

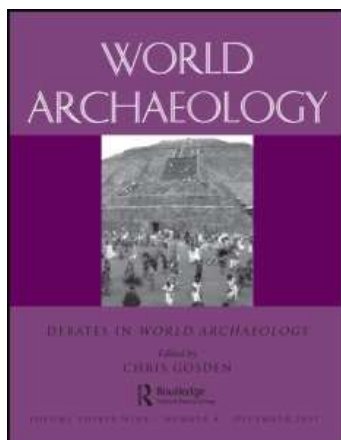
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Tradition and agency: human body representations in later prehistoric Europe

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Tradition and agency: human body representations in later prehistoric Europe

John Robb

Abstract

What is a tradition? This paper argues that the concept of tradition has to be regarded as more than either a shorthand for passively inherited cultural baggage or an actively invented ancient heritage. Through a discussion of Neolithic figurines and Copper and Bronze Age statue-stelae in the Central Mediterranean and Alps, I argue that in some cases archaeological traditions should be understood as having an emergent quality that makes them more than the sum of the individual creative acts generating them and gives them qualities of agency. The implications for a multi-scalar interpretation of the past are discussed.

Keywords

Italy; human body; art; tradition; Neolithic; Copper Age; Alps; stelae; agency.

Introduction: traditions of ‘tradition’

Consider a flock of starlings wheeling across the sky. What is it exactly? Each bird is a living, autonomous creature which directs its own flight. Yet the flock is obviously not just a collection of randomly moving birds. It rises in a smooth flow of birds, turns, spirals and descends in a loose, fluid unity. In other words, it possesses an obvious flock-ness which develops through the flight patterns of single birds but is not reducible to them; how each bird flies is reciprocally conditioned by the movement of all the others.

In such a case, it is patently pointless to insist upon a single way of describing the phenomenon we are observing. Clearly some questions are best understood by considering each bird as an individual entity, while others are best understood by seeing the aggregate as a single loose, transient unit bound together by the reflexes of avian sociality. Indeed,

we could extend this argument to further scales of analysis, from the molecular structure of a cell to the flock's place among a cohort of species interacting to form an ecosystem.

Yet archaeological theory has not kept pace with even this simple example. Consider a tradition. Archaeologists commonly use the term 'tradition' simply to describe historical continuities in their material. To the extent that we actually mean anything by 'tradition' beyond a purely archaeological formal classification, this common-language usage mirrors anthropological usage: from the early twentieth century through to the present day, 'tradition' has been used to connote a group's passively inherited cultural baggage, the arbitrarily defined ways of doing things which provide a group with raw material for identity and creative action (Geertz 1973; Kroeber 1948). In other words, it is simply a place holder or negative category, that which remains once you have separated out action, agency and even structure. Even those few works that explicitly theorize tradition treat it generally in this way. Hobsbawm and Ranger's *The Invention of Tradition* (1983), for example, argues that the creative formulation of new traditions – by which they mean identities and practices allegedly hearkening back to a deep past – was a notable feature of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe. Even if we generalize this argument to other moments in history, they thus explicitly contrast actively invented, socially contextualized, pseudo-historical traditions from the broader residual category of arbitrary things people inherit from the past and reproduce without questioning, and about which neither the native nor the theorist has anything much to say.

This theoretical stance mirrors ones in other topics of social theory – for instance, on 'primordial' and 'pragmatic' views of ethnicity (Bentley 1987) – and, more broadly, defines a theoretical crossroads which post-structuralist theory leads into but has difficulty escaping from. Effectively, we dichotomize ethnicity and tradition under the two rubrics of structure and action. 'Invented' tradition focuses upon people acting intentionally, as in Hobsbawm and Ranger's approach. In contrast, 'inherited' tradition casts tradition as a structuring principle, in the face of which humans are essentially passive, even if (in contrast to notions such as *habitus*) tradition provides an unstructured kind of structure which really amounts to a catch-all bucket of things which persist historically simply because they persist.

As a theoretical manoeuvre, this polarization gives us very little theoretical grip on tradition. We can observe, over historical and archaeological time, that practices and beliefs possess an evident 'traditionhood': they persist coherently in identifiable form, often for very long periods. Yet, except in those cases where we can see them as active inventions or as highly structured, we lack a basis for understanding tradition *per se* as a theoretical object. This in turn limits our ability to answer questions such as how traditions relate to individual action and to their cultural context, why some traditions are homogeneous and others heterogeneous, and why and how they form regional patterns.

The frame surrounding this picture is a discussion of how we formulate units of analysis such as 'tradition'. Although recent archaeological theory has tended to regard levels of analysis other than action – particularly 'structure' and 'system' – as reifications, I argue that there are questions we cannot answer simply by looking at the archaeological record solely in terms of creative, fluid human action. Humans are made of molecules, yet humans can do things which cannot be understood by viewing them only as an assemblage of their component molecules. Why then should we deny that societies, or social relations,

or traditions, have emergent qualities which cannot be understood as those of their component people? Indeed, recent work on the relationality of personhood and agency (Strathern 1988) approaches the issue from the other direction than Braudelian perspectivism (Bailey 1983) but also suggests that we should adopt a more flexible approach to our ontological categories of analysis. In other words, if the individual can be critically deconstructed into composite personhood emerging from diverse relationships, why should historical stories not be told in terms of the long-term trajectories of these relationships rather than the person emerging from them?

The approach taken here is that a unit of analysis possesses an analytical reality if it can be shown to have emergent qualities, in other words if we can understand some patterning in the past by looking at it in terms of that unit of analysis rather than its component parts or any larger formation it contributes to. The flock as an emergent unit of bird directionality, as noted above, provides an immediate example. Similarly, it is obvious that that one can approach material culture – in this case, prehistoric art – using a range of analytical concepts and scales suited to different interpretative purposes; it is surely more reductionist or determinist to insist upon an exclusive focus upon the individual agent than to argue that in some contexts other entities – material qualities, styles, traditions, social relationships – may structure material processes. In developing this argument, I will examine ‘traditionhood’, what makes a tradition a tradition and not simply a collection of individual acts of expression, and why traditions have the historical trajectories they do.

