



# Women and Rainfall: An Eco-ritual Among the Alps of the Past Les femmes et la pluie : un éco-rituel parmi les Alpes du passé

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Women and Water: The Flow of Matriculture  
Les femmes et l'eau : le flux des systèmes matriculturels

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## Résumé de l'article

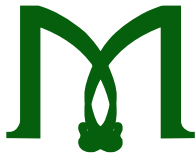
Cet article s'intéresse à un rituel « légendaire » qui s'est déroulé au XIXe siècle près de l'église San Salvatore à Albosaggia, un petit village de Valteline, une vallée alpine du nord de l'Italie. Ce rite consistait à immerger des crânes humains afin d'attirer et de repousser l'eau de pluie selon les besoins du moment. Ce rituel est analysé à travers la récupération et la problématisation d'un corpus hétérogène de sources attestant de son historicité. Une hypothèse est ensuite proposée sur les liens entre l'eau, les morts et le féminin qui les sous-tendent. Ainsi, l'étude propose l'adoption du terme « éco-rituel » pour résumer ce phénomène. Ce faisant, une forme culturellement distinctive d'action féminine est mise en évidence : le pouvoir symbolique d'influencer le cycle de l'eau, qui est à la fois une force vivifiante ontologique et économique.

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## **Women and Rainfall: An Eco-ritual Among the Alps of the Past**

**DARIO BASSI**

### **Abstract**

*This paper focuses on a 'legendary' ritual that took place in the 19th century near the church of San Salvatore in Albosaggia, a small village in Valtellina, an Alpine valley in northern Italy. The rite in question comprised the immersion of human skulls in order to attract and repel rainwater according to the needs of the moment. The ritual is analyzed through the recovery and problematization of a heterogeneous corpus of sources attesting to its historicity. A hypothesis is then proposed on the connections between water, the dead and the feminine that underpin them. Thus, the study proposes the adoption of the term 'eco-ritual' to encapsulate this phenomenon. In doing so, a culturally distinctive form of female agency is displayed: the symbolic power to influence the water cycle, which is at the same time an ontological and economic vivifying force.*

**Keywords:** eco-ritual, female agency, Italy, Alps, matriculture

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## Sommario

*Il presente contributo si concentra su un rituale “leggendario” che si svolgeva nel XIX secolo nei pressi della chiesa di San Salvatore ad Albosaggia, un piccolo paese situato in Valtellina, una valle alpina dell'Italia settentrionale. Il rituale in questione consisteva nell'immersione di teschi umani per evocare e respingere l'acqua piovana sulla base dei bisogni del momento. Il rituale viene analizzato attraverso il recupero e la problematizzazione di un corpus eterogeneo di fonti che ne attestano la storicità. Viene quindi avanzata una lettura sulle possibili connessioni tra l'acqua, i morti e il femminile alla loro base. Lo studio propone quindi l'adozione del termine “eco-rituale” per catalogare questo fenomeno. In questo modo, viene mostrata una forma culturalmente peculiare di agency femminile: il potere simbolico di influenzare il ciclo dell'acqua, che è allo stesso tempo una forza vivificante ontologica ed economica.*

**Parole chiave:** eco-rituale, agenzia femminile, Italia, Alpi, matricoltura

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## Résumé

*Cet article s'intéresse à un rituel « légendaire » qui s'est déroulé au XIXe siècle près de l'église San Salvatore à Albosaggia, un petit village de Valteline, une vallée alpine du nord de l'Italie. Ce rite consistait à immerger des crânes humains afin d'attirer et de repousser l'eau de pluie selon les besoins du moment. Ce rituel est analysé à travers la récupération et la problématisation d'un corpus hétérogène de sources attestant de son historicité. Une hypothèse est ensuite proposée sur les liens entre l'eau, les morts et le féminin qui les sous-tendent. Ainsi, l'étude propose l'adoption du terme « éco-rituel » pour résumer ce phénomène. Ce faisant, une forme culturellement distinctive d'action féminine est mise en évidence : le pouvoir symbolique d'influencer le cycle de l'eau, qui est à la fois une force vivifiante ontologique et économique.*

