

Painted Mountains: the Fiemme Valley shepherds writings between ethnoarchaeology and material culture studies

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1. INTRODUCTION

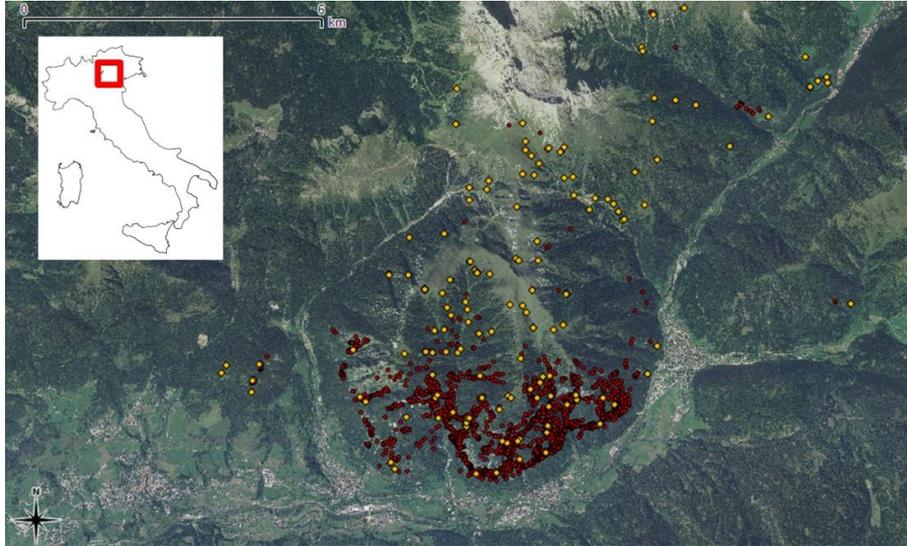


Fig. 1. Fiemme Valley (TN, Italy) and the pastoral writings area. The red points indicate the rock walls (with one or more writings), the yellow points identify the structures.

Monte Cornon in the Val di Fiemme (eastern Trentino) is a limestone massif situated above the villages of Tesero, Panchià, Ziano di Fiemme and Predazzo (fig.1).

In the recent past, its slopes were subject to intensive use in a local economy based on forestry, tillage and grazing. Down through the centuries, the shepherds working in the area left thousands of

inscriptions on the rock using the red ochre sourced from local mines (Vanzetta, 1991; fig. 2). The most common types of inscription were initials, abbreviations, dates, names, animal head

counts, animal and human drawings, sacred images, doodlings and greetings (fig. 3).

Starting in 2006, the Museo degli Usi e Costumi della Gente Trentina conducted ethnological research involving interviews with the older shepherds of the valley aimed at



Fig. 2. The mine entrance and the lode of *bol* (ochre)

deciphering the strange phenomenon of the writings. This led to the discovery of two rock shelters used by the shepherds during their daily and seasonal livestock movements, which then became the subject of ethno-archaeological investigation². Excavations carried out in 2007 on the two shelters uncovered evidence of serial settlement below the historical layers,

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characterised by the presence of hearths and carbon layers and the absence of a material culture. Radiocarbon dating of these levels unexpectedly indicated use of the shelters from prehistory/proto-history on, while dendrochronological analysis of the timbers of the remains of a cabin, still present in one of the two shelters, confirmed what had been stated by the shepherds.



Fig. 3. Some of the writings (livestock statistics, family symbols, animals, self-portraits, brief textual notations, etc.)

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE INSCRIPTIONS AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF PASTORALISM IN THE VAL DI FIEMME

As of 2008, and within the framework of the APSAT project³, research moved on to the systematic reconnaissance and surveying of the inscriptions and the structures used by the shepherds, with the creation of a database and online posting of data gathered, as well as identification of the physical-chemical properties of the layers of paint.

A series of about 160 reconnaissance expeditions on foot, covering about two-thirds of the total area, allowed surveying (photographic) and GPS positioning of over two hundred rock walls, each bearing one or more inscriptions, for an estimated total of more than 30,000⁴.