Stelae and figurines: human body representations in the Neolithic and Copper Age Central Mediterranean and Alps

There are three major techniques of human body representation in the Central Mediterranean and Alps between about 6000 BC and about 1500 BC: rock art, figurines and stelae. Each has its particular region and floruit. Rock art is found sporadically throughout the Alps, with major concentrations at Monte Bego, Valcamonica and Valtellina. Though poorly dated, most of it seems to postdate the Neolithic and Copper Age, and it will be referred to only in passing here. Figurines are known through the Italian Neolithic from its beginning around 6000 BC through to its end around 3500 BC (Fugazzola Delpino and Tinè 2003; Giannitrapani 2002; Holmes and Whitehouse 1998; Robb 2007). They are known from as far north as the Adige valley, Liguria and Friuli down to Sicily and Malta. Figurine making generally ceased by about 3500 BC, though in Malta and Sardinia flourishing local traditions extended beyond this. Stelae, in contrast, are not known before about 3000 BC, after which they appear across much of Europe.¹ In the area discussed here, stelae occur in a number of strongly localized traditions, mostly in the Alps, though sporadic examples are known as far south as Puglia and Ustica, off Sicily (Fig. 1) (Barfield 1995; Casini et al. 1995b; Casini and Fossati 2004; Holloway 1991). Most stelae traditions appear to date to the Copper Age (early–mid-third millennium BC) or Early Bronze Age, though the Lunigiana tradition (Ambrosi 1972, 1988; Anati 1981; De Marinis 1995a; Iardella et al. 2004; Maggi 2001) continues through the Bronze Age, with the latest examples probably dating to the Iron Age. Several new stelae traditions appear in the Iron Age, notably the Daunian (Nava 1980, 1988; Tunzi Sisto 1995) and

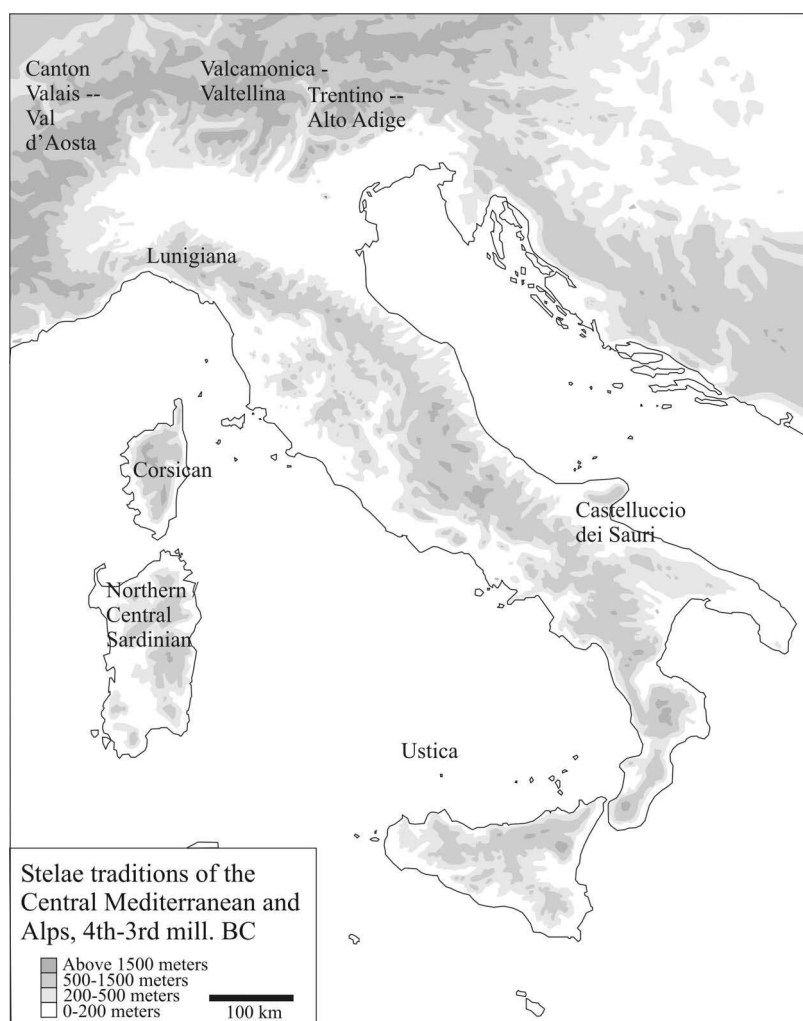


Figure 1 Location of stela traditions in the Alps, central Mediterranean and adjacent regions.

Villanovan (Padovana 1977) stelae. While the former could perhaps be conjecturally related to the earlier, poorly dated Castelluccio dei Sauri stelae in the same region (Tunzi Sisto 1980, 1999), the latter have no local antecedents and may represent a reinvention aided by an Eastern Mediterranean stimulus.

‘Tradition-ness’, corpuses and typologies

A good starting point here is to contrast the formal characteristics of figurines and stelae (Figs 2 and 3, Table 1). ‘Prehistoric art’, to prehistorians, triggers the reflex to create typologies and corpuses. When arranged through such tools, figurines and stelae both belong to traditions of creative practice, but, clearly, of quite different kinds.

