



PREISTORAIN  
ITALIA

## Searching for Palaeolithic and Neolithic Ancestors in Italy

Luciana Percovich with Elvira Visciola - 2023

# Old Europe

- Marija Gimbutas coined the term Old Europe referring to the Neolithic, but we can speak about Old Europe at least as far back as the Upper Palaeolithic, because we find the same symbols, tools, materials, furniture and wall art in places thousands of kilometres apart.
- Upper Palaeolithic traces in Italy are very similar to those in the **French-Cantabrian area** or the **Balkan area**, as if the hunter-gatherer societies of the past had developed a very similar spirituality, behavioural patterns, ideas and symbols, present throughout the European continent and beyond.

A case in point is represented by **Alca Impennis**, a bird of the penguin family, attested in areas with a cold climate such as Magdalenian Europe.



Birds were hardly ever represented in palaeolithic art so this is a particularly significant graffito.

*Alca Impennis* was found in Europe:

- in the wall art of the cave of **El Pendo** in Spain
- and of **the Cosquer Cave** in France
- on a pebble and engraved on the walls of **Grotta Paglicci** in Italy
- in **Grotta Romanelli** in Italy
- at the **Laugerie-Basse** site in France.
- from the brown earth deposits of **Grotta Romanelli** also come two finds of *alca impennis*, **a humerus and an ulna** (Museo Civico di Maglie, Lecce) as evidence of the presence of this species in the Mediterranean area.

# Italy during and after the last Ice Age (from Upper Pleistocene to around 12,000 years ago)

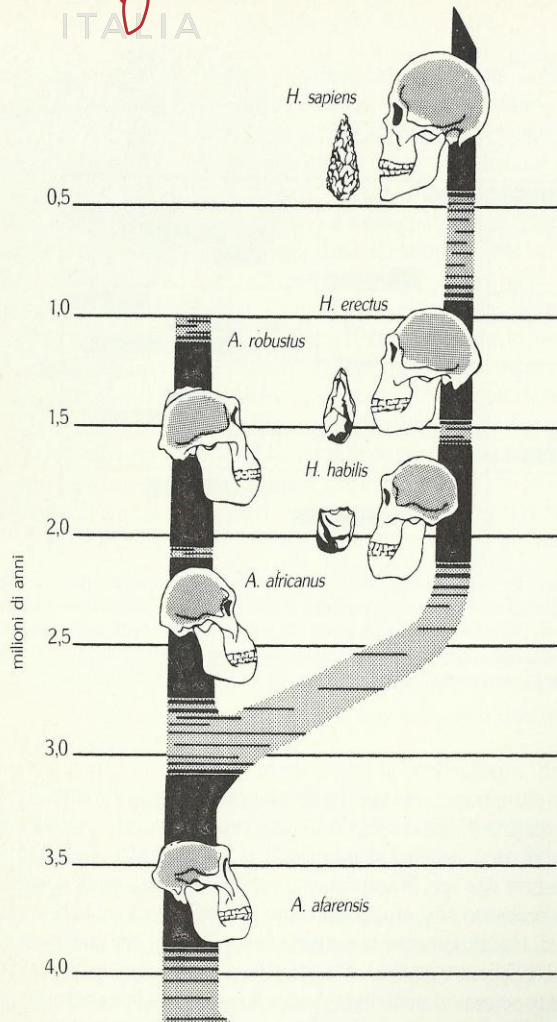


## In Italy, research on Palaeolithic sites came much later than in other EU countries

Luigi Pigorini (1842-1925), an archaeologist and the first Italian palaeoethnologist, improperly decided at the time when the first discoveries were being made that there were no traces of the Palaeolithic in Italy, unlike in France and Spain where the discoveries of the Lascaux and Altamira caves contributed to the birth of Prehistory, which had been ignored until then.

This prejudice accompanied the academic approach even after his death, and his supporters continued to obstruct anyone who tried to talk about artefacts dating from before the Neolithic period, preferring to focus their research on the rich Roman, Greek and Etruscan history.

It was only from the 1940s that studies on the Italian Palaeolithic began to deepen. And only in recent times has there been a particular interest in Prehistory, also with important contributions at an international level.



Questo è il risultato dell'unificazione dei dati del diagramma di pagina 275. Tutti i fossili *A. afarensis* possono essere considerati in blocco fra i quattro e i tre milioni di anni, tutti gli *A. africanus*, tra i due milioni e settecentomila anni e i due milioni e duecentomila anni, tutti gli *A. robustus* fra i due milioni e centomila anni e il milione di anni. E così via. Johanson e White sono convinti che *A. afarensis*, il più antico e il più primitivo ominide conosciuto, fosse ancestrale a tutti gli altri. Essi ritengono che l'accresciuta dimensione dei molari fosse un tardo fenomeno concernente gli australopithecini, e hanno dislocato i tipi che lo presentano in modo congruente, con *A. robustus*, quello che mostra il maggiore sviluppo dei molari, alla fine di quella linea. Questo lascia i tipi *Homo*, con molari essenzialmente immutati rispetto a quelli del loro antenato *A. afarensis*, su una linea propria, con *H. erectus* e *H. sapiens* via via più progrediti che si evolvono da *Homo habilis*. Gli utensili, come indica il diagramma, sono una invenzione di *Homo* e non degli australopithecini.

## The oldest traces

*homo aesernensis* (Isernia, Molise, 750,000 years ago): similar to *homo erectus*, it did not bury the dead but left tools and bones of killed animals that may testify to the ritual of group hunting of large animals. It is contemporary with the remains of similar human forms found in Asia and Africa.

*homo cepranensis* is dated 500/450,000 years ago (Frosinone, Lazio).

*homo neanderthalensis* along the Aniene valley around 250,000 years ago.

Fragments of human bones, accompanied by faunal remains and numerous flint tools, were also found in four nearby localities: Ponte Mammolo, Sedia del Diavolo, Casal dei Pazzi and Monte delle Gioie, dated between 295,000 and 245,000 years ago.



