

## Palaeolithic cave art in Italy: from the iconography of signs to the underlying symbols

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### Abstract

*Palaeolithic cave art in Italy is present in various sites located in the peninsula and in the Mediterranean islands. The iconography encompasses different types of signs carved and painted on rock surfaces, usually inside dark caves and not in the open air. The signs represent naturalistic figures and geometric or abstract forms.*

*In this paper a hermeneutic hypothesis is proposed, starting from the consideration that the signs at present visible are the residuum of a more complex phenomenon, a "total social fact" (Mauss) proper to the Prehistoric world, comprising noticeably prayers, gestures, discourse, dances, sounds and music - realities of course which leave no fossil traces!*

*In particular the ceremonies organically linked to rock 'art' cannot be seen to-day but thanks to hermeneutical horizons it is possible to plausibly (in homage to the Plato's Cave) high light and throw into relief the silhouettes figuring on the stage of Prehistoric Man.*

**Keywords:** *Italy; Palaeolithic Art; Iconography; Symbols; Hermeneutics.*

### Résumé – L'art paléolithique dans les cavernes d'Italie : De l'iconographie des signes aux symboles sous-jacents

*On peut trouver de l'art paléolithique dans les cavernes de l'Italie et de ses îles. L'iconographie comporte divers types de signes, peints ou gravés sur les surfaces rocheuses, à l'intérieur plutôt qu'à l'extérieur des grottes.*

*Ils peuvent représenter des figures réalistes ou des formes abstraites et géométriques. Une hypothèse herméneutique nous permet d'aborder ce matériel comme le résidu d'un phénomène autrement plus complexe : un fait social total, comme l'aurait dit Mauss, spécifique au monde préhistorique, un tout ayant entre autres pour parties des invocations, des gestes, des discours, des danses, des sons et de la musique – des réalités qui ne se prêtent guère à la fossilisation !*

*En particulier bien que les cérémonies associées à l'art rupestre ne puissent plus être vues telles quelles, il est possible et plausible (en hommage à la caverne de Platon) de projeter les silhouettes de nos ancêtres préhistoriques sur des horizons herméneutiques.*

**Mots-clés :** *Italie ; Art paléolithique ; Iconographie ; Symboles ; Herméneutique.*

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## **Resumen – Arte parietal paleolítico en Italia: Desde la iconografía de los signos hacia los símbolos subyacentes**

*El arte parietal Paleolítico en Italia se ubica en diferentes sitios de la península y de las islas mediterráneas. La iconografía incluye diferentes tipologías de signos grabados o pintados, generalmente en oscuras cuevas y no al aire libre. Los signos representan figuras naturalísticas, geométricas y abstractas.*

*En esta ponencia se propone una hipótesis hermenéutica que considera los signos, visibles en la actualidad, como el residuo de un fenómeno más complejo, un "facto social total" según Mauss, específico del mundo prehistórico, que incluye evidencias de oraciones, gestos, discursos, danzas, sonidos y música, realidades que, por supuesto, no dejan huellas fósiles!*

*Específicamente las ceremonias relacionadas con el arte "rupestre" no pueden ser vistas en la actualidad, sin embargo gracias a horizontes hermenéuticos, es posible plausiblemente (en homenaje a la caverna de Platón), iluminar y evidenciar las siluetas que aparecen en el escenario del Hombre Prehistórico.*

**Palabras clave:** Italia; Arte Paleolítica; Iconografía; Símbolos. Hermenéutica

## **Riassunto – Arte parietale paleolitica in Italia: Dall'iconografia dei segni ai simboli soggiacenti**

*L'arte parietale paleolitica in Italia è presente in vari siti localizzati nella penisola e nelle isole mediterranee. L'iconografia comprende differenti tipi di segni incisi o dipinti, normalmente in buie grotte e non all'aria aperta.*

*I segni rappresentano figure naturalistiche, geometriche e forme astratte. In questa relazione viene proposta una ipotesi ermeneutica che parte dalla considerazione che i segni oggi visibili sono il residuo di un più complesso fenomeno, un "fatto sociale totale" secondo Mauss, specifico del mondo preistorico, comprendente evidenze di preghiere, gesti, discorsi, danze, suoni e musiche, realtà che, ovviamente, non lasciano tracce fossili ! In particolare le cerimonie organicamente connesse all'arte "rupestre" non possono essere viste oggi, ma grazie ad orizzonti ermeneutici, è possibile plausibilmente (in omaggio alla caverna di Platone) illuminare e mettere in rilievo le silhouettes che compaiono sul teatro dell'Uomo Preistorico.*

