



"ADIO PASTORI!". ETHICS AND AESTHETICS OF AN ALPHABETIZED PASTORAL SUBCULTURE. THE CASE OF FIEMME IN THE EASTERN ALPS (1680-1940)

"¡ADIÓS, PASTORES!". ÉTICA Y ESTÉTICA DE UNA SUBCULTURA PASTORIL ALFABETIZADA. EL CASO DE FIEMME EN LOS ALPES DEL ESTE (1680-1940)

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MOUNT CORNON IN THE FIEMME VALLEY

In the recent past the slopes of Mount Cornon 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 red ochre. The writings specifically make use of alphabetic signs and numbers in a significant display of the shepherds' acquired ability to write. In this context, the recurrent "tag"-like format of the shepherd-writers, a single glyph with one's initials and a date, not unlike that of the contemporary graffiti-writers of the metropolitan suburbs, can be seen as the embodiment of a specific aesthetic of self-esteem, group distinction and individual pride, and as the specific voice of a community of marginal workers exiled to the mountain flanks.

Key words: Trentino, Fiemme Valley, shepherds' inscriptions

En el pasado reciente las laderas del monte Cornón fueron objeto de un uso intensivo en una economía local basada en la silvicultura, la labranza y el pastoreo. A lo largo de los siglos los pastores que trabajaron en el área dejaron en las rocas miles de inscripciones hechas con color ocre rojo. Los escritos hacen uso de signos alfabéticos y numéricos, como muestra significativa de la capacidad adquirida para escribir de los pastores. En este contexto, el recurrente formato "tag" de los pastores-escritores, que consiste de un único glifo con las iniciales de su nombre y la fecha, no muy diferente de las inscripciones producidas por los grafiteros de los suburbios metropolitanos, puede ser visto como la encarnación de una específica estética de autoestima, distintiva del grupo y muestra de orgullo individual, asimismo como la voz específica de una comunidad de trabajadores marginales exiliados en los flancos de la montaña.

Palabras clave: Trentino, valle de Fiemme, inscripciones pastoriles

The Fiemme Valley, or Fleimstal, is a major sector of the Trentino province in the Eastern Alps, formerly the so-called Welschtirol or Italian Tirol, which was annexed to Italy from the Hapsburg Empire after World War I. The altitude here ranges from about 1000 masl at the valley bottom to around 2200 masl on the surrounding ridges. In the northern portion of the valley, Mount Cornon (2189 m) is a limestone massif (fig. 1) directly overlooking a cluster of small medieval agrarian municipalities (Cavalese, Tesero, Panchià, Ziano, Predazzo) that since time immemorial have managed huge commonly-held land estates, known by their time-honoured institutional name of "Magnifica Comunità di Fiemme," in a mixed local economy based on forestry, tillage and grazing that has been carried out for many centuries.

Within the wider landscape of the valley (fig. 2) and the assets of the "Magnifica," the steep, rocky slopes of Mount Cornon were generally marginal lands used for summer grazing of sheep and goats, while bovines, which required richer and less rugged pastures, were sent to the opposite side of the valley. The shepherds who performed this extremely hard work, in which they were isolated alone on the mountain for weeks and

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Figure 1. Mount Cornon seen from the South (photo L. Gasperi).
 Figura 1. Monte Cornón visto desde el sur (foto de L. Gasperi).

months on end in all kinds of weather, were also marginal in a sense, and since the activity continued in the traditional way until the 1960s, the individuals that were chosen for it were generally described as very young, down-and-out, and/or least sociable local unmarried males within the complex social structure of the villages. Since feudal times, this structure has been characterized as being rather hierarchically stratified, with the Prince (or the Bishop of Trento, in our case) sitting at the top, followed by senior officials of the “Magnifica Comunità,” in lieu of a localized feudal lordship, then a middle class composed of the clergy, the educated and professional citizens. Under these is the largest class, consisting of free small landowners, and at the bottom is an underclass of outcasts, shepherds, migrant workers and vagrants.