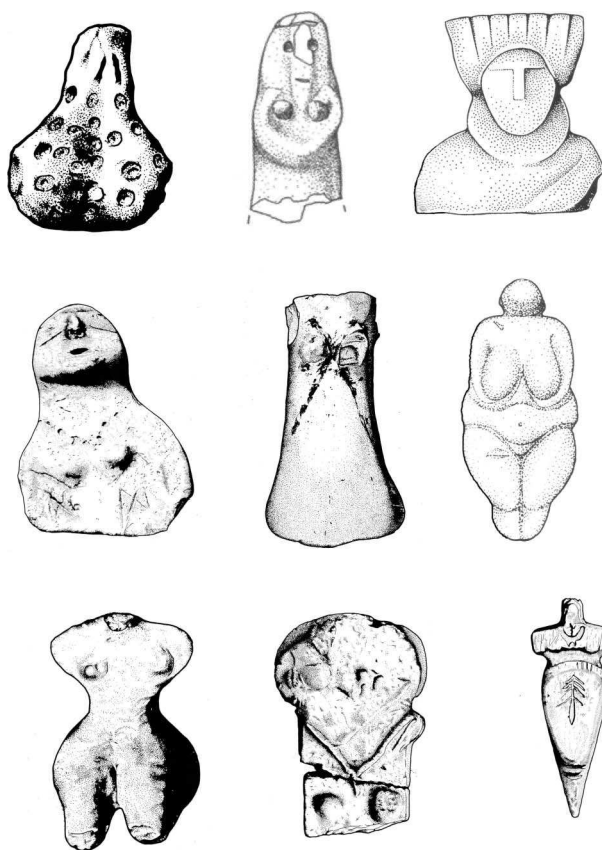


Figure 2 Neolithic Italian figurines. Top, from left: Penitenzeria, Favella, Baselite; middle, from left: Passo di Corvo, Catignano, La Marmotta; bottom, from left: Arene Candide, Vhò. Riparo Gaban (see Robb 2007 for sources).

Neolithic figurines: production without a canon

The most notable formal characteristic of Neolithic Italian human figurines is their great heterogeneity. There are fifty to 100 examples known from Italy, Sicily and pre-Temple Period Malta (Sardinia, which also has numerous examples, is not considered here). Defining a corpus is straightforward, though the exact count depends upon how one counts fragmentary specimens (Fugazzola Delpino and Tinè 2003; Giannitrapani 2002; Holmes and Whitehouse 1998). However, typology quails. There are only a couple of well-defined forms common enough to be considered really a type (the best examples are the 'mushroom-headed' Po Valley form and the Ligurian form with cradled arms, with about half a dozen examples each, and a southern form with an elaborate headdress, with three widely scattered examples). Of the numerous others, some are linked principally by general representational style (for example, the relatively schematic Calabrian and eastern Sicilian examples and the cylindrical Adriatic models) rather than by close adherence to a given prototype, and there are many unique, one-off examples. It is particularly striking that

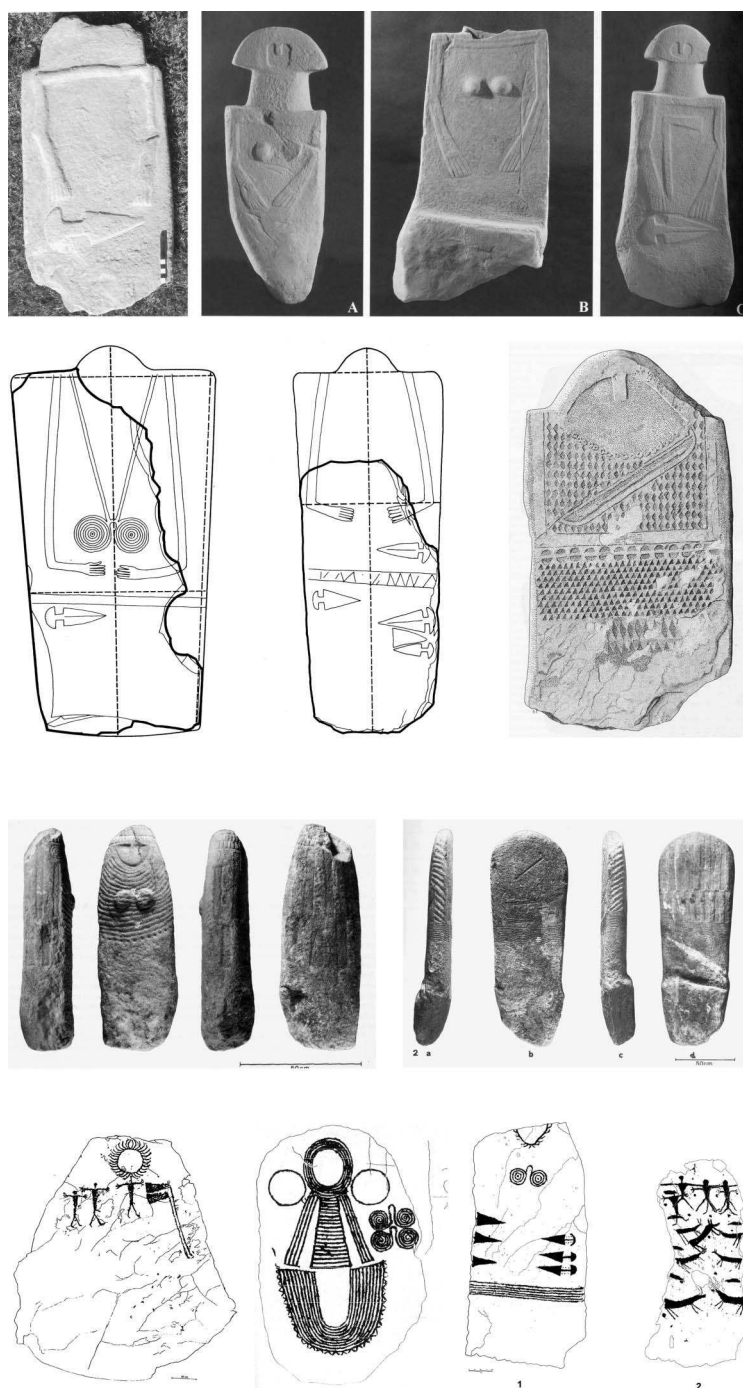


Figure 3 Northern Italian and Alpine stela traditions. *A* (top row). Lunigiana: Filattiera (Iardella et al. 2004: 136); Groppoli (Iardella et al. 2004: 130); *B* (second row). Sion, Switzerland (Gallay 1995: 176, 182); *C* (third row). Trentino-Alto Adige: Arco (Pedrotti 1995: 270, 261); *D* (bottom row). Valcamonica and Valtellina: Ossimo (Casini et al. 1995a); Teglio (Casini et al. 2004: 213); Campolungo (Marretta 2004: 241).

