

Art and Shamanhood



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A series of books on the advances in the studies of shamanism

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Art and Shamanhood

Edited by
Elvira Eevr Djaltchinova-Malec



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Umberto Sansoni

The shamanic-ecstatic hypothesis for the Alpine rock art of Valcamonica

Introduction

Shamanism and similar ecstatic techniques are highly important features within the magico-religious traditions of ancient and historical cultures, while also demonstrating clear foundations in prehistoric and proto-historic contexts. It is only by considering the vast distribution in time and space of the variety of cultures and the deep connections with basilar psychological structures (Bolmida 2012; Sansoni 2012) that we can propose with confidence the animist-shamanic complex, or at least its roots, is the most ancient religious practices experienced by *Homo sapiens*. Moreover, recent studies have detected the fundamental role of shamanism within hunter-gatherer types of societies since Palaeolithic times (e.g., Lewis-Williams 1992; Clottes, Lewis-Williams 1996). This deep-seated role still strongly persists in some nomadic-pastoralist contexts, while seemingly has decreased among farming groups to the point where it disappears with the first occurrence of segmented urban societies. The implications are whenever a society becomes complex and organized, it also starts to develop divergent ways of interacting with the spiritual world, thus ‘sublimating’ and frankly marginalizing animistic-shamanic experiences. In fact, this kind of approach to spirituality is very hard to regulate, considering the deep personal connection of involved individuals with the sacred and nature. But still, some distinctive traits of shamanism – such as lucid visions which can sometimes be assimilated into trance (the soul’s flight), the role of animal guides, fighting off demons, different magical therapies, the use of hallucinogens, etc. – are preserved in both oriental and occidental mysticism. Additionally, we have evidence of shamanic practices derived from historical texts since ancient Greek and Roman times as well as the

wider mythological and folkloristic heritage of the Middle and Modern Ages. In particular, there is the case of the 'Benandanti' in the eastern Alps who were active until the 16th century (and eradicated by the Italian Inquisition), or the Illyrian 'Krasniki', the Serbian 'Zduhac', the Hungarian 'Tàitos' (until 18th century) as well as some other notable German and Mediterranean traditions.

The huge diversity of visionary experiences among different cultural groups is, in fact, a reflection of the variety ways in which societies connect with the religious world. But the strong connection between known shamanic practices of trance techniques is also clear. These can be associated with the use of hallucinogens, fasting, sensorial deprivations, visions (sometimes triggered by mental dissociations linked with schizophrenia and epilepsy), the incubation of dreams, music, singing, dance (often accompanied with the rhythmic sound of a drum), the conscious and controlled exit of the soul from the body for travel (or 'magic flight'), encounters with spirits or gods, the visitation of spirit guides in form of animals (in certain cases fantastic or anthropomorphic), the passage into the upper or lower world (through tunnels, stairs or bridges), and an organized cosmology that has a central point (*axis mundi*) which may be the World Tree or the Tree of Life.

It must be emphasized that a shaman should not to be confused with a priest; he or she is an active practitioner and not a passive receiver of mystical messages such as a *medium*. Moreover, he or she perceives the spiritual *other*-world as real, the truly genuine one and when compared to our world it looks like a lie (Jivaro of Equador) or a 'faded dream' (Drury 1995).

Finally, the rite of initiation is a very important characteristic of shamanism as it facilitates spiritual ascension which provides direct knowledge about both the real and the spiritual world. Additionally, shamanic rituals tend to magically focus upon a practical goal of which the most well known form is to cure an illness; however, there are other objectives, such as guiding a deceased's soul, hunting success, fixing broken taboos and rebuilding cosmic harmony between different worlds.

Rock art and shamanism

When considering the wide expanse of the phenomenon, its archaism and its basis in so-called animism, it is likely shamanism is one of the most ancient manifestations of sacred experiences among early *Homo sapiens*. Palaeolithic cave art, though still subject to vigorous debate, provides us with strong clues about this religiosity; however, post-Palaeolithic rock art undoubtedly provides incontrovertible evidence, such as the case of the Bushmen rock paintings (Lewis-Williams 1981, 1987). The fundamental role of shamanism in society is an

undeniable fact in Australia, Central Asia, Siberia, South Africa, Central and North America, and in many other regions across the world. In the northern part of Africa, I also advanced the same hypothesis for the pre-Neolithic Round Head rock paintings of the Central Sahara region. Here there are a few scenes closely similar to specific compositions from southern Africa that are related to trance dance, soul flights and animal figures with special characteristics (San-soni 1994).

