



## POSSIBLE FUNERARY SCENES IN ROCK ART: SOME CASE STUDIES FROM GREECE, ITALY AND PORTUGAL

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**ABSTRACT** - In this article we present eleven case studies of possible funerary scenes belonging to Iron Age rock art from Greece, Italy and Portugal, where anthropomorphic figures can be observed associated with horses and birds. Their funerary character is discussed based not only in a rock art analysis, but also based on data from classical literature and iconography available on pottery, coins, jewelry and other archaeological evidence with a similar chronology

**RIASSUNTO** - In questo articolo vengono presentati e studiati undici casi di scene di arte rupestre interpretabili come scene funerarie e riferibili all'età del ferro da Grecia, Italia e Portogallo. Si possono osservare figure antropomorfe associate a cavalli e uccelli. Il loro carattere funerario è discusso non solo attraverso l'analisi del loro contesto, ma anche sulla base della letteratura classica e sull'iconografia disponibile su ceramica, monete, gioielli e altri reperti archeologici con una cronologia simile.

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### INTRODUCTORY NOTE

The possible funerary scenes presented in this article belong to Iron Age rock art from Greece, Italy and Portugal. These are human figures associated with horses (four examples) and birds (six examples)<sup>1</sup>. One curious example from Portugal shows a warrior together with a horse and three water birds.

The two examples from Greece can be seen on Rock 3 of Prophet Elias (Philippi), while the cases from Italy are all from Valcamonica, one from Foppe di Nadro, one from Pagherina, one from Campanine Alta, three from Scale di Cimbergo, one from Bosc del Vicare and one from Coren del Valento. The only example from Portugal is from Rock 3 of Mocissos, in the now submerged area of the Alqueva dam.

After the description of the case studies we discuss the need for a coherent methodology for their interpretation. In fact, the information available in classical Greek and Latin texts, together with the analysis of the existent iconography on pottery, coins, gold artefacts and so on reveals a deep belief in the immortality of the soul among several peoples from the European Iron Age, this idea being fundamental to understand the possible funerary scenes presented here.

It is not our intention to prove or deny the existence of life after death, but our aim is to make a better interpretation of the minds of the peoples who left, the engravings carved on the rocks studied in this article. In order to achieve that, the association of the human depictions with horses and birds allows us to consider myths and funerary symbolism based also on the 'religious' thought of other peoples from the same period in neighbouring regions.

Finally we make some considerations regarding the horse's funerary symbolism and its association with equestrian aristocratic elites, connected with its high social, military, economic and religious value.

### CASE STUDIES

We present the examples of human figures associated with horses separately from those associated with birds. Among these, there are three cases of long-legged birds, two cases of water birds and one of a possible rapine bird.

The example which shows simultaneously a warrior, a horse and three water birds will be analysed last.

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<sup>1</sup> We don't discuss here other possible funerary scenes, like incomplete human figures (busts), which appear in Naquane and Zurla, without the association of the mentioned zoomorphic figures.



### *Anthropomorphic figures and horses*

- Panel C, Rock 3 from Prophet Elias (Philippi, Greece)

On this panel there is an abstract figure with body and arms in the shape of a 'Y', riding a horse intentionally depicted without a head, next to another horse with a rectangular saddle associated with a shield and a bow with arrow (Fig.1), constituting the depiction of the warrior's equipment, as in some Late Bronze Age funerary stele from other regions (Coimbra et al., 2011).

- Panel B, Rock 3 from Prophet Elias (Philippi, Greece)

Among the superimpositions of this panel it is possible to see a war scene: a warrior with an axe in his left hand seems to be falling from a horse intentionally carved only with half of its body, since the two grooves which define the horse's body end in two small cup-marks. Near the warrior's feet there is a depiction of a bow with an arrow (Coimbra et al., 2011). On the right side of these engravings another warrior on horseback shoots an arrow in the direction of the other horse rider, which is the reason for his fall. Near the second warrior there is a depiction of a palm branch, symbol of his victory (Fig.2).

- Rock 27 from Foppe di Nadro (Valcamonica, Italy)

On this rock, a depiction of a warrior constituted of only the head, neck and arms, holding a shield in his left hand, seems to be floating over the image of a horse (Fig.3). This anthropomorphic figure seems to be intentionally incomplete, like other examples at Naquane and Zurla.

- Sector C, Rock 49 from Scale (Valcamonica, Italy)

In this example it is possible to observe a horse with two heads in opposite directions, certainly with a mythological meaning, ridden by a warrior with a sword and a shield (Rossi, 2009: 311).

