NEW EVIDENCE OF ANCESTRAL LANDSCAPE IN TRENTINO IN THE COPPER AND BRONZE AGES
THE RITUAL SITES OF CLES-CAMPI NERI AND LA VELA DI TRENTO

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ABSTRACT

Recent investigations (1999-2007) carried out at the site of Cles-Campi Neri in the Valle di Non have brought to light a circular stone structure which can be attributed to a period between the Late Copper Age and the initial phase of the Early Bronze Age. Two structural phases have been identified. The earlier one saw the presence of a large enclosure made up of large blocks enclosing a smaller structure. The items found at the upper levels are made up of flint tools altered by heat. There are also small agglomerations of calcined human bones. In the subsequent phase the area inside the large enclosure was filled in with a platform made up of stones and pebbles, covered and surrounded by organic soil, in which hundreds of flint tools and flakes have been found, along with rarer fragments of pottery. The agglomerations of calcined human bones continue in this phase. Other circular stone structures are positioned along the external perimeter of the platform. Initial analysis of the structural context and the overall material culture, the presence of probable food offerings, suggested by palaeobotanical analysis, and of cremated human remains, make it possible to surmise that the site may have been linked to ritual practices or complex funeral rites.

There are considerable similarities between the site of Cles-Campi Neri and the funeral and cult complex dating back to the Copper Age discovered in 2006 at La Vela di Trento (sector Vela IX) in the Adige valley. The cult area developed diachronically according to the principle of horizontal stratigraphy, illustrating the progressive extension of the structure from the centre towards the outside. It was made up of a series of stone rings delimiting the structured platforms. The placing of the remains of human skeletons and animal remains, mostly calcined, on these has been documented, along with archaeological material including flint tools, parts of copper and stone ornaments and occasional pottery sherds. It has also been ascertained that fires were lit. A baby was found buried in a jar (pithos burial) in the southern part of the area investigated. This can be attributed to the Early Bronze Age.

The structure brought to light at La Vela very probably represents evidence of more extensive rites and funeral practices linked to the cult of ancestors, according to a practice also documented in other alpine areas.
INTRODUCTION

This paper intends to provide an initial summary of the results of excavations carried out at the cult sites of Campi Neri near Cles, in the Val di Non (western Trentino) and La Vela (Trento) in the Adige valley (fig. 1), despite the fact that processing of the data acquired and study of material from both sites is still at a very early stage.

CLES-CAMPI NERI

Since the beginning of the 19th c., the Campi Neri area (676m a.s.l.) has been known to have provided a significant number of findings dating back to the period between the Early Bronze Age and the Roman period (Campi 1887; Campi 1891, p. 69-75; Campi 1909, p. 307-312; Giovanelli 1828), including the so-called Tabula Clesiana, a sheet of bronze carrying the edict with which the Emperor Claudius granted Roman citizenship to the local populations in 46 A.D. (CIL V, 5050; Mommsen 1869; Buonopane 1990, p. 194-195, no. 5050; Buchi 2000, p. 75-80; Tozzi 2002).

The research carried out between 1999 and 2007 by the Soprintendenza per i beni archeologici of Provincia autonoma di Trento over a surface area of more than 7000 sq. m emphasized the fundamentally important role of the site, frequented almost continuously from the Copper Age up to the Roman period (Ciurletti et al. 2004; Endrizzi et al. 2009).

The data currently available demonstrates the existence of a large well-organized sanctuary area, the real size being unknown, crossed by tracks and marked by ceremonies involving the deposition of votive offerings, the sacrifice of animals and the ritual use of fire.

1. In this paper section 2 (Cles-Campi Neri) has been written by Lorenza Endrizzi and Nicola Degasperi, section 3 (La Vela in Trento) by Elisabetta Mottes and Nicola Degasperi and section 4 (conclusions) by Elisabetta Mottes and Franco Nicolis. Figures and photographs have been processed and designed by Nicola Degasperi and Chiara Maggioni (CORA Ricerche Archeologiche s.n.c., Trento). English translation by Vivienne Frankell.