The members of that underclass tended to be seasonally employed to watch over flocks of sheep and goats on the large areas of Mount Cornon that were not subject to regular summer mowing. This meant that the flocks had to be kept at an intermediate altitude, away from the fields and meadows surrounding the village and equally far from the hayfields at the top of the mountain (fig. 2), the Pizancae, which were subject to mowing and could only be occupied after the end of

August. The pasturing season lasted about four months, from the end of May to the beginning of October, during which time the shepherds could make use of a variety of huts and shelters scattered around the mountain, which they had to share with mowers, hunters, and other itinerant individuals.

The inscriptions of Mount Cornon

Although little known and poorly studied, the occurrence of inscriptions from modern times in pastoral contexts is quite commonplace throughout the Italian mountains (Rossi 1981; Rossi & Gattiglia 1996, 2001; Micati 2002), constituting part of a specific pastime of shepherds that can also be found elsewhere in the world. Our overall claim here is that such modern examples of rock inscriptions display a number of features that directly bring them under the scope of the study of “rock art,” in its broadest planetary perspective.

In the valley of Fiemme, these inscriptions—which we shall define indifferently as *writings* or *graffiti*, in lieu of the slightly more pompous *pictographs*—were painted in red—and not engraved—by shepherds and goat-herders with a softened twig used as a brush on

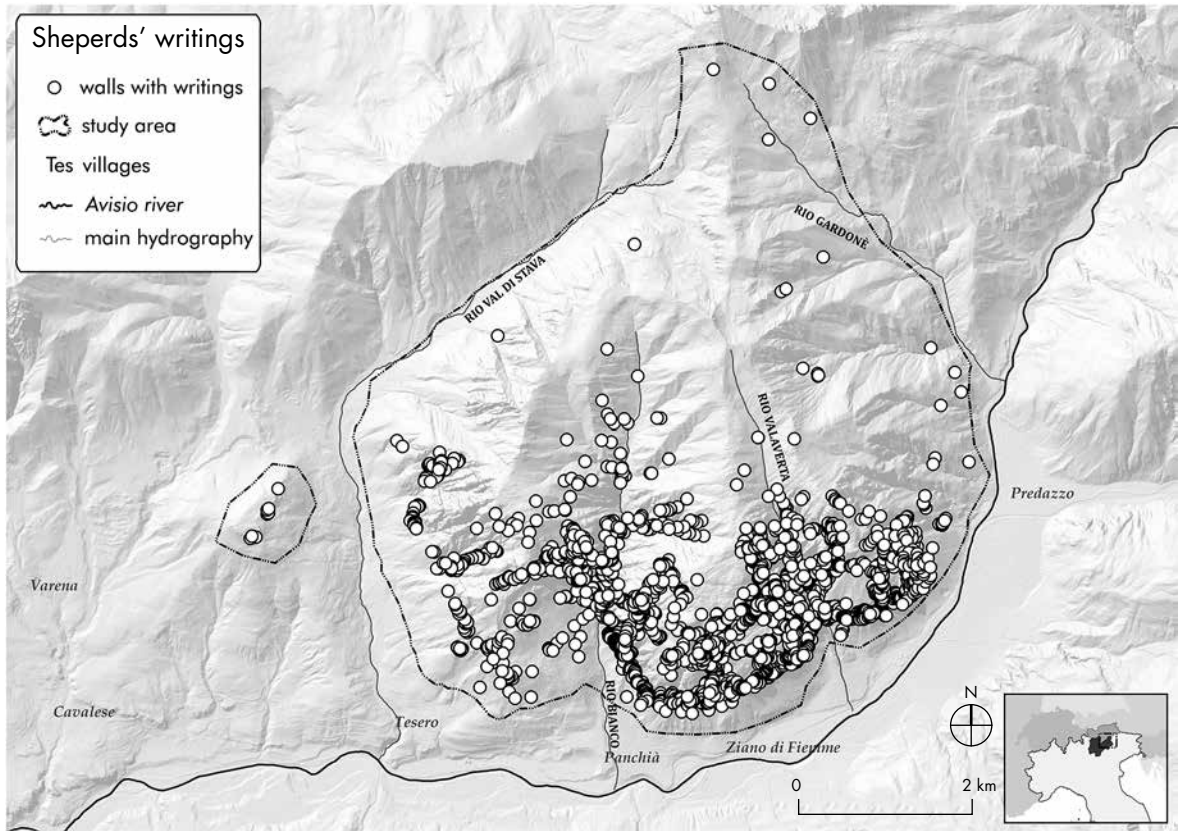


Figure 2. The Central Fiemme Valley and the location of the areas with the presence of shepherds' inscriptions (graphic processing by R. Covi).

