Shepherds’ Writings and Shepherds’ Life on Monte Cornon (Fiemme Valley, Trentino): an Ethnoarchaeological Perspective
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Abstract

Monte Cornon in the Fiemme Valley (eastern Trentino) is a limestone massif which rises above the villages of Tesero, Panchià, Ziano di Fiemme and Predazzo. In the recent past, its slopes were subject to intensive use in a local economy based on forestry, tillage and grazing. Thousands of inscriptions are still visible on these slopes today, showing that shepherds passed through the area and used it for grazing. The most common types of inscription are initials, abbreviations, dates, names, animal head counts, animal drawings and greetings. The writings are executed in a local red ochre. Ethnoarchaeological research carried out by the ethnological Museum of the Uses and Customs of the People of Trentino and involving interviews with the older shepherds from the valley aimed at deciphering the strange phenomenon of pastoral writings.

Excavations were carried out on shelters in order to seek confirmation of the information gathered during the interviews with the shepherds. Serial evidence of settlement was discovered below the historical layers, characterised by the presence of hearths and carbon layers and the absence of a material culture. Radiocarbon dating of these levels indicated use of the shelters from prehistory/proto-history on.

KEYWORDS: Northern Italy, Trentino - Fiemme Valley, Shepherds’ Inscriptions, Ochre, Pre-Protohistory.

Riassunto

Sulle pendici del monte Cornon in Valle di Fiemme (Trentino orientale), un massiccio calcareo che si erige a monte degli abitati di Tesero, Panchià, Ziano di Fiemme e Predazzo e che è stato oggetto nel più vicino passato di intenso sfruttamento nell’ambito di un’economia agрослavepastorale, sono ancor oggi visibili migliaia di scritte che testimoniano il passaggio e l’attività pastorale in loco. Si tratta di iniziali, sigle, date, nomi, conteggi del bestiame, figure di animali, messaggi di saluto.

Le scritte sono state realizzate con un’oca rossa, reperita localmente.

La ricerca etnoarcheologica condotta dal Museo degli Usi e Costumi della Gente Trentina tra i vecchi pastori della valle al fine di fornire un’interpretazione al particolare fenomeno delle scritte pastorali, ha portato all’individuazione di due ripari sottoroccia usati rispettivamente come luogo di sosta temporanea, nell’ambito di una spostamento giornaliero dagli abitati di fondovalle, e come ricovero stagionale, durante la stagione estiva. Le campagne di scavo, condotte nel 2007 nei due ripari per cercare riscontro alle informazioni avute dai pastori intervistati, hanno messo in luce, al di sotto dei livelli storici, una serie di frequentazioni caratterizzate dalla presenza di focolari e di livelli carboniosi nonché dall’assenza di cultura materiale. Le datazioni radiometriche dei carboni di questi livelli hanno evidenziato un’occupazione dei ripari già a partire dalla preistoria/protostoria.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Italia settentrionale, Trentino - Valle di Fiemme, scritte pastorali, ocra, pre-protostoria.

From the beginning of the 18th century on, graffiti became customary among those tending sheep and goat flocks in the Val di Fiemme in eastern Trentino. This habit of the solitary shepherds driving small flocks on their brief seasonal transhumance of tagging rocks with decorative inscriptions in a very methodical and conscious fashion is already well-known from many other grazing contexts in the Alps and elsewhere. An obvious case in point is Cornon Monte - a limestone massif situated on the right side of the valley orographically speaking (Fig.1), a little south of the more famous Latemar group and the Alpe di Pampeago - where the concentration of inscriptions is some times amazing (Fig. 2) on the slopes between about 1200-2000 metres above sea-level, or along the flat ledge formed by the southern slopes at the lower edge of the old pasturelands of the municipalities of Tesero, Panchià, Ziano di Fiemme and Predazzo.

The ‘writings’ (dates, initials, symbols, drawings, texts…), are in pigment paint obtained from a local hematite known as ból, which is readily found in the Valaverta on Monte Cornon.

