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The Mind of the Shepherds Five Centuries of History Told by the Rocks of the Fiemme Valley

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Abstract

Mount Cornón in the Fiemme Valley (Eastern Trentino, Northern Italy) was subject to intensive use in a local economy based on forestry, agriculture and animal farming. Through the centuries the shepherds working in this area left thousands of inscriptions on the rock using red ochre. There are initials, family symbols, acronyms, dates, names, livestock tallies, portrayals of animals, greetings and short anecdotes. What is surprising is the shepherds' ability to write before the first literacy schools in the valley were established. The resulting visual effect is that of a painted mountain, which looks like other rock art contexts of the Alps such as, for instance, Valcamonica in Lombardy or Monte Bego in France; but there the writings are engraved on the rocks. The ongoing historical-ethnographic and ethno-archaeological research on the rock art sites of Mount Cornón by the Museo degli Usi e Costumi della Gente Trentina aims to reveal the circumstances of pastoral life in the Fiemme valley over the last five centuries and, thus, to discover the particular socio-economic and cultural context that brought the writings into being.

Keywords: *Ethno-Archaeology, Fiemme Valley, Rock Art, Shepherd's Writings, Trentino – Northern Italy*

1. Introduction

It is a thousand-year old history that is painted on the rocks of Mount Cornón¹ in the Fiemme valley (figure 1). When the shepherds, from the villages or the valley bottom, used to bring their flocks to the high pastures, they would take paths along steep slopes to reach the grassland, or at least some grassy canyon or flat ground, to exploit the grass resources the mountain could offer to the full. In their passages the shepherds wanted to leave a trace of themselves on the rock by writing their initials or their signature, a date, a sum, some greetings, or an anecdote using a red ochre found on the same mountain (figure 2). However, what is

¹ Mount Cornón (see figure 1), which has a maximum altitude of 2,189 metres, is composed of three distinct mountains. From West to East we find: Mount Cornón, as it is properly called, Mount Pizancae and Mount Pelenzana.

the meaning of this writing? Why did the shepherds write? What was their motivation? An ethno-archaeological investigation, carried out between 2007 and 2017, tried to find an answer to these questions.



Figure 1 – Mount Cornón in the Fiemme Valley. Photo by Laura Gasperi.
Courtesy of Museo degli Usi e Costumi della Gente Trentina



Figure 2 – Mount Cornón – Cava dal Bol LXIII.
Courtesy of Museo degli Usi e Costumi della Gente Trentina

2. The Writings

Spread over an area of about 6,400 hectares, the inscriptions are concentrated on the rocky walls above the residential areas of the villages of Tesero, Panchià, Ziano di Fiemme and Predazzo. More precisely, they are in the altitudinal range between the last fields assigned to agriculture and the high elevation grasslands assigned to haymaking. The inscriptions are found in those parts of the mountain related to grazing or mountain pasture, in particular rock shelters, ledges, rock faces, or near some springs, where the shepherd used to wait for the flock to graze or take a break before reaching the higher pastures; and on a mountain as rugged as the Cornón, the places to take a break were always the same, so that, as time passed, it is precisely in those spots that large painted friezes originated, such as the *Coròsso dai Nomi*, the *Coròsso da l'Aqua* or the *Coròsso da la Palestra*, which look like large frescoes with great visual impact (figure 3).



Figure 3 – Mount Cornón – *Coròsso dai Nomi I*: detail of the writings on the wall
 Courtesy of Museo degli Usi e Costumi della Gente Trentina

If at first sight the writings simply seem to mark the transit of shepherds, on a more careful reading they represent a sort of 'stone archive' from which one can reconstruct the memory of a past that has left no trace in coeval written documents as regards the daily life and most intimate moods not only of shepherds, but also of hunters, haymakers and miners, who passed through the mountains for various reasons.

There are 2,730 painted walls identified in the Cornón group, all of them located between 1,200 and 2,000 metres above sea level: i.e., below the pastures traditionally intended for haymaking and above the cultivated land just outside the residential area. The shepherds were supposed to graze community flocks there, being careful not to damage the land reserved for other subsistence activities. This spatial organization reflected an intentionally intense exploitation of the territory and a strict regulation of the use of community resources.

The information about the pastoralism of the Fiemme valley that can be gathered from 47,700 writings includes, in addition to the chronology (present in 24,389 inscriptions, 51.12%), the name and surname of the shepherds writing in 1,511 cases (3.16%). In 34,528 inscriptions (72.38%) writers left only their initials, sometimes together with the family sign (9,644, 20.21%), so as to be better identified by readers. This family sign² (called *noda*) was very important in the past for marking sheep as well as wooden tools and equipment used in collective activities (Bazzanella and Kezich 2013; Bazzanella *et al.* 2013a). In 289 cases (0.6%), the shepherds also wrote the name of the village they were coming from: mainly villages in the valley, but also from the near by Fassa valley; Primiero, Falcade, Belluno, Enego, Pejo in the Sole valley; and the Non valley. Exactly 3,111 inscriptions (6.52%) included counts of animals grazing. Of these 2,409 (5.05%) display a count of goats, 2,482 (5.2%) a count of sheep and 208 (0.43%) a count of young goats. The sheep were bred for their wool. Therefore, they didn't need to be milked and they could follow the shepherd for a long time away from the villages: from late spring through all summer and autumn and, if the ground did not freeze, also in winter. The writings are sometimes completed with *historiolae*, short messages (greetings and dedications) included to provide more information about the moods of the shepherds, which recur in 1,912 writings (4.00%) and represent a unique heritage to trace the historical memory of the more recent past of pastoralism. Lastly, there are assorted drawings (pictograms: 4,778, 10.01%) of animals and human figures, sacred symbols, buildings, plants and doodles (table 1).

