

Arms and the Armed: The Evocative Ritual Language in Val Camonica Rock Art



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Abstract Depictions of weapons and of armed human figures in Camunian and Alpine rock art are common, particularly after the advent of metalwork and especially beginning with the Copper Age. They are found on monuments and on rocks, as can be seen clearly in the megalithic sanctuaries featuring stelae, anthropomorphic stelae, and statues-menhir, as well as in the most significant Alpine spiritual centers and elsewhere, such as Val Camonica (It. *Valle Camonica*, Lo. *Al Camònega*), Mount Bego (*Mont Bégo*), Val Tellina, and Monte Baldo, on the Veronese shore of Lake Garda (*Lago di Garda*). Depictions of weapons are important for the chronological and cultural placement of the engraved complexes; the depictions of armed human figures that dominate some Alpine engraving sets are no less important. That is particularly the case in Val Camonica and Val Tellina, over a very long period of time running from the Bronze Age up to the Iron Age and even into prehistoric times. The depictions of men holding weapons—in a wide variety of stylistic, iconographic, and compositional arrangements, and belonging to many different periods and stages of engraving—represent a ritual language that was used at the very time the pictures were being created. They are an evocative language that commemorated, revived, and spoke of mythical forefathers, ancestral heroes, departed warriors, founders of communities, and indeed anyone who played an important role in the past and became an object of worship. The ritual gesture of depicting them might have served the ritual function not only of commemoration but of calling their presence back from the past into the community in times of particular need.

Keywords Val Camonica · Capo di Ponte · UNESCO (United Nations Education · Scientific · and Cultural Organization) site · Prehistory · Rock art · Prehistoric art · Rock engravings · Graffiti · Warriors · Arms · And the armed

If we want to understand the weapons designed and used by human beings since prehistory—their use, the fighting, the prestige of those who possessed and used them, and their development over time—we must not overlook archaeological findings.

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This approach entails examining material culture and, in particular, the enormous body of representations that somewhat characterize the entire Alpine world, and especially Val Camonica.

The valley of the ancient Camuni is home to almost 300,000 images engraved on rock, created over a period of more than 10,000 years, spanning from the end of the Würm glaciation to the beginning of the Roman era and beyond.

1 The Camuni's Open Culture

Camunian rock art is an immense treasure trove of information not just about Camunian culture but also about the cultures of the past from northern and central Italy, and from the Alpine world. It gives us insights into their cultural and technological evolution, the relationships they established with the world around them, their ability to absorb cultural developments from the outside and elaborate them, and their ability to preserve their own identity even under the influence of stronger, more forceful cultures, as well as their religion(s) and rituals.

Val Camonica is a long valley running from the Po valley and Lake Iseo (It. *Lago d'Iseo o Sebino*, Lo. *Lach d'Izé o Sebi*) for about a hundred kilometers into the Alps. It is a long, natural route that connected the Mediterranean to the world beyond the Alps. The first people to traverse it discovered a vast area, an immense hunting basin, a land rich in resources that were hospitable, strategically safe, and uniquely beautiful, fed by unique morphologies, perennial glaciers, roaring watercourses, and safe, sunlit locations in which to build permanent settlements.

From the Neolithic onward, the valley gradually became more populated by humans, giving birth to and evolving into what on other occasions I have referred to as the "Camunian open culture" (Priuli 2011).

Material culture and, in particular, rock art has in fact allowed us to observe how, from the Neolithic onward, "Camunian Culture" was basically a fusion of heterogeneous cultural influences: during the Neolithic era, groups from the Square-Mouthed Vases culture (*cultura dei vasi a bocca quadrata*) converged in the valley while, at the same time, typically Transalpine cultural elements may be detected, such as those of the cultures of the Rhine and the Danube. To these were added the Lagozza cultural elements typical of the Ticino area. In the Copper Age, the Camuni took a strong influence from the first metalworking semi-nomads and therefore from the Remedello culture which spread and firmed up its knowledge of copper and its uses. There was a strong influx of the Bell-Beaker Culture and, over time, from the Ligurians, the Po valley pile dwellers, the Polada peoples, and, later, the paleo-Venetians, the Golasecca peoples, the Italic peoples, the Etruscans, the Rhaetian people, and the Celts, to name just a few. Together, they forged a hospitable Alpine culture that was open to all technological or religious innovation.

2 Val Camonica: The Sanctuary of Alpine Prehistory

Other valleys could have fulfilled the same functions as Val Camonica and perhaps even better: ease of access, the amenity and economic opportunity, and the fact that it was an important transit and connection route between the Mediterranean, the plains, and central Europe. What made the Val Camonica a meeting place and a reference point for many cultures was most probably its sacredness (Figs. 1.1 and 1.2).

Two splendid mountains rise up in central area of Val Camonica: the Concarena, with its majestic and inaccessible dolomitic ridges and, before it, the Pizzo Badile Camuno, an awe-inspiring peak that stands out in the valley and that towers like an immense monolith over the center of the valley, also dominating all the plains up to the edges of Lake Iseo. It is very likely that these two mountains were considered sacred: at their feet, the largest known concentration of rock art in the world can be found.

Fig. 1.1 Mount Concarena.
Photograph by E. Oescher



Fig. 1.2 Val Camonica.
Pizzo Badile. The “Spirit of the Mountain”



The mountain is a ladder to be climbed to draw closer to the land of the gods. It is the element that unites the terrestrial world with the celestial one above, bursting with superhuman forces. But a sacred space is such when something sacred manifests there, that is, if the hierophany that once led to its consecration periodically repeats and re-validates that sacredness or the “sacred temple.”

The Concarena and Pizzo Badile seem to have enjoyed this sacredness over time due to two spectacular phenomena that regularly occur on them. Twice a year—one evening in early spring and another in early autumn—a while after sunset, for a few minutes, a brilliant ray of light shines up into the already dark sky from a deep groove in the Concarena, breaking up the halo of shadow cloaking and dominating the outline of this imposing limestone massif. During these both astounding and terrifying few minutes, onlookers remain surprised, staring, and speechless—even today. Then, the large split in the mountain seems to close and the valley slips into the evening darkness. One must wait another six months until the phenomenon repeats itself.

Twice a year, but for a few more days, the Pizzo Badile casts an immense shadow into the calm but still chilly skies of March and into the September haze: tall, solemn, sharp, and framed by a thousand resplendent rays that crest the sky. This shadow is both enrapturing and frightening, looming over the valley like a spirit, gradually lowering until it disappears, when the sun becomes too strong over the mountain’s summit.

This phenomenon still impresses anyone who sees it at its peak, due to its sheer size and seemingly inexplicable and momentary yet regular recurrence, coinciding with the equinoxes. It certainly did not pass unnoticed by the valley’s ancient inhabitants who likely saw a manifestation of the supernatural in that immense and unexpected duplication of the mountain, where it opened up under the aggressive strength of light. Perhaps they considered it the supreme solar entity to which they were certainly devoted.

The area dominated by these two sacred mountains and marked by these spectacular hierophanies was chosen as a sanctuary, a spiritual center. People gathered in that immense sanctuary for millennia. The place became the destination for pilgrimages, and on the valley rocks, at the feet of those mountains, they prayed. Priest-artists created images and celebrated rites by carving on the rocks. Through these rites, they recreated the world, reviving sacred times, the mythical era of creation. And in that place, they brought their mythical forefathers, their ancestral heroes, and their achievements back to life. A spiritual center is a meeting place where people gather, a place of commercial and cultural exchange, the place where local culture opens up to other ones, evolves, and adopts external cultural aspects, continuously enriching itself.

3 Paleo-Iconographic Language

What is written, carved, scratched, or painted on the rocks tells us of human beings over time and of their spiritual and material lives: it is a paleo-iconographic language whose concrete meaning often escapes us but is without doubt loaded with content tightly connected to the culture it expresses. If the symbols had a voice, they would surprise us. They would tell us so many things we cannot even begin to imagine. They would speak to us of cultural and inter-tribal relationships, conflict, aspirations, technologies, gestures, rituals, gods and myths, heroes, demons, and countless other things.

