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Hermits and knights: Medieval legends and archaeological data in the Alps of central Valcamonica, northern Italy

Summary

This paper discusses the legend of St. Glisente, which is still very popular in some villages of Valcamonica (Central Alps of Lombardy, northern Italy). According to one of the narratives the saint, formerly a knight of Charlemagne, after serving the king for many years during his wars for the Christianization of the Lombard tribes, decided to retire to the high mountains of central Valcamonica (Brescia). Here he lived as a hermit in a small rock-shelter located at an altitude of 2000 m now locally called “niche of St. Glisente”. The surveys carried out along the watershed that separates Valcamonica from Valtrompia led to the discovery of many archaeological sites. They show that these mountains had been settled since the beginning of the Holocene and also during the Middle Ages. The radiocarbon dates obtained from a few campfires show that some kind of human activity took place mainly at the turn of the 1st millennium AD in the plateau where St. Glisente’s rock-shelter is located at an altitude of 2000 m.

Keywords: Central Alpine arc, Valcamonica, St. Glisente, Hermitage, Legends, Lombards, Middle Ages, Radiocarbon dating.

Riassunto

Eremiti e cavalieri: leggende medievali e dati archeologici nelle Alpi della Valcamonica centrale, Italia Settentrionale.

Il presente lavoro riguarda alcuni aspetti della leggenda di San Glisente, che è tuttora ben nota in alcuni paesi della Valcamonica (Alpi centrali lombarde, Italia). Secondo le informazioni disponibili, il santo era un cavaliere di Carlo Magno che, dopo aver combattuto per molti anni durante le guerre promosse dal re per la cristianizzazione delle tribù Longobarde, decise di ritirarsi nelle montagne della Valcamonica (Brescia), dove condusse una vita eremitica, in un piccolo riparo sotto roccia, che si apre a circa 2000 m di altezza, noto come “Nicchia di San Glisente”. Le prospezioni archeologiche condotte lungo lo spartiacque che separa la Valcamonica dalla Valtrompia, hanno portato al rinvenimento di numerosi siti archeologici attribuibili ad un periodo che va dall’inizio dell’Olocene al Medioevo. Le datazioni radiocarboniche ottenute da alcuni focolari, hanno dimostrato che una certa attività antropica ebbe luogo nella sella in cui si apre il suddetto riparo, intorno alla fine del I millennio AD.

Parole chiave: Alpi centrali, Valcamonica, San Glisente, Eremitaggio, Leggende, Longobardi, Medioevo, Datazioni radiocarboniche.

1. INTRODUCTION

In a recent issue of the SAA Archaeological Record regarding “*Mountain and high-altitude archaeology*”, M.A. Stirn argued that «during the last 20 to 30 years ... occasional research projects ventured into the alpine zone and discovered that, in contrast to past beliefs, mountains can offer a rich and chronologically deep archaeological record that is often equally dense and better preserved than that of the surrounding lowland areas» (STIRN 2014, p. 7). Though this statement was not immediately accepted by all archaeologists (see f.i. DESBROSSE, KOZŁOWSKI 2000), it is however indubitable that since its beginnings high-altitude archaeology explored some aspects of human peopling in extreme environments to shed light on problems rarely considered by archaeologists before (FEDELE 1984; BETTINGER 1991; MILLER, CARMODY 2020).

High-altitudes started to attract attention of archaeologists to the Alpine region at the beginning of the 1970s, thanks to the unexpected discovery of hunter-gatherer sites in the highlands of Trentino-South Tyrol. They were followed soon after by the organization of specialized round tables, and the prompt publication of their proceedings (see *Preistoria Alpina* 1983 e 1992; BIAGI, NANDRIS 1994; DELLA CASA 1999; TILLET 2000; DELLA CASA, WALSH 2007). Just a few years later, the interest in the mountain zone was reinforced again by the impressive discovery of the Copper Age Iceman in South Tyrol (FLECKINGER 2003).

Though old-continent, high-altitude archaeology developed mostly in the Alps, researches are currently underway in other regions of Europe where such environments have been widely

exploited both in prehistoric and historic times up to the present (BIAGI, NISBET, STARNINI).

This paper investigates a very small aspect of historic high-land zone archaeology of the central Alpine arc, where archaeological and environmental studies developed mainly during the last three decades (see BARONI, BIAGI 1997; PINI *et al.* 2016; 2017; CROCE, VENEZIANO, CASTELLANO 2017). In other alpine regions important investigations are currently underway, exploring different aspects of high-altitude archaeology following a great variety of approaches (see WALSH 2005; CARRER 2015; HAFNER, BRUNNER, LAABS 2017; WALSH, GIGUET-COVEX 2019; CARRER, WALSH, MOCCI 2020).

2. ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE LANDSCAPE

The scope of this paper is to present and discuss a series of events that took place in a unique region of central Valcamonica during the Middle Ages, and to define their reliability with the help of archaeological and scientific analyses (see MIRAMONT *et al.* 1999; HAJDAS 2009; NUSSBAUMER *et al.* 2011). The article is focused on the legend of St. Glisente, formerly a knight of Charlemagne (ZALLOT 2012, p. 217), who, according to the legend (COMINELLI 2012, p. 155), lived in hermitage in these mountains during a period whose chronology is still debated. Very little is known of the first historic peopling of this part of the central Alpine arc of Lombardy (see OEGGL 1994; PINI *et al.* 2016; 2017). This is mainly due to the scarcity of archaeological data (CARRER 2015; GILCK, POSCHLOD 2019), and the poor information provided by a few manuscripts that describe the early



fig. 1 – The saddle where the St. Glisente niche opens (blue dot) taken from the top of Mt. Crestoso, with the location of the radiocarbon-dated points SGL-015, GrA-65414 (blue dot), SGL-009, GrA-48362 (red dot) and SGL-1, GrN-18980 (yellow dot). The black dot in the background marks the approximate location of the church of St. Glisente on Mt. Berzo (photograph by P Biagi, 2005).



fig. 2 – The St. Glisente niche from the south-east, with the position of radiocarbon samples SGL-015, GrA-65414 (blue dot), SGL-009, GrA-48362 (red dot) and SGL-1, GrN-18980 (yellow dot) (photograph by P Biagi, 2014).

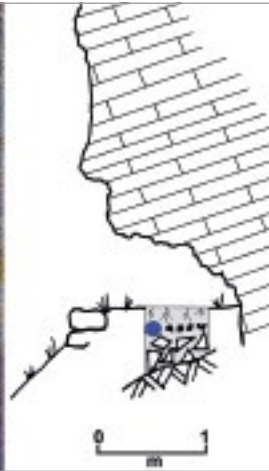


fig. 3 – The St. Glisente niche from the north-east as it is now with the position of the radiocarbon date SGL-015, GrA-65414 (blue dot), and profile of the sediments inside the shelter (photograph by P Biagi, 2014; drawing by E Starnini).



fig. 4 – Interior of the crypt of St. Glisente church on Mt. Berzo taken from its entrance. The sarcophagus is partly visible in the background (photograph by P Biagi, 2006).



fig. 5 – The suggested sarcophagus of the saint inside the crypt of St. Glisente church on Mt. Berzo (photograph by P Biagi, 2006).

development of pastoralism in the neighbouring Valtrompia highlands (BERRUTI 2004; 2006).

The territory considered in the present paper is part of an arc-shaped watershed that separates Valcamonica, in the west, from Valtrompia, in the south, and Valsabbia, in the east (BIAGI 1998). The ridge elongates about 25 km between Lake Iseo and

Lake Idro in the Central Alps of Lombardy (province of Brescia, northern Italy). Its average altitude ranges between 1450 and 2000 m, with a few peaks slightly higher than 2200 m (*fig. 1*).

The watershed is dotted with many small lakes of glacial origin that formed at the end of the Pleistocene and are dammed by moraines and rock-glaciers. At present, some basins are filled

with thick deposits of peat a few of which have been cored for pollen analysis (SCAIFE, BIAGI 1994). Due to the glacial action that shaped the entire watershed, many areas look gently rounded. This is the case for the northern slopes of the ridge, where multi-direction striations are clearly visible on the surface of the *roches moutonnées*. These latter consist of Late to Middle Permian beds of coarse sandstones and conglomerates of fluvial origin (CASSINIS *et al.* 1986) the surfaces of which show evident traces of a few glacier movements that most probably occurred during the Late Glacial Maximum (LGM).

Systematic archaeological surveys were carried out in the territory during the last 35 years (BIAGI 1998). They led to the discovery of both scatters of knapped stone artefacts and prehistoric sites, most of which have been radiocarbon-dated and attributed to different Mesolithic cultural aspects from the Pre-Boreal Sauveterrian to the beginning of the Atlantic Castelnovian (BIAGI 1994; BIAGI, STARNINI 2015 e 2016; BIAGI, STARNINI, NISBET 2017). Their presence shows that the watershed was sporadically, most probably seasonally settled by groups of hunter-gatherers from the early Holocene onwards when, at the beginning of the postglacial, progressive climatic and environmental ameliorations favoured the establishment of summer hunting camps even at high altitudes (BIAGI, STARNINI 2015; PINI *et al.* 2016).