Table 1 Characteristics of central Mediterranean figurines and stelae

	<i>Figurines</i>	<i>Stelae</i>
Location, date	Sixth–fourth millennia BC, throughout the central Mediterranean	Mostly third millennium, in well-bounded regional traditions (in Italy and Alps: Lunigiana, Val d'Aosta/Canton Valais, Valcamonica/Valtellina, Trentino-Alto Adige, Castelluccio dei Sauri; elsewhere: Iberia, Provence, Languedoc, Bulgaria, Northern Greece, Ukraine)
Context of deposition	Houses, villages, middens, found isolated, disposed of unceremoniously	Landscape, cult sites, often found in groups
Material	Mostly clay	Stone
Size	Hand-held (5–15 cm)	'Life-sized' (50–150 cm, with examples up to 300 cm)
Movability	Mobile	Fixed
Identities depicted	Mostly females	Males, females and sometimes ungendered or smaller ungendered examples (sometimes interpreted as children)
Definition of body	Highly variable; no consistent selection of body zones to represent and emphasize	Standardized geometric template for body divisions and their relations; generally well bounded except for in Valcamonica-Valtellina
Imagery	Little, but variable; hair, dress or body markings occasionally represented	All traditions: weaponry, ornaments, and some schematic facial and body details such as eyes, noses, breasts; varying by tradition: dress, hair style; additional imagery rare except in Valcamonica-Valtellina
Use context	Small, perhaps private groups; present in many groups but infrequent; informal disposal	Aggregation of perhaps large groups for public ceremonial occasions; highly visible display in enduring material

there is no single pattern for representing the human body. The body can be presented standing or sitting, rigidly geometric or curvilinear, with or without gestures, ornaments or identifying marks. The torso, the head, the lower body or any combination of these can be the dominant element, with the other areas left schematic or omitted entirely. Two-headed examples are known, and a few examples, such as the one from Penitenzeria (Robb 2007), are not self-evidently anthropomorphic. The Penitenzeria example is interpreted as anthropomorphic because it resembles one or two other images which represent the human form somewhat less schematically and more recognizably.

Figurines, thus, lack a consistent prototype to which new productions consistently refer; even if they reproduce a specified practice, it is the process, and not the formal

characteristics, of the output which is largely indexed in the genre. They lack the sense of tradition to which Gell refers:

My aim in introducing this material is to explore the theme of 'traditions'. To what extent can we study the whole gamut of Maori meeting houses, distributed in time and space, as a single, coherent object, distributed in space and time, which, in a certain sense, recapitulates, on the historical and collective scale, the processes of cognition or consciousness?

(Gell 1998: 254)

To the extent that Italian Neolithic figurines belonged to a tradition, it is as a tradition of practice. Following on from this, one way to make sense of them is to relate their formal characteristics to the nature of this practice, following Barth's (1987, 2002) argument on the reproduction of knowledge. While we do not know the figurines' actual use with any precision, or whether they had a single consistent use, they are generally found discarded in quotidian contexts in low frequencies, suggesting a low-key, relatively informal use, possibly private or involving few people. Their consistent presence, but low frequency relative to other material things such as pots, lithics, axes, beads and grinding stones, suggests that they were used only at long intervals or sporadically; one possibility is that they may have been used in rites of childbirth or coming of age. Materially, their production sequence and physical style are generally closely related to those of pottery, a medium whose decoration seems to express the reflex to produce finely graded, highly local heterogeneity (Robb 2007). Much as in Barth's (1987) example of marked localism in Mountain Ok ritual, the tradition of figurine practice thus would have involved the infrequent reproduction, whether secret or not, of knowledge important to a specific context and discarded afterwards, by small groups of participants. It is unsurprising that the actual content of such knowledge, as represented in the range of ways the human body is shown, varied immensely.

Creating tradition in Italian stela carving

Stelae are a completely different matter. With the exceptions of the Valcamonica-Valtellina groups (which will be discussed below), each corpus typically possesses a strong stylistic unity. The Lunigiana stelae (Ambrosi 1972, 1988; Anati 1981; De Marinis 1995a; Iardella et al. 2004; Maggi 2001), for example, all begin with a flat, carefully shaped stone slab, which is then divided into a head and a body, gendered through the iconography of weaponry and breasts or a necklace (Whitehouse 1992, 2001), and left otherwise plain. The arms and hands, and sometimes the face, may be indicated in a highly repetitious way through the same visual shorthand. The major axis of variation appears to be chronological, separating the earlier stelae, whose head is integrated with the body, from the later Bronze Age examples for which the head is separated clearly from the body by a distinct neck. The Trentino-Alto Adige group (Fossati et al. 2004; Pedrotti 1995; Tecchiati 2004) employ different conventions. They also begin with a prepared stone slab which is divided into specific body zones; in almost all a belt is used

to divide the upper and lower body, while the head is defined by a neck line and/or a collar-like garment or necklace. The body is gendered, again through weapons, breasts and necklaces. In contrast, however, to the Lunigiana group, there is a distinct tendency to clothe the body, with many necklaces or shawls depicted on female stelae, and with vertically striped garments depicted on stelae of both genders. Moreover, while single weapons are used diacritically to gender stelae as male, weapons are also used in a different way, with repeated images of axes or daggers added to a stela. Sometimes these multiple weapon images clearly lie outside the original geometric scheme according to which the stela was laid out, and they may be later, perhaps commemorative, additions.

