



## CROSSES AND MONSTRANCES IN THE HISTORICAL ROCK ART OF MONTICOLO. SOME CONSIDERATIONS AND INTERPRETATION PROPOSAL

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**ABSTRACT** - The crosses engraved on rocks have often been considered as clear evidence of Christian religious devotion. Recent studies though are more cautious and try to analyze step by step each single sign, in order to attribute it either to the sacred or civil sphere according to the specific case. This intervention will propose some images concerning only the dimension of the sacred. The case we are going to present are made of engravings dating back to the historical age, more precisely referring to the chronological lapse spanning from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I will analyze the simple or complex monstrances belonging to local churches for which it is possible to offer a reasonable catalogue in order to compare and date them with a certain precision. In addition, I will propose some ideas to foster further reflection concerning the reason why such objects, which are almost exclusively used for religious ceremonies inside churches, have been particularly engraved on the rocks at Monticolo di Darfo (Valcamonica). The most simple explanation could be that they are representations of propitiatory objects related to the Eucharist. An additional hypothesis which is proposed here for the first time and which is not in contrast with the first one, explains such representations referring to the devotional practice related to the veneration of the dead. The presence of the latter in the area of Bergamo and Brescia is supported by evidence of specific rituals which implied the use of monstrances and late Baroque/Neoclassical stage machineries.

**RIASSUNTO** - Spesso si sono considerate le croci incise sulle rocce come segni certi di devozione religiosa di ordine cristiano. Gli ultimi studi sono, in realtà, più cauti e cercano di analizzare, di volta in volta, ogni singolo segno riconducendolo, a seconda del caso, alla sfera sacrale o alla sfera civile. In questo contributo sono proposte alcune immagini che rimandano esclusivamente alla dimensione sacrale. I casi presentati sono incisioni di epoca storica; più precisamente nell'intervallo cronologico che va dalla fine del XVIII secolo al XX. Sono presi in esame degli ostensori, semplici e complessi, appartenenti alle chiese locali e per cui è possibile offrire un ragionevole catalogo per il confronto cui trarne la datazione con una certa precisione. Sono inoltre proposti degli spunti di riflessione sul perché tali oggetti, utilizzati quasi esclusivamente per le cerimonie religiose all'interno delle chiese, siano stati rappresentati in modo preponderante sulle rocce del Monticolo di Darfo (Valcamonica). La spiegazione più semplice potrebbe essere una rappresentazione di un oggetto propiziatorio legato al culto eucaristico. Una seconda tesi, che qui si propone per la prima volta pur non essendo in contrasto con la prima, prevede che tali rappresentazioni trovino una spiegazione nella pratica devozionale legata al culto dei morti che, nel territorio Bresciano e Bergamasco, trova dei riti precisi che fanno uso di ostensori e macchine sceniche tardo barocche/neoclassiche.

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### INTRODUCTION

This study focuses on some petroglyphs of a short and recent chronological period. The interest towards historic engravings has spread thanks to various authors who have documented with a fairly shared methodology<sup>1</sup> the Christian Era petroglyphs.

Until than those human manifestations were almost not considered or studied; also the dating where showing gaps related to the approximate analysis method and to wrong interpretation. Below are presented some rock engravings of the lower Valcamonica, datable in full modern time, between XVIII and XX century. To slim this brief presentation – introductive and not exhaustive – I have avoided a systematic description of all the rocks of the site and of the single figures postponing this necessary work to another time. I therefore apologize with the colleagues for having neglected the catalogue of the engravings to reach the focal point of the dating and of the interpretative hypothesis. In this account there isn't an essential analysis on the typology of human frequentation of the site in modern time.