Today we think differently from those who created these symbols, as we live in a totally different world from them. We have an exclusively materialistic, ego-centric, and selfish relationship with the environment, whereas the humans of the past who created them were essentially animists, attributing vitality to everything and often to powers higher than their own. As such, they had a creed: a spiritual charge so elevated and complex that we cannot even imagine it. So, we limit ourselves to formulating interpretative hypotheses, often at the risk of abusing that language, misunderstanding it, and distorting its meaning, under the false assumption of being able to go back in time and attend the lessons of the ancient engraving artists.

We have the presumption to believe that we know how to read those symbols and have the ability to interpret them, but in reality, we do not have the mental capacity or the culture to do this, as our culture is thousands of years distant from that which the symbols express and totally different from what became the existential and spiritual basis for it.

There is perhaps no need to conduct mental lucubrations in an attempt to understand and explain those symbols. Maybe we need only a simple-thinking approach for the simple expressions that we regard as complex, but which perhaps are not complex at all. Our commitment to trying to read the symbols of the past is, without doubt, commendable; but still, our readings remain interpretative hypotheses of what we can see of a reality whose substance escapes us.

4 Ritual Language

Among the infinite interpretations of the signs, symbols, and figures, and of all rock art, the most obvious and now widely documented, thanks to relatively recently drawn and also written evidence, such as the battle scene with a Latin inscription on Rock no. 91 of the National Park of Naquane (*Parco nazionale delle incisioni rupestri di Naquane*) in Capo di Ponte, is the one that includes religious motivations (Priuli 2015). Signs, beyond their formal appearance, become a ritual language in many cases because of the very way they were conceived and made—both technically and iconographically. Depending on the type, location, context, and era, they take on different meanings, have a permanent or transitory value, and a personal or

community function (Priuli 2013). However, beyond cultural content, many signs for us today are also iconographic documents that lead us back to the material lives of those who produced them and of the community around them, as they refer to those lives.

5 Arms and the Armed

This applies to the representations of weapons and therefore of armed human figures, so common in Alpine and Val Camonica rock art, especially from the advent of metalwork onward. The list of sites and rocks that host images of arms and the armed could be endless. Consider the Mount Bego area, where thousands of images of daggers, axes, and halberds adorn the rocks in the Valley of Marvels (Fr. *Vallée des Merveilles*, *Valle delle Meraviglie*) and Fontanalba, created at so many different points over several centuries (Priuli 1984).

Weapons and armed figures appear sporadically in the western Alps, but in the Aosta Valley (It. *Valle d'Aosta / Val d'Aosta*, Fr. *Valleé d'Aoste*), greater numbers are engraved into rocks, while others decorate anthropomorphic monuments (Mezzena 1981, 15–62). Depictions of daggers and axes appear in considerable numbers in Val Tellina, on monuments, and on rocks, like the one in Tresivio which were engraved in an advanced phase of the Bronze Age. Numerous late Bronze-Age swords are engraved in the Rock of the Ratlins (*Pietra delle Griselle*) in Torri del Benaco, along the Veronese shore of Lake Garda and they certainly are not lacking on the valley walls of the deep Val d'Assa canyon on the Asiago plateau (Gaggia 1983; Priuli 1983).

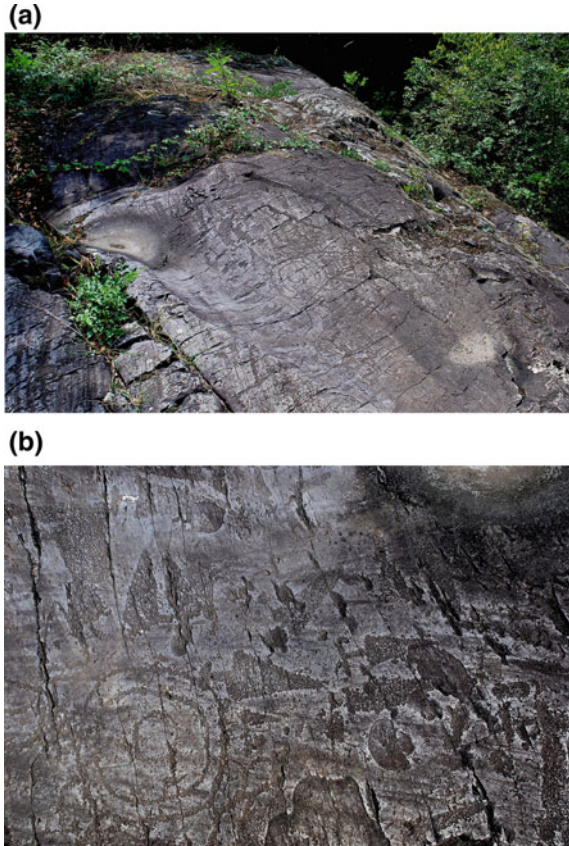
6 Arms and the Armed in Val Camonica

Yet it is especially in Val Camonica where there is not only a large quantity of depictions of weapons and armed figures but also an uninterrupted continuation of art that began in the Copper Age and lasted into historical times. In order to deal with the depictions of weapons and armed figures, we must first turn our gaze to human events and their development from the Upper Paleolithic onward (Figs. 1.3 and 1.4).

Representations of weapons in the Upper Paleolithic period are extremely rare. The few recorded examples are apparently in “hunting contexts”: assegais and perhaps arrows toward the Mesolithic. There were no great fights for power or hegemonic ambitions; there was simply the need to procure food and perhaps impress the group and its women, take women from other groups, or to seize land or protect one's own hunting ground.

The conflicts first arose between groups, clans, and extended families of nomadic and semi-nomadic lifestyles during the Mesolithic era, with the intent of seizing hunting grounds and pastures, and to protect their herds. In the Neolithic period, the

Fig. 1.3 Nadro. Rock Art Natural Reserve of Ceto, Cimbergo, and Paspardo (Riserva naturale Incisioni rupestri di Ceto, Cimbergo e Paspardo). Foppe di Nadro, r. n. 4



advent of settlements and the search for and appropriation of productive areas led to the establishment of private property, the birth of villages, and the institutionalization of clans and stratified tribal societies. These changes generated jealousy, envy, craving for land, and the consequent need to be strong, influential, and fearless, to acquire power, to be able to become the leader of the group, and ultimately, to be able to lead it to the conquest of the most productive spaces.

However, material and iconographic evidence from the Neolithic era that would allow us to deepen our knowledge of the combative actions is scarce during the Neolithic period, with the exception of two cases. The first is Talheim, Baden Württemberg, where a mass grave containing 34 skeletons—old and young—was discovered. The evidence from this site allows us to observe the effects of the slaughter of a village's people using stone axes, committed at the beginning of the fifth millennium BCE. The other was during the same period on the edges of the settlement in Schletz, Lower Austria, where numerous graves revealed many skeletons. There were no young women among them, presumably due to one tribe imposing itself on another

Fig. 1.4 Val Camonica,
Malegno Rock no. 1



and kidnapping the women (Wahl 2004, 97–100). The weapons of this period were polished stone axes, flint knives, spears, bows and arrows, and rudimentary clubs.

It was with the advent of metalwork that things radically changed. From that moment, the violence of war took hold and veritable tribal conflicts began. This was a result of the need to conquer sites rich in minerals, to preserve such sites that had already been seized, to succeed, to boost one's prestige, to have power, and the consequent stratification of society with rich, fearless warriors at its apex. Material culture—stone and then metal weapons—represented strength and the power that came with it. Thus, they became a distinctive element of role and rank, to the point of elevating the warrior to the status of hero, as Maria Theresa Guaitoli has pointed out (Guaitoli 2004, 17–33).

