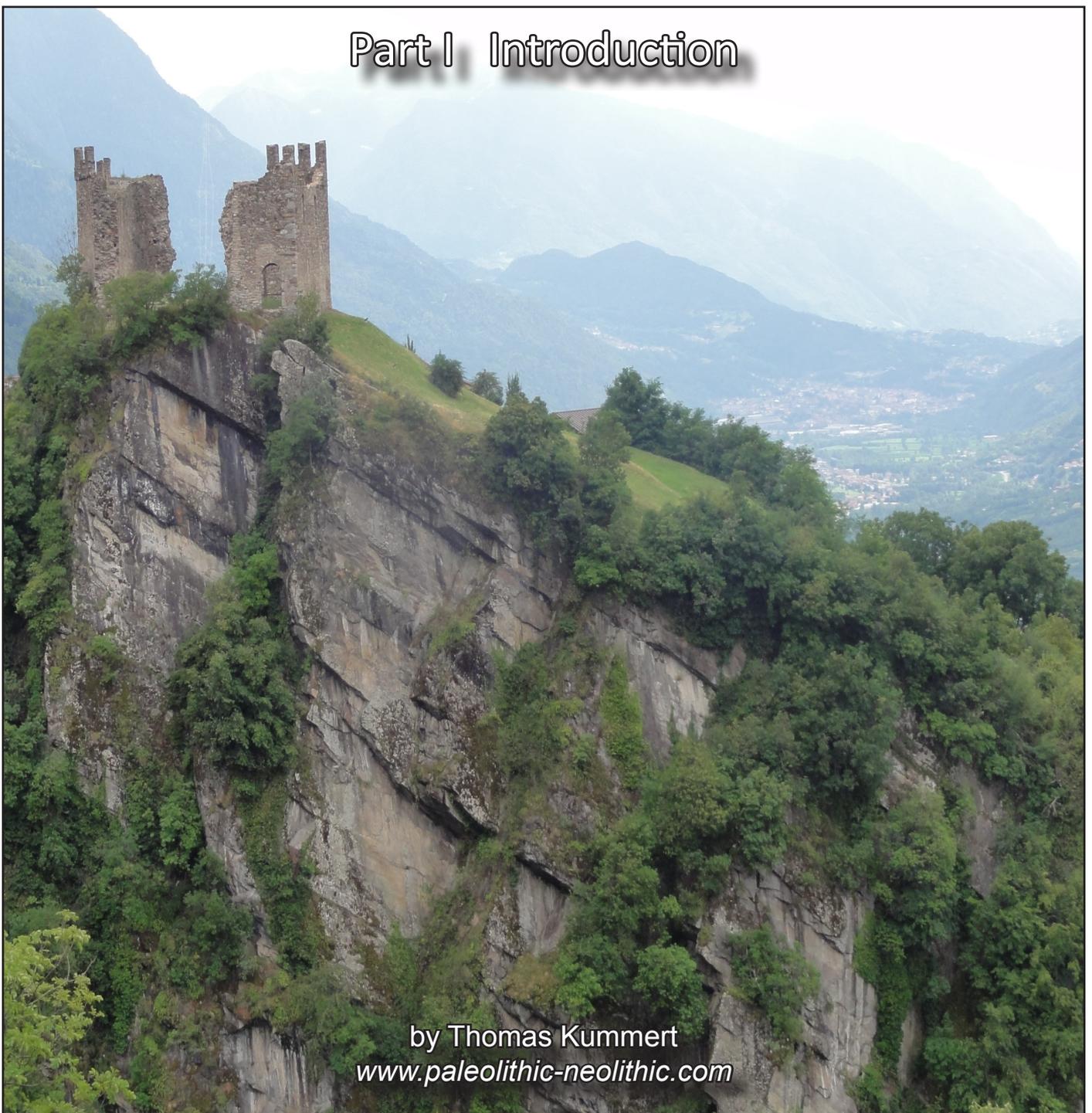


# Amazing Italian Neolithic Engravings in Val Camonica

Part I Introduction



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View from Foppe di Nardo over Val Camonica



Val Camonica is the most important pre-historic rock art site in Europe, because it offers the greatest number and density of images plus variety of motifs. Approximately 400,000 petroglyphs were carved in soft greyish black Permian sandstone on over 2,000 rather large bedrock surfaces at over 180 different sites in the Camonica Valley in northern Italy.

