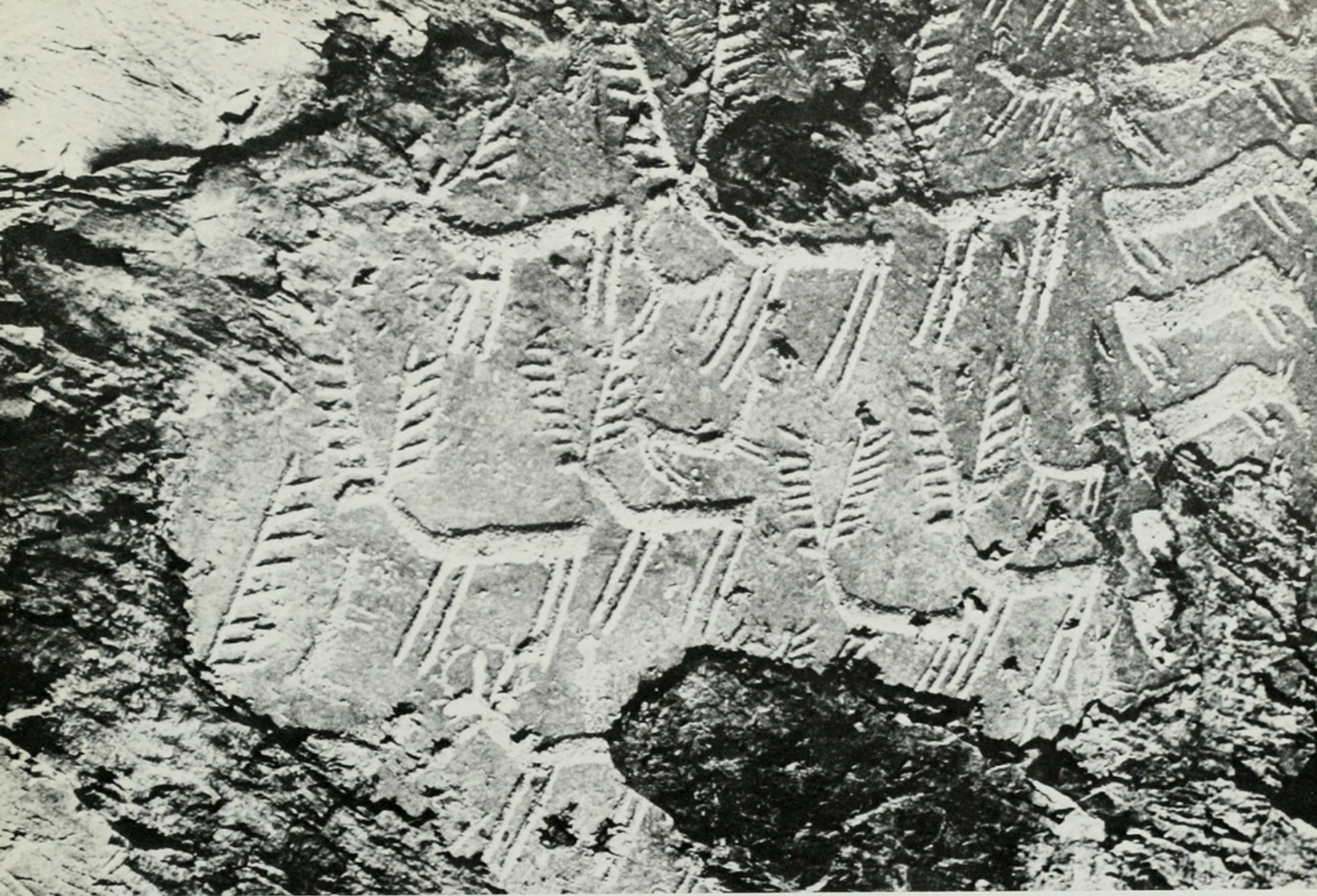




Bronze Age carving of elk found at Cemmo

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Valcamonica: World's Richest Treasury of Rock Carvings

