

Rock Art in Finalese Area (Western Liguria) and Prehistoric Religious Beliefs and Practices

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Summary

A large number of archaeological sites and artifacts dating back to prehistory near Finale Ligure (Western Liguria), are due to the first manifestations of human cults. The Authors, in light of these findings, explore the primitive roots of the religious phenomenon.

Introduction

As previously described (14), (15), the religious factor is an integral part of the true nature of the man. Occurs, in other words, with "ineradicable and irrepressible" questions as: "what is the meaning of life, pain and death?" and "why is it worth living?".

These questions are the ontological foundation of life and men has always tried to relate their lives of creatures destined to die, with the total meaning of life itself.

The archaeological research conducted by the Authors of this work in the District of Finale Ligure, has confirmed that since the beginning of its existence, the man had a relationship with the mystery of the Godhead.

Description

The Finale is a "unicum". From geological point of view, in fact, the high frequency of karst features (with the formation of natural cavities), promoted, since ancient times (350,000 years ago), the human presence.

The discovery of "bifaces" from Manie Plateau and Grotta delle Fate settlements dates back, in fact, to the presence of Homo Erectus. The Grotta delle Fate and the Arma (a Ligurian term to indicate a cave) delle Manie have also returned the skeletal remains of Homo Neanderthalensis who lived during the Middle Palaeolithic (120,000 to 38,000 years ago). It is with Neanderthals that appears the first documentation certainly related to the religious: the burial of the dead that took place in the caves themselves, were oval in shape, covered with stone slabs. This ritual demonstrates the respect of these primitive men for the deaths. The simultaneous presence in the burial of objects of daily life (food, stone tools, and jewels with engraved decorations) and red ochre (that likely recalls the blood, as a vital element), could be related with the hope of new life after the death of the body.

About 38,000 years ago in the Upper Palaeolithic, during the last great glaciation that marked the extinction of Neanderthals, Homo Sapiens appeared: in the cave of Arene Candide were found several graves, including the most famous of them the "Young Prince" (dating back to 24,000 years ago), so named for the rich outfit that accompanied this man, who died prematurely, in his life after the physical death.

In the Neolithic Age (which grew, in Liguria, from 5,800 to 3,600 BC.) the man, nomadic hunter and gatherer, became a farmer and breeder. The better control of natural resources, made man sedentary, led an increase in population with the simultaneous change in social organization and the introduction of the concept of "property". In less than 2,000 years, man's life changed more significantly than during the previous 2 million years: a radical mutation known as the "Neolithic Revolution".

In the Ligurian Riviera, these changes are set out, according to recent observations (3), (5), (6), (12), (21), (23), (29) for the presumable migration of new peoples from south and central Italy. The archaeological finds at Arene Candide, Arma della Pollera and, quite recently, at Pian del Ciliegio Rock Shelter (Manie Plateau) date from, mostly, the period of "Impressed Ware Culture" (Early Neolithic: 5,800 to 5,000 BC) and "Square-Mouthed Pottery Culture" (Middle Neolithic: 5,000 to 4,200 BC). They are associated with cults and rituals that developed in the Mediterranean Basin, connected to the reproduction and growth of plants and animals. The discovery of female figurines features would seem, in fact, tied to propitiate the fertility of the land and flocks (6). From 4th millennium BC, the man increased knowledge concerning the processing of metalliferous minerals. Following the development of metallurgy, the communities were organized into increasingly complex structures, with true hierarchical structures. Hillforts (Photo 1), known as Castellieri or Castellari, were built in high places. In Finalese have been well studied: Hillfort of Verezzi, Castelliere delle Anime on Rocca di Perti, Sant'Antonino, Monte Sant'Elena above Bergeggi.

Distinct ethnic identity were defined, linked to quite distinct geographical areas. In the North Western Italy and in Southern France, between the Middle Bronze Age (about 1,600 BC) and early Iron Age (about 900 BC) appeared the characters of a new people: the Ancient Ligurians, one of the ethnic groups of pre-Roman Italy.

Since the end of the fifth millennium, at the end of the third millennium BC (a period covering the Neolithic and Bronze Age), developed a civilization related to the cult of the stone. Megalithic buildings were erected: single and/or aligned Menhirs, Dolmens and Cromlechs (megalithic fences). The presence of such structures is often related to areas of engraved rocks, believed to be contemporaneous with each other.

The significance of this proximity, could be explained as a sign of the presence of the "sacred". In this regard, the engraving of "prayers" confirm this hypothesis. Cups and gutters, may be, instead, have been used as containers and liquid collectors (organic and / or meteoric) for ritual purposes (7), (8), (9), (10), (11), (25), (26). The "cruciforms", may be, on the other hand, signs of Christianization and, as such, be ascribed to more recent times. This would confirm the attendance of these sites even in Roman, Medieval and, perhaps, even more recent Ages, with purposes (hunting, animal breeding, agriculture) that differed from the originals.