As can be seen from fig. 1, most of the inscriptions are to be found around the tall vertical rock faces rising to average height of about 1200 m from the slopes outside the villages on the valley floor.

³ A three-year research project funded by Provincia Autonoma di Trento; Bazzanella, Pisoni, 2009; Bazzanella, Pisoni, 2010; Bazzanella *et al.*, 2011 (in press).

⁴ Surveys conducted by L. Pisoni, I. Cavada, S. Zeni, M. Palmeggiani, M. Gabrielli e M. Bazzanella.

Furthermore, the distribution of the inscriptions indicates a series of routes leading up to the middle and upper slopes of the mountain, where the inscriptions progressively thin out, possibly also due to the absence of rocks suitable for use in writing.



Fig. 4. a) a large Alpine hut b) a small Alpine hut c) a rock shelter

The structures and shelters, which were also photographed and GPS positioned, were divided into three categories: large huts, in use and otherwise (21 occurrences; fig. 4a); small huts, in use and otherwise (11 occurrences; fig. 4b); and rock shelters, in disuse (32 occurrences; fig. 4c).

Large huts include a series of constructions with a surface area of between 20 m² and 40 m², built as log cabins or in stone. Most of the large huts are situated around the high altitude meadows, although there are some buildings lower down, also located around meadows or clearings.

The smaller huts have the same architectural features as the larger ones, although they do not exceed 10 m² in size. As with the larger huts, most are situated around the high meadows.

The rock shelters, almost exclusively located on the middle slopes of the mountain, can be



Fig. 5. Some of the objects found on the Cornon Mountain (TN, Italy)

further divided into four sub-categories: drywall shelters, shelters with hearths, shelters with wooden structures and traps for wild animals.

Using a disciplinary approach that takes account of both the archaeology of the contemporary past (Buchli, Lucas, 2001; Harrison,

Schofield, 2010) and the ethno-archaeology of abandonment (Gonzalez-Ruibal, 2003), 16 finds of various types were also made.

The implements (fig. 5), found in the meadows, pastures and rock shelters, can be attributed to at least four types of users: shepherds (bells, shepherds' crooks, tins for food), foresters (whetstones and a miniature bottle of spirits found at Col delle Tende, an old loggers' camp), hunters (a cartridge shell) and climbers-hikers (high-energy food sachets).

3. THE SHEPHERDS' WRITINGS: A LANDSCAPE OF SOCIAL ASSERTION

Landscape archaeology has occupied itself with the most varied of issues in recent years, including questions linked to the process of social construction (identity, ethnicity, etc.), and, to come closer to the case in point, to practices of social resistance and assertion (Cambi, Terrenato, 1994; Cuozzo, 2001).

Various examples relevant to this last theme come from so-called African-American Archaeology, which is concerned with the material conditions of the slaves on the US plantations (Orser, 1998, Ferguson, 1992).

Research has revealed how the slaves launched a sort of resistance (not always conscious) against the dominant ideology, manifesting itself in the reproduction of their own 'traditions' - some experts believe that so-called 'colonoware' ceramics and the buildings known as 'slave cabins' may in part be traced back to the African tradition (Galke, 2009) - and their reluctance, which continued through until the mid-19th century, to assume the material customs of white society (Ferguson, 1992: 116-120).

Power, labour, resistance and social assertion also had geographic dimensions. The spatial organisation of the plantations broke down into agricultural, manufacturing and residential areas, in which the whites occupied colonial-style houses whereas the blacks were confined to purpose-built 'slave quarters' (Ferguson, 1992: 77-82).

In the same way, archaeology has recently addressed the Spanish Civil War and the Fascist colonisation of western Ethiopia, tracing in accordance with the topographical connotation of events a series of landscapes, prominent among which landscapes of repression, terror, subordination, etc. (Gonzalez-Ruibal, 2007; Gonzalez-Ruibal, 2010).

At a theoretical level, the spatial distribution of social dynamics has recently been approached by Dan Hicks and Laura McAtackney, according to whom the various ideologies coexisting within one and the same community can orient actions and behaviour and give rise to certain material results, to be found in the archaeological record (Hicks, McAtackney, 2007: 15).