The dates inscribed form an unbroken sequence stretching roughly from 1720 to 1960. These are four-digit Common Era notations, more or less elaborate two or three letter initials, abbreviations, numbers referring to livestock statistics, religious symbols, and the somewhat more mysterious ‘family symbols’ belong to the homesteads on the valley floor, as well as decorative doodlings and somewhat less frequent naturalistic representations and/or very brief textual notations or epigraphs in good and normally legible dialectic Italian.

The Research Project, Objectives and Methods

Taken together, the graffiti seems to carry on almost into the contemporary era at least some of the conventions and
customs of pastoral rock art as we know it from the evidence to be found in many other classic pre- or proto-historic sites of this type, or from more or less remote ethnographic contexts in temporal and spatial terms, to this end the following factors should be noted:
- the generally ‘remote’ location of the graffiti sites, or their representation of the remote character of the grazing areas;
- the basic habit of marking or inscribing a rock wall to the highest level reachable with an outstretched arm and/or using artificial aids (for example a tree-trunk placed against the rock wall);
- the overall conventional nature of the inscriptions, in other words the generalised use of well-defined stylistic features, and a tendency to use auto-referential short-hand and/or cryptograms;
- the tendency for the graffiti to be grouped or crowded at certain points on the cliffs, which thus became real rock blackboards (to cite just one of many, the so-called ‘Coròsso dai nomi’ in Valaverta in the townlands of Ziano (Fig. 2). This density of placement, sometimes to a striking degree, is a good indication of the chaotic, non pre-ordained, anarchic and essentially impulsive nature of the basic graffiti urge.

In contrast to pre- and proto-historic rupestrian art, the original meaning of the Val di Fiemme graphemes is still in part accessible to us for the not insignificant reason that at least some of the last authors of the writings themselves and some of the shepherds who acted as their users, or rather readers, are still alive today.

Fig. 1. Monte Cornon in the Fiemme Valley.

Fig. 2. Writings in Valaverta.
The ongoing historical-ethnographic and ethnological research of the ethnological Museum of the Uses and Customs of the People of Trentino on the rupestrian sites of the Cornon massif aims to reveal the circumstances of pastoral life in the Val di Fiemme over the last three centuries by studying the writings, and thus also to discover the particular socio-economic and cultural context which allowed the graffiti to emerge. In this regard, *mutatis mutandis*, it will perhaps prove possible to project into the past at least some of the constituent connotations of this casual pastoral graffiti of modern times, and thus even to reveal the hidden social causes and meanings providing its inner inspiration, in order to evaluate the degree to which it might possibly shed some light on its more or less illustrious antecedents of pre- and proto-historical times.

A first and interesting element in this regard, which emerges in coherent fashion from the statements of interviewees, has to do with the moderately but most definitely *transgressive* nature of the graphic act, almost as if the tagging of bare rock with an initial and a date in fact represented a sort of challenge to some unwritten prohibition, or an assertive and somewhat shameless proclamation of an individual principle of identity. ‘Here it is...the sin! (sic)’ was the comment from an old interviewee (F. D.) when faced with a piece of rock which he had marked with his own initials more than 65 years before (22.7.1941): while another local interviewee (G. V.), a forestry officer by profession, and very well versed in rural graffiti to the extent being the author of an important book on the subject (VANZETTA 1991), responded to the question of whether he himself had ever felt the impulse to indulge in the difficult art of *böl* graffiti by answering categorically and energetically that he hadn’t (‘No. Never. Why not? Because I just didn’t!’).

Furthermore, the interviewees’ interpretation of at least some of the more recent writings also regard these from the same perspective of an art-form inspired by a subtle sense of secrecy and surrounded by an equally subtle aura of reproof, befitting of the marginal or marginalised status enjoyed by shepherds in village life both present and past. Typical would be the more or less ubiquitous initials, still legible today and dating from the years around 1930, of one S. G., a legendary tender of flocks who was caught up in more than one harsh boundary dispute and also suspected by some of being directly responsible for the arson of one of the very few bàti or Alpine huts in the area (the ‘Bàito dai Sassi’ dating from about 1800), which in fact was never rebuilt, with serious repercussions on a grazing culture already in rapid and inexorable decline.