**Mots-clés:** éco-rituel, agence féminine, Italie, Alpes, matriculture

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This article focuses on a particular ritual which involves the symbolic manipulation of rain. It used to take place near the church of San Salvatore in Albosaggia, a small village in

Valtellina, an Alpine valley in Northern Italy. The ritualistic act entailed the deliberate placement of human skulls in direct contact with water and it was performed by elderly women to induce or avert rain. Although oral testimonies collected in the 1980s attest to the practice of this ritual at the beginning of the last century, its historicity has yet to be proven. In fact, until now this rite has been considered to be a legend. However, an examination of a limited number of written sources indicates that, at a minimum, it was performed throughout the nineteenth century.

I offer here a comprehensive, multifaceted, and in-depth analysis of the hydrological, environmental, economic, and religious contexts of the skull-washing ritual of Albosaggia. This facilitates a deeper understanding of the functionality and meaning of this and similar rituals. This approach also illuminates the ecological perspective that informed the rituals, leading to two conclusions: first, that these rituals should be identified as *eco-rituals* and, second, that the symbolic influence of women on the water cycle should be recognised as a culturally unique form of female agency.

### **Around the essentiality of water**

It is evident that liquid water is the most vital fluid element in the environment for all humans and most non-human beings. Rather than being a theoretical knowledge, it is reasonable to assume that this kind of shared primordial awareness primarily manifests itself to humankind as *Zuhandenheit*,<sup>1</sup> or rather, in less philosophical terms, as an example of embodied cognition.<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, the view of water as a substance of paramount importance might have been solidified through the observation that organisms and flora on land and in the air require it for survival and proliferation. In the end, this understanding has evolved into the identification of a foundational ecological principle, facilitating the domestication of crops and livestock. Conversely, dehydration is likely to have been experienced and understood by the physical organism as potentially fatal, and the boisterous forces of floods, rainstorms and hailstorms, as well as water shortages in agricultural activities, as dangerous.

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1 In his 1928 work *Sein und Zeit*, Martin Heidegger posits the notion that, in addition to instruments and completed products, there exist entities that do not necessitate manipulation yet are nonetheless instrumental. Water, for example, can be regarded as an entity of this kind. In this sense, water can be understood through its practicality (*Zuhandenheit*), which can be related to what is in his lexicon termed *Umsicht*, that is to say, a prescient vision of the environment.

2 The theory of embodied cognition suggests that cognitive processes are not exclusively mental, but also physical and sensory. Accordingly, bodily experiences are integral to the comprehension and analysis of sensory information. Consequently, human thinking cannot be regarded as an activity distinct from the body in and through which it is produced. This theory has given rise to a broad interdisciplinary research field, yet the absence of specific authorship hinders the attribution of authorship. Notable proponents of this theory include Francisco Varela (*Embodied Mind*, 1992) and Antonio Damasio (*Descartes's Error*, 1994).

In relation to the above issues and concerns, a variety of irrigation systems and defensive strategies adopted in the past around the world have been extensively documented in numerous historical studies.<sup>3</sup> However, it is important to regard rituals that are based on ecological visions, incorporating symbolic human actions and believed to influence the hydrological cycle and meteorological conditions as equivalent responses to the same existential challenges that human societies face in their interaction with their respective 'own' bodies of water, situated within a particular spatial-temporal and cultural context. Although they operate at a non-factual symbolic level, from a historical-cultural perspective their effectiveness is ultimately irrelevant and they constitute an equally valid object of study, to paraphrase Marc Bloch (1924, it. ed. 2016 : 9).

Rainmaking rituals are a prime example of this phenomenon. Observed across a variety of cultures worldwide, these rituals have been the subject of extensive study by numerous anthropologists who have employed a range of approaches in their research (Frazer 1890; Buttree 1930; Randolph 1947; Simonse 1992). Historians have also contributed to this field of enquiry (Rupert 2002; Beattie 2004). Nevertheless, one of the most noteworthy illustrations of the belief that weather was subject to ritual influences in Modern Catholic Europe can be seen in the public ceremonies of Rogations.

