

Numbers and letters as tools of production processes in Iron Age: the case of the weight looms in ancient Lessinia (Northern Italy)

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ABSTRACT

In the Iron Age of the Italian Peninsula almost all the civilizations have developed a proper counting/number system, partly inherited – together with the alphabet – from the Greeks, partly autonomously developed.

The Authors have analysed an advanced sign system connected with a class of objects referred to the textile production in Northern Italy during the second Iron Age (end of the 5th-1st Century B.C.). In the Lessinia Mountains, to the north of Verona, they could analyse 80 stone loom weights (from 1 to 2 kg heavy) presenting a varied repertoire of inscribed signs. It was possible to recognize a group of base signs, partly alphabetic, partly naturalistic or symbolic, varied by small diacritical marks. Authors argue that a similar sign system can represent the trace of quantitative/qualitative inputs connected with the production, not only of textile, but also of other classes of artefacts.

Keywords: Loom Weights, Iron Age textile production, Iron Age Epigraphy, Northern Italy, Numbers, Marks.

RIASSUNTO

Numeri e lettere come strumenti di processi produttivi nell'età del Ferro: il caso dei pesi da telaio nell'antica Lessinia (Italia settentrionale)

Nell'età del Ferro della penisola italiana quasi tutte le civiltà svilupparono un proprio sistema di conteggio/numerazione, parzialmente ereditato insieme all'alfabeto dai Greci, parzialmente sviluppato in modo autonomo. Le autrici hanno analizzato un sistema avanzato di segni connesso con una classe di oggetti riferentesi alla produzione tessile in Italia settentrionale durante la seconda età del Ferro (fine VI-I secolo a.C.). Nei monti della Lessinia a nord di Verona le AA. hanno potuto analizzare 80 pesi da telaio di pietra (pesanti da 1 a 2 chili), che presentano un repertorio vario di segni iscritti. È stato possibile riconoscere un gruppo di segni-base, parzialmente alfabetico, parzialmente naturalistico o simbolico, variato grazie a piccoli diacritici. Secondo le AA. un tale sistema segnico può costituire una traccia di indicazioni quantitative e qualitative connesse con la produzione, non solo di tessili, ma anche di altre classi di manufatti.

Parole chiave: pesi da telaio, produzione tessile dell'età del Ferro, epigrafia dell'età del Ferro, Italia settentrionale, numeri, marchi.

I. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGICAL REMARKS¹

Ordering the data of the loom-weights from Monte Loffa for their publication we had to deal with a heterogeneous amount of information. Monte Loffa, in the North-eastern Veneto Pre-Alps (Fig. 1), has been excavated from the end of the 19th until the middle of the 20th century by different archaeologists, who didn't always publish their results scientifically, or even didn't publish them at all. The main difficulty was satisfactorily identifying the original contexts.

Despite this, we dispose of a large amount of new

computerized epigraphic data coming from the revision of all Raetic inscribed objects for their publication in the corpus Monumenta Linguae Raeticae (MLR 2015). In addition we have a good knowledge of the Iron Age mountain settlements of the Raetic region, which includes Trentino-Alto Adige, North-Western Veneto, Northern Tirol and Southern Engadina Valley (Migliavacca 2013, 2014).

The marks we discovered from the Raetic area belong to one of the most complex system of Iron Age Italy: no direct comparison could be found in Etruscan, in Venetic, in other writing context of ancient Italy, even not in the Italic-Celtic writing area, or later in the Latin script itself, although we know that marks/signs were present in all these areas.

We have to remark that a very marginal value is

¹ The first paragraph and the results paragraph have been written by the two Authors together. The paragraphs 2,3 and 4 were written by Mara Migliavacca; the paragraphs 5-6 by Simona Marchesini.

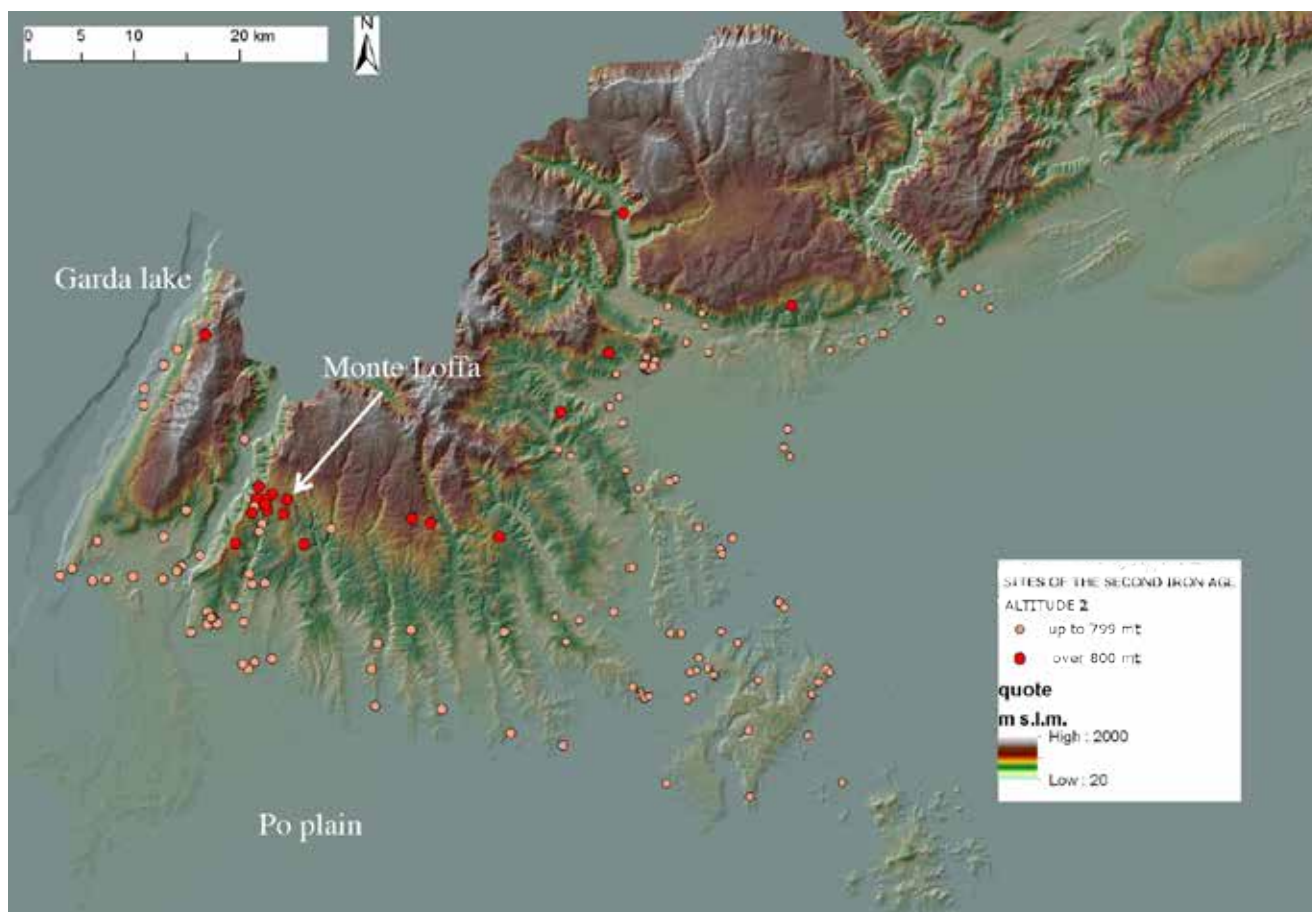


Fig. 1 – The settlement of Monte Loffa at the upper limit of the permanent settlements in the Second Iron Age (Digital Terrestrial Model; from Veneto Region, elaboration F. Ferrarese and M. Migliavacca).

