

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLACE, VALAMONICA, ITALY

by

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In the northern part of Italy in the high valley of the Po river, there lived tribes of people known as the Camunians. They date from 8,000 B.C. to around 11 A.D. They left behind over a hundred and thirty thousand engraved figures in the Camonica Valley, known as the largest concentration of prehistoric art in Europe. More than three-fourths of these are situated in the vicinity of Capo di Ponte.

These rock carvings illustrate the life, traditions, religious beliefs, social and economic affairs and war time activities of this prehistoric populations. Here lies eight thousand years of pre-Roman history about the Camunians, until they were conquered and became part of the Roman Empire.

Why did people create so many rock engravings in this valley, and does it have something to do with the rock formations and celestial orientations? The solstice and equinox solar display are part of the *importance of place* in Valcamonica. The impressive geography must have profoundly inspired prehistoric people to come to this valley and carve their life histories over periods of thousands of years.

Most of the rock engravings in Northern Italy are found in Liguria, Piemonte and in Lombardy, but the richest area for variety of styles, subjects and abundance of figures are found in Valcamonica. This valley is between Pisogne and Edolo and there are about one hundred and thirty thousand rock carvings. See Figure 1.

Professor Emmanuel Anati has been studying these rock engravings for over 30 years. He established the Center for the Study of Prehistoric Art (Centro Camuno Di Studi Preistorici) nearly 20 years ago, and created a facility for students to come and document the engraving sites, record them through unique drawing techniques and carry out archaeological surveys throughout the valley. The following article is based upon the writings of Professor Anati and his former students and colleagues. This article covers some of the major sites in Val Camonica including Cemmo, Pissarzo, Seradina, Cereto, Bedolina, Longoprato, Planareto, Perseghinega, Perseghe, I Pozzi, and Scianica. See Figure 2.

Cemmo is a site located adjacent to where the Centro Camuno Di Studi Preistorici was built. Here there are two large boulders 15 meters apart, with vertical walls covered by numerous carvings. During an excavation in 1962, an alignment of monoliths was found between the two boulders. See Figure 3.

Near the boulder was uncovered a prehistoric hide containing over 30 pieces of coloring materials, including ochre, clay and soft stones that produced a gamut of colors. Also included were incisor tools, of quartzite and stone-percutors. See figure 4.

From the presence of coloring materials found at the feet of some engraved rocks, and the traces of color remaining in some carvings, it has been concluded that prehistoric man actually did color the engravings. Deterioration accounts for their now uncolored appearance. The tints used by prehistoric man were yellow, red, brown, green, violet and other colors as well. Anati believes that it is necessary to paint the engravings to better study and analyze what is there. This procedure includes, first cleaning and washing the engraving, to clear it of moss and lichens. Many of the carvings were made with a pecking technique, or hammering on the surface with a pointed tool which creates pock-marked areas and lines. There are thread-like carvings made by scratching. Many of these are very fine and often invisible if the rock is not properly treated and cleaned. Anati concludes that it is necessary to find a way to give a clearly legible and copiable surface, reducing to a minimum the possibility of errors and personal interpretation. This he calls the "Neutral Method".

Moving past Cemmo, we climb up the hill toward another site called Bedolina. Here is one of the oldest topographical plans found in Valcamonica and in Europe. It dates back to the Bronze Age. There are figures of huts, and patterns of fields with pathways, a creek and property ownership marked by canals and walls. Until fairly recently there were still fields maintained with paths of similar shape and steps cut into the rock near the spots marked on the map as a ladder pattern and the remains of an ancient creek which followed the same general shape as depicted on the rock. See figure 5.

Across the valley to the east from Capo di Ponte is a national park known as Naquane. There are a large number of carvings located in the park that belong to the IV period of Camunian art and are associated with the Iron Age or first millennium B.C. See Figure 6.

The park stretches up the hill side and encompasses several Roman roads that link the valley to the other side of the mountain and the next valley. The inscriptions date back to the last phases of Camunian art, from the sixth to the second century, B.C. Towards the end of this period, the Camunians began using the North Etruscan alphabet but used the local language. See Figure 7.

The Neutral Process

When the rock carvings are not clear enough to be seen by the naked eye, a preparation of neutral color is applied to bring the carvings into relief. This consists of putting a dark color (black) over the entire surface, rubbing it into the cracks and depressions. Then it is rubbed off the high points and flat un-pecked places. A second color is then applied with a flat sponge, over the raised areas. This white color adds the needed contrast for recorders. This process is called the Neutral process because it makes all the characteristics of the engravings evident and allows the differences in marks left by various instruments to be distinguished with precision. It eliminates personal interpretation. It is in plain contrast to the old method where figures or their outlines were hand-colored according to what could be seen by the unaided eye. See Figure 8b.

Painting the rock surface makes it possible to analyze cases of overlapping as a means of stratigraphy. It is also a protective means to prohibit photosynthesis and the growth of lichens and other organisms that attach to the surfaces and promote the deterioration of the engraving.

It may well be asked "How can anyone date the petroglyphs (with chemical analysis) after the surface has been scrubbed and painted?" The answer is - it already has been dated, and confirmed by many different kinds of studies in archaeology and prehistory in Europe.

The overlapping and comparative degree of erosion, and the differences in technique, patina and execution, lead to a definite succession of local phases. The recognition of these engraving sequences in chronological order produce the dating of these engravings. See Figure 9 and 9b.

The comparison of overlapped styles on numerous rocks allows us to see any repetitive characteristics. The presence of determined styles and of certain stylistic and figurative technical patterns, common to many different rocks, establishes the general stylistic evolution of rock art in a given area.

Valcamonica is especially favorable to this type of comparative stratigraphical analysis because of its great quantity of engraved rocks. The changes in style allow us to establish a chronology relative to the carvings themselves. Together, the study of archaeological and ethnological elements of all the stylistic phases, leads to an absolute chronology.

Topics that are used to date the rock carvings include: extinct animals and fauna of a defined period; rites and customs of certain cultural periods; weapons and tools of certain periods in technological advancement; burial customs; and certain types of huts or dwellings. These all serve as guides for the dating and chronological analysis.

There are six principal periods: the Proto-Camunian period which illustrates a cultural level of hunters and gatherers; the four periods of Camunian civilization which represents the stages of a life having a complex economy but a relatively simple social structure; the Post-Camunian period from the Roman age; and the Post-Roman age that illustrates the result of contact between the Camunian population and the Roman world.

The following is a pictorial review of the sequence of styles and dates:

The earliest is the simple style dating back to the Proto Camunian, about 8,000 to 6,000 B.C. It is characteristic of large wild animals, arrows and short spears, hunting and gathering activities and clan symbols. There are very abstract stick figures. See figure 10a and 10b.

The first age, Camunian I dates from 5,000 to 3,800 B.C.. It is associated with human figures, astral symbols, bows and arrows, "boomerangs", dogs, gardening, and the beginning of the Solar cult. This is during the Neolithic age. See Figure 11 and 11b and 11c.

Camunian II, A, B and C, is 3,800 to 3,000 B.C. and comes at the end of the Neolithic age. It has anthropomorphic compositions, early ploughs, patterns of meanders, idol-forms, and large idols. There are abstract compositions, some cattle, goats, and agricultural activities that enter the scene. See Figure 12 and 12b.

The carvings on the Naquane Park sites, that date around the third millennium B.C. have numerous overlappings clearly shown here with daggers and different styles of animals. Phase III is from 3,000 B.C to 1,100 B.C. and is called the Chalolithic that leads into the Bronze age. During Phase III we find compositions with wagons and ploughs, weapons and tools and sub-triangular daggers, halberds, battle axes, and typical Bronze age axes. See Figure 6 and 7.

The Great Rock at Naquane Park has a very elaborate panel. There are some 876

figures, belonging to five phases of engravings. For more than a thousand years prehistoric artists returned here to engrave their ritual figures, their impressions and their memories often reusing spaces which had already been previously worked on.

There are many examples of houses found on Rock 33, with figures of prehistoric huts that date from the Iron Age, the first millennium B.C. See Figure 13.

We also find items of daily use, such as looms. They are vertical looms with weights very similar to those known in the first millennium B.C. in Greece and other central European countries. The figures here go back to the second millennium B.C. and are the oldest figures of weaving-loom found in Europe. See Figure 14 and 14b and Figure 7.