With the Iron Age (that, in Liguria, developed between 900 and 180 BC) the stele statues (or anthropomorphic steles) made their appearance: these standing stones with engravings are well represented in the Lunigiana (Eastern Liguria). Currently, two examples of these artifacts found in the Finalese, are the rudimentary steles of Pila delle Penne (Photo 3 and 4) and at Bric Le Pile (Photo 6).

The religiosity of the prehistoric man was directed, according to the most current theories, to the veneration of the dead, the peaks of mountains, springs, rivers, trees, weather phenomena (thunders and lightnings) and from the celestial bodies, especially the sun and the moon, but also constellations of stars.

In Finalese astronomically oriented structures have been reported: "Observatory" of Bric Pianarella, Menhir and Dolmen of Verezzi, Dolmen of Monticello, Rocks. Stone Altars (Photo 5), furthermore were found on the highest peaks of the area: Monte Cucco, Rocca degli Uccelli, Bric del Frate, Arma Strapatente, Bric of Sant'Antonino, Pila delle Penne, Bric Le Pile (25), (26).

All these megalithic structures, as previously described, are in close proximity to engraved rocks widely known: Ciappu de Cunche (i.e. Ciappo delle Conche. The term "Ciappo", in the Finale, shows a large slab of stone), the Ciappu de Cunchette (i.e. Ciappu dei Cexi or Ciappo dei Ceci), the

Ciappu du Sá (i.e. Ciappo del Sale), Ciappo della Valle dei Frassini - to name only the largest - with the presence of prayers, crosses, cups and gutters (Photo 2).

The dating of these archaeological remains is not univocal. The existence of other similar structures in the European area, is well known.

We remember, in fact, what has reported in numerous studies that refer to the sanctuary of Panoias, (Northern Portugal). Here, beside a large rock with ponds, canals and cups, there is the following Latin inscription dating from the third century AD (11):

"HUIUS HOSTIAE QUAE CADUNT HIC IMM(ol)ANTUR EXTA INTRA QUADRATA CONTRA CREMANTUR - SAN(gu)IS LAC(i)CULIS (iuxta) SUPERFU(ndi)TUR".

(i.e. "Here the slaughtered victims are consecrated to the Gods: their entrails are burnt in the square ponds and their blood is diffused along the surrounding small ponds").

Large rocky outcrops in Finalese, similar to those described for the sanctuary of Panoias, could have had an analogue function, at least for a certain period.

The fact, moreover, that the "Stone Altars" are built on high ground, indicates, probably, the desire to choose an appropriate site for have a sort of visual inspection of the land below, also in relation to the sacredness of the hill stations and mountain peaks, typical of the Ligurian-Celtic populations. Dolmens and Menhirs are not, therefore, unrelated to the Finalese and sub-alpine cultural area, as it was thought until a few decades ago (Photo 7, 8 and 9).

It believed, in fact, that the megalithic culture had been arrested in the Alps region, without crossing the Alps. Only exception was the Apulia in Southern Italy, where dolmens, menhirs, specchie (i.e. mounds of stones) were attributed instead to the influence of people from the Balkan Peninsula, across the Adriatic Sea. In fact, in the rest of the Mediterranean basin, the megaliths are well represented.

Puglisi's work: "La civiltà appenninica. Origine delle comunità pastorali in Italia" (27) in 1959 and the discovery, a few years later, of the Neolithic necropolis of Aosta, proved the unfoundedness of this thesis (4), (7), (8), (9), (10).

Regarding Liguria, in the second half of the eighties of last century, in the northern Sanremo hinterland (Imperia Province), were identified two circular burial mounds. One of them, studied with stratigraphic methods from the local section of the International Institute of Ligurian Studies, has been attributed to the final phase of the Bronze Age (1).

The penetration of megalithic structures in this Region was thus demonstrated, presumably from the nearby Provence.

Consequently, other artifacts found in Liguria, especially in the Finalese area (just mention the Menhir and Dolmen of Verezzi), until then attributed, though with reservations, to the recent rural culture, took on a different meaning and scarcity of megalithic remains in Italy, differently from the transalpine regions (especially the North-Western and the islands), could be explained by the increased turnover of civilizations over time, that would have radically transformed the appearance of the area, resulting in the loss of many of these artifacts (7), (8), (9), (10).

