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The Ranaldi Shelter and the first figurative expressions of man in Basilicata (Italy)

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Cultivated fields around the Pisconi Anthropological Natural Reserve (photo AA)



Panel of the Pisconi Anthropological Natural Reserve

UNIQUE PREHISTORIC CAVE ART FOUND IN ITALIAN MOUNTAINS

By Professor Francesco Ranaldi, Director of the Provincial Museum, Potenza

UNTI, about 20 years ago, it was finally realized that there were no examples of palaeo- or neolithic rock art to be found in Italy. In fact, in comparison with the archaeological art of this period to be found in France and Spain, the carved basins of the Aurignacian in the Grotto of Tucino (Matera) and the schematic figures painted on the walls of the Aurignacian in the Grotto of Tucino (Matera) are entirely marginal manifestations.



A black and white photograph showing a rock shelter entrance with people standing nearby.

Only very recently, however (2016), has there been a realization that there were similar paintings or carvings on the mountains of Italy itself. Examples of these recent discoveries are the figure of a bull (2016), the carved basins of the Aurignacian in the Grotto of Tucino (Matera), the schematic figures painted on the walls of the Aurignacian in the Grotto of Tucino (Matera), the schematic figures painted on the walls of the Aurignacian in the Grotto of Tucino (Matera), the schematic figures painted on the walls of the Aurignacian in the Grotto of Tucino (Matera).



A black and white photograph of a rock painting depicting a bull or similar animal.

The Ranaldi Shelter (Filiano - I; RANALDI 1966; 1967) at the Serra Pisconi site takes its name from its discoverer, Francesco Ranaldi, an archaeologist and director of the Potenza Provincial Archaeological Museum from 1954 to 1988. The site – previously reported by shepherds, who generically mention the existence of inscriptions, and by Francesco Verrastro, a local farmer – is improperly known as Tuppo dei Sassi, an incorrect site name that takes its origin from a wrong indication (BORZATTI VON LÖWENSTERN, INGLIS 1990: 75).

The shelter is located near the Carpini hamlet (Filiano), between the Piano del Conte and Lagopesole (Avigliano - PZ), not far from the spring of the Bradanello stream. The area, called Serra Pisconi, is located at 879 meters above sea level, inside the large Lagopesole forest. Previously part of the possessions of the Doria Pamphilii princes, today it is a state forest with a prevalence of turkey and downy oak. The area is a hilly plateau with an average altitude of 700 m above sea level and maximum elevations of just over 1000. Serra Pisconi is two kilometers from Piano del Conte as the crow flies. It is the place where, until the early decades of the 900s, the ancient Lago Pesole (Lacus Pensilis) was located, a basin of Pleistocene origin, expanded with a retaining wall and an earth dam during the 18th century by the Doria Pamphilii princes. Thereafter, from 1923-1925, it was drained by a drainage channel in order for an experimental zootechnical village to be built. On March 29, 1972, the Pisconi Anthropological Nature Reserve was established by ministerial decree: access is permitted only for study purposes and any other human activity is prohibited. The State Forest Company provides the protection of the area, and the shelter, previously vandalized, is now properly protected by a metal enclosure and gate. The entire territory of Filiano, in addition to gate and gate. The entire territory of Filiano, in addition to gate and gate. The entire territory of Filiano, in addition to gate and gate.

The article by Francesco Ranaldi published January 15, 1966 in The Illustrated London News

1 Ancient and noble emblazoned family extinct after the Second World War, princes of Melfi from the fifteenth century.



Ranaldi Shelter, the enclosing gate



The Ranaldi Shelter, the enclosing gate



The access path to the *Ranaldi Shelter*



The limestone rock formation hosting the *Ranaldi Shelter*



Ranaldi shelter, photography and figure numbering (from BIANCOFIORRE 1965)