2. The research, headed by Lorenza Endrizzi, was carried out by CORA Ricerche Archeologiche s.n.c., Trento, under the supervision of Nicola Degasperi.
Fig. 2 – Cles-Campi Neri (Trento), Phase 1.

Fig. 3 – Cles-Campi Neri (Trento), Phase 2.

Fig. 4 – Cles-Campi Neri (Trento), Phase 3.

Fig. 5 – Cles-Campi Neri (Trento), Phase 4.
The area is situated on the gentle slope of a terrace made up of typical deposits from the deglaciation. The data currently available allow us to surmise that between the Copper Age and the Late Bronze Age, but perhaps also in subsequent phases, the environment was humid, with short-lived areas of stagnant water. Major containment and drainage works also show that considerable attention was paid to controlling the colluvial dynamics of the slopes and the management of flowing water. Indeed, starting from the end of the Bronze Age, an impressive linear structure 230m long made with large blocks of stone, pebbles and earth and a series of drainage channels designed to drain off water flowing down the slope were realized above the cult area. These works had the scope of hindering colluvial processes which began in the later phases of the Bronze Age, probably as a result of advanced deforestation, and which had led to the progressive obliteration of the Copper Age structures.

In the most southerly sector of the site, excavations of a more or less circular structure, with a diameter of around 8.50m, have been carried out (fig. 10). Thanks to flint tools and pottery, this can be dated to a period between the Copper Age and the initial phase of the Early Bronze Age.

The excavations brought to light numerous remains of old tree stumps throughout the area, some of which showing signs of uprooting with the use of fire. This evidence would seem to demonstrate the presence of forest and the human intervention aiming to delimit an open space, which was probably the first step in the process to define a “human” space to be used for cult activities and for the establishment of a cultural landscape.

Close to the structure, there is a marked bend in a probable “road”, which headed straight towards the North, made up of small stones covered with beaten earth, part of which has a small drainage channel running alongside it.

Roads with clear sacred and ritual roles are a constant element in every stage of frequentation of the site. The two oldest tracks, corresponding with phases of relative hydrogeological stability, are found above the imposing line of stones. The first, which has already been mentioned, can be attributed to the Copper Age and beginning of the Early Bronze Age (fig. 2). The second, recorded for a length of more than 200m and dating back to the Later Bronze Age, also made a bend close to the platform, which must therefore still have been visible and respected (fig. 5).

In this paper we present a summary of the sequences in the main phases of this monument, paying particular attention to the structural and cult aspects. These phases will be identified more precisely in chronological terms following full study of the remains of the material culture.

In the earliest phase the structure was made up of a broad ring made with large blocks, which enclosed in an eccentric position a smaller circular structure (with a diameter of 2.9m) made up of large stones and superimposed slabs (fig. 10c).

The top of the smaller structure, covered with slabs of metamorphic rock, was perhaps used for the lighting of fires. One should also note the presence of a large rough-hewn boulder inside the same structure. This was found lying on its side but was probably originally erect (fig. 10c). There were other traces of combustion and cremated bones in a small ditch situated close to the smaller enclosure. Outside the main enclosure, to the east, a small stone enclosure backs onto the structure, whereas a short distance away there is a subcircular platform with a high concentration of flint tools. The materials relating to the first phase are represented by flint tools, sometimes altered by heat (fig. 6-9). There are also small piles of calcined human bones (fig. 10a).
In the second phase the internal area of the large ring was filled with stones and pebbles in order to realize a platform (fig. 3), on which collections of calcined human bones were found. These are also present outside the southern limit of the platform, dispersed over a vast area. The western perimeter of the ring was interrupted by a fire pit, containing stones altered by the effect of heat and charcoal. The lighting of limited local fires also continued above the platform, as is shown by the substantial presence of charcoal.

In the third phase the stretch of the main enclosure which had been interrupted by the fire pit was reconstructed; the platform was also further raised by adding more stones and pebbles (fig. 4).