In this way the landscape, in addition to having a multi-temporal dimension, becomes the material repository of the political, social and economic practices of the community.

A spatial distribution of social phenomena in the centuries gone by can be identified in the Val di Fiemme also.

The valley floor, made up of a series of villages organised in accordance with the nucleated settlement model (Cole, Wolf, 1994), is characterised by the buildings of institutional power (the town halls, schools etc.), religious power (churches, the hospital in Tesero) and economic power (the building of the Magnifica Comunità, or Commons, of the Val di Fiemme). The homes, plots of land and places of industry on the other hand represent the private citizens and their activities (tillage, pastoralism, crafts).

The middle slopes of Monte Cornon (1200-1800 m) are marked by the presence of tens of thousands of writings by shepherds and a certain number of shelters, presumably used during pastoralism and forestry activities.

As the altitude rises, the writings thin out (and then vanish) and the huts begin to appear, which were used both by haymakers and shepherds (for the end-of-season grazing).

It is thus evident that if the villages of the valley floor were home to all active social elements in the valley, the mountains played host to only some of these (above all shepherds and, to a lesser extent, haymakers and foresters), whose material vestiges are however still quite visible.

These, and particularly the inscriptions, are not extraneous to the life of the valley floor, but refer to it in their form and content. For example, there are representations of the sacred heart, of the shrines scattered through the environs of the villages and of the lacework on the cloth often found in homes. The content of the inscriptions too reflects the life of the valley floor,

with numerous references to religion in the 18th and 19th centuries (the IHS Christogram or the sacred heart), and the timid emergence of human beings themselves (who begin to write their full names instead of using initials) and more properly political and national concerns (inscription reading W LENIN (long live Lenin) and W L' AUSTRIA (long live Austria) in the 20th century).

In terms of an overall spatial analysis, the material evidence (writings and structures) of at least 350 years of pastoralism make up a sort of 'landscape of social assertion', different from the dominant landscape consisting of the private and institutional buildings of the valley floor.