usually given to this particular epigraphic class, which is commonly studied as *instrumentum inscriptum* (Marchesini 1997; Ambrosini 2000; Bergamini 2009; Antolini-Marengo 2012). Generally speaking no systematic, comparative research has been devoted to the complex system of signs and marks on loom-weights until now. We know indeed that ancient people had begun to write on these objects, as well as on other textile tools much earlier than the 21 signs alphabet was introduced and used (Haarmann 1996). Firstly, the contexts of the inscribed loom-weights are described; secondly, the collected data are presented and finally some possible interpretations are proposed.

2. THE SETTLEMENT OF MONTE LOFFA

The settlement of Monte Loffa (De Stefani 1880-1881; De Stefani 1885; De Stefani 1885-1886; Pigorini 1885; Battaglia 1934; Zorzi 1960; Salzani 1981; Salzani

1987; Salzani 2001-2002) lies in the eastern Veneto Pre-Alps, in the Lessini Mountains, that have always been a natural passage between the alpine world and the Po plain. For this reason the area can be defined as a borderland: not only a geographical, but also a cultural, linguistic, economic and political one. Different people and influences have been placed one upon another over the long run; during the Iron age the main actors were the Veneti living in the Po plain and in the southern fringe of the piedmont area, the *Raeti* living northwards in the Trentino region, the Celts who occupied the plain between Oglio and Mincio as well as the plain between Mincio and Adige in the 4th century; and finally the Romans who arrived in the Po plain in the 2nd century B.C.

Monte Loffa lies at the upper limit of the belt of permanent settlements in this Pre-Alpine region ranging from 800 to 1200 m above sea level. The sites at this height did perhaps not experience directly the great social and historical changes of the period, but con-

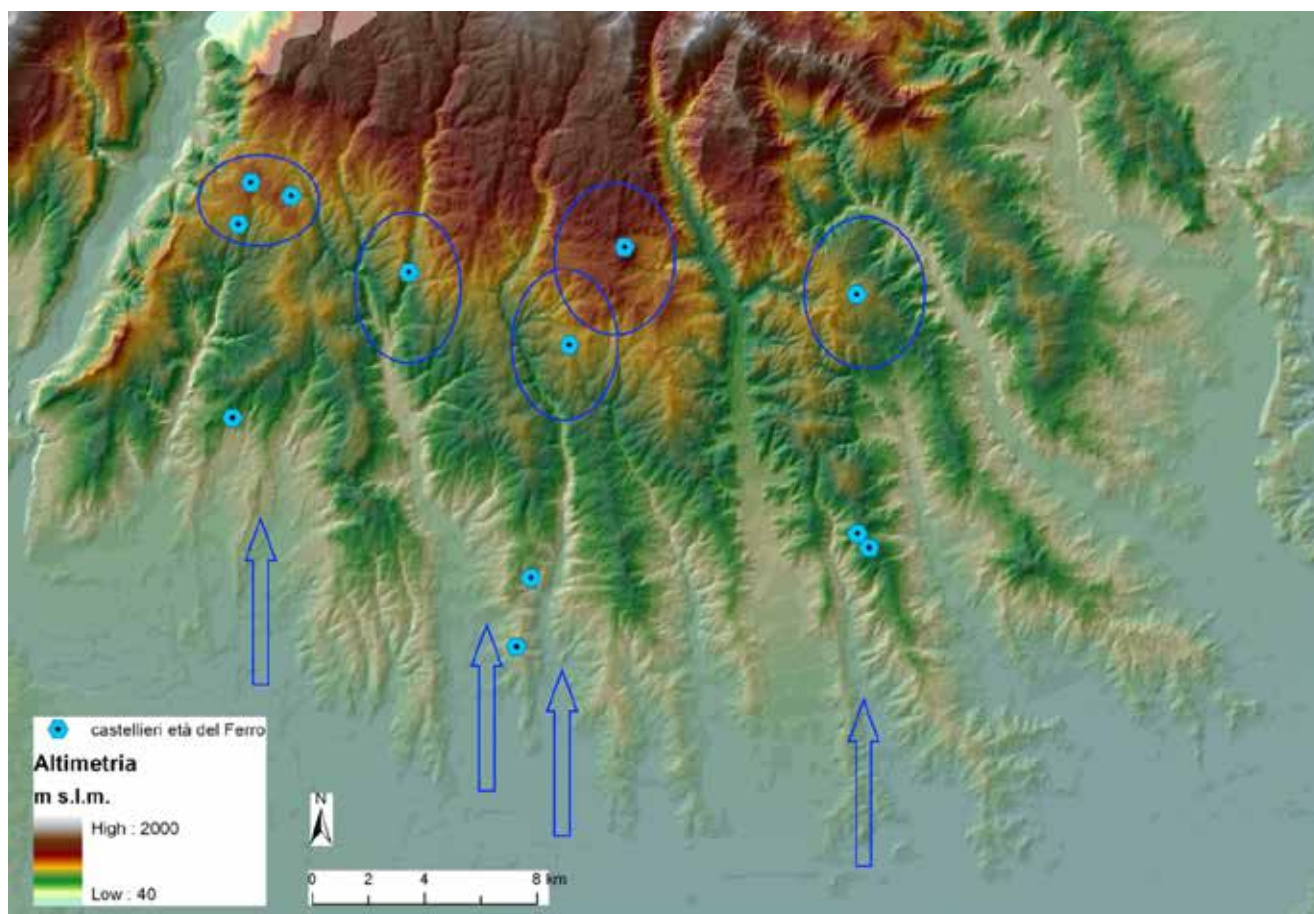


Fig. 2 – The Iron age defended sites (Digital Terrestrial Model; elaboration F. Ferrarese and M. Migliavacca).

trolled the key-passage from the hill ecosystem to the mountain one, important for metals, animal husbandry and trade.