² Regarding family or 'house' signs see also: Zug Tucci 1982; Gri 1990-1991; Isabella 1995; Bernardin 2015. The function of these symbols was to mark the private property as opposed to public. These signs resemble heraldic symbols, but unlike the latter, they were used by all social classes and their origin is more ancient. The illiterate employed them to be able to identify the property they owned. Their function was limited to the community area in which they had been generated.

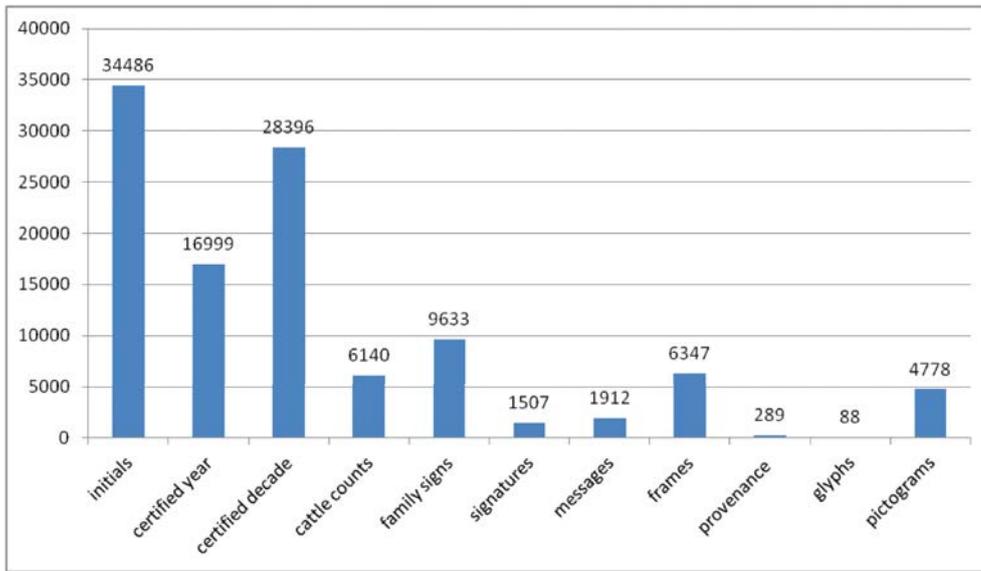


Table 1 – Mount Cornón: types of writings

2.1 *The Chronology of the Writings*

The shepherds' writing activity on the rocky walls of mount Cornón is documented from the second half of the fifteenth century up to the mid-twentieth century, in other words to the end of 'traditional' society when industrialization attracted to the bigger towns a considerable amount of workers and contributed to depopulating the mountain (figure 4).

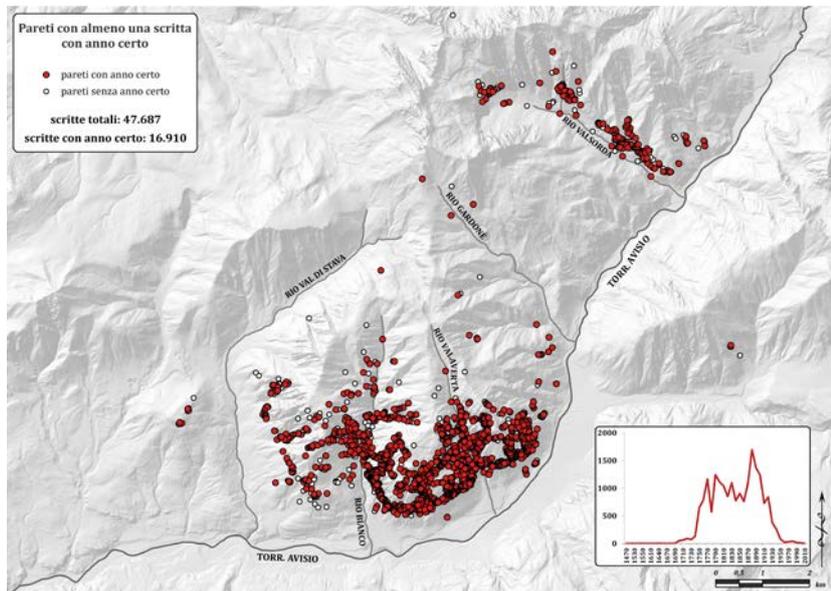


Figure 4 – Mount Cornón: spatial distribution of the walls with writings and chronology. Graphic processing by Roberta Covi. Courtesy of Museo degli Usi e Costumi della Gente Trentina

Few writings are dated before the end of the sixteenth century (11) and their low number until the end of the seventeenth century, only 21, is certainly due to the daily and unstoppable exposure of the rocky supports to rain, sunlight and frost. These conditions have inexorably compromised the readability of all the writings, even the most recent ones, that have not been protected in some way from water and sun. We can therefore hypothesize that the low number of writings before the first half of the eighteenth century is due to the low demographic rate of the valley and also to the low literacy rate of the shepherds (Silvestrini 1982; Sartori Montecroce *et al.* 2002). Conversely, the production of the largest number of writings, from the second half of the eighteenth century until the end of the nineteenth century, coincides with the period of the most intense exploitation of the mountain by the communities of the valley bottom. It is certainly due to a demographic increase and to the Teresian school reform (1774) that was aimed at giving a basic education to all without distinction of class or sex (Vadagnini 1998; Antonelli 2001; 2013).

The oldest inscription on mount Cornón dates back to 12 June 1470. It was left just above the village of Ziano by a shepherd with 'JBZ' as initials, who was guarding 170 sheep. This inscription was very difficult to identify, due to how faded it was, and has been made legible only through digital image processing. Almost six centuries separate us from this writing, but even just this one indicates that the custom of painting the rock in this area is very old, perhaps much older than this date.

The second oldest writing dates back to the first half of the sixteenth century (1527) and is located on the base of one of the two huts in Valboneta, right at the edge of the area destined for making hay, which were built to accommodate those making hay and shepherds after the end of hay making.