The Neolithic ax (see the numerous stone axes featured in the grave goods of the first monumental dolmens of the Bretons, in some instances depicted in engravings on their stone orthostates) transitioned to the Aeneolithic dagger. This can be seen in the tombs of Remedello and Spilamberto, and in those of the Bronze Age (Cornaggia Castiglioni 1971; Bagolini 1981). Then, in the late Bronze Age and early Iron Age, the sword emerged and became the “semantic symbol” par excellence that accompanied a king/warrior/hero. In areas under Rhaetian influence, that symbol was the ax, which had a long, wide blade during the Celtic La Tène era, or even the spear.

Archaeological findings of grave goods have restored a rather exhaustive image of the weapons and their formal development—particularly from the Neolithic onward. But it is Alpine rock art, particularly in Val Camonica, that offers not just indications of the evolution of the weapons and their diverse types according to the period in which they appeared and the cultures who made them from the Aeneolithic onward,

but also of the use that was made of them. This can be seen in thousands of “fight” scenes and through iconographic context.

In the Copper Age and in the Bronze Age that followed in Val Camonica, vast rocky surfaces feature depictions of copper Remedellian-type daggers and daggers from the later Bell-Beaker culture, usually alongside halberds and axes (see the relevant rocks, no. 3, 4, 21, 22, 23, and 60 in Foppe and the Dos Cui Rock in Nadro, but also in Seradina in Capo di Ponte and in the Luine Archaeological Park of Rock Engravings (*Parco Comunale delle Incisioni Rupestri di Luine*)) (Cittadini 2017). These same depictions also feature in the Aeneolithic Monumental Compositions (*Composizioni Monumentali eneolitiche*), alongside representations of axes and, in some cases, halberds, arranged in sophisticated compositions with a high level of artistic-compositional sensitivity in graphic terms. Together, they seem to echo the figurative elements characterizing the megalithic proto-statuary and statuary that line the route to the Mediterranean, toward the Italian hinterland, particularly in some of the valleys that head into the Alps toward central Europe, such as the Val d’Adige, Val Tellina, the Aosta Valley, and, of course, Val Camonica.

The anthropomorphic stelae in Val di Magra and in Lunigiana, those belonging to the Megalithic complex of St. Martin de Corléans (It. *L’Area megalitica di Saint-Martin-de-Corléans*, Fr. *Site mégalithique de Saint-Martin-de-Corléans*) in Aosta, those of Sion-Petit Chasseur in the Swiss canton of Valais, the Sardinian ones in Sarcidano (*Cavallo del Sarcidano*), those in the Sarca Valley (*Valle del Sarca*), and those in South Tyrol, represent mythical forefathers, ancestral heroes who became demi-gods, the objects of worship. They were often gathered in sanctuaries—spiritual centers that endured over time. In such environments, the male anthropomorphic monuments are characterized by representations of axes, halberds, daggers, and, in some cases—like in Aosta and Sion—also by bows and arrows. Examples include the large male statue-menhir in Lagundo (Bolzano) on which some nine Remedellian-style daggers and 12 axes are engraved, and the Arco 1 stele, with seven daggers, three axes, and as many halberds.

There is no doubt that these representations of weapons and of daggers, halberds, and axes, in particular, allow us to distinguish the rank of the figure portrayed on the monument; they are symbols of strength, of prestige, and of power acquired through heroic actions that remain in the collective memory, a permanent exaltation, and celebration of the mythical heroic forefather.

The daggers depicted are typical Remedellian daggers with triangular blades that vary in length. The grip has a half-moon end. There are archaeological findings of precisely this type of daggers in various northern Italian localities, particularly in Remedello in the Brescian plains (*Bassa Bresciana/Pianura bresciana*).

The halberds engraved—of which there are archaeological findings dating back to the Copper Age (the Remedello culture) and particularly in its final phases (the Bell-Beaker culture)—actually lasted for most of the Bronze Age. It seems that, despite appearing barely functional, above all, they were a symbol of power.

Axes are present on the Val Camonica and Val Tellina monumental compositions and also on the anthropomorphic stelae of Trentino and South Tyrol, apparently in a phase preceding the full adoption of the halberd and, in a few cases, alongside it.

This is the case on Cemmo Rock 2. They also appear alongside daggers on anthropomorphic stele Arco 1 in Trento. In some cases, even in the Aeneolithic, it seems that some depictions also present perforated stone axes, while the vast majority must have been in copper, in the Similaun and Remedello styles.

With the end of the Copper Age, the dagger changed its appearance, becoming slimmer. The end of the grip is no longer a half-moon but becomes globular. It continues to feature in some monumental compositions, such as on Cemmo Rock 3 and the Corni Freschi in Montecchio di Boario (Terme), as well as on numerous rocks, particularly in the central area of Val Camonica, and often on those that had previously been the site of Remedellian daggers.

In the Aeneolithic tombs, warriors' grave goods contained a flint or copper dagger (and in rare cases a bone one, such as at Spilamberto—this too functioned as pointed weapon), arrows, polished stone, or copper axes. Meanwhile, in the monumental compositions depicting the qualities of the mythical hero-warrior and on the proto-statues that celebrate/portray him, the high and unreal number of weapons depicted on the body is an exaltation of strength and prestige. With the end of the Aeneolithic and the beginning of the Bronze Age, the ax and dagger remained elements/weapons that distinguished warriors and their social status, as testified by material finds, but also by Val Camonica rock engravings and more.

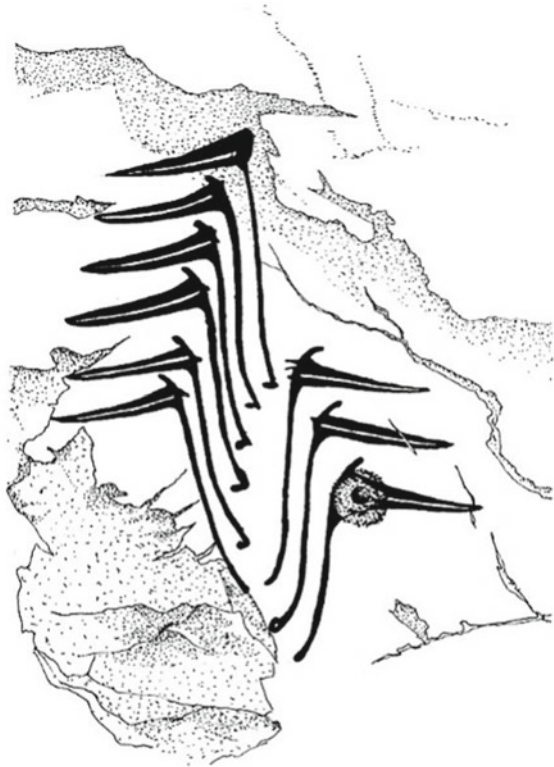
During the Bronze Age, the sword also became a distinctive element of personal belonging and marker of social status. In central and southern Europe in the late Bronze Age, power and wealth lay in the hands of a few ruling families within their territorial and cultural spaces. The sword was their status symbol, as were the chariots with which they were buried (Sperber 2004, 174–199). Swords and precious bronze objects—items of prestige—were not only used but given and received. In other words, these objects were items exchanged between members of the ruling social classes and often offered up to supernatural entities, as shown by our findings in watercourses, lakes, or “storehouses” (*ripostigli*) on high summits (Peroni 2004, 161–173).

7 Depictions of Arms as a Replacement of Votive Offerings

It was common for objects and weapons to be placed in watercourses and especially in sacred locations, dedicating them to numina or departed heroes (Ibid., 161–173). But in Val Camonica and particularly in the Boario Terme area, it seems that they perhaps created depictions of the objects and weapons on many rocks instead of offering them up. In this way, they dedicated that rock or its site to the warrior/hero to whom the arms refer (Figs. 1.5, 1.6, 1.7 and 1.8).

The great sanctuary of Luine in Boario, a rocky promontory dominating the lower valley, was probably dedicated to the cult of heroes from the Copper Age onward, but especially up to the Middle Bronze Age, and its rocks are studded with representations of axes, daggers, and swords, as well as halberds which, in the immediate vicinity,

Fig. 1.5 Boario Terme,
Corni Freschi



are also present along with Bell-Beaker daggers on the Corni Freschi boulder at Montecchio.