During Phase IV from 1,100 to 16 B.C. but mostly around 850 B.C. we have the coming of the Iron Age. Here we have large scenes of fighting, of daily life, economic activities, spirits and imaginary beings, inscriptions, and humans with square bodies. We see the weapons, funerary ceremonies, horse, wagons, goats, and sheep. See Figure 15 and 15b.

Inside the park interpretive center are some monoliths behind glass. These were relocated from the Cemmo site for security reasons. See Figure 16.

The Chalcolithic period is characteristic by the figures on this rock, that belong to the II-A period. The datings are confirmed by figures of weapons, triangular bladed daggers, halberds, and flat axes that are all elements known by archaeological findings and provide parallels to datable assemblages. Figure 17 is a Shaman from Naquane.

The Etruscan influence is seen entering the valley after the transition period from the Bronze age to the Iron Age. See Figure 18.

The helmet, the sword, the shield and the engraving technique along with the figurative style that typifies the square body and the calves of the legs with muscles are typical of the IV-E phase of the Camunian engravings. The face corresponds to the period of Etruscan influence which goes from the sixth to the middle of the third century B.C.

Returning to the valley itself and the importance of place that must have given rise to such a multitude of sites, I would like to draw your attention to the mountain formations. See Figure 19 and 20.

To the East is a pinnacle named Pizzo Badile. During the spring and autumn equinox sunrise, the sun rises behind Pizzo Badile and the shadow of the top of the mountain is projected towards the sky sometimes forming suggestive shapes which the popular legend call "the spirit of the Mountain". The Naquane area is located at the foot of Pizzo Badile.

To the West is a craggy ridge called the peaks of Concarena, dominated by one deep cleft. It is here during the spring and autumn equinox sunsets, that the sun goes directly into the cleft when viewed from certain positions. It is no wonder to me that this valley was a magnet for ritual and spiritual inspiration to the prehistoric people of Valcamonica.

Summary

It is hard to abbreviate the amount of information and lengthy time table represented in this part of Northern Italy. A visit to all the engraved rocks in this valley would require some months of excursions. This brief survey may serve as an introduction to those interested in learning more about the Camunicans and sites in Valcamonica. There is truly an importance of site here that drew so many people to this valley to leave their history and mythology engraved on the rocks.

The Centro Camuno di Studi Preistorici in Capo di Ponte is open year round for students and interested people to come and study the engravings and use the facility for research. There is an extensive library and slide and film archive. Besides the European sites, there is extensive material collected from China, Siberia, Africa, and the Middle East. There is lodging available and terrific food, all very inexpensive. Tours and lectures are provided by Professor Anati and his graduate students. The Centro puts on an annual symposium in the fall, late September or early October, when travel to Europe is at its lowest rates and the weather is at its' finest condition for field trips in the Alps. It is a worthwhile and memorable experience that everyone interested in rock art should undertake to gain a global perspective of prehistoric art and to contribute their own expertise to the European community.

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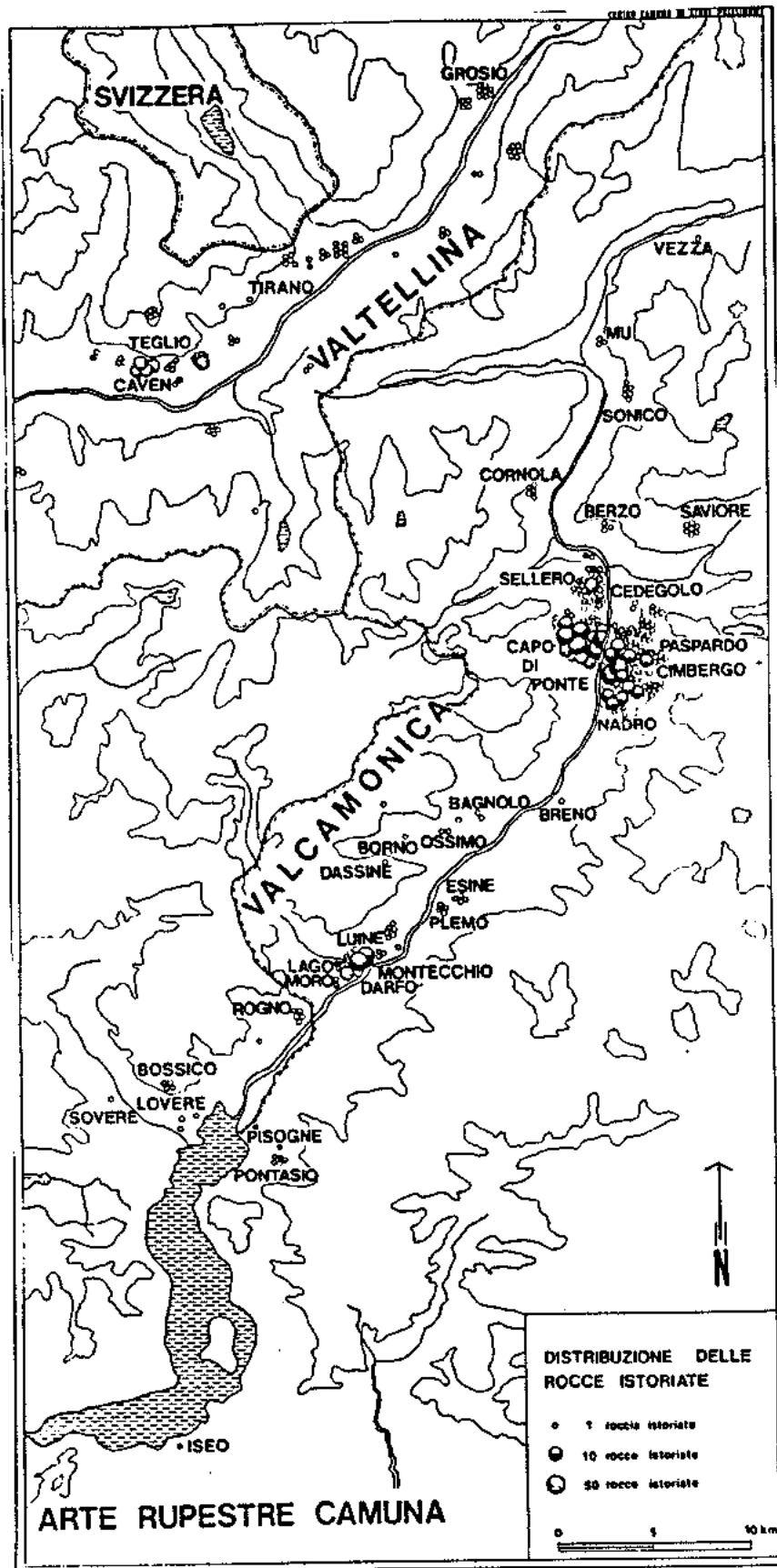


Figure 1. The distribution of rock art in Valcamonica, northern Italy, (after Anati 1977, pg. 8)



Figure 2. The boulders at Cemmo, (after Pruii, 1985 pg. 72.)

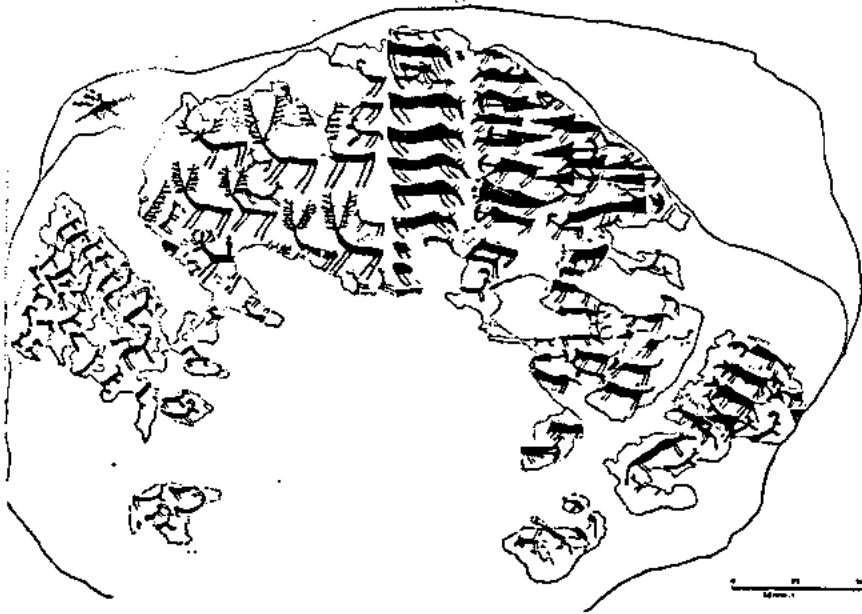


Figure 3. A drawing of the right boulder at Cemmo, (after Anati, 1987, pg. 33).