Monte Loffa is on a plateau that is naturally defended on three sides while the northern one is artificially defended by a stone-wall. Therefore it can be defined as a *defended site* (or *castelliere*), like other sites protected by more or less impressive fortifications, made of dry-stone walls, sometimes using megalithic elements. Their construction implies well-defined planning and a big common effort on the part of an organized and stable human group, possibly connected with the need to control goods, or larger territories under the influence of different sites.

The Iron age *defended sites* (Fig. 2) controlled the passage from the high inner valleys – today called *vaj* – and the high pastures zone and were certainly involved in the exploitation of these high pastures – we should think especially of wood and grassland exploitation – and the fortifications might indicate the need to con-

trol the goods involved in the exploitation (wood, cattle) and the relationship with the people coming from other valleys (Fig. 3).

In a recent study (Migliavacca 2013) it has been proposed that Monte Loffa was the centre of one of the Iron age polities present in the Prealps (Fig. 4).

3. THE CONTEXT OF THE FINDINGS

Inside the defended area, 5200 squared metres large, more than thirty buildings were found at Monte Loffa, one of which was interpreted as a sanctuary. The others were used as granaries, storage rooms, dwellings, where various activities – especially connected with wool working – were performed.

Many whorls (Fig. 5) and grinding/pestles tools were found; the last can be connected with the production of colours and the activity of dyeing, as well as with felting production (Migliavacca, Atzori, Longo 2008).

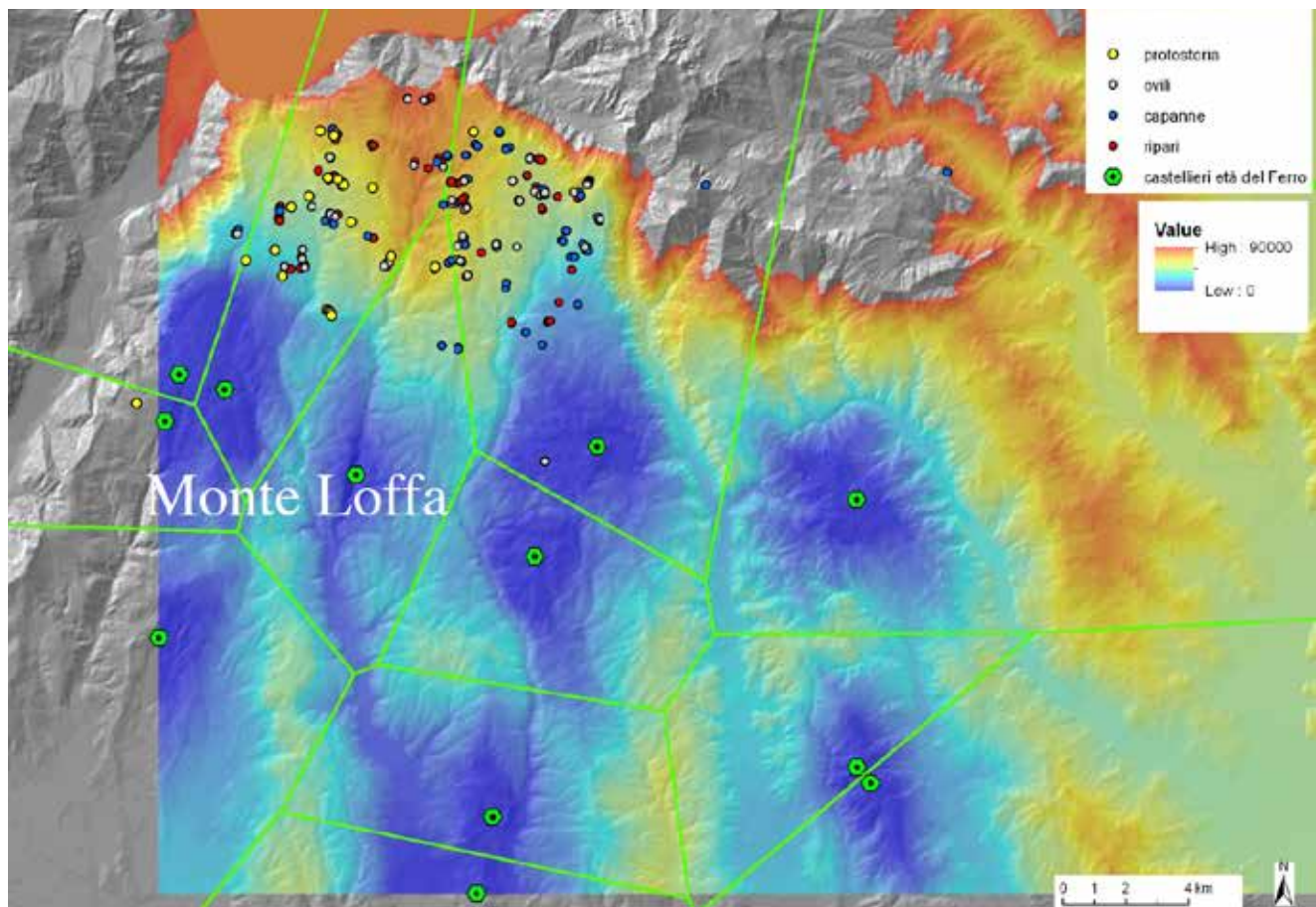


Fig. 3 – Cost Analysis based both on distance and slope and Thiessen Polygons Analysis applied to the Iron Age defenden sites showing the control on the highlands by Monte Loffa (Digital Terrestrial Model; elaboration F. Ferrarese and M. Migliavacca).

The first excavations date to the end of the 19th century, and are due to Stefano De Stefani (De Stefani 1880-1881; De Stefani 1885; De Stefani 1885-1886). In his publications he underlines the discovery of 10 loom weights in hut number 9; in hut 23 loom weights were found together with hearths, stone mills, stone hammers and sharpeners. Therefore we can assume the presence of different vertical looms in different huts.

There are more or less 70 loom weights recovered by Battaglia, in his fieldwork held in 1930. 49 of them were found in a single building, called the north-eastern hut by the discoverer: they were found along the northern wall, and 10 of them were inscribed with characters that Battaglia defined as “paleoveneti”. Battaglia (Battaglia 1934) interpreted the loom-weights as ritual and the building as a sanctuary, also because of the complex doorway: a feature common to other buildings of the Raetic type, as we now know.

In august 1950 and in may 1951 regular excavations were held by Zorzi in the North-Eastern area of the

Castegion of Loffa. They are unpublished.

At the Museum of Natural History in Verona a small number of loom-weights (7) is recorded as “coming from fieldwork of Guglielmo Benedetti in 1950”, although no regular excavations under his direction are known.

4. DATA DESCRIPTION

It is not possible to reconstruct the context of the discovery of the 107 weights that were found in different excavations (not all regular and regularly recorded) in the time span of a century. As far as we can understand, they were discovered in groups of tens spread in different buildings. The number of weights found together has comparisons in similar Iron age settlements of the zone, for example at Santorso, Monte Castegioni, Montebello.