Figura 2. El valle central Fiemme y la ubicación de las áreas con presencia de inscripciones pastoriles (procesamiento gráfico de R. Covi).

the surface of the limestone rock within a time span running from about 1650 to 1950. In fact, what makes very specific the body of inscriptions from the Val di Fiemme is the consistent use of a local red haematite, which has made them particularly evident and resilient. In fact, thanks to the fortunate presence on this very mountain of at least two quite substantial red hematite mines that were well known among painters in the valley since the 15th century the shepherds working in the area left an estimated 30,000 inscriptions on around 2,462 different rock surfaces on the mountain (Vanzetta 1991, Šebesta 1998, Bazzanella et al. 2012). These writings were made with red hematite or *bòl* (i.e., “stamp”) obtained from the nearby mines; the same dye that was commonly used to mark sheep fleece to indicate ownership. For the writings, the *bòl* was ground up, mixed with saliva, and applied to the rock with the end of a beech or hazelnut twig that had been softened by chewing to serve as a brush.

To arrive at the first inscribed sites (fig. 3), which occupy a zone from around 1700 to 2000 masl one has to brave the steep mountain slopes to reach the base of

the cliffs below the summit ridge. Shepherds' initials are the most common element in the Fiemme inscriptions (fig. 4), followed by other acronyms in block capitals (as is also common in the “tag” format of contemporary urban graffiti writers), and by four-digit dates that begin with an upper case “J” that means “1,000.” Roman numerals are also common and usually indicate tallies of sheep or goats. Lastly there are assorted drawings of animal and human figures, sacred symbols, doodles and dedications.

Often, shepherds left their initials (first and last name) followed by the letters FL (an abbreviation for: *fece l'anno J...* or ‘wrote in the year J...’) and by the year itself. The day, month and tally of animals brought to pasture are found below or next to such inscriptions. Almost always the writer added the symbol or sign of his ‘house’ (a kind of “home-tag” or house-brand locally called the *noda*), an unambiguous reference to his patriline. These family signs were very important in the past for marking sheep as well as wooden tools and equipment.



Figure 3. Ziano di Fiemme, examples of painted rocks on the slopes of Mount Cornón (photo L. Gasperi).

Figura 3. Ziano di Fiemme, ejemplos de rocas pintadas en las laderas del monte Cornón (foto de L. Gasperi).

The inscriptions themselves may also be enclosed by frames of different shapes and are sometimes accompanied by drawings and symbols, including religious ones such as christograms, crosses and floral motifs. Occasionally we find figures of animals, both domestic ones in pastoral scenes and wild ones in hunting scenes, which closely resemble those of their prehistoric forebears and include a marked preference for the theme of the stag (fig. 5). In a later period we also find portraits and self-portraits of shepherds (fig. 6), greetings (fig. 7) and assorted anecdotes (fig. 8).

From a chronological perspective, the inscripational activity of the shepherds of Fiemme has been documented from the second half of the 17th to the middle of the 20th centuries, and later, or roughly up until the recent decline of traditional society in this area. Within this timeframe, the inscriptions may be classed into two groups:

- a) pre-1850 *ca.* The oldest inscriptions (fig. 9) overwhelmingly consist of complete initials, the 'home-tag' or family symbols, pictograms, sacred symbols and livestock tallies. The author of each inscription is



Figure 4. The features of an inscription: a) initials, date, family signs and frame; b) initials, date, family signs and livestock counting (“C 66”= 66 goats) (photo L. Gasperi).

Figura 4. Las características de una inscripción: a) iniciales, fecha, marcas de familia y recuadro; b) iniciales, fecha, indicaciones familiares y recuento del ganado (“C 66” = 66 cabras) (foto de L. Gasperi).

only identifiable from the home-tag and the writing area is carefully framed, often creating a sort of small shrine topped with a cross. The inscribed area is also often surrounded by dots or highlighted to give the inscription a “relief” look. These stereotypical designs seem to express a desire to mark the territory and leave some trace of one’s passage through it.