The other traditions of stelae in the Alps and Northern Italy (for example, that known from the two ceremonial centres of Saint Martin de Corleons near Aosta (Italy) (De Marinis 1995b) and Petit-Chasseur, Sion (Switzerland) (Favre and Mottet 2004; Gallay 1995; Heyd and Harrison 2004) are less numerous and often known from only one or two sites; hence their stylistic homogeneity is perhaps less surprising. The same is true for sporadic Piedmontese examples (Gambari 2004), a recently recognized example at Mount Bego and the tradition known from Castelluccio dei Sauri in Puglia (Southern Italy) (Nava 1980, 1988; Tunzi Sisto 1999), which provides a prehistoric precursor for the Iron Age Daunian stelae. Within the various stela traditions, the stela cannot be understood only as an individual creation. Particularly in contrast with figurines, they are closely rule-bound; they reproduce a formal template or model for what a stela should be. Variation within a group tends to be in details of clothing or smaller elements; the strong conventionality is most evident in the foundational assumptions of the genre. The human body in life is changing, irregular, lumpy and individual; it can take many positions and there is not a single, self-evident way to divide it into zones, identify the distinguishing feature of each zone, or to assign emphasis to its component parts within a vision of the whole. This potential for difference is exploited to the full in figurines, which show the body as anything from a head atop a featureless cylindrical shaft to a pair of buttocks with a featureless cylindrical shaft rising out of them to a 'realistic' woman with lifelike cradled arms to a two-headed body or a rigid, minimally modelled cylinder. In contrast, the stelae begin by reducing the human body to a highly standardized two-dimensional, tabular form. Variation is not seen as part of the body's form itself but as superficial. Moreover, within each group, there are highly consistent body divisions; the head is always separated from the body by a neck, neckline or necklace in Lunigiana, and in most other traditions the upper body is also separated from the lower body with a belt. Each body zone is distinguished by consistently applied diacritics: facial features in the head (themselves highly stereotyped; the usual form is a 't'-shaped combination of brow and nose) and weapons and ornaments in the upper body, with the lower body commonly left unelaborated. The point is not merely that stelae, as a form of production, are highly formulaic, although they are. Rather, one gets the impression that this formulism is part of the specification of the genre itself.

In any representation, it is reasonable to suppose that some aspects index what kind of thing the representation is in itself and identify what genre of production it belongs to, while others present permitted elaborations or variations within this form of production. With the stelae, it is not only the constancy of these geometric schemata for outlining the

human form which suggests that this schema actually constitutes the stela genre. We might additionally cite the very simplicity of this form of representation which makes it an appropriate visual shorthand for condensing a range of basic significations. It is also noteworthy that, except in Valcamonica (see below), Iberia and perhaps along the Atlantic façade where the stela tradition sometimes merges into megalithic art, menhirs and ‘idoles’, there is very little middle ground between stelae and other forms of representation: for example, there are few things surviving archaeologically which could represent monumental-scale human representations but which do not bear this geometric schema for the human body, nor do we find this schema applied to other material things which are not large stone objects placed in the landscape. Thus, the formulism is itself part of the specification of what is being created; if a worker departed from these conventions, he or she would not be producing a divergent stela, but rather would not be producing a stela at all.

The various stelae traditions in Northern Italy and the Alps thus illustrate very well Gell’s view of tradition. As Gell (1998: 255) points out, the transmission of a tradition involves the recapitulation of a collectively held ideal model. Moreover, this works over time; the prototype of which each new creation is an index summarizes the collective memory and acts as a guiding plan for future examples. Stelae are almost always imprecisely dated, and we lack the chronological precision to recreate the network of protentions and retentions – links of inspiration and foreshadowing over time among works of art within a tradition. But the endurance over time of a consistent form which is visible in the stelae traditions (including the longest-lived one, Lunigiana) provides strong evidence for such a mechanism. If we acknowledge the influence of past acts of stela creation on the makers of each new stela, it follows that we must follow Gell in attributing an agency to the prototype or the tradition itself. The stela tradition itself forms a system of distributed cognition which operates at a scale beyond the context within which a specific example was created.

At this point it is useful to situate the stelae in a field of action, much as we did with figurines. All material behaviour occurs within a field of action, a defined way of doing a particular thing which specifies the proximate goal, the necessary material elements, the roles and attitudes of participants, and the symbolic context; fields of action mediate between *habitus* and the creative improvisations of individual agents (Robb 2004, 2007). Some characteristics of the use context of figurines and stelae are summarized in Table 1. As noted above, figurines were probably used in infrequent, informal, possible private performances, probably by small groups. Stelae, in contrast, were enduring and public monuments. They were placed in groups, sometimes in alignments, as at Pontevecchio in Lunigiana and Ossimo in Valcamonica. While the practices involving them are not clear, in most traditions they are associated with death and the dead. The association between stelae and burial or human remains is clear at sites in Valcamonica (Fedele 2004) and in the Val d’Aosta (De Marinis 1995b) and Canton Valais (Favre and Mottet 2004; Gallay 1995), as well as in stela traditions in the Ukraine, Bulgaria, Iberia, Sardinia and France (Barfield 1995; Casini et al. 1995b; Casini and Fossati 2004), though there is little contextual evidence for or against this in Lunigiana (Maggi 2001) or the Trentino-Alto Adige (Tecchiati 2004). While archaeologists traditionally assumed that stelae represented religious images such as portrayals of deities, in the last decade it has become increasing

accepted that they may represent ancestral figures (Fedele 2004). Whether or not the 'ancestral' interpretation is accepted, the point here is that, unlike figurines, each instantiation of the prototype stela was represented publicly, to periodically assembling groups, perhaps as many as up to 100 people at Ossimo in Valcamonica (Fedele 2004), in a long-enduring and long-visible medium. The conditions in which knowledge was distributed and reproduced thus helped preserve the stela prototype over time, as an active element of consciousness.

Traditions and regional history: stelae and the representation of embodied value

As Gell (1998) notes in his discussion of Maori meeting houses through time, traditions both have a temporal ordering and are situated within social contexts which represent particular historical moments. For the fourth and third millennia BC, there are three obvious contexts in which to place the stela traditions.

