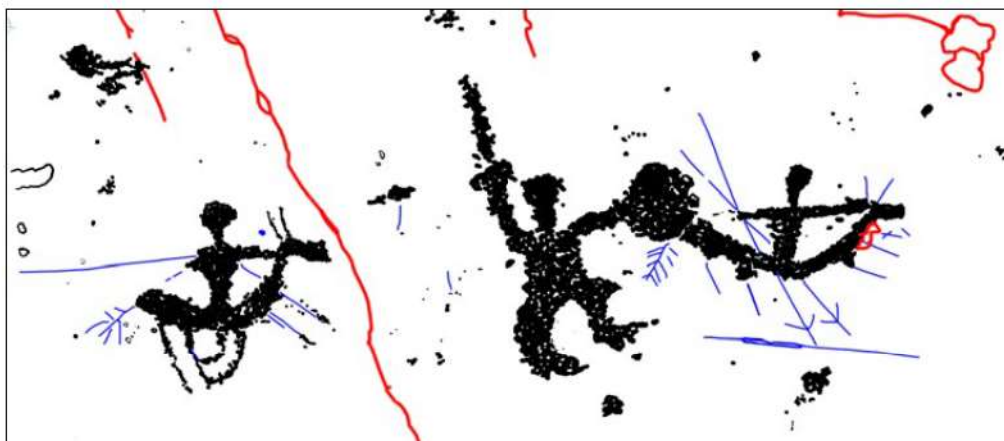


FIGURE 3. TWO HORSEMEN WITH FILIFORM PREPARATION LINES, PAGHERINA R. 5 (TRACING DIP. CCSP).

may have been used for finishing details, in search of the stylistic variety that was granted to painted art, but which was very difficult to obtain in rock engravings. This is further confirmed by the use of filiforms to refine the trappings and the clothes of the acrobats and warriors on rock number 50 in Naquane (phases IV C-D).

In Pagherina, rock number 5, the figures of two horsemen still show traces of filiform preparation lines which form the animals' legs, tails and ears, besides men's arms and weapons (Fig. 3). On rock number 27 in Foppe di Nadro it is to mention the scene of the deer wounded by an incised spear; moreover in Seradina, rock 12, there are both an archer with a filiform bow and a goat with *graffiti* horns. In Vite ('al de Plaha – Bial do Le Scale) rock number 94, there is a small building for which both of the techniques were used; finally in Dos Sulif a dog engraved with mixed technique and an Iron Age warrior with scratched spear are present (Marchi, 1996).

#### 4.b Figurative, non-geometric, incised rock art

In Valcamonica numerous filiform subjects find punctual comparison in pecked or painted representations. Below, we will list and discuss the most significant case studies, according to a general classification on a typological level.

##### *Weapons*

In addition to the earliest examples which have already been briefly discussed, several different weapons – mostly axes or knives with sinuous blade – were engraved in various contexts of the middle Valley.

Because of their central importance as a chronological guide fossil, knives and sheath of the Introbio type (dated between the II century BC and the beginning of the I century AD) represented in filiform technique in Foppe Nadro rock number 24, Pia d'Ort rock 1 and 24 (Fig. 6), Redondo rock 20 are of great importance. This typology, which is well known in terms of archaeological finds, counts around fifty specimens in pecked technique (Roncoroni 2011). Introbio and similar knives are also present in Piancogno, so far the only area in Valcamonica characterized by an exclusive presence of incised rock art. The engravings, which are located in an impervious area between the Trobiolo and the





Daen Valleys, also retains a number of depictions of axes, swords and spears sometimes difficult to date, but generally ascribable to the final phase of the Iron Age or to the full romanization. Between the swords, the roman *gladius* is well attested in the area, for example on the so called Roccia delle Spade/Swords Rock (Priuli 1993).