By Lois Bolton Lundy

The richest concentration of rock art known in Europe today is to be found in a narrow, 75-kilometer-long valley of the Oglio River in the central Alpine area north of Brescia, in Lombardy, Italy. Some 130,000 engravings, discovered over a 20-year period, represent only an estimated 15 to 20 percent of the area's total treasures. Because of the enormous number of engravings, their superb state of preservation, and the clear stylistic identification of the epochs to which they belong, they comprise an important aid to understanding man's artistic, cultural, social, economic, and even political evolution. These rock carvings amount to

an almost continuous 8,000-year-old diary of the daily life of the Camunian people from prehistory to the Roman occupation and beyond.

In the heart of the valley's rock-carving area is the village of Capo di Monte, where the Camunian Center for Prehistoric Studies (Centro Camuno di Studi Preistorici) is headquartered. The staff of the center, founded in 1964, is engaged in various aspects of archeological research, including exploration and laboratory analysis of carvings, as well as publishing, exhibitions, and seminars; the center also houses one of the world's most comprehensive libraries on rock art.

"Prehistoric research," observes Emmanuel Anati, director of the center, "contains all the premises to change our own lifestyles. Since it is

Lois Bolton Lundy is a former Field Museum staff member now living in Italy.



Battle scene found at Naquane

Photo courtesy Lois Bolton Lundy

about man, his past, and his behavior, it concerns every one of us. It loses interest when the archaeologist and his followers see only objects to catalog or describe, without making any historical reconstruction. We're looking into the past to find the meaning of the present. In historic expression of human life,

we search out the essence of a destiny uniting all men. We're looking for an identity and definition of our era and our society through continuous close contact with the vestiges of history."

Style

The rock-carvings of Valcamonica are divided into six periods, starting from a Pre-Boreal stage some 10,000 years ago and continuing to the Sub-Atlantic age on the eve of Romanization of the area in the first century B.C. Epi-Paleolithic hunting peoples etched images of animals, mainly elk, onto the rock—an exercise that may have been part of a ritual to ensure a successful hunt. Subsequent changes in style and subject matter reflect new material and ideological influences on the human community.

The evolution of art does not appear to follow a linear development. Each phase tends to reflect contemporary influences rather than a development out of the artistic style of previous generations. From the Palaeolithic to the Iron Age, elements of style can be analyzed as a search for expression, synthesis, simplification, or symbolizing of shapes. Each period reflects the aesthetic and intellectual values of the age, while the style and range of subject matter, the composition, and the artist's selection of area on the rock face indicate ideological-conceptual needs, together with the social, economic, and technological level of artists of the epoch.

Why Valcamonica?

When the valley's huge Pleistocene glacier retreated between 12,000 and 10,000 years ago, it left rock fashioned in fascinating, provocative shapes. Not only were the shapes a stimulus to man's imagination, but the glacier-smoothed surfaces were a clear invitation to self-expression. The Pre-Boreal climatic stage, which signaled the introduction of human life in Valcamonica, lasted approximately from 8,000 to 7,000 B.C. As temperatures rose and pine trees and birches began to grow in the valley, bands of hunters came in search of animal prey. These hunters are responsible for the oldest carvings in the area. At that time, fauna was still of a Pleistocene type, and elk, the largest member of the deer family, dominated this early period of rock carvings. As temperatures continued to rise in the successive Boreal period, and vegetation increased, the subarctic fauna which had occupied the valley for thousands of years began to disappear and various types of deer and wild goats appeared.

After a new cold spell—between 6,000 and 5,000 B.C.—which seems to have precluded human habitation in the valley, a new human presence returned in the Atlantic climatic period, a little before 5,000 B.C. It was the beginning of a generally warm, humid period in which man turned from the search for food to the production of food. The Camunians of this period put more emphasis on agriculture and introduced innovations into their own culture. This Atlantic period was followed by a cooling-off period, the Sub-Boreal stage, which lasted from 3,000 to 800 B.C. Fir trees, alders, pines, and oaks, in the lower altitudes, flourished while fields covered the valley. This was the period of maximum cultural, and perhaps even demographic development, among the Camunians.