## Caves



# Fumane – Hohlenstein Stadel - Trois-Freres



## Fumane Cave, Veneto

### 60,000-25,000 Neanderthal and Sapiens

- The image *on the left* comes from the Aurignacian levels of Grotta Fumane, Veneto. Painted in red ochre, it depicts a human figure with a linearly developed body, horizontal arms and spread legs, two large horns on the triangular head identified as a mask and at navel height two small lateral prominences; from the right arm hangs something, perhaps a four-legged animal or a ritual object.
- It has been interpreted as a shamanic figure, similar to other figures found at Aurignacian sites, such as the ivory statuette of the **lion-man of Hohlenstein-Stadel** (*central figure*) and the shamanic figures with deer antlers in the Cave des **Trois-Freres** in France, *right*, or like those in the Grotte del Genovese , Sicily.

# Paglicci Cave 1, Puglia



Paglicci Cave was frequented during all the various phases of the Palaeolithic - over 4.000 finds - three burials – one dog remains (between 20000 and 12000 bce).

One of the most interesting finds is a thick limestone slab found on the floor of the atrium of the cave, presumably detached from the vault; it is the slab depicted in the top *left*, showing painted in dark red the posterior portion of a horse's leg, depicted up to the rear part of the belly, running to the right.

The figure had to be about 45 cm tall.

The details of the painting, as well as the detail of the horse's hoof, are stylistically reminiscent of the artistic productions of the Cave of Lascaux (France).

# Paglicci Cave 2



Two more horses painted in red on the wall of a very internal room of the **Paglicci Cave**, one vertically and the other in profile, in full archaic style reminiscent of Franco-Cantabrian art, with the animals in a static position and their voluminous and bulging bellies suggestive of pregnant mares.

Near the wall also a series of **hands**, at least five certainly recognisable, some are 'positive', i.e. painted by direct impression of hands smeared with colour, others are 'negative', i.e. made by spraying colour around them.

A 2009 study by Dean Snow on handprints left inside the Palaeolithic caves of **Paglicci** and **Peche-Merle** showed that these were mostly small and thin and therefore assumed to belong to the **female** Homo Sapiens

# Romito Cave, Calabria Caviglione Cave, Liguria



## Romito Cave and Caviglione Cave Upper Palaeolithic

- On the *left* the aurochs from the Romito Cave in Calabria, where the Palaeolithic artists' skill in exploiting the deformations of the rock surface is evident. The irregularities of the rock surface were used to create the figures and thus create a sort of three-dimensional effect. A feature that returns in many European Palaeolithic cave art productions.
- The image on the *right* is the horse from the Caviglione Cave in the Balzi Rossi complex in Liguria,. A naturalistic style figure depicting a steppe horse that lived during the final phase of the Wurm glaciation. The animal's body is furrowed by deep vertical carvings, some of which predate its execution.



# Addaura Cave, Sicilia

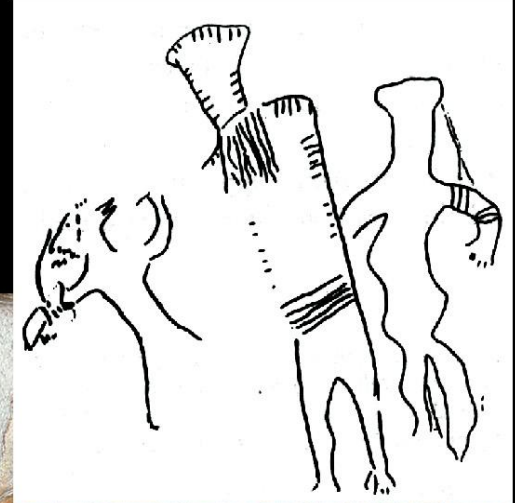
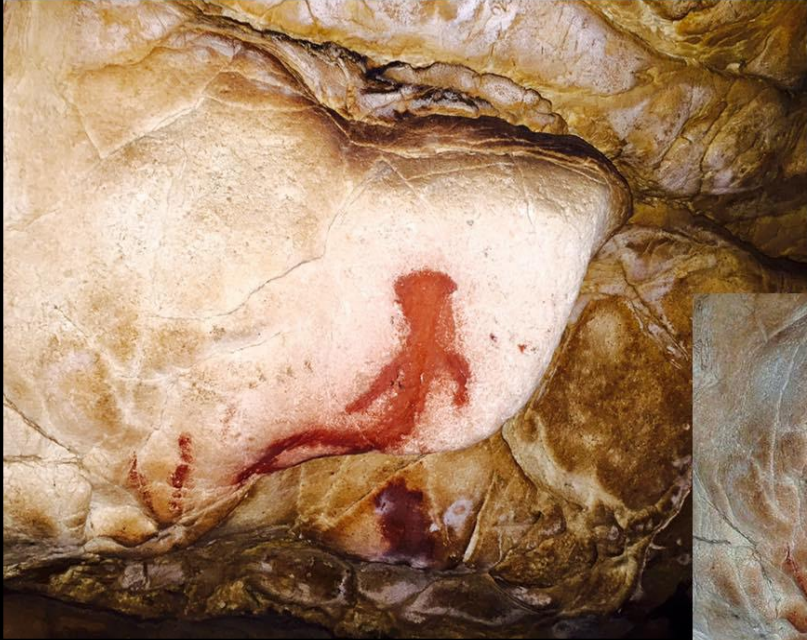


## Addaura Cave, Sicilia about 14.000 bce

The central panel, with *two detailed images on the left and right*, comes from the Addaura Cave, Palermo, Sicilia. It is a manifestation of wall art that has provoked much debate as to its interpretation. Figures are represented in a naturalistic style, static, with an essential profile, often with few anatomical details (eyes, mouth, sex), but overall it is a narrative scene, focused on the two figures lying on the ground in a sort of initiation or fertility rite, while the other figures observe the main scene.

It represents a *unicum* in Europe, both for its articulated and decidedly narrative layout and for the graphic language used, which has its own stylistic specificity that refers neither to the Upper Palaeolithic Mediterranean nor to the Franco-Cantabrian style.

# Grotta del Genovese, Levanzo, Sicilia, Upper Palaeolithic



## Grotta del Genovese, Levanzo, Sicilia, Upper Palaeolithic

- *At top left and bottom right*, two images of anthropomorphic figures painted in red ochre have wedge-shaped heads, as if wearing a *headdress* or mask, have no facial features and seem to emerge from the depths of the earth.
- The anatomical imprecision and scarcity of anatomical details may recall anthropomorphic paintings from the Franco-Cantabrian region.