4. LANDSCAPE OR LANDSCAPES? THE PROCESSES OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

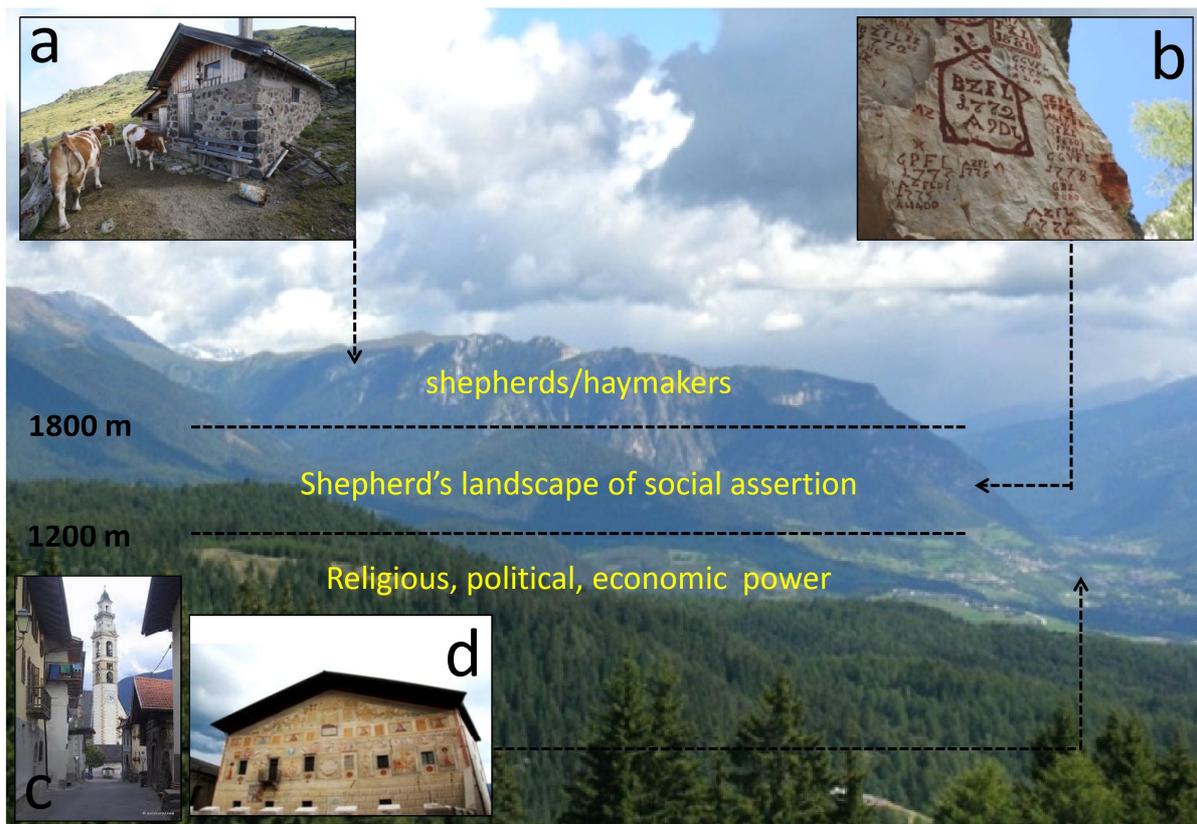


Fig. 6. Fiemme Valley social landscape before 1950's; a) Valbona sheperds hut; b) Corosso dai Nomi and some writings; c) Tesero church; d) Magnifica Comunità di Fiemme Palace, one of the bases of the economic power in the valley.

The economic role of tourism and skilled crafts (Leonardi, 2005), which developed rapidly, especially in the second half of the 20th century, had considerable repercussions on the social makeup and material landscape of the Val di Fiemme, especially in terms of crafts areas and the expansion of building.

A radical change also came about in economic activity, with the decline towards the middle of the 20th century of the old Val di Fiemme pastoral system, which up until that point had developed with coherent methods and rules for almost three centuries.

Materially this was reflected in the almost complete abandonment of the rock shelters and the practice of writing using ochre. Huts and meadows remained in use, but they were used by other social actors (no longer haymakers, but rather shepherds, tourists, hikers, etc.)

The associative link writings/rock shelters is therefore obvious, since these are situated on the same portion of the mountain, and attributable to a precise historic moment. Once the moment

had passed, these two elements were unable to renew themselves.

In a diachronic sense, even though the shelters are not exactly datable, the two most outstanding landscapes therefore fall into two categories: pre and post 20th century (fig. 6-7).