Conclusions

The Religious Sense is born, therefore, from the remotest antiquity and the man has asked to identify rituals (worship of the dead) and to recognize the sacral presence in certain geological formations (e.g. mountain peaks) or the construction of megalithic structures, like Menhirs and Dolmens.

These artifacts can be dated to an amount of time between the end of the fifth millennium to the late third millennium BC: corresponding, roughly, to a period ranging from the Neolithic and the Bronze Age (20), (30).

This length of time could be corresponding with that of other megaliths that have already been described by Scientists and by the Authors.

The dating of the described petroglyphs and megaliths is a difficult problem to the present, because are placed outdoors and can easily modified by atmospheric and human factors.

The Stone Altar above the Strapatente Cave, the other Altars or "Stone Tables" on the tops of rocky outcrops of Finalese, the so-called Dolmen of Monticello (near Finale Ligure), the rudimentary anthropomorphic Stele of Pila delle Penne (Photo 3, 4) (25) and of Bric Le Pile (Photo 6) (26), the findings of the Plateau of San Bernardino (among which the Bric Pianarella Observatory and the Archaeoastronomical Complex of Marcello Dalbuono), but also other neighboring megaliths (2), (3), (5), (6), (12), (13), (17), (20), (21), (23), (24), (29), (30), (31), represent only some examples of findings that would deserve a more detailed study in the light of modern scientific knowledge (e.g. archaeometry, and archaeoastronomy, stratigraphy, geology, etc.) that could lead to important innovations in the area of Western Liguria and, especially, in the Finalese.

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Photo 1: Hillfort of Verezzi



Photo 2: Engraved rocks at Ciappu de Cunche



Photo 3: Stele at Pila delle Penne



Photo 4: The wall and Stele of Pila delle Penne



Photo 5: The Altar with cup marks and gutters at Bric Le Pile

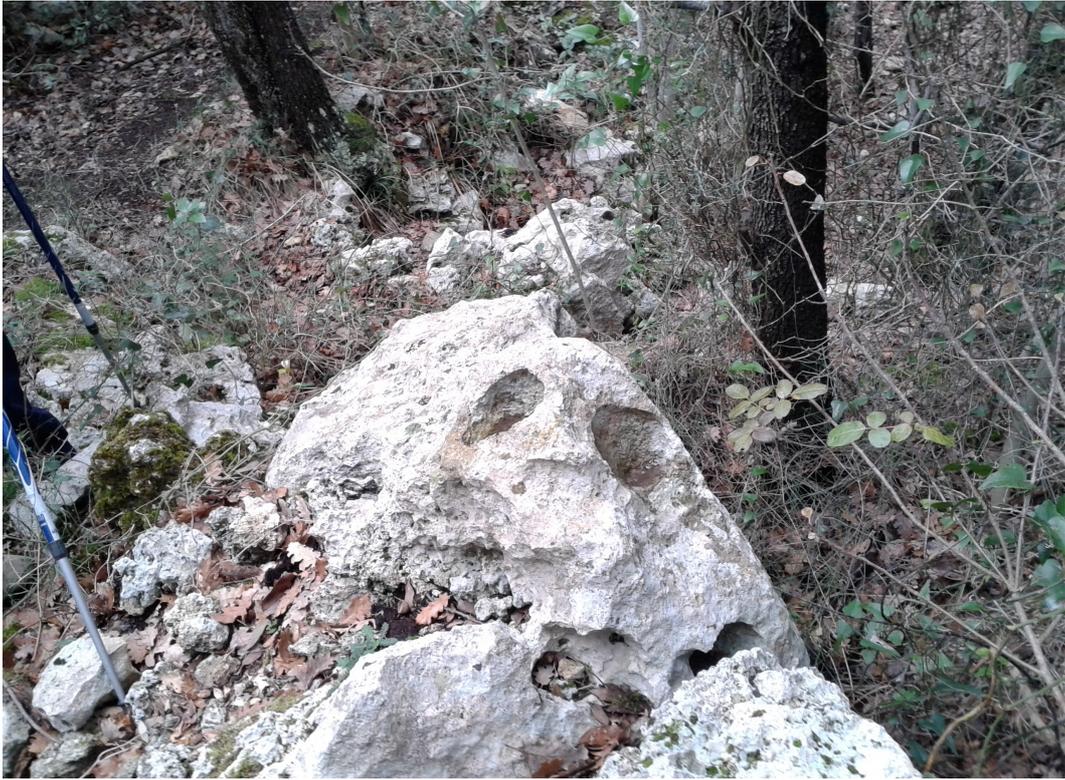


Photo 6: Stele of Bric Le Pile



Photo 7: "Observatory" of Bric Pianarella



Photo 8: The Dolmen of Monticello



Photo 9: The Altar above Arma Strapatente