Among the most ancient writings, there is a group of inscriptions dated to 1558. The rocky wall where they have been painted is now located in the territory of Panchià but at that time was part of the village of Tesero. In 1558 we are still far away from the separation of the settlements of Panchià and Ziano from Tesero, which occurred in 1780. About the author of the inscriptions, who left five records of his passage, we know only the initials 'BA' of the name and 'T' of the surname. We don't know anything else about him except that he decided to enclose two of his five writings in linear frames.³ In one of these he made a dotted decoration, creating a sort of background to better bring out his identity, and in one of the others he surmounted the frame with a cross decorated with a point above and below the two arms and enclosed in a circle. In the writings the initials of the author's name and surname are followed by the abbreviation 'FL', which stands for 'FATTO L'ANNO'⁴ and means 'made in the year' (figure 5). Almost all these writings have been affected by the passage of time: frost has made small portions of the rocky support come away here and there, which has significantly compromised the image.

With a closer look at the details of the 47,705 writings that were found in the Fiemme valley, it was possible to sort them by their features and period of execution to facilitate understanding

³ I use the masculine pronoun because the shepherds were predominantly men. However, in 18 cases in the inscriptions of Mount Cornón women's writings are also documented.

⁴ These abbreviations are very common in alpine popular epigraphy (Antonelli 2006; Bettega forthcoming). They are exhibited in the villages of the valley bottom on the architraves of houses, haylofts, stables or huts (and also outside and inside the churches and on aedicules). They must be understood as part of *riti di soglia* ('ancient threshold rites') carried out in search of protection (Fillipetti and Trotterau 1978). Yet more symbols can be interpreted in the same way, such as the sacred heart, the cross, the Calvary, the trigraph of Christ, the monogram of Mary, the rose of fortune, the wheel symbolism of the sun (all very frequent on the rocks of Mount Cornón).

of them. In their typology, the writings have a variability that makes it possible to distinguish, at first sight, two groups: the writings realized before the first half of the nineteenth century and the writings made after then (Bazzanella *et al.* 2014).



Figure 5 – Mountain building with the writing 'FATTO L'ANNO'. Photo by Marta Bazzanella.
Courtesy of Museo degli Usi e Costumi della Gente Trentina

2.2 *The Writings of the First Period*

In the first group, the oldest, dated to some time before 1850, the writings are essentially composed of initials, abbreviations, dates, family symbols and counts of livestock. The author is hardly recognizable except through the family sign, and the writing space is surrounded by a frame, often creating a sort of small votive shrine surmounted by a cross, or characterized by a full-colour background (figure 6) in which the writing appears as a kind of negative. These stereotypical writings seem to express the clear desire by the author to mark the territory, to leave a trace of his passage. The mastery of writing is not yet evident (Baggio 2013) so that for the authors of this period we can only speak of a primitive literacy.

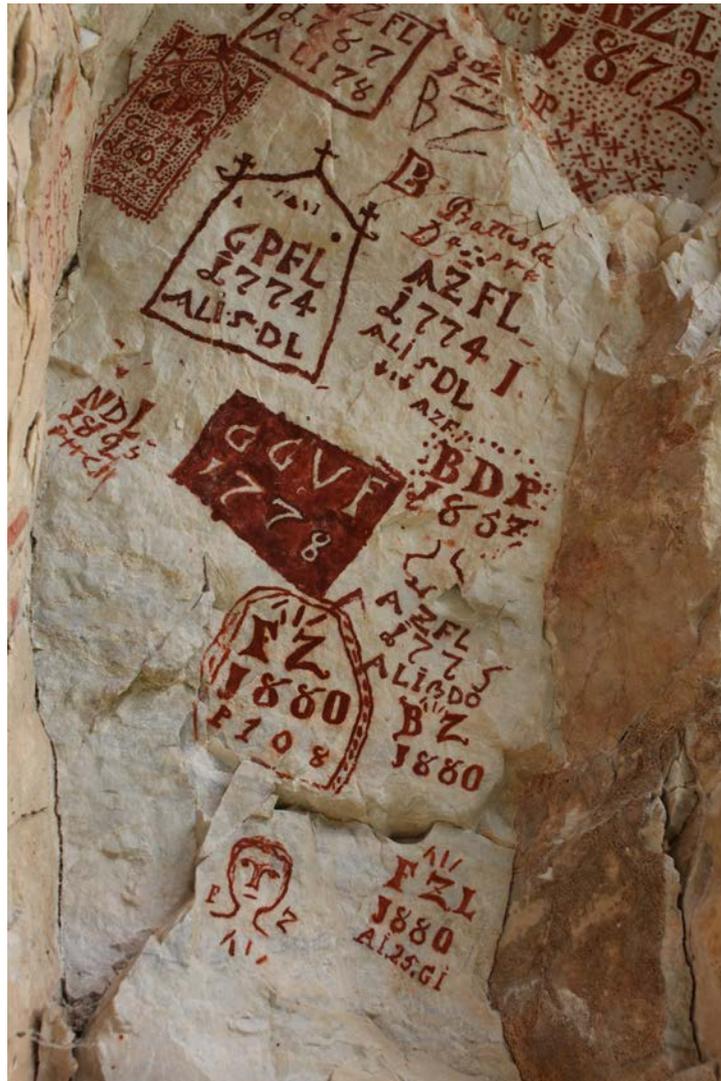


Figure 6 – Fiemme Valley, Mount Cornón: example of writing of the first period.
Courtesy of Museo degli Usi e Costumi della Gente Trentina

2.3 *The Writings of the Second Period*

In the second group of writings, dated to some time after 1850, the initials and the family signs often give way to the author's full name, frequently completed by an indication of his municipality of origin. Furthermore, brief descriptions of the days spent in the mountains begin to appear, accompanied by anecdotes that seek to convey events such as weather condition, a search for a lost sheep, great effort, fatigue and happy, or less happy, moods. In the late twentieth century messages of a public nature appear, reflecting the great political events of the time. In this period, the authors of the writings show well-established mastery in writing (figures 7, 7a).



