

The dating of cup-holes in South Tyrol

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ABSTRACT - By their very nature, cup-holes are difficult to date. However, dating is possible if they are found on archaeological sites where they can be correlated with readily datable archaeological objects (Fig. 1-2). The production of cup-holes in South Tyrol covers an extensive period of time; apart from a pause during the Roman Age, cup-holes were manufactured from the Early Neolithic until the beginning of the XVIII century. Their manufacturing undoubtedly culminated during the Middle Bronze Age. During the Iron Age, the method of hollowing out stones decreased gradually, until it ceased completely during the subsequent Roman Age. During an advanced period of the Early Middle Ages, and certainly when Christianity had already taken a strong foothold, stones with cup-holes slowly seemed to prevail again. By the Late Middle Ages, their presence at both holy and laic sites is widely documented. At profane places, cup-holes were believed to catch witches or - according to a more dubious interpretation - to protect from the bad spirits of the legend of "The Wild Chase". It is possible that stones with cup-holes might have been reused at later times for superstitious reasons; in those cases, the cup-holes probably lost their initial meaning.

KEY WORDS: Cup-holes, correlated with archeological sites

PAROLE CHIAVE: Coppelle contestualizzate, datate da scavi archeologici

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By nature cup-holes are difficult to date. However, approximate dating is possible if they are found in archaeological sites where they can be correlated with datable archaeological hollowed out cup-holes (Fig. 1-2). It is known that the production of cup-holes in South Tyrol covers an extensive period of time, apart from a pause during the Roman Age, cup-holes were manufactured from the Early Neolithic until the beginning of the XVIII century. Their manufacturing slowly ceased when previous concepts of the sacred (magic or demonic) changed into something more modern and reasoned.

Their manufacturing undoubtedly culminated during the Middle Bronze Age but still went on to the end of this period (Luco Culture).

During the Iron Age, the method of hollowing out stones decreased progressively until it ceased completely during the Roman Age.

During an advanced period of the Early Middle Ages, and however when Christianity had already taken a strong foothold, stones with cup-holes slowly seemed to prevail once again for different reasons which have not yet been examined. In any case there is ample documentary evidence of their presence in both holy and profane sites during the Late Middle Ages on thresholds and window sills of constructions built in these periods.

In the latter case, the presence of cup-holes is believed (to this very day) to be "Hexenfalle" (traps for witches) or - according to a similar but more dubious interpretation - as a protection from the evil spirits of the legend of "The Wild Chase" (Wilde Jagd). In some cases, it is possible that stones with cup-holes might have been used for superstitious reasons.

Previously dated pot-holes mainly on stones and slabs

1 - Early Middle Neolithic: Villandro-Plunacker, Pinzago, Velturmo-Tanzgasse, Barbiano-Rabanser, Bressanone-Stufles.

2 - Copper Age, with bell-shaped vase, in a Megalithic area: Velturmo-Tanzgasse.

3 - Early Bronze Age: Varna - Castelliere Nössing.

4 - Middle Bronze Age: Bressanone - Pla-

bach, Bressanone - Albanbühel, Bressanone - Elvas - Pinatzbühel, Velturmo-Trumbühel.

5 - Final Bronze Age: near Sonnenburg Pusteria/Pustertal Valley (Fig. 1).

6 - Iron Age: Laives-Reif, Bressanone-Albanbühel (Fig. 2), Vadena-Laimburg, Velturmo-Tanzgasse.

7 - Late Middle Age: in cloisters, churches and cemeteries, mainly on thresholds, windowsills or on slabs inserted in the walls, sometimes with dates or with Christian symbols.

SUMMARY - By their very nature, cup-holes are difficult to date. However, dating is possible if they are found at archaeological sites where they can be correlated with readily datable archaeological objects. The production of cup-holes in South Tyrol covers an extensive period of time; apart from a pause during the Roman Age, cup-holes were manufactured from the Early Neolithic on until the beginning of the XVIII century. Their manufacturing undoubtedly culminated during the Middle Bronze Age. During the Iron Age, the method of hollowing out stones decreased gradually until it ceased completely during the subsequent Roman Age. During an advanced period of the Early Middle Ages, and certainly when Christianity had already taken a strong foothold, stones with cup-holes slowly seemed to prevail again. By the Late Middle Ages, their presence on both holy and laic sites is widely documented. In profane places, cup-holes were believed to catch witches or - according to a more dubious interpretation - to protect from the bad spirits of the legend of "The Wild Chase". It is possible that stones with cup-holes might have been used at later times for superstitious reasons; in those cases, the cup-holes probably lost their initial meaning.

RIASSUNTO - Le coppelle per loro natura sono elementi difficilmente databili. Una datazione è comunque possibile se ci si basa sui rinvenimenti in scavi archeologici di pietre coppellate ben contestualizzate. La produzione di coppelle altoatesine copre un periodo lunghissimo, compreso tra il neolitico antico e l'inizio del XVIII secolo, con una interruzione nell'Età Romana. Il massimo sviluppo della coppellazione si ebbe certamente nella media età del Bronzo. Nell'Età del Ferro l'uso di incavare coppelle diminuì progressivamente fino ad essere, a quanto pare, del tutto ignorato nella successiva età romana. In un momento avanzato dell'altomedioevo e comunque in un momento di cristianizzazione ormai affermata, la presenza di coppelle sembra riaffermarsi gradualmente. Questo fenomeno risulta invece ampiamente documentato nel basso medioevo, sia in luoghi sacri che profani. In questo ultimo caso la presenza degli incavi viene spiegata (ancora sino ai nostri giorni) con la funzione di "Hexenfalle" (trappole per le streghe) e forse analogamente, ma con minore certezza, come schermo di difesa contro la "caccia selvaggia" ("Wilde Jagd"). In alcuni casi non si esclude una conservazione di pietre con coppelle per motivi di superstizione.



Fig. 1 - Rock surface worked with numerous cup-holes, serving as the foundation for a Final Bronze Age hut at the castle "Sonnenburg" at S. Lorenzo/St. Lorenzen



Fig. 2 - View of a pole hole using a stone with a cup-hole as a base for the pole. This kind of structure was frequently found at the Middle Bronze Age settlement at Bressanone-Albanbühel/Brixen-Albanbühel



Fig. 3 - A stone with a cup-hole found inside a hut from the Middle Iron Age (Bressanone-Albanbühel/ Brixen-Albanbühel)