**Parole chiavi:** Italia; Arte paleolitica; Iconografia; Simboli; Ermeneutica.

In a particular moment of Man's history on our planet, the phenomenon of Rock Art appeared, more or less 40,000 years ago, formed by signs projected on rocky surfaces, in caves, in shelters or in the open air. The typology is vast and varied: from figurative naturalistic and descriptive signs to abstract geometric and symbolic notations.

This huge amount of signs that men have impressed on the surrounding world is not the result of an immediate transformation of Homo Sapiens's intellectual activity, but is the effect of the maturation of a long cognitive process based on the psychic dimension and comporting stages leading to a more enlarged Self knowledge, grounded in reflexively deepening thought associated with the knowledge of another world perceived as separated from or discontinuous with human personality.

A symptom of this abstract thinking could be located in stone artefacts, e.g. the amygdalas, denoting a research of symmetry and aesthetics, far removed from mere functionality, already noticeable in Lower Palaeolithic times.

There is an evolutionary momentum inclining Man to prove his worth over and against Nature, as arbiter and modifier of reality, despite his being from time to time

overcome by the force of wild animals, by atmospheric and telluric events –this possibly being the reason why he has often submitted himself to the numinous, to the sacred, to the extra-human, the super-human, or the divine– in a word the transcendent other.

So, rock art is the vehicle of intermediation and of communication between two worlds, one transcendent, the other spiritual, the kingdom of the sacred and divine versus the kingdom of man, the effective world, real, tangible and concrete, where the daily drama of life unfolds.

Rock Art, for over a century now, is the object of scientific studies, decoding, discussions, and disputes, sometimes passionate. The material produced could fill up the mythical Library of ancient Alexandria in Egypt, if it was still in existence and if it were possible to concentrate there all the books, all the writings, all the notes, all the sketches and copies, all the documentation produced by the scholars in this field. But this fact is not possible now and it will be very difficult also in the future.

Towards attaining the goal of this utopian and virtual Global Library, IFRAO's action is only the first modest step albeit an exemplary one in conserving and preserving the memory of Rock Art. For unfortunately every day sees the loss, as with animal species, of a considerable quantity of material data despite the fact that we are acquiring fresh evidence incessantly thanks to the specialized researches developed in the four corners of the world. Our horizon is certainly today more vast than in the past: the discoveries are multiplied in every continent; some sites have disappeared or been destroyed. But an impressive number of new districts of rock art are being discovered, the increase of documentation is exponential and would seem at times to follow a developing curb worthy of a pandemic!

The aim of our past Masters was the magisterial management of all disciplinary knowledge; this goal is now in crisis, owing to the flood of empirical evidence available on the net. This situation provokes a fresh consciousness of our congenital inadequacy in coping with the sea of data stowed in the electronic bilges of websites all over the world.

## **The science of signs**

To undertake the study of Rock Art, some basic concepts from the science of signs are useful to navigate on the ocean of information that is presently disposable. They are crucial in trying to answer the first of the three fundamental questions confronting mankind: from where do we come? What were the mental maps that controlled the cognitive activities of man to pursue his course, more or less deliberately until arriving at his present provisional halt?

I omit intentionally the third question: where are we going? The present times are not particularly encouraging as to future of the human future race: the chimpanzee armed with a machine gun has once again jumped off the subway, according to the tragic metaphor coined by Edgard Morin; we are constantly on the edge of the abyss.

The universe represented by the whole complex of rock art requires pragmatic research or empirical study of the origins of the signs used and of the effects in relation to the hypothetic or conjectured behaviour that they may have provoked; our semantics is therefore the analysis of rock signs taking into account the different manners of making sense by material signs; syntactic approach is the combinatory

study between signs, over and above their specific significance and their relation to behaviour ( the expressions and the gestures intended or induced).