Figure 7 – Fiemme Valley, Mount Cornón: example of writing of the second period.
 Courtesy of Museo degli Usi e Costumi della Gente Trentina



Figure 7a – Example of a political writing on the rocks of Mount Cornón. You can read: 'AZINO F.D. Zorzalin 23/10/18 [...] fine della guerra mondiale cola disfata dei Todeci EVIVA SAV[...] Po[...] ('end of the world war with the defeat of the Germans HURRAY'. On the top of the writing someone else wrote: donkey).
 Courtesy of Museo degli Usi e Costumi della Gente Trentina

3. *Society and Economy in the Fiemme Valley Between the Mid-Sixteenth Century and the Mid-Nineteenth Century*

The history of pastoralism in the Fiemme valley is inseparable from that of the *Magnifica Comunità di Fiemme* and its member villages, which have been able to preserve their independence and the governance of their territory over the centuries, proving great ability in self-regulation. The *Magnifica Comunità di Fiemme*, whose origin dates back to the late Middle Ages, manages a collective patrimony founded on a vast territory of about 200 square kilometres, of which over 110 are kept as woods, whose management is entrusted to elected representatives. Considering the traditional economy of the valley, based on tillage, forestry and grazing, a wise collective management of the resources was necessary for the sustenance and development of the local communities in the harsh mountain environment (Netting 1981). The *Magnifica Comunità di Fiemme* was born in the first place to allow the use and the protection of these common assets. The main purposes were in fact to prevent the attempts by higher authorities to seize the resources, to defend them from the negligence of the local populations and to regulate their use, by those entitled, in order to guarantee their best possible exploitation and preservation (Degiampietro 1997; Giordani and Zancanella 2008).

Pastoralism was also strictly controlled by local institutions: by the municipalities, through the respective *Società di Malghe e Pascoli* (Mountain Pastures and Dairy Societies), and by the *Magnifica Comunità di Fiemme* which used to manage the community's properties. From the twelfth century the documents preserved in the archive of the *Magnifica Comunità* (Bonazza and Taiani 1999; Sartori Montecroce *et al.* 2002), testify to the custom of exploiting the common parts with annual rotations, according to a specific division of the mountain pastures.

The rights for the communal exploitation of the high pastures, which also existed in other contexts in the Alps, although with different arrangements, were ratified in the Fiemme valley in 1315 by Prince Bishop Henry of Metz with the so-called 'Privilegio Enriciano'.⁵ The rights of members included the opportunity to obtain free firewood and wood to repair or construct houses, fences, work tools etc., which still exists today. This document lists all mountains, pastures and woods belonging to the *Magnifica Comunità di Fiemme*. The same paper confirms two hundred year-old rights such as the right to graze, to harvest timber, to hunt and fish. From the beginning of the twelfth century, we can therefore refer to the *Magnifica Comunità di Fiemme* as a collective institution, recognized by the ecclesiastical authorities and provided with self-given rules regulating its management and the exploitation of lands and woods (Sartori Montecroce *et al.* 2002). Woods, pastures and huts were exploited in rotation by the villages according to a hundred year-old alpine custom. This partitioning lasted until 1847 when rotation was cancelled (Giordani 2016; 2018).

From the regulations known as 'regolamenti d'uso delle malghe' (regulations for the use of the mountain pastures) and 'quaderni d'onori per l'affittanza delle malghe' (notebooks for renting the mountain pastures and dairy), it is often evident that the job of the shepherd was prestigious in traditional society,⁶ and was very far from the relative marginalization of the last decades brought about by abandonment of the primary sector in favour of more profitable service industry, related

⁵The roots of *Magnifica Comunità di Fiemme* hail from a long time ago. During the fourteenth century, Henry of Metz (1310-1336) Prince Bishop of Trento issued a document confirming the community's ownership of the land: it is the so-called 'Privilegio Enriciano' (Degiampietro 1975; Giordani and Zancanella 2008).

⁶As pointed out by the shepherds during the interviews (Delladio 2015).

to tourism and craftsmanship (Giacomoni 1991).⁷ A man needed to benefit from the trust of the community to be appointed shepherd of the collective flock by the *Società di Malghe e Pascoli* (there was one society for each municipality), according to established rules and practices.

At the beginning of the warm season, the main task of the shepherds was to keep the flock in the range above the inhabited areas, between the last cultivated land and the fields reserved for haymaking, respecting the boundaries of the assigned lots and all the *bandi di pascolo* (grazing bans) that the forest management required. The goats and the sheep had to wait until the meadows on the summits had been mowed, grazing in the meantime only in the intermediate areas of the mountain, at lower altitudes, between 1,200 and 1,900 metres. Between the end of August and the beginning of September, after the seasonal mowing, goats and sheep had all the grassy area for themselves for the remaining summer period and until late autumn, when the arrival of the first snow or the first frosts would mark the end of the grazing. Whether the shepherds with their flocks were in the intermediate areas of the mountain or, towards the end of summer, in the high elevation fields, in both cases they would stay in the mountains overnight, using huts commonly called *bàiti* (huts), when available, or rock shelters. The southern slopes of the Cornón are in fact characterized, above the villages, by steep sub-vertical walls shaped by selective erosion, and there are many shelters and niches created by both the effect of gravity, due to the detachment of materials from the base of the walls, and the influence of karst processes. In some of these shelters (Bazzanella 2012), it is still possible to find evidence of past human presence, such as remains of hearths and dry-stone walls, related to the search for protection against the hardships of the weather, given that the steep terrain did not allow the construction of wood or masonry huts.

Finally, the area of Mount Cornón became a heavily exploited area, strictly controlled in carrying out its economic activities.