The question of the elusive S.G.’s boundary incursions and graffiti work bring us to our second major theme, *viz.* the function of the writings as territorial markers in pastures. This function can be understood in a general sense, since the writings are distributed over an area which taken together is exactly coterminous with the lands given over to grazing activities; but also in a more particular sense, given that each inscription, albeit implicitly, stands at least as an indirect (and possibly a very much direct) claim of basic and individual rights to graze.

In a general sense, the microcosm of the graffiti is that of small-scale domestic sheep and goat rearing exercised by single households, by a number of households together, or by hamlets or villages confined to the orographic right of the valley (the left-hand side is more fertile and was and remains today the province of cattle grazing), bounded from below by tillage and coppice-woods, and limited above by the highland meadows where hay making was practised up until about 1960, which required an absolute and categorical ban on grazing.

Thus, despite the vast variations in altitude to be found inside an area of rural landscape characterised by the most forbidding shepherds drops, the space actually given over to grazing activities appears as a relatively ‘closed’ space, shut in from all sides by ‘other’ land uses, and riven internally by divisions and boundaries (for example, between the individual Municipalities of the valley floor or between the lands of Magnifica Comunità or Commons of the Val di Fiemme and the municipalities themselves), which required of the individual shepherds a perfect knowledge of the complex and rather inflexible etiquette attaching to rights of use.

Within this space - which is only vast and airy in appearance, but which was in fact limited not only by the above-mentioned restrictions but also by environmental difficulties which it would be difficult to overestimate - the activity of pastoral graffiti was practised during the periods of free-time and boredom in the grazing work cycle, which were possibly also times of frustration. It took on that specific character, often shared by graffiti artists and writers of any time or space, which highlighted certain performance-oriented and laconic qualities native to any ritual activity, and indeed to such small, ineffable and private settings of accounts.

**Surveying - Excavations**

Surveying of the writings of the Latemar-Cornon group, which started in July 2006, led to the discovery of two rock shelters, where in 2007 two excavations were carried out by the Museum of Uses and Customs and the People of Trentino, in order to estimate the chronological range of deposits: the shelters in question are those of Trato and Mandra di Dos Capel (BAZZANELLA, WIERER in this book).

As regards the archaeological framework of the area, notable Mesolithic finds (LEONARDI 1991) have been made at altitude near the Passo di Pampeago (1980 metres a.s.l) and the Passo del Feudo (2121 metres a.s.l.). A Neolithic ground stone axe-head was also found in an unspecified location in the surroundings of Ziano, and a late Bronze Age axe-head, in bronze, was found in the Mandrizzi dai Sassi area to the north-east of the village; a bronze spearhead was also found in the Valaverta area. A number of finds from Roman times were made in the area between the alluvial fan and the entrance to Valaverta, and more particularly in the environs of the hamlet of Zanon, including a residential area and burial grounds. Also worthy of mention is the *Brandopferplatz* in Monte Rocca/Corno.
Nero (Passo degli Occlini) about two kilometres as the crow flies from Cornon, the ‘Rhaetian’ dwelling of Tesero Sottopedonda, the Dos Zelor site in Castello di Fiemme - inhabited during the late Bronze Age, the late Iron Age and in Roman times -, and the second Iron Age evidence from the Dos della Tavanella in Castello di Fiemme and the Dosso of San Valerio in Cavalese.

The archaeological surveys and excavations were carried out in July 2007 in two different rock shelters (the Trato and Mandra di Dos Capel shelters) situated respectively right in the centre (1500 m) and at the upper limit (2000 m) of the area in which the graffiti is found. They attempted to investigate the specific circumstances of what would seem to be a relatively continuous pastoral presence in these apparently very remote areas, as well as to ascertain and corroborate the timeframe indicated by the writings themselves (1720-1960).

More in general and regarding the established timeframe, it had at first been expected that long and continued periods of use of the shelters prior to the introduction of semi-domestic and locally based grazing practises could be excluded as a possibility. C-14 AMS analyses of the carbon finds recovered from the various layers however have allowed confirmation of the use of these sites in pre- and proto-history. This allowed establishment of a completely new timeframe - the beginning of the Bronze Age or perhaps even the transitional phase between the Copper and Bronze Ages - for the introduction to the Val di Fiemme of sheep and goat rearing, which could in turn be made to coincide with the presence in the valley of well-structured sedentary or semi-sedentary settlements.