Archaeological finds and isolated artefacts of more recent periods were also recovered from the surface surveys in this territory. They consist mainly of flat-retouched flint arrowheads attributable to the Early and Middle Bronze Ages. They were collected along the ridge of the watershed, where a Late Bronze Age bronze spearhead was also found (see also MARZATICO, TECCHIATI 1998, p. 39). All these items show that many of the present-day footpaths were already open and utilised during late prehistoric times, when Bronze Age hunters began to move towards the high-altitude mountain zones during the good season, in a period during which the most important passes linking great communication transalpine valleys started to be strictly controlled. Other archaeological traces consist of hearths, most of which were systematically radiocarbon-dated. A few of them yielded Bronze and Iron Age results, while a few others, dated to the different Medieval periods, most probably indicate that in this territory coal production was practised also at high altitude (BIAGI 2003).

Also a few peat basins were pollen-cored to interpret the variations of the upper tree-line oscillations, the changes that took place in the woodland cover between the end of the Pleistocene and the present, and record any eventual evidence of human interference on the mountain landscape during the aforementioned long time-period (BIAGI, NISBET, SCAIFE; BIAGI, NISBET, SCAIFE 1995; SCAIFE, BIAGI 1994; BARONI, BIAGI 1997). The data regarding the woodland exploitation in historical times are still scarce, with the exception of a few cases (MARZIANI, CITTERIO 1999). However, the information collected during the last 10 years shows that alpine pastures and treeless zones characterised the highlands of Valcamonica above 2000 m of altitude (PINI *et al.* 2016, fig. 7; see also BIAGI, STARNINI, NISBET 2017, tab. 2).

Moreover, it is important to remark that iron mining was practised in the mountains of central Valcamonica even at middle-high altitude between the Iron and Early Middle Ages (CUCINI TIZZONI, TIZZONI 1999). Also during the Lombard kingdom the Ponte di Val Gabbia mining area, located at ca. 1300 m of altitude, was most probably exploited as shown by four radiocarbon dates whose results fall between 1560±45 BP (491±51 AD at 1σ: BM-3052) and 780±40 BP (1238±24

AD at 1σ: BM-5035) (TIZZONI 1999, p. 13). They remark the importance played by ores in the economy of the highlands that surround the Valcamonica during this period (CUCINI TIZZONI 1999).

Other archaeological sites discovered in the valley bottom consist of graveyards and isolated tombs. They have been attributed to the 6th and 7th centuries according to the typology of the grave goods. A few settlements and churches of the 6th-8th centuries AD were also excavated (LEONI 2012).

3. ST. GLISENTE AND THE LEGENDS

The legend of Charlemagne in the central Italian Alps, Valcamonica (Brescia) in particular, is thought to have spread in the 14th century (MEDOLAGO 2012; PENNACCHIO 2012) independently from that of St. Glisente, whose cult is attested at least since the first decades of the 12th century AD in both Valcamonica and Valtrompia (COMINELLI 2012). The two legends are to be framed into the general picture of the wars that Charlemagne waged against the Lombards in the late 8th century. They were soon followed by those against the Avars, Saxons and Danish in central and northern Europe (see CASTIELLA 2016), whose scope was to Christianize the barbarian pagan tribes settled in these lands, convert or exterminate the infidels.

According to oral traditions, and as reported by a few manuscripts in late Medieval Latin (GUERRINI 1911), St. Glisente was a knight of Charlemagne's army. He followed the king together with his brother Fermo and his sister Cristina during the military campaigns that took place in northern Italy in 773 AD. Their scope was to Christianize the Lombards (Langobards) of the central Italian Alps (FREEMAN 2017, p. 11), Valcamonica in particular (BONDIONI 2012; LORENZI 2012).

This is the general picture into which the legend of Charlemagne, «a saint-ruler in a special relation to God» (CURTA, STUCKEY 2011, p. 188), is framed, and the cult of St. Glisente developed and rapidly affirmed, partly within an anti-clerical Christian world, though it is not clear whether relationships really existed between the king and the saint (MEDOLAGO 2012, p. 79).

Glisente and Fermo, though they were not believers, after years of bloody and cruel wars, whose scope was in effect the conquest of the entire Valcamonica, decided to release from the Frankish army after the battle of Mortirolo (BONDIOLO 2012, p. 56). A few years later they converted to Christianity and spent the rest of their lives in the high mountains of middle Valcamonica in hermitage and prayer. According to the ancient chronicles Glisente settled in a rock-shelter that opens on a mount around Berzo (*fig. 2*), while his brother and sister retired in two other remote mountains of the same region, around Borno and Lozio respectively.

Given the asperity of the landscape they decided to communicate lighting a fire every evening not only to keep in touch, but also to know whether they were still alive. Following the legends, St. Glisente passed away on the 6th of August, 796 AD (COMINELLI 2012, p. 156), his sister a few years later, while their brother Fermo died soon after.