- b) post-1850 *ca.* In the second group of writings (fig. 10), the signs, abbreviations and family symbols gradually are replaced by the name and surname of the author written in full and often accompanied by his hometown, evidencing an ever more widespread literacy. It also appears in their messages that the writers wished to record some event—the cold, their hunger, an escape from danger—and sometimes included a brief diary entry and basic chronological

data—dates and lengths of time, good and bad work experiences, a desire to have fun, the state of the weather, the search for some lost sheep, the difficulties of the day, their exhaustion, and even their emotional state (Bazzanella et al. 2013).

Here are some examples:

- ECCO LA MIA MEMORIA Ò PASE[...] SE TI PIACE LEGERLA (HERE IS MY SOUVENIR O THOU PASSERBY, IF YOU CARE TO READ IT), (Dolae XCI 1);¹
- ECCO LA MIA MEMORIA Ò PASSAGER [...] SE TU BRAMI DI L[...] GERLA MI CHIAMO PIETRO GIACOMELLI 1886 (HERE IS MY SOUVENIR O THOU PASSERBY, IF YOU CARE TO READ IT MY NAME IS PIETRO GIACOMELLI 1886), (Dolae XCI 5);²
- GL 1889 ECCO LA MIA MEMORIA O PASAGIERO SE MI BRAMI DI [CONO]SCER[E] (GL1889 HERE IS MY SOUVENIR DEAR PASSERBY IF YOU ARE WILLING TO KNOW ME) (Rio Bianco VIII 3);³
- ECO CARI LETORI DA PIÙ ANI CHE SI FA CUESTA VITA SOLITARIA E TORMENTOSA CUANDO SENTO [...] RICORDATEVI DI ME ADIO (HERE DEAR READER SINCE MANY A YEAR I’VE BEEN CARRYING OUT THIS SOLITARY AND TORMENTED LIFE REMEMBER OF ME GOODBYE), (Val Averta CXXXVII);⁴
- CARI AMICI VI PRECO DI NON FARSI QUESTA VITA CRUDELE [...] (DEAR FRIENDS I BEG YOU NOT TO ENGAGE IN A LIFE AS CRUEL AS THIS), (Corona dai Peci I 2).⁵

These kinds of messages were often accompanied by the standard greeting (fig. 11):

ADIO PASTORI (FAREWELL O SHEPHERDS)

Later in the 20th century, sparser messages begin to appear that are more public in nature, reflecting major political events of the time such as the end of World War I that led to the area becoming part of Italy.

Ethno-archaeological research

Beginning in 2006, the Museo degli Usi e Costumi della Gente Trentina—a large ethnographic museum on the bank of the Etsch River slightly north of Trento, founded in 1968 by ethnographer Giuseppe Šebesta—conducted some extensive ethno-archaeological research that included a general survey of the inscriptions, some excavation, and interviews with older shepherds in the valley that sought to build a full scale registry and some overall interpretation of the writings. This led to the discovery of a number of rock shelters used by the shepherds during their daily and seasonal herding activities that then became the subject of ethno-archaeological investigation (Bazzanella et al. 2012).

Excavations carried out in 2007 on two particular shelters uncovered evidence of serial settlement below



Figure 5. Representations of wild animals: the stag (photo L. Gasperi).

Figura 5. Representaciones de animales salvajes: el ciervo (foto de L. Gasperi).



Figure 6. Representations of the shepherd Silvio Gilmozzi of Panchià (born in 1922): a) rock art self-portrait; b) anonymous photograph from approx. 1960.

Figura 6. Representaciones del pastor Silvio Gilmozzi de Panchià (nacido en 1922): a) retrato en arte rupestre; b) fotografía anónima ca. 1960.



Figure 7. Greetings: "ADIO PASEGERI" (GOOD-BYE PASSERSBY) (photo L. Gasperi).

Figura 7. Saludos: "ADIO PASEGERI" (ADIÓS, TRANSEÚNTES) (foto de L. Gasperi).