Exceptional in the area under study, though, seems the group of 49 weights found by Battaglia.

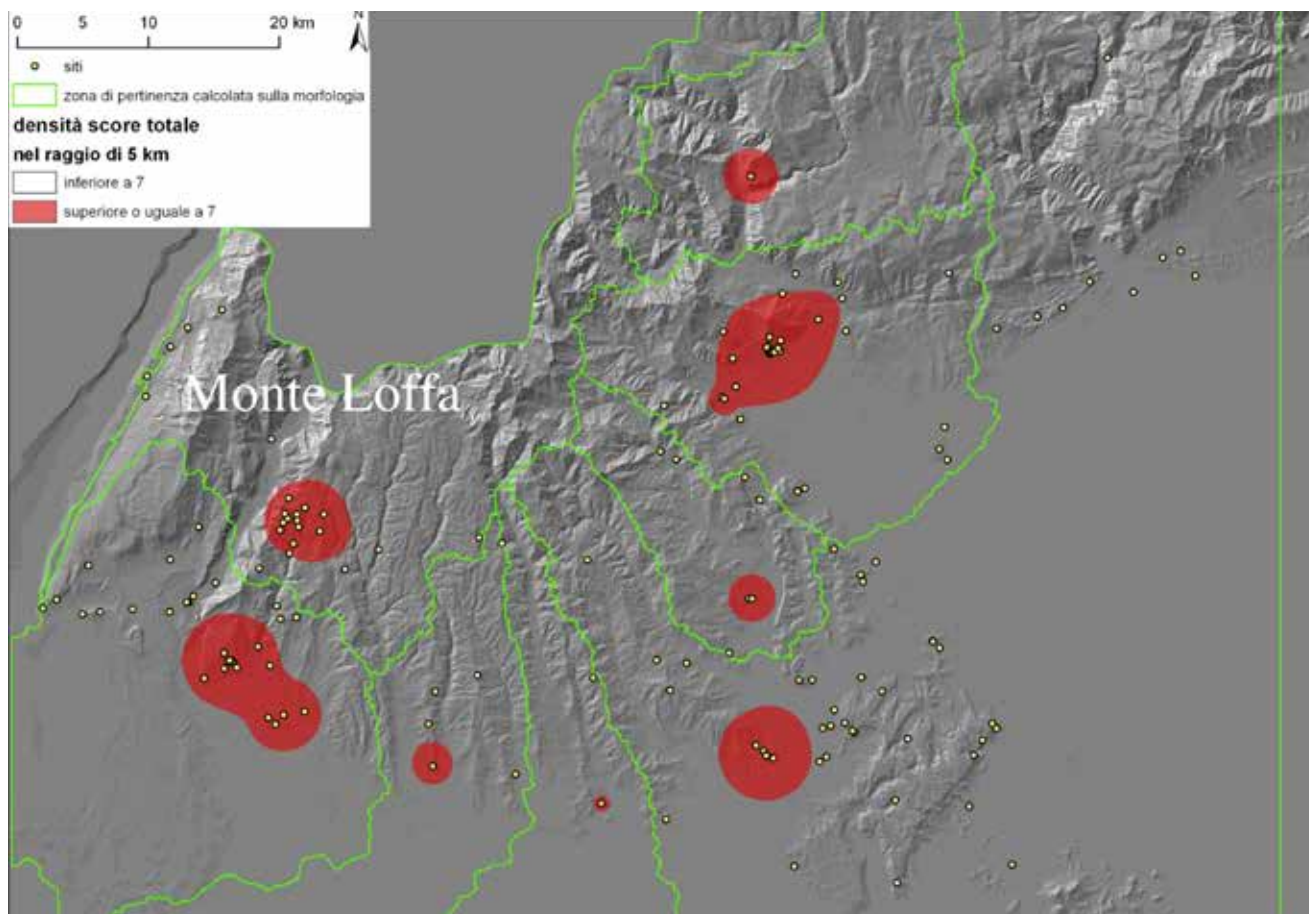


Fig. 4 – Monte Loffa as key-site of one Iron age polity (Digital Terrestrial Model; elaboration F. Ferrarese and M. Migliavacca).

The loom weights from Monte Loffa are made of local calcareous stone and in some cases resemble a truncated pyramid (Fig. 6), most of them could be defined as stele-shaped. They are heavy with a mean of 1994 grams and a mode around 2 kilos (Fig. 7). It is worth remembering that in the same area, in Roman times, most of the clay weights were 600-900 g heavy, although a number of stone weights arrived to 2100 g (Busana, Cotti Cabasso 2012; Basso 2012). It has been supposed that they were used to weave very heavy carpets or clothes, or flax fibres that need a particular tension of the threads, but the weight could also have been out of proportion with the needs of the texture. 30% of the weights is 2000-2250 grams heavy; 25% is among 1750-2000 g heavy; but lighter and heavier weights are present, in smaller proportion. The height ranges from 8 to 21 cm, with a mean of 16,840 cm; the width (Fig. 8) has a mean of 11,74 cm. The thickness shows a mode around 6 cm, but different steps are present: around 2,5 cm; around the 4 cm; and around 7,5 cm.

We are not able to reconstruct a set of weights surely used together, although among those discovered by Battaglia we know that 49 were found together.

5. SIGNS AND THEIR TYPOLOGY

Almost half of the 107 loom-weights from Monte Loffa (i.e. 47 pieces) are inscribed. If we count weights with more than one inscription we reach the number of 65 signs or connections of signs (Fig. 9).

Since all loom-weights (with one exception) are made of stone, the inscriptions are mostly engraved with deep and wide strokes on one face sometimes on two faces or on the profile. A lower number of inscribed signs are practiced with a sharper and more subtle tool, presenting a less deep flaw. The coexistence of deeper/wider and less deep strokes lead us to think that in some cases the loom-weights were reused or inscribed by different persons and occasions during their life cycle.