From then on, there have been only minor climatic variations, with hot and cold spells occurring every 200 to 300 years, right down to the present day. Throughout all of these periods, the natural environment, the climate, the flora and fauna, and the economic resources shaped man's thinking, behavior and lifestyle. And rock art was a physical manifestation of man's reaction to his existence in this world.

Techniques

Exploration and discovery is the culmination of a lengthy process that starts with observation of preselected areas, aerial photographs, and the geological study of rocks appearing there. The prehistoric Camunian artist's favorite rock was fine-grain, Permian sandstone. The locations where this rock appears are naturally the first to be examined by archaeologists, although carvings may also be found on granite, conglomerate, and on schist—which means the whole valley must be explored. When carvings are found, the rocks must be cleaned and washed, the degree of deterioration studied, remaining incrustations examined, and the rock documented.

Many of the carvings were made with a pecking technique, which involved hammering on the surface with a pointed tool to create pock-marked areas and lines. There are also threadlike carvings made by scratching. Many of these are often invisible if the rock is not properly cleaned, so it was essential to find a way to provide a clearly legible and copiable surface. This minimized the possibility of errors in personal interpretation. When 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 coloration method puts the smooth surfaces in chromatic contrast to the pecked

areas and the natural cracks of the rock. All the characteristics of the engravings are thus rendered clearly evident and the differences in marks left by various instruments may be clearly distinguished. It also permits analysis of figure overlapping as a means of establishing stratigraphy.

The coloration also serves a protective function: the coloring used inhibits the growth of lichens and other organisms which otherwise readily attach to the surface. These organisms, which constitute one of the main causes of decay, are unable to grow on the rocks. Coloration also allows the observer to look at the carvings as they were seen by prehistoric man. The presence of coloring materials at the foot of some rocks and traces of colors in a few engravings indicate that prehistoric man colored his engravings. Deterioration accounts for their present uncolored appearance. The chromatic contrast is generally created by using black and white, though prehistoric man used yellow, red, brown, green, and violet as well. When the "neutral" (so-called because it eliminates personal interpretation) treat-

Iron Age stela at the Camuno Center



Photo courtesy Lois Bolton Lundy

ment is finished, the rock is ready for examination. Documentation then proceeds with a survey, tracings, photographs, and analysis of hammering and overlappings. This procedure leads to a study of all the data available on the rock surface.