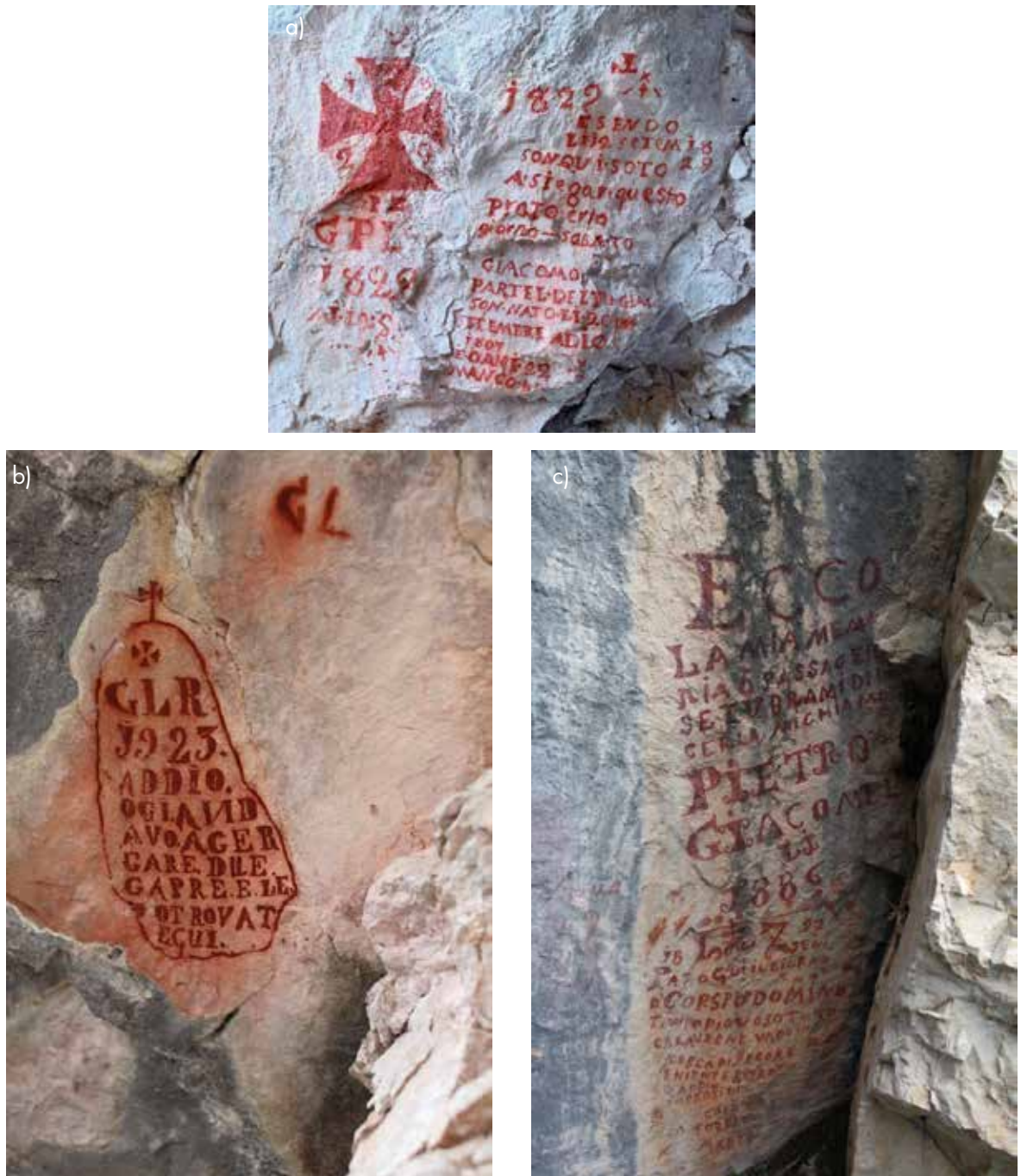


Figure 8. Anecdotes. a) "ESENDO LI 12 SETEMBRE 1829 SONO QUI SOTO A SIEGAR QUESTO PRATO ERTO. GIORNO - SABATO. SONO GIACOMO PARTEL DEL FU GIACOMO. SONO NATO LI 20 SETEMBRE 1807 E O ANI 22 MANCO 8 DI. ADIO"; b) "GLR. 1923. ADDIO. OGI ANDAVO A GERGARE DUE GAPRE E LE O TROVATE QUI"; c) "ECCO LA MIA MEMORIA O PASSAGER SE TU BRAMI DI LEGERLA. MI CHIAMO PIETRO GIACOMELLI. 1886" (photo L. Pisoni). English translation: a) "12 SEPTEMBER 1829, SATURDAY: I'M SWING THIS STEEP MEADOW HERE BELOW. I AM GIACOMO PARTEL. I WAS BORN ON SEPTEMBER 20TH AND I AM 22 YEARS BETWEEN EIGHT DAYS"; b) "GLR 1923 LOOKING FOR SOME LOST GOATS I FOUND THEM HERE. GOODBYE"; c) "HERE'S MY MEMORY OR PASSENGER IF YOU LIKE TO READ IT".