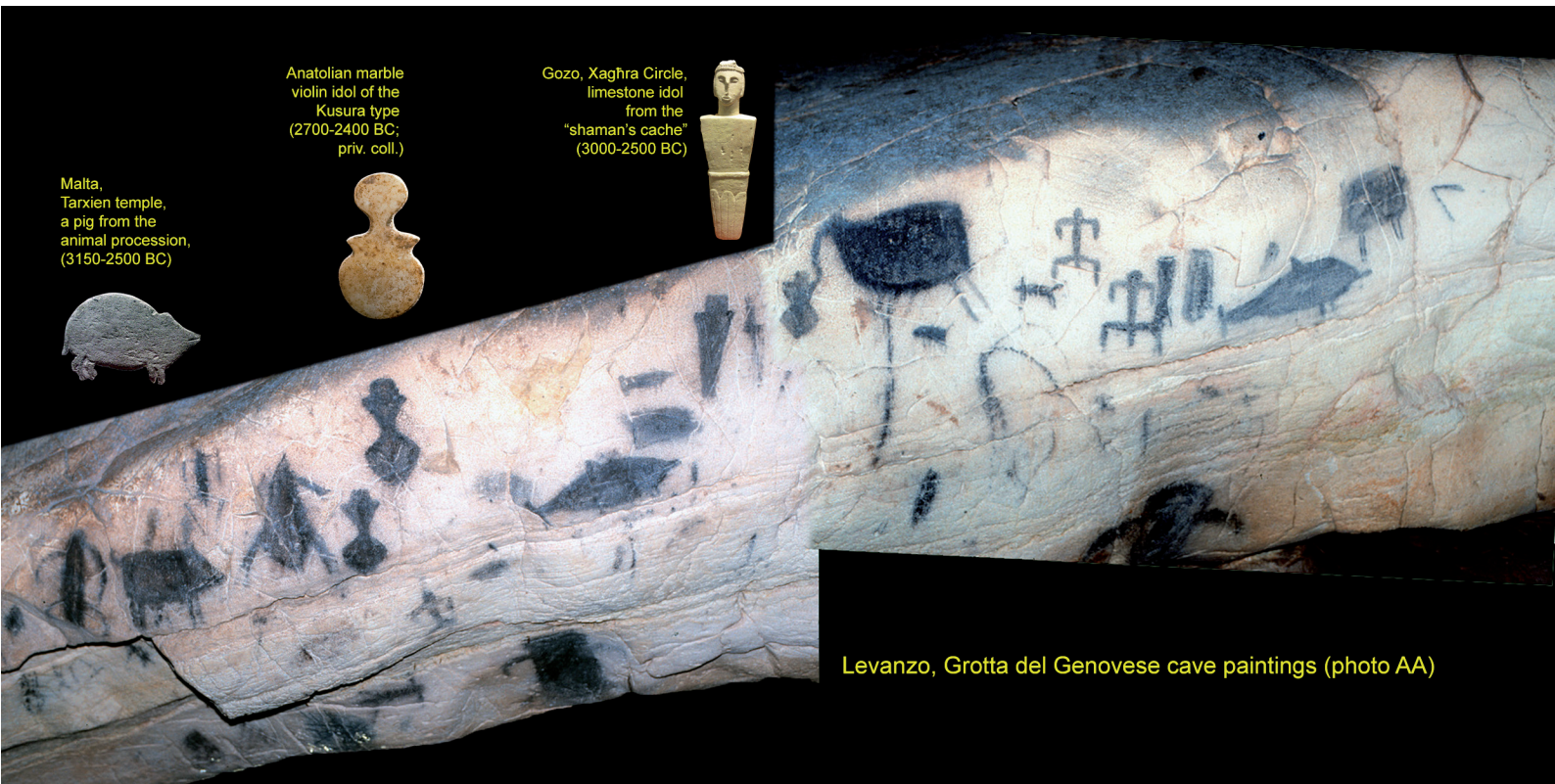
It is possible to reach the site within the *Reserve* via a comfortable path. An excellent open-air museum has been created, making access easy after a pleasant walk of about twenty minutes. Guided tours can be conducted in complete safety; in fact, in 2011, metal grids were installed to consolidate the overlying rocky blocks. The Municipality of Filiano, in collaboration with the Civil Protection and the *Pro Loco Association* of Filiano², manages the guides inside the *Reserve*. To guarantee full tourist enjoyment and cultural enhancement, the *Reserve* includes a Visitor Center³ and a parking lot near the Carpini hamlet.

The *Ranaldi Shelter* lies at the base of a water-soluble limestone outcrop, which is fissured and unstable. It houses the first figurative human traces in Basilicata, some wall paintings of about thirty figures – mainly deer, dogs, and polylobate, anthropomorphic, and pectiniform figures – painted in red ocher on a vertical wall. The paintings occupy a rectangular area roughly 65 cm high and 52 cm wide. According to Franco Biancofiore, at

the time professor of palethnology at the Universities of Bari and Rome who first published the images, the “color red wine” was applied directly on the rock, a “yellowish surface” that does not appear to have been prepared to be painted (BIANCOFIORRE 1965a; 1965b). Biancofiore applied for a research concession to the then Superintendent of the Antiquities of Lucania, Dino Adamesteanu; he found ceramic shards belonging to the “Matera civilization”, terminology that today refers to a non-initial phase of the Ancient Neolithic (second half of the 6th millennium BC) in the soil near the ground of the shelter.

² See the website <https://www.prolocofiliano.it/>, last checked on May 30, 2018. Contact: info@prolocofiliano.it.

³ The building was built as part of the “Conservation, enhancement and fruition of the Palaeolithic site Toppo dei Sassi-Acer Montis di Filiano” project, funded by the Basilicata Region, according to the Framework Program III Agreement – Integrative Cultural Heritage of the Tertiary Tourism and Integrated Promotion Office – Department of Productive Activities, Corporate Policies and Technological Innovation.



Levanzo, *Grotta del Genovese* cave paintings (photo AA)