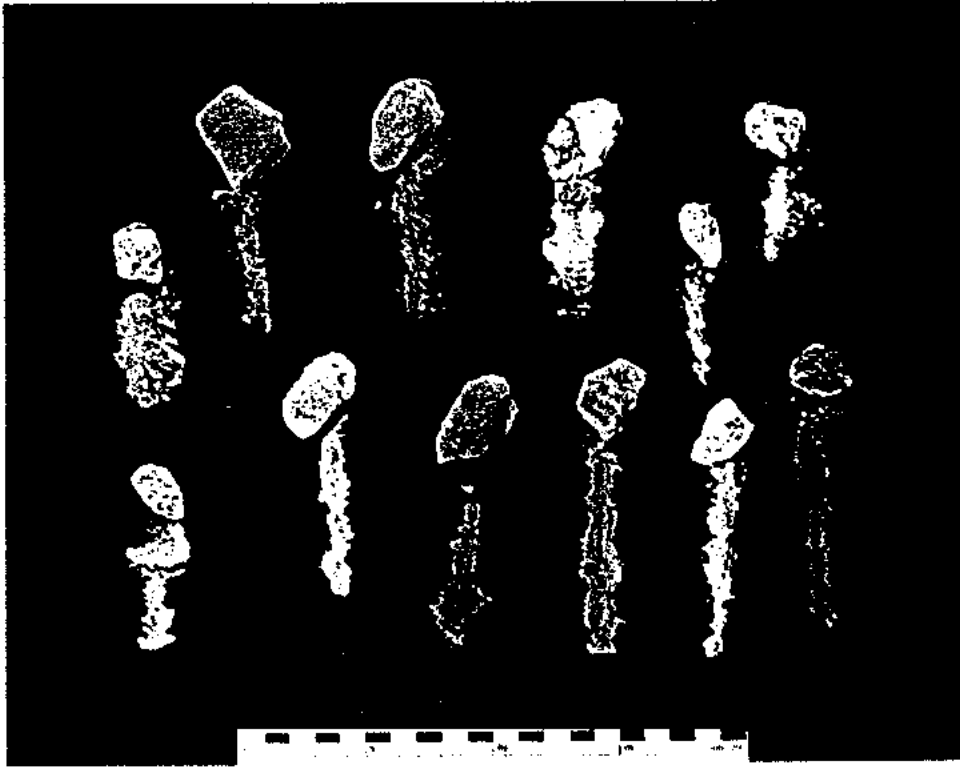


Figure 4. A section from a hoard of coloring materials found in the excavations of the boulders at Cemmo, (after Anati, 1976 pg. 37).



Figure 5. The map of Bedolina (Bronze Age). Close to the prehistoric huts are cultivated fields, canals and creeks; lower are some figures of huts added in the Iron Age. (After Anati, 1987, pg. 41.)

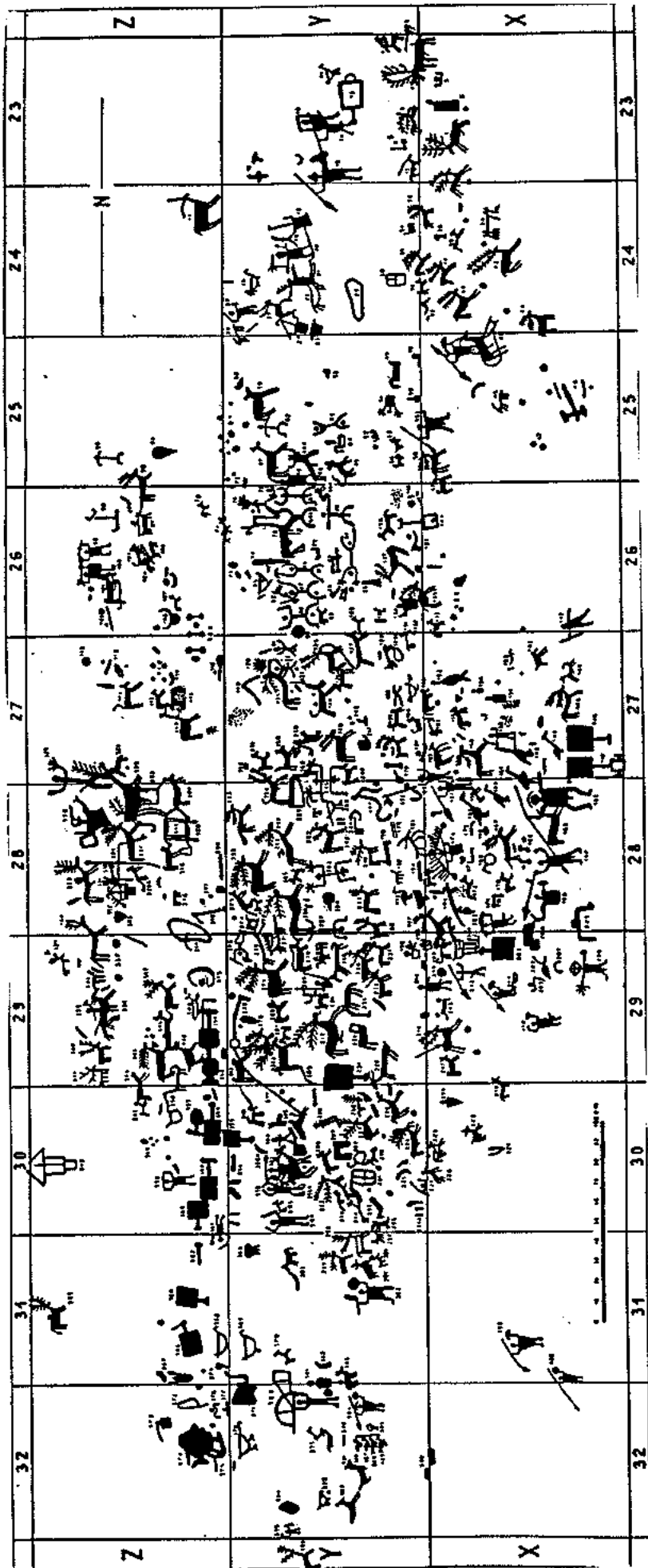


Figure 6. Tracing from the central part of the Great Rock at Naquane. (After Anati, 1987 pg. 25)