Figura 8. Anécdotas. a) "SIENDO 12 DE SEPTIEMBRE 1829, SÁBADO: ESTOY SEMBRANDO ESTE PRADO EMPINADO. SOY GIACOMO PARTEL HIJO DEL FALLECIDO GIACOMO. NACÍ EL 20 DE SEPTIEMBRE Y CUMPLIRÉ 22 AÑOS EN 8 DÍAS. ADIÓS"; b) "GLR 1923 ADIÓS. BUSCANDO DOS CABRAS Y LAS ENCONTRÉ AQUÍ"; c) "HE AQUÍ MI MEMORIA, OH TRANSEÚNTE, SI QUIERES LEERLA. ME LLAMO PIETRO GIACOMELLI. 1886" (foto de L. Pisoni).



Figure 9. Inscription of the Earlier Period, pre-1850 (photo L. Pisoni).
 Figura 9. Inscripción del Período Temprano, pre-1850 (foto de L. Pisoni).



Figure 11. "ADDIO PASTORI" (FAREWELL O SHEPHERDS) (photo L. Gasperi).
 Figura 11. "ADDIO PASTORI" (ADIÓS, PASTORES) (foto de L. Gasperi).

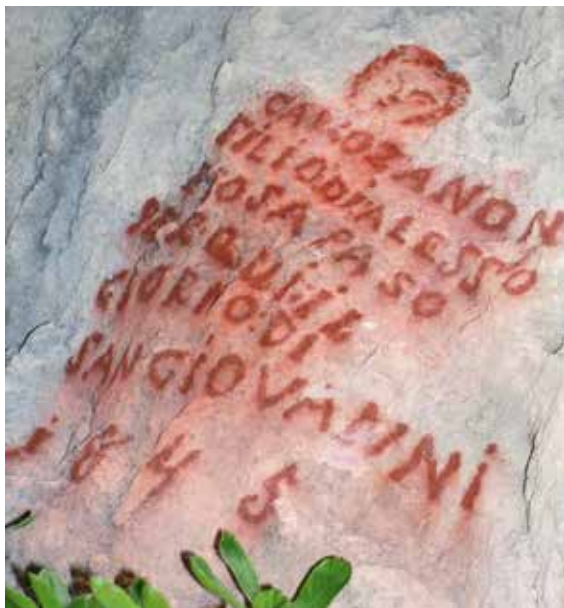


Figure 10. Inscription of the Later Period, post-1850: the name and surname of the author are written out in full (photo M. Bazzanella).
 Figura 10. Inscripción del Período Tardío, post-1850: el nombre y apellido del autor son escritos en toda su extensión (foto de M. Bazzanella).

historical layers that was characterized by the presence of hearths and carbon layers and a lack of material culture. Radiocarbon dating of these levels unexpectedly indicated that the shelters were occupied intermittently as early as the Bronze Age (2300 BC), while dendrochronological analysis of the timber remains of a cabin still present in one of the two shelters confirmed that it was erected recently, around 1930, a detail that was corroborated by the surviving shepherds we interviewed (Bazzanella & Wierer 2013). A general survey of the inscribed rocks throughout the area conducted between 2007 and 2012 and recorded in a GPS database will provide significant quantitative data about the local patrilineal lines that engaged in transhumance and outline the pathways of individual shepherds in the pastoral area, and should also tell us about the evolution of the flocks over a three-century timespan. Most of the evidence, however, will obviously be related to the writings themselves.

Despite their relative modernity (*ca.* 1680-1940 AD) compared to other known rock art sites, the shepherd writings of Fiemme share a number of significant features with their prehistoric antecedents. First of all,



Figure 12. Ziano di Fiemme: a palimpsest of inscriptions (photo M. Bazzanella).