In this context, the importance of sheep or goat rearing and forestry in areas with no great tradition of tillage (also underlined in the ethnographic studies of D.P.S. Peacock) is evident from the Roman inscription on Monte Pèrgol, in the Val Cadino, which marks the boundary between the municipia of Tridentum and Feltria, indicating how important these grazing resources must have been.

It should not therefore be excluded that the Val di Fiemme was involved in the production and trading of wool, which was firmly established and well-structured both in the Iron Age and in Roman times among settlements in the pre-Alpine areas of Veneto and the proto-urban centres of the plains.

Finally, timber from the Alps - the axe-heads mentioned above should be borne in mind in this regard - satisfied the needs of furnaces, ship-building yards and builders (especially in the case of Coastal towns such as Altino and Aquileia, which erected impressive stockades).

**Surveys of Writings**

Between 2009 and 2010 two research campaigns were carried out on the Latemar-Cornon group aimed at surveying the writings, buildings and objects left behind by the shepherds, following two lines of research: a field study to survey material evidence of 300 years of grazing and a series of interviews with the last living shepherds in order to confirm findings.

To date about 1600 rock walls have been discovered bearing the traces of one or more inscriptions, which can provisionally be numbered at around 10,000. Fifty three structures have been identified which can be divided into 3 broad categories: large Alpine huts (Fig. 3), small Alpine huts (Fig. 4) and rock shelters (Fig. 5).

Finds consist of work implements (bells, files, blades, nails

![Fig.3. Large alpine huts in Bonetta Valley.](image)
Fig. 4. Remains of a small alpine hut.

Fig. 5. A rock shelter on the Monte Cornon.
Interviews with shepherds have allowed definition of the features of the grazing economy in this part of the valley, the purpose of some of the buildings and interpretation of the strategic and symbolic meaning of the writings.

On the basis of the data gathered from the two lines of research, it is possible to see grazing as an activity which was strictly regulated by the local institutions, including the Magnifica Comunità or Commons of the Val di Fiemme and the Società Malghe e Pascoli - Dairy and Grazing Companies - managed by the municipalities. The surveys have also shown that the writings are mainly distributed on rocks from just above the village up to an altitude of 2000 m: an area used in spring and summer grazing. Almost none have been found in the pastures located at high altitude, which were used for mowing or for grazing late in the season. In this area, situated above 1600-2000 metres, are found the large huts which, depending on their location and the time of year, were used by shepherds, mowers, or by both. The huts made up a sort of “system” around which was organised a complex network of rock shelters and smaller constructions, also but not exclusively used by shepherds and hay-makers.

Data gathered also reflect the changes which came about in society in general and in the lives of shepherds in particular in the Valle di Fiemme of the 20th century. If in the inscriptions dating from the 18th and 19th centuries references to religion or to grazing are often found next to the name and date, during the 20th century there are several examples of writings of a political (UP LENIN) or nationalistic (UP SWITZERLAND, UP AUSTRIA) nature which are much more concerned with purely secular life, as well as self-portraits (of the shepherd S.G.), as if the attention of the shepherds were turning progressively away from the creator and his creation to give more importance to human matters.

As for the study of objects found, the numerous rusted food cans, together with other finds from modern times, allow us to assemble a sort of material periodisation (in the manner of J. Deetz) which would accompany historically defined events in our understanding of the environment.

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As research continues it will allow elaboration of a model of standardised mass-produced items.

Notes

1 We adopt the terminology proposed by Dellantonio, 1995.
2 Both axe-heads are conserved in the Museo del Castello del Buonconsiglio in Trento.
3 Housed in Musei Civici in Rovereto (TN).
4 Funded by the Autonomous Province of Trento within the framework of the APSAT project (Ambiente e Paesaggi dei Siti Trentini di Alto Piano - Environment and landscape in the high mountain sites of Trentino).

References

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