The images of weapons are very often arranged as they would have been on the bodies of the ancient anthropomorphic stelae (e.g., Rock no. 46 of Luine) or as an ax and halberd alongside each other (as in Rock no. 30), as if the rock itself were the body of the hero/warrior or the abode of his spirit. The act of engraving and depicting the weapons in a complex evocative ritual—about which we know nothing, but which we can imagine—was certainly very important for the Camunian culture. It may have replaced the material act of laying arms in watercourses, in rocky ravines, at the summit of mountains, or in devotional bundles at the foot of the rocks devoted to specific tutelary deities or heroes, ancestors, warrior princes, or mythical beings, since—as we have mentioned—the rocks could have been considered the abodes of their spirits.

The dagger had been the dominant weapon among the depictions of the Copper Age; but as testament to the birth and establishment of a warrior elite, and the consequent development of military technologies, in the Bronze Age, other weapons established themselves. Use of the ax took hold. The sword asserted itself as it evolved from a thrusting weapon with slender blade into an aggressive slashing weapon for

Fig. 1.6 Boario Terme,
Luine 1



war, clearly designed and made for the purpose of killing—thus attributed to warriors. In parallel, the spear emerged.

Oddly, there are almost no depictions of weapons (swords, spears, or axes) in the hands of warriors or of fight scenes at any point in the Copper Age or in a large part of the Bronze Age. Weapons held by warriors and what seems to be fight scenes became dominant in Val Camonica during the Iron Age and last until the Roman era, although there are still depictions of weapons and groups of weapons, which in some cases seem to be isolated from a “narration” or “commemoration” of a battle. In some instances, as is clear, for example, on Rock no. 1 of Dos de l’Ora in Berzo Superiore, fight scenes and depictions of weapons are on the same rock but belong to different engraving stages, each one created in several stages, as well (Priuli 1979). A spear depicted right next to or even on top of the image of a mythical warrior

Fig. 1.7 Boario Terme,
Luine 2



Fig. 1.8 Monte Baldo, Torri
del Benaco



armed with a spear could have been a ritual that evoked the strength and prestige of the warrior and a means of loading his spear with “mana” and the strength of the ancestral hero to whom the rock was an offering.

There are numerous depictions of weapons, especially among the La Tène engravings from the late Iron Age and the Roman era in Val Camonica, which were found in Piancogno: bundles of spears, spear, and javelin tips, axes with wide blades, Lovere- and Giubiasco-style knives in sheaths, and swords. Instances associating axes, knives, swords, and spear tips (warriors’ weapons) are not uncommon, as can be seen clearly

on the Rock of Swords (*Roccia delle spade*) of Group 13 on the Cà de Dos Boulder (*Masso di Cà de Dos*), on the Rock of Weapons (*Roccia delle armi*) of Group 6, and on the Stone of Weapons (*Sasso delle armi*) of Group 7 (Priuli 1993).

In addition to their symbolic content, the dense and extensive presence of depictions of weapons and armed figures on Camunian rocks tell us the history of their formal, technical, cultural, and chronological development.

8 Fight Scenes and Armed Figures

The anthropomorphic stelae are a material expression of the ancestral heroes and perhaps of the founding fathers of the various communities. They are the ones who introduced metalwork and most strongly characterized the Copper Age depictions (late fourth and third millennium BCE). But it was depictions of armed human figures and of scenes representing or recalling fights that characterized the long period running from the late Bronze Age to the Roman era, particularly present throughout the Iron Age (Figs. 1.9, 1.10, 1.11 and 1.12).

Armed human figures, often on horseback, and fight scenes are the most common works in Camunian rock art. They are found almost uninterrupted across the entire area of the central valley and perhaps in an even more concentrated way on its right-hand slope, in the area that ascends from Seradina to Bedolina and beyond. Their almost monotonous repetitiousness (for us) could therefore also be down to a rituality with a strong basis for worshiping ancestors, commemorating events or actions, and celebrating the person(s) depicted as the victor(s)—the warrior rising to hero status on account of his accomplishments (See Fig. 1.15).

It is understood as being unlikely—if not worth excluding entirely—that rock carvings of armed individuals could respond to a personal and/or collective need, a desire to stamp one's own presence or to demonstrate a particular social status, as



Fig. 1.9 Berzo Demo. Dos de l'ora

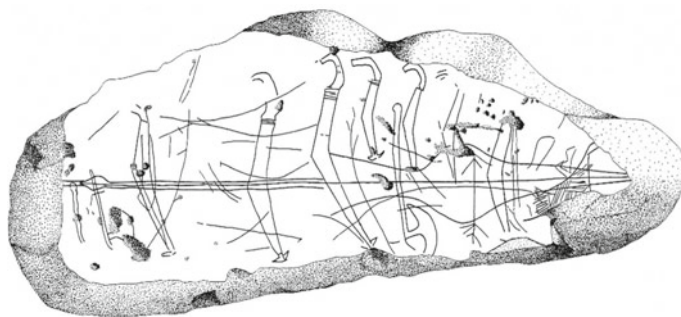


Fig. 1.10 Piancogno. Stone of Weapons



Fig. 1.11 Val Camonica, Piancogno, Rock of Swords

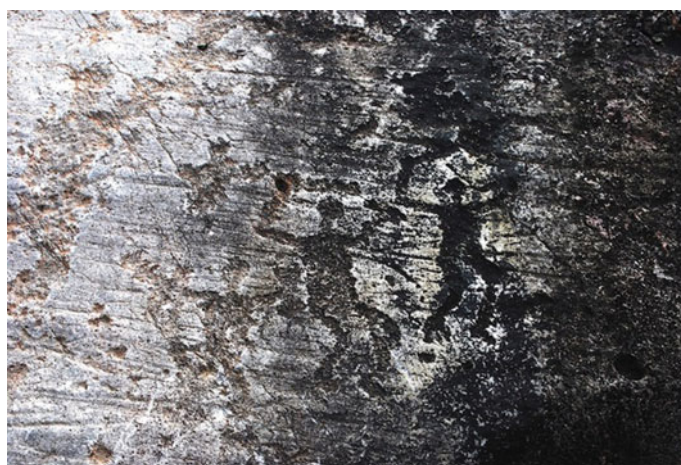


Fig. 1.12 Capo di Ponte. Bedolina. Armed figures depicted on a rock overlooked by the Pizzo Badile, a sacred mountain

suggested by Manuela Zanetta (Zanetta 2009, 283–290). Such intent can be inferred from the technical-executive and stylistic analyses of the Camunian depictions (and this concept can be extended to all the artwork) and that, except in extremely rare instances, these are not the personal works of anyone who felt the need to draw themselves. They are, instead, the work of the few skilled in this ritual practice: specialists in engraved art, “priest-artists” who knew the engraving techniques well and who probably worked by commission from individuals or their community for specific occasions.

As has been said, engraving is what has been left behind of a rite, conducted by specialists: ministers of worship, the intermediaries between the material, earthly world, and the supernatural land of the gods and spirits. This figure was believed capable of communicating with the dead, of invoking their memory, and of reviving them. They also acquired the technical ability to choose and prepare tools suitable for engraving, while also refining the dexterity required to create the artwork.

9 Categories of Depictions of Arms and the Armed

Depictions of armed figures are categorized as: individuals, armed figures in fight scenes, armed figures on horseback, armed figures on horseback in fight scenes, armed figures hunting, and figures armed “on parade (Figs. 1.13 and 1.14).”

Each category includes numerous types of drawings, as has been highlighted on several occasions, changing stylistically depending on the period to which they belong and on the “priest-artist” who made them (Priuli 1991). They have different weapons and panoply of varying completeness; there is sometimes an indication of clothing, other times not.