Figura 12. Ziano di Fiemme: un palimpsesto de inscripciones (foto de M. Bazzanella).

one is struck by the choice of sites, which are both overtly monumental and considerably remote from the permanent farming settlements of the area. Second, the rock surfaces appear to have been inscribed rather at random, in a chaotic and haphazard fashion, as if to underline the extemporaneous, anarchic nature of the urge to write (fig. 12) acted out by solitary individuals at odd times.

A third aspect is that, despite the apparent anarchy, the style of the writings appears to be considerably consistent and highly conventionalized over a long period of time, almost 300 years in the case of Fiemme. In our case, the writings appear to be situated at the far end of a continuum of local folk art conventions as seen in many other contexts, including wood carving (fig. 13), material culture, rural architecture, embroidery (fig. 14), religious folk art (fig. 15), and in a rather wide array of other expressions of folk literacy (Bazzanella et al. in press).

Meaning of the inscriptions

Within this general framework there are some features that are quite specific to the Fiemme case. First

and foremost is the fact that, unlike their prehistoric counterparts, the Fiemme inscriptions greatly surpass pictographic expression by making use of alphabetic signs and digits. Indeed, the display of alphabet usage is the single most prominent feature of the writings of the shepherds of Fiemme, and is made very clear by the “core concern” of the Fiemme writers, which, like that of contemporary graffiti writers, is to display a name tag, a graphic representation of one’s initials, in addition to the date of the inscription, as if to declare, first and foremost: “I was here. And I can write.”

In this sense, the deliberate display of one’s name may have some deep psychological implications, similar to those noted by Norman Mailer in his groundbreaking book-length essay titled *The Faith of Graffiti*, published in 1974, which, according to the other author, photographer Jon Naar, should have been called *Watching my name go by*. “It is almost as if we must go back to that primeval state of existence, in to that curious intimation of how our existence and our identity may perceive each other only as in a mirror” (Mailer & Naar 1974: 31).

Thus, in a context of pastoral wilderness and with specific modalities of performance that are in many



Figure 13. The same decorative symbols, a) in wood carving and b) in rock art (photo P. Borsato, L. Pisoni).

Figura 13. Los mismos símbolos decorativos, a) tallados en madera, b) en arte rupestre (foto de P. Borsato, L. Pisoni).



Figure 14. a) Decorative 'enframing' of the rock art from the Fiemme Valley (photo I. Gasperi); b) similarly enframing embroidery on regional textiles (photo P. Borsato).

Figura 14. a) Encuadre decorativo de arte rupestre del valle de Fiemme (foto de I. Gasperi); b) similitud en el encuadre bordado de los textiles regionales (foto de P. Borsato).

important respects not unlike those that can be inferred from similar prehistoric sites, what we find in Fiemme is a boisterous display of the acquired ability to write, a boast that is made all the more significant because it comes from mountain shepherds, a class-bound group of semi-literate, relatively uneducated, marginal labourers. And, as with other rock art sites around the world, in Fiemme the very conspicuous and abundant inscriptions on the rock—there are an estimated 30,000 entries—directly lead us to questions about the motivation and meaning behind them.

Unlike their prehistoric counterparts, however, the inscriptions of Fiemme are more easily accessible owing to the not insignificant fact that at least a few of the original writers are *still alive today*. Obviously, this fact widens the potential scope of a proper ethnographic investigation, such as we have carried out among the surviving shepherds. Our research focused on the underlying reasons, significance, and specific aesthetic attitudes and ethical values in play among those who produced the writings.

In this context, one of the most important details possibly is that the act of writing was generally regarded as a minor yet not insignificant act of transgression, and is sometimes explicitly referred to by informants as a “sin” (“peccato”), the “sin of the shepherds” (“il peccato dei pastori”). Thus, we have found that the act of writing on the rocks was generally regarded with some measure of reproach, something slightly *unethical*, an act that, when performed, would evoke the same kind of reluctance that any mountain climber would feel when circumstances forced him to hammer a nail into virgin rock.