According to Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), the Helvetic father of Sémiologie, the system of signs are many (e.g. writing, the deaf-mute alphabet, symbolic rites, military signals, etc.) with language being the most important. It is thus possible to conceive of « *une science qui étudie la vie de signes au sein de la vie sociale* ».

In this sense Saussure conceives Semiology as a general science of signs, in the overarching frame of the social psychology. The sign, according to Saussure, does not link a thing to a name, but a concept to an imagined; it is like a medal with two faces, *signifié-signifiant*, and the relationship is fixed on the base of an abstract system of rules, la langue, that springs from collective use. This fact presupposes that all the members of a particular society give an identical value to the various signs which become true “codes”, rigid and conventional, namely a system of correspondence between significant and significations.

Actually, the various schools in the area share a common theoretical matrix and there thus emerges a conception of semiotics as a global science or heuristic analytic paradigm seeking to conceive the world as a “Whole” made up of systems of signs considered as communicative tools, as models of the world, as elements that regulate behaviour. Semiotics, in this sense, is proposed as a general theory of culture and of social environment; the communicative process is defined in turn –at the level of elementary structure– as an information model, a “total social fact” (Mauss).

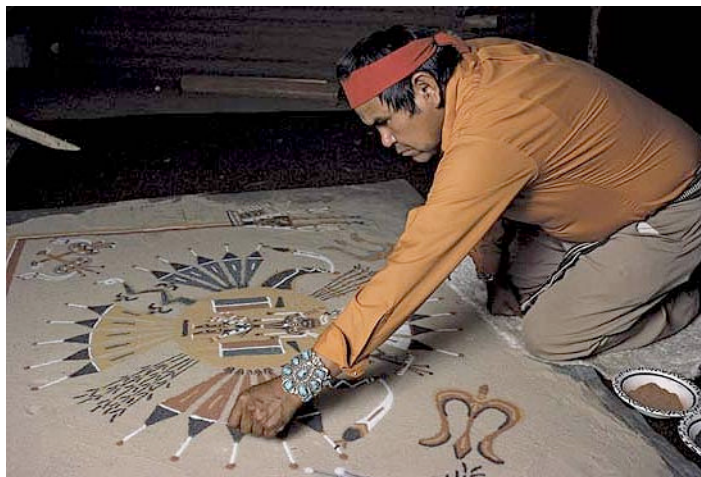
Concerning Rock Art, since we are confronted with situations that derive their peculiar characters in connection with space, with time and with different individuals that interact within a complex of signs, it is possible to utilize theoretic patterns deriving from the semiologic and meta-linguistic fields.

Sign production work can be assimilated to praxis, because the human subject is the actor of the semiotic practice, the central point lying in the pragmatic relationship between sender and addressee. The base of every quest as to the nature of the communicative acts, realized in a determined logistic situation (by actors placed in systems of socio-historic, biological, psychological, perceptive conditioning and so on) is synthesized by the centrality of the human being.

Rock Art is located at the top of this antinomian divide: by slight interventions, by little superficial modifications on the cave walls, shelter, open air rocks, man has transformed the territory creating the sacred panorama, an operation of enormous political, economic, and social importance.

Today Rock Art is a mere relict, the surviving datum of a complex cultural construction from which time and memory have erased nearly all the vital component parts; rites, sounds, songs, mimed actions, do not leave traces; oral tradition and bodily gesture don't fossilize!

The iconographies traced on soils, on sands (Fig. 1), on skins, on bark, wood, leaves, textiles, on adobe plaster, have often not resisted the passage of time, and most are definitively lost.



**Fig. 1.** Rituals of today. Navajo sand paintings, similar to Tibetan sand mandalas, are created on the floor of the hogan under the direction of the shaman. Before the sun sets, the sand painting is erased and swept onto a blanket to be carried outside. (Photo Navajo National Museum).

Only Rock Art, exactly because it is rock solid, has been conserved and gives us the data –for over 30,000 years– on one aspect of the cognitive activities of man as a symbolic thinker: there are sufficient few surviving signs on rock to connote culturally the territory –even the most desolate and desert– and for the re-emersion of peculiar landscapes, the hearth and homeland of man, for us to read minimally today.

There are special places associated with prehistoric art where the numinous and the supernatural present their epiphanies and where often rock art still exists today as the surviving sign of sacredness and of rituals that have suffered the ruin of time.