### SITE FEATURES

The site is a small hill called Monticolo di Darfo (Valcamonica, municipality of Darfo Boario Terme). The location is known because at its feet has been found a huge boulder with engraved a copper age composition (location Corni Freschi, municipality of Darfo Boario Terme). The site has always been known, but except

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<sup>1</sup> With some differences and divergences please see, for the contents and the methodology, the following contributions: VASCETTI 1986; GATTIGLIA - ROSSI 1999; GATTIGLIA - ROSSI 2001; ROSSI - GATTIGLIA 2001; BIGANZOLI - PIZZIGONI 2006; SANNA 2006; SGABUSSI 2006; BASSI 2008; CASINI - FOSSATI - MOTTA 2008; GASTALDI - TROLETTI 2009, p. 340; TROLETTI 2013.



for one excavation<sup>2</sup>, there is no full analysis on the hill. There are reports<sup>3</sup> and a basic and not exhaustive documentation through photos<sup>4</sup>. The rocks already known are 6, but more have reemerged in this last year. The Monticolo (small mountain) is crossed by a path which cuts it, more or less, from north to south. The two surfaces (rock 1 and 2 of the Monticolo) taken in consideration are at about 350 meters from sea level and are located on the historical way. Most of the figures is datable in the last 3 centuries, but is possible that some engravings, not studied here but identified<sup>5</sup> in the area, might be of proto-historic time. The rock is of a dark pink colour and has a conformation similar to the boulder of Corni Freschi. The area is currently uninhabited and has become part of a park<sup>6</sup> in phase of development.

#### SOME SUBJECTS

On the rocks of the Monticolo there are many crosses, some of which are engraved as deep as one centimeter. I leave, for briefness of presentation, the analysis of the typologies. The presence of the crosses is surely to read as a sign of Christian devotion and for propitiatory purposes, to remember an event or to call upon a blessing. In many cases the crosses lose their religious value to assume the value of border markers thus entering in the urban sphere. I believe that the “resacralization” concept proposed in the last decades and by many authors<sup>7</sup> is not in general acceptable, and in particular in this site. I have previously suggested<sup>8</sup> how the crosses engraved on the rocks, in most cases, might be related to sporadic and spontaneous manifestations of private devotion. I exclude instead the official Church<sup>9</sup> wanting to exorcise the signs left on the rocks in the time of “*dei falsi e bugiardi*” (“false and liar gods”, Dante Alighieri). The official Church wouldn’t have had scruples in destroying the «pagans» rocks if they thought they could have been harmful for the orthodoxy.

Between the most interesting images the monstres stand out, those figures are easily visible on the rock as they have been deeply carved in the rock and with effort. From a stylistic point of view is difficult to find details related to real and precise models. In fact what is represented on the rocks is not always very detailed. On the contrary, the tendency is to fix on the stone the essential elements, able to, without any doubt, give the idea of the subject.

From these considerations is understandable how the monstres of the Monticolo are rendered in a minimal way, but without falling in generalizations. The fundamental elements are easily visible, like the basement, the support that also serves as handle, the circle with rays with a cross above. In the center of the circle there is a marking, not always readable as is very small, is possible that it might be a cross or the symbol “IHS”. In some cases letters are added (in general placed on the left and on the right of the monstres). The most elaborate monstres present racemes with protruding leaves. There are also cases in which the object seems sub stained by anthropomorphic figures, possibly angels. These are the general characteristics, but there are special features appearing only in specific figures. Is evident that the monstres remind of the Eucharistic cult, is less evident what has lead the engravers in this location to create the images. In an attempt to propose some hypotheses of interpretation I would start, before the dating of images, from the fact that these sacred objects are used only for religious purposes, and are relegated inside sacred buildings (churches, chapels, convents). The monstres are not found in homes nor in outdoor shrines. There are some cases (limited to a few examples<sup>10</sup>) where the monstrance is painted in sacred images, but in a context of sacred conversation, or in combination with saints in Eucharistic adoration, or because the monstrance is an iconographic attribute of the saint.

On the contrary, the crucifix is present also in private homes, in agricultural areas, in public places and in many niches arranged on the roads. In practice, the cross is a very popular subject, most familiar, and most widely known and, I would point out, more visible up close and very easy to portray. Conversely, the monstrance is not owned by private citizens, there are a few within a community, it is not “approachable” by the layman, it can be seen in the church (and by far!) or during the annual *Corpus Domini* procession. On these occasions the monstrance passes through the streets to bring the Eucharistic blessing to the people and in the homes<sup>11</sup>. The monstran-

2 Only the Soprintendenza ai Beni Archeologici della Lombardia (Archaeological Superintendence of Lombardy) has conducted a stratigraphic excavation at the top of the hill to study the remains of a masonry building.