1. One is a general monumentalization of the landscape, the development of a range of interventions or constructions other than habitations which marked landscapes in particular ways. While megalithic building is often associated (particularly in British writings) with Neolithic origins, it is probably more correct to think chronologically rather than in relative stage time here. There is a general wave of monumentalization across much of Europe after about 4000 BC. Along the Atlantic and Baltic, this coincides with the Early Neolithic, but elsewhere (Malta, Sardinia, Iberia, Southern and Eastern France, Switzerland, Germany, Poland, Italy) it can follow up to two millennia of non-monumental Neolithic life and accompanies the *end* of the Neolithic. Monumental constructions (in earth and stone), rock art, and stelae are all part of this new marking of the landscape.
2. The second development is the linkage of monumentalized landscapes and ancestry. This linkage employed the meaningful use of stone as an enduring material, but also involved the widespread rise in the ceremonialism of group burial, both in formal extra-mural cemeteries of single burials and in communal tombs. In the few cases where stelae have been excavated in context, they appear to occur in funerary sites (Sion, Val d'Aosta) or in cult sites with redeposited human bone (Ossimo).
3. Finally, exchange and prestige. There are relatively few clear and recurrent prestige symbolisms in the Neolithic. In contrast, in our area, the Late Neolithic and Copper Age is distinguished by an increase in trade, particularly in metal items, and the increasing centrality of traded items to clearly marked and recurrent material symbolizations of prestige, particularly weapons and ornaments. These items were used in highly visible display in everyday life, as well as being used or referenced in many other contexts, for instance, moments of exchange or ceremonial deposition, burial and rock art. A resurgence in hunting and in associated technologies (e.g. pressure-flaked bifaces) may be associated. Stelae distinguish different kinds of ancestral being or other person through markers, prominently including weaponry and ornaments.

In these contexts, it is straightforward to formulate a general preliminary interpretation of not only the role of stelae but also the formal and aesthetic characteristics so fundamental to the tradition (see also Robb 2007: ch. 8). In brief, there was a general shift in how social value was defined and reproduced between the fifth and the fourth millennia BC. Before this date, value was heterarchical, with different sources of value (particular kinds of prestige) based in activities such as farming, trade, warfare, making things, and probably skills such as oratory or social networking; there is little sign of any unified single scale or idiom for social value. After this date, value systems were simplified around a single conceptual axis ('prestige' in a generalized sense) which was extended into many hitherto separate fields of endeavour. One archaeological manifestation of this is that the archaeological record suddenly snaps into focus, with more clearly interpretable social themes: extended production systems such as pastoralism, kin networks mobilized through genealogical links commemorated in group burial rites and new synaesthetic symbolisms (for instance, red as a colour of relatedness, and gleam or shine as a manifestation of social prominence, which creates value for newly usable metals).

Prestige cannot be an empty symbolism. To the extent that personhood is both defined relationally and embodied, new forms of value call into existence new persons and new bodies (Hamilakis et al. 2002; Joyce 2005; Meskell and Joyce 2003; Shilling 2003; Treherne 1995). To the extent that we can define a general Neolithic body (and the very fragmentariness of the evidence may itself be telling), it would consist of a highly variable aggregate of citations of relations and qualities. Neolithic figurines, for example, vary immensely as to which bodily zones, qualities and gestures they foreground (and some are even ambiguously human); Neolithic burials provide either unelaborated skeletons or quirky, one-off combinations of bizarre rites and goods. This is consonant with other Neolithic trends, such as highly regionalized pottery whose decorative principle was the creation of local difference. In contrast, the Late Neolithic/Copper Age prominent person is a generalized leader, whose body is defined by the signs of generalized capability for action and interaction. Weapons, for example, are the fulcrum of many kinds of contact: ostensibly a capacity for violence (which must be read as bodily *hexis*, a habitual attitude (Robb 1994)) but also an ability to provide food (via hunting) or to protect, a tangible sign of successful exchange relations, and a reference to technologies and aesthetic qualities which were not symbolically neutral. In this sense, Copper Age bodies, like Late Neolithic and Copper Age pots, are subject to simplification: rather than many potential bodies distinguished by their basic constitution, we have one standard, abstracted and schematized, body which enters into all situations.

While the causal processes underlying this shift are beyond the scope of this paper, this interpretation can thus encompass the shift in genres of body representation, from a variable, sometimes sporadic, household-based rite producing figurines to a landscape-based, socially quite important rite producing stelae and tied closely into other major symbolisms. It can also encompass the formal and meaningful characteristics of the shift – for example, the change from heterogeneity to homogeneity, from many potential bodies to a unique, generalizable one, and the great loss of potential difference implicit in the geometric schematization of stelae.

Why was Valcamonica different? Local histories and traditions

The interpretation proposed above gives a good basis for linking the rise of stela traditions throughout fourth- and third-millennium Europe to widespread social trends. Yet if we are not to see such changes as an unstoppable juggernaut of *Zeitgeist* rolling through Europe and eradicating both local difference and the ability of agents to act – and surely this would be a reductionist reification – we must also look at how traditions were formulated locally.

To start with, many – in fact, most – groups did not adopt the practice of stela making (or at least in stone; Barfield (1995) has argued persuasively that there was a widespread tradition of similar representations in wooden posts). Just as in other areas, change was not so much a matter of adopting an exotic practice from one's neighbours as of convergence from previously different ways of life: stelae probably evolved from a range of antecedents including menhirs in France and Spain, figurines in the Central Mediterranean and possibly wooden markers elsewhere. Moreover, the elements of a fourth–third-millennium regional context were configured differently everywhere. For example, along the southern, mostly insular fringe of Europe, including the Aegean, Malta, Sardinia and to some extent Iberia, people often shared general, widespread trends: a shift from clay to stone human body representations, a shift from small to larger or monumental representations, a shift from habitation spaces to ritual spaces or landscapes. However, they did so without adopting the stela genre, and indeed in choices such as the gendered representation of mostly female beings these trends were harnessed in the construction of conspicuously different traditions; they provide one glimpse of what a heightened Neolithic tradition put into a fourth-millennium social and material idiom might look like.