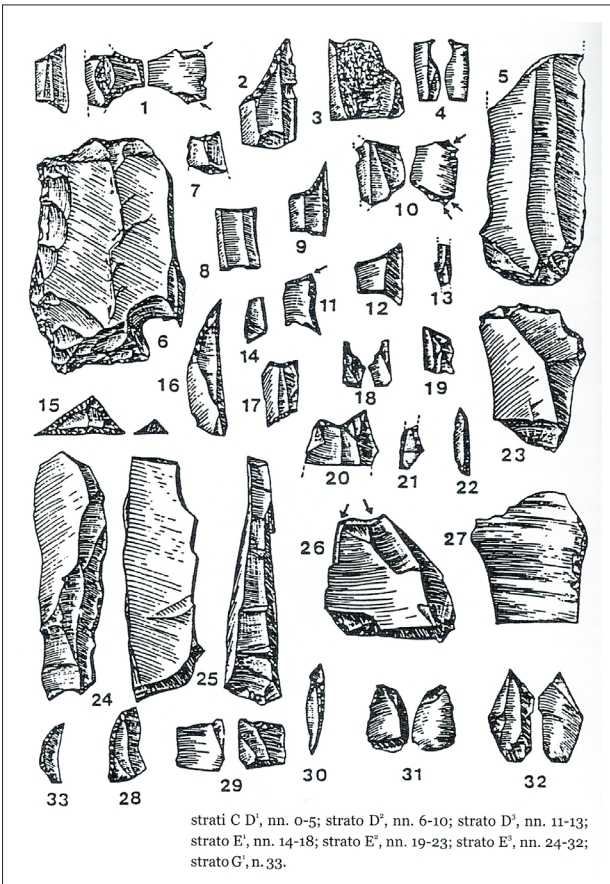
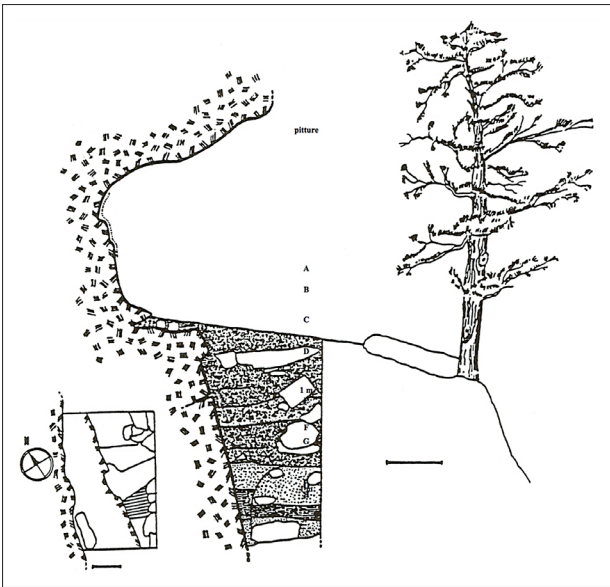
Levantine art, hunting scene to a deer herd, *Cova dels Cavalls*, Valltorta, Mesolithic (photo *Lyceo Hispanico*)

Analyzing the figures from a stylistic point of view, he found similarities between the lobed and the flat Anatolian idols and with the outline of the painted “idols” of the *Genovese Cave* of Levanzo. These can easily be compared to the violin idols of the Kusura kind, of the Early Age Bronze Age in

Levanzo, *Grotta del Genovese*, cave paintings; on the top, comparisons with archaeological finds from Malta and Anatolia (photo AA)

Western Anatolia dated to the first half of the 3rd millennium BC. As for the animal figures, Biancofiore matched them to those of Iberian schematic art; this art, according to the most recent studies (TORREGROSA GIMÉNEZ 1999; COLLADO GIRALDO, GARCÍA ARRANZ, 2013), covers a chronological span from the Ancient Neolithic to the end of the Copper Age/beginning of the Bronze Age, i.e. from the end of the 7th through the 3rd millennium B.C. From an interpretative point of view, like Ranaldi, Biancofiore highlighted a relationship among quadrupeds and human figures, recognizing the depiction of a hunting scene. Based on this, the two scholars hypothesized about the persistence of late-Mesolithic traditions, typical of groups of nomadic hunter-gatherers – not shepherd-farmers – who could possibly still survive in these semi-mountainous and wooded areas during the first Neolithic period. The paintings of the shelter could thus witness the influence, by an acculturation process favored by the eastern agricultural “colonization”, of new schematic style elements on a figurative culture still based on naturalism. Francesco Ranaldi speaks expressly of organized tribal hunting, with animals struck or perhaps held in ties, hypothesizing also a ritual or ceremonial background for such rock paintings (RANALDI 1966).

At this point, it should be outlined that, as concerns the painted shelters of the Iberian Peninsula,



Ranaldi Shelter, archaeological stratigraphy at the base of the painted rock wall and flint finds from the Mesolithic levels (from BORZATTI VON LÖWENSTERN 1971)