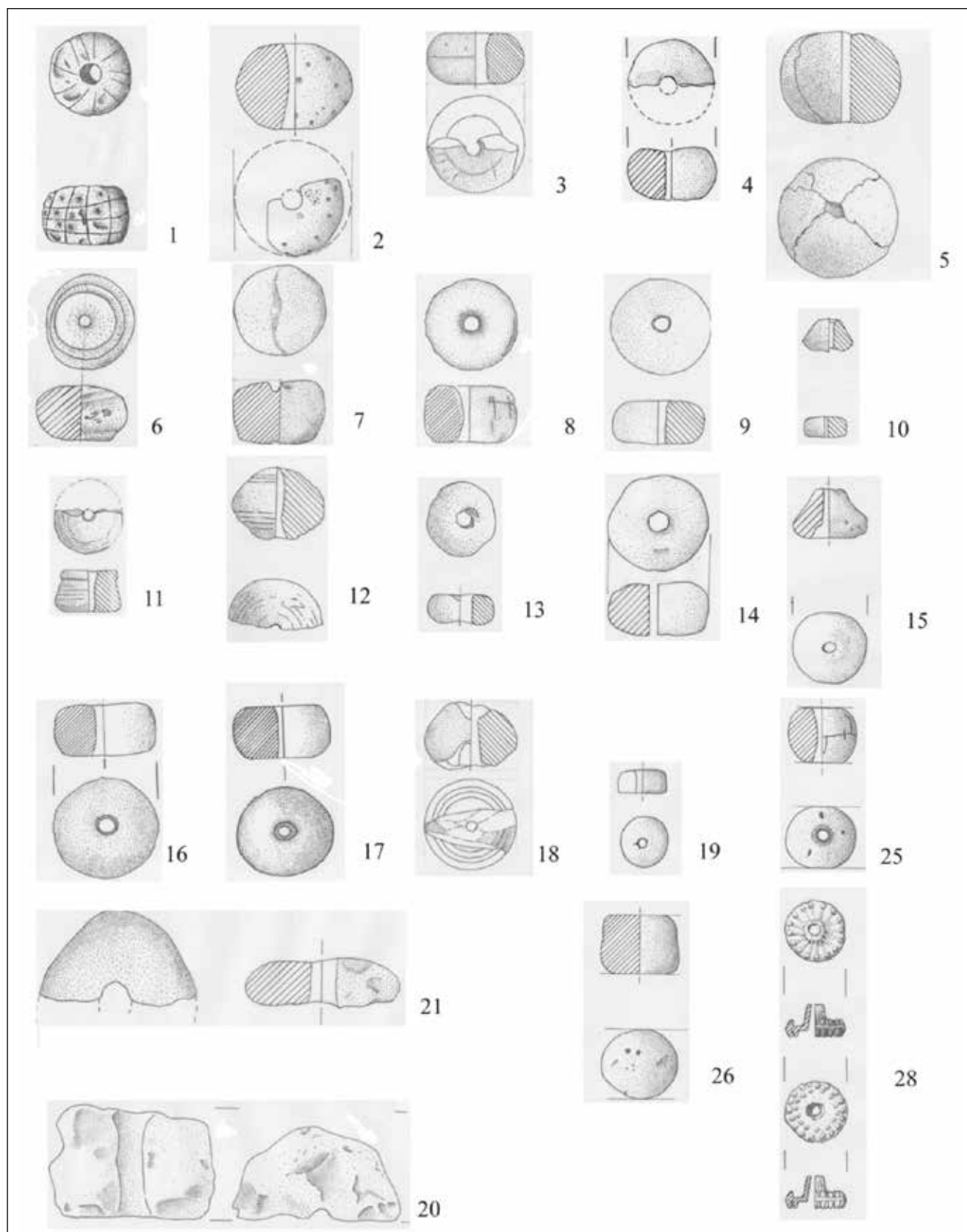


Fig. 5 – The whorls from Monte Loffa (from Migliavacca 2005: 133).



Fig. 6 – The stele-shaped form of the loom-weights from Monte Loffa (photo: S. Marchesini).

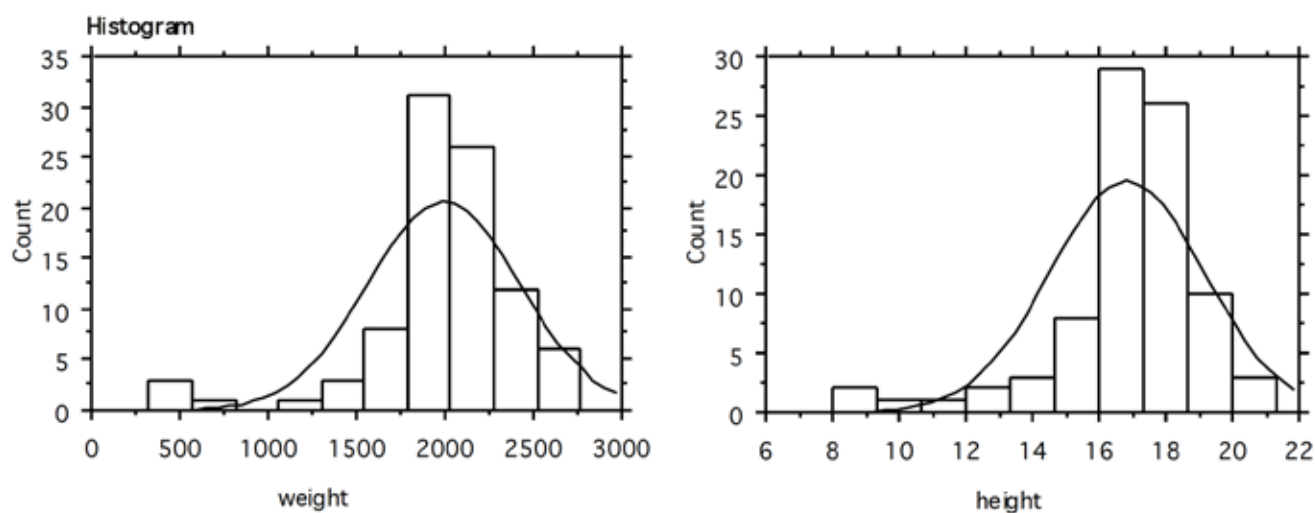


Fig. 7 – Histograms with the statistical analysis: weight (in grams) and height (in centimeters) of the loom-weights (elaboration M. Migliavacca).

It was a very laborious task to establish a coherent typology of the signs. This is principally due to the difficulty to understand the direction of the letters/symbols and the way the signs were read, since they are sometimes written orthogonally on one face of the weight, sometimes vertically on the profile and in most

cases letters or signs are combined together in ligatures that don't respect the original form of the sign.

One possible explanation is that part of the signs was practiced on the weight to signify something before it had been hung on the loom (for example in choosing the threads?).