# More details from Genovese Cave



# Riparo Dalmeri, Trentino Alto Adige



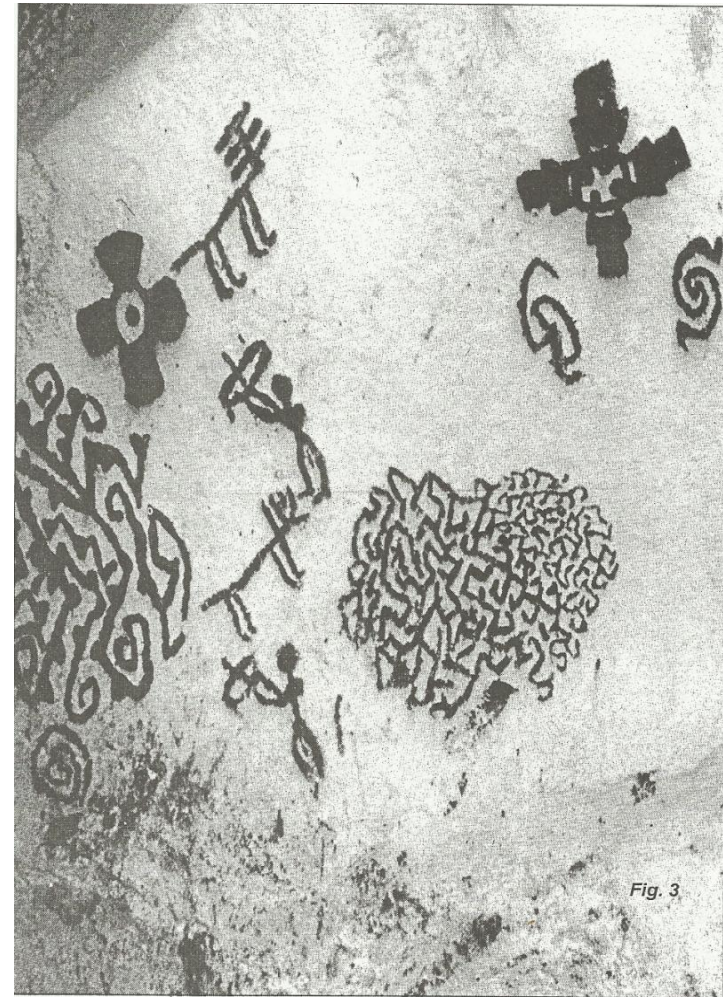
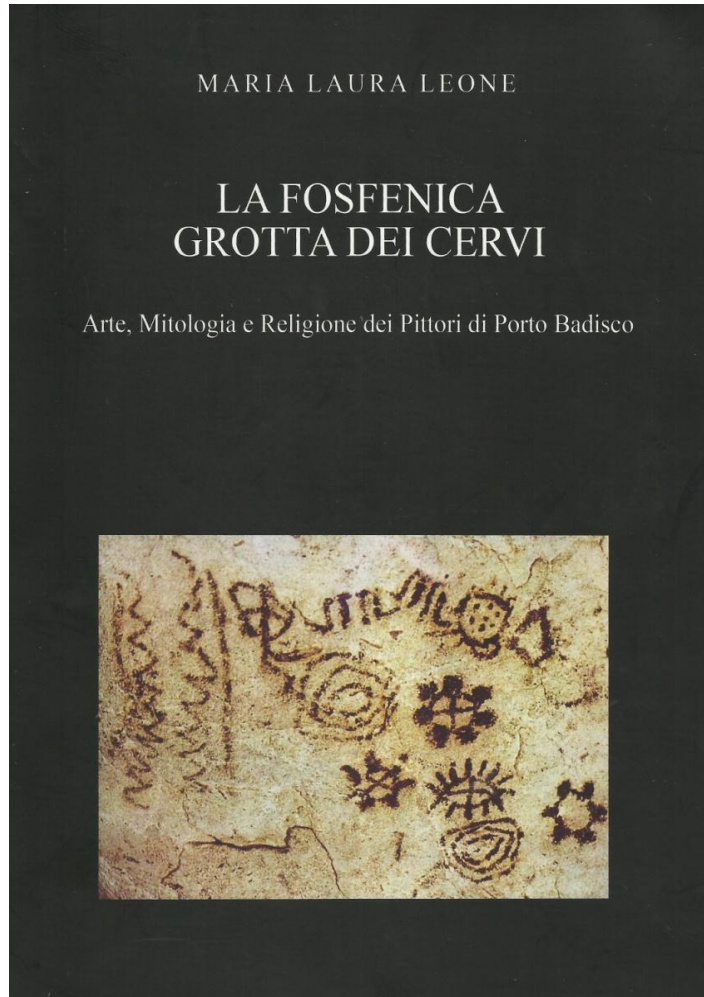
## Dalmeri Shelter, Trentino Alto Adige, about 13,000

The ochre silhouette paintings are made on native stones with dimensions of approximately 15x10x6 cm.

On the floor of the cave, 267 stones were found painted in red ochre with different motifs, many with zoomorphic representations, others with schematic symbolic figures and a total of 7 stones with anthropomorphic figures.

The 4 stones on the left are of a naturalistic type, in hieratic posture with the trunk erect, hips straight and parallel, lower limbs strongly parted. In particular, the first one on the lower left could be a female image, perhaps in childbirth position or with a posture during a ritual or dance.

# Neolithic: Grotta dei Cervi (Deers Cave) di Porto Badisco, Puglia





# More from **Grotta dei Cervi**, Puglia, V – IV millennium

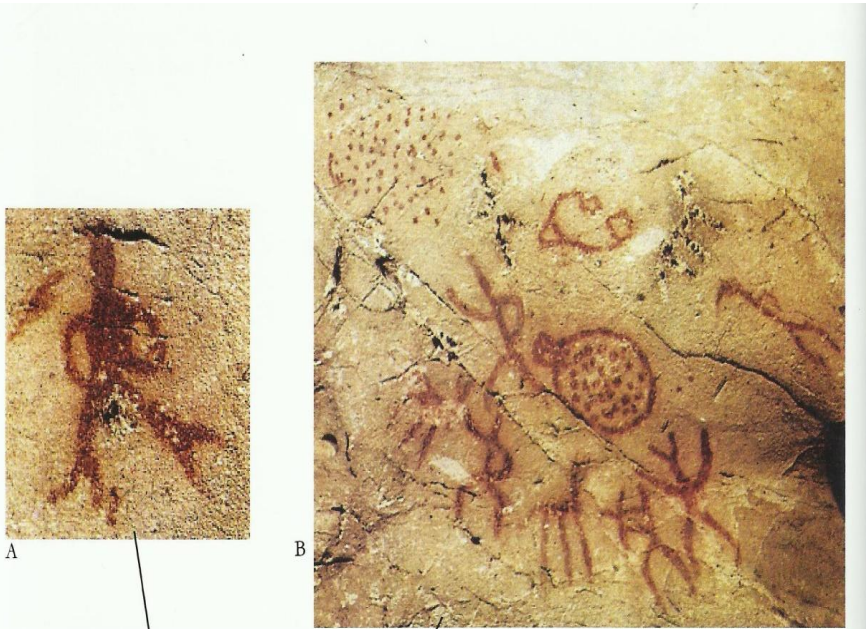


Fig. 7. A - La Donna-Pesce del Gruppo 16. B - La scena di caccia. C - La faccia nella pietra che ospita le pitture del Gruppo 16. (Graziosi, 1980)