4. *The Writings of the Prisons*

In the Fiemme valley, the custom of 'exhibited writing' is not limited to the rocks of Mount Cornón or the houses of the villages of the valley bottom. Writing on churches and buildings was a widespread practice, as can be witnessed thanks to recent restorations. A special case in the valley is that of the prisons of the palace of the *Magnifica Comunità di Fiemme*. On the doors and on the walls of the cells, located in the basement of its historic building in Cavalese, about 500 writings of prisoners were documented thanks to restorations (Delugan 2013).

Four cells and the rooms in front of each one (ante-cells) exhibited writings dating back to the period between 1838 and 1902, i.e. from the moment the Bishop of Trent rented the building to the *Giudizio Distrettuale di Cavalese* (administrative and judicial district) until the Community of Fiemme purchased it a few decades later.⁸ In most cases, the crimes were of violence and against property.⁹

As on the rock walls of Mount Cornón, here names, dates, short annotations, drawings, information on the village of origin or profession of the writer, devotional messages, proverbs, insults, messages of love, erotic thoughts and the causes and the period of detention also recur

⁷ In the past ten years, many foreign shepherds, mainly Romanian, have replaced the locals, here as elsewhere, even though recently young people seem to have become interested in returning to this economic activity.

⁸ The episcopal principality of Trent ended at the beginning of the nineteenth century, as a consequence of Napoleon's invasion; thus, the Bavarian government turned the palace into a courthouse for the Fiemme, Fassa and Primiero valleys. The cells were used up to the end of that century (Degiampietro 1997; Giordani and Zancanella 2008).

⁹ The research conducted at the Cavalese court archive (Delugan 2013) did not document the presence of shepherds among prisoners.

(figure 8). Among the drawings there are crosses, sacred hearts, female images, human figures both male and female, plants, animals, buildings and work tools. The writing is mostly done with a pencil, but can also be carved, engraved or stamped, in this case generally on the wooden covering of the walls, probably using tools like awls, nails or knives that escaped the prison's apparently not very strict supervision. Only one inscription, located on the brick wall of one of the ante-cells, was made with *ból*, the same pigment used by the shepherds on the Cornón.

Taken together, the writings of the prisoners¹⁰ recall those of the shepherds of Mount Cornón, as they share the same feelings of self-assertion and self-representation of men relegated for long periods in isolated (subordinate) places far from their original social context.



Figure 8 – Cavalese, the prisons of the *Magnifica Comunità di Fiemme*. A: ante-cell. B: writings on the wooden walls of the prisons. Courtesy of Museo degli Usi e Costumi della Gente Trentina

5. *The Ethno-Archaeological Research*

To better outline the meaning of the high concentration of pastoral writings on Mount Cornón, ethno-archaeological research was conducted, based on the one hand on an ethnographic interview of the last shepherds of the Fiemme valley and, on the other, on the archaeological investigation of the deposits of two rock shelters, identified through the interviews, to define the human presence in a diachronic perspective (Bazzanella *et al.* 2012; Bazzanella *et al.* 2013b; Bazzanella and Kezich 2013; Bazzanella *et al.* 2016).

The first shelter, the *Trato*, is situated above Ziano di Fiemme (figure 9) at an altitude of 1,550m, at the base of a rock wall, up to 100m high, interrupted to the east by a steep and partially grassed canyon. The site is located along one of the main access roads to the Cornón high

¹⁰ As regards the prisoners' writings, see also (Lombroso 1888; Pastore *et al.* 1990; Setti 2008).

pastures, which were off-limits until the mowing had occurred, and above the cultivated land, in the altitudinal range where most of the writings are found. The shelter, whose dimensions are of 17 square metres, is placed far from any water source and was therefore used only for short amounts of time, as interviewees emphasized. Fires were lit mainly to warm up and dry clothes during rainy days, not for cooking, as the shepherds, when it was possible, used to spend the night in the *bàiti*, used as base camps (Bazzanella and Wierer 2013). They would sleep outside only when they were too far away to return before the end of the day or in the summer, when the *bàiti* were used by haymakers.



Figure 9 – Ziano di Fiemme – the *Tiuto* shelter: the frieze and the excavation. Photo by Marta Bazzanella. Courtesy of Museo degli Usi e Costumi della Gente Trentina

A more careful analysis of the writings of the shelter made it possible to better outline its characteristics from both a chronological and a content point of view and to make a small report of local history. The frieze consists of 68 writings, more than half of which (38) are chronologically defined. The oldest inscription dates back to 1717, the most recent to 1901. The second half of the eighteenth century was a time of more intense use of the place (with 25 writings made by 17 different shepherds). During the first half of the 1800s, the graffiti activity is represented by 10 writings (made by 4 shepherds at least), whereas during the second half of the same century and throughout the 1900s only three dates were identified (1853, 1887 and 1901). There are at least 40 authors, identified on the basis of their initials, but the readability within the palimpsest is strongly compromised due to overlaps and the conservation status (colour fading, small detachments of the rocky support etc.). In 13 cases the shepherds returned

to the *Trato* shelter to leave more than one writing, as in the case of GBP, belonging to the Partel family, who was accompanied by 80 sheep and left its family/house mark in 1809, in 1810 and in 1813 (on the 7th of May). From the family/house signs it was possible to recognize the presence of shepherds belonging to some of Ziano's families: the Zanons, the Zorzis 'Tistonato', and the Partels, but in most cases the signs were not identified. Only a few shepherds went into the details of their passage, adding the year, the month and the day of the transit (10 cases), as well as the livestock count (8 cases). We learned that the *Trato* shelter was used during April and July, and also that between 20 and 91 goats or sheep were brought to pasture. Among the symbols accompanying the writings the heart and the cross recur; 11 inscriptions also present a delimitation consisting of a frame (7 cases) or a dotted background (4 cases). All the graphic delimitations belong chronologically to the second half of the eighteenth century and can be interpreted as the shepherd's intention to distinguish and separate himself from others at a time when use of the place was very intense (Bazzanella and Kezich 2013).