In rural areas where the Roman rite was practiced, the Greater Litanies were established and conducted on an annual basis on 25 April, St. Mark's Day. In contrast, the Lesser Litanies were mobile liturgies, usually held on the Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday prior to the Assumption (Plese 2023). Greater Litanies incorporated prayers that were to be recited to ward off threats to the community's survival. Such dangers included wars and epidemics, as well as storms and blizzards, which could potentially disrupt a successful harvest. During the ritual procession conducted through the agricultural plots, the parish priest would recite a list of possible evils, to which the parishioners in row at his back would respond with the formula *Libera nos* [Free us from], thereby establishing a prolonged collective interplay with the deity of God. The litanies thus served an apotropaic function, encompassing protection from natural cataclysms.

Moreover, in the event of protracted inclement weather, particularly persistent and hazardous rainfall, processions or masses were held. These prayers included requests for a clear sky (*ad postulandam serenitatem*) and an end to rainstorms (*preces ad repellendam tempestatem*). Both prayers, which were recorded in the *Rituale Romanum* from 1614 until the Second Vatican Council's reform, were intended to achieve the same outcome: they were recited in the hope of inducing a change in the weather, that is to say, to halt the falling of rain.

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<sup>3</sup> Reference is made here to the scientific journal *Water History* and to fundamental contributions from others such as Terje Tvedt, editor of three series of volumes entitled *A History of Water* (2006-2016).

## About the Alps in the past

In the context of the 'water towers of Europe,'<sup>4</sup> the Alps, the general consensus is that the domestication of cereal-producing and animal species commenced approximately four millennia BCE.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that the earliest records of complex and extensive irrigation systems date back only to the twelfth century CE (Bodini 2002: 22). These water infrastructures are known by various denominations (*Ru/Bisse/Wasser*) and comprise successive series of concave channels constructed from wood and supported by iron claws affixed to the walls of the ledges. The purpose of these channels is to facilitate the transportation of liquid water, sourced from higher latitudes, to lower ones. The water is then distributed through smaller irrigation ditches. It should be noted that the primary function of this structure is not to store water, but rather to convey it during the spring and summer months. This arrangement has not spread throughout the entire alpine arc, though, but is limited to valleys that historically recorded low precipitation rates. It remains functional in a few areas, such as *Alto Adige/Südtirol*, where it is acknowledged as a traditional irrigation system (Ketzer 1997; Bodini 2012; Leibundgut, Vonderstrass 2016). This finding does not immediately imply that the Alpine inhabitants did not deploy other bodies of water for irrigation or other infrastructure for the same purposes, but it corroborates the assertion that rainwater has long played a pivotal role in irrigation across the majority of alpine regions since the advent of agriculture.

It is widely acknowledged that agricultural labour in European alpine valleys is subject to a unique set of challenges that differ from those experienced in lowland plains: the total area of land in an alpine valley is only 25% of the total lowland territory, a percentage that decreases to approximately 10% at higher altitudes (Viazzo 1990: 35). In addition to the presence of forests, bare rocks, permanent snow and glaciers, the available space is subject to influence from other factors, such as solar irradiation and steepness. Consequently, not all areas that are devoid of 'clutter' and potentially suitable for cultivation and farming were necessarily conducive to sufficient artificial watering. While in lowland areas irrigational water can be easily sourced from rivers with a more or less constant flow, in the Alpine regions seasonal fluctuation in the flow of watercourses and the steepness of the slopes (i.e. the force of gravity) renders rainwater an essential component for irrigation. Furthermore, heavy rainfall can lead to significant challenges,

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4 The term 'water tower' is employed in the discipline of hydrology and associated sciences to denote mountain chains or highlands that typically contribute substantial quantities of water.

5 In the context of the Alps, however, agriculture and farming must not be considered as activities that are mutually exclusive. Rather, they should be regarded as co-dependent activities that integrate with each other in a semi-closed eco-cultural niche. Historians of the Alps have engaged in prolonged debates concerning the characteristics, immigration strategies and gender-based work activities of *Alpwirtschaft* (see Sanga 1984, 1997). For a concise overview of the extant literature pertaining to the characteristics and taxonomy of *Alpwirtschaft*, consult Gilck and Poschlod (2019).

including landslides and floods, which have historically posed a major threat to alpine communities and cultivated areas.

