

From stone bodies to tamed environment

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Ritualistic and symbolic uses of stones in prehistoric societies are material indications of collective representations and relationships with the environment.

I will focus on the central Alps (Valcamonica, Valtellina and Val Venosta) of the third millennium BC where ritual practices involved manipulation of stones at different scales, including steles. Steles are stone bodies, personal effigies of men, women and maybe children. Sexual and gender characteristics of these bodies are expressed in forms and dimensions of stones as in the iconography they're wearing. Erected in alignments in ceremonial sites, these steles represent segments of chalcolithic societies and highlight some aspects of their social functioning. What is much more interesting is that these stone bodies seem to be created to evolve like real/human bodies. They had complex biographies.

Analogy between the human body and steles appears at different levels of the ritual practices. Some small stones brought on the site have the same iconic morphology as the steles. In addition, there may be a parallel between the treatment of the steles and the treatment of the dead and their bones as supposed by F. Fedele concerning the Anvoia site. These practices are part of a context in which there seems to be continuity between human and natural agents.

The ritualistic and symbolic uses of stone in the central-Alps of the IIIrd millennium BC, which could be explained by the existence of a collectively shared sense about stones, allow us to approach the way chalcolithic societies considered the world in which they were living. Archaeological remains, and more precisely the ones discovered in ceremonial contexts, invite us to be careful when using concepts such as Nature/Culture, wild/domestic. In the case of the steles, humans are turned to stones and stones are socialized/domesticated. The stones are invested with meaning and it seems that the evocation of the human body is a leitmotif of this kind of practices. Therefore, it seems possible to argue that for the groups of the third millennium BC, stones were not conceived as raw materials extracted from nature. It's in stones that the Chalcolithic groups have chosen to recognize and express some features that couldn't be more social: human body and social constructions.