The story reported above is most probably based mainly on an inscription written in Medieval Latin that is engraved at the bottom of a painting of the saint, at present on display in the church of San Lorenzo at Berzo Inferiore in Central Valcamonica (PANTEGHINI, CERE 2010, p. 6). The inscription was transliterated as follows by father Beniamino Zacco around the middle of the 17th century (GUERRINI 1911, p. 38), the same century



fig. 6 – St. Glisente, the gentleman on the left, represented in a fresco that decorates the church of St. Lorenzo di Berzo Inferiore in Valcamonica (from ALBETTI 2010).

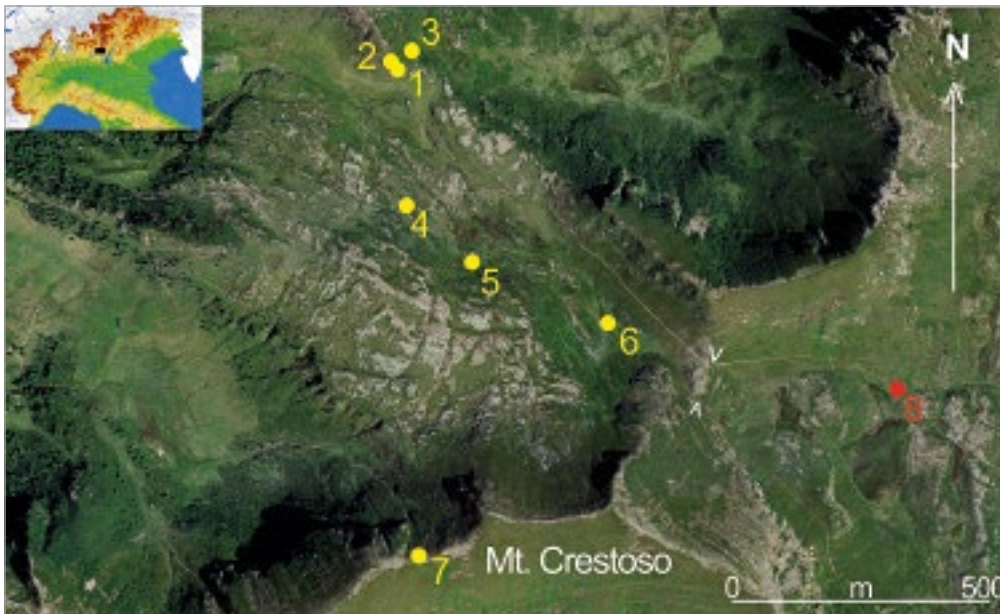


fig. 7 – Distribution map of the radiocarbon-dated samples reported in this paper from the St. Glisente saddle and its surroundings: SGL-015, GrA-65414 (n. 1), SGL-009, GrA-48362 (n. 2), SGL-1, GrN-18980 (n. 3), SGL-2, GrN-20888 (n. 4), GLS-97, GrN-24816 (n. 5), SGL-3, Beta-35212 (n. 6), CRT-1, GrA-48361 (n. 7). Number 8 (LC, HAR-8872) is from a peat sample that covers the Late Mesolithic site of Laghetto del Crestoso, dated to 1960 ± 60 BP (33 ± 66 AD at 1σ). See also *tab. 1*. The two white arrows mark the pass that separates Valtrompia, in the east, from Valcamonica, in the west (drawing by P Biagi).

during which Glisente was made holy: «*Hic est sanctus glisentus gallicus, qui tempore caroli regis fuit miles strenuus et virilis, et una cum rege, tempore paganorum, luctabatur pro fide christi in valle camunica, tandem illuminatus divino spiritu, assendit supra hunc montem et hic duxit vitam heremiticam. Cui deo favente quotidie apparebat quaedam ursatella portans sibi poma et alia silvestria pro suo alimento. Concurrerat etiam ovis cum suo lacte, quam saepe mulgebat. Hoc modo in hac spelunca vitam suam secreto finivit. Multi pie quaeritantes eius corpus, viderunt columbam portantem ligna et folia super hanc speluncam pro ecclesiae aedificatione, et ipsi appropinquaverunt: ubi multis miraculis illustrati, in eius honorem hanc ecclesiam aedificaverunt*».

The same legend is narrated also by another 17th century monk, father Eleuterio Cappuccino. This author reports that the spoils of the saint, according to the story, had been buried in the mountain niche where he spent the last years of his hermit life and later died (fig. 3). His body was later stolen and transferred

by the villagers of Bagolino, and not by those of Collio, as previously suggested. However, the precise place where Glisente was first buried is still unknown and disputed, mainly because his grave has never been discovered.