The multiple valences, the relationships and the symbolic connections that were existed between imagination and surroundings have almost completely disappeared, but still persist the specific characters of the rock phenomenon that enable us to insert it in the category of the religious - taking the term at its etymological value namely the “being bound together” –rock art thus still echoes the social life of communities in the remote past.

In fixing a centre that organize the territory, and then orders the universe drawing out from the primordial chaos, the “internal” territory is established in all its reassuring familiarity, a reliable source of daily living in opposition to the “external” territory, unknown and untrustworthy, peopled with prevalingly hostile forces.

“Powerful places” instanced by the presence of Rock Art, considered as genius loci present us with data relating to a fundamental phenomenon of the human culture: landscaping. In the light of these considerations, landscape is not simply a portion of territory or a geographical notion, but assumes the valence of the highly spiritual building up of Humanity.

And it is exactly in this open theatre formed by rock art sites that is possible to make a museum of the most ancient cognitive activity of Man.

The projection that we often risk to apply to Prehistoric Art, reminds us of the masterly warning by André Leroi-Gourhan: “to avoid putting in the mouth of prehistoric man Bantu words pronounced with European accent.”

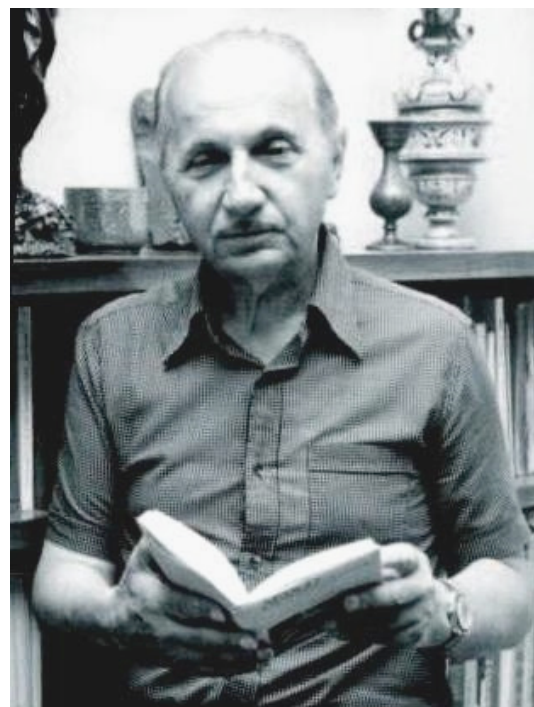
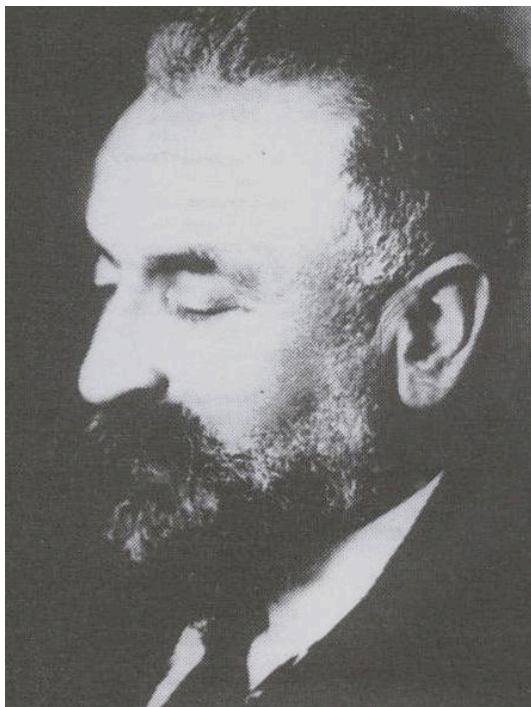
## **Palaeolithic cave art in Italy**

During the last century, and particularly after the Second World War, the evidence of prehistoric art in caves and on artefacts has increased in Italy, in particular relative to the Upper Paleolithic and to the Post- Paleolithic.

With regard to the most ancient populations, the so-called Pleistocene hunters and gatherers, a new wave of researchers and specialized centres concerned with prehistoric and rock art has emerged, Italy being no exception, producing new field research and accumulating fresh data in a systematic and ordered manner.