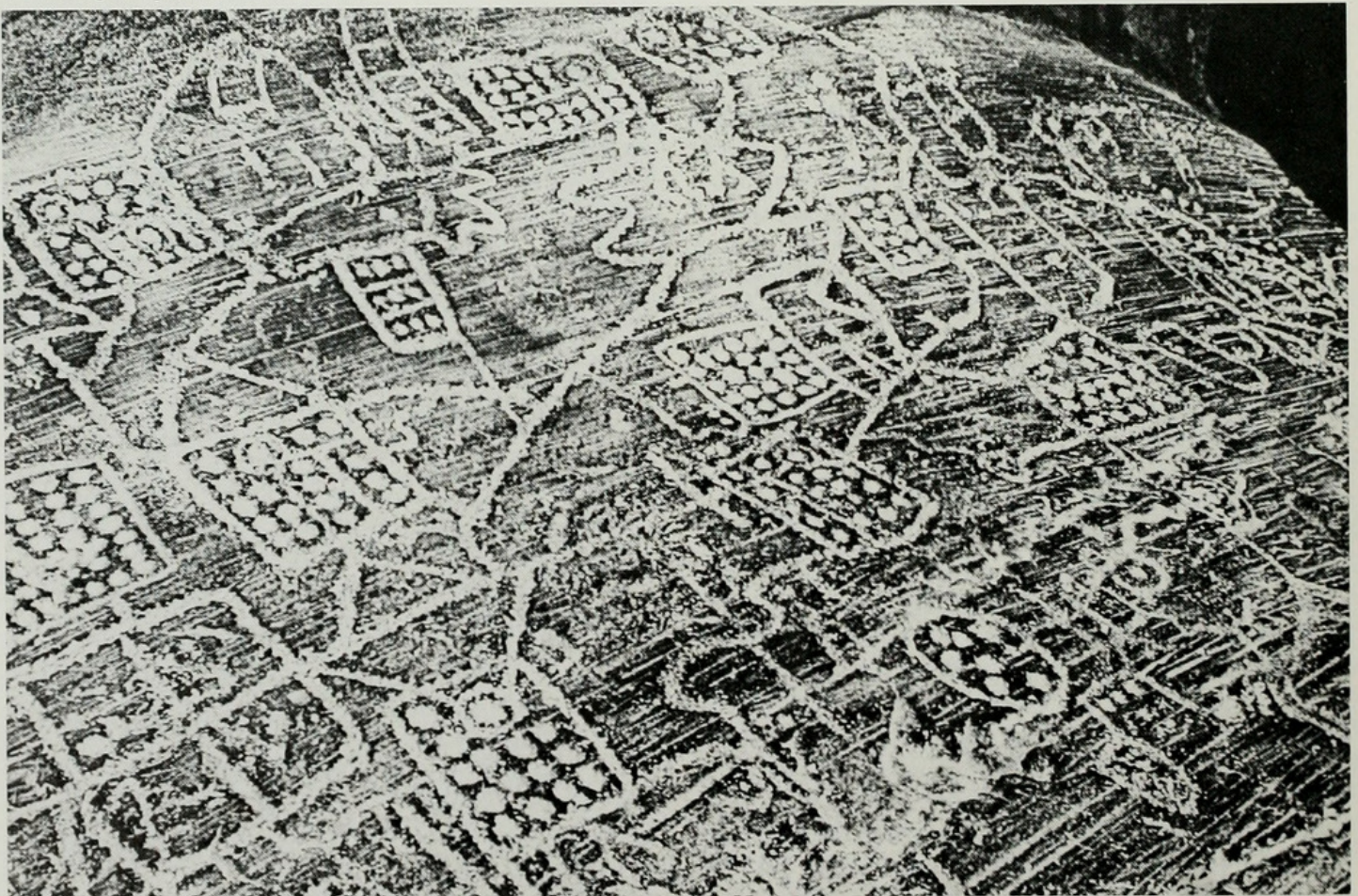
The great advantage of the life-size integral tracing is that it gives one the opportunity to define every mark on the rock, to the point of even distinguishing between individual peck marks. From the tracing, used as a record and integral part of research, the crucial analytical factors of the carving become apparent. It is possible to tell which of the marks were man-made, which occurred naturally, and whether natural cracks and forms were used by the carver as part of his engraving. One may determine whether a sketch was made prior to carving, what type of color was used, and the raw materials employed. Tracing often means reenacting the artist's original work, which leads to definition of the steps employed in the carving. Almost every rock, out of more than 800 recorded in recent years in Valcamonica, is full of innumerable details which the eye and mind of the researcher might not have picked up in their full significance without the preliminary treatment and time-consuming tracing.

Significance

The analysis of such a huge number of engraved rocks, recorded over the course of 20 years, creates a cultural context for the Camunian artist. All the elements of each single phase of existence are examined in order to reconstruct the artist's daily life: the technological level, arms and common tools, domestic animals bred, wild animals hunted, economic activities, beliefs, mythology, religion, family life, community work division, and the sociopolitical structure. One notes the new factors that entered into the culture over the course of thousands of years, making it increasingly more complex and distinctive.

The study in Valcamonica permits reconstruction of 8,000 years of cultural evolution from the arrival of the first bands of Epi-Paleolithic hunters through the various stages of tribal life, each with its own innovations, activities, and beliefs until the advent of the Romans and beyond. The eight-millennium sequence reveals the cultural processes which led to such a change in our existence — from a society made up of small bands of hunters to our contemporary civilization. □

Bronze Age map found at Bedolina



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Above and below: Bronze Age compositions

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