Perhaps starting from the end of the third phase, the platform was sealed with a small earth mound (fig. 5). The presence of this covering has not been recognized at stratigraphic level, but is however suggested by analysis of the spatial distribution of findings. Indeed, hundreds of flint tools and flakes have been found around the perimeter band of the structure, together with rare pottery fragments, which were presumably ritual offerings.

The paleobotanical analysis carried out on an initial group of samples has shown the presence of at least eight types of wood, cereals (barley, emmer wheat and foxtail millet), pulses (lentils) and charred remains which can perhaps be attributed to unidentified prepared food.3

Initial analysis of the peculiarity of the monumental structure, the presence of flint tools which were often broken or altered, shattered pottery fragments and probable charred food offerings and of the “controlled” dispersion of cremated human remains suggests that the context of Campi Neri was a cult place, partly linked to burial rites and practices, the details of which are still to be defined.

During the subsequent Middle Bronze Age, close to this ancient structure, which was evidently recalled for a long period of time, there is evidence of the lighting of fires in shallow circular pits around 20cm deep, then filled with stones and accompanied by parts of cattle skulls (fig. 10b).

3. Analysis underway by Elisabetta Castiglioni from the Laboratorio di Archeobiologia dei Musei Civici di Como.
The archaeological site of La Vela is situated in the area north-west of the city of Trento and covers part of the large alluvial cone formed by the stream of the same name, close to its confluence with the River Adige (fig. 1).

La Vela (Trento) is one of the most significant sites in terms of archaeological research in the alpine area, due both to the stratigraphic sequence identified, which documents long human frequentation of the area from the early Mesolithic up to the Roman period, and the significance of the prehistoric evidence brought to light, particularly as regards the Middle Neolithic (Square Mouthed Pottery Culture) (Bagolini 1977; Bagolini 1990a; Bagolini 1990b; Pedrotti 1990; Degasperi, Pedrotti 2002a; Degasperi, Pedrotti 2002b; Degasperi et al. 2006; Mottes, Rottoli 2006; Mottes 2007; Mottes forthcoming).

The presence of archaeological deposits is currently documented in ten distinct sectors (Vela I-X) which from 1960 to 2009 were opened up following the digging of foundations for construction purposes (fig. 11).

In May 2006, in view of work to extend a building in an area already subjected to archaeological investigations in 1976 (sector Vela III) (Bagolini et al. 1976), the Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici of Provincia autonoma di Trento, planned stratigraphic investigation in one area of the lot which had not yet been explored (sector Vela IX). The research, carried out over a surface area of just 45 sq. m, brought to light an extraordinary Copper Age cult and funeral area, which is currently unique in the Adige valley (fig. 15, 17).

The exceptional state of conservation of the structure is due to the fact that it was realized in a raised position on an old gravel bar of the Vela stream, protecting the area from the flooding and erosion which characterized the environment of the stream cone.

The cult area is made up of a series of stone rings and developed over time according to horizontal stratigraphy, showing a progressive extension of the structure from the centre towards the outside (fig. 15). This stratigraphic data has been confirmed by the spatial distribution of the findings, by archaeobotanical analysis and in particular by anthracological analysis, which highlights the predominance of individual Taxa in the different structures.\footnote{4. The research, headed by Elisabetta Mottes, was carried out by CORA Ricerche Archeologiche s.n.c., Trento, under the supervision of Nicola Degasperi.}

\footnote{5. The archaeobotanical analysis carried out by the Laboratorio di Archeobiologia dei Musei Civici di Como was supervised by Mauro Rottoli in relation to the carpological remains (Rottoli 2008) and by Michela Cottini in relation to the anthracological remains (Cottini 2008).}
Fig. 12 – La Vela di Trento (sector Vela IX). Copper Age flint sickle blade.

Fig. 13 – La Vela di Trento (sector Vela IX). Copper Age flint crescents.

Fig. 14 – La Vela di Trento (sector Vela IX). Copper Age flint arrowhead of the long triangular Remedello style.