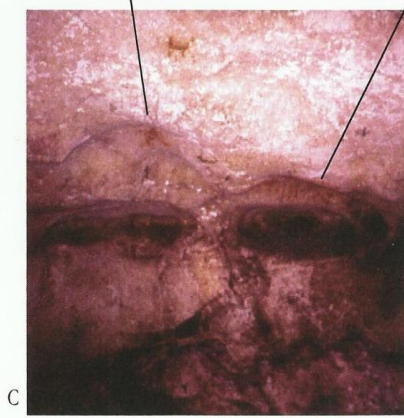


Fig. 8. A - Un particolare del Gruppo 11. B - Il Gruppo 12. (Graziosi, 1980)



# Ancestresses



They share very similar features, a small head with a smooth face leaning forward, a distinct neck and narrow shoulders; breasts forming a single mass with the abdomen, flat buttocks, legs tapering downwards, small arms folded on the belly below the breasts. Bodies of mature women.

**Lady of Lespugue**, found in a quarry near Lespugue in the foothills of the Pyrenees, dated to 25,000 years ago

**Yellow Venus of Menton**, found in the Barma Grande of the Balzi Rossi and dated to around 28,000 years ago

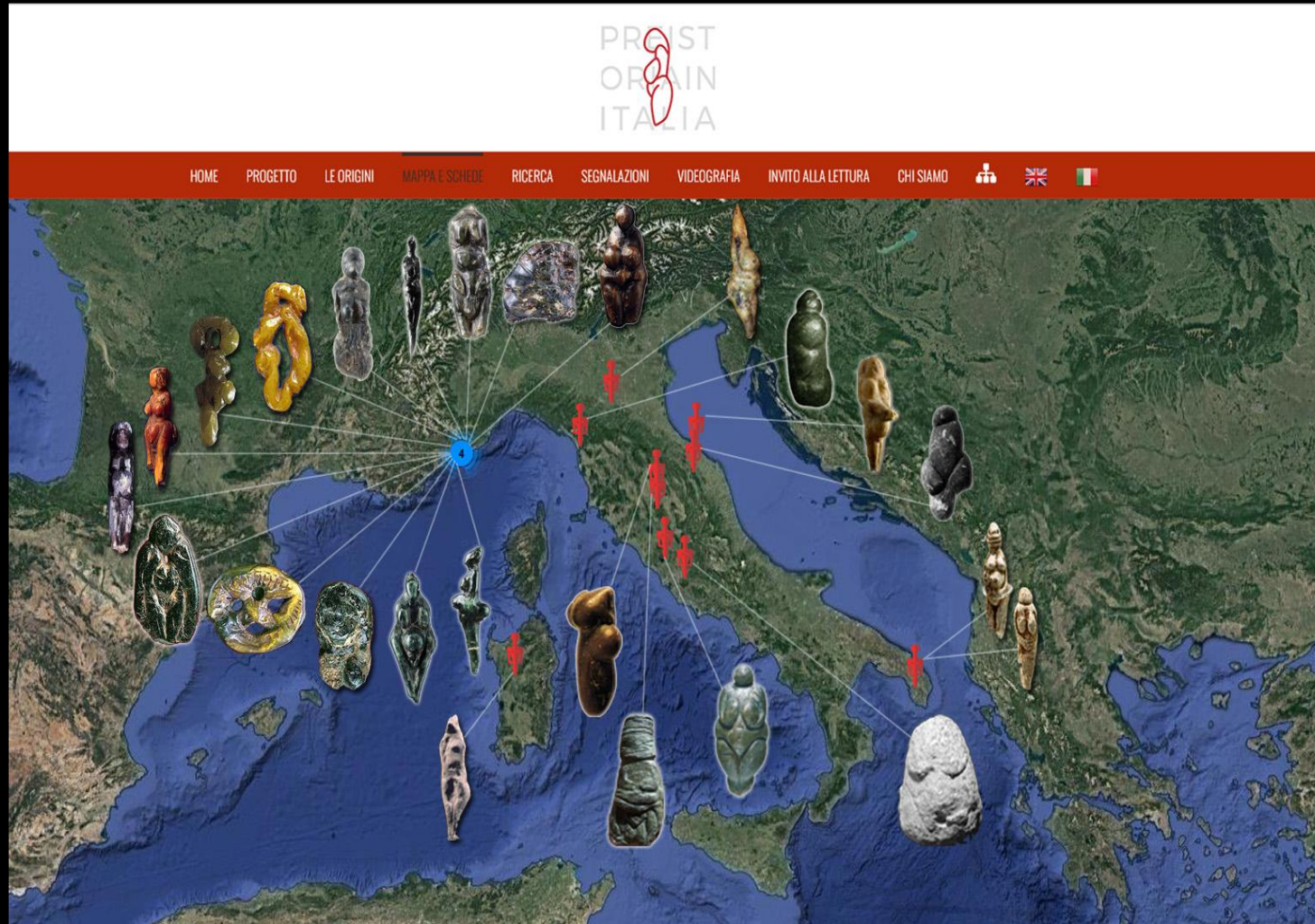
**Lady of Willendorf**, dating from around 23-24,000 years ago, found in the Wachau region of Austria. It was recently discovered that the rock from which it was made, oolite, probably comes from Lake Garda, proof of the large movements of Palaeolithic peoples

**Venus of Kostienki**, found in Russia in 1983, dated 23-21,000

**Venus of Gagarino**, Ukraine, made of mammoth ivory, dated to around 28,000

**Double Venus of Avdeevo**, enigmatic in that it consists of two joined figures, one the opposite of the other, found in 1941 in Russia and dated 22,500.