Given the overcrowding and complexity of the writings, the desire to leave a reminder of themselves is also evident,¹¹ as is the ambition of writing close to other writers' inscriptions (very old in some cases), whose memory was already certainly lost. According to the testimonies collected (interviews with old shepherds), there was not an ideal time for writing: it would occur while the animals were grazing, during break times or during rainy hours, waiting inside shelters for the good weather to return.

Thanks to its location, the *Trato* shelter was suitable for an ethno-archaeological investigation with regard to the chronology of the deposits. Other reasons were its dimensions, which allowed not only the shepherd but also his flock to take a break, and the presence of a frieze of writings with dates ranging from the second half of the eighteenth century to the very first years of the twentieth century. The excavation, conducted in the summer of 2007, involved an area of 1 x 3m and was performed to a depth of about 1m before large boulders which forced the end of the investigation were encountered. The deposit consisted of debris layers alternating with charcoal layers. The combustion areas also contained burnt stones. From the excavation and sieving of the sediment, carried out with sieve meshes of 1x1 mm, nothing was found ascribable to anthropic presence, with the exception of a nail and two fragments of small animal ribs. However, C-14 analysis of charcoals¹² allowed us to document a long period of use of the shelter, stretching from prehistoric times, precisely from the Middle Bronze Age (fifteenth century BCE), up to the fourteenth century C.E. (Bazzanella and Wierer 2013).

The second shelter object of ethno-archaeological investigation, called *Mandra di Dos Capèl*, is located at an altitude of 2,030m in the municipality of Ziano di Fiemme, at the eastern end of a plateau overlooking the Valaverta. This area is still without arboreal vegetation today and therefore represents a suitable place for sheep grazing, as well as overnight stays. The shelter had archaic features, consisting of a group of 29 wooden elements of various sizes (figure 10). The blackening of the rock and the presence of carbonaceous soil to the west of the accommodation structure indicated the presence of a hearth. On the walls of the shelter there are some isolated writings dating back to 1867 (BDP), to 1889 (GG from Masi di Cavalese, with 212 sheep), to

¹¹ In their form, the writings of the Fiemme valley also recall the messages of the summit books – books left on the summit of a mountain where excursionists may leave their messages (Campesi 2015) and the graffiti of the metropolitan suburbs (Kezich 2013).

¹² The C-14 AMS dating of the charcoal particles recovered in the various excavation levels was carried out by CEDAD (Centro di Fisica Applicata, Datazione e Diagnostica), research centre of the University of Lecce (Bazzanella and Wierer 2013).

1915 (TZ), to 1925 (GIL) and to 1928 (Giacomo Zorzi Zamata). There is also a self-portrait, dated 1933, made by Silvio Gilmozzi, a shepherd from Panchià, who also left the message 'PÙRE SILVIO' ('poor Silvio').



Figure 10 – Ziano di Fiemme – the shelter by the *Mandra di Dos Capèl* and the shepherd Carlo Trettel.
Photo by Marta Bazzanella. Courtesy of Museo degli Usi e Costumi della Gente Trentina

The ethnographic survey, conducted among the shepherds of the valley, allowed the tracing of the last shepherd to use the shelter.¹³ His father had laid the axes of the roof in the early 40s of the last century. The structure of the shelter was however pre-existing and its builder is still unknown. The dendro-chronological analysis conducted on the wooden structure of the shelter¹⁴ identified different restoration phases. The oldest dates back to 1776 and consisted of the re-use of material from a previous structure, the others date back to the end of the 1800s (1894, 1895, 1897), the beginning of the 1900s (1905, 1906, 1911), 1919-23 and 1942-43 (Bazzanella *et al.* 2012). The last two periods of use have been confirmed by the ethnographic research.

¹³ Carlo Trettel from Ziano di Fiemme.

¹⁴ The analysis was carried out by Mauro Bernabei and Jarno Bontadi of the CNR/IVALSA laboratory, San Michele all'Adige, Trento (see also Bazzanella *et al.* 2012).

The excavation, that aimed to test the chronological-structural information received from the shepherds, involved an area of 8 square metres, including both the area of the shed and that of the hearth. The deposit was investigated up to a depth of about 1m and revealed two hearths and some charcoal layers. A dry-stone wall, parallel to the wall of the shelter (and 3m away from it) was documented; it was built to contain soil erosion. The evidence recovered consists of metal objects, some wooden fragments and sporadic animal remains. All the metal objects come from the highest layers and are ascribable to historical periods. These are nails of various types, used in the construction of the hut, a shovel, a file, a rivet, iron wire and various fragments of iron sheets. A coin, an Austrian *carantano* from 1858, was found in the uppermost layer.¹⁵ The absence of material culture in all the underlying levels must surely be considered carefully, but in this specific case it could be due to the particular economic destination of the site: a pastoral structure for short breaks, or for short seasonal stays, which usually leave no trace, except when a fire is lit (as confirmed also by the *Trato* shelter). The dating of charcoal particles¹⁶ also showed an early use of this shelter in prehistoric times. The dates refer to the Copper Age, the recent Bronze Age and the Iron Age (Bazzanella and Wierer 2013).