3 ATP, Soprintendenza ai Beni Archeologici della Lombardia, Milano: Darfo Boario Terme Folder. ANATI 1980, p. 117, lists the presence of 6 rocks divided in this way: 3 Post-Camuno (Common Era); 1 with cup marks; 2 non datable. Unfortunately there is no indication of the position of the findings.

4 Photographic archive of Dipartimento Valcamonica e Lombardia del CCSP, Niardo (Bs): non catalogued slides.

5 During the survey Project 2012-2013 (L. 77/06, E.F. 2010) I have catalogued for the Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici della Lombardia in all 16 rocks.

6 Park Lago Moro, Luine e Corni Freschi, (Darfo Boario Terme).

7 SANSONI 1986; LORENZI 1993.

8 BIGANZOLI 2005, pp. 68, 69; TROLETTI 2009, p. 369; TROLETTI 2013.

9 Please see the village of di Cimbergo (Valcamonica, Bs) where the Church has never, for what we know, expressed doctrinal concerns in general on the inhabitants of this location who were surely involved in the production of rock engravings (GASTALDI 2009, p. 343).

10 See the processional banner preserved in the sacristy of the church in Terzano (BS): *Ostensorio e Angeli* (BERTOLINI - PANAZZA 1984, p. 145); another example is preserved in the parish church of Gorzone (Bs): *Santi vescovi che adorano l'ostensorio sostenuto da angeli* (*Ibi*, p. 330).

11 POISA 1999; CALLAEY 1958.

ce is therefore an object not widespread and not always visible, especially closely, to understand the details. This consideration may serve to explain the poor diffusion<sup>12</sup> on the rocks and to a controversial aspect about the dating of the engravings. At first glance the items shown here can be traced, with some approximation, to eighteenth-century models. However, it should be recognized that the eighteenth-century monstrance could have been in use even in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In fact, if one takes in consideration the heritage of church utensils of many churches of Valcamonica (and in particular those of the churches near the studied area<sup>13</sup>), it is evident that there are many liturgical pieces dating from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century. It is therefore necessary to point out that we could be in the presence of a monstrance made in XVII-XVIII century, but seen and engraved on the rock during the following centuries. In fact, some of the dates that can be associated directly with the monstrance, or placed in the context of the rock itself, militate the dating to the nineteenth century.

#### WHICH POSSIBLE INTERPRETATION?

At the base of the act of recording a monstrance there is a religious need and a propitiatory value. However, such a concentration in this location imposes an additional and necessary reflection. I wonder, for example, why in other areas of Valcamonica with rock carvings of historical period these subjects don't appear. Before proposing an interpretive key I would like to bring to your attention 3 figures that are on the same rocks. For brevity of the intervention and to give a better outline I summarize in the following points:

There are geometric figures formed by two trapezoids with a common edge (Figs. 1 and 14). One of these trapezoids, the larger and elongated, bears within itself a cross. The smaller and short trapeze is placed in the lower position so it looks like a support, a pedestal. The image can remind of a small Calvary even typically the Calvaries present a hill (some with a triangle as a base, see the Rock 2 of Monticolo) where a cross is stuck. In our case, however, the hill seems to have sharper corners, with the overlying cross circumscribed in another geometric shape that is narrow in width starting from the top downwards. These details suggest a coffin or a tomb. However it is not to exclude the possibility that they can be a kind of Calvary with a more elaborate outline and pedestal.

The second figure is a kind of tombstone that resembles the shape of an upside down shield (Fig. 2) with a cross inside and initials. There are more, with various shapes in other locations<sup>14</sup>. This composition may remind of a commemorative plaque. They can also be compared to some boundary stones in Valcamonica, placed by the roadside to remember tragic or however mournful<sup>15</sup> events.

