

THE GRAPHIC SEMIOLOGY OF PREHISTORIC MAPPING: THE CASE OF VALCAMONICA

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We shall begin with a distinction between linearity as such – sheer graphism – and delineation. Linearity is the tracing of contour, the fashioning of figure as pure form. Delineation concerns what linear figures are about: how they are put into action, what they mean, where they are tending. Semiosis occurs in both instances. Linear signification is non-narrative and is confined to the denotative sense of individual elements construed as basic units of meaning: e.g., postures and gestures of human figures, meanderings and turnings of rivers and streams, etc. The semiotics of delineation has to do with entire narrational sequences – dramatic episodes, emblematic actions, and stories.

Prehistoric mapping combines the two modes of semiosis, especially in the case of an overtly hybrid map such as that at Bedolina. We shall contrast this complex semiotic whole with simpler designs such as are found in the map at Seradina and the petroglyphs at Giadighe and the Ponte San Rocco.

We shall maintain that all maps, including these prehistoric examples, are indicative: they refer to the landscape they represent, however differently. But certain of these maps rely more on iconicity (i.e., pictographic inscription proper) and others more on symbolic signs (e.g., abstract and/or schematic representations), while still others (most notably Bedolina) rely on both. By employing a Peircean trichotomous model of semiosis, we hope to enter into the debate between C.D. Smith and P.D.A. Harvey in their clashing interpretations of the maps of the Valcamonica area, especially those at Bedolina and Seradina. In our discussion, we shall bring in factors often neglected in purely semiotic discussions of prehistoric maps, namely, the role of the human body in their creation and perception as well as the place of the larger landscape in which they are set.