To date, the number of historical studies reporting on a ritualistic submergence of sacred objects for the purpose of inducing or halting rainfall in the Alpine region is limited. Evidence suggests that a cross was immersed on an annual basis by religious officials at the Barmasc chapel in the Aosta Valley and, on the Mediterranean shore, at San Fruttuoso in Camogli as a preventative measure against drought (Piazza 1998). These occurrences appear to be linked to the submersion of crosses and statues portraying saints in various regions of France, where there is a confluence of numerous collective memories (Sébillot 1905). Studies on centuries-old rituals in Perpignan and Essey, categorised as Christian versions of certain Greek and Roman cults of female deities associated with rain and fertility (Santyves 1933), also support this theory. Moreover, in the seventeenth-century Rhône River basin, the purpose of immersing icons was to protect the productivity of fields and agricultural activities from potential harmful floods (Benoît 1935).

## About Valtellina

The alpine region of Valtellina is located in the northernmost reaches of Italy and extends 120 kilometres in length and 66 kilometres in width, demarcating the boundary between the central-eastern and south-eastern Alps. The topography of Valtellina is defined by the Insubric tectonic line, which traverses the region from east to west in the lower and middle sections, and from south to north in the upper portion. This configuration gives rise to a substantial portion of Lower Valtellina being parallel to the Alpine ridge. Consequently, the southern side (Orobic side) experiences shaded conditions, while the Alpine side (Rhaetian side) is exposed to abundant sunlight. From a hydrological perspective, the area falls within the Adda River mountain catchment basin.

With the exception of a brief period,<sup>6</sup> the region was under the administration of the Grisons between 1512 and 1797, when it joined the Cisalpine Republic, definitively severing its political ties with the Swiss world. Reports compiled during the Napoleonic and Austrian administrations (1797 - 1814 / 1815 - 1859), including those by Francesco Bellati, Antonio Tadini, Melchiorre Gioia, Pietro Rebuschini and Stefano Jacini, if considered as a whole, provide a comprehensive overview of the hydrological conditions of Lower Valtellina and the irrigation and flood protection systems during the first half of

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<sup>6</sup> The uprising, also known as the *Sacro Macello*, resulted in the expulsion of the Grisons from Valtellina for almost two decades (1620-1639). This uprising was primarily driven by political motivations and religious differences between the Protestant-tolerant rulers and the Catholic inhabitants of the region. Interest in the event, given its repercussions on geopolitics of Modern Europe and salience in local history, has recently gained momentum in occasion of its 400th anniversary (see *1620, la rivolta di Valtellina*; 2021).

the nineteenth century. Without excluding scientific articles from the same decades,<sup>7</sup> the majority of accounts make reference to a rudimentary infrastructure in very few towns and their environs.

It seems that the infrastructure in question comprised a limited number of artificial channels of varying dimensions, the purpose of which was to extract water from streams for limited irrigation of meadows in the valley bottom during the summer farming season and for micro-scale horticultural purposes, that is, within household gardens.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, it is certain that the absence of systematic, effective, and stable control of the Adda River and its tributary streams caused floods until the end of the century.<sup>9</sup>

Given the preponderance of Catholicism within the population, it is unsurprising that there are few attestations of religious events regarding the weather. The State Archives of Sondrio (ASSo) holds the Romegialli Collection, which includes documents listing worship expenses paid by deans, including one for the public exposure/exhibition of the mortal remains of Saints *per li bisogni del'acqua* [for the need of water] on 21st of September 1701.<sup>10</sup> Within the same archival fund, there is evidence of multiple acquittances. Among these, there is one from the political authorities that attests to the disbursement of a sum of money to three priests intended to facilitate the observance of three masses, with the intention being the invocation of atmospheric precipitation.<sup>11</sup> As part of the aforementioned archival collection, there is also a preserved draft of a formal protest submitted by the archpriest of Sondrio. In this document, the archpriest articulates his concerns regarding the legitimacy of a Confraternity's involvement in processions *per impetrare la pioggia* [to obtain rain] in 1716.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, a review of documentation held in the Archivio storico comunale di Sondrio reveals financial expenditures incurred for cult affairs between 1801 and 1829, including those related to *rumate* [thunderstorms].<sup>13</sup>

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7 One example among many, *Memoria sull'agricoltura del Dipartimento dell'Adda* (1813), bears the signature of Ambrogio del Majno.