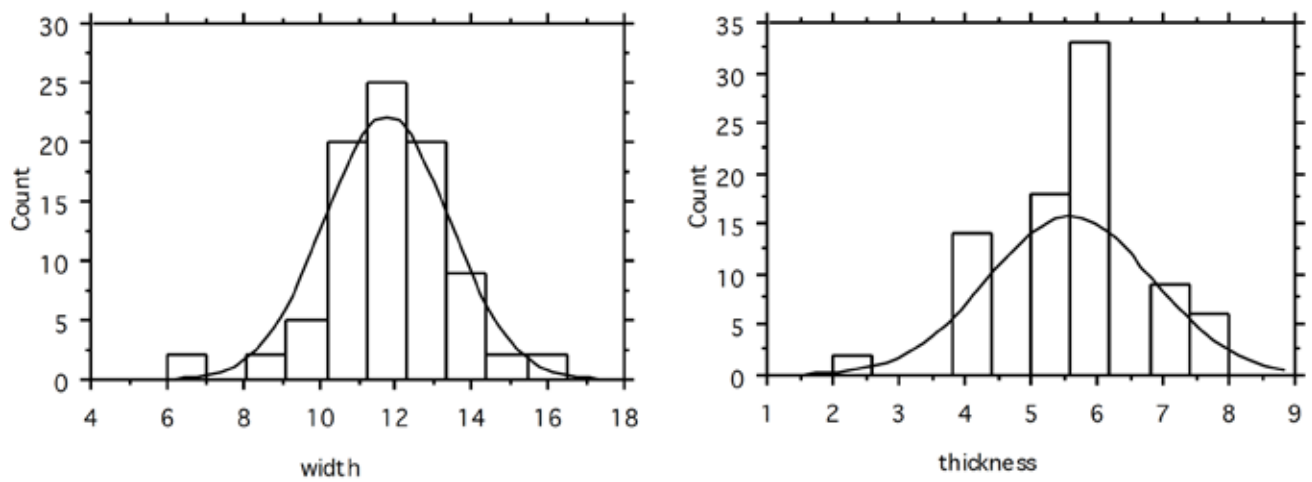


Fig. 8 – Histograms with the statistical analysis: width and thickness (in centimeters) of the loom-weights (elaboration M. Migliavacca).



Fig. 9 – The graffiti on the loom-weights (elaboration S. Marchesini).

Type of inscription	Total
Base signs: both letters and numerals	16
Complex signs/symbols	18
Ligatures	6
Connections (nessi)	23
<i>Signs on different parts of the l.w.</i>	14
<i>Diacritics</i>	12
<i>Letters on profile</i>	9

Table 1 – Typology and amount of sign types

Signs inscribed on the profile gave information when the weight was hanging from the loom.

Basing our interpretation both on internal analysis as well as on the comparison with the written letters/numerals/signs observed in the Raetic area and in other writing contexts, we proposed a provisionally typology of inscribed signs (Table 1).

Our typology distinguishes the following categories for the 65 signs: base signs, complex signs, ligatures, connections or nexus. We have also highlighted as separate score: how many weights showed signs on different parts of the surface, how many diacritics were used in the inscriptions and how many weights were inscribed on the profile.

Description of the types and terminology (Fig. 10, 1-5):

Base or simple signs/numbers/letters (16x) are elementary forms, which are sometimes coincident with letters, sometimes with numerals, being difficult to separate the two categories. All of them, with the exception of the star and the square base trident, can be also alphabetic letters.

Complex signs/symbols (18x) are variations of simple signs, sometimes changed through diacritics. We had some difficulty to understand if apparently non-iconic signs could have for their writers/readers a symbolic meaning indeed, which is lost for us. Therefore we decided to held the two categories together.

Ligatures (6x) are letters that share some traits. This

trait is wide attested in almost all scripts of the ancient as well as the modern world.

Connections or nexus of base signs (23x).

A remark must be made on **diacritical marks** (Fig. 10.6) they are little strokes (Haarmann 1996: 39) that have a function in many writings systems, where they can serve for differentiating the conceptual basis of the basic signs. If we look for cultural (more than chronological) comparisons, similar diacritics have been found in the so-called “Danubian writing” (in the Eneolithic Age, ca. 5000-3000 B.C.), in the Indus script (26th-20th century BC.), in the Linear A and in the Cypriot Syllabic script at the end of the second thousand B.C. or in the Greek alphabet (where letters/numerals have been modified through small diacritics, mostly an X).

6. COMPARISONS

If we look at other sets of inscribed/impressed loom weights of Ancient Italy we don't find any comparable correspondence.

The small Messapic pyramidal weights made of clay had cut, impressed or scratched inscriptions representing god names, personal names or their shortenings. Weight looms with simple signs present mostly simple letters, small figures or X signs (Marchesini 1997).

Etruscan loom-weights, also made of clay, present personal and god names too. Many shortenings or initials with 2 or 3 letter combinations have been observed. Unfortunately the overviews published until now (for example Ambrosini 2000) don't take into account the “great amount of records with only a letter or a sign such as X or other symbols, which are very difficult to investigate”. A look on other systematic publications of Etruscan inscriptions (such as the Corpus Inscriptio-num Etruscarum or the Rivista di Epigrafia Etrusca) gives a similar feedback: no complex sign system, similar to the Raetic one has even developed among the Etruscans.

Several monographs (Margherita Gleba 2008a Gleba 2007; Gleba 2008b; Gleba, Ed. 2012; Gleba 2012) and many papers have been devoted more generally to weaving and looms – including also chapters on the loom-weights – and textiles in the ancient world, but they don't specifically deal with inscriptions or impressions. In recent times two papers are devoted to the inscribed weights in the Roman age. Bergamini 2009 and 2011 analyses impressed figures on roman weights from the lower Po region. He recognizes and describes as recurrent signs the herringbone (called also “ramo secco”), the *decussis* or St. Andrew's cross, the wheel, the

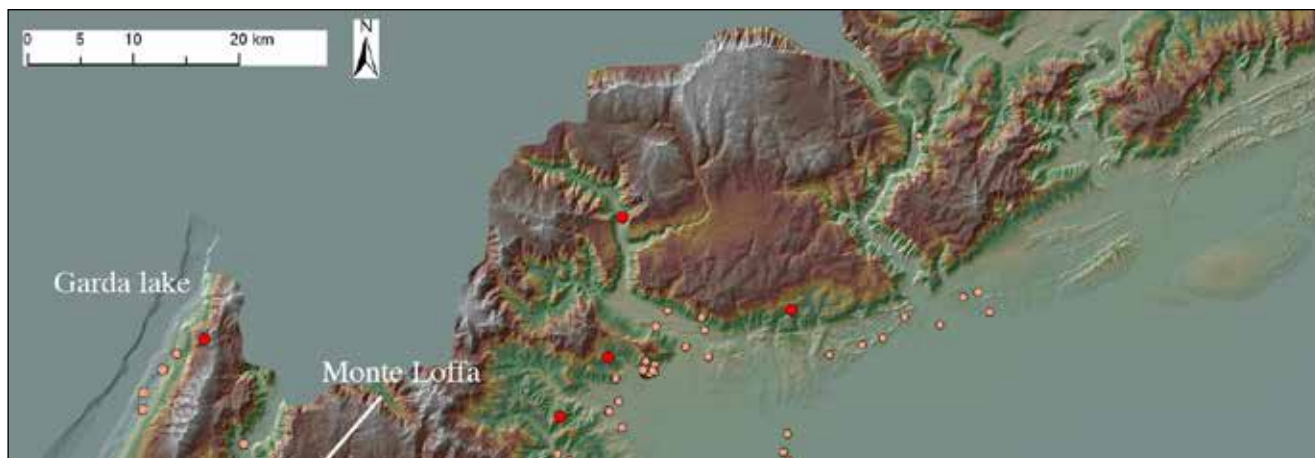


Fig. 10.1 – Typological analysis of the graffiti: base signs/numbers/letters (elaboration S. Marchesini).