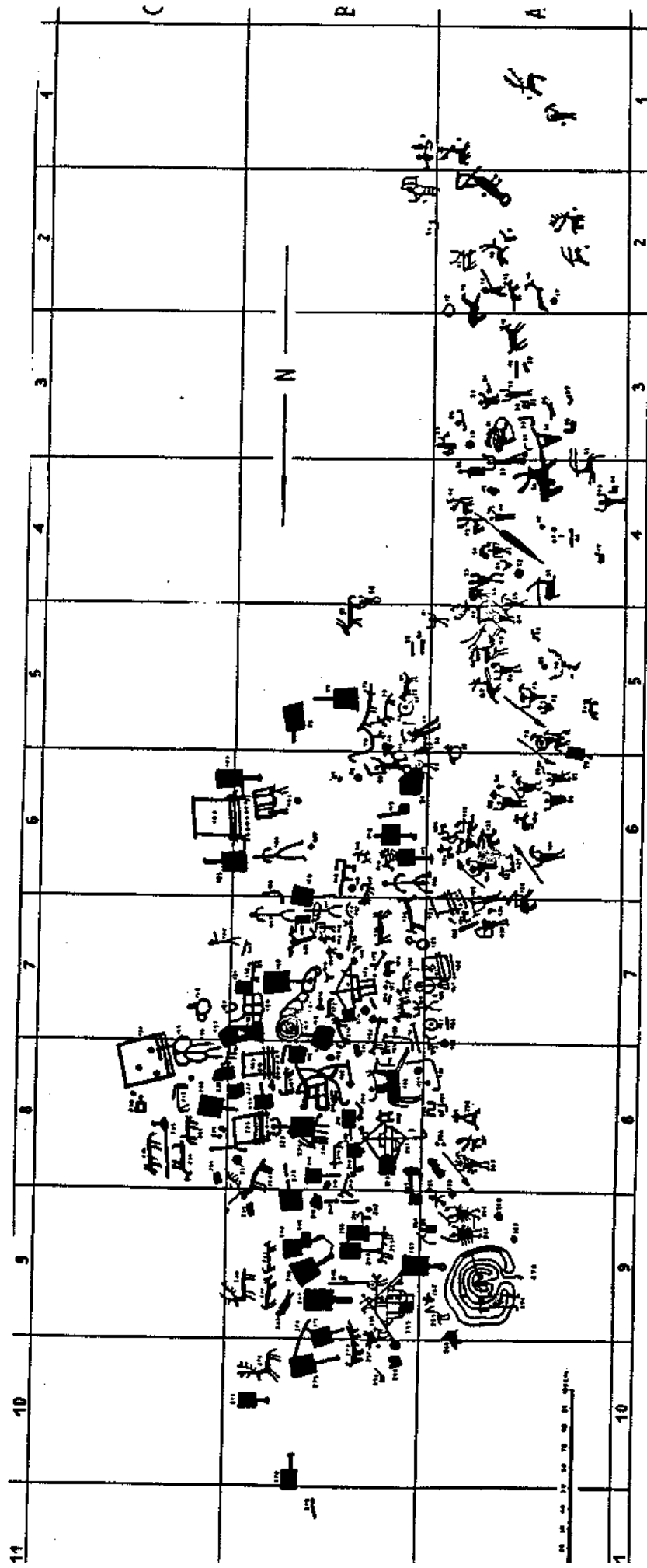


Figure 7. Tracing of sector 1 of the Great Rock at Naquane. On this rock there are nine sectors of engravings. (After Anati, 1987 pg. 26.)



Figure 8. Bagnolo, rock n.2 when it was first discovered. The engraving was hidden by incrustations. The same rock after it was cleaned. (After Anati, 1977 pg. 12)

ELEMENTS OF ETHNOLOGICAL ANALYSIS							
STYLE	PHASE	DATA DEPICTED SUBJECTS	COMMON WEAPONS AND TOOLS	DOMESTIC ANIMALS	ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES	MYTHOLOGY AND RELIGION	SOCIO-POLITICAL STRUCTURE
PROTO-CAMUNIEN	Sub-sarcastic	VENI ANIMALS PREDOMINANCE OF Elk	POUNDS AND SHORT SPEARS		HUNTING FISHING	None	Class
I		HUMAN FIGURES SCHEMATIC STONES SCHEMATIC STONES	BOVES, BUCKS AND SHORT SPEARS "BOULDERING"	BOVS	CARDING	Late cult and typology of tools	
II	A B C	HUMAN FIGURES GRAVE PATTERNS, BUCKS HEADS HUMAN FIGS, SCHEMATIC OBJECTS COMPOSITIONS	SPEARS AND ARCS OF THE "HEBELLING" TYPE "BOULDERING"	CATTLE BOVS	HUNTING STYCK-BLASSING POTTERY PLANNED TRADE	Typology of specific type and anthropomorphic figures	Large Tribes
	Transition	WEAPONS AND TOOLS (LONG BOWS)	LONG TRANSVERSE BOWS, ARCS	BOVS	POTTERY PLANNED TRADE		
III	Early	SCHEMATIC COMPOSITIONS WITH WEAPONS AND ASTER STONES	"HEBELLING" TRANSVERSE BOWS PLOWERS			Partisan	Tribes with authoritarian leadership
	Widely	WEAPONS AND TOOLS	STONE ARCS AND VEIL ARCS BATTLE ARCS	POB	METAL SPINNING	Democratized	
	Late	WEAPONS AND TOOLS	TRANSVERSE BOWS PLOWERS AND TRANDS	POB	PROFESSIONAL RESEARCHERS	Religion	
	Transition	PERSONALIZED AND HUMANIZED FIGURES	TRANSVERSE BOWS AND ARCS	BOVS SHEEP	PROFESSIONAL RESEARCHERS	Method conception of the property is revealed through their evolution	
IV	A B	DIAMONDS BUILT STRUCTURES "TILES"	TRANSVERSE SHEPHERD SHEPHERD	BOVS	PROFESSIONAL RESEARCHERS	Partisan Democratized	Feudal structure
	C D E F	"PINKLES" HUMANIZED FIGURES AND ETHNOLOGICAL "UNITY" SCENES OF HUMAN AND ANIMALS SCENES OF ANIMALS AND OTHER ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES	TRANSVERSE PLOWERS AND TRANDS TYPICAL "HORN" ARCS SCYTHES AND BUCKLES "BOULDERING" BOVS AND PIGS	BOVS SHEEP CATTLE PIGS SHEEP	PROFESSIONAL RESEARCHERS PROFESSIONAL RESEARCHERS	Method conception of the property is revealed through their evolution	
	Transition	PERSONALIZED AND HUMANIZED FIGURES	TRANSVERSE BOWS AND ARCS	BOVS SHEEP	PROFESSIONAL RESEARCHERS	Method conception of the property is revealed through their evolution	
	Transition	PERSONALIZED AND HUMANIZED FIGURES	TRANSVERSE BOWS AND ARCS	BOVS SHEEP	PROFESSIONAL RESEARCHERS	Method conception of the property is revealed through their evolution	
	Transition	PERSONALIZED AND HUMANIZED FIGURES	TRANSVERSE BOWS AND ARCS	BOVS SHEEP	PROFESSIONAL RESEARCHERS	Method conception of the property is revealed through their evolution	
	Transition	PERSONALIZED AND HUMANIZED FIGURES	TRANSVERSE BOWS AND ARCS	BOVS SHEEP	PROFESSIONAL RESEARCHERS	Method conception of the property is revealed through their evolution	
POST-CAMUNIEN		DIAMONDS	SPEARS AND BOWS		PROFESSIONAL RESEARCHERS	Partisan Democratized	Feudal structure

THIS ETHNOLOGICAL ANALYSIS ILLUSTRATES THE DATA PRESENTLY AVAILABLE FOR CAMUNIC VALLEY
THIS IS CONSTANTLY REVISED BY NEW DISCOVERIES.

☐ PRE-NEOLITHIC TRADITIONS

☐ NEOLITHIC TRADITIONS

☐ POST-NEOLITHIC TRADITIONS

Figure 9. 8 and 9b show the Chronology of Camunian Art and the Elements of ethnological events. (After Anati, 1976)



Figure 10. A Proto Camunian (epi-palaeolithic) type elk struck by a spear. Rock 6 of Le Crape, Luine. (After Fossati, 1990b pg. 11.)

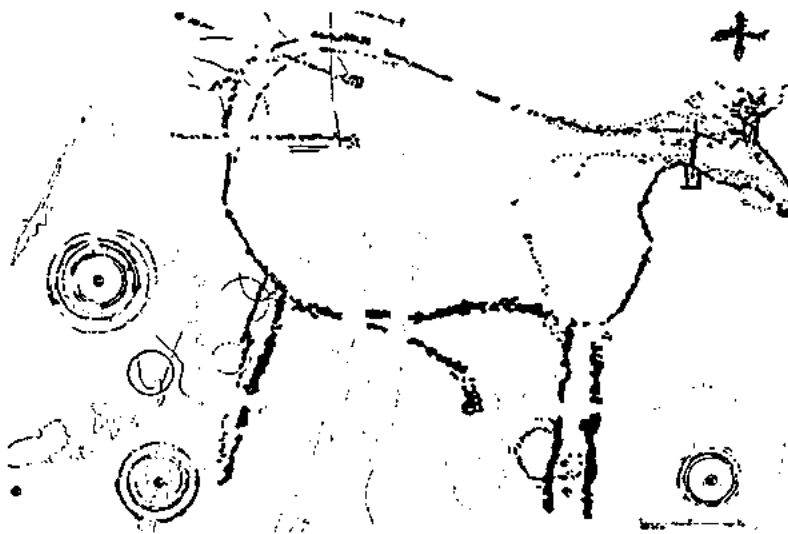


Figure 10b A large animal from the proto Camunian period. (after Fossati, 1990a pg. 25.)