The third subject is a complex image composed by a monstrance supported by two angels carrying also branches with leaves (Fig. 3). The two angels stand on a base that extends ending with the curls. At the center of the base there is an inscription SACRA - MENTO (sacrament). On the sides of the base there are the initials "D" and "B" and between the two angels are other unreadable letters. The monstrance is surrounded by a kind frame resembling a cloud (Fig. 9) surmounted by a cross.

The third figure, as I have already had occasion to point out<sup>16</sup>, could be a scenic machine for the "Holy Forty Hours' Devotion" or for the "Triduum of the Dead". This item is documented<sup>17</sup> in the provinces of Brescia, Bergamo, Cremona and partly of Verona. It is a mobile device that is mounted on the main altar of the church to raise it by adding structures equipped with statues, candles, decorations and a space where the monstrance can be placed typically surrounded by a halo (Figs. 6, 7 and 8). The devices were mounted on the altar only for the celebration of the Sacred Triduum of the dead<sup>18</sup>.

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12 In the rock art of historical phase known to us, this is the site where there is the highest density of monstrances. See the monstrance in the municipality of Ristolas (lastra di Peyroun, Hautes-Alpes, Alpi Cozie, 2052 m.) dated between the XVIII and the XIX centuries; the monstrance engraved in the Tour Saint-Nicolas (La Rochelle, Charente-Maritime): both studied by GATTIGLIA - ROSSI 1999, pp. 58-60. See also the possible monstrance (GATTIGLIA - ROSSI 2001) engraved in Palon locality, municipality of Usseglio (To). Another likely monstrance was found in Romita (locality) in the Val d'Assa (Vi); see RIGONI STERN 2010, pp. 110, 114. I believe on the contrary, improbable that the rayed circles engraved in Brenzone (Vr) might be monstrances as instead claims GAGGIA 2002, pp. 74-77. Also Cristina Gastaldi agrees with me about the fact that in the circles of Garda lake we can't see monstrances as the "religious imagination is always very clear, since devotion doesn't allow mistakes".

13 On the average, each parish church preserves 2 monstrances. For the comparisons I have searched between the objects still present in the parishes of the municipalities of Darfo B.T. and Angolo.

Darfo, parish of santi Faustino e Giovita: *Ostensorio*, XVIII Century (BERTOLINI - PANAZZA 1984, p. 206);

Bessino (Darfo), church of San Giuseppe: *Ostensorio*, XVIII century (*Ibi*, p. 302);

Gorzone (Darfo), church of Sant' Ambrogio: *Ostensorio*, XVIII century (Fig. 4, *Ibi*, p. 348);

Angolo (Bs), church of San Lorenzo: *Ostensorio*, XVIII Century (Fig. 5, *Ibi*, p. 58).

In the parish churches of the hamlets of Erbanno and Angone (the inhabited centers closer to the Monticolo) are not preserved meaningful examples of monstrance. In fact, in the catalogue of the liturgical objects (BERTOLINI - PANAZZA 1984), I haven't found any ancient monstrance.

14 See as comparison the stone (gravestone?) engraved on the south-east sector of rock 1 in Grevo (Bs): a rectangle with a cross fitted on a triangular hill within, the date (1967) and some initials. Graphic direct tracing from SOLANO - MARRETTA 2004, p. 10.

15 SGABUSSI 1999, p. 80.

16 TROLETTI 2004, p. 453.

17 For the drawings, the builders and the diffusion see: BOSSAGLIA 1978; PASSAMANI BONOMI 2009.

18 Tree days of prayer and meditation on death and in memory of the deceased. The liturgy previewed, at the end of the ritual, the Eucharistic adoration with the exhibition of the monstrance in the center of the scenic structure. As a matter of fact some mobile scenic structures were used for the celebration of the Sante Quarantore, 40 hours of Eucharistic adoration.



The monstrance is associated with some initial letters (Fig. 1) and are close to those figures of edged crosses, reminiscent of the coffins. So the closeness between the crosses-coffins, the monstrance and the initials could be explained by the essential elements of the Triduum of the Dead. I would like to highlight how during these celebrations was scheduled, as well as the mobile device with the monstrance placed on the high altar, even a coffin (Fig. 13) that could be put at the center of the church in memory of the transience of life.