However, from an archaeological point of view, there is no evidence of any grave-pit inside the St. Glisente niche, as confirmed by a profile opened inside the shelter (fig. 7, n. 1 and fig. 3). In contrast, the sequence shows that horizontal, undisturbed late glacial deposits lay about 15 cm below the surface, above which is a dark soil whose lower part is rich in small charcoal pieces of *Alnus Viridis*. These latter were dated to 105 ± 30 BP (1808 ± 96 AD at 1σ : GrA-65414), showing that the shelter was settled not earlier than about 1-3 centuries ago. Other authors hypothesize that the body was buried inside a sarcophagus that is still preserved in the crypt of St. Glisente church on Mt. Berzo (figs. 4 and 5), ca. 3.5 km north-northwest of the niche, as first reported in 1222 (FAPPANI

1978, p. 137; ARCHETTI 2000, p. 536). The church is a suggestive Romanic structure of the 12th-13th century that was rebuilt several times in different ages, whose present aspect is attributed to the 15th century. The small church is located on a gentle slope that faces Valcamonica at 1956 m of altitude. The date of the crypt below the church is very debated because the authors attribute its construction to different ages between the 7th and the 14th-15th century AD (PANTEGHINI, CERE 2010, p. 33; see also SCARLETT 2013, p. 202, note 497).

However, according to most authors, the remains of St. Glisente's grave have never been discovered. A few bones of uncertain attribution were found in a box uncovered behind an icon inside a grave in the church of St. Lorenzo di Berzo Inferiore in Valcamonica (GUERRINI 1911, p. 38).

Moreover, G. Lochi provided us with a very precise description of the events that took place in 1822 in the same church (FAPPANI 1978, pp. 139-142). More precisely he described in detail a grave inside which the remains of a unique, almost mummified adult male body were found. The burial was located inside a wooden coffin, oriented in west-east direction. The individual was dressed with an almost black "moleskin" mantle, a wool skirt and a fine cloth shirt (*tela fina*). The coffin yielded also a wooden stick. According to the description reported in a letter signed by Bishop G. Tredici, regarding a preliminary study of the bones made by father P. Gemelli (FAPPANI 1978, p. 143), the body was well-preserved, though in an advanced state of mummification. However, it was impossible to define the date of the burial. Although we cannot confirm that the tomb is that of St. Glisente, the mantle finds parallels with the one wore by the saint represented in a fresco that decorates the same church (ALBETTI 2010, fig. at p. 6).

Quite a contrasting story is reported by a local historian, priest A. Sina (1944). His contribution is based on both the decoding of all the available manuscripts, and his profound knowledge of the old families of Valcamonica and their long traditions. According to A. Sina, Glisente was a member of a noble family. Its origins are to be sought in the history of one of the three Frankish families that had settled in Esine, a village located in the same valley, most probably around the end of the 1st millennium AD. During the 11th century his family had been invested, and later provided with large properties among which were some high-altitude pastures in central Valcamonica, where Mt. Roncole is located. This latter is probably the mountain where Glisente retired to prey and where, according to some chroniclers, he died, following the example of other saints and hermits of that period in the central Alps (ARCHETTI 2016), and where the church dedicated to his memory was later built.

A. Sina reports that the cult of the mythical figure of St. Glisente (fig. 6) was already practised in the 13th century, while the written version of the legend is to be dated to the 14th century AD. Already in this period his cult was worshipped by many villagers of Valcamonica and its surroundings, among which is Valtrompia (FAPPANI 1978, p. 137). However, his legend, following the story of the king-hero who had Christianized the valley and imposed the "true" religion to the natives with the force of his arms, most probably originated in the 10th (or 12th?) century (LORENZI 1979, p. 27).

As mentioned by P. Bona (GUERRINI 1911, p. 40), already before 1662 the inhabitants of both Valcamonica and Valtrompia celebrated a feast in honour of St. Glisente on Mt. Berzo, every year on the 26th of July, a tradition that still continues today (PIOTTI 1912, p. 6). The date is supposed to mark the day when the body of St. Glisente was removed from the small mountain church where it was buried and remained until the 15th

century, down to the church of San Lorenzo di Berzo Inferiore (SCARPETTA 2013, p. 202, note 498).

Following another hypothesis put forward by P. Guerrini (GUERRINI 1911, p. 41), Glisente was a friar of the order of the Humiliates, who built a house on Mt. Berzo. Although Guerrini's reconstruction was soon rejected by O. Piotti (PIOTTI 1912, p. 5), the aforementioned author suggests that the shrine of St. Glisente might be the "*Domus de Eseno*" (House of Esine), which is reported in an old list of the houses of the Humiliates (SINA 1911).