Various axes-halberds (*Hellebardenäxte*) similar to the Ornavasso and Giubiasco types, with crescent-shaped cutting edge, are incised in the central portion of rock number 44 in Naquane; on rock 62 of the same site, a series of *Hellebardenäxte* is covered by an equid of the Late Iron Age (phase IVF). These weapons find precise comparison with the iron axes deposited in central alpine funerary contexts, dating approximately from the IV to the I century BC. The Latin poet Horace, in his ode dedicated to Drusus, remembers them as one of the weapons used in combat by the Alpine populations during the Iron Age. Another filiform ax, probably of the same typology, is also recognizable on rock number 24 in Pia d'Ort (Sansoni, Gavaldo 1995).

Although the arch had to be widespread, it is extremely rare in the rock art of Valcamonica. However two filiform cases with nocked arrows are known on rock number 24 in Foppe di Nadro.

As for spearheads, there are some figures from Loa characterized by narrow, elongated blade and extended cannon-shaped socket, comparable with specimens dating back to the mid-late La Tène (III-I century BC) and particularly well represented in ritual sites of the Alpine region (Solano, Marretta 2009). The most recent discovery, however, came to light in July 2014 on rock number 60 in Foppe di Nadro during our last recording rock art fieldwork. It is a slightly leaf-shaped spear characterized by short, conic socket and large rhomboidal blade, not entirely dissimilar from some of the Golasecca spearheads found in Moncucco (CO) and dated to the first half of the Iron Age.

#### Vessels

Figures of vessels, though present in Valcamonica, are quite rare consisting in no more than thirty cases. Regarding the filiform attestations, Piancogno is again characterized by the highest concentration of figures, thirteen of various types, mainly *oinochoai* (one in Ca' del Doss and three on Roccia dei Vasi/Vessels Rock) and generic vessels (two in Roccia dei Vasi/Vessels Rock, four on Roccia delle Spade/Swords Rock and three on Roccia del Labirinto/Labyrinth Rock).

However, the most peculiar specimen is undoubtedly the *Schnabelkanne* incised on rock number 20 of Redondo, with raised spout, conical, slender body and nearly horizontal shoulders (Marchi, 2007). The details and the delicate realization, allowed Porter (2003) to propose that this wine container came from a Celtic context, but was an imitation of Etruscan models. Its dating could thus be placed between the V and IV century BC.

#### Huts/barns

To date, approximately two thousands of different representations of hut/barn buildings were surveyed in Valcamonica, the vast majority of which produced by pecking (Savardi 2013). Only very few examples of the same typology, definitely comparable with the pecked models, is executed with the filiform or *polissoir* technique. The chronology of this kind of figures is in all cases restricted to the Iron Age.

Rock 24 in Foppe di Nadro shows one building well detailed and provided of hoof and two rectangular elements placed horizontally one over the other (basis) and topped by a roof with a triangular section (Fig. 4). Cross-shaped fillers pattern part of the structure. Another occurrence in the same area is incised on rock number 4. Five filiform huts/barns can be found on rock number 27, 16 (with two examples juxtaposed), 47 and 49 in Campanine di Cimbergo (Savardi 2007; Sansoni, Gavaldo 2009). In Dos Cui rock number 1 and Vite ('al de Fuos) rock number 51 are also represented isolated huts/barns, the latest being V-IV century BC in dating (Tognoni 2007).