THE ETHICS AND AESTHETICS OF THE MOUNT CORNON INSCRIPTIONS

There are thus two very distinct sides to the aesthetics and the ethics of these writings. On the one hand we have the exhibited display of literacy, which is made apparent to all with some measure of pride. This fits very well with the mythical figure of the shepherd traditionally held in Europe: an individual who engaged in music, poetry, calendrical and arithmetic computations, and philosophical speculation, disciplines that could be easily practiced and nurtured in the long, solitary hours they spent in the pasture. On the other hand, as a sort of counter-action, the act of defacing the cliffs with writing was regarded as ethically dubious, a minor act of transgression, by which the shepherds violated both the social boundaries of the supposedly illiterate sector

of society and the topological boundary separating the world of humans from that of nature.

In a situation similar to what occurs in the contemporary subculture of urban graffiti writers, these two separate sets of values merge into a single attitude, a mixture of the unspoken guilt emerging from a perceived social offence and the individual pride inherent in the act of transgression. Around this attitude a sense of collective belonging emerges in the form of a very specific subcultural identity that pertains to the unfortunate solitary individuals who were exiled to the mountainside every summer by the community.

This set of attitudes, has quite specific contemporary equivalents. In her recent book titled *The Graffiti Subculture*, the British anthropologist Nancy Macdonald (2001: 2) writes:

Graffiti is not one to share its stories. It's cheeky like that. It flirts in the public eye, as Hebdige (1988) might say “hiding in the light,” revealing all and yet revealing absolutely nothing. We are unaware that the city walls are alive with its social drama. We have no clue that the tangled mass of names crawling across their surfaces speak. We don't hear the intricate commentaries they have to offer us about the lives, relationship and identities of those who wrote them. And why should we even care? Because as I found out when I plucked graffiti from its hiding place and took a closer look, this drama, these commentaries and the vibrant subculture that lays behind them have a great deal to tell us about the culture we live in and some of the people who share it with us.

Our proposition here is that the interpretation of the particular social scenario of the Fiemme graffiti can, at least in some small measure, be projected back into the remote past, to protohistoric and prehistoric sites, and be applied to the hermeneutics of rock art as a whole in a least two important respects.

The first is that the inscriptions on the rocks, rather than reflecting a collective cultural concern through the expression of common values and icons, can be seen instead as the products of completely isolated individuals acting at random in response to an inner urge to leave a sign of their presence. The haphazard, random distribution of the inscriptions on the rock surface reveal solitudes reaching out to other solitudes and connecting with each other by the mere act of writing one name next to another, i.e., next to where one's mates left their mark at some point in the past.

The second is that the actual performance of such a graphic act may be socially secluded, surrounded by an aura of secrecy, or socially sanctioned in a more or less formalized way. It can be, as in the case of Fiemme, a rather exclusive private ritual of one specialized labour group or one segment of the entire community that is completely unknown to the others and/or more or less actively disliked or marginalized.



Figure 15. Decorative religious folk art: a) on mobile surfaces; b) on stationary rock art located on the slopes of Mount Cornon (photos P. Borsato and I. Pisoni).

Figura 15. Arte popular religioso, de carácter decorativo: a) en objetos móviles; b) en arte rupestre ubicado en las laderas del monte Cornón (fotos de P. Borsato e I. Pisoni).

From this perspective, rock art sites may not be the graphic embodiment of specific cultural entities as a whole but can be seen as the expression of separate segments of a social world to which they bear distant, at most partial, though at times very substantial, witness.

NOTES

¹ THIS IS MY MEMORY O THOU PASSER BY, IF YOU CARE TO READ IT (Dolae XCI 1).

² THIS IS MY MEMORY O THOU PASSER BY, IF YOU CARE TO READ IT MY NAME IS PIETRO GIACOMELLI 1886 (Dolae XCI 5).

³ 1889 HERE DEAR TRAVELER IF YOU ARE WILLING TO KNOW ME (Rio Bianco VIII 3).

⁴ HERE DEAR READER FOR MANY A YEAR I'VE BEEN LIVING THIS SOLITARY AND TORMENTED LIFE REMEMBER ME GOODBYE (Val Averta CXXXVII).

⁵ DEAR FRIENDS I BEG YOU NOT TO ENGAGE IN A LIFE AS CRUEL AS THIS (Corona dai Peci I 2).

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