All the uncertain and often unreliable data reported above are made even more complicated by the controversial role played by different categories of hermits during the Middle Ages (DUFF 2011) many of whom «took on the mantle of hermit without any kind of church endorsement» (ROMAN 2016, p. 81), as well as by the fact that the exploitation of caves by hermits in many regions of the former western Roman Empire is a well-known habit that continued to be practised for at least about 700 years from the middle of the 1st millennium AD onward (see f.i. SCHULZE-DÖRRLAMM 2018; WOJENKA 2018). This was a period of great complexity and major religious and political transformations (see f.i. CURTA 2006) during which different types of asceticism originated and developed (STARK 2003), and «the effects of what was regarded as religion was quite different from those so considered in modern society» (ASAD 1993, p. 29).

4. ARCHAEOLOGY AND RADIOCARBON DATING

During the surveys carried out along the Valtrompia-Valcamonica watershed, a few fireplaces and charcoal lenses were discovered. They were systematically GPS-mapped and sampled. Moreover, they all were radiocarbon dated from identified charcoal pieces at Groningen University Isotope Research Institute. Four lists of absolute dates have already been published (see BARONI, BIAGI 1997; BIAGI 2003; BIAGI, STARNINI 2015; BIAGI, STARNINI, NISBET 2017).

Two fireplaces were discovered close to the St. Glisente niche that opens at 45°51'37"N-10°18'11"E. The first (SGL-2) was found by chance at 1990 m of altitude, along a profile opened by the Corpo Forestale dello Stato (State Forestry Corps) during the cleaning of the footpath that, starting from the above shelter, moves southwest down to Lake Rosellino (45°51'25"N-10°18'01"E) (fig. 7, n. 4). It consists of about 2 m long and 20 cm thick *Pinus* charcoal lens, radiocarbon dated to 1040±30 BP (994±18 cal AD at 1σ: GrN-20888) showing that coal was made in this place. A second hearth, composed of *Picea/Larix* charcoals, was found at 2025 m of altitude, along the lowermost slope of Mt. Crestoso, about 15 cm below the surface (GLS-97: 45°51'38"N-10°18'10"E). It yielded a date of 1050±30 BP (984±23 AD at 1σ: GrN-24816) (fig. 7, n. 5). An almost identical result was obtained from the uppermost layer of a sequence of three overimposed buried soils, uncovered at about 45 cm of depth, during the excavation of a trial trench «inside a cirque dammed by a Late Pleistocene small moraine», about 500 m south-east of the niche at 2010 m of altitude (45°51'32.3"N-10°18'18.2"E) (fig. 7, n. 6). This soil sample was dated to 1040±70 PB (997±88 AD at 1σ: Beta-35212: SGL-3), while the lowermost one, about 10 cm below, yielded a date of 1230±60 BP (787±77 AD at 1σ: Beta-35213) (BARONI, BIAGI 1997, p. 80).

Other important results were obtained from another lens of charcoals discovered on the small conglomerate terrace lying just above the roof of St. Glisente's niche (SGL-009:

Sites									
WATERSHED	Coordinates	Altitude (m)	Lab. N°	¹⁴ C date BP	δ ¹³ C	Cal date BC/AD	Material	Reference	Figure
SGL-015	45°51'37"N-10°18'11"E	1990	GrA-65414	105±30	-25.21	1808±96 AD	<i>Alnus viridis</i>	This paper	7, n. 1
SGL-009	45°51'45"N-10°18'10"E	2000	GrA-48362	2815±35	-24.53	972±40 BC	<i>Picea/Larix</i>	BIAGI, STARNINI 2005, p. 257	7, n. 2
SGL-1	45°51'28"N-10°18'12"E	1990	GrN-18980	2895±35	-23.63	1091±60 BC	<i>Picea/Larix</i>	BARONI, BIAGI 1997, p. 79	7, n. 3
SGL-2	45°51'38"N-10°18'11"E	1990	GrN-20888	1040±30	-23.29	994±18 AD	<i>Picea/Larix</i>	BARONI, BIAGI 1997, p. 79	7, n. 4
GLS-97	45°51'38"N-10°18'10"E	2025	GrN-24816	1050±30	-23.88	984±23 AD	<i>Pinus</i>	BIAGI, STARNINI 2005, p. 257	7, n. 5
SGL-3	45°51'32"N-10°18'21"E	1992	Beta-35212	1040±70	n.d.	997±88 AD	Buried soil	BARONI, BIAGI 1997, p. 82	7, n. 6
CRT-1	45°51'15"N-10°18'13"E	2117	GrA-48361	740±35	-24.84	1258±19 AD	<i>Picea/Larix</i>	BIAGI, STARNINI 2005, p. 257	7, n. 7
LC	45°51'18"N-10°18'53"E	2006	HAR-8872	1960±60	n.d.	33±66 AD	Peat	BARONI, BIAGI 1997, p. 15	7, n. 8
GUGLIELMO									
PSZ-2	45°46'12"N-10°10'50"E	1525	GrN-27231	415±25	-25.61	1459±17 AD	<i>Fagus sylvatica</i>	BIAGI 2002, p. 247	
GU-3	45°44'49"N-10°11'53"E	1665	GrN-27948	850±30	-25.92	1188±27 AD	<i>Fagus sylvatica</i>	BIAGI 2002, p. 247	
BRUFFIONE									
BRF-1	45°54'18"N-10°29'05"E	1896	GrA-59624	1935±30	-22.37	63±34 AD	<i>Taxus baccata</i>	This paper	
BRF-4	45°54'21"N-10°29'05"E	1845	GrA-59631	1405±30	-24.15	629±18 AD	<i>Picea/Larix</i>	This paper	
BRF-2	45°54'19"N-10°29'17"E	1865	GrA-59625	380±30	-24.04	1530±69 AD	<i>Picea/Larix</i>	This paper	
BRF-3	45°54'20"N-10°29'47"E	1845	GrA-59629	310±30	-25.30	1569±52 AD	<i>Picea/Larix</i>	This paper	