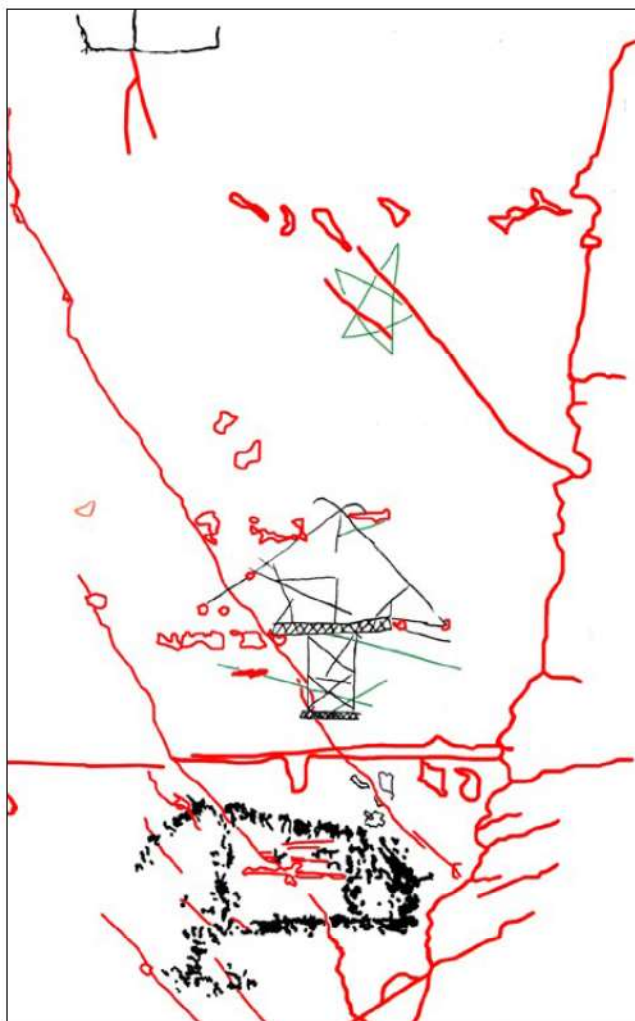


FIGURE 4. FILIFORM HUT/BARN REPRESENTATION AND PENTACLE, FOPPE DI NADRO R. 24 (TRACING DIP. CCSP).

In addition, great interest has the 'village' represented on rock number 2 in Loa, where it can be recognized a bipartite type of building scratched in *polissoir* and surrounded by two similar but smaller figures. The very same idea of 'inhabited area', but in a naturalistic style that has no comparison in the context of pre and proto-historic rock art, is expressed by the unusual pile-dwelling kind of building with elevated timber trackway incised on the rock number 2 in Zurla. In this case, thou, it is highly probable that the composition is the work of a modern hand.

#### *Anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures*

The number of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures scratched on the rocks of Valcamonica is quite high, but only in rare cases it is possible to date them with some confidence to the proto-historic period. From what is known to date, this type of engravings is definitely more common in the historical period. Most of men's and animals' representations have very generic typologies, made with schematic traits, and superimpositions are rarely present to solve the issue of dating.

Therefore we will present below only a selection of examples of those panels which fit most certainly in the context of the camunian Iron Age or in the process of Romanization.

Foppe di Nadro is a key location for the analysis of this class of representations: on rock number 24, sector C, just below the famous 'camunian rose' lies a filiform warrior who is partially superimposed and appears to fight against another anthropomorphic, made with the pecking technique. The difference in the armament of the duelists could be an indication of a slight chronological anteriority of the incised figure, but it is possible that this was a way to emphasize an underlying cultural difference (thus representing, in a general sense, the fight against the enemy/the other). The probable chronology stays within the limits of the IV D phase. On the same surface there is a second human representation, armless and in front view. A series of eyes, which are surly engraved by the same author, are arranged in pairs or individually around it. The chronology proposed by Gastaldi (in press/personal comment) is the Iron Age, with possible influences of eastern origin.

A group consisting of a 'hunter' with a spear and a pair of deer is portrayed on rock number 27 in the same area of Foppe (Fig. 5). The panel is difficult to define from a chronological point of view,