A more pertinent example here concerns the Alpine stela traditions. Within a radius of 100km, between 3000 and 2500 BC, there are three distinct stela traditions: in Switzerland and the Val d'Aosta; Valcamonica and Valtellina (probably including the adjacent Venosta branch of the Adige Valley); and the Trentino-Alto Adige. A fourth tradition begins in Lunigiana, not far distant, around this time. It is notable how these traditions are closely related to each other but stylistically quite distinct (Table 2; Fig. 3). For example, while all share a basic body geometry, the Sion (Switzerland) and Saint Martin (Val d'Aosta) examples are more markedly tabular or slab-like than the Trentino-Alto Adige stelae, and the Lunigiana stelae depict the arms much more consistently. It may be socially significant that one of the most noticeable differences concerns clothing: the Lunigiana stelae rarely depict clothing; the Sion and Saint Martin stelae show elaborately patterned garments; the Trentino-Alto Adige stelae show different patterns of attire, sometimes with vertical stripes strikingly similar to that on the Ice Man's tunic, which dates to only a few centuries earlier in the same region (Spindler 1994).

The Valcamonica/Valtellina group, sandwiched between the Trentino-Alto Adige and the Val d'Aosta/Swiss group, is the odd one out. The Valcamonica/Valtellina statue-menhirs (Casini et al. 1995a, 2004; Fedele 2004; Keates 2000; Marretta 2004) take on the general concept of monumentalizing ancestral figures via large stone representations placed in the landscape, and they share some iconography, particularly weaponry, with the other traditions. But they also differ radically. Unlike all the other stela traditions, the body is not drawn upon a carefully shaped stone slab, but on an irregular, often

Table 2 Contrasts among Alpine and Northern Italian stelae traditions

	<i>Lunigiana</i>	<i>Val d'Aosta/Sion</i>	<i>Trentino-Alto Adige Valley</i>	<i>Valcamonica-Valtellina</i>
Boundedness	Stone mass represents body directly	Stone mass represents body directly	Stone mass represents body directly	Body outline is sometimes carved onto stone mass but borders don't necessarily coincide with edges of stone
Anthropomorphism	Clear anthropomorphism	Clear anthropomorphism	Clear anthropomorphism	Most are not clearly anthropomorphic
Body template	Standard layout of body divisions	Standard layout of body divisions	Standard layout of body divisions	Highly variable
Other imagery	Standard, limited range of weaponry, breasts, facial features and necklaces	Limited range of weaponry, clothing and facial features	Limited range of weaponry, clothing and facial features	Highly variable range of weaponry, smaller human figures, cosmological symbols, animals, etc.

unmodified or minimally modified boulder or mass. They range from clearly human-like to some boulders, rock faces or standing stones which are arguably not intended to be seen as anthropomorphic. Moreover, they vary immensely, to the point that it is virtually impossible to describe a standard model or typology of them (Fedele 2004). When an anthropomorphic body is shown, it is almost never defined in a standard arrangement of body zones. Rather, the Valcamonica statue-menhirs depict a complicated, seemingly disorderly accumulation of multiple symbols – animals, ornaments, weapons, cosmological motifs. They also have a much more obvious and marked temporality or artefact biography; while stelae in all traditions can occasionally be shown to have been remodelled, the Valcamonica ones, in which imagery is rarely subordinated to any clear overriding design, really suggest an ongoing, active accumulation and alteration of imagery, presumably at ritual moments. For example, a number of the Ossimo-Anvòia menhirs were re-carved several times, sometimes by adding new carvings to existing designs, sometimes by superimposing new designs directly over older ones, and in one example by actually inverting a menhir and carving new images over the older, now upside-down ones. Such alterations also included changing the physical placement and orientation of the stelae.

In considering Valcamonica, it is tempting to contrast two idealized models of how to compose a human body. The one normally underpinning the stela traditions asserts the body as a unified whole, an orderly array of interlocking qualities subordinated to a whole, internally diversified in some stable balance but presented to the world as a finished, integral composition suitable for all contexts. In contrast, the one asserted in Valcamonica preserves a Neolithic model of the individual as an ongoing, more fluid, continually developing aggregation of citations. To the extent that the body often provides a vehicle for thinking about the nature of personhood and a map for social relations, such an idealized contrast would have important implications for the nature of social change between the Neolithic and Copper Age. Whether or not this is so, this contrast at least shows how local traditions were formulated. They were not imposed or absorbed as intact wholes. The Valcamonica/Valtellina group share the basic concept of the stela and much imagery with other, contemporary traditions, but, rather than simply adopting these wholesale, they work these into an extremely distinct local form of practice. Once they were locally formulated they could possess a traditionhood which gave them considerable historical momentum; the moment of formulation was highly contingent and local.

Why should the Valcamonica/Valtellina stela tradition differ so much? This is difficult to know, not least because there are almost no excavated third-millennium contexts from Valcamonica, particularly for sites other than ritual or rock-art sites (Fedele 1990, 2004). However, two facts may be relevant, one aesthetic and one geographical. Aesthetically, Valcamonica is the only place in Europe where stelae were introduced into a landscape with a pre-existing tradition of rock art. Hence the concept of placing monumentalized human representations in the landscape may have been assimilated to traditions of making rock art. In fact, many of the ways in which the Valcamonica statue-menhirs differ from other stela traditions are those in which it reproduces the conventions of rock art. Second, Valcamonica may be demonstrating a quite intentional construction of local difference. The fourth and third millennia BC in the central Mediterranean, in general, were characterized by many enclaves of locally unique, archaeological florid ritualism,

particularly of origins and ancestry (Robb 2001). It is clear that at the same time as inter-group similarity was being constructed through some forms of action, particularly exchange, inter-group difference was being defined in media such as pottery and ritual. Why Valcamonica? Given the importance of exchange in the general scenario outlined above, the conditions and social reception of exchange may have been central. It may be significant here that the other stela traditions lie along major modern transit routes which were probably also important in prehistory: the Trentino-Alto Adige group straddles the major route to the Brenner pass, the Saint Martin-Sion group straddles the route to the Great St Bernard pass and the Lunigiana group lies astride a major pass over the northern Apennines. Without resorting to geographical determinism, we can imagine that groups in such situations were exposed and perhaps receptive to regional contacts, ideas and convergences, as well as participating in increased levels and centrality of trade) – all things which would favour development of a stela tradition along the standard pattern proposed above. In contrast, while Valcamonica and Valtellina participated in trans-Alpine contacts which are visible in material culture commonalities and in traded goods such as metals (Fedele 2003), such contacts probably were carried out through a network of smaller passes. Levels of exchange and receptivity to ideas from elsewhere may have been either less or structured differently. Without being isolated, as in Malta (Robb 2001), ritual practitioners integrating these elements into a new local tradition may have put the emphasis firmly upon the construction of something truly locally different.