Some Centers have focused on Prehistoric Art. In 1988 took place in Darwin (Australia) one of the most important events in this area of scientific investigation at the international level, namely the founding of the IFRAO International Federation of Rock Art Organizations, with the role of networking the institutions devoted to rock art in the four corners of the world; in this way an extraordinary progress was made possible thanks to the new scientific collection of data, meetings, publications and vulgarization; the initiative is still very active and hopes to continue to be so in the future.

In Italy, a pioneer in the prehistoric art field was Prof. Paolo Graziosi (fig. 2), an anthropologist of Florence University, supporter of the Istituto Italiano di Preistoria e Protostoria, the Italian department of the international UISPP–UNESCO. Graziosi's professor in Florence was the Pinerolese Prof. Silvio Pons; together with Giovanni Marro and Piero Barocelli, they founded the CeSMAP, Study Center and Museum of Prehistoric Art of Pinerolo together with the Anthropological Institute in the Turin University.



**Fig. 2.** Marcel Mauss (1872-1950) and Paolo Graziosi (1906-1988). Marcel Mauss was a French anthropologist with extremely broad interests, including sociological theory, magic, religion, and exchange as a “*total social fact*”.

Paolo Graziosi was an Italian archaeologist and anthropologist. During the last century, his studies were the landmark for all specialists at an international level in the field of Prehistoric Art.

Paolo Graziosi focused on some particularities of Palaeolithic Prehistoric Art in Italy, placed mainly in the coastal caves of the peninsula as well as in some islands – the whole constituting a sort of “Mediterranean Province”. Since the 1950's in Italy only one cave with parietal engraved figures has been thoroughly investigated: the Romanelli Cave, near Castro in Terra d'Otranto, discovered in 1905 (Fig. 3).



**Fig. 3.** Romanelli Cave.

The Romanelli Cave in the Puglia region presents a series of carved figures on the walls and on the ceiling of the cavern. One can see a semi-naturalistic bovid, synthetically outlined, and other schematic–geometric figures similar to the stylized silhouettes of women and vulva (Fig. 4).