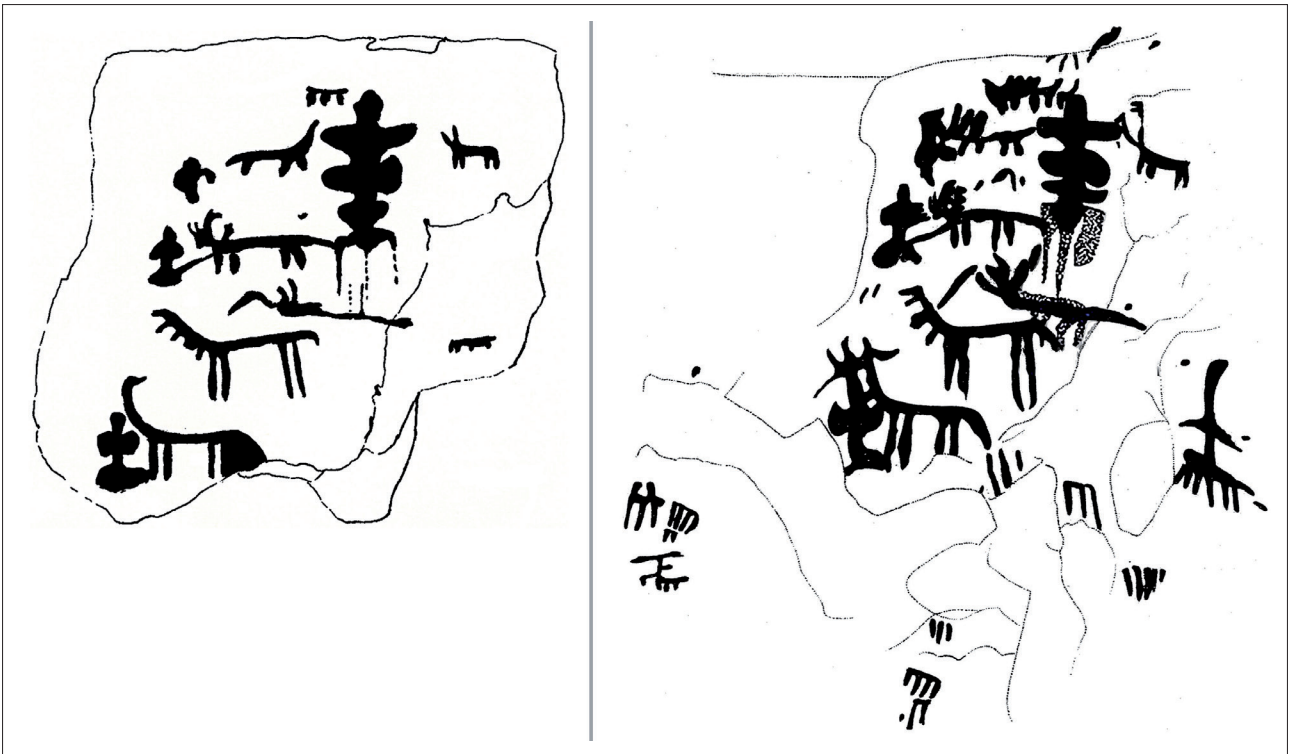
there is a partially overlapping period that includes the Levantine-style rock paintings and the schematic art paintings. Such an overlap is interpreted as a coexistence within the same territory of human groups of Mesolithic tradition, which produced art in the Levantine style characterized by naturalistic human and animal figures and other Neolithic groups, who came from the East, possibly by sea, and produced art in the schematic style (TORRE-

GROSA GIMÉNEZ 1999). On the other hand, it is also appropriate to take into account how the presence of wild herbivores can pose a threat to agricultural areas with the risk of destroying the harvest and how the removal of this threat by hunting or capture should not only comply with the schemes of a hunter-gatherer economy, but also a farmer economy as, in more recent phases, mythologies linked to the capture of deer still testify.

In the summer of 1971, Edoardo Borzatti von Löwenstern, thereafter professor of human paleontology at Florence University, carried out an archaeological dig at the base of the painted wall at the invitation of Superintendent Adamesteanu. He dug a trench of 5x3 m, reaching a depth of 4 meters (BORZATTI VON LÖWENSTERN 1971). He found acid soil, which probably prevented the preservation of any bone and faunal remains, and found no trace of the pottery fragments in the “Matera style”. He found instead 387 splinters or fragments of light flint, not of good quality, worked on the spot. Evaluating its strong microlithization, the large amount of geometric fragments and the absence of pottery, he attributed these finds to the Mesolithic⁴, not archaic, but of an early Tardenoisian stage. In the scientific report of the Archaeological Superintendence of Basilicata, they are referred to as the Castelnovian *facies* (LEONINI 2015), which is the most recent of the Mesolithic.

Later, the archaeologist dealt with the iconographic aspects (BORZATTI VON LÖWENSTERN, INGLIS 1990), recognizing the presence of further iconic elements such as pectiniforms, probably zoomorphic figures. He identified at least two pictorial phases, observing that the three vertical traits of the lower “limbs” of the larger polylobed figure seem to belong to a previous figure. After that, he was very doubtful about the anthropomorphic interpretation of the lobed figures, declaring “the pictorial complex shows mixed elements that make it difficult to correctly contextualize it from the chronological and the cultural point of view”. Moreover, he claimed that the interaction among human figures and deer is quite unclear. The main contradiction arises from the presence of two styles: naturalistic, in his opinion, as concerns the animals and schematic-abstract for the other figures, despite the relation that seems to exist among them. On these bases, he defined the style of the animal figures as impressionistic, suggesting a comparison with the Levantine art, which testifies to a Mesolithic tradition in the Iberian Peninsula and survived until the beginning of the Ancient Neolithic. So, in his mind, the *Ranaldi Shelter* rock paintings could be related

⁴ The Mesolithic predates the Neolithic, which began in southern Italy at the end of the 7th millennium BC.



Ranaldi Shelter, reproductions of the figures, left from RANALDI 1967, right from BORZATTI VON LÖWENSTERN, INGLIS 1990



Ranaldi Shelter, watercolor reproduction of the figures (from BORZATTI VON LÖWENSTERN 2016)

to the Mesolithic items he found in the diggings at the base of the shelter. More recently, the scholar made a further exegetical step, explaining the lobed figures as plants, such as trees – against which adult male deer would rub themselves to mark their territory – or oak leaves, in particular *Quercus frainetto* (BORZATTI VON LÖWENSTERN 2016 in SABIA 2016: 188). Basically, he recognized the presence of a naturalistic scene, populated by a deer herd in the wood.

With respect to the graphic reproductions of the *Ranaldi Shelter* art, no real iconographic tracing is currently available; only quite schematic drawings, such as the ones published in RANALDI 1966, RANALDI 1967 and in BORZATTI VON LÖWENSTERN, INGLIS 1990. However, the watercolor reproduction by Edoardo Borzatti von Löwenstern published in SABIA 2016: 187 is more defined. The numbering of figures was performed in BIANCOFIORE 1965b, pl. I, marked on a photograph; eleven elements were catalogued. We may hope that accurate tracings and hi-definition digitally filtered photographs will enrich the knowledge of this important rock art site. A virtual museum could also be considered, as a preparatory tool for the visit or to support a subsequent in-depth analysis, in order to further enhance the site. In this regard, we may look at the recent creation of the *Virtual Museum of the Crodo Balma dei Cervi*⁵, another shelter with rock paintings located in Piedmont. Here, the virtual visit is more detailed than the real one in certain aspects, thanks to the presence of panoramic views, elements of augmented reality and contextual related contents.