tab. 1 – Radiocarbon and calibrated dates of the sites mentioned in the text.

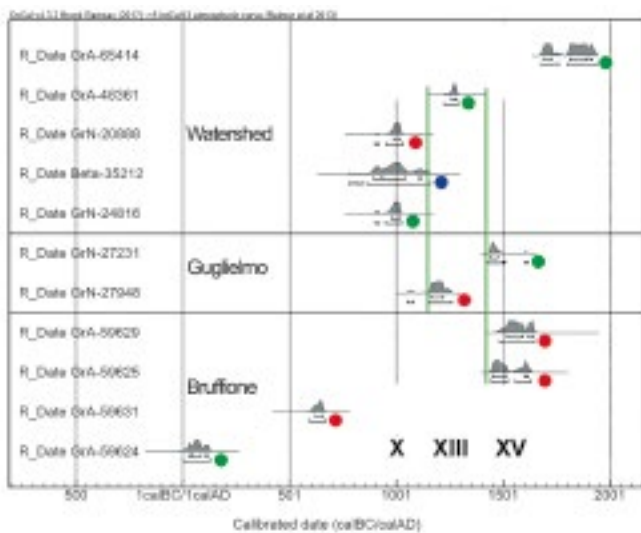


fig. 8 – OxCal plot of the radiocarbon and calibrated dates from St. Glisente saddle, Mt. Guglielmo and Laghetti di Bruffione. Charcoal lenses (green dots), soil sample (blue dot), coal production spots (red dots) (plot by T Fantuzzi, drawing by P Biagi).

45°51'45"N-10°18'10"E). A sample of *Picea/Larix* fragments retrieved from its surface was dated to 2815±35 BP (972±40 BC at 1σ: GrA-48362). It shows that some kind of activity took place in the area most probably around the beginning of the Iron Age (fig. 7, n. 2). This date is rather similar to another assay from a *Picea/Larix* charcoal lens excavated along a footpath located a few metres north-east of the niche (GrN-18980: 2895±35BP; 1091±60 BC at 1σ) (fig. 7, n. 3).

Another *Picea/Larix* charcoal sample was collected from a small fireplace discovered on a saddle that opens along the western upper slope of Mt. Crestoso, about 1 km south of the niche, at an altitude of 2117 m (CRT-1: 45°51'15"N-10°18'13"E) (fig. 7, n. 7). Around the fireplace a small chert artefact was found, most probably a fire-flint (see WEINER 2012). The charcoal sample was dated to 740±35 BP (1258±19 AD at 1σ: GrA-48361). It shows that the footpath that takes to the saddle was already opened and exploited around the middle of the 13th century AD.

The assays reported above fit well into the range of the few historical dates at present available from the central Italian Alps obtained from fireplaces and coal production spots discovered during thirty-five years of research in the region (fig. 8; tab. 1). Other radiocarbon dates from similar structures



fig. 9 – Distribution map of the three highland zones of the Central Alps from which historical radiocarbon dates have been obtained: St. Glisente saddle (n. 1), Mt. Guglielmo (n. 2), and Laghetti di Bruffione (n. 3) (drawing by P Biagi).

have been retrieved from charcoal samples collected from two neighbouring mountains: Mt. Guglielmo (or Gölem), at the head of Valtrompia (BIAGI 2002) (*fig. 9*, n. 2), and Laghetti di Bruffione, in upper Valsabbia (*fig. 9*, n. 3). All together the dates show that the high-altitude pastures of the central Italian Alps were sporadically settled mainly during three medieval and post-medieval periods, more precisely at the turn of the 10th century, during the 12th-13th, and the 15th-16th centuries (*fig. 8*). While earlier archaeological evidence is very scarce in the study area, the latter two periods are documented by the research carried out at a high-altitude fortified site excavated in upper Valcamonica (BELLANDI, CESANA 2017).