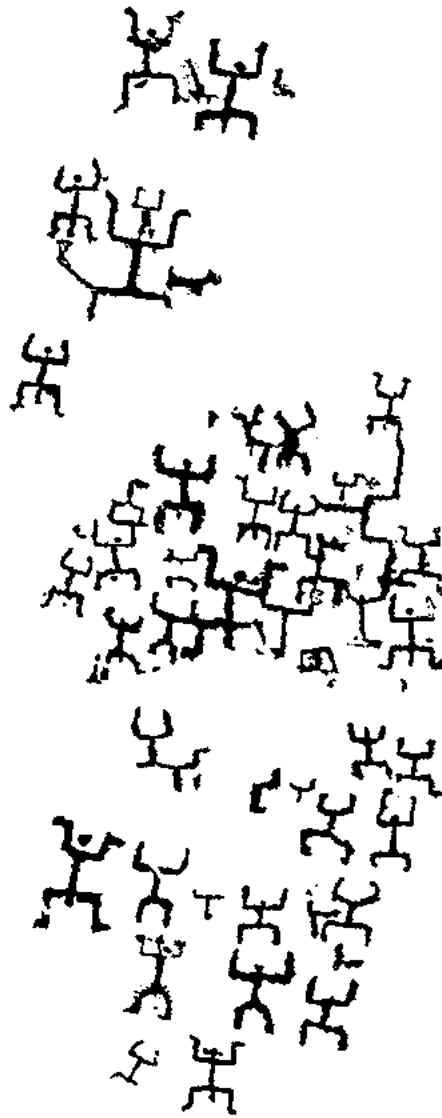


Figure 11. A composition of schematic anthropomorphic figures from period I-Final of II-A. from rock 50 at Naquane.(After Anati, 1976 pg.60.)

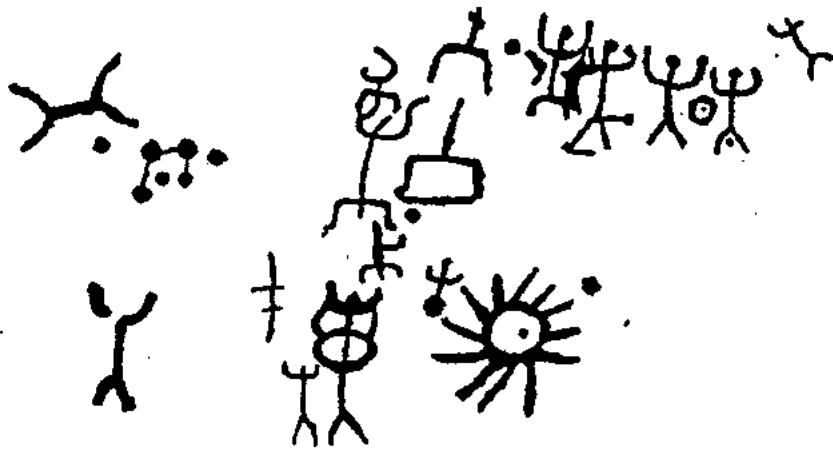


Figure 11b A scene of the solar cult from periods III-A or B on rock 59 at Coren di Valento.
(After Anati, 1976 pg. 67.)



Figure 11c The "Cult of the dog" attributed to Neolithic period. Rock 1, Foppe di Nadro.(After Fossati, 1990b pg.13)

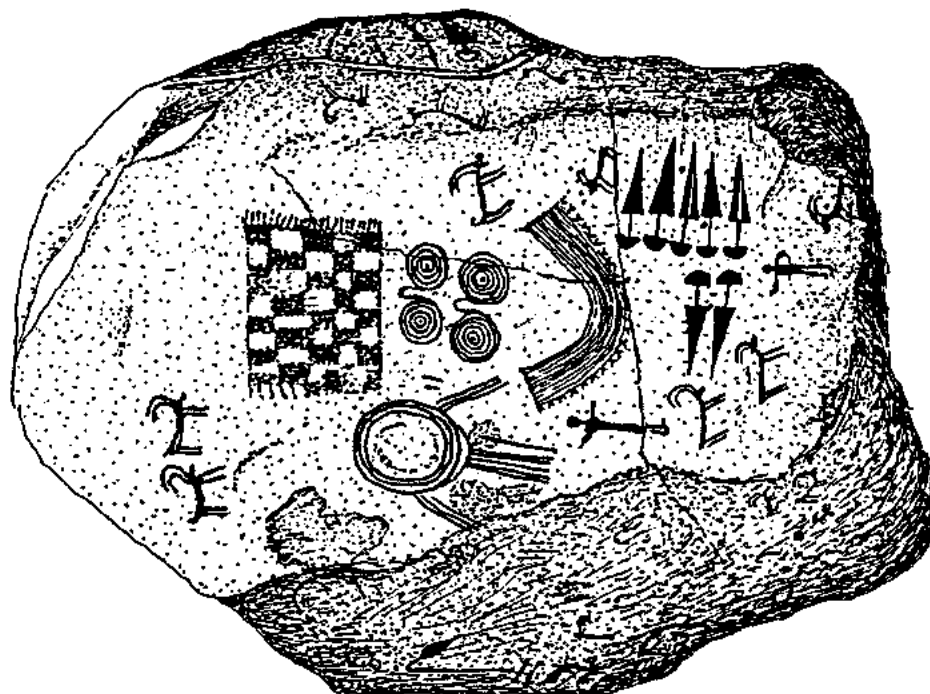
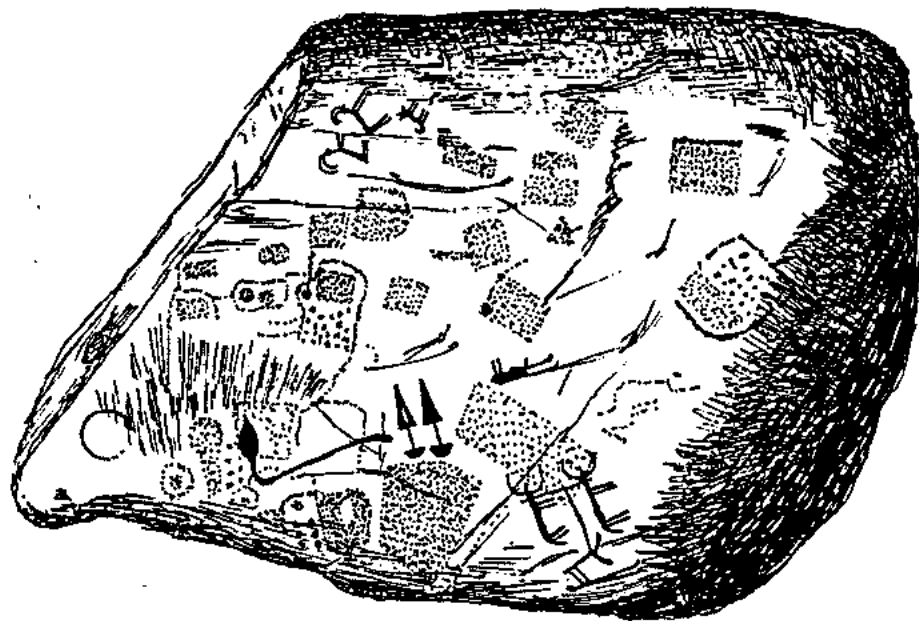
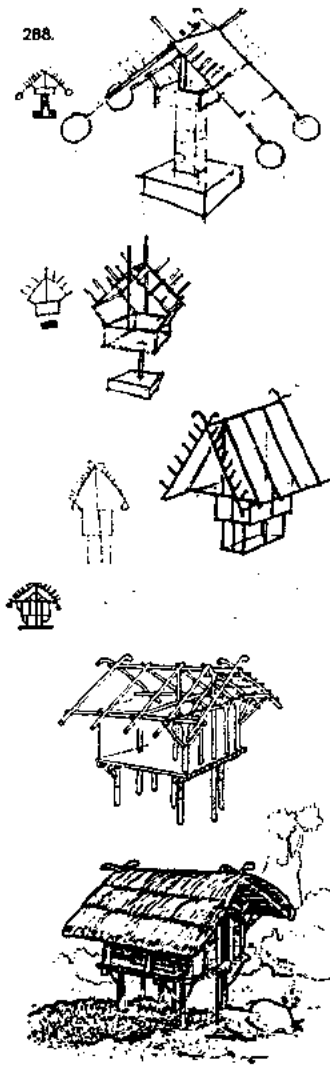