Fig. 1.13 Rock art Natural reserve of Ceto, Cimbergo and Paspardo, Foppe di Nadro, r. no. 24

Fig. 1.14 Capo di Ponte. Naquane. R. no. 35. Running character, armed with a sword



It would be impossible to conduct an exhaustive analysis of all the armed figure depiction categories here, even more so of all the types of depictions within each category. That is because it would require analyzing several thousands of depictions that dominated throughout the Iron Age. As such, this chapter is limited to bringing to light just a few examples that could inspire interpretative considerations of the typical Camunian rock art that features armed figures and fight scenes. It must also be said that not all the engraved rocks contain armed figures, while others—dozens of them—seem to be devoted to this type of representation. They are often repetitive in type and in some cases stylistically different, suggesting they come from different stages of engraving. It is not uncommon to see them laid on top of each other, such as if the rock had been chosen to host representations of that specific “hero,” who is then depicted several times over a long period of time.

One example of this is that of Campanine in Cimbergo, where 580 armed figures were recorded on 56 of the 102 engraved rocks. They are concentrated in the central area of the site, suggesting that the choice of rocks was not left to chance but a response to specific requirements (Zanetta 2009).

Fig. 1.15 Capo di Ponte. Naquane. R. no. 50. Warrior with a shield, a sword with an antenna or anthropomorphic hilt, and a kilt; made using filiform engraving technique



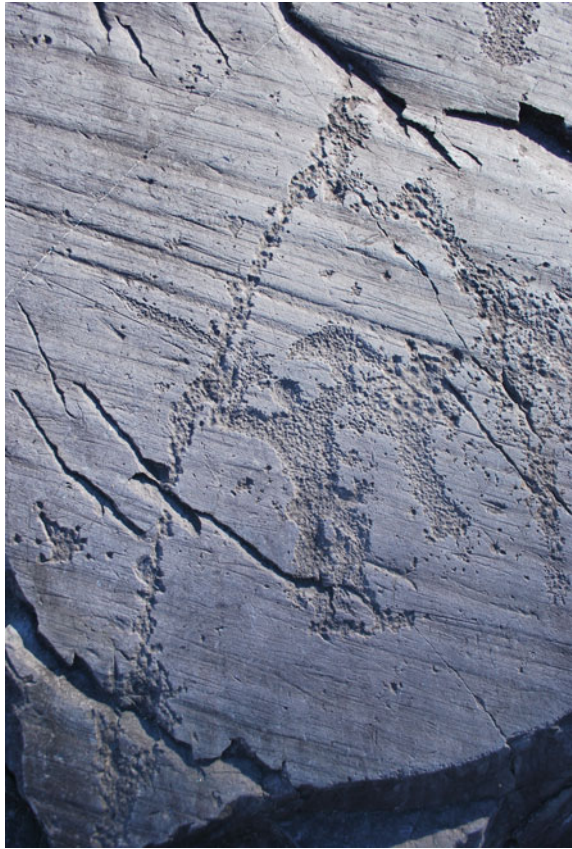
10 Individual Armed Figures

Simple, individual armed figures make up the largest portion of the depictions of armed humans. These are isolated human figures. They are associated with others but are not poised for combat with them. Nor are they part of scenes, such as hunting scenes, or placed next to duelers. Instead, they are defined only by their panoply which, more often than not, consists of a sword and shield, spear and shield, ax and shield, and, in some cases, a helmet (Figs. 1.15, 1.16 and 1.17).

They are very often in a static stance, their weapons raised above their heads in what seems to be a sign of jubilant victory. In Campanine in Cimbergo, some 425 of the 580 depictions of armed figures are individuals.

While it is reasonably easy to recognize the type of ax held by the warriors, it is more difficult to understand the true shape of the swords, as these are represented in a much more basic way, with the exception of a few swords that are reproduced in much greater detail. An example of this is the antenna sword in the hand of the warrior on Rock no. 48 of Cimbergo's Bosc del Vicare, or the one that can be traced

Fig. 1.16 Capo di Ponte, Naquane, r. no. 50. Warrior armed with shield and sword with an antenna or anthropomorphic grip; a spear has later been placed in his hand, engraved using a metal tool



back to the Campovolano sword of the sixth century BCE, engraved in the hand of a warrior bust on Rock no. 61, also in Cimbergo (Ibid.). Others can be found on Rock no. 50 of Naquane. There is also an engraving in Piancogno on the Latin-alphabet Rock in the hand of what is probably a Roman-era warrior (Priuli 1993).

Instances of armed individuals wearing kilts, drawn using the filiform engraving technique and wearing headdresses or helmets, are not rare. The sizes of these individuals vary. Generally, little distinguishes them from other depictions of armed figures, but there are cases of large-scale representations, such as in Paspardo, where a warrior, armed with a spear, rectangular sword with central umbo, and knife sheathed in his belt, stands to about a meter tall and is engraved in a rocky ravine. Other examples are the four warriors placed almost in a line, one under the other. They can be found on Rock no. 50 in Naquane in Capo di Ponte. The most visible of the four, known as the “Etruscan warrior,” is in the central section of the rock and is the result of a transformation of a previous La Tène-era depiction of a warrior, with the typical long, thin sword. In a later era—such as in Roman times—the head has been enlarged and covered with a crested helmet. The small sword has been enlarged and

Fig. 1.17 Capo di Ponte.
Naquane. R. no. 50



the arm that carried the sword horizontally above his head has been transformed into a gladius. What could have been a depiction of a warrior, hero, or Celtic divinity has been transformed into one of a legionary, centurion, or Roman hero, or even into a representation of the god Mars.

Another interesting case in which a figure was changed into another is on Rock no. 9, also in Naquane: here, a square-bladed ax from the seventh–fifth centuries BCE was turned into a human figure by adding a leg, an arm, and a head, evoking a certain likeness between weapon and bearer.

Armed individuals also characterize hunting scenes. In these, they are armed predominantly with spears and bows, and arrows, but there is no small number of instances of “hunters” who attack animals with swords.

11 Armed Warriors in Combat Scenes

Depictions of armed figures in what appear to be combat scenes are numerically fewer than in the previous category. Still, they do feature in large numbers and in

Val Camonica that number is in the thousands. The desired association of two or more duelers allows us to speak not of simple depictions but of scenes loaded with narrative which, in some cases, is well expressed in their stances, their movements, and the position of the attacking and defensive weapons. For the most part, there are two armed figures, but there are instances in which there are more. Except in rare cases, they have the same formal features: they are stylistically identical, and they are more or less the same size. They almost always carry the same weapons and are arranged facing each other (Figs. 1.18, 1.19, 1.20, 1.21, 1.22, 1.23, 1.24 and 1.25).

The weapon most commonly held in fight scenes is a sword. It is not always possible to recognize the type and, in many instances, it cannot be distinguished from the arm that holds it, becoming an extension thereof. The shield, which, depending on the period to which it belongs, can be small and round, ox-hide rectangular, or oval in shape; in some cases, the metal umbo is shown at its center. There are also fight scenes with axes and spears.

However, it is important to highlight that an impressive repetition of figures and scenes of the same type has been observed over large areas and even more so on the same rocks. This can be noted, for example, on the “Astronauts Rock” in Zurla, where three pairs of duelers have been arranged in a row on the rock, perhaps created by different operators using different instruments, but still very similar to each other and depicted in the same pose.

There is a tremendous number of scenes with almost identical contents, depicting armed warriors or combat scenes, engraved on rocks, at some distance from one another. Analyses of the engraving techniques, the style, the compositions, and the figurative elements allow us to think of the work of a single hand, as if the “engraving artist” had traveled, by commission, to celebrate the same rite by recreating the same characters.



Fig. 1.18 Capo di Ponte, Seradina. Fight scene with anthropomorphic-gripped sword



Fig. 1.19 Capo di Ponte. Zurla. “Astronauts” Rock Pair of duelers armed with a small shield and short sword



Fig. 1.20 Capo di Ponte, Seradina 3

In Seradina, Iron Age fight scenes between two schematic characters are repeated to exhaustion. They are almost all the same, with the express feature of having the outline of an arm that grips a small shield or sword.