The pollen core extracted from Armentarga peat bog, at 2345 m of altitude, about 40 kms north-west of the Valcamonica, has shown that pasture in the area intensified around the end of the 11th century AD (FURLANETTO *et al.* 2018, p. 224). Though the data available from our sites do not confirm the evidence provided by Armentarga, two similar historical dates would suggest that the St. Glisente saddle was visited for the first time at the turn of the 10th-11th centuries (SGL-2 and GLS-97), during which three subsequent episodes of soil formation interstratified by thin sterile layers are documented from a deposit delimited by a small morainic circle a few hundred metres from the saddle (SGL-3).

5. DISCUSSION

The surveys carried out in the central Alps of Valcamonica, and the absolute dates obtained from different charcoal features discovered in the region, have yielded a few new data that help us interpret some aspects of the human peopling of the region in historic times. Moreover, they provided us with archaeological evidence confirming, or rejecting, any trace of the eventual presence of St. Glisente in these mountains. Medieval material culture remains have never been recovered all over the highland zones discussed in the present paper. This fact contrasts with the archaeological data available from the valley bottom (LEONI 2012). The data at present available can be summarised as follows:

1) St. Glisente's saddle and its surroundings have not yielded any evidence to confirm that some kind of human activity took place in the area during the period of Charlemagne (774-814 AD) whose invasion of Valcamonica is strictly related with the legend of St. Glisente. However, the discovery and radiocarbon dating of charcoal lenses and coal production areas within the same saddle tell us that the locality was sporadically settled about two centuries later than the period during which the saint is suggested to have lived in hermitage and prayer in these mountains.

2) In contrast with the oral traditions and written documents, the so-called St. Glisente niche was never settled in medieval times neither used as a burial ground ever. This is clearly demonstrated by the stratigraphy of the deposits that fill the niche itself. It shows that the topmost organogenic layer, about 15 cm thick, is followed by a thin level of *Alnus viridis* charcoals that yielded an AMS date of 105±30 BP (1808±96 AD at 1σ: GrA-65414) (*fig. 3*). The presence of charcoals suggests that the

shelter was briefly settled one or two centuries ago and never before. This horizon is followed by a thick sterile deposit of late glacial origin that forms the lowermost part of the sequence down to the bedrock. In contrast the *Picea/Larix* charcoal lens found on the small terrace that opens at the top of the niche was dated to the Final Bronze Age or Early Iron Age (2815±35 BP; 972±40 BC at 1σ: GrA-48362). Though a few fireplaces and charcoal lenses were discovered around the niche, none of them can be related to a presence in the area or to the fires that the saint is reported to have lightened to keep in touch with his sister and brother.

3) At present we do not have any scientific data to demonstrate that the partly mummified (?) male human body discovered inside the coffin in the church of San Lorenzo di Berzo Inferiore in 1822 is to be attributed to the saint (see also ZALLOT 2012, p. 219). Moreover, is unknown if these remains are still preserved and where.

4) The collected archaeological and palaeoenvironmental data show that the high-altitude pastures of the studied section were frequented mainly during the medieval and post-medieval periods at the turn of the 10th century, during the 12th-13th and 15th-16th centuries (see *fig. 8*). We can suggest that these are the historical periods during which the highland zones described in this paper were more intensively exploited.

To conclude: to date we do not have any archaeological evidence confirming the presence of St. Glisente in the mountains of central Valcamonica, though medieval features in the form of fireplaces and coal production spots have been discovered and radiocarbon dated all along the high-altitude watershed discussed in the present paper. Moreover, only one date from Lake Bruffione (GrA-59631) can be attributed to the Lombard period. So, we can suggest that the image of the saint is to be framed into the variegated picture connected with different forms of hermitage and their wide diffusion in Europe, as well as in Lombardy and its mountains (ARCHETTI 2016; see also PENNACCHIO 2012, p. 131; ZALLOT 2012). They fall into the even more general image of the hermit as a «reminder of another kind of Christian life» (ROMAN 2016, p. 83). Though these cases of mountain hermitage are often poorly known from manuscripts, inscriptions, and also oral traditions, they are confirmed by the evidence provided by caves and rock shelters inside which shrines and churches were sporadically built (BERGSVIG, DOWD 2018). The image of the St. Glisente is undoubtedly crowned by a legend that originated and developed since Charlemagne's times, when the king and his army were believed to represent the bearers of the "true" (Catholic) religion, and St. Glisente was one of the most interesting actors to play the role.

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