### *Anthropomorphic figures and birds*

- Rock 47 from Scale (Valcamonica, Italy)

An anthropomorphic figure with a feathered helmet holds a sword in his right hand and a rectangular shield in his left. This warrior shows the depiction of the sex and stands on a very big bird with a long neck and beak and also long legs, maybe a representation of a stork (Fig.4).

- Sector A, Rock 49 from Scale (Valcamonica, Italy)

On the central part of this rock, an anthropomorphic figure with horns but without weapons rides a bigger bird with long legs.<sup>2</sup>

- Rock 11 from Campanine Alta (Valcamonica, Italy)

On this rock it is possible to observe a human figure without arms standing on a smaller bird.<sup>3</sup>

- Rock 62 from Bosc del Vicare (Valcamonica, Italy)

A warrior with a crested helmet, holding a sword in his right hand, stands on two water birds depicted facing in opposite directions. The human figure reveals also the representation of armour (Fig.5).

- Rock 5 from Pagherina (Valcamonica, Italy)

On this rock there is a representation of a warrior with an axe and an oval shield standing on a 'half water bird' ship.<sup>4</sup>

- Rock 64 from Coren del Valento (Valcamonica, Italy)

A warrior with an axe and a big shield rides what seems to be a rapine bird, depicted bigger than the human figure.<sup>5</sup>

### *Anthropomorphic figure, horse and birds*

- Rock 3 from Mocissos, Portugal

On this now lost rock,<sup>6</sup> a warrior holding a spear and a shield in his right hand stands on the back of a horse, resting his left hand over his belt. Three water birds (added later?) are depicted looking in the same direction as the horse (Fig. 6). Unfortunately the only available drawing does not indicate the geographic orientation of the panel, which could be useful for interpretation.

### DISCUSSION

According to C. Renfrew (1994: 47), 'in all attempts to investigate the early past there is the risk that we first conceptualize, setting up a whole series of categories of our own construction, and then order our data

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2 See Rossi, 2009: 310.

3 Idem.

4 See Marretta, 2007: Fig. 13.

5 See Marretta, 2005: Fig.3.

6 It's under the waters of the Alqueva dam.

(our observations bearing upon the past) in terms of such categories.’ In fact, regarding the scenes described previously, it is important to keep in mind that ‘looking at an ancient image implies that one should have acquired the ability to view this image as would a person from that culture, but it is difficult to recover “the eye of the epoch”’ (Olmos quoted by Marco, 2008: 53).

Indeed, in order to make an interpretation of rock art which may be the least subjective possible, it is crucial to find a methodology of approach which can be somehow objective. In the case of the examples presented here, classical literature can be very helpful, as well as some iconography from the second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC, available on gold artefacts, coins, pottery and so on.

In fact, the analysis of Greek and Latin texts together with the iconography referred to reveals a deep belief in the immortality of the soul among several peoples in the European Iron Age, this idea being indispensable to understand the scenes presented in this article. For example, in the *Iliad* (Book XXIII) it is mentioned that Achilles ordered a sacrifice of four horses over the funerary pyre of his friend Patroklos, in order to guide his soul to Hades. Latin writers like Diodorus Siculus, Caesar (*De Bello Gallico*, VI, 14), Lucan (*Pharsalia*) and Pomponius Mela talk about the faith in immortality in Gaul and among the Celtic tribes from the Iberian Peninsula (Green, 1992; Marco, 2008).

Also archaeological evidence shows a strong belief in an afterlife. As M. Green (1992: 167) wrote, ‘the presence of Iron Age graves filled with food, drink and other equipment attests to the belief that the deceased would have need of possessions in the next world’. In some of these graves horses were also sacrificed and buried together with their owners, probably with the same aim mentioned in the *Iliad*.

Regarding iconography, the golden diadem from Moñes (Asturias, Spain), dated between the 2nd century BC and the 1st century AD (Marco, 2008), represents what seems to be an otherworld scene, showing ornitomorph human figures holding cauldrons,<sup>7</sup> among several fish and men riding horses.

Thus, according to classical literature and archaeological evidence one can observe that the horse appears in several cultures with a psychopomp<sup>8</sup> character, meaning that it is a guide for the soul in the afterlife.

The iconography of some coins from Gaul also reveal his idea, where one can see the so called ‘bird-horseman’ (Fig. 7), being the bird that is ‘the animal metamorphosis of the deceased person ascending to his astral dwelling place on the horse’ (Marco, 2008: 63), that could be itself an attribute of a divinity.<sup>9</sup> In fact, the Celtic idea of metamorphosis<sup>10</sup> is ‘the belief that the domains of animals, men and gods, life and death, are not separate but are an aspect of an integrated whole in which supernatural beings have the ability to change shape’ (Marco, 2008: 64).