Also in Seradina—to name just one site—pairs of duelers from the end of the Iron Age are extremely common and repetitive. They have empty geometric bodies and carry large rectangular or oval-shaped shields and a sword, rendered in a very simplistic manner that makes the type unidentifiable.



Fig. 1.21 Capo di Ponte, Seradina Geometric anthropomorphic figures with shields and rough swords



Fig. 1.22 Capo di Ponte, Naquane, R. no. 1. Fight scenes whose formal, stylistic, and conceptual identity is consistent with the scenes on Rock no. 47

The same, identical depictions of fight scenes are repeated on the same rock, often overlapping one another. This common motif is enlightening for an understanding of the engraving phenomenon and of their repetitiveness. Indeed, it seems that they are the result of a need to regularly revive the historic hero (perhaps in the event of a danger to the community), who has become a myth for having performed memorable deeds, or who perhaps distinguished himself in defending against invaders or in a tribal conflict.

Perhaps the most emblematic example comes from the numerous fight scenes of the late Iron Age that characterize Rock no. 47 at Naquane. In them, a great armed



Fig. 1.23 Capo di Ponte. Naquane. R. no. 1. Armed warrior superimposed on the representation of the labyrinth associated with a ritual combat scene with swords; the duelists are tied to each other by one leg

character, muscular with understated phallus, uses his spear to pierce the adversary, who is depicted as a smaller, more schematic engraving, his stance one of surrender.

The stylistic identity of the scenes and their characters' stances lead us to believe that the scenes may have been engraved by the same operator who, at various points during his "priestly" work, has been called upon to revive the hero, on a rock that has perhaps been devoted to that hero. The same scene, almost definitely engraved by the same hand—which can be deduced from the unmistakable style—can be found in the central section of the Large Rock, or Rock no. 1, also at Naquane. In this instance, it is associated with two engravings of ritual shovels, which, as we have written elsewhere, are usually tightly associated with worshipping the dead (Priuli 2018). The same character—absolutely identical to the previous one—has arched legs and an indication of a helmet on his head. He is placed below the depiction of a labyrinth engraved on the same rock. The argument that the two figures are engraved using different pecking techniques does not exclude the possibility that they were made by the same operator: the pecking performed by striking a stone tool with direct blows is different as different stone tools were used, and stronger or weaker forces were applied when striking the tool on the rocky surface.

Also associated with the labyrinth, the dueling figures, and the character—and perhaps deliberately placed below the maze—is an engraving of a shovel. This element distinguished rank or was a symbol of passing from life to death, and therefore of rebirth in a new dimension and with new roles in life and the community, or a



Fig. 1.24 Cimbergo. Bosc del Vicare. Dressed hero with a cloak and cuirass, armed with a sword, shield, and helmet, carried by two birds (Rossi 2009, 308–312)

new social status. That was perhaps achieved by combatants who, through the ritual of duel, passed a test of initiation.

Another element in support of this hypothesis could be the engraving of a bird right next to the labyrinth and the armed figures. Birds—whether migratory or resident—are often associated with fight scenes and with depictions of armed figures, in some cases even carrying them. This is a clear allusion to the journey of departed and heroes to the “higher land,” and to the return journey, they make when they are recalled through the engraving rite, as can be clearly seen on some rocks at Cimbergo (Rossi 2009, 308–312).

An interesting type of fight scene is the one in which “arbitrators” or “elders” appear beside the contenders. On Rock no. 12 at Seradina in Capo di Ponte and in a very similar scene on Rock no. 7, two duelers with a small shield and short sword—held as if to thrust—are each accompanied by a large figure armed with spear and concave shield (Marretta 2018). Are they arbiters of a dispute or elders overseeing the initiation ceremony for young people becoming warriors?

Fig. 1.25 Ceto. Zurla. Larger warrior armed with a shield, sword, and crested helmet. He seems to attend a fight between two duelers, who are characterized by their visible kilts and headdresses



12 Armed Figures on Horseback and the Armed Figures on Horseback in Combat Scenes

There are also numerous depictions of armed figures and fight scenes on horseback. These can be easily traced back to the end of the Bronze Age and to the entirety of the Iron Age, which gradually became a symbol of wealth, prestige, and power. The armed humans on horseback are more or less the same as the ones already examined. Scenes of horses and riders depicted alone or in combat, are engraved in Val Camonica in all the styles that characterize the long time period between the end of the Bronze Age and the Roman era (Figs. 1.26, 1.27, 1.28, 1.29, 1.30 and 1.31).

There are some very schematic depictions and others—particularly from the sixth century BCE—that is much more dynamic and naturalistic. There are also many depictions of horses and armed riders disconnected from any clear narrative of combat or parade. While, in some cases, the importance of the horse seems to have been exaggerated, in others the horse is very small compared to the armed rider, even grossly disproportionate to him, with the obvious aim of exalting the rider's strength



Fig. 1.26 Capo di Ponte. Naquane. R. no. 50. Large armed figure standing on a horse



Fig. 1.27 Capo di Ponte. Naquane. R. no. 50



Fig. 1.28 Capo di Ponte. Naquane. R. no. 1. Armed warriors on large horses



Fig. 1.29 Capo di Ponte. Naquane. R. no. 1. "The Procession"

and prestige. This prestige and the rider's heroic actions are emphasized by depicting him standing on the horse's back and raising his weapons above his head as a sign of victory.

This is the case, for example, of the horse that carries an enormous warrior, armed with a sword and shield, engraved on the central section of Rock no. 50 at Naquane. During the Christian era, a cross was placed in his hand, with the clear aim of



Fig. 1.30 Foppe di Nadro. Rock no. 28 Warrior armed with a sword and shield, riding a deer

Christianizing that character and his host rock, or of depriving it of its meaning and functions.

On the same rock, in the immediate vicinity of the first, we find the contrary: a large running horse, disproportionate in terms of shape and size and with a large fringed tail; on its back, a small warrior stands, armed with shield and sword. He is detailed and wears a visible kilt. Not far above him, two warriors on horseback confront each other, wielding swords and shields.

On the Large Rock, or Rock no.1, of the National Park of Rock Engravings of Naquane in Capo di Ponte, there are not so many fight scenes, but there are several characters armed with spears and swords. Here too, we find armed warriors sitting on the back of the horses. Two enormous horses are engraved in particularly deeply carved geometric shapes. One carries a warrior armed with a sword and round shield and the other a warrior armed with a spear and shield. They seem to be riding in the same direction. The figures seem to be associated with the engraving of a deer and with depictions of ritual shovels; so much so that they could be seen as representations of heroes who passed away.

A short distance away from the scene, a scene features a number of small but carefully engraved human figures, which are evidently crafted by the same hand. Attention has been paid to their arrangement and the role of the characters featured as if they had gathered for a parade or procession.

There are engravings of characters in praying positions, with their arms raised to the sky; some are armed with spears or swords and shields; others are unarmed but have a large feathered headdress that serves as indication of their rank or role, perhaps on a sacred field. A single human figure armed with a spear and shield, with a feathered headdress, and on horseback, is associated with the engraving of a shovel.

It is possible that these four types of figures represent the social stratification of the time of the warrior princes (the second half of the first millennium BCE). At



Fig. 1.31 Cimbergo. Campanine. R. no. 47. Warrior armed with a sword and scabbard, shield, and feathered helmet, carried by a wading bird (Rossi 2009)

the top of that structure was the armed character on horseback who perhaps also assumed the role of a priest, the distinctive sign of which may have been the large feathered headdress. The shovel drawn at the feet of that heroic rider is perhaps meant to indicate that he has passed away, while the scene could have been created to invoke his presence and reaffirm his power over the community.

There are also plenty of depictions of armed characters riding deer, as on Rocks no. 57 at Naquane and no. 28 of Foppe di Nadro, as well as those who seem to ride birds: these are clearly representations of mythical beings and heroes.