Figure 12 and 12b From Borno (After Priuli, 1985 pg.64)

286. Pescarzo, Bedolina. Rappresentazione di capanna con tetto cupo-liforme.

287. Cimbergo, Campanine. Composizione di rappresentazioni di luoghi di culto.

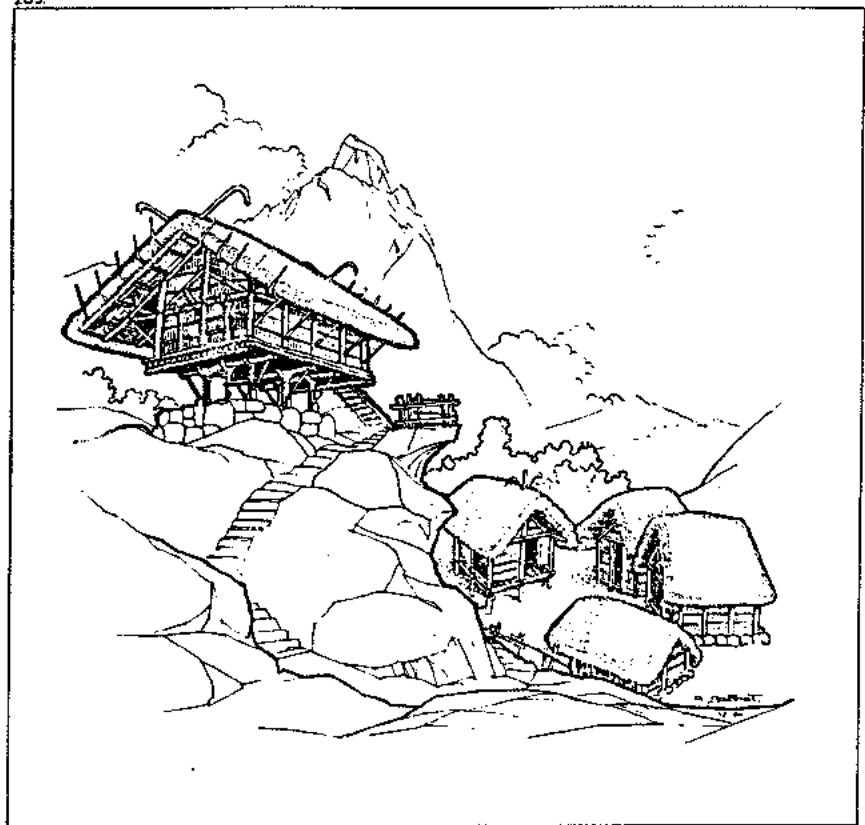
288.



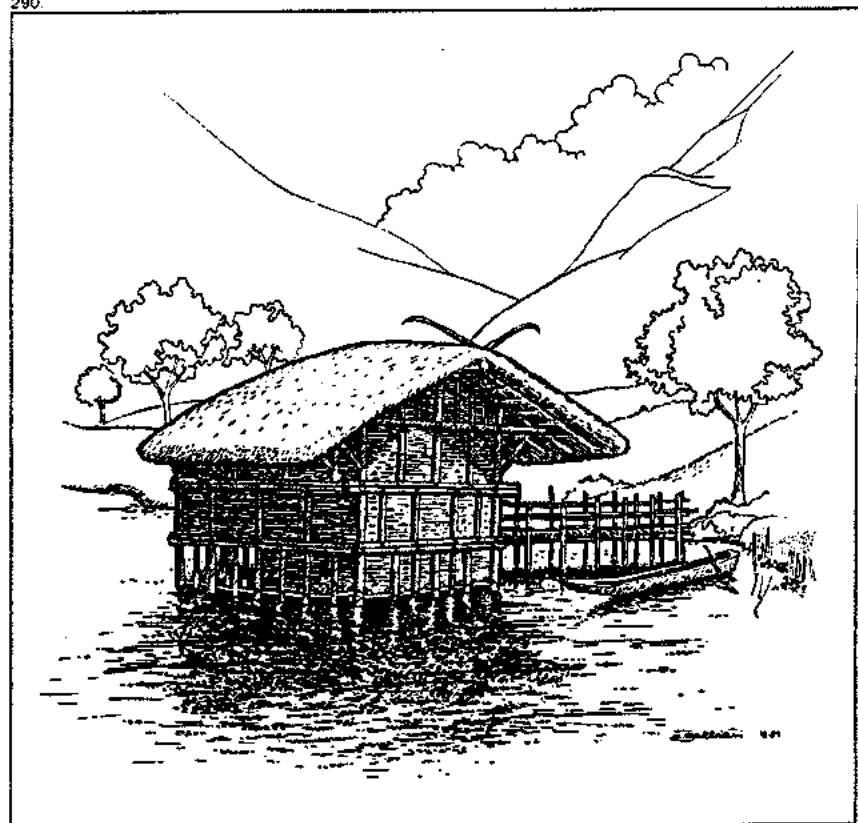
286. A seguito di una accurata analisi di alcune figure di costruzioni, ad opera del sig. Alberto Gabiati, è scaturita una serie di ricostruzioni ideali ed una suggestiva interpretazione grafica di alcune di esse.

289. Villaggio di capanne e luogo di culto.

290. La palafitta.



290.

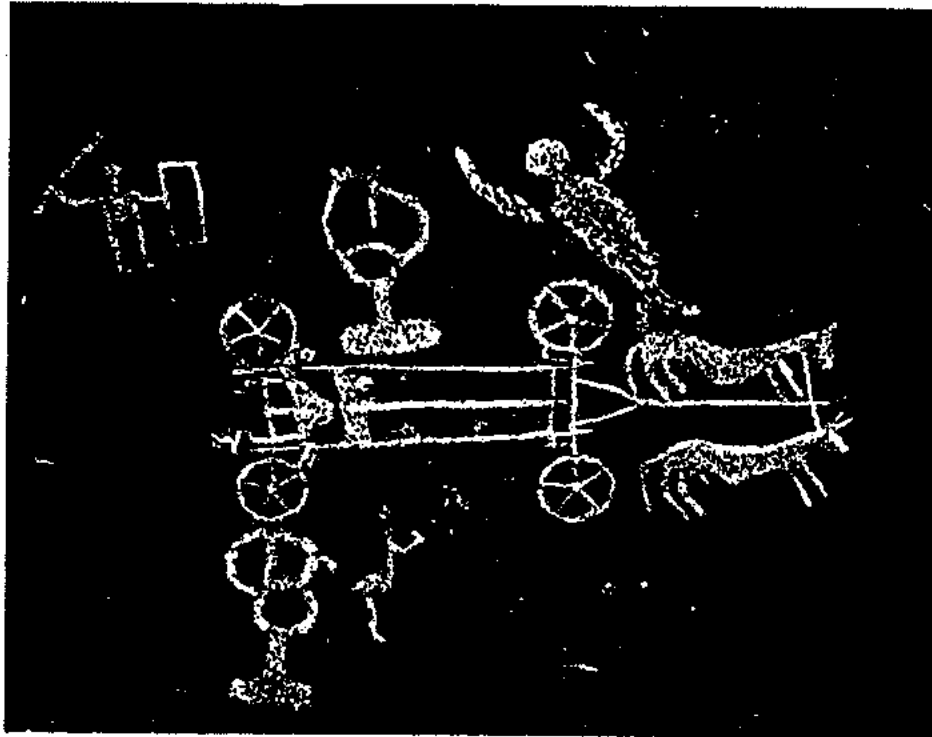


Disegni e schizzi di Alberto Gabiati.

Figure 14. Schematic designs of the structure and artists conception of what the huts looked like. (After Priuli, 1985 pg. 126.)



Figure 15. Figure of weaving loom from the Great Rock at Naquane. Figure of a weaving-loom painted on a Greek vase of the VI century B.C. (After Anati 1987 pg. 27.)