As we have seen, the chronological and interpretive frame of the *Ranaldi Shelter* rock paintings follows two distinct paths: on one hand, we have a Mesolithic naturalistic depiction of a herd of deer in their wood, on the other, a schematic Neolithic hunting scene with the persistence of more ancient tra-

⁵ See the *Virtual Museum* online site at <<http://www.balmadeicervi.it>>.



Ranaldi Shelter, the schematic four-legged figures of the main panel (photo AA, digital enhancement)

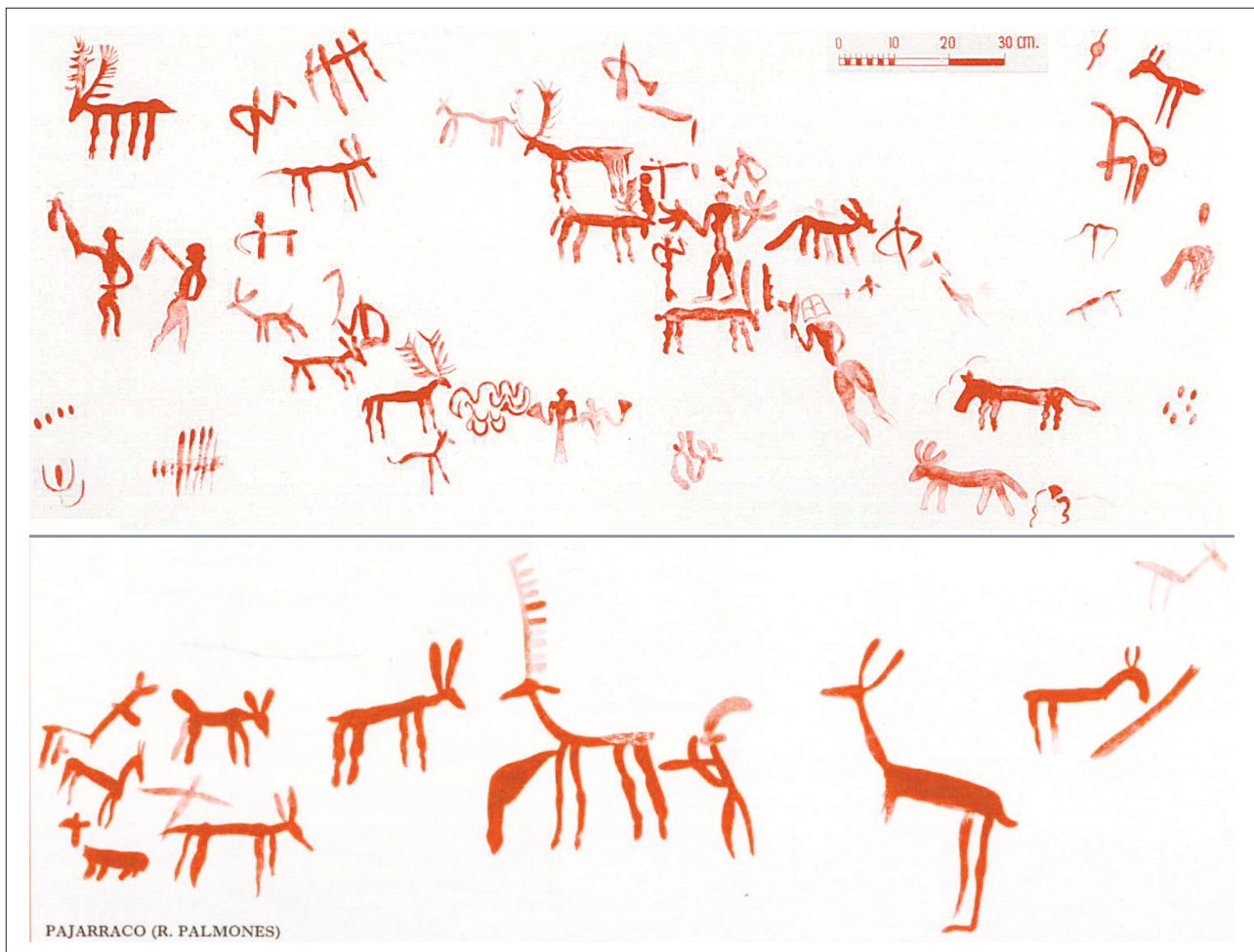
ditions. Therefore, archaeological publications and administrative documents deal with the rock figures differently, ascribing them to one of the two archaeological periods, Paleolithic-Mesolithic or Neolithic, with a significant difference of some millennia.

The style of the figures, however, is undoubtedly schematic. The deer (we may count at least five of them), as well as those of Porto Badisco, and dogs of the *Ranaldi Shelter* are depicted with stick-shaped segments; the same occurs in the schematic art of the Iberian Peninsula, which extends along the Mediterranean arch up to Provence and the western Alps. There are numerous shelters with paintings of deer herds and hunting scenes: among the most remarkable, we may cite the *Cueva del Tajo de las Figuras* (BREUIL, BURKITT 1929: 11-24, pl. I, III, IV), the *Abrigo principal de Bacinete* (*Ibid.* XXVII and XXXI) and the *Cueva del Pajarraco* (*Ibid.* pl. XXIV), all belonging to the so-called *Arte Sureño* (Southern Art) group, which occupies the extreme south of the Iberian Peninsula in Andalusia.