All bedrock surfaces were grinded flat by moving glaciers during the last Ice Age. This created an ideal working platform for engraving and the fine linear scratch marks here are so typical for glacier movement. The engraved area starts north of Lago Iseo and extends for 70 km further north where the valley climbs and becomes narrower.

### How Did It Happen?

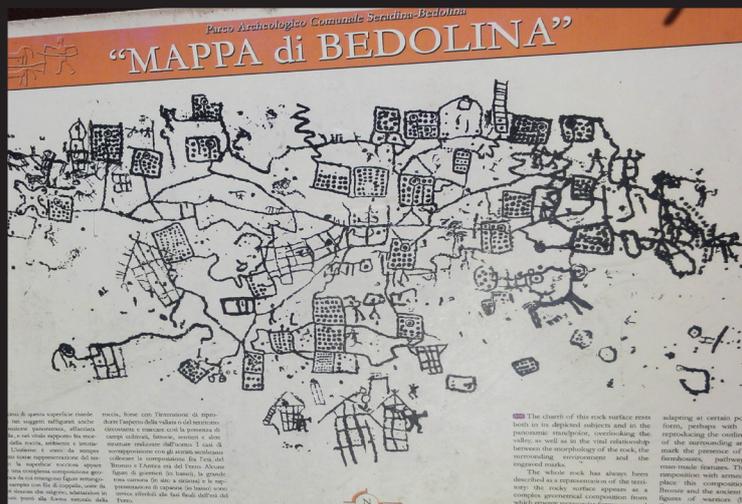
The following fictitious story is a good kick off for getting into the right mood for viewing and understanding Val Camonica rock art. The grand chief of the Camuni Tribe had called all the elders from the different villages in the valley to meet at the next full moon at the tribe's main

consultation site to solve an increasingly irritating thus recurring problem.

The meeting place was well selected. It was situated high up on a mountain terrace overlooking the entire valley and most of its villages. And most significantly the selected spot was in direct sight of the key ritual site in the valley. At this holy stone circle called Cemmo with various monoliths fully covered with engravings they prayed to their gods and got in contact with their ancestors. Everybody had finally arrived and settled down around the fire.

The chief stood at the corner of the steep slope and looked over the numerous small clan villages, which he could identify by their long trails of smoke from their fireplaces. In anticipation the elders

watched him and waited quietly what he had to say. They knew it must be something very important, as he was so calm and stood there deeply wrapped in thought. Overlooking the valley he suddenly had the idea, which could solve the problem once



and for ever and at best cast in stone. He was certain the gods had followed his thoughts and gave him this brilliant solution here on the spot. The problem he needed to solve was the regular fighting about the borders of territories and farming fields.

### First Neolithic Maps?

Every year after flash floods the marked field borders disappeared and often the riverbed moved too. He turned to the elders and pointed at the large bare bedrock behind them. We are engraving this rock with the borders of all fields, he announced. And when there is a dispute in future, we come here to remark our flooded and disappeared fields.

They were surprised about this ideal permanent solution and without further discussions nodded in consent. This is how it could have happened, but experts are still not really certain, if the huge engravings found at the Bedolina site really represent topographic maps.

The huge layouts with numerous lines, dotted spaces and many other motifs give the engravings