Prehistoric and Proto-historic Europe

Surely, prehistoric societies in Central and Western Europe must have experienced some form of shamanic expressions that displayed characteristics specific to their regions. Moreover, these practices can be discernable through the careful examination of ancient iconography and mythology. In regards to this, there is no doubt that rock art plays an important role in providing evidence of the possibility, if not the complexity, of prehistoric images that truly represent sacred domains. However, it is not by chance that the academic interest for shamanic-animistic themes should inform our investigations into the rock art of Europe, more specifically from the cave paintings of France and Spain to the Alpine rock carvings of north-eastern Italy.

With regards the post-Palaeolithic period in Europe, one crucial question is that of the movements of the Indo-European speaking cultures. In summary, it is accepted that there was a first wave which came into Western Europe during the late 4th millennium BCE. They then generally spread throughout all Europe (Bell-beaker culture) and firmly established themselves by the Bronze Age, 2nd millennium BCE, as recently confirmed by palaeogenetic studies (Cavalli-Sforza, Menozzi, Piazza 1994; Cavalli-Sforza 2001, Bocchi, Ceruti 2001). Moreover, it is easy to discern the concordances between the western and eastern groups of Indo-Europeans through their religious and symbolic traditions, not only due to traces of mythological-ritual patterns from the early historic period, but also to the evidence of iconography from contexts dating to the 2nd millennium BCE. Consequently, a common social-ideological identity can be discerned which is confirmed by data accumulated from the fields of archaeology, palaeogenetics, linguistics as well as those of art history and the phenomenology of religions.

However, how does shamanism fit into this European context? Compelling evidence comes from examining the traits of an eastern Indo-European group known as the Indo-Iranians. In particular, the rock art of Central Asia from the end of 3rd millennium BCE to the 2nd millennium BCE have semiotic-mythic connections to the early written sources of the Indian *Vedas* and the Iranian *Avesta* (Rozwadowski 2002, 2004). There is a possibility that some shamanic influences could have diffused from very ancient Asian cultures into the Indo-Irani-

ans and were shared with the Indo-European tribes while they were still united. These two groups then split with the Indo-Iranians moving south and east while the Indo-Europeans turned towards the west and extended its influence across all Europe. However, a second wave of Indo-Iranians, the Iranian speaking Saka-Scythians, also reached the Balkans in the later part of the 1st millennium BCE.

Echoes of the original Indo-European/Indo-Iranian unity are detectable in elements of the shamanic-ecstatic phenomena, as testified by the ritual evidence and iconographic data, such as the rock art imagery from the late 4th millennium BCE to 2nd millennium BCE. The mythological texts of the *Vedas* and *Avesta* also importantly provide us with early source materials on shamanic characteristics. For example, the great importance and value of the *soma-haoma* drink within the rituals is well known and clearly relate to *ambrosia* and *nectar*, the drink of the gods, in the Greek myths. *Soma-haoma* is probably linked to the emergence of alcoholic (or other) drinks during the 3rd millennium BCE and echoes of similar value are found later within the Greek cycle of myths about Dionysus, the god of wine and ecstasy-*enthousiasmós*. Moreover, there was also the general spread of ritual vessels for drinking found in the funerary contexts of the Corded Ware Culture (2900–2400 BCE) and replaced by the Bell-Beaker Culture (2400–2200 BCE), which were the first cultures that appeared to be so widespread across Europe.

It then follows that it would be a potentially fruitful avenue of research to compare the expressions of rock art from the west (especially the Alps and Scandinavia) with the east from Central Asia during the Chalcolithic and Bronze Ages. Upon an initial inspection both regions share a common range of depictions (horses, chariots, warriors, praying figures, humans with ‘big hands’, weapons, solar symbols, etc.) which may hold underlying common themes. Moreover, they may be links between the rock art representations from east to west that connect with elements of shamanic themes and rituals.