8 More than fifty years later, Ercole Bassi's comment is of particular significance: "L'irrigazione è praticata in poche località e quasi limitatamente ai prati, sebbene gli abbondanti corsi d'acqua perenni permetterebbero una irrigazione quasi generale. Tra le località dove maggiormente si usa l'acqua a scopo irrigatorio si indicano i conoidi del Tartano, di Postalesio, di Ponte, i piani di Sondrio, di Bormio [...]" (*La Valtellina* 1890 : 95).

[English]: "Irrigation is practiced in a few localities and almost limited to meadows, although the abundant perennial watercourses would allow almost general irrigation. Among the places where water is mostly used for irrigation purposes are the alluvial fans of Tartano, Postalesio, Ponte, the plains of Sondrio, Bormio [...]"

9 See Valentini C., *La sistemazione idraulica della Valtellina*, Milano, Tipografia e litografia degli Ingegneri, 1890.

10 ASSo, Raccolta Romegialli, b. 17, fasc. 12, sottof. 2

11 ASSo, Raccolta Romegialli, b. 17, fasc. 12, sottof. 2

12 ASSo, Raccolta Romegialli, b. 22, fasc. 9, sottof. 12

13 Archivio storico comunale di Sondrio, b. 171, fasc. 1



## On the Orobic side, Albosaggia and the church of San Salvatore

It can be further attested that the parishes of villages on the Orobic side near Sondrio, the main town of the valley, used to perform communal religious processions evoking rainfall whose final destination was the church of San Salvatore in Albosaggia. Considered at that time - and still today - as one of the oldest places of worship in the entire valley, this church would later become known for being the burial site of immense human remains.<sup>14</sup> During over two decades as parish priest in both Albosaggia and Caiolo, Bernardo Petrucci left notes about these religious parades. On April 19, 1807, in response to inquiries from his superior, Andrea Sertorio, vicar forane of Sondrio, Petrucci stated:

[...] Great is the devotion not only of the People of Albosaggia, but also of all the nearby Parishes, who contribute in procession to the public needs, even though it is located on a mountain, that is, a disastrous and almost solitary *Alpe*.<sup>15</sup>

In his personal diary, the so-called *Effemeridi* - in which local and major events are reported alongside observations of trends in various fields, and consequently meteorological conditions - Petrucci indicated that the church of San Salvatore was the designated arrival point for at least three ritual processions, which were held with the specific intention of bringing an end to periods of drought.

At the beginning of this month [August 1803] there was a great drought. We went in process to S. Salvatore, the Novena of the Virgin of the Assumption was said, and God, moved with compassion, granted the much needed water.<sup>16</sup>

The drought continues. Public prayers are held everywhere, but the water cannot be seen. On the 21st [July 1806], standing in procession at S. Salvatore. The weather was clear, windy and cold, yet those despondent souls received a

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14 “La Comparrocchiale di S. Salvatore è cospicua per la sua antichità, e per la particolare divozione che si professa alle anime defunte, le di cui ossa ivi si trovano. Infatti è sorprendente il numero delle Ossa, che ivi si trovano, e sembra incredibile che in quella Chiesa possa essere stati sepolti tanti cadaveri. Si osservano eziando delle Ossa di straordinaria grandezza, quali da tutti gl’osservatori hanno ecitato meraviglia.” (ASDC, Curia, Miscellanea, b.4 fasc.1, s.fasc. 22, f. 3v)

15 “Grande s’è la divozione non solo del Popolo d’Albosaggia, ma ancora di tutte le vicine Parrocchie, quali concorrono processionalmente ne’ pubblici bisogni, benché trovasi sopra un monte, ossia Alpe disastroso, e quasi solitario.” (ADSC, Curia, Miscellanea, b.4 fasc.1, s.fasc. 22, f. 3v)