These preliminary considerations bring us back to the case studies of anthropomorphic figures and horses in rock art. On Panel C of Rock 3 from Prophet Elias, the war equipment of a horse-rider (shield, bow with arrow and horse with saddle) is depicted in a way that recalls the Late Bronze Age funerary tombstones from the south of the Iberian Peninsula. Along with the equipment, the warrior is represented in a very schematic way, on the back of a horse without a head, meaning probably that they are both dead (Coimbra et al., 2011), on their way to the otherworld. This rock could have been a sanctuary of the Hedones (Dimitriadis, 1999; Coimbra, 2009), a Thracian tribe known for being expert riders. This idea is also supported by the scene on panel B, which celebrates the victory of one rider over his enemy, who falls from his horse. More than representing a funerary scene, this particular scene depicts the victory of a horse-rider and the death of another.

On Rock 27 from Foppe di Nadro, the anthropomorphic figure that looks to be floating over a horse seems to be intentionally incomplete, meaning probably that it is the representation of a deceased person, guided by the horse to the afterlife. Similar incomplete human figures (busts) can be found at Zurla and, according to Sansoni and Marretta (2001), in a phenomenological way they seem to allude to spirits of deceased people, recalling the spirits of ancestors.

The psychopomp character of the horse seems to be also represented on Rock 49 from Scale, in the case of the mythical two-headed horse with a rider. The belief in psychopomp horses survives in later cultures, like for example in Scandinavian mythology during the 8th and the 9th centuries AD, regarding Sleipnir, the eight-legged horse of Odin, which transported the souls to the Valhalla, the paradise of the Viking warriors killed in combat.

Besides the horse, birds also appear very often associated with funerary scenes during the European Iron Age. For example, in Celtiberian painted pottery from Museo Numantino (Soria, Spain) it is possible to see

7 The cauldron can be a reference to the otherworld feast. For example, according to Green (1992), in Irish mythology these banquets consisted of eating pork and drinking liquor in great quantities, provided by the inexhaustible cauldron.

8 From the Greek ψυχοπομπός (psychopompós), a word composed from Ψυχή (*psyche*, soul) and πομπός (*pompos*, guide).

9 For Sophocles, the horse is a companion to the solar divinity (Fol, 1983).

10 From the Greek Μεταμόρφωσις (metamorphosis), word composed by μετα (*meta-*, changing) and μορφή (*morphi*, shape). This metamorphosis was interpreted by some classical authors as the Pythagorean belief in μετεμψύχωσις (metempsychosis) the transmigration of the souls.



a dead warrior, lying on the ground, being devoured by a vulture (Marco, 2008: Fig.9).<sup>11</sup> These tribes used to expose the corpses of warriors killed in combat to vultures, in order that they could more easily reach the Otherworld (Lorrio, 1997). This ritual had already been mentioned by Silius Italicus in the 2nd century AD, following the information of earlier classical writers such as Posidonius of Apamea, referring to the soul of the warrior that 'goes up to the gods in heaven, if the body is devoured on the field by the hungry vulture' (Marco, 2008: 61).

Claudius Aelianus describes similar rituals among the Arevaci from the Iberian Peninsula, mentioning that this people considered the death in combat to be noble, leaving the dead warriors exposed to vultures, believing that this bird is sacred (Marco, 2008). Thus, the vulture, besides being considered sacred,<sup>12</sup> appears with a certain psychopomp character, since it contributes to an easier way to the afterlife.<sup>13</sup>

The water bird is also a guide of the soul in the otherworld, a concept that has its origins in the ornitomorphic solar ship from the European Bronze Age, which seems to have deep roots in the minds of all Indo-European peoples (Marretta, 2007), for example, the myth of Apollo's voyage in the land of the Hyperboreans, on a chariot pulled by swans. An other example is the 'half water bird ship' on Rock 5 from Pagherina and the scene on Rock 62 from Bosc del Vicare, where the ship,<sup>14</sup> a magical vehicle, is represented by two water birds looking in opposite directions, which transport the warrior on a heroic or divine voyage (Marretta, 2007), to the Afterlife.

The other examples of warriors transported by birds can be interpreted as images of an important deceased person, a heroic ancestor (Rossi, 2009), as seems to be the case of Rock 11 of Campanine Alta and Rocks 47 and 49 from Scale. Of these three examples, the one from Rock 47 of Scale is the most suggestive, since the warrior transported by the bird is represented with his weapons (helmet, sword and shield), probably on his way to the otherworld.