Valcamonica

With regards to iconography, the rock art of Valcamonica (Camonica Valley) in the Central Alps of north-eastern Italy provides valuable clues for traces of ancient Indo-European shamanism. The rock art heritage of Valcamonica is defined by four chronological phases:

a) The Epipaleolithic phase (*circa* 7th millennium BCE). In this earliest phase the rock carvings depict wild animals, such as deer, elk and wild goats, that are expressions of hunter-gatherers, such as North American Eskimos and the Siberian tribes. Shamanic elements can be carefully discerned within this cultural horizon. Nevertheless, the engravings at Valcamonica, Crape and Luine are depicted in a semi-natural, stylized pattern that gives us no hint to their symbol-

ic, cosmologic, religious meanings, as opposed to the images of wild animals in Palaeolithic art.

b) The Schematic phase of the Late Neolithic and Chalcolithic (late 4th millennium BCE to beginning of the 3rd millennium BCE). Shamanic elements are often connected to the appearance of specific human images.

c) The Middle and Late Chalcolithic phase (3rd millennium BCE). This is when Indo-European themes become fully developed in the rock art of Valcamonica. A great number of symbols are carved on stelae and boulders. These observe a strict compositional order involving circles, solar-symbols, weapons, human figures, symbols of the feminine, animals and abstract signs. Subsequently, during the Bronze Age compositional rules were less strict and shamanic elements can often be found related to human images.

d) The Iron Age phase (1st millennium BCE). The meanings of the rock art of Valcamonica develop great ideological complexity which focus upon the images of warriors. The importance of armed men are linked to mythical-religious meanings and feature links to Indo-European ideology and values. Most of the engravings represent mythical scenes and many carvings have 'visionary' features that describe some kind of magic or ritual. Some rock art images use animal figures as symbols, often with funerary value. Among the scenes, some panels are related to the shamanic context.

From within the above phases, the carvings of shamanism have been then divided into two main typological groups:

1. Human or anthropomorphic images

Some of the human images represent humans (or human-like beings) with big open hands: this particular feature can be found all over the Alpine region from the Neolithic to Iron Age and up till the Late Middle Ages. These engravings usually represent figures executed in a praying position; they usually occur in the central part of the carved panel and are bigger than the surrounding human figures. In turn, they are also often related with meaningful signs and/or animals. Besides the exceptional nature of their open hands, they sometimes also have oversized feet and sexual attributes. It is a common pattern found worldwide in shamanic contexts (Sansoni 1983) that could represent deities, 'spirits', sacred persons or shamans; unfortunately, the carvings do not provide enough information to discern their meanings. Important specific scenes of shamanism from Valcamonica are as follows:

At Naquane (Rock 1) and Campanine (Rock 16), which date to the 4th millennium BCE, there are two schematic figures (male and female) with raised arms and open hands. They may be reciting prayers, dancing or it could possibly refer to a trance ceremony.



Fig. 1. Campanine, Rock 61. Warrior upon a couple of ducks (Middle Iron Age)



Fig. 2. Naquane, Rock 35. Running figure with a solar-shaped head (Middle Iron Age)

Furthermore, upon Naquane (Rock 1) we find four images of women executed in schematic style with big open hands. The heads and necks of two of them are detached from their shoulders, perhaps representing the splitting of a shaman during the trance (Fig. 1). Additionally, upon the same rock dating to the 4th millennium BCE were engraved two human figures (male, schematic style), with big open hands and naturalistic sexual attributes. These figures were surrounded by Iron Age depictions of a herd of deer, dogs and two birds in a close association; thus, redefining these two humans as ‘masters of animals’ in the Iron Age. A similar meaning could be assigned to a scene nearby, where a stag and a human bust were added in the Middle Iron Age to a human figure with open hands that was engraved during the Bronze Age.

Human busts (i.e. humans without the lower part of the body) are a motif frequently found during the Chalcolithic to Late Iron Age; they rarely hold weapons, and are often closely associated with human and animal figures, granary-huts (connected to funerary symbolism) and other scenes. This class of images could also, perhaps, represent guardian spirits, ancestors and, especially when big open hands are featured, even shamans during their ‘soul travels’.

Another spectacular panel with the 'big open hand' pattern is found at Cereto (Rock 28), where the so-called 'enchantment scene' (Fig. 2) was engraved in the Middle Iron Age. It features two humans with big open hands who are standing in front of an armless man. Meanwhile, human beings with big open hands that seem to 'fly' among other figures are found at Naquane (Rocks 41 and 66), Foppe di Nadro (Rocks 20, 23 and 35). This type of scene could be representations of shamanic 'soul travels' as the big open hands may symbolize an active power.

It is important to point out that there are panels found in every chronological phase which have dance scenes (Ragazzi 1995). These often show the use of drums, such as the scenes carved at Zurla and Foppe di Nadro. As we all know dance, song and rhythm are important components of shamanic ceremonies.