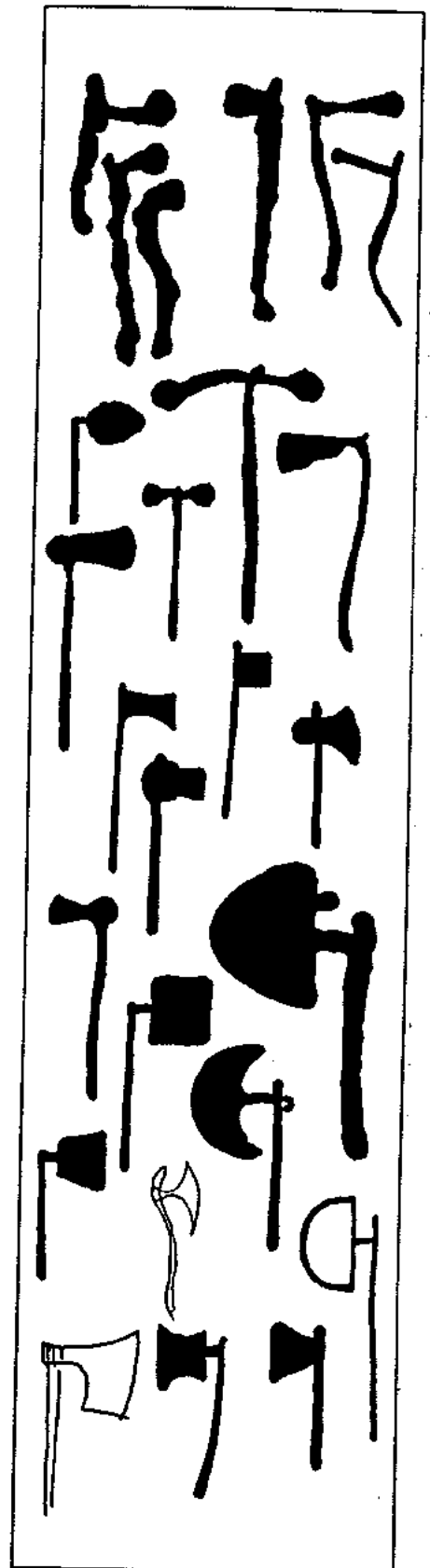
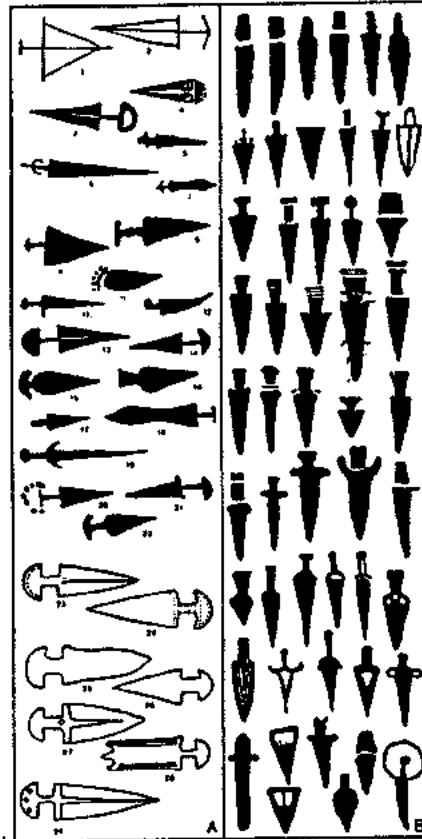
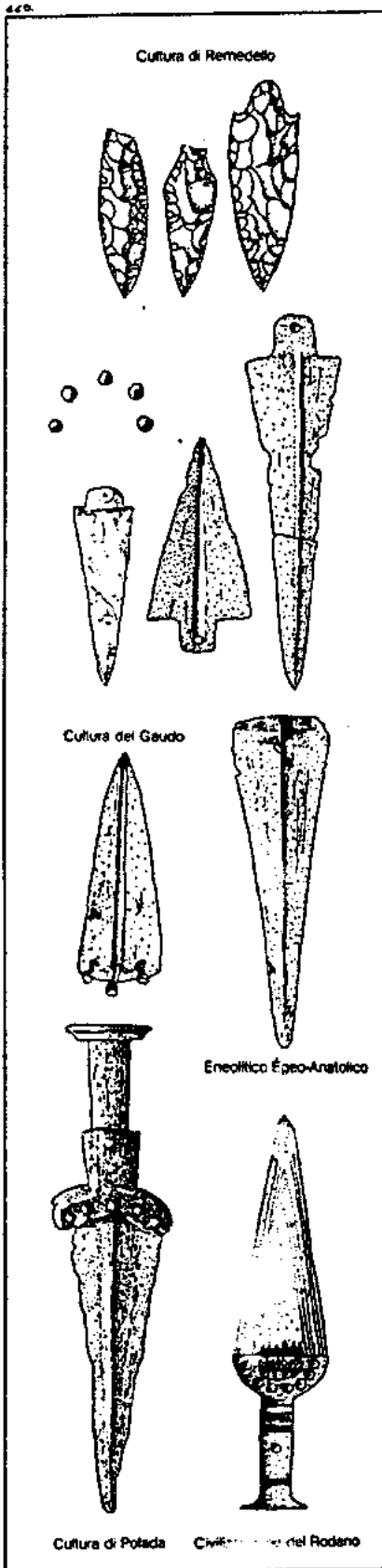


Figure 16. Examples of daggers and axes, halberds and spears. (After Priuli 1985, pg. 106.)

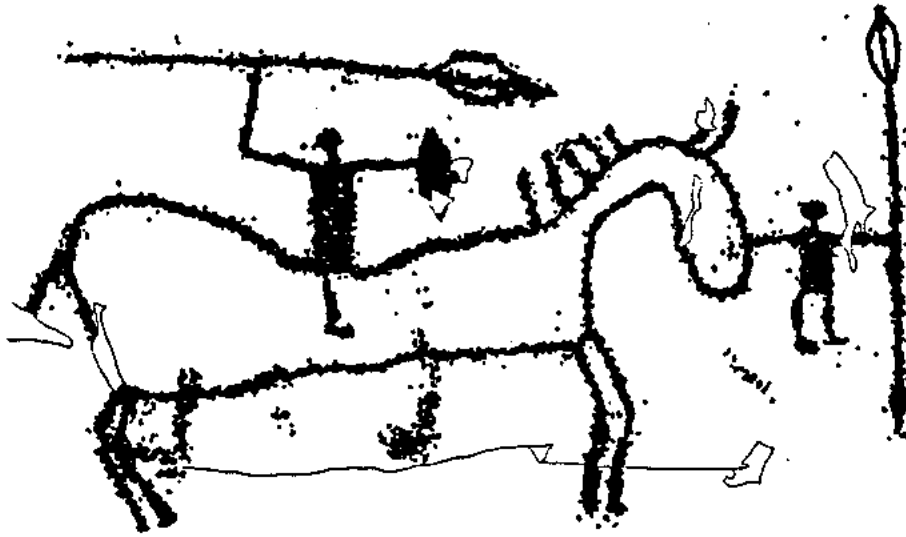


Figure 16b A horse and rider of the Iron Age on rock 27, Foppe di Nadro. Her the horse is emphasized as something of power and belittling all foes. (After Fossatia 1990b)