Coming back to the *Ranaldi shelter*, we count four polylobate figures; one is larger than the others. As for spatial arrangement and alignment, they do not seem to fit well with the animal figures, although we may not exclude a relation. Three of them follow a vertical alignment on the left side of the painted panel. Looking attentively at the enhanced photographs (decorrelation stretch via software), we may recognize their anthropomorphic nature. Human schematic bodies show upper and lower limbs curved downwards; they are male, with “fat” limbs and bust with rounded edges. Schematic black-painted figures with lowered limbs, albeit more orthogonal, are also found inside the *Grotta del Genovese* at Levanzo. The larger figure maintains “fat” bust and limbs with rounded edges, and shows a symmetrical shape, similar to a “Rorschach spot”, with four bilateral lobes protruding from the central body. The second and the last pair of them, starting from the top, are bending at an angle downwards. It is in this figure that Edoardo Borzatti von Löwenstern recognized a superimposition and recently interpreted it as an oak leaf.



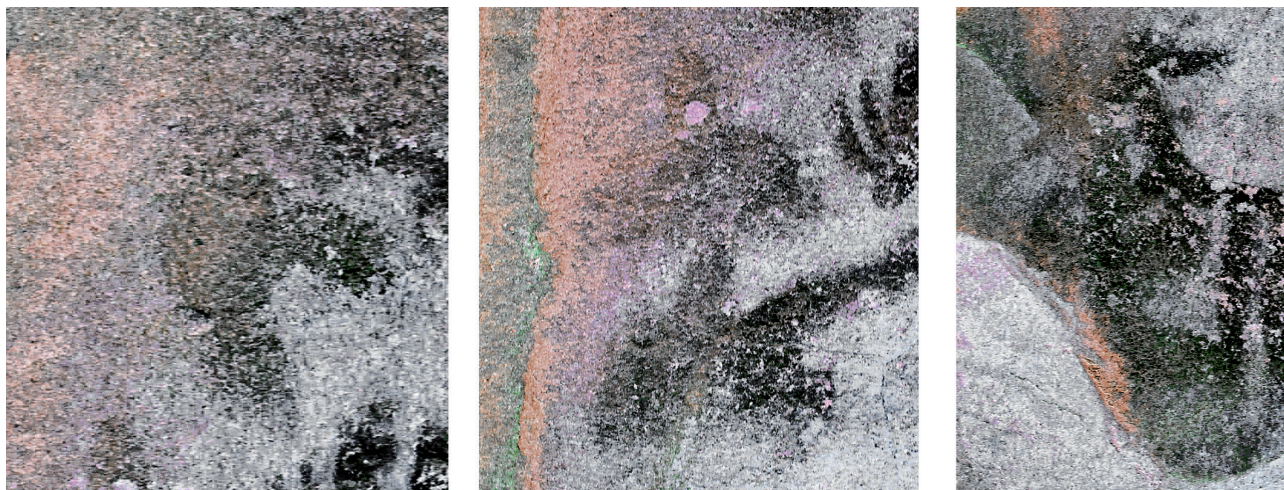
Iberian peninsula, schematic rock paintings, *Cueva del Tajo de las Figuras* (from BREUIL, BURKITT 1929)