Rock 64 from Coren del Valento is another similar example, where a warrior transported by a raptorial (?) bird carries an axe and a shield (Marretta, 2005: Fig. 3).

Finally, on Rock 3 from Mocissos (Alqueva, Portugal) an anthropomorphic figure standing on horseback seems to be guided not only by the horse but also by three water birds, zoomorphic motifs all looking in the same direction. Unfortunately, the lack of the indication of the north on the only drawing available<sup>15</sup> does not allow us to find out if the animals are moving to the west, where is the access to the otherworld in Celtic mythology.

#### FINAL NOTE

According to Renfrew (1994: 49), 'iconographic representation is one of the most promising routes towards the detail of some belief systems', arguing also that interpretation may often be difficult but, in some cases, it is possible to detect reference to what may be recurrent themes across cultures (Renfrew, 1994). In fact, analysing several cultures from the European Iron Age, a recurrent theme that appears with strong evidence is the psychopomp character of the horse, which F. Quesada and M.M. Gabaldón (2008) also associate, since prehistory, with a solar symbolism.

The association of the horse with afterlife funerary beliefs contributes also to a link with the aristocratic elites and the sphere of power (Tirador, 2011). Indeed in the protohistoric rock art of Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal there are many examples of horse-riders represented with their weapons as a symbol of their social importance, which allows a consideration of the existence of equestrian elites during the Iron Age. These elites could have had symbols to distinguish them from the rest of the society, like several bronze fibulae in the shape of horse-riders found in the Celtiberian area (Fig.8). Besides these artefacts, the Celtiberian tribes from Numancia (Spain) used a bronze banner in the shape of a horse-rider sitting on a double-headed horse, 'seeming to be a representation of the *heros equitans* – the hero horse-rider – with the aim of justifying a mythical past and legitimating their social power' (Coimbra and Oosterbeek, 2012).<sup>16</sup>

It is very natural that these elites wanted to be represented on horseback even in funerary scenes, which indeed can be seen not only in rock art but also on several archeological remains like coins, jewellery, pottery, funerary stele and so on.

11 Besides pottery, this kind of scenes also appears on some Iberian funerary stele from the 2nd–1st century BC (Lorrio, 1997).

12 According to Biedermann (1989), Greek gods like Zeus, Apollo and Athena can appear in the shape of a vulture.

13 The same character can also be seen on the iconography of a funerary urn from Uxama (Soria, Spain), where birds seem to guide souls to the afterlife (Lorrio, 1997: Fig.129).

14 According to Marco (2008: 59) 'in the Celtic world, the ship was a symbolic element affording access to the "Other World", towards the West, where the sun sets.'

15 This rock is now under the waters of the Alqueva dam.

16 This same idea of the need of legitimating the social power of these dominating equestrian elites, justified by a mythical past, can also be seen in G. Rossi (2009) and V. Tirador (2011).

The importance of the horse among Iberian peoples has been mentioned since classical writers and can be observed through many iconographic examples, revealing this animal's high social, military, economic and religious character, which can explain the existence of sanctuaries like El Cigarralejo (Murcia, Spain), where a deity protector of horses was worshipped (Quesada and Gabaldon, 2010) and many votive stone figurines of horses were found<sup>17</sup>.

Another recurrent theme across several cultures, which appears with a psychopomp character, is the bird, which seems to corroborate the association of anthropomorphic figures with birds in rock art, in the area of Campanine di Cimbergo. Among these examples, the most impressive are the warrior transported by two water birds on Rock 62 from Bosc del Vicare and the warrior carried by a long-necked bird on Rock 47 from Scale. These must be unambiguously representations of a voyage to the otherworld, because horses are ridden in the physical world, but not birds.

It was noticed that sometimes the bird can also be the representation of the soul on his way to the afterlife, as seen on several Gaul coins, in a reference to the beliefs concerning metamorphosis and metempsychosis, and that, in other examples, birds like the vulture can assume a divine character, helping the dead warriors to reach the Otherworld more easily.

The psychopomp character of both horses and birds seems to be the explanation of the scenes analysed in this article, allowing us to consider them as funerary representations left on the rocks by people who lived during the end of the first millennium BC and whose beliefs influenced other cultures that came afterwards.

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17 Another type of horse votive figurines, made in bronze (Fig.9), was also found in other Iberian sanctuaries like Pinos Puente (Jaén) and Mesa de Luque (Cordoba) and in the Celtiberian settlement of Numancia (Bellido, 2003).