# Italian Ancestresses



Interesting is the **hood** consisting of a sort of triangular appendage running from the neck to the shoulders

### Lady of Bracciano

(discovered in the lake village of La Marmotta and wrongly dated to the Neolithic due to the context of the find, although the statuette's features suggest the Palaeolithic)

### Lady of Laussel

(carved in bas-relief at the entrance to the Laussel Cave in Dordogne, dated to around 20,000 years ago)

- figure engraved in the cave of **Cussac** (in Dordogne)

- Yellow statuette from **Menton**, (Balzi Rossi, known as Venus of Menton, dated c. 18,000).



## Headgears again.

On statuettes from Parabita and Alimini, Lecce, Puglia.  
The faces of Palaeolithic statuettes are always covered, leaving  
no visible details



# Gonnesdorf silhouettes

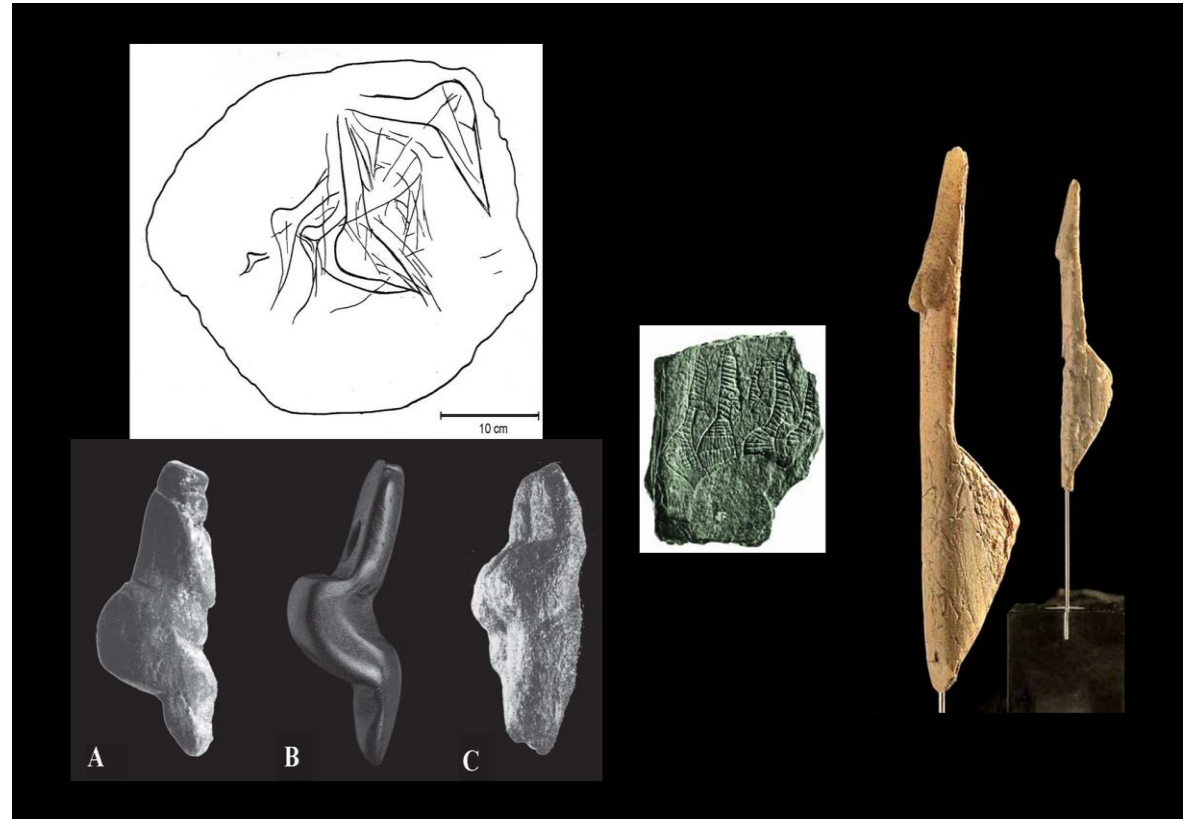
**Block of Lalinde**, France, engraved with stylised, armless female figures with sometimes a hint of breasts;

below left three examples of statuettes from France with **Courbet's Venus**,

from Switzerland the pendant of **Neuchatel-Monruz** and again from France with the **Venus of Enval**;

in the centre engraved on a slate slab the same stylised silhouette

a figurine in the round, with prominent buttocks and breasts from the **Gonnersdorf** site in Germany



## Gonnesdorf silhouettes in Italy

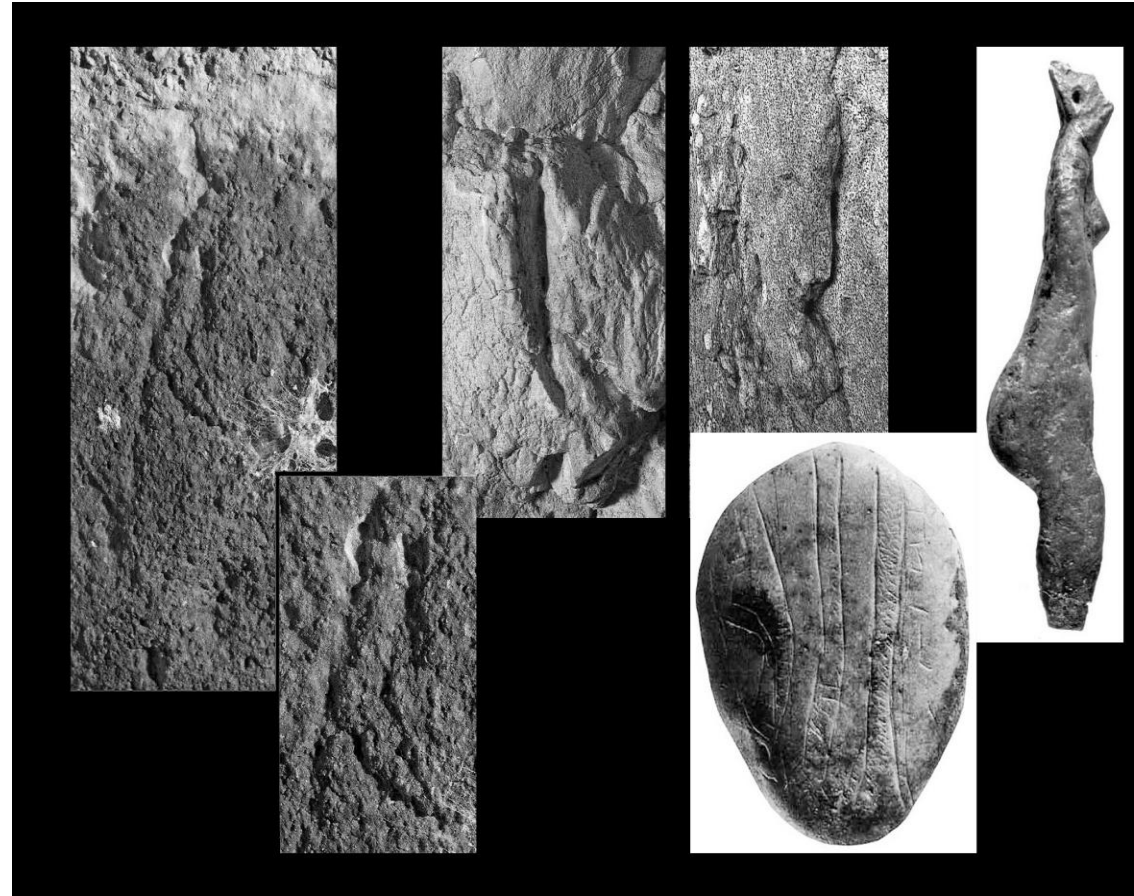
*Left:* small 2 cm. engraving on the wall  
of **Grotta Romanelli**, Puglia, dated to  
around 10-12,000 years ago.