It is difficult to confirm if the Sacred Triduum<sup>19</sup> of the Dead iconography has been capable to leave some traces in the imagination of those who have then made the petroglyphs. If we accept the interpretation linked to the cult of the dead cannot be explained the total absence of the writings PAX and REQUIEM which could be easily realized. With these divergent considerations, I present also other probable interpretations. The compositions with the monstrance shown in this symposium are also comparable with the tabernacles (Figs. 10 and 11) and the “thrones” (small thrones, Fig 12) for the sacrament and for the relics, both of these objects are common in the area of study.

## CONCLUSIONS

The concentration of monstrances engraved on the rocks of Monticolo has no comparison in the other rock art sites of historical time already known. This fact makes that the monstrances are the distinguishing feature of the area. There are many doubts left, as stated above, about the dating and even more on the reasons that moved the men who have left this signs here. In addition, the area presents an unexplained fact: from the oldest findings of the boulder of Corni Freschi (dating back to the Copper Age) to the recordings of our historical time there is a chronological gap of more than 4 millennia. At the present time are missing engravings testifying the intermediate stages between these two eras<sup>20</sup>.

In this communication I have tried to present some suggestion to trigger thoughts. In conclusion, I propose that the monstrance with initial letters and the nearby crosses (or likely coffins), can be interpreted as votive offerings as well as a commemoration of a deceased person. This is suggested because of the particular practices dedicated to the cult of the dead in Valcamonica. It is no exaggeration to speak of cult – and not just of suffrage – as the popular tradition, but also some texts<sup>21</sup>, confirm that the prayers and rites for the dead and for the souls in Purgatory where believed to help even the faithful who are still alive.

Even with the perplexities expressed above I would say that the monstrances were made between the end of the eighteenth century XX. However, it is very likely that most of the monstrances were concentrated in the nineteenth century. I would exclude that the incisions are to be connected to the Eucharistic procession of *Corpus Domini* because it is very unlikely that were held as far up as to the Monticolo<sup>22</sup>.

As I have said in the introduction data on the use of the site in the modern era are at the present moment absent. From my previous study<sup>23</sup> on the area of Campanine di Cimbergo (Valcamonica, Bs) I have shown, however, that the presence of engravings in historical times with figurative subjects might be an indication of the frequentation of the places for agro-pastoral purposes.

The strong prevalence of figurative subjects engraved on Monticolo makes me think of the use of the site (at least in modern times) for a pastoral activity, but on this point I reserve future verifications. However, while there are many signs which are related to the urban world, there are as many figures that come from the religious world. Another consideration that I would like to propose in order to start a debate in this conference, is about the motivations leading to the act of engraving. I wonder what the man of the pre-Christian era and Modern have in common – or in what they differ – in the value assigned to the rock, the place, the act of engraving and the image on the stone. It is possible that an understanding of the historical rock carvings (religious and civil) might be helpful to understand the prehistoric rock art? I think it's difficult to carry on a confrontation because this field is very risky. However, I believe that this issue could be questioned at least to have some ideas on which reflecting<sup>24</sup>.

19 This hypothesis, in a preliminary way and without the support of arguments, has been proposed by me at the conference Alpine rock art (GASTALDI - TROLETTI 2010, p. 90).

20 I specify that they have been found, but are not anymore visible, cup marks on the rock. Other discoveries are under study. I remind instead that the human presence (in historical time) in the area, has been documented in the excavation above mentioned by the Soprintendenza ai Beni Archeologici della Lombardia.

21 SEGALA 1622; ROA 1627; MANNI 1673; CHIARAMONTI 1788.

22 Among the considerations I have suggested, I would add that on the Monticolo there are no shrines; the only one found by me is at the feet of the hill on the road side ending to the fields.