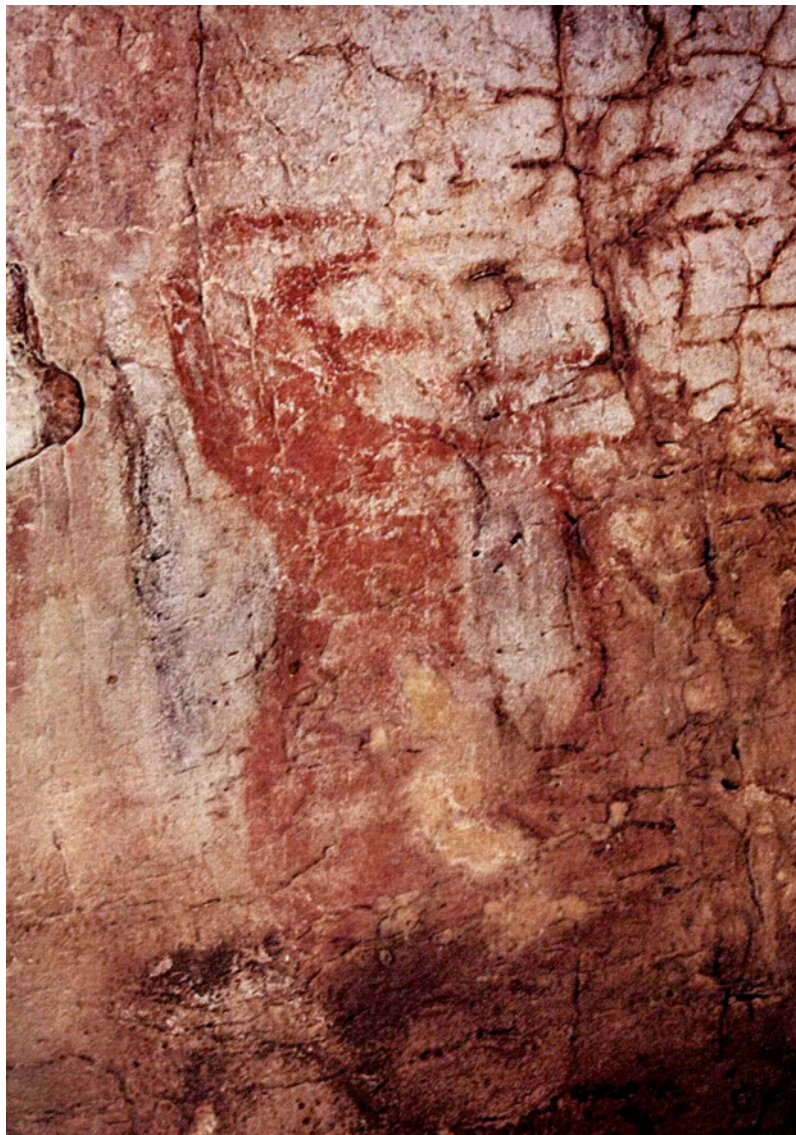


**Fig. 4.** Romanelli Cave : semi-naturalistic bovid and other schematic–geometric figures. (Photo Paolo Graziosi).

In the succeeding decennials further discoveries were made: the Paglicci Cave, in the Gargano peninsula, Puglia; the Cala dei Genovesi Cave, in the Levanzo island; the Addaura and Niscemi Caves, at Monte Pellegrino near Palermo, and minor sites in the Palermo and Trapani area (Za Minica, Dei Puntali, Racchio and Isolidda caves); the Romito Shelter in Papisidero, Calabrie; the Caviglione Cave, at the Balzi Rossi in Liguria.

The caves containing parietal art, linked to the Upper Palaeolithic and Epipalaeolithic horizons, afford mainly carved signs; only few possess paintings notably the Paglicci and Levanzo Caves. In a few grottoes it was possible to connect the archaeological levels to the wall decorations.

The Paglicci Cave has paintings, discovered by Francesco Zorzi and Franco Mazzena in 1961, located in the deepest and darkest part of the cavern, in a sort of niche. Some positive prints of hands in red colour can be seen together with two complete figures of horses, plus a cervical-dorsal line of an equine, still visible in red ochre (Fig. 5). Silhouettes and anatomical details are clearly underscored; the big abdomens denote possible images of “pregnant” mares.



**Fig. 5.** Paglicci Cave : two vertical figures of horses in red ochre. (*Photo Franco Mezzena.*)

The figurative style of the Franco-Cantabrian type, also present in various lithic carved plaquettes found *in situ* in the cave at archaeological levels, can be attributed to Gravettian and Epigravettian horizons.

The Cala dei Genovesi Cave (Fig. 6), located in the Levanzo island, in the Egadi Archipelago, about 30 meters above actual sea level, was discovered by Anna Vigliardi, Francesca Minellono and Paolo Graziosi in the 1950s. About 30 Palaeolithic engravings have been recorded, almost all in naturalistic style, animals of small dimensions (from 15 to 30 cm) and only 4 (3 carved and one painted in red ochre), are anthropomorphic. Between the zoomorphic figures there are cervids (fig. 7), bovids (Fig. 8) and equids.



Fig. 6. Cala dei Genovesi Cave.



Fig. 7. Cala dei Genovesi Cave : between the zoomorphic figures there are cervideus. (Photo Paolo Graziosi.)



Fig. 8. Cala dei Genovesi Cave : a carved figure of bovid. (Photo Paolo Graziosi.)

The archaeological layers of the Cala dei Genovesi, relate to Epipalaeolithic horizons and can be associated with the parietal figures which date to the end of the Pleistocene, when the sea level was about 40 meters lower than today –the site being then an isthmus whose surviving element is the present day islet of Levanzo.

In 1952, Jole Marconi and Luigi Bernabò Brea discovered prehistoric carvings in the small cave of the Addaura, on the slopes of Mount Pellegrino, near Palermo, in Sicily. The sunlit cave has revealed a “unicum” in Pleistocene art: scenes where human figures prevail, concentrated in the middle, surrounded by marginal figures of animals (Fig. 9). The styles are realistic with about ten figures delineated by contour lines, skilfully made.