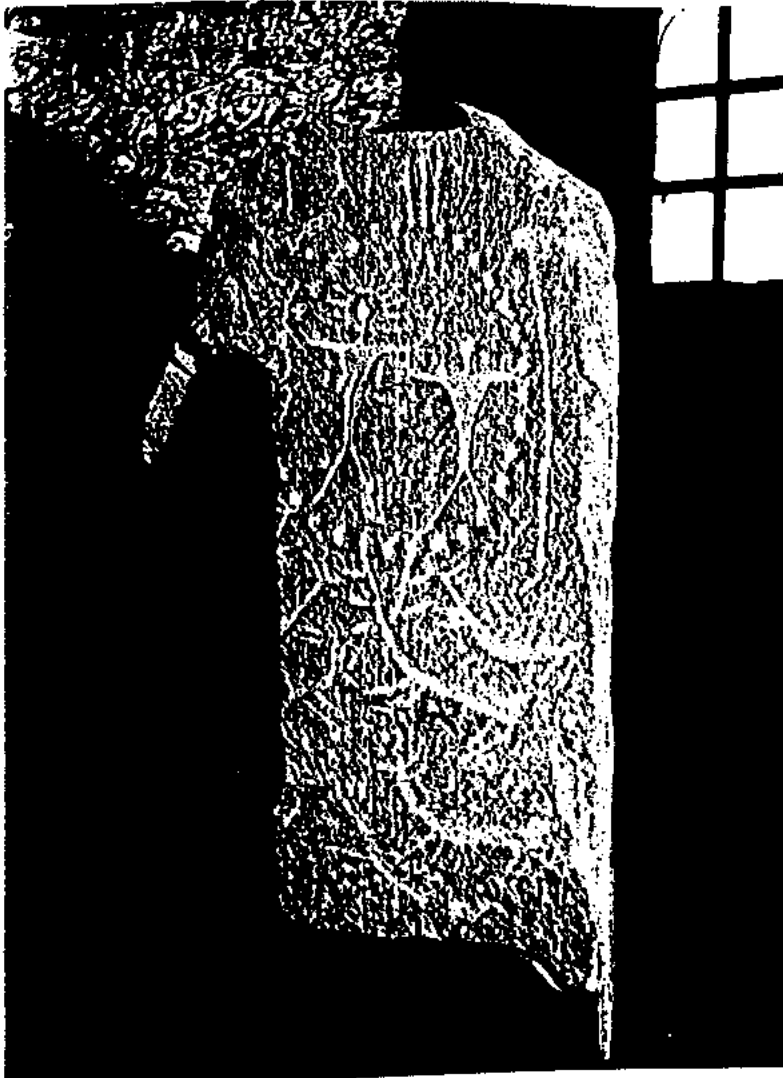


Figure 17. Boulder from Cemmo, now at the museum ant Naquane. (Museum postcard.)

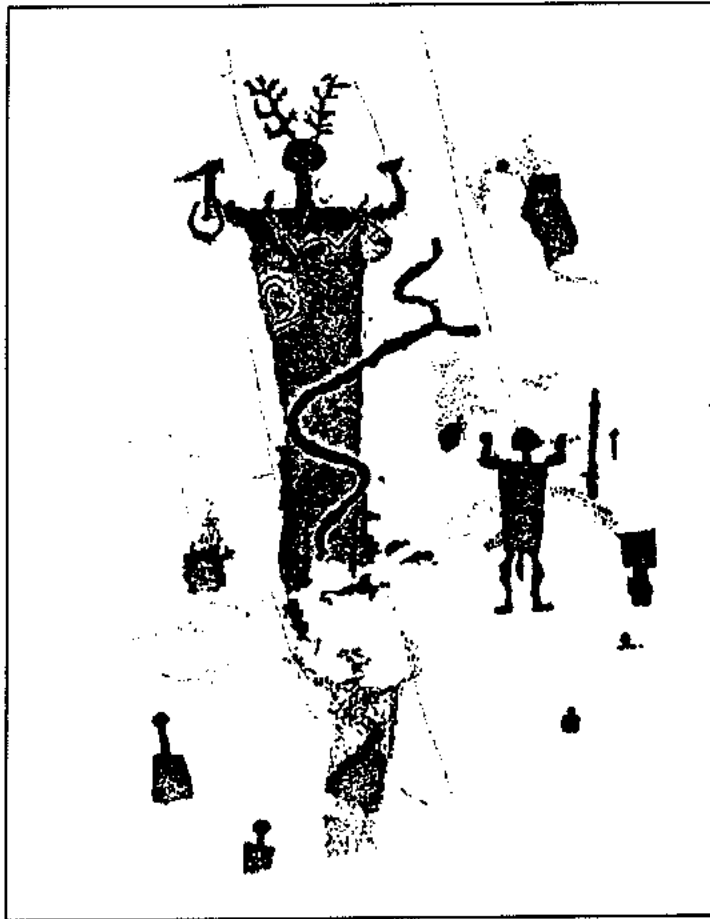
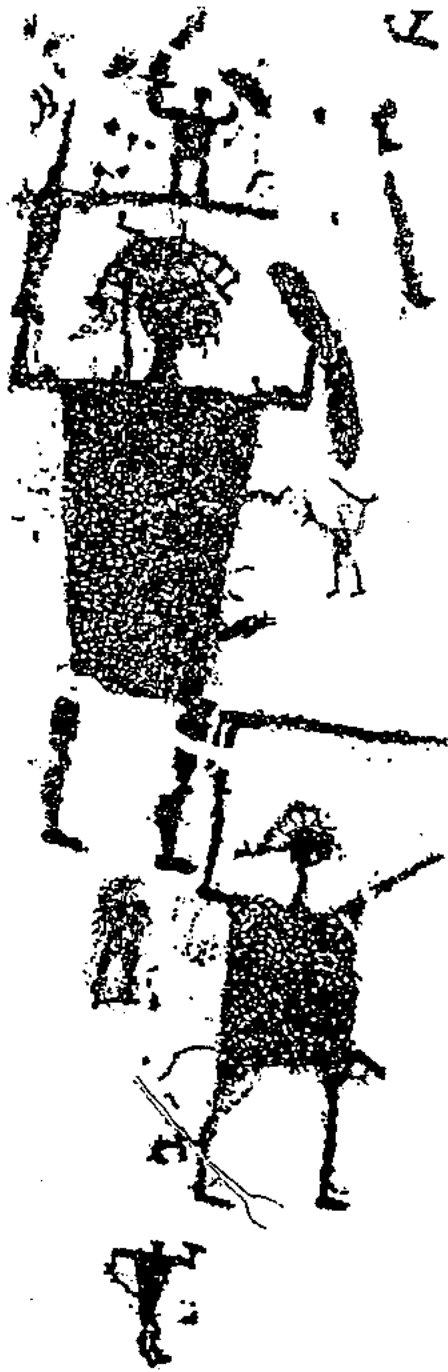


Figure 18. Shaman with similar headdress and snake as the Celtic version found on metal bowl. (After Priuli, 1985 pg. 79)



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Figure 19. Figures from the period of Etruscan influence on rock 50 at Naquane. (After Anati, 1987 pg. 23)

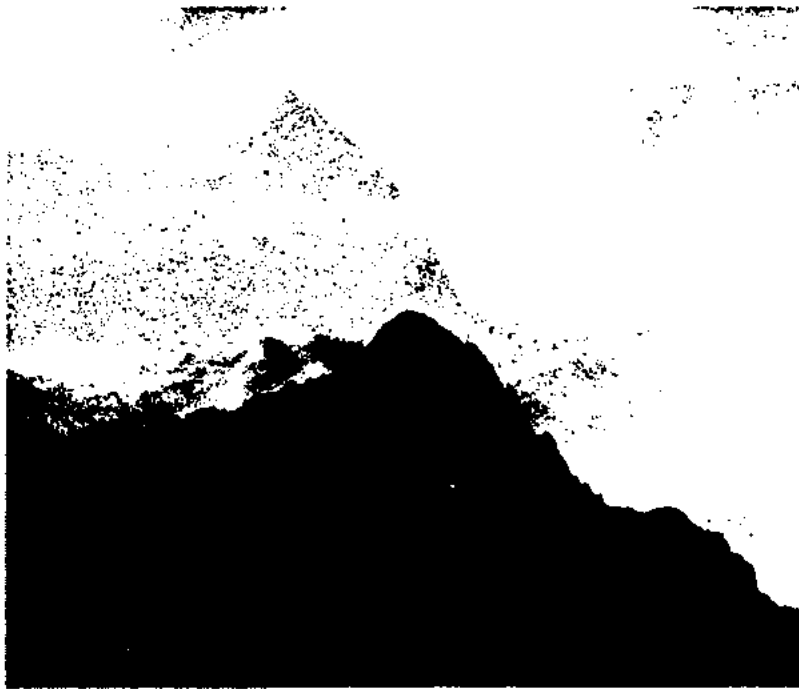


Figure 20. A pinnacle named Pizzo Badile. (After Purili 1985 pg. 53)



Figure 20b The Concarena peaks with the deep cleft on the left end. (After Priuli 1985 pg. 52.)