*Above centre* two silhouettes engraved  
on the walls of **Grotta di Pozzo**,  
Abruzzo, an area in central Italy dated  
to 12-13,000 years ago.

*Above right, the Lady of Macomer*, a  
Palaeolithic statuette just over 13 cm  
high, made on volcanic rock.

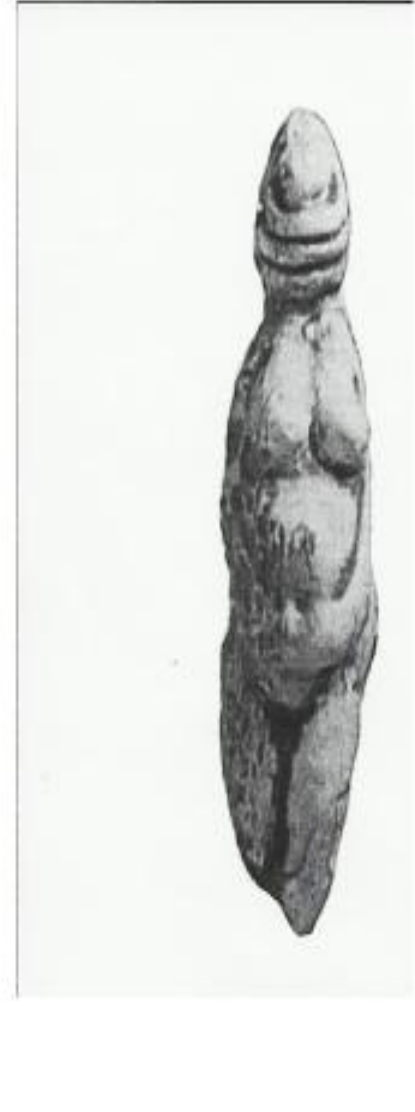
her head is that of a **Sardinian Prolago**,  
a small extinct mammal from the  
Upper Pleistocene of Sardinia. but the  
general shape of the silhouette  
typically evokes this style.

*Below* is an engraved pebble from  
**Grotta Paglicci**, Puglia, in which three  
main figures are depicted, of which the  
one on the left has been interpreted as  
the well-known silhouette of  
Gonnersdorf,





# Italian Palaeolithic Ladies



# The Lady of Savignano, Emilia Romagna



# Lozenge figurines from Balzi Rossi Liguria, and Mal'ta, Siberia



## The Shaman

The Pebble of Tolentino,  
Marche

Upper Palaeolithic  
about 14.000



# Painted pebble from Ortucchio, L'Aquila. Abruzzo Upper Palaeolithic 13/11.000



Fig. 1 – ciottolo dipinto da Ortucchio (G. Di Paolo)



# BURIALS

The **Prince of Arene Candide** (but now thought to be a young girl) and **the Dame of Caviglione**, Liguria, **Delia**, the mother of Ostuni and **the Woman of Paglicci**, Puglia.



# Burials from Gravettian to Neolithic

- The **Prince of Arene Candide** (but most probably a young woman) and the **Dame of Caviglione**, Liguria  
**Delia**, the mother of Ostuni and the **Woman of Paglicci**, Puglia.
- The map also shows the burial site known as '**the Magdalenian girl**' found in France in the prehistoric refuge of Cap Blanc, where animal sculptures dating back to the Magdalenian period, between 8-17,000 and 11-10,000 years ago, were also found.



## Delia, the pregnant woman of Ostuni

The skeletons of a woman who died and was buried between 25,000 and 20,000 years ago with the baby she was carrying were discovered in the cave of S. Maria d'Agnano (Ostuni, Puglia).

The cave has known various frequentations over the millennia, becoming a place of worship even in the Christian era.