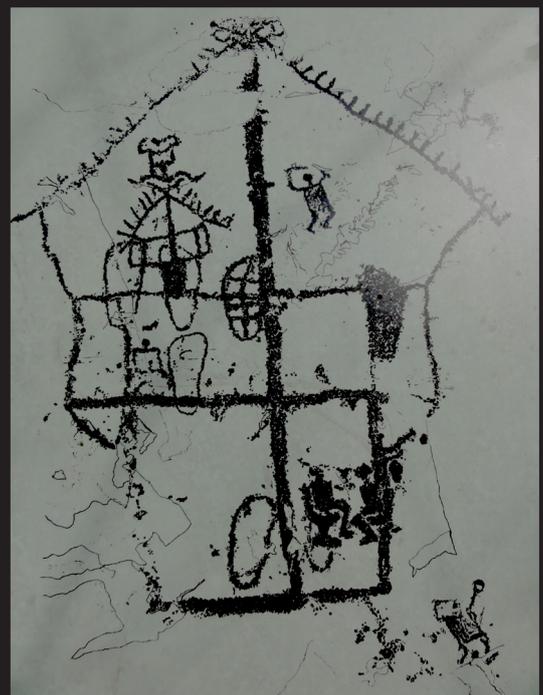
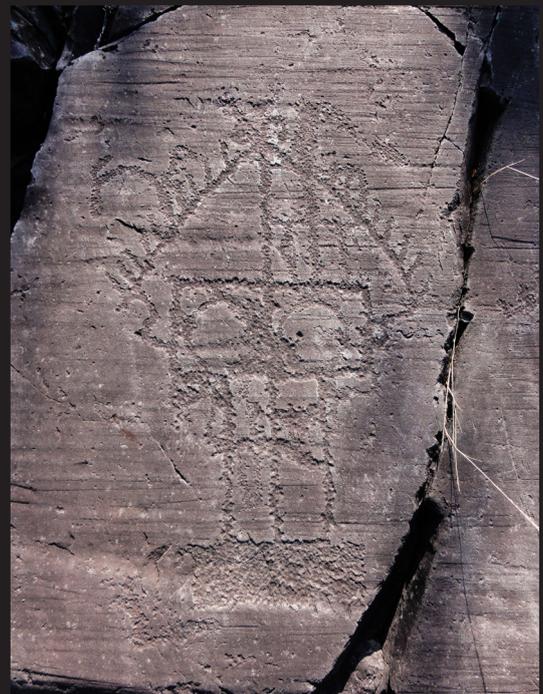


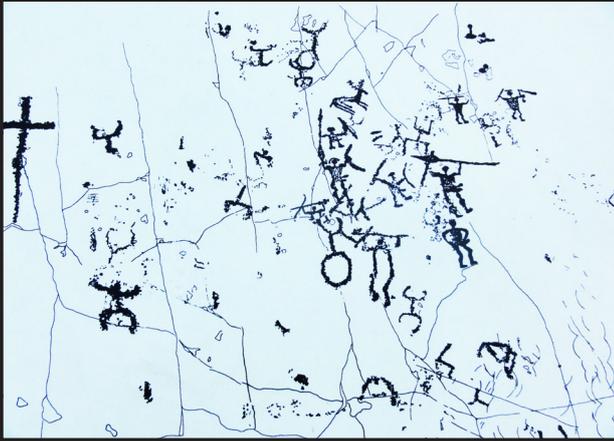
the look of a map. But the final proof is still missing. If it is true, they were possibly the world's first detailed regional maps having been created about 4,000 years ago.

### Living 5,000 Years Ago?

But please look at the pictures for yourself and see if you could agree, or come to your own different interpretation. The assumed maps and the house like looking images are the most intriguing and thought provoking motifs found at Val Camonica and are also unique to the area.

When you want to understand the meaning and myth of rock art, you have to take a huge step back in history. Play the mind game





with me and just imagine you are in the place of the Ice Man living over 5,000 years ago also called "Ötzi" after the mountain range he was discovered at.

One thing is sure, you have to have totally different priorities to be able to survive. There is no social structure of any kind like state welfare or insurances. Your family and clan are the most important things in our pre-historic life. Second comes your animal herd and the most precious possessions are your hunting gear and weapons to defend yourself against common attacks.

These items all have to be hand made by yourself. It is hard work to get in a good harvest from your small fields and sometimes it is a fight for survival against the elements. Your only transport is on foot and you have to produce everything you and your family need and consume.

And finally you try to imagine you would be wearing the Ice Man's clothing. Please refer for more details to the Ice Man article on this website. Now you will get the picture of pre-historic life and rock art images suddenly get more comprehensible. Rock art is next to the spoken word the only way of communication and is understood by all speaking many different regional languages and dialects.

But now beam back into today's reality and find out what there is to discover at Val Camonica. And how fascinating these engravings really are and what story they can tell you after this imaginative exercise.