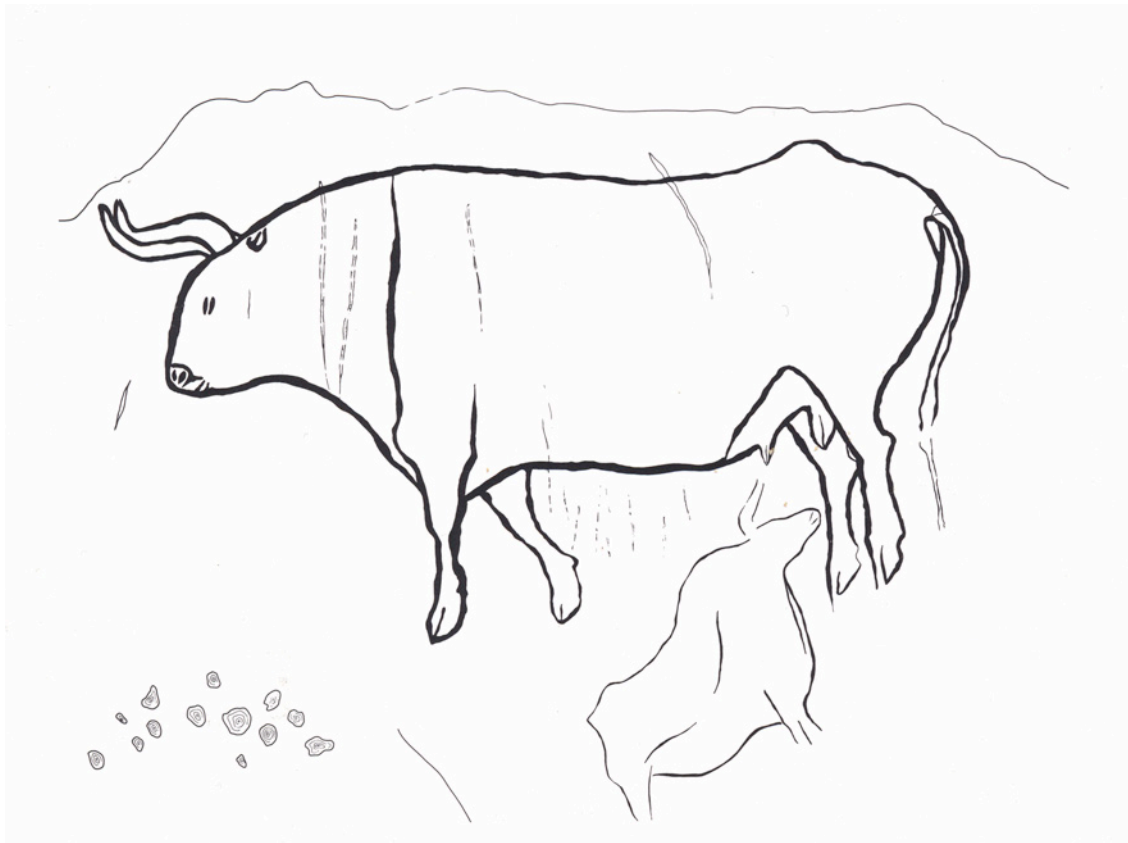
**Fig. 9.** Addaura Cave : scenes where human figures prevail, concentrated in the middle, surrounded by marginal figures of animals. (*Photo Paolo Graziosi.*)

A few meters away is a second cave (Addaura II) presenting two profiles of bovids deeply carved.

In 1954, still on Monte Pellegrino, but on the slope facing Palermo, another small cave (Niscredi) was discovered, containing carved figures, two horses and three bovids, similar to the representations of the Levanzo and Addaura sites. In the nearby Puntali Cave, figures of two equids and one cervid can be found.

In 1961 Agostino Miglio discovered animalistic figures in the large Romito Shelter, near Papisidero in Calabria. A strong archaeological deposit present in the shelter and in the cave has enabled accurate chrono-cultural evaluations relating to Epipalaeolithic times.