2. Animals and hybrids (anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures)

The rock art of Valcamonica, especially during the Iron Age, is rich with fantastic depictions of human and animal images, such as two- or three-headed human figures, deer with unrealistic antlers, horned snakes, figures on stilts, animals with nine legs and labyrinth-like patterns.

Deer

The mere presence of depictions of deer with antlers ("the typical mark for a shaman": Salmony 1968) could lead us directly into the shamanic world. There are many correspondences between the myth of deer and shamanism among Siberian and Asian cultures and hints of similar phenomena could be found in the myths belonging to the Scythian and Germanic and Celtic tribes (Citroni 1990). The deer has a deep symbolic meaning (Marazzi 1984; Camuri 1994) as its primary role is to be a *medium* between different worlds and dimensions; a vehicle and a guide both for shamans and souls. There are images of humans riding



Fig. 3. Naquane, Rock 73. The probable image of the Celtic God Kernunnos (Middle to Late Iron Age)



Fig. 4. Naquane, Rock 57. Riding stag (Middle Iron Age, tracing A. Fossati)

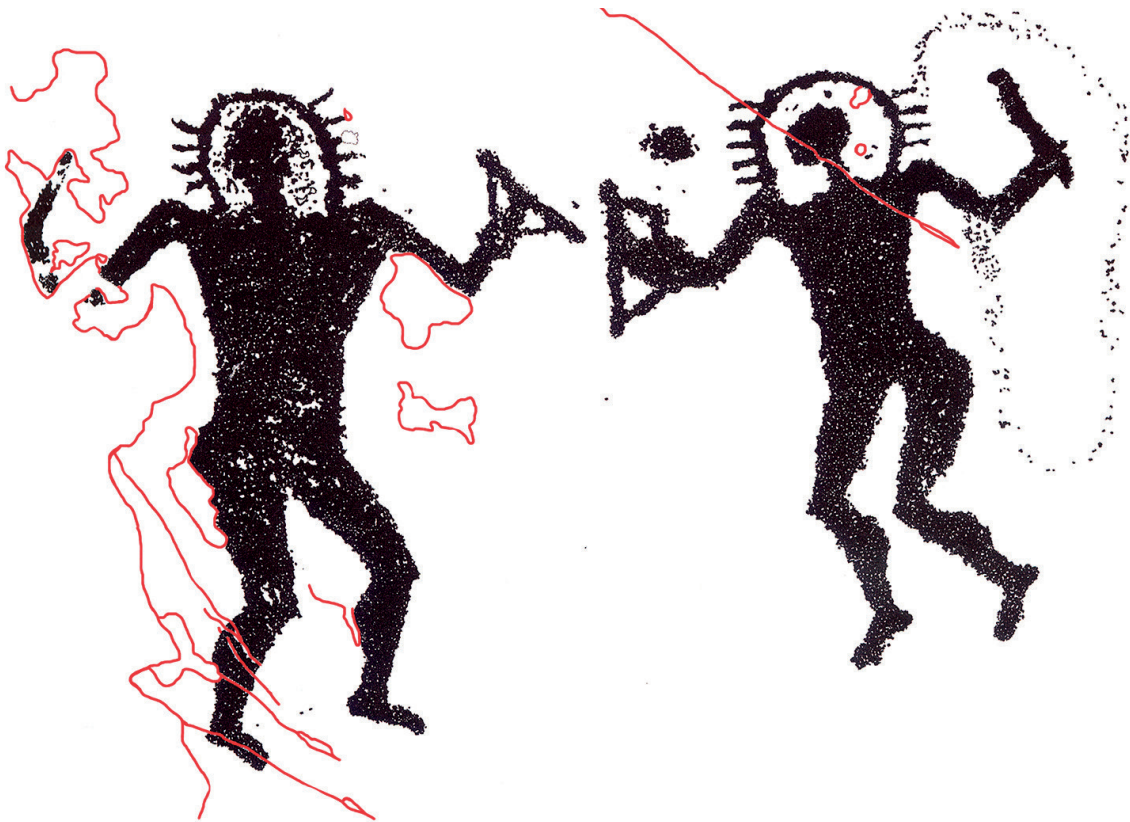


Fig. 5. Zurla, Rock 1. A couple of dancing warriors or musicians with drums and rods (Middle Iron Age)

deer in Valcamonica (Naquane Rock 14, Fig. 6; Cemmo 1, Chalcolithic; Foppe di Nadro Rock 26, Fig. 5, Bronze Age, Naquane Rock 57, Fig. 4, Iron Age) and the association between deer and busts/warriors/praying figures could be relevant to this symbolic context. Moreover, there is the large depiction of a big anthropomorphic figure wearing deer antlers that may be considered to be the Celtic god *Kernunnos* (Naquane Rock 70, Middle Iron Age, Fig. 3).