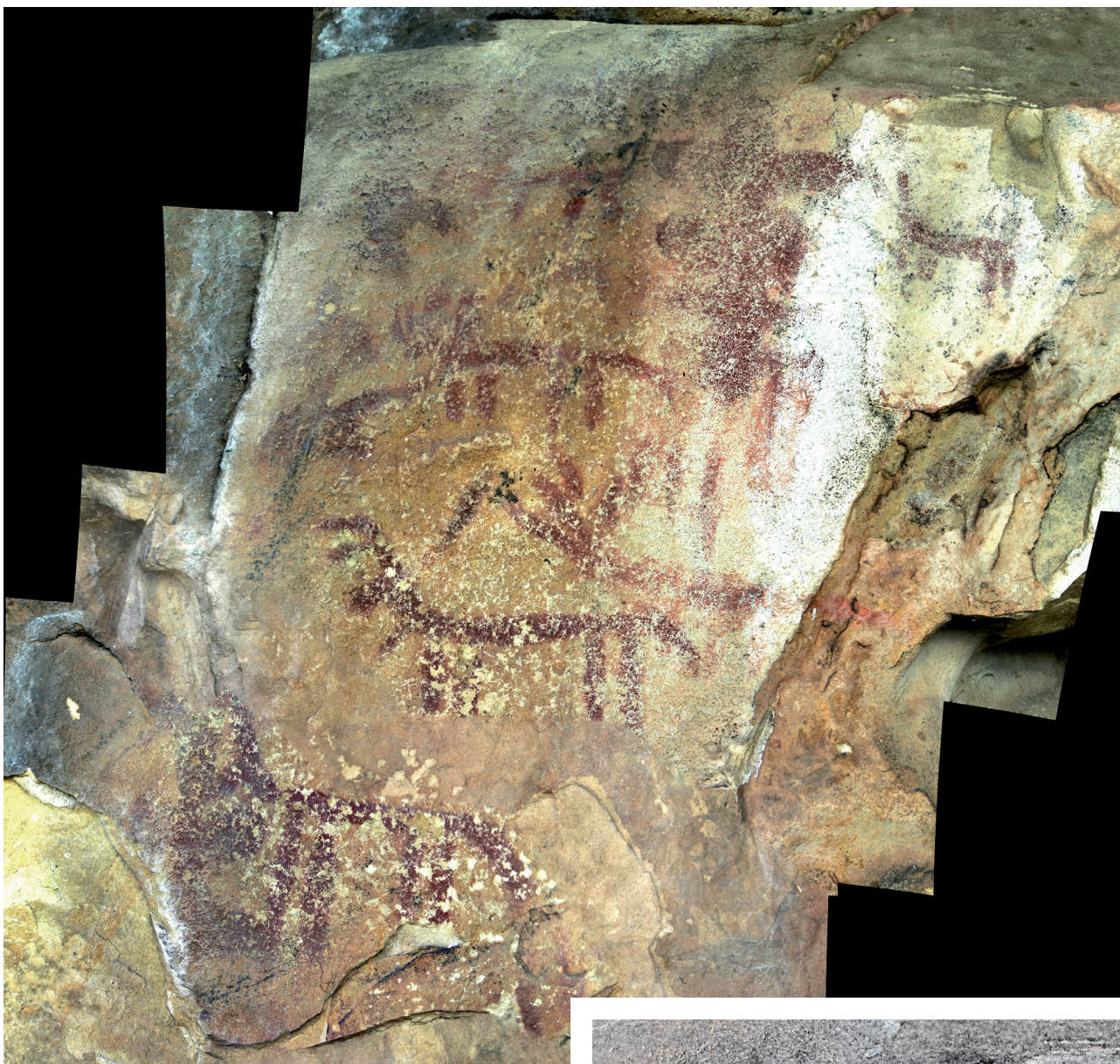
Iberian peninsula, schematic rock paintings, above the *Abrigo principal de Bacinete*, below the *Cueva del Pajarraco* (from BREUIL, BURKITT 1929)

However, in Iberian schematic art, idoliform figures are widespread – some figures from Levanzo are defined similarly – including the so-called eyed idols. Sometimes some figures exhibit the multiplication of the limbs, referred to as poly-anthropomorphic. From time to time, hats of various shapes, even feathered hats, appear so that they are considered to be prominent figures or of particular ritual or mythological value. The three upper lobes, two lateral and one apical, of the large polylobed figure

of the *Ranaldi Shelter* could be a representation of a broad-brimmed hat with a possible ceremonial function. Based on superimpositions and comparisons with movable art, these figures are generally assigned to the less ancient phases, particularly to the Chalcolithic (the 3rd millennium BC) in the study of Iberian schematic art. Although we may not rely on direct archaeometric datings, which are rarely obtainable due to the lack of organic binders, we can recognize two pictorial phases in the *Ranaldi*



Ranaldi Shelter, the schematic anthropomorphic figures of the main panel (photo AA, digital enhancement)



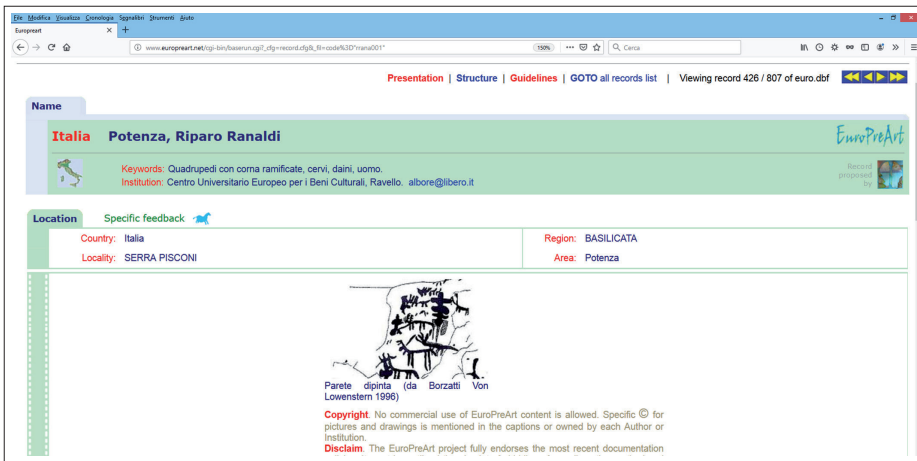
Ranaldi Shelter, the main panel, photomosaic (photo AA)

di Shelter palimpsest: the representation of a deer herd in the most ancient (Neolithic) and the presence of idoliforms and human figures with arms curved downwards in the following one (Chalcolitic).

The paintings of the *Ranaldi Shelter*, the only ones known so far in Basilicata, are an archaeological asset and represent a cultural heritage of extreme value and rarity. Together with those of the *Grotta dei Cervi* (the *Cave of the Deer*) at Porto Badisco (Otranto), the *Grotta del Riposo* (the *Resting Cave*) at Rignano Garganico and the *Grotta del Genovese* (the *Genoese Cave*) at Levanzo Island, they are part of the very limited group of sites in southern Italy with post-Palaeolithic rock paintings. They are able to pass on the precious images of our distant past only thanks to delicate and unique preservation conditions. They offer a glimmer of our prehistory

Ranaldi shelter, main panel, the polylobed figure (photo AA, digital enhancement)