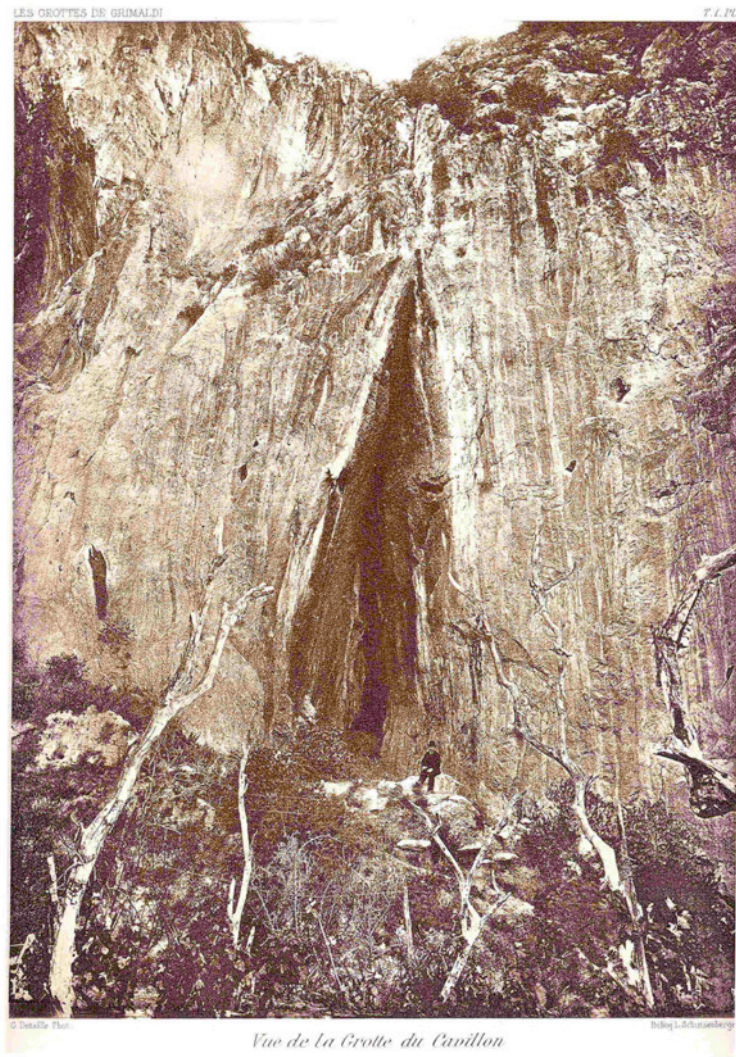
On the boulder located at the western end of the shelter are the animalistic figures between the most impressive, masterly and aesthetically highest realization of the whole Palaeolithic. A large figure of a bovid or bull is carved in a deep V line, sure and masterly delineated in a lateral profile (Fig. 10). The anatomic details (nostrils, mouth, eye, skin folds, cracked hoofs, penis and scrotum) are realistic and of exceptional quality.



**Fig. 10.** Romito Shelter : large figure of bovid or bull. (*Tracing by Dario Seglie – Tere Grindatto, CeSMAP, 1974.*)

The caves on the border between Liguria and Côte d'Azur, on the Tyrrhenian littoral, have been studied and excavated since the first half of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century. But the discovery of Palaeolithic art in these caves is relatively recent, in 1971 (Fig. 11); thanks to the surveys of Giuseppe Vicino, linear and geometric signs have been found, such as vulvae and phallic motifs, and an outstanding carved figure of a horse in naturalistic style, outlined in lateral perspective, associated with linear strokes deeply carved by the “polissoir” technique (Fig. 12).

The parietal Pleistocene art in Italy, present particularly in the South of the peninsula and in the Mediterranean Sicilian islands, constitutes an ensemble of forms presenting naturalistic, sub-naturalistic (zoomorphic and anthropomorphic) styles and abstract or geometric signs.



**Fig. 11.** Caviglione Cave. (Archive Giuseppe Vicino.)



**Fig. 12.** Caviglione Cave : an outstanding carved figure of a horse in naturalistic style. (Photo Giuseppe Vicino.)

Chronologically, this important phenomenon extends over a long period of time - over 10,000 years, starting from the Gravettian Era dated to 22,000 years BC to the end of the Epipalaeolithic, about 11,000 years ago.

This general analytic frame of Italian Prehistoric Art is largely indebted to the studies of Prof. Paolo Graziosi in the 1970's that remain today the fundamental synthesis, although ulterior studies and surveys of detail are contributing to a more refined definition of Pleistocene Art in Italy.

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