Horses

Horses often share with the deer the same symbolic meaning and it is often perceived as a vehicle for soul travel by Siberian shamans. There are many engraved images of horses in Valcamonica and many horse riders; some riders are even standing upright and keeping their balance on the horse's back. At Campanine (Rock 49) was engraved the image of a two-headed horse which dates to the Middle Iron Age.

Dogs

Dogs often have connections to shamanism as well as to the *other-world*, which is found in Classical and middle-European myths. In Valcamonica many dogs are depicted near warriors (Fig. 17), praying humans and other figures (perhaps dead persons?). There are dogs involved in ceremonies and cults with praying men (Foppe di Nadro Rock 27) and in a similar scene a dog's head is used at Foppe di Nadro Rock 35. At Pià d'Ort (Rock 39) three dogs were represented with doubles of their figures as if they were mirrored; perhaps, to make visible the 'double symbolic dimension' of the animal.

Birds

Birds are symbols of the soul and traditional animal spirit guides during the soul's travels. Birds are constantly imbued with sacred meanings throughout the world. They are frequently represented in rock art (Colotto 1997) and at Valcamonica often linked with human figures (praying persons and warriors), granary-huts and labyrinths, the symbols of the initiatory journey (see for example Naquane Rock 1, Campanine Rock 1, Foppe di Nadro Rock 60). Many aquatic birds were engraved at Campanine during the Middle Iron Age (Sansoni, Gavaldo 1998, 2009, Fig. 15) and some evocative scenes feature human figures seeming to be riding on birds (Rock 49, Fig. 13), standing on the back of a bird (Rock 50, Fig. 18 and Rock 11, Fig. 11) or holding a bird by its tail (Rock 50, Fig. 16). The most interesting image is the engraving of a warrior, wearing a crested helmet, a sword and mantel, who is standing on two birds (Rock 62, Fig. 12). Another warrior riding an aquatic bird is also found at Coren del Valento (Fossati 1994, Fig. 14). These figures are comparable to the depictions of small boats decorated