Discussion: a flock of stelae

It is impossible to discuss tradition without discussing agency. This is evident in the shortcomings of both of the customary definitions of ‘tradition’, that of inherited tradition and that of invented tradition. The former presents a picture of tradition as the cultural baggage which people inherit from the past and reproduce unquestioningly. This model affords time depth and continuity, but at the cost of any real sight of human creativity. Applying this model to our figurine and stelae examples above reduces ‘tradition’ to a largely descriptive rubric of stability, and gives little ability to understand change, whether in clear-cut patterns (as in the development of parallel Alpine stelae corpuses) or in more complex ones (as in the fascinating hybridity of the Valcamonica/Valtellina series). On the other hand stands the alternative view, derived from Hobsbawm and Ranger’s (1983) ‘invention of tradition’ argument, in which the important thing about tradition is not its actual time depth but the fact that people invent cultural capital for some proximate purpose and believe, or at least pretend, that it is truly ancient. Here we have human creativity and change in abundance, but we have sacrificed a theoretical grip upon time depth and the internal logic of situations. An ‘invention of tradition’ argument might throw light upon why prehistoric Italians, in particular social settings, may have seen the custom of erecting stelae as a desirable public ritual, but it would be somewhat less illuminating as to how this practice fitted into a larger cultural logic and why many subsequent generations – who were presumably as active and politically engaged as their predecessors – continued to do it. Moreover, the ‘invention of tradition’ argument really deals not with cultural change in general, but with a quite specific situation in which such

changes draw upon a narrative which casts them as a return to ancient ways and beliefs. We have no way of knowing whether the first Copper Age people to put up stelae considered it as a return to an ancient and legitimate way of doing things; there is certainly little attempt to reference earlier representations and practices in most stela traditions, and for all we know, this change was seen as a self-conscious break with the past rather than a reinvention of it.

Thus, in this case as in many others, we have to make sense of what are clearly long-standing social traditions, and neither conventional model of tradition really helps much. This impasse results from the underlying logic of the dichotomy. The polarization between 'inherited tradition' and 'invented tradition' rests upon an assumption of the economy of agency: our narratives of the past allow only a single protagonist. Hence, if tradition is strong, people must be passive; if people are active, tradition must be labile.

This is a problem in agency. Agency has always been an ambivalent or multivalent concept (Dobres and Robb 2000; Dornan 2002; Robb 2004). Perhaps the greatest watershed is between practice- and structuration-oriented views which foreground the relationship between human action and social reproduction (Bourdieu 1990; Giddens 1984) and those which decentre humans and locate causal efficacy in networks of people, things and other entities (Gell 1998). Even within a structurationist view, structure is normally seen as enabling action; history provides precedents, resources and ways of doing things. Following this view, it is not necessary to see an opposition between tradition as historical inheritance and tradition as creative action. More generally, structurationist views and causal-network views really address different questions complementarily, and at different scales. For purposes of tracing the long-term genealogy of traditions, as opposed to analysing their reproduction by particular agents in the short term, I would argue that tradition provides a particularly useful analytical entity in a way completely distinct from either conventional view.

We may summarize this argument in four key points.

1. A tradition is a historical process of continuity of rule-governed practice or knowledge.
2. As the contrast between figurine and stela traditions shows, traditions arise from specific fields of action, which provide the conditions within which knowledge is distributed and reproduced and hence the formal qualities of the tradition; consequently, just as different birds vary in their flock-ness, different traditions may vary socially in their obvious or formal tradition-ness.
3. As stela traditions show, some traditions possess a homogeneity or rule-governed quality so evident as to suggest that reference to a particular prototype is not merely relevant to how the field of action is carried out but in fact constitutes the definition of the field of action itself. In such cases, Gell's definition of the corpus as a distributed object, with the prototype as a historical agent, is particularly appropriate.
4. Such a system is characterized by substantial coherences. Externally, in the examples explored here, the internal logic of representations was closely tied into a wider logic of *habitus* which allowed it to cohere with many other forms of action in

which agents were engaged. Even within each tradition, actions are carried out in knowledge of each other; the locus of agency is thus not so much in individual acts as in the network of relations between them; the historical process is a conversation between people, past exemplars and future possibilities. It is in this sense that a tradition may be a process of 'distributed cognition' (Gell 1998) which may unfold at a pace quite different than that of the ethnographic time of social reproduction. Such a view allows a more useful approach to the time depth of archaeological traditions than either current view of tradition.

The extension of this argument is that a tradition really is more than simply a descriptive summary of the individual examples constituting it. To the extent that a tradition does not merely provide the means or vehicles of expressing meanings by the individual agent, but rather constitutes these meanings, prompts and guides actors, and furnishes the terms of argument and divergence, it can be considered as a system of prototypical meanings and actions distributed through people acting within tradition. It is a historical force which creates the examples constituting it through the situated creativity of particular people working within it. Hence, at a certain scale of analysis, we are seeing not individual stelae but a flock of stelae. It follows that tradition, in itself, is an important analytical entity in constructing long-term histories; whether we then wish to go on and consider traditions as protagonists or agents is a matter of our taste in theoretical vocabulary.

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Note

- 1 While there is some variation in terminology, in the common usage followed here, 'menhir' refers to a standing stone, often unshaped, roughly shaped or with

simple imagery added; 'stela' refers to a tabular marker or standing stone; 'statue-stela' refers to a stela which has been carved into an anthropomorphic form, particularly in the Adige, Swiss and Lunigiana traditions; and 'statue-menhir' refers to a menhir or mass of stone, sometimes unshaped, which has been given an anthropomorphic form or imagery, particularly in the Valcamonica and Valtellina traditions.

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