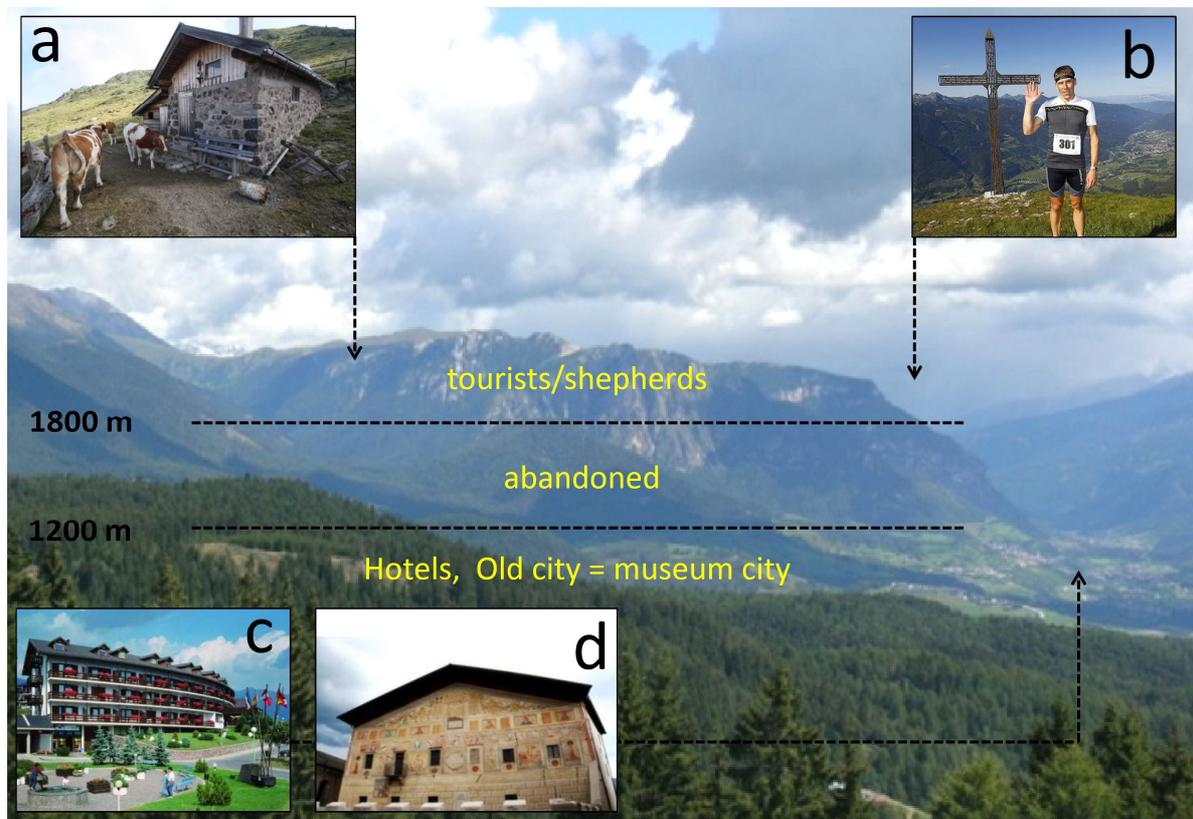


Fig. 7. Fiemme Valley social landscape after 1950's; a) Valbona sheperds hut; b) a sportsman on the Cornon Mountain; c) Veronza tourist Village, Carano; d) Magnifica Comunità di Fiemme Palace, now important also for the tourists (old city=museum city).

With the end of the second millennium, the Alpine valleys, and with them the Val di Fiemme, have come to represent a stratified area where different spaces and dimensions coexist and where the production of images relating to the mountain, which started at least as early as the 17th century, involves a larger number of subjects than in the past (Arnoldi, 2009).

A given material landscape can thus become, to name only the more obvious viewpoints, a place of hard work (the shepherd, the forester, etc.), a pure and uncontaminated place (the environmentalist, the hiker, etc.), a place inhabited by people not yet corrupted by civilisation (the city dweller), and so on.

Among those we interviewed, it is possible first and foremost to detect a certain difference between the last shepherds to have authored writings and those who came after them.

For the former, Monte Cornon is an idealised place, populated by memories of their youth, linked to hard work but also to achievements and to the history of a valley that some believe is destined to be forgotten.

The current shepherds are seen as a little detached from those who went before, since they use motor vehicles and electric light in their huts, they often go down to the valley; above all, because grass has lost a great deal of its economic value, they no longer follow the complex pastoral system of rules.

For them Monte Cornon is not a mountain of the past to be idealised, but rather part of a present of hard work. They do not often speak of their forerunners and sometimes they seem to have a certain opposition to the world of the valley floor ("You wouldn't by any chance be

homesick and missing your mummy up here, would you?” one of them asked us during our weeks spent at altitude during research).

A Tesero environmentalist, who has spent a lifetime studying the eagles of Monte Cornon, sees this mountain as a place that must be protected by humans against the damage wrought by those same humans. He frowns on hunters, sporting associations and well-equipped trails (seen as “motorways”), but is not opposed to the presence of environmentally-aware hikers and those devoted to the natural sciences and humanities, in part because increased scientific interest in the mountain might well bring about greater measures of protection.

For the inhabitants of the villages on the valley floor, on the other hand, the mountain represents the continuation of the village and the relations characterising it (social, parental, symbolic, etc.), invisible to outsiders.

Thus, for example, the left-hand valley of the Rio Bianco, which for the researchers is mainly just another topographic feature, is for many of the inhabitants of Panchià linked to one of the best-remembered shepherds of the village, who drew his self-portraits here as well as the likeness of his sweetheart, later to become his wife.

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