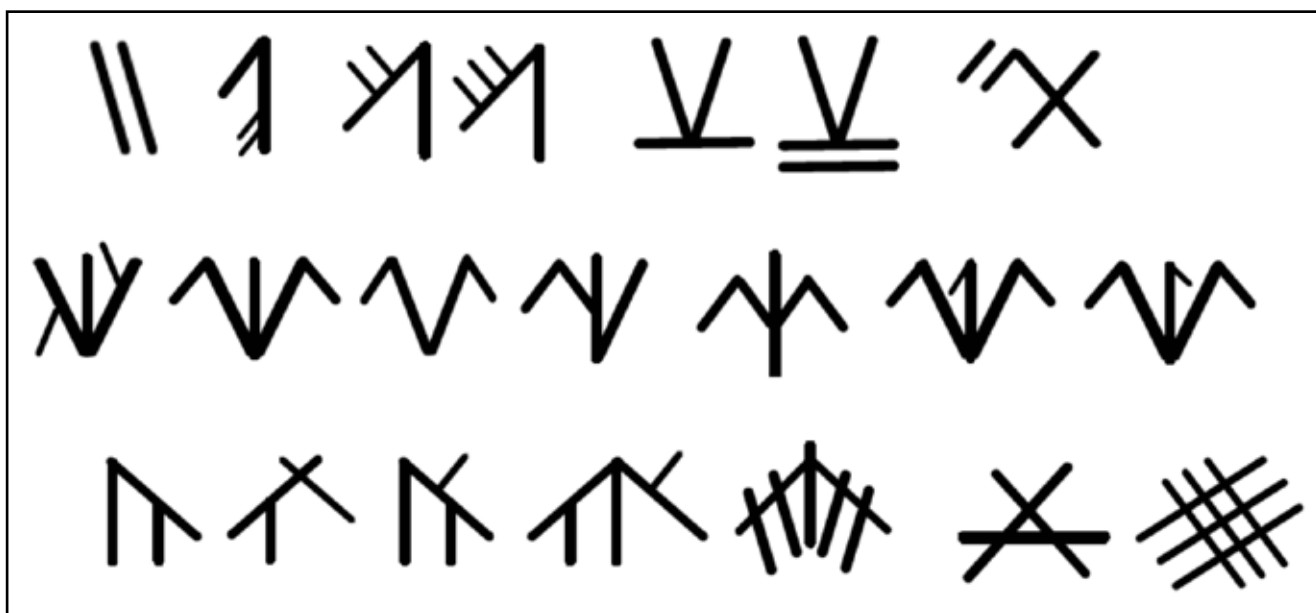


Fig. 10.2 – Typological analysis of the graffiti: complex signs/symbols (elaboration S. Marchesini).

ring, the hexameric sun, the small globe and the human figure. Alphabetic signs, ligatures, nexus and texts with personal names are also registered, but the signs listed by Bergamini don't appear on our weights, nor personal names, entire or abbreviated.

Another recent contribution to the inscribed loom-weights of the roman age comes from Antolini, Marengo 2012. Also in this paper, among non-alphabetic signs are listed simple lines, circles, crosses,

wheels, stars and dot rosettes and more complex elements such as meanders, bands or similar, which in the authors' view probably reflect patterns of the textiles. Neither this paper nor the contributions listed above, are provided with tables showing the type of non-alphabetic signs or signs compositions. From the description furnished by the authors we can argue that no signs comparable to those on our loom-weights exist in the Roman world.



Fig. 10.3 – Typological analysis of the graffiti: ligatures (elaboration S. Marchesini).



Fig. 10.4 – Typological analysis of the graffiti: connections of base signs (elaboration S. Marchesini).



Fig. 10.5 – Typological analysis of the graffiti: complex combinations (elaboration S. Marchesini).

7. RESULTS

From the data showed above the following elements can be highlighted:

- the number of 107 looms-weights allows to suppose a possible belonging to at least 8-10 complete sets, if we imagine each set made of 10-15 weights.
- the parameters “weight” and “inscription” seem not to be significantly connected as heavier and lighter weights are inscribed as well; 75% of the weights are 1500 to 2500 gr heavy; only 9 pieces weigh less than 1500 gr and 5 cases weigh more than 2500 gr. Both the heavier and the lighter weights cannot

have represented a complete set: most probably they must have had a specific function within other sets; the corpus of inscriptions on the loom-weights from Monte Loffa is unique and original (Fig. 11-12): a combination of numbers, letters and symbols, with a small amount of repetitions/iterations, composing a well varied repertoire; the information they must have given was not serial like in stamps, trade-marks or similar, but diversified relating to their function. The only iterated sign is the cross, one of the most generic but less characterizing signs;

- no personal names are inscribed on the surface of the ML loom-weights, neither in an extended form,