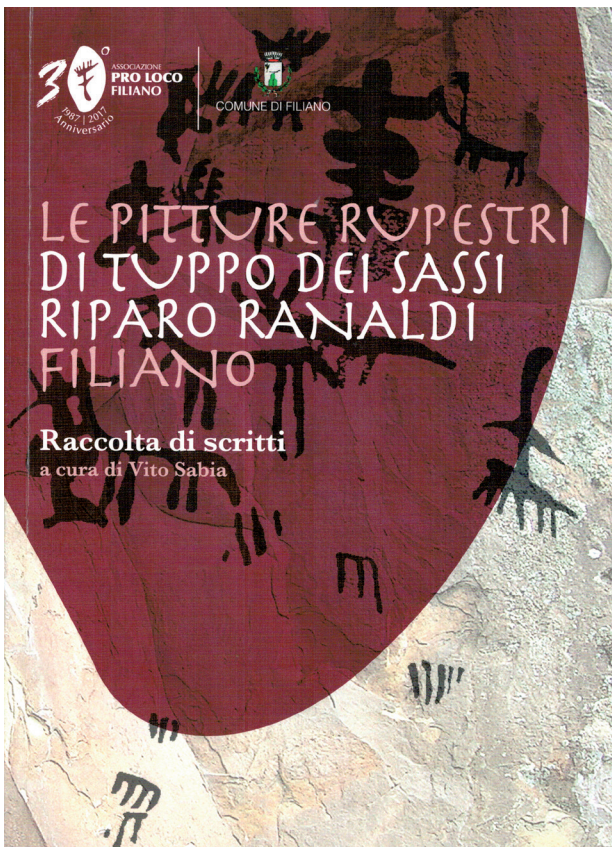




Ranaldi Shelter, the EuroPreArt record

and its beliefs that we cannot glimpse in any other way: in fact, there are very few sites throughout Italy with prehistoric rock paintings, even if sheltered. It is the duty of archaeologists and an opportunity for local communities – who can find in them the oldest and most precious expression of their cultural heritage – to study and promote them.

In 2016, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the discovery of the paintings (1965-2015) by Francesco Ranaldi, an interesting volume was published, carefully edited by Vito Sabia (SABIA 2016). The work, dedicated to the memory of the discoverer, is commendable and worthy of diffusion, gathering in a single volume all the specialized and



Ranaldi Shelter, the cover of the volume edited by Vito Sabia in 2016

informative papers published on the *Ranaldi Shelter* since 1965. It also shows the documentation of the diggings conducted by Edoardo Borzatti von Löwenstern, who was one of the most attentive scholars of the area. The volume contains a rich photographic section and includes unpublished documents, such as a typescript by Francesco Ranaldi; the appendix contains the establishment

decree of the *Pisconi Anthropological Nature Reserve*, in which the site is located.

The EuroPreArt⁶ project, a prehistoric art database funded by the European Union's *Education and Culture 2000* Program (ARCÀ 2012), is free to access online and contains a descriptive archaeological record⁷ of the *Ranaldi Shelter*, with the drawings of the paintings published in BORZATTI VON LÖWENSTERN 1995. Information about the *Ranaldi Shelter* is also on *Wikimedia Commons* (a *Wikimedia Foundation* project), one of the largest archives of digital images and multimedia files with free license available on the net, aimed at the dissemination of knowledge and connected to *Wikipedia*.

Among others, we can see the "Drawing of the cave paintings of *Ranaldi Shelter*"⁸ executed by Ranaldi himself and the drawing of the archaeological stratigraphy recognized by Edoardo Borzatti von Löwenstern during the 1971 diggings⁹. In addition, the Filiano Municipality joined the *Wiki Love Monuments Italy* cultural heritage initiative in 2018, uploading other images of the shelter and rock paintings on the *Wikimedia Commons* platform¹⁰. All images in *Wikimedia Commons* are

6 See the website <<http://www.europreart.net>>, last check on May 30, 2018.

7 You may refer to the online record at <http://www.europreart.net/cgi-bin/baserun.cgi?_cfg=record.cfg&_fil=code%3D%22rrana001%22>, last check on May 30, 201.

8 See the URL <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Disegno_delle_pitture_rupestri_di_%22Riparo_Ranaldi%22.png>.

9 See the URL <https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toppo_dei_sassi#/media/File:Stratificazione_del_suolo_in_Toppo_dei_Sassi.png>.

10 See the details of the single images here <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=Special:Search&profile=default&search=17D5930005+incategory%3A%22Images_from_Wiki_Loves_Monuments_2017_in_Italy%22+&fulltext=Search&searchToken=d7j0tc1x54lt5un7b3vq2ui9y>



Ranaldi Shelter, the main panel, photomosaic (photo AA, digital enhancement)

published under the *Creative Commons license Attribution_Share Alike 4.0*, which freely allows anyone to reuse, modify and share them as long as an appropriate mention of authorship is cited and they are distributed under the same license as the originals. Lastly, we may find the Wikipedia entry concerning the *Ranaldi Shelter*¹¹, improperly referred to as *Tuppo dei Sassi*.

¹¹ See the URL

<https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tuppo_dei_sassi>.

It is hoped that the *Ranaldi Shelter* can be studied again in the future in order to allow for a more detailed chronological attribution and to complete its exegetical path; these are functional elements that strengthen the promotion and the cultural and the educational fruition of the site. The aim is to bring new generations closer to the roots of our cultural heritage and to play an important role to promote tourism and enhance the resources of this magnificent territory.

(English proofreading by Whitney Kathryn ISAACS)



Ranaldi shelter, the shelter and an illustrative panel (photo AA)

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