The surveys conducted by the Museo degli Usi e Costumi della Gente Trentina between 2007 and 2011, in order to record all the written and material evidences on Mount Cornón, made it possible to identify even the structures related to the practice of the mountain pasture.¹⁷ These are *malghe*, huts (or huts' foundations, built with the technique of *Blockbau*) and rock shelters that reflect an intentionally intense use of the territory, as well as a strict regulation of the use of common resources.¹⁸

Malghe and huts were generally located in the high pastures above 2,000m. The surveys have identified 32 of these structures, but some of them were also found at a lower altitude, where meadows or clearings allowed their construction. At the medium altitude (1,500-1,900 metres above sea level) 41 rock shelters provided evidence of human presence. All these shelters have surfaces ranging from 5 to 20 square metres. The anthropic activity consists of the occurrence of dry-stone walls, built to delimit an area to take a break, to accommodate a pallet or to adjust the slope in front of the shelter, in order to get a more or less flat surface to stay (as by *Mandra di Dos Capèl*). We could furthermore find evidence of fire lighting, recognizable by the blackened ground or by the blackened stones present in the area. Many abandoned objects were found during the surveys (Bazzanella 2012; Pisoni 2013): food cans, iron wires, nails, fragments of tools such as rasps (certainly used to sharpen the tools to cut trees and therefore related to the presence of forestry workers and woodcutters in the shelters), fragments of bottles, soles of boots, bullets and traps/baits for animals such as salt pans (related to hunting), collars for goats or sheep, walking sticks (sometimes engraved, which recall the livestock surveillance activity and therefore the transit of the shepherds).¹⁹

¹⁵ As regards the value of a *carantano*, the accounts book of Francesco Dondio of Tesero (1832-1858) record that 6 *carantani* were paid for a day of wool carding; and that 9 *carantani* were paid for a pair of wooden men's clogs (Vinante 2015).

¹⁶ The C-14 AMS dates of the coals recovered in the various excavation levels were carried out by the CEDAD research centre.

¹⁷ The survey of the museum was funded within the projects: 'Stone Archives/Archivi di Pietra', supported by the CARITRO Foundation and APSAT (Ambiente e Paesaggi dei Siti d'Alture Trentini / Environment and Landscapes of Upland Sites of Trentino) funded by the Autonomous Province of Trento.

¹⁸ *Malghe* and huts belonged to the municipality or the *Magnifica Comunità di Fiemme* and were used commonly from ancient times by all the registered population (the *vicini*) that owned livestock (Nequirito 2011; Giordani 2016; 2018).

¹⁹ These activities took place on Mount Cornón up to the great flood of the 1960s that put an end to the exploitation of the woods of the mountain when the easiest access routes were wiped out (Degiampietro 1975).

The rock shelters identified thanks to the systematic investigation conducted in the whole area of Mount Cornón to provide an explanation for the presence of thousands of writings made by shepherds on its rocks, were certainly subject, in the recent past, to human presence related to the economic exploitation of all the possible resources of the mountain: the grass for breeding the livestock, the hunting, the timber and the undergrowth plants. Even today these shelters preserve in the palimpsests of their written walls (such as by the *Trato* shelter) and in the stratification of the ground (such as by *Mandra di Dos Capèl* shelter) the evidence of human presence in an even more remote past, with roots in prehistory. While the analysis of the writings of the shelters enabled the recovery of the names and the families of the shepherds who lived between the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries, the ethnographic survey and the observation of the landscape have made it possible to get some indications, albeit scarce, of the economic activity carried out and to rediscover the exact places frequented by the shepherds of the last generations of the traditional society.

5.1 *The Colour of the Writings*

The shepherds were able to paint the rocks of Mount Cornón thanks to the presence of hematite veins, easily found in some mines on the mountain itself and on the near by Latemar. These mines were exploited in the early decades of the last century to obtain the pigment and, in a distant past, probably also to extract the iron contained in the mineral (Leonardi 1991).

In the local dialect, this pigment is called *ból* (mark) or *ból de besa* (sheep's mark) because it was mainly used to mark the sheep. To make the red ochre last and make it resistant to sun and bad weather on the rocky support, the shepherds put a bit of sheep's or goat's milk in a slightly concave stone and then rubbed the piece of ochre on the wet stone to obtain a thick mash, which at that point was ready to be spread on the rock to obtain the writings.²⁰ A twig, chewed at the end or beaten with a pebble to partially release the fibres, was used as a brush. Saliva or urine were alternatives to milk. That the writings have remained clearly visible for over four centuries shows that this preparation was very effective (Delladio 2015).

The writings were often made very high up on the wall, up to 8-12 metres. To make them the shepherds reached the wall using trunks of dry trees as ladders, or climbing, in spring, on the snowdrifts at the base of the rocks.

The ethno-archaeological research into the phenomenon of the shepherds' writings was integrated with a geophysical analysis conducted with the aim of determining the supply source of the red pigment used by the shepherds and identifying any presence of binding substances used to allow the dispersion of the colour and improve its subsequent application on the calcareous substrate (Toniutti and Miotello 2013).²¹ In relation to the pictorial layer, the analysis made it possible to ascertain that the hematite crystallites responsible for the red colour of the writings have shapes and dimensions perfectly compatible with those of the raw material present in the mines of the Latemar-Cornón group. As far as the binding substance is concerned, traces of an organic component, that was identified as milk, were found in a part of the analysed pictorial layers. In a couple of cases, the presence of carotenoids was also identified. These substances are easily found in natural products such as flowers, berries and vegetables. For the samples taken into consideration the use of resins, greases or waxes was excluded.

²⁰ Ferruccio Delladio, a shepherd from Tesero active on Mount Cornón between 1941 and 1953, interviewed in 2007, said: '... You took a small slightly concave stone and spat on it, scratching with the *ból de besa*, then you took a sprig of juniper you had to fray with your teeth ...' (Delladio 2015, 84-85).

²¹ The geophysical research has been conducted by the Department of Physics of the University of Trento.