### Massive Engraving Activity

The Neolithic sites found in the valley offer 10,000 years of steady engraving activity with constant, but different intensities of creations including Bronze and Iron Age.

The oldest images are found in the southern part at Luine and are about 15,000 years old. They are not the oldest in Europe, but nevertheless of great significance to experts studying the purpose and meaning of rock art.

Imagine Val Camonica became the first UNESCO World Heritage site in Italy, even before Rome was listed. Today it has eight parks, which can be visited. The most important being the National Park of Naquane in the valley's center at the town of Ponte di Capo, which also was the first National Park in Italy.

All this was achieved through the "Father" of pre-historic rock art in Europe Italian born Emmanuel Anati.

### Fascinating History

About hundred years ago the first reference was made to a cult site, a ritual

circle of twelve carved stelae and engraved boulders, which today is called Cemmo. But only after 5,000 BC the so-called "Neolithic Revolution" could be attested in the valley. This change from hunter-gatherer societies to permanent settlers arrived here late and needed 5,000 years to move from the "Fertile Crescent" in Mesopotamia to Europe.

It was an important cultural and total lifestyle change for the Val Camonians. It included for the first time farming activities, animal domestication and breeding, and also the production and use of pottery, weaving, construction of stone houses, plus the critical knowledge of metallurgy to produce better tools and weapons. The famous Ice Man lived during the same period only hundred kilometers further north.

### Local Geography

The valley of Camonica stretches over 70 km south of the Alps and is situated about 40 km north of the city of Brescia. The rock art rich area starts north of Lake Iseo. Most petroglyphs are found on a 25 km stretch in the middle section of the valley. Most large rock art areas with multiple bedrock surfaces are close to each other and indicate various Neolithic settlement areas.

The highest concentration of rock





art are found around the villages of Capo di Ponte, Luine, Sellero and Ceto. Capo di Ponte is a small typical north Italian town and the center with the Naquane National Park and a new museum, worth visiting. Most sites are situated at an altitude from 200 to 1,400 meters, few lie at a maximum of 2,000 meters altitude.

I spend a full week here with the help and direction of a local archaeologist hiking up the slopes on both sides of the beautiful valley to explore fascinating spots with stunning views over the valley, which even rock art enthusiasts like me seldom see.

### Dating Rock Art

The oldest engraved image

at Luine is a large elk figure measuring about one meter. From 4,000 BC engraving activity increased dramatically. Rock art is primarily dated by motifs and engraving techniques. Most images were created by pecking with pointed hammer stones and later during the Bronze Age with first metal chisel tools.

But most motifs were created during the Iron Age in the Camuni Period. In the valley we also find many new so far unknown motifs, as well as superimposed creations. But we still do not know, who were the creators of these engravings and for which occasion and reason were they hammered in stone?

Sure there are many theories, but we only know that later the population in the valley had contact with Etruscan, Celtic, Veneti and Raetian cultures, which influenced some of their motifs and engraved representations. At that time a few short inscriptions were also added.

### Purpose of Rock Art

Neolithic rock art had a multitude of purposes, such as: cult rituals, meditation, myth, clan identity, wealth demonstration, prestige, memory recordings, funerary purposes, initiation ceremonies and teaching the young. There is a strong relationship at Val Camonica of image, the position in the overall composition



on the rock and the landscape. It was also a universal communication instrument understood by everyone across any language borders.

It is assumed engravings were created by selected few during celebratory, commemorative, initiation or propitiatory rituals. These special purpose creations included hundreds of images engraved on a single huge bedrock surface, such as on Rock 34 at Luine, Rock 1 at Naquane, Rock 27 at Foppe di Nardo, Rock 2 at Carpena Sello and Rock 12 at Seradina.

These five examples are some of the largest engraved bedrock surfaces in the valley with up to 1,000 images and motifs on a single rock. It is a pre-historic recording or better history book, which unfortunately we cannot yet fully interpret and comprehend.

### Images & Motifs

Val Camonica engravings are defined by various concepts, topics, styles, subjects, techniques and the careful selection of places. From 5,000 BC we see the evolution from religious to secular motives.



During the Neolithic Period to the Copper Age motifs are focused on religious concepts of sun, universe and fertility cults.