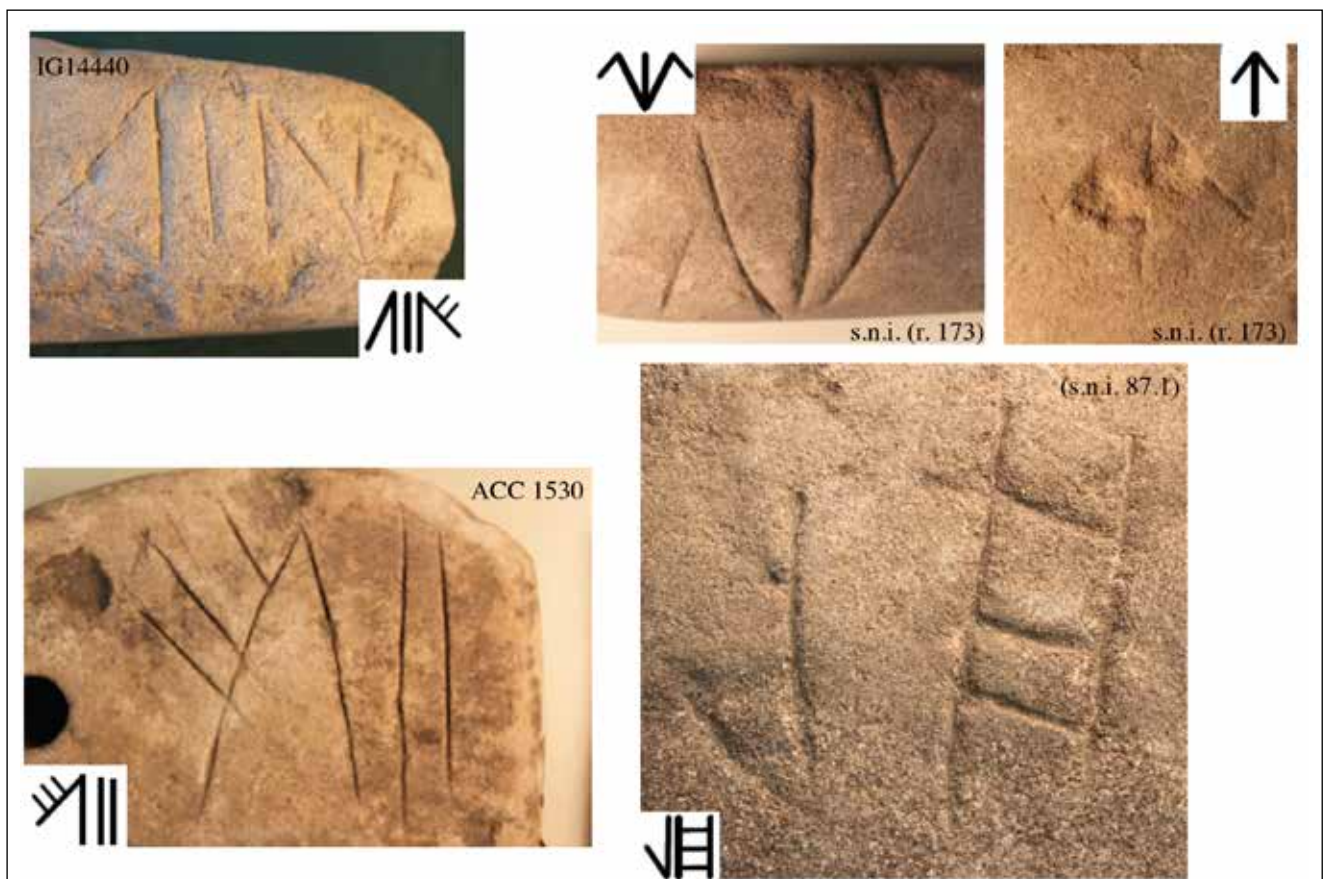
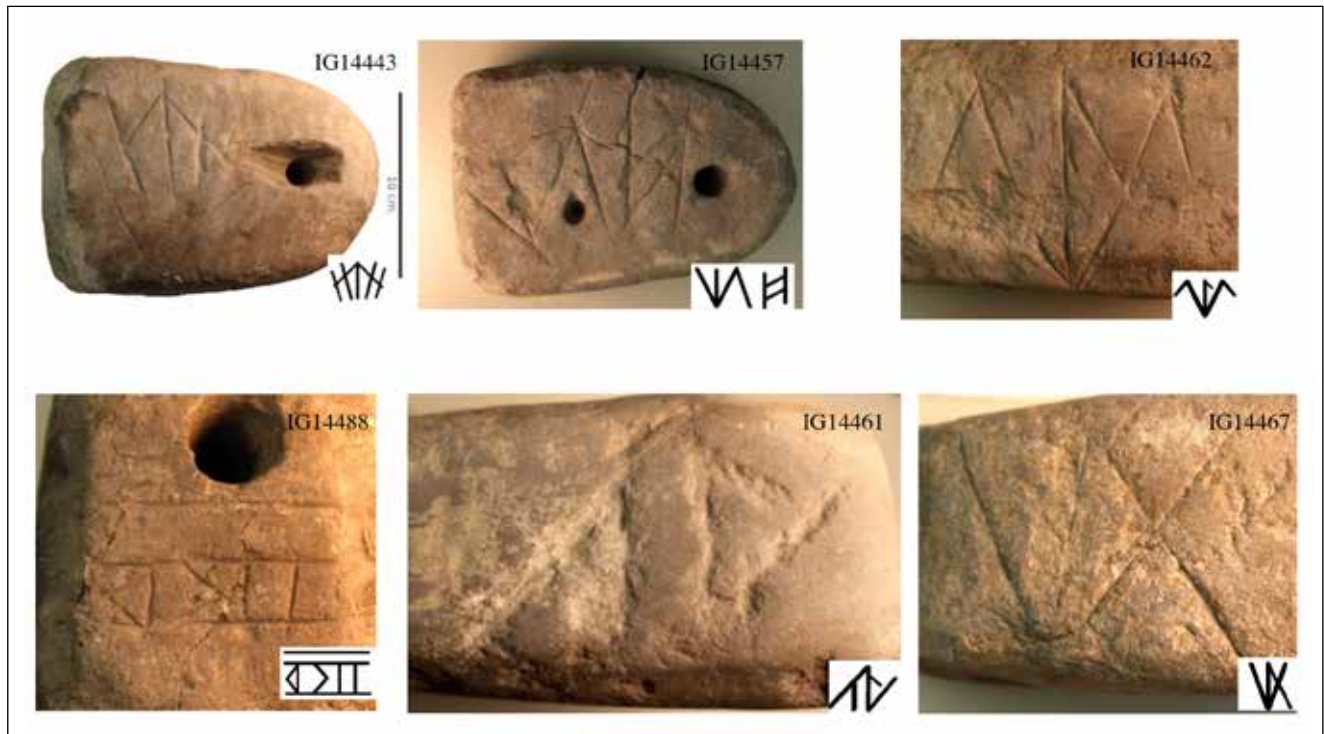
Fig. 10.6 – Typological analysis of the graffiti: the discredits (elaboration S. Marchesini).

- nor as initials; in most cases the signs must not have expressed the belonging to a person or a to a workshop, since there is too large a number of different marks for a restricted number of sets and for a restricted area like Monte Loffa;
- the variability of the inscriptions has more probably to do with specific instructions during operations of processing textiles; very sophisticated weaving and methods and techniques are known in Iron Age Italy, as the cases of the textiles in the Tombs of Verrucchio (8th-7th cent. B.C.) attest (for instructions see for example the soumak technique of the textiles found in the 8th-century tomb 89 at Verrucchio (BO): Gleba 2007: 73; Stauffer 2002, 2003 and 2004).
- the signs system was not directly imported from any other neighbouring cultural basin, but developed locally; we can argue that such a complex use of notation must have been developed in a long span of time, probably with an oral, non written tradition.

- The long distance comparisons, in time and space, suggest the hypothesis that perhaps a common technical language and signs set was used and shared by many communities in connection with the weaving practice, especially when the activity became complex with the production of decorated fabrics and needed a coordination and uniformity in the carrying out, as is well known in the ethnographic record (see for example Morandini, Romeo 1991; Izdanja Etnografskog Muzeja Istre 2004; Kovačević 2003).

Fig. 11 – Some sample of inscribed loom-weights with transcription of the signs (elaboration S. Marchesini).

Fig. 12 – Some sample of inscribed loom-weights with transcription of the signs (elaboration S. Marchesini).



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