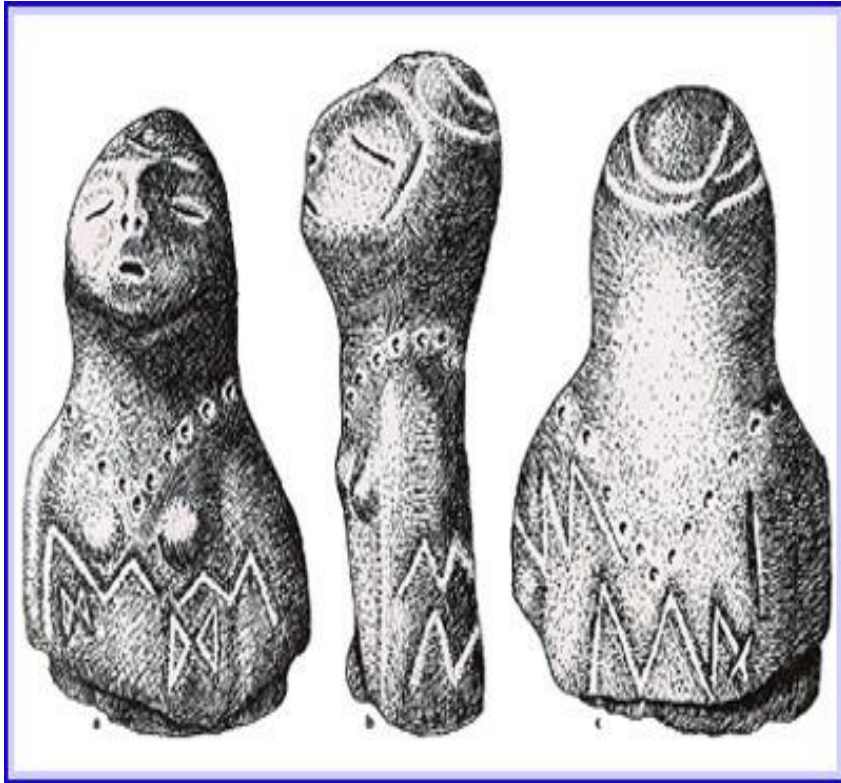
Delia, the pregnant woman of Ostuni

# Neolithic statuettes

[www.preistoriainitalia.it](http://www.preistoriainitalia.it)



# Passo di Corvo and Bovino, Puglia VI millennium





The statuette of  
Passo di Corvo  
detail

a child Great Mother?

photo by Alessandra de Nardis

# Gaban Statuette

The statuette - engraved on a bone plate and only 7 cm high - was found in 1971 at the Gabàn shelter, just above Trento.

It dates back to the early Neolithic period between VI and V millennium



## Vicofertile, Emilia Romagna

Neolithic statuette found in a female burial from the mid V millennium (Square Mouth Vase culture).

PRIST  
OF MAIN  
ITALIA





The Double  
Goddess of Piadena  
Emilia Romagna  
V millennium



## Canne, Puglia, V millennium





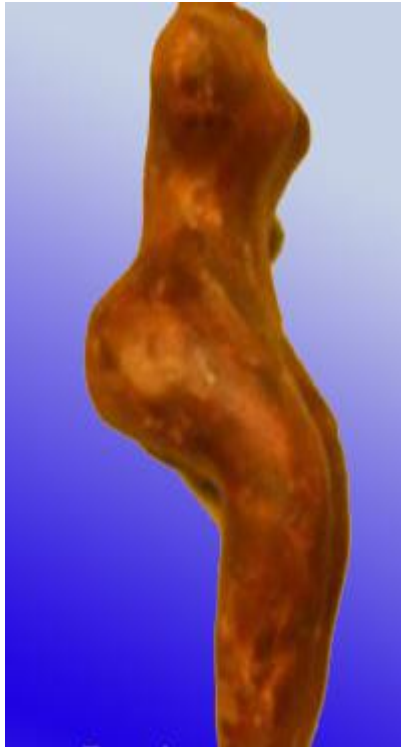
# stele or menhir, from 3.000



# Massa Carrara stele

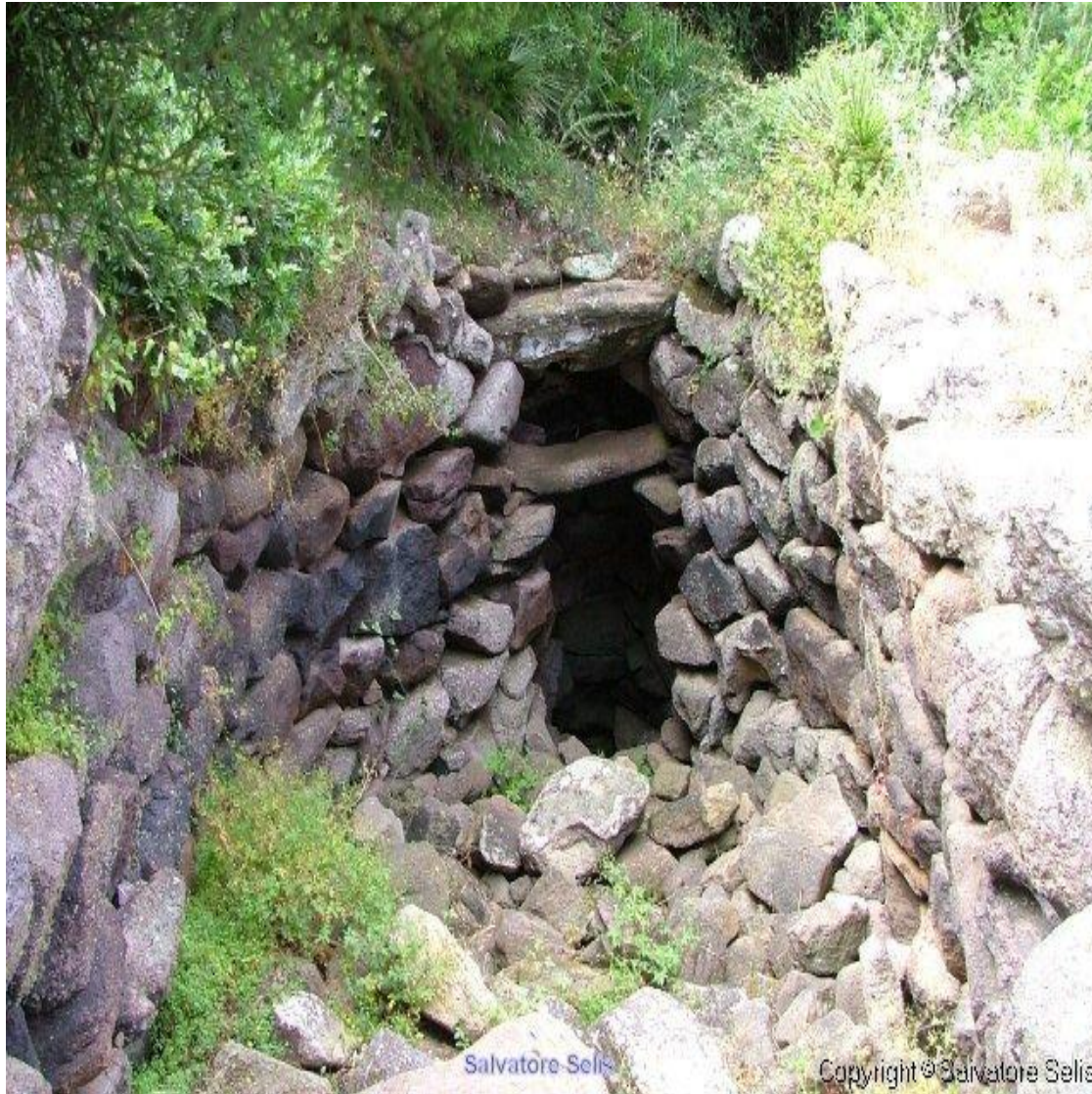


Neolithic **Earthenware** from Arene Candide, Liguria (left)  
and **Stele** from Moncigoli (Massa Carrara)  
and Teglio (Valtellina) (right)