During the Bronze and Iron Age secular concepts with warrior celebration, prestige and values take over. Various images could be interpreted as male initiation rituals, such as hunting scenes.

Duels could be interpreted as possible weapons training as they only depict two persons equipped with the same weapons and defensive gear such as helmets and shields. Certain scenes even show sportive actions or acrobatics on horseback with standing riders.

Experts believe that female initiation is only depicted by symbols, such as foot prints, shovels and looms, possibly even the "Camunian Rose". Unfortunately no scenes with detailed acts were engraved as part of the compositions.

Therefore we have no knowledge about ceremonies, its actors and the creators of engravings. Humans and animals were engraved in both naturalistic and schematic style. We can distinguish two figurative trends, praying humans with raised arms and topographical maps. About the age of praying figures there

are still controversial opinions being discussed by rock art experts.

Some believe they are Neolithic and about 5,000 years old, or from the Bronze to Iron Age, that means they would be around 2,000 year younger. But possibly the symbol image of praying figures or so-called "adorants" was

used for the same purpose for a long time in all these periods.

But new research results show more thematic distribution patterns. For example great warriors concentrated at Paspardo, radiant helmed warriors at Zurla-Ceto, and the archaeological proven deer god Kernunnos at Naquane. It is close to certain that there were other sacred areas with further still unknown deities.

### Sequence & Phases

A relative chronology of motifs and styles has been established. In the beginning only deer and elk were created by hunter-gatherer clans. From 4,000 BC onwards during the period of early settlers petroglyph creation took off with different motifs important





to their new lifestyle.

A Second Phase started during the Copper Age when ritual circles were erected with engraved monoliths used as ceremonial sites and religious sanctuaries. Engravings on these monoliths or stelae included two types of motifs weapons and fertility symbols. They represented male or female depictions.

Weapons were always arranged in vertical order, possibly indicating their mass production or military strength. About 100 stelae or fragments thereof were found in the valley. These monoliths are interpreted to represent deities or deified ancestors.

The Third Phase started with the Bronze Age with new complex social structures, stable settlements and long distance trade. The possession of metallurgic knowhow gave power and created wealth through trade. This was also the time and change from burial to cremation. During the Late Bronze Age the first warrior images appear.

The Fourth Phase started with the Iron Age or Camuni Period onwards. It was the most creative

rock art phase, about 60% was created with the largest diversity, complexity and evolution of shapes. Warrior images are the most prominent motif including hunting and duels scenes. These are explained in more detail in Part II.

We see also hunters with bow and arrow, but only few men on horseback. Later more static warrior figures were created with square bodies, possibly indicating body armor as a next step of metallurgical development.

Next to horses, deer, hunting dogs, birds and domesticated goats, buildings and agricultural scenes with ploughing, horse drawn wagons became a common motif.

#### Few Settlements Found

Neolithic settlements in the valley could be attested over all periods at various sites. They were often

erected on elevations, which are easy to defend, as well as at strategic points to control the trade routes passing through the valley. But unfortunately they are too few with little archaeological evidence found which could be linked and help to explain rock art images and compositions.

#### Important Cult Sites

So far nine different cult sites with over 100 monolith or stelae were found, dating from the Copper and Bronze Age to the Iron Age with some attested use still during Roman times. These include Bagnolo Ceresolo, Cemmo, Cevo, Corni Freschi, Foppe di Nardo, Ossimo Anvoia, Ossimo Pat, Ossimo Plasagrop and Paspardo La Bolp. Monolith or menhirs were used for funerary purposes and represented ancestors or clan founders.

Cult circles certainly were places of worship and oracle, because female symbols and sun disks point to fertility. Cemmo is certainly the most important, but recent excavations have brought new interesting facts to light at Pat. These give it a new significance because the findings explain in more detail the ceremonial use





and value of cult sites in the valley.

Valtellina Valley was in the past thought to be only a “province” of the Camonica Valley. But more recently the two areas are seen as one culture because of its similarities in motifs. It has also become one of the most important sites for Copper Age monolith or menhirs in Europe. This we will explain in more detail in Part II.