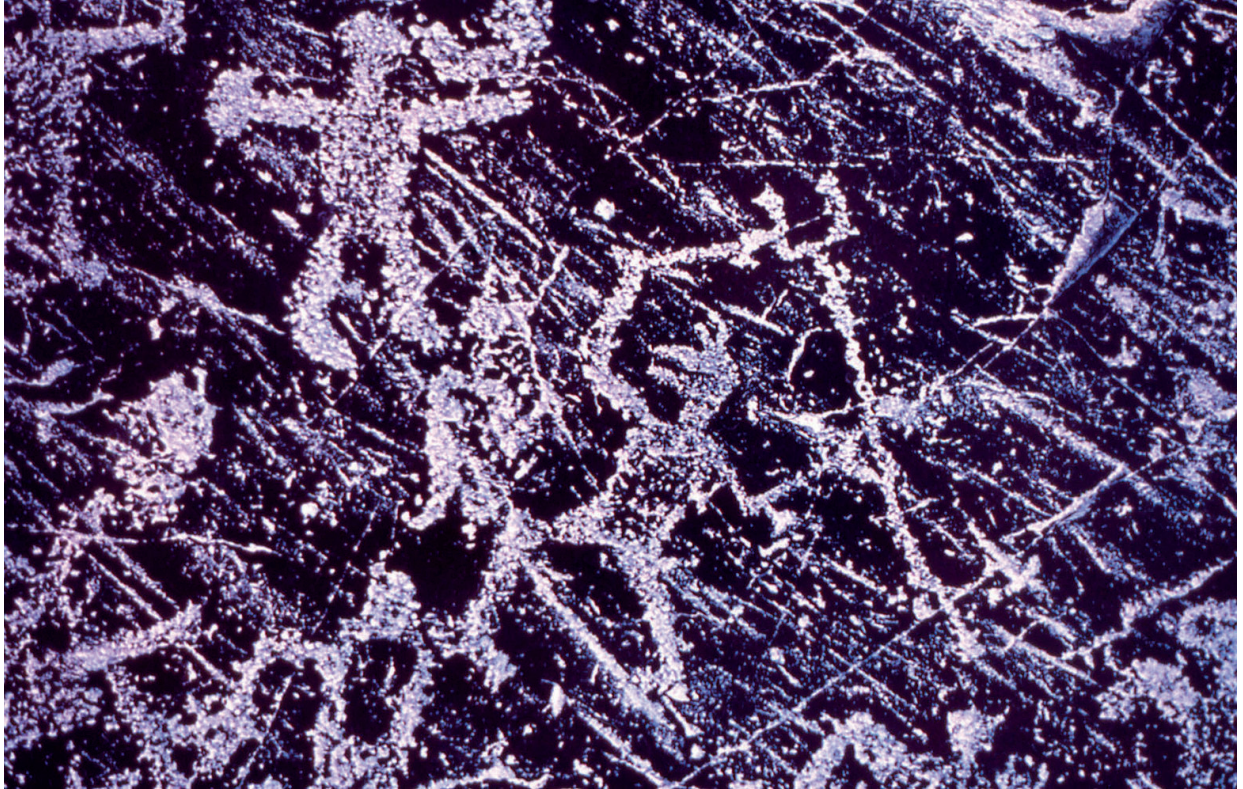


Fig. 6. Bedolina, Rock 17. Anthropozoomorphic figure with bird shape head in fighting attitude (Middle Iron Age)



Fig. 7. Dos del Pater, Rock 6. 'Wolf' with huge jaws near an incomplete horse (Middle Iron Age)



Fig. 8. Ronchi di Zir. A chest with arms spread of a natural crack (Late Neolithic or Middle Bronze Age)



Fig. 9. Campanine, Rock 50. Orants with the body on the line of a crevice (Late Neolithic)



Fig. 10. Ossimo, Rock 8. Stele with a solar-headed anthropomorphic figure on the top of composition (Copper Age)

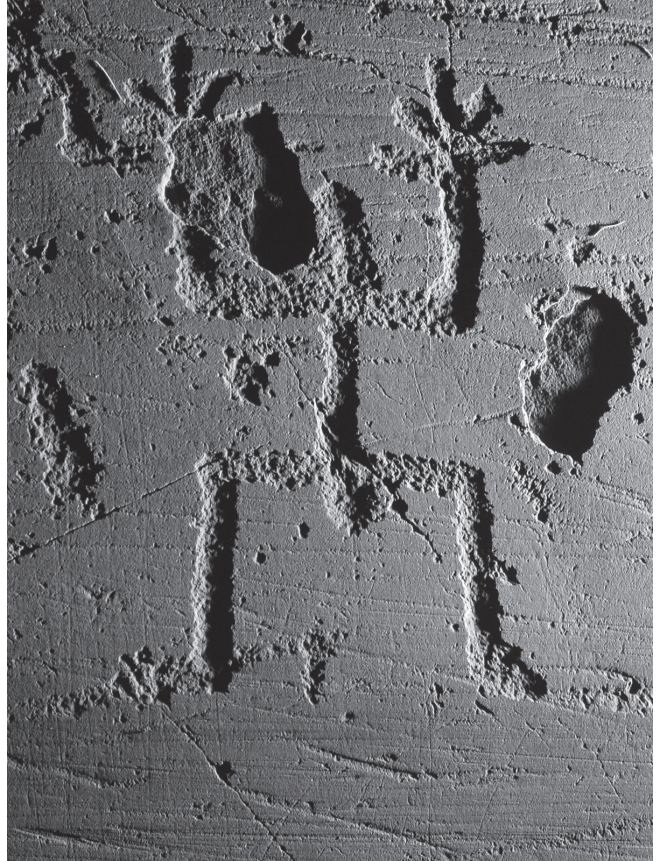


Fig. 11. Pagherina, Rock 1. Female with big hands (Late Neolithic)



Fig. 12. Naquane, Rock 1. Females with big hands and abnormally long necks or their heads separated by the body (Middle to Late Bronze Age)



Fig. 13.
Naquane, Rock 1.
A corral scene with
a line of female orants
over a female with big
hands; perhaps scenes
of trance (Bronze Age)



Fig. 14. Campanine, Rock 49. An aquatic bird
being ridden by a knight adorned with
deer antlers (Middle Iron Age)



Fig. 15. Zurla, Rock 12. Horse carrying the
wheel (Early to Middle Iron Age)



Fig. 16.
Zurla, Rock 31. Huts-burns and a dog
transformed in anthropozoomorphic figure
with the addition of legs (Early Iron Age)



Fig. 17. Campanine, Rock 49. A double-headed horse being ridden by a warrior
(Middle Iron Age)