Fig. 1.32 Foppe di Nadro. Rock no. 28

13 Armed Figures in Hunting Scenes

Armed figures in hunting scenes are almost as numerous as the representations of animals in hunting contexts. Hunting, particularly of deer, but also of wolves, foxes, and boar, was carried out using traps, snares, nets, and especially with bows and arrows, and lances. All of this is widely documented in the many hunting scenes engraved on rocks throughout most of Val Camonica (Fig. 1.32).

Depictions of deer hunting scenes in which the hunter is on horseback are very common. In one case, the hunter is even standing on the horse, ready to launch his spear toward a deer surrounded by dogs. There is no doubt that this is a depiction/recalling of a mythical event, of a heroic hunter, exaggerated through this almost acrobatic depiction of him on his horse. In reality, it is unlikely that deer were hunted by horse, if only because, when hunted, they tend to flee into the undergrowth: it would be impossible for a hunter on horseback to follow them.

In at least two instances, at Foppe di Nadro and at Bedolina, deer hunting scenes depict the deer being struck by a spear while also being attacked by the hunter with a sword. It is very likely that, after being injured by the spear, the deer were then finished off with a sword.

14 Armed Figures on Parade

Depictions of armed figures “on parade” are perhaps more numerous than one would think. The same “procession” on the Large Rock, or Rock no. 1, of the National Park of Rock Engravings in Capo di Ponte (mentioned above), could number among this

type of armed figure depictions. On many rocks, there are lines of armed characters one next to another—all in a similar form and armed in the same way. Neither are instances of armed figures on horseback rare; they seem to parade, one in front of the other. Often the rocks are engraved with groups of characters armed in different ways. They seem to show off their weapons without any belligerence toward each other, as can be seen on many rocks in Seradina, Cimbergo, Nadro, Naquane, and Zurla (Figs. 1.33, 1.34, 1.35 and 1.36).

On Rock no. 50 at Naquane, there is a scene consisting of three armed figures. The detail to attention of this scene is particularly noteworthy. At the center is an



Fig. 1.33 Zurla. Armed figures on parade, showing off their weapons



Fig. 1.34 Capo di Ponte. Naquane. Rock no. 50 Fight or parade scene



Fig. 1.35 Nadro. Dos Cui

anthropomorphic figure in frontal view. The bust features decorations suggesting a garment or cuirass while the right-hand grips a long sword with an antenna or anthropomorphic grip, which suggests a Celtic origin. The bent left arm seems to hold a large circular shield of which there is only an outline. On the right and left of this engraving—in perfect symmetry around it and placed sideways so as to face toward the warrior—are another two figures. They are armed with small shields and swords of the same type as the one held and extended upward by the central figure. The two armed figures' heads are in profile and feature either thick, bushy hair or

Fig. 1.36 Capo di Ponte, Naquane, Rock n. 93. Latin votive inscription next to a fight scene. The lucky one or the winner in a combat was engraved



a fringed headdress and kilts. They are not pecked but scratched into the rock. The scene can be dated to the latter half of the first millennium BCE.

A particularly interesting scene is engraved on a rock at Dos Cui in Nadro in the Rock Art Natural Reserve of Ceto, Cimbergo, and Paspardo. There are three splendid warriors with understated phalluses, armed with large concave shields on which there is a clear indication of a central umbo. Much care has been taken over their creation, with good anatomical research and accentuation of their muscles. They are static and brandish long swords with antenna or anthropomorphic grips in their right hands. The style is not dissimilar from the one that characterizes the scene on Rock no. 50 and the engravings seem to have been created by one “artist” who was very skilled with the engraving tool and technique. However, in this scene, the deliberate stillness of the central figure contrasts markedly with the dynamism of the two armed figures facing one another. In this instance, the three figures seem to show off their strength, their prestige, and their weapons.

The almost monotonous (for us) repetitiveness of fight scenes and armed figures is possibly the result of rituals strongly linked to the cult of the ancestors, commemorating the events or actions, and celebrating the person depicted as the victor—the warrior rising to hero status on account of his accomplishments.

The association of warriors and birds is certainly no coincidence and is found often on the rocks on the left-hand side of the valley. The bird is generally a wading or a migratory aquatic bird and symbolizes the transition or journey to the afterlife or vice versa. As such, depictions of armed figures carried by one or more birds—as can be clearly seen on Rock no. 62 of Bosc del Vicare, on Rock no. 11 of Campanine Alta, and on Rock nos. 47 and 49 at Scale—are emblematic (Rossi 2009).

These are the people who had passed away and were revived, recalled, simply remembered, or perhaps heroized through the rite of engraving. For this reason, they are depicted at the point of their death or, in some cases, in victory, as can be seen in what is likely a gladiatorial combat scene with a Latin inscription, on Rock no. 93 of the Naquane National Park in Capo di Ponte (Priuli 2015).

15 Depictions of Weapons, Particularly Axes

As mentioned, depictions of halberds and axes on the rocks of Val Camonica characterize and are recurrent from the late Copper Age onward, throughout the Iron Age until the Roman period, as can be seen from the observation of the Piancogno rocks (Priuli 1993) (Figs. 1.37, 1.38 and 1.39).



Fig. 1.37 Boario Terme, Crape, Roccia no. 8



Fig. 1.38 Foppe di Nadro. Rock no. 34

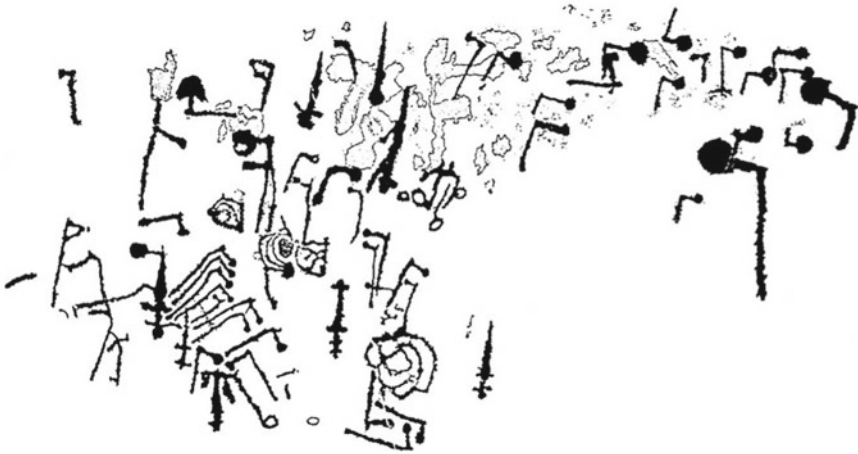


Fig. 1.39 Monte Baldo, Castelletto di Brenzone

Since the Neolithic period, the ax has always enjoyed a high symbolic value: just think of the numerous stone axes—generally made to a very high standard but almost never used, therefore decorative—planted in the earth or buried around the dead in the large megalithic tombs of the Bretons and often depicted inside them.

In Val Camonica rock art, and not only there, symbolism of the ax seems to be linked once again to the celebration of a specific person who had passed away and, as Carancini (1984) says about these artifacts, they connote a “...socially eminent deceased figure, belonging to an aristocratic hegemonic class that loved to adorn itself with what, according to its own vision of the perfect warrior, was considered lavish symbols of political power...” In Val Camonica, a large number of axes were depicted from the Copper Age onward, particularly on stelae and monumental compositions, often in association with halberds and, as already said, generally alongside Remedellian daggers and, later, Bell-Beaker ones.

The anthropomorphic stelae also often had axes and halberds as their dominant iconographic and content element. For example, on the anthropomorphic stele no. 3 of Arco, on some of those in the Aosta Valley, and on almost all the male anthropomorphic stelae in South Tyrol, to name a few. It is, however, particularly at the end of the Early Bronze Age (23rd–17th centuries BCE) and throughout the Middle Bronze Age that they became dominant on the rocks of some sites, such as Foppe di Nadro and especially Luine in Boario. Observations of the rocks at Piancogno show us that they appear throughout the Iron Age until the phases of Rhaetian and La Tène culture influence, and up to the Roman era. They are found in compositions or in compositions of figures of knives, spears, and spearheads; in so many other cases, they are held by characters, who are not necessarily in a fighting scene. They are often depicted in a large size, a clear sign of their power, as Carancini highlights.