Fig. 15 – La Vela di Trento (sector Vela IX). Copper Age cult and funeral area built with a series of stone rings defining structured platforms (photo and plan).

Fig. 16 – La Vela di Trento (sector Vela IX). Early Bronze Age jar covered with two stone slabs and containing the burial of a baby (pithos burial). The bottom of the jar has been chipped away in ancient times.
Awaiting the results of new radiocarbon dating underway at Leibniz Labor in Kiel and the completion of specialist analysis, it is possible to suggest a sequence for the main phases of evolution of the cult area:

- a layer of fine rubble and gravel was laid artificially to prepare for the raising of the stone structures, over the alluvial deposits of the Vela stream;

- the inner ring (US 22) of the cult area was constructed using selected stone material (Scaglia Rossa) (fig. 15). The perimeter of the ring delimited a platform structure (US 23) that was probably constructed around an element in larch wood (*Larix decidua*) fixed in a vertical position. There is evidence of cremated human bones, unburnt human bones and the calcined remains of animals on the platform;  

- at a subsequent phase the central wooden element was uprooted (perhaps burnt). The pit was closed and carefully sealed with a row of stones, which divided the perimeter of the stratigraphic unit 22 in two. A second ring of stones was prepared (US 27) with at least two superimposed lines of stones on the northern side (fig. 18). The interior saw the building of a second platform (US 28) (fig. 15), which was constructed around a small mound of earth covering the older structure. The presence of this covering has left few traces (US 8). It was not recognized during the excavations, being surmised subsequently on the basis of comparative analysis of the data. The leaving of small piles of cremated human bones continued on the platform, in a more accentuated manner. The archaeological material recovered has included numerous flint instruments (fig. 12-14), copper tools and ornaments and some pottery sherds. Furthermore, there is evidence of the lighting of fires with beech wood (*Fagus sylvatica*). Radiocarbon dating obtained on a burnt human bone coming from the platform (US 28) gave the following measurement: KIA31837: 4510±35 B.P., corresponding to 3340-3100 B.C. cal.;  

- the cult area was further extended towards the north, with the adding of a further ring of stones (US 34) and the laying of a new platform (US 35) (fig. 15). Unfortunately the stratigraphic situation to the south was compromised by subsequent events;  

- the central rings were covered with further earth and a large platform (US 36) was constructed, the real dimensions of which we do not know but which was probably delimited by a stone

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6. The anthropological analysis was carried out by Alessandra Mazzucchi (Laboratorio di Antropologia e Odontologia Forense dell’Università degli Studi di Milano and Osteoarch Lab).

7. The radiocarbon measurements expressed in B.P. have been calibrated to give calendar dating (B.C.) using the software OxCal 3.10, selecting the intervals with 1 sigma, on the basis of atmospheric data provided by Reimer and other authors (2004).
enclosure similar to previous ones (fig. 15). A drastic reduction in the concentration of calcined bones has been recorded for this phase, whereas the quantity of flint tools and pottery (typologically not diagnostic) increased. The lighting of fires is documented by the presence of two distinct concentrations of anthracological remains: hazel (*Corylus avellana*) to the west and oak (*Quercus sez. Robur*) to the east. The carpological remains include hazel (*Corylus avellana*), present in all the phases, and a particular abundance of cornel wood (*Cornus mas*), which is practically absent in the more internal structures. Radiocarbon dating is available for this phase, obtained on a sample of charcoal which assigns this period of frequentation to a final phase of the Early Bronze Age: KIA 30563: 3381±28 B.P., corresponding to 1735-1630 B.C. cal.

To the south of the structured area, a baby was found buried in a ceramic jar (*pithos* burial) (fig. 16). This is a funeral rite that is documented in Northern Italy only during the Early Bronze Age and only in Trentino, in particular in the Adige valley. It was reserved for newborn babies or foetuses, which were placed almost exclusively in jars, in their turn placed in graves and covered with small slabs of stone (Nicolis 2001; Nicolis 2004; Nicolis 2005).