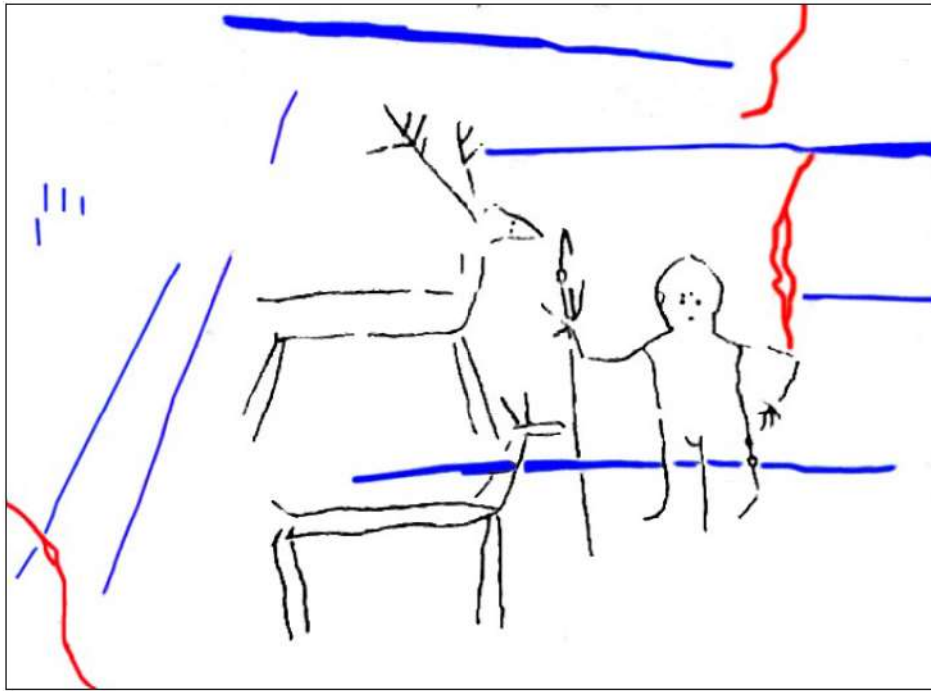


FIGURE 5. PANEL REPRESENTING A 'HUNTER' WITH A SPEAR SURROUNDED BY A PAIR OF DEER, FOPPE DI NADRO R. 27 (TRACING DIP. CCSP).



FIGURE 6. A POSSIBLE METALLURGICAL WORKSHOP OF THE IRON AGE SUPERIMPOSED TO A SERIES OF FILIFORM ANTHROPOMORPHIC AND ZOOMORPHIC FIGURES, INTROBIO SHEATHS AND INSCRIPTIONS, PIÀ D'ORT R. 1 (TRACING DIP. CCSP).



but the ithyphallic nature of the representation argues in favor of a proto-historic dating. At Pia d'Ort rock number 2 there is a number of animals (mainly horses) and human figures in realistic style that in certain cases are clearly covered by daggers of Introbio type, which provide a *terminus ante quem* for the anthropo and zoomorphic representations.

Filiform horses are also present in Dos Sulif and Pià d'Ort (Fig. 6, r. 1; 24), while a group of Iron Age warriors with spears can be found on rock number 20 of Redondo (in filiform technique) and in Loa, rock number 1 (in *polissoir*). Men armed with spears and oxhide shields are also engraved in Seradina, rock number 12 and Zurla (phase IV D-E).

But again the area of greatest interest with regard to quantity, but also quality of the panels is undoubtedly Piancogno. We report here as examples the representations of Cernunnos, the antlered god



FIGURE 7. SORCERER ROCK,  
PIANCOGNO (PHOTO  
M. COLELLA, DIP. CCSP).







FIGURE 8. WARRIOR ARMED WITH AN AX, PIANCOGNO, WARRIORS' ROCK (PHOTO M. COLELLA, DIP. CCSP).

of Celtic tribes (also pecked in Naquane, r. 70), the so called 'sorcerer' (Fig. 7), on the homonymous rock, and several groups of animals (horses, deer, canids, swine and even a sort of gallinacean) and warriors armed with sword, ax, spear or rarely bow present on a variety of surfaces in the area (Fig. 8). As far as the typology of their armaments is concerned, what described in the section dedicated to unclasped weapons still applies.

### *Symbols*

The footprint is one of the most frequent representations in the rock art of Valcamonica starting from the Ancient Iron Age, with more than a thousand cases counted to date (Gavaldo 2012a).