Insofar as concerns male human tombs in the La Tène necropolis in Ornavasso in Val d’Ossola (Piedmont), the main element of the grave goods in the most prestigious

tombs was the ax with a wide blade—the same that is depicted several times on Rock nos. 44 and 62 of the National Park of Rock Engravings of Naquane in Capo di Ponte and on Rock no. 4 in the Paspardo valley, to name just a few. These figures have been recognized as axes of the Hellebardnaxt, Wessen, or Ornavasso type.

Axes too, then, are often a symbolic representation of the deceased, as they often represent the high rank of that figure when they are depicted in huge proportions in the hands of some characters. Depicting them could have been a means of celebrating the departed, considered a hero, a mythical being, or even a demi-god. On that matter, it's worth remembering what Durand underlines: heavenly summit-dwelling warrior divinities are characterized by having the ax as their emblem. This includes the Balto-Slavic god Perun, the Germanic Tyr, the Norse Thor, and even Jupiter Dolichenus (Durand 1972).

All that has been said about axes and halberds can easily be applied to the depictions of spears, spearheads, and javelins and to the depictions of daggers, swords, and knives.

16 Spears

There are numerous depictions of spears in Val Camonica in various kinds of scenes and compositions. Although seemingly almost absent during the Neolithic and Copper Age, they are present in the Bronze Age and especially throughout the Iron Age. The contexts in which they appear are hunting scenes, combat scenes, and engravings of “parades.” On some particular rocks, spears are the main element depicted, seemingly isolated from any scene. They have been made by repeatedly scratching the rocky surface, often working with the glacial striations until the desired depth of groove is achieved. The tip is carved at the end of that groove using the same technique. Examples of this include a rock at Zurla, the Dos de Costa Peta Rock at Paspardo, and some rocks in the Dosso Loa in Berzo Superiore, where two life-sized tips have also been depicted. These were made by placing the real object on the rocky surface in order to trace its outline (Fig. 1.40).

Scratched depictions of groups of spears and particularly of spearheads and javelins are very common on the rocks of Piancogno. These are clearly part of the depictions in the valley from the last centuries BCE (the La Tène era in the Po valley) and the Roman period. During the Bronze Age, some instances of these are linked with axes, daggers, and swords. This can be seen clearly, for example, on Rock no. 34 of Luine in Boario.

17 Swords

It has been said that swords feature in most of the combat scenes—whether real or ritual—engraved on the rocks of Val Camonica. The engraving techniques used

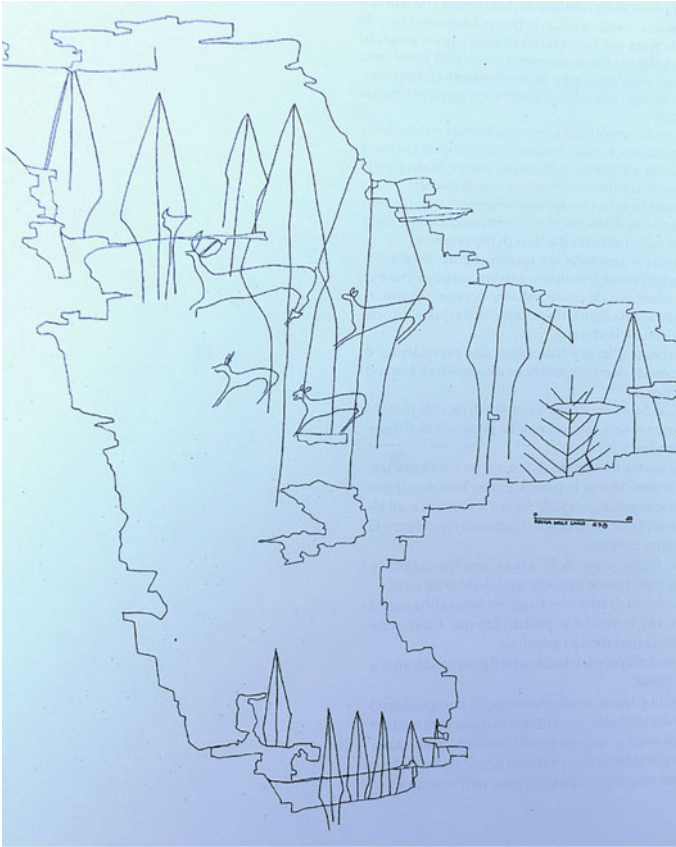


Fig. 1.40 Piancogno. Rock of the Spears

and the dimensions of them (often very small) have not allowed for much detail in their shape. For the most part, they are just a rectilinear element being held, a mere allusion to the real object.

Swords appear in figurative culture in the Middle Bronze Age, in association with other weapon figures. For example, on Rock no. 34 at Luine, a sword seems to have been possibly added to a composition of axes, spears, and daggers from the Copper Age and the Early-Middle Bronze Age. It is, however, with the Iron Age that the sword becomes the most commonly depicted fighting weapon. This can be seen as much in combat and parade scenes as in depictions of warriors who seem to be apparently isolated from any “narrative tale” of a fight.

In the late Bronze Age and early Iron Age, the images of duelers with swords are very simple and schematic. Often, they are stick figures, their linear legs apart. Insofar as it lacks detail, the sword could also be a baton or a small shield. Only later in the early Iron Age do the depictions of weapons begin to take on more realistic and dynamic shapes, with the swords’ shapes and sizes better defined and

oval-shaped shields seemingly from the Villanovan culture. From the eighth to the seventh century BCE, those shields began to get progressively more round before becoming rectangular and ox-hide-shaped around the sixth century BCE. In the hands of warriors, they are depicted with a concave shape, and a highlighted central umbo.

In other instances, particularly during the period of Etruscan influence, a desire to highlight the anatomical shape of the armed figure emerges, particularly the legs and arm muscles. They have well-defined swords, where even the shape and size are detailed, meaning that, in some cases, it is possible to tell from which culture and type it is. The intention is obviously to highlight the symbolic content and so load the bearer with all the values that weapon symbolizes. Examples of this could be infinite and it is impossible to list them all here. It is sufficient to name a few: on Rock no. 6 of Foppe di Nadro, in the upper section and in the center, there are two large depictions of warriors (the largest of the entire set of engravings, in which there are 166 human figures). They are armed with rectangular shields and wield large swords with anthropomorphic or antenna grips.

The armed figure on Rock no. 48 of the Bosco del Vicare at Cimbergo holds a sword, recognizable as an antenna sword, but proportionally much larger than real. Another interesting example could be the bust of an armed figure on Rock no. 61 on the same site. It holds a large sword, very similar to that of the armed hero on Rock no. 62, being carried by two birds. Also on Rock no. 52, five figures arranged in a circle seem to dance, armed with shields and swords held upward. One carries a long spear. Very similar depictions can also be found on the upper section of the Dos Cui di Nadro rock, the same rock that hosts a dense series of the oldest depictions of Remedellian daggers.

18 Conclusion

Insofar as the study of weapons (knives in the oldest period especially during the Copper Age, and axes, swords, and spears from Bronze Age to Iron Age) is useful for understanding cultural and technological evolution of the Camunian culture (and of any Alpine culture), we must also consider all such representations and combat scenes as powerful expressions of religious sentiments within the Camunian culture. This cultural urge to depict did not arise out of a desire to describe an episode, rather the very act of creating these rock arts evoked the spirits of those who carried a weapon, meaning all the warriors—the ancestral heroes, the mythological ancestors, and all others who had an impact on the history of Camunian culture and the cultures in relationship. Today, these representations also illuminate the “martial culture” of a people who were absorbed by the Romans two thousand years ago.

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