It has recently been suggested that the jar burial rite was linked to contacts with the Ionian islands and Peloponnese (Greece), most probably through the intermediation of coeval cultures situated along the two sides of the Adriatic sea (Nicolis 2005, p. 530).

Anthropological analysis has shown that this was an individual aged between 0 and 6 months. The mouth of the jar was sealed with two flat stones (fig. 16), whereas inside there was the tooth of a sheep or goat (*Ovies aries/Capra hircus*). One extremely significant fact, unique in terms of the evidence available for the Adige valley area to date, should also be noted: the bottom of the jar was missing and had been clearly chipped away in ancient times (fig. 16). During the excavation of the *pithos* burial, which was done in the laboratory, it was thought that the opening on the base could have a practical function in terms of inserting the body of the child. After restoration it was instead possible to observe that the mouth of the jar was wider than the hole realized in the base. It was therefore surmised that the hole on the bottom had a practical and ideological role: the direct contact with the gravel substratum would indeed have assisted the rapid outflow of liquids resulting from decomposition, accelerating the process of body transformation, which in the anthropological context is given particular significance (Favole 2003).

Preliminary anthropological investigations have shown that the bone material coming from the cult area was mainly cremated and is represented by skull fragments, the main section of long bones and fragments of teeth, whereas there are no fragments of spongy bone, pelvis or the spine. There are also remains of unburnt human bones (phalanges, metacarpals, teeth and fragments of jaw). From the demographic point of view the fragments analyzed show the presence of several individuals, both adults and children, these last with an age of between 0 and 6 months.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Analysis of the two Trentino sites highlights also a number of common features in relation to structural, ritual and chronological aspects as also demonstrated at other cult sites in the alpine area, such as Velturino/Feldthurns, Tanzgasse (Bolzano/Bozen) for example (Dal Ri et al. 2004) and those documented in the Valcamonica and the Valtellina in eastern Lombardia (Poggiani Keller 2006).

From the structural point of view, at both sites the presence of stone circles and probably coverings represented by mounds of earth has been recorded. However, it should be underlined that the sites examined should not be considered as genuine tumuli but rather as complex structures taking different forms at the various stages of development.

In terms of rituals, the leaving of selected cremated human remains and of burnt and unburnt animals has been documented. There is archaeological material that can be interpreted as grave goods or as offerings. There is also evidence of the deposition of fruit, cereals and prepared food. The presence of fires is a constant.
At both sites there is documentation of extensive continuity in terms of frequentation for ritual purposes. The Cles Campi Neri sites shows continuity of frequentation of the same area for the purposes of cult continuing from the Copper Age up to Late Antiquity. At La Vela, near Trento, evidence of activities linked to worship relates to the Copper Age and the Early Bronze Age. A long period of continuity in terms of use is a recurring characteristic of burial and cult sites in other Italian regions. They were not simply places destined for the burial of members of a community, but central places, where the cultural memory was maintained, becoming a tool for claiming identity through the cult of mythical ancestors. Moreover the place where a mythical event took place is by itself a sacred place and it must be preserved also with the help of the new architecture. These places were thus genuine ancestral landscapes.

There are some differences between the two sites, first of all the presence of pithos burial rites for babies, only recorded at La Vela. It is appropriate to recall that in northern Italy this type of burial rite is currently only documented in the Trentino stretch of the Adige valley and usually took place in rock shelters or at the base of rock faces; for the first time, at La Vela, it has been documented in an open area on a cone. Typologically, the jar would seem to belong to a later phase of the Early Bronze Age, in contrast with previous suppositions that the rite could be attributed chronologically to the initial phase of the Early Bronze Age only (formative phase of Polada by R. Perini) (Perini 1990, p. 234; Nicolis 2005, p. 528).

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


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8. E.g. Remedello Sotto (Brescia) (De Marinis 1998), Aosta Saint-Martin-de-Corléans (Mezzena 1997; Mezzena 1998), Ossimo Pat (Bergamo) (Poggiani Keller 2002; Poggiani Keller 2006), Gardolo di Mezzo (Trento) (Mottes et al., this volume).