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Fig. 1 – Horse without head, ridden by a “Y” figure.  
Photo: F. Coimbra

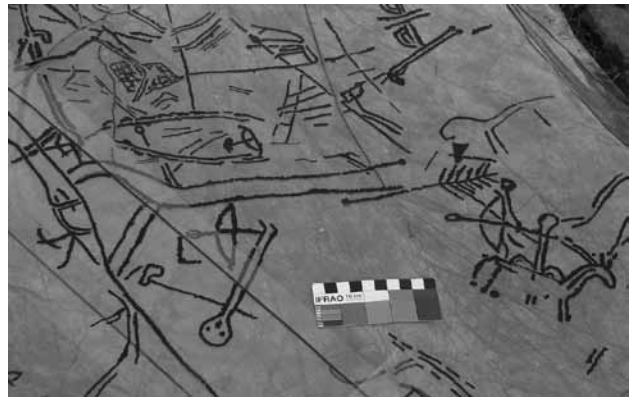


Fig. 2 – Warrior falling from a half bodied horse.  
Photo: F. Coimbra

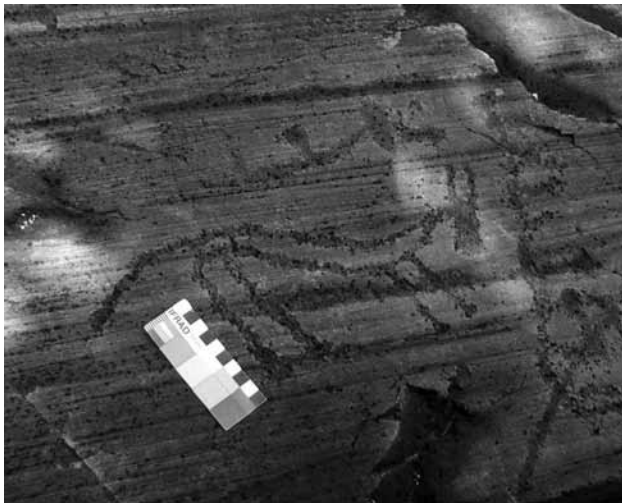


Fig. 3 – Human bust over a horse.  
Photo: F. Coimbra

Fig. 4 – Warrior riding a long necked bird.  
After Rossi, 2009



Fig. 5 – Warrior standing on two water birds.  
After Marretta, 2007

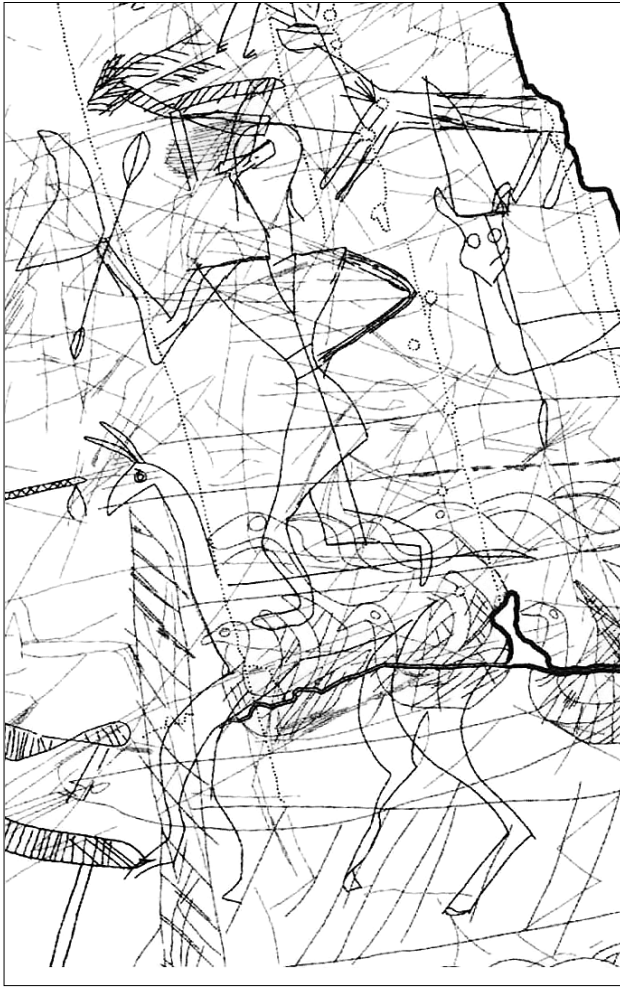


Fig. 6 – Warrior standing on horseback. After Baptista, 2002



Fig. 7 – Bird riding a horse.  
After Marco, 2008



Fig. 9 – Votive figurine  
Photo: D. Delfino



Fig. 8 – Celtiberian fibula with the shape of a horse rider.  
Photo: D. Delfino