### Burial Sites

Only few burial sites were found, possibly most were destroyed through building activity in the last hundred years, when archaeology had little importance. Normally burials were done in caves or under natural rock shelters. Most were collective burial places also using secondary depositions.

Some small stone mounds exist at Ossimo Pat and a necropolis was excavated at Breno Val Morina dating back to 500 BC. Later burial practices changed to cremation.

### Camuni Tribe

The first tribe mentioned by ancient historian Strabo living in the valley was the Camuni Tribe. He described them as socially well organized and divided into various social classes. The ruling chief had all power,

but warriors and priests enjoyed a special position.

The Camuni were known as a superior warrior tribe using iron weapons and living in fortified villages. For their weapons they mined and produced iron in mass and were masters of a well-developed metal technology including smelting and forging. So they produced swords, daggers, knives, lances and iron tools.

Their houses were built from stone and timber and they even established a simple road network. So they could use for their extensive farming activities ploughs and four wheel carts for transport of their harvests.



The Camuni people were excellent farmers, breeders and herders. From the Bronze Age onwards they created the majority of engravings and used iron tools. For them rock art was a secular and cultural message.

Their inscriptions have unfortunately not yet been deciphered. Normally they consist of single words representing names of people, warriors or deities. So the inscriptions are too short to be able to be deciphered, despite the fact that their alphabet is similar to the North Etruscan.

Other known alphabets discovered in northern Italy are Bolzano or Raetian, Magre, Veneti and Lepontic. Finally depictions of Celtic gods show trade ties with Gallic tribes living in southern flatlands.

### Lago Moro - Luine Park

This is the most ancient site in the valley with over 100 engraved rocks and is situated on a mountain terrace above today's spa city of Darfo Boario Terme. Here the oldest human traces from hunting tribes were found and date back 17,000 years ago.

Luine like most important pre-historic sites close to Neolithic settlements, has a high concentration of rock art engraved again on the



typical large bedrock surfaces. These were grinded flat by glaciers and made these surfaces ideal for engravings.

The most ancient rock art in Val Camonica is found here and is about 15,000 years old. The most famous Epi-Paleolithic images are found on Rock 6 & 34 in the park. The huge elk and one meter long deer wounded by a spear or arrow with backwards turned head was created by our ancestors over 10,000 years ago.

For comparison that happened 5,000 years before the Ice Man "Ötzi" lived. Certainly it was a sacred ceremonial hill site with a wide variety of motifs including various human figures in adoring position with raised arms or armed warriors in fighting scenes and armed horsemen. Their weapons include axes, daggers, halberds, spears and shields. They were created as single figures or in groups.

Interesting are also the numerous geometrical figures and symbols, which invite many theories about their purpose and meaning. They include abstract signs, dots, wavy or straight lines and foot prints. Rectangular shapes are often decorated inside. In addition we see here also maze shapes, long lines, grooves, cup marks and rare circles. The short

alphabetic inscriptions are of Camuni origin.

### What To Expect In Part II

In the second part of our Val Camonica rock art article we will cover the Capo di Ponte area in more detail. This will include the Naquane National Park, famous Cemmo Cult Circle and rich in rock art Seradina-Bedolina Park plus the areas on the eastern valley side of Foppe di Nardo and higher up Cimbergo and Paspardo.

We also will illuminate the purpose of the intriguing house like images plus the interpretation of the fascinating warrior depictions. And we will also focus on the excavation results and new findings of monolithic cult sites such as Cemmo and Ossimo Pat.



### 3D "Pitoti" Project

The most modern digital techniques are used today to document all 400,000 Val Camonica depictions. The aim is to find out common symbols and styles, plus to establish with certainty the sequence of image and motif creations.

This technique also makes the filiform very fine sub-millimeter scratching depictions visible, as well as highly eroded rock art. We are looking forward to these new findings and future publications.

### Conclusion

This is the most important rock art area in Europe with numerous unique motifs only to be found here. The region must have been inhabited at the time by various clans and over a long period. Because the engravings cover a period of over 15,000 years right into the Roman Empire.

It is a pity that various new interesting interpretations of Val Camonica rock art are not published as long as the father of European rock art E. Anati is still directing the local archaeological authority and disapproves of the results of these new findings.