23 TROLETTI 2013.

24 We can think about the hiatus – still not understandable – of more than a millennium. I refer only to Valcamonica where the last engravings of the ancient time documented reach the first centuries of the Christian era, and the first engraving of historical time are to locate at the XIV century. Therefore there is about a millennium of complete absence of engraving activities. On this topic see TROLETTI 2011, p. 434, footnote 4.

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Fig. 1 Monstrance, crosses, crosses with pedestal and edge R. 2 - Monticolo



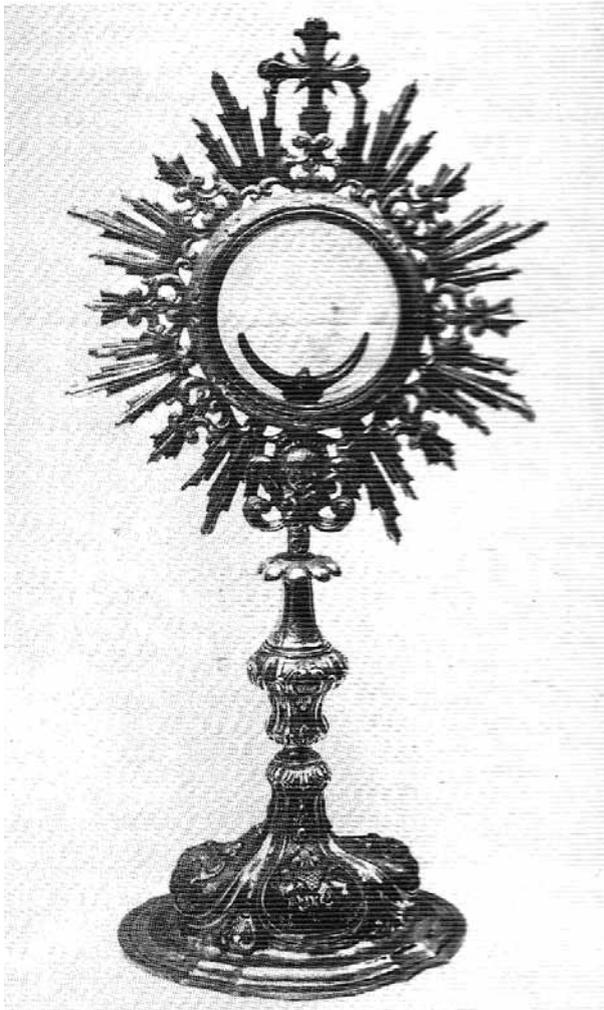
Fig. 2 Tombstone with crosses, initials and date, R. 1 - Monticolo



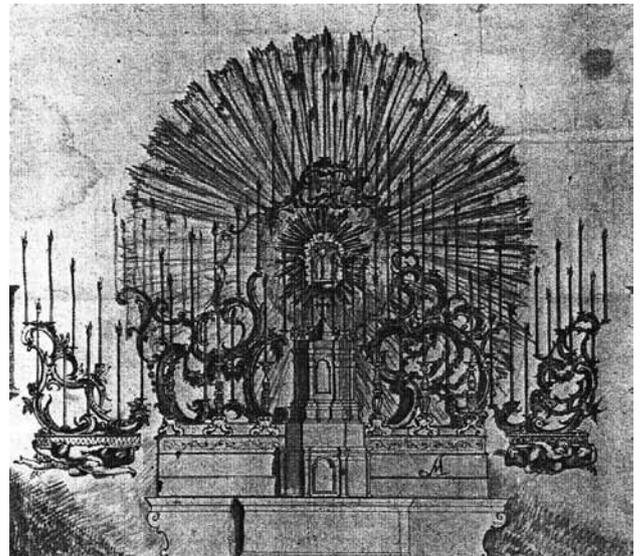
Fig. 3 Monstrance supported by angels and basement with the writing SACRA MENTO, R. 2 - Monticolo