# Sardegna

one of the myriad sacred pits





# Montessu site in Villaperuccio (3240-1600 bc)



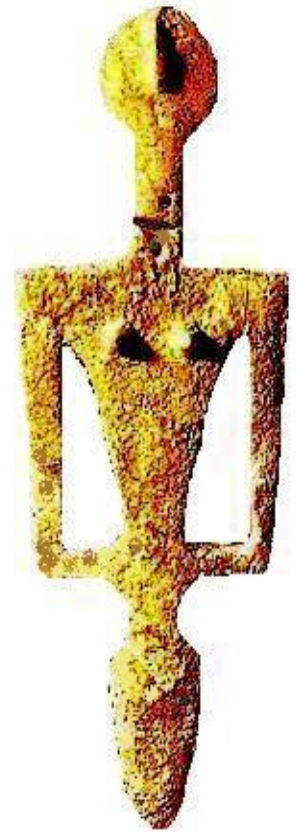
# Pranu Muteddu- Goni (3200-2800)



# Domus de Janas of Sa Pala Larga - Bonorva



# Macomer, Nuragic sitting goddess, Decimoputzu ...





# The Bronze People



*Ritrovamento* Sardegna, loc. sconosciuta  
*Esposto* Museo Antichità, Torino; Museo Pigorini, Roma  
Altezza 14 cm.



*Ritrovamento* Sardegna, loc. sconosciuta  
*Esposto* Museo Antichità, Torino  
Altezza 18,5 cm.



*Ritrovamento* Sardegna, loc. sconosciuta  
*Esposto* Nationalmuseet Antiksamlingen, Copenhagen  
Altezza 20,7 cm.

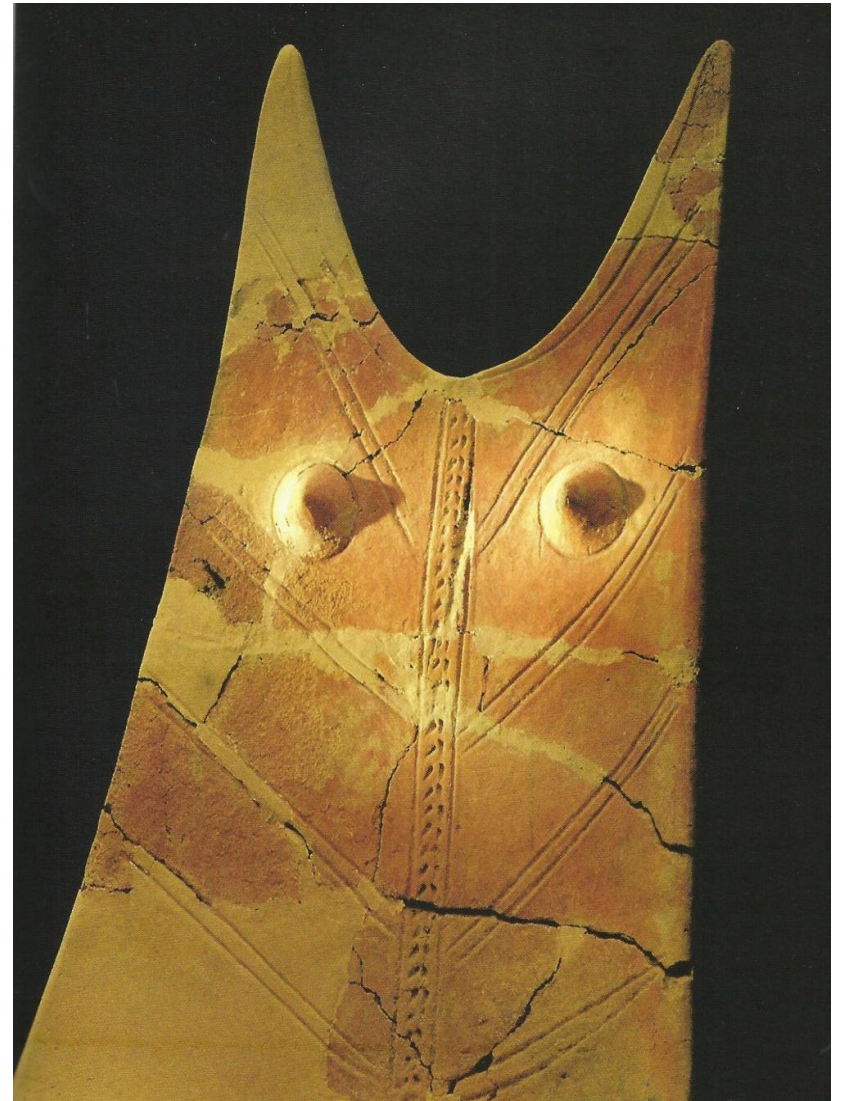


*Ritrovamento* Urzulèi (NU), loc. Sa Domu e S'Orcu  
*Esposto*: Museo Archeologico, Cagliari  
Altezza 10 cm.

## Small lozange idols, Palermo, mid III millennium



# Sicilia, Castelluccio Caves(Agrigento, about 2000, Museo Orsi)



# Italic Goddesses in Momolina Marconi

*Riflessi mediterranei  
della più antica religione  
laziale, 1939*

[www.studiumanistici.uni  
mi.it/files/\\_ITA\\_/Filarete/  
005](http://www.studiumanistici.uni<br/>mi.it/files/_ITA_/Filarete/<br/>005)

*Da Circe a Morgana,  
Scritti di M. Marconi, a  
cura di Anna De Nardis,  
Venexia 2009*



Bona Dea.



Bona Dea.

# Hera/Giunone

Looking at us, resisting,  
waiting for  
a different world,  
again!



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Italian and English