This symbol, related to the concept of presence, is also known in filiform examples on rock number 24 of Foppe di Nadro. There, in a circumscribed portion of the surface, at least two different sequences of footprints, partially overlapping, are engraved. A rather anomalous element, not totally unknown in Valcamonica, should be noted: five of the footprints also show toes, incised using simple vertical lines.

Much rarer – only fifteen occurrences – is the theme of labyrinth (Gavaldo 2012b), which is known in two filiform examples in the area of Pincogno (Roccia del Labirinto/Labyrinth Rock) and Campanine di Cimbergo, rock number 5 (for the pecked versions see eg Naquane r.1, Verdi r.1, Zurla r. 2 etc.).

### *Inscriptions*

The catalog of pre-Roman and Roman inscriptions on the rocks of Valcamonica is extremely wide, enough to not be possible to provide a comprehensive overview of the topic in this paper. However, we will report here some of the areas of greatest interest for the study of camunain epigraphy in relation to the engravings made with the filiform or *polissor* technique.



The north-Etruscan inscriptions consist mostly of single words (usually proper names) and more rarely alphabets. Alphabets are located in at least four complete copies, plus some fragments, on rock number 24 of Foppe di Nadro, while three others (one of which is lost) come from Piancogno on Roccia delle Iscrizioni/Inscriptions Rock, Roccia delle Spade/Swords Rock and Roccia dell'alfabetario camuno/Camunian Alphabet Rock (Tibiletti Bruno 1993). Letters, single words or inscriptions are incised, *inter alia*, on rocks number 1 and 24 in Pià d'Ort, number 24 and 26 in Foppe di Nadro, number 1-2-3-4 in Loà, number 1 in Pagherina, on Dos del Curù boulder and, of course, in many examples on Piancogno outcrops.

This same area is also known for its interesting testimonies of Latin writings: two incomplete alphabets, one clockwise from A to T (on Roccia dell'alfabetario/Alphabet Rock) and the other counter-clockwise from A to S with omission of some letters, on Roccia del Labirinto/Labyrinth Rock. On the so-called Roccia di Vanus/Vanius Rock two warriors accompanied by a series of Latin inscriptions are represented; the reading of the text has allowed to interpret the scene, giving an identity to the figures: both sons Maccus (a name of Celtic origin), the two brothers are called respectively Ponticus, the horseman, and Vanus, the warrior on foot (Priuli 1993).

## 5. Conclusions

The analysis of the overlaps and associations between and among filiform and pecked figures reveals that on some surfaces (Foppe di Nadro r. 24 and r. 27, Pià d'Ort r. 24, Naquane r. 1 and so on) the two techniques coexist, alternate, complement each other, while in the late Iron Age, on other panels (in Piancogno and again Foppe di Nadro, r. 24, r. 43) the filiform technique is used exclusively or predominantly. The filiform technique plays a relative marginal role in most sites, but also it can sometimes assume characters of great centrality in others (Piancogno or Campanine for the historical period) or on individual rocks (Foppe di Nadro rock number 24 or Pià d'Ort rock number 1 and 24) or areas of the surfaces, where it seems to deliberately play a special, dedicated role, like painting.

It should also be pointed out that incised rock art allows expressing specific details that are way more difficult or even impossible to create by pecking. On the other hand this technique is very fast and perhaps, in some cases, it was probably used in one go, with a partially 'popular' connotation. Pecking, maybe even for its potential to accommodate the colour may have had – in general – a higher or at least a more traditional value.

The geometric shapes and the complex images, typologically near to the similar pecked engravings, feature a certain stylistic naivety and often their own logic and symbolic structure. The relationship with the contemporary pecked images is strong, as well as the thematic parallels with painted figures, such as those recently discovered in Paspardo, areas of Bial de le Scale (Fossati 2007) and Forra del Re (Stig Hansen 2009; Colella, Sansoni 2010) that are extremely rare in Valcamonica.

From the above analysis, we can see that the themes represented have a strong symbolic or ritual meaning, not certainly less important than that of the pecked figures, thus giving incised rock art a significant role in the context of pre and protohistoric engravings of Valcamonica.

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