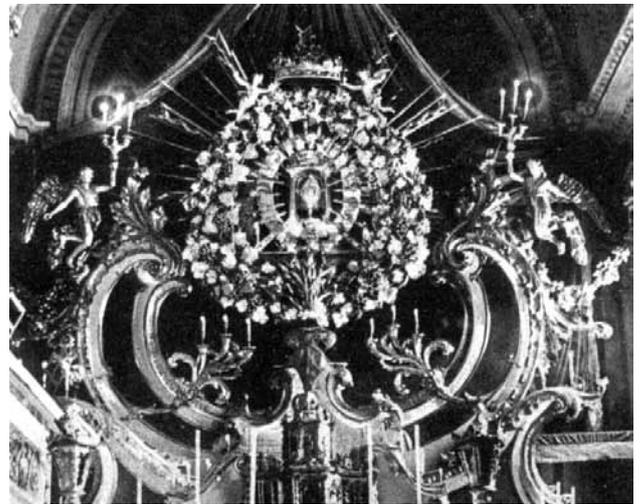
Fig. 4 Monstrance of the XVIII century, Gorzone (Darfo)



*Fig. 5 Monstrance of the XVIII century, Antolo*



*Fig. 6 Triduum of the Dead device, drawing from workshop of Fantoni from Rovetta (Bg)*



*Fig. 8 Device for the holy forty hours, Ponte di Legno*



*Fig. 7 Triduum device, parish church of Edolo (historical photo)*



*Fig. 9 Detail of the monstrance of R 2 - Monticolo*

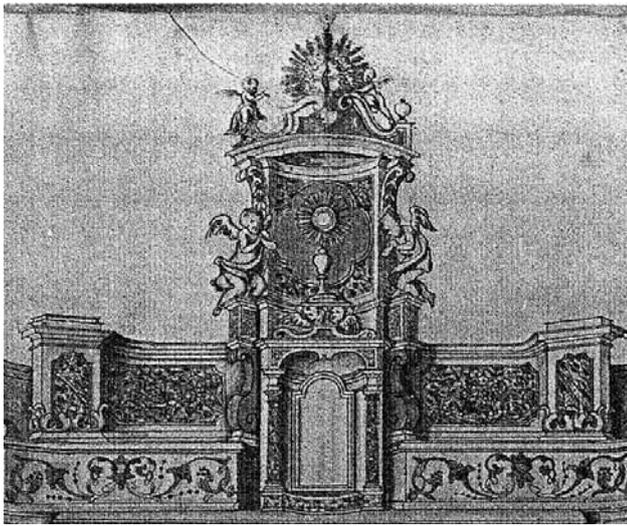


Fig. 10 Altair and Ciborium for the exposure, design from workshop of Andrea Fantoni, Rovetta (Bg)

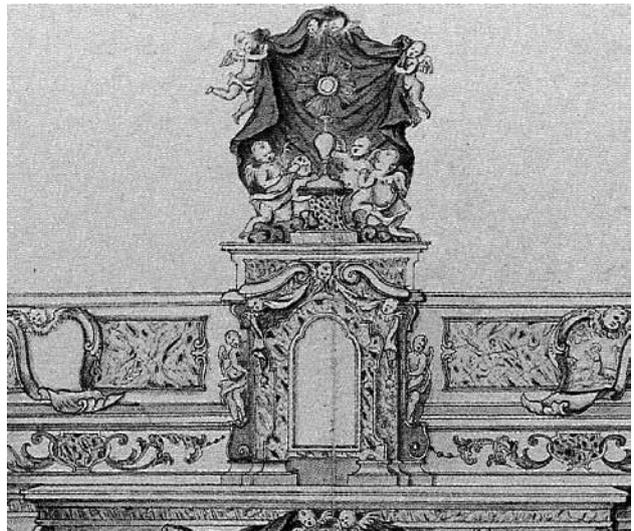


Fig. 11 Altair and Ciborium for the exposure, design from workshop of Andrea Fantoni, Rovetta (Bg)



Fig. 12 Throne for exposure, Beata (Piancamuno, Bs)



Fig. 13 Coffin for the Triduum of the dead ritual, Cividate Camuno (Bs)



Fig. 14 Cross with initials surrounded by a shape resembling a coffin, R. 1 - Monticolo ▶