5.2 *The Writings and their Authors*

The messages left by the shepherds on the rocks of Mount Cornón are part of a folk custom of exhibited writing inside and outside houses, churches or on rocks; a custom which was particularly widespread in the Alps and made with the intention of marking, watching over and controlling the territory, establishing in this way a dominance over nature, a nature subjugated by man from the most remote times, from prehistory, to obtain from the surrounding environment everything needed for subsistence. This is already evident from the first seasonal camps related to hunting (dating back to the Paleolithic and Mesolithic) and to scouting the territory in search of precious raw materials such as flint, quartz, ochre, metals and even salt. Moreover, this is highlighted by the first stable settlements in the innermost valleys of the Alps, obtained by terracing the slopes of the mountain, where human survival depended on a clever exploitation of all the resources of the territory. This balance reached its maximum expression in the traditional society of the last three centuries, with an economy based on tillage, forestry and grazing and on a strict control over all the territory (Netting 1981; Viazzo 2001). Everything was controlled; everything was strictly regulated because everything, down to the last blade of grass, was necessary to survive in the Alps. It is in this context that the shepherds' writings of the Fiemme valley have to be included and understood. The written landscape, the topic of this paper, originated over the centuries thanks to the natural presence of a high-quality pigment. In this way the memory left by the men, mainly shepherds, who travelled along the countless paths of this mountain, was preserved.

The shepherds had the task of leading the flocks to the Cornón pastures, while keeping them outside the forests and meadows devoted to haymaking. Every trespass was punished. So, only the most inaccessible land remained available to the shepherds, who were able to move on those slopes with as much dexterity as their sheep and goats, strong because of the remuneration they received, and often very resilient.

Grazing the flocks in the high pastures, making sure the animals did not get lost during transfers or hurt themselves or even die from falling into precipices, administering them the right medicines, helping them when they were giving birth, weaning the little ones: this was a complex task, which required commitment and could not be carried out by anyone. In carrying out their work, however, the shepherds could feel lost and need help and protection; this protection was offered by religion, a religion that promised shelter against the hostilities of nature. This is why religious symbols were reproduced in every dangerous place, inside and outside the villages (Fillipetti and Trotureau 1978; Troletti 2013; Antonelli 2006; Bettega forthcoming; Fait *et al.* forthcoming).

In the writings of the fifteenth-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the only imagery the shepherds had was the Christian one. Even the *nòda*, or home/family sign, was often inserted in an aedicule-shaped frame surmounted by a cross, so as to protect the shepherds and their families from adversities and 'evil'.²² We are dealing here with the folk expression of a faith permeated by doctrinal certainties, characterized by the trust in the affective closeness of the

²²It should be noted, here only in passing, that the Christianization of the Fiemme valley took place quite late, around the tenth-eleventh centuries, and met considerable resistance in a community that possessed a religiosity of which very few traces remain (Cavada 2000, Bonazza *et al.* 2008). The trial for witchcraft celebrated in Cavalese in the years 1501-1506, in whose documents Mount Cornón is often mentioned as a site of the Sabbaths, ended with 20 'witches' and two 'sorcerers' burnt at the stake (Di Gesaro 2003; Giordani 2005). Nowadays we know from the documents that the number of death sentences must have been even greater and this may have caused the definitive abandonment of the pre-Christian imagery (Renzetti and Taiani 1988). The high number of Christian symbols occurring on the rocks of Mount Cornón could also connote the strongly repressive character that the new religion imposed on the communities of the Fiemme valley.

saints, of the Virgin and of Christ, guaranteed by the priests with their preaching. Sacred shrines, tabernacles, aedicules and wall niches are found in the villages of the valley bottom or along the country or mountain roads, at crossroads, bridges or stopping stations with the aim of reassuring the believers. The niches and crosses on the rocks of the Cornón are therefore to be interpreted as signs of an extemporaneous religiosity, made with an auspicious intent, given the danger of the places. The Christian religion seems to characterize almost all the writings, so that it is only in the last century that some writings with 'secular' content (figure 7a) appeared, revealing independence and autonomy from the Catholic Church.

6. *Conclusion: the Motivations of the Shepherds*

The red writings left over the centuries on the rocks of the Latemar-Cornón group arouse, besides the wonder that inevitably arises in the observer of these walls at the beauty of their visual effect, the formulation of some questions about the authors and the meaning of these spectacular messages.

These are the same questions we ask ourselves in front of the painted caves of the Paleolithic in France or in Spain (the famous caves of Lascaux, Chauvet, Cosquer and Altamira), or also in front of the no less famous alpine rock engravings of Valcamonica in Lombardy or of Mont Bego in the Merveilles valley (Maritime Alps, southern France), which date back to pre- and protohistory.²³ The difference between the prehistoric drawings or engravings and the writings of the Fiemme valley consists in the fact that some authors of these younger writings are still alive.

As previously mentioned, the meaning of this writing activity, which was possible thanks to the natural availability of colour, is obtainable from the interviews conducted among the last shepherds of Mount Cornón. They wrote, especially as they were young, to imitate others, with the aim of taking possession of the territory, of leaving a trace of themselves, of excelling and surpassing other shepherds, friends or relatives. However, these interpretations are valid only for the last generations of shepherds: those closest to us.

Observing the writings of Mount Cornón it would be simplistic to stop at first impressions, since the shepherd-writers, 'artists' if we want, using just a rudimentary brush and a rock as canvas, told us a lot more. They told us the year, the month and the precise day of their passage, often accompanied by the name of the saint of the day, by the indication of the number of livestock led to pasture and by the specification of the family they belonged to (deducible from the sign of the house, which best served to identify the author of the writing). Greetings or anecdotes that occurred in the mountain, some drawings, doodles or self-portraits complete the writings, performed by those who were better at drawing, and they were many. What transpires from the reading of the anecdotes is the desire to leave a precise memory of themselves and their own moods, happy or unhappy, of their fears about what could happen on the Cornón. What still emerges from the rocks of Mount Cornón is the whole culture of the villages of the valley bottom.

Finally, the writings found on the whitish rocky slopes of Mount Cornón represent an exceptional testimony of folk writing from the period between the pre-modern age and the 1950s-60s. These writings recall the image of a peasant society of the upland, sub-divided into patrilocal families and strongly permeated by Christian religion, almost until the beginning of the twentieth century.

²³ de Lumley 1995; Barfield and Chippindale 1997; Marett 2005; Magnardi and Breteau 2005; Arcà 2009; Clottes 2010; Magnardi 2015.

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