16 “Nel principio di questo mese [agosto 1803] si provò una grande siccità. S’andò processualmente a S. Salvatore, si fece la Novena della Vergine Assunta, e Dio mosso a compassione concesse l’acqua tanto necessaria.” (ASSo, Raccolta Romegialli, b. 18, fasc. 16, f. 12v)

fair amount of rain that same evening, which then resumed on the 24th, and now the campaign is very promising and has advanced. Although rye and wheat suffered due to the dry weather, and consequently the harvest was very poor in the Plains.<sup>17</sup>

[July 1807] The countryside is what can be called beautiful. The drought now makes us fear. Prayers, offices, processions are held, and God shed some water at the end of the month. We hope for more to come. We also went to S. Salvatore, to the Madonna, and to Moda, and every evening it always came a little water, so much so that the countryside did not get worse.<sup>18</sup>

As reported, lack of precipitation was a significant cause for concern, even fear, particularly considering the absence of any substantial irrigation systems or water storage infrastructure in the area during dry summer months. Ultimately, the site where people gathered for *public needs*, which is to say, for the necessity of rainwater, was San Salvatore, where they sought intercession, either directly from God or indirectly through prayers to Madonna. However, Petrucci never alluded to any rituals about rainwater that did not conform to Catholic standards during his years of service. There are no mentions of non-standard rituals in both his personal documents and the pastoral care questionnaire sent to him prior to Bishop Carlo Rovelli's visit in 1796. It is of interest to note that there are no other individuals, either before or after Petrucci, who ever made mention of such rituals.<sup>19</sup>

This absence may be the main reason why Remo Bracchi, the most prominent linguist of the Valtellina dialect, appeared dubious regarding the existence of water-related rituals involving human skull bones in the past. He dismissed them as a “[...] remembrance of a rain ritual that appears to hark back to other times and other regions [that] is handed down.”<sup>20</sup> His proficiency in the domain of local folkloric studies is held in such high esteem that it is not uncommon for both amateurs and academics to have always referred to

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17 “La siccità continua. Pubbliche orazioni si fanno d’ogni dove, ma l’acqua non si vede. Nel dì 21 [luglio 1806] stando processionalmente a S. Salvatore. Il tempo era Sereno, Ventoso, e freddo, eppure quelle anime defonte c’ottennero la sera stessa una discreta pioggia, che poi riprese nel dì 24, ed ora la Campagna ripromette assai, ed è avanzata. Sebbene la segale e fromento abbi patito per l’asciutto, e per conseguenza la raccolta fu scarsissima nelle Pianure.” (ASSo, Raccolta Romegialli, b. 18, fasc. 16, f. 22v)

18 “[Luglio 1807] La Campagna è quello che si pò dire di bello. La Siccità ora ci fà temere. Si fanno Orazioni, Uffici, Processioni, e Dio sul finir del Mese mudò qualche po’ d’acqua. Si spira ne verrà dell’altra. Anco noi siamo andati a S. Salvatore, alla Madonna, ed alla Moda, ed ogni sera venne sempre un po’ d’acqua, tanto che la Campagna non andava peggiorando.” (ASSo, Raccolta Romegialli, b. 18, fasc. 16, f. 25r)

19 The question of why is addressed later in the final paragraph.

20 “Ad Albossaggia si tramanda memoria di un rito di pioggia che sembra richiamarsi ad altri tempi e ad altre latitudini.” (*Nomi e volti della paura nelle valli dell’Adda e del Mera* 2009 : 82)

these rituals as fictional legends.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, prior to an analysis of these rituals as attempts to determine the precipitation cycle trend, it is necessary to reaffirm their historicity. By doing so, the focus is directed towards accounts that have hitherto been overlooked.

## The rainfall rite

In his extensive research into Italian popular traditions in the 19th century, Giovanni Tassoni (1977: 135) identified water-related rituals taking place in Albosaggia by referencing the contribution of Giambattista Marchesi, published in July 1898 for *Archivio per le Tradizioni Popolari*. In his article, Marchesi remarks on the use of a bell known as *baiona*, which was specifically designed to be rung only during storms in order to dispel them, but also briefly reports how, in times of need – notably during drought or potential flooding of the Livrio creek – local farmers would visit the church of San Salvatore to retrieve large skulls of the deceased and bath/wash them in the nearby brook, with the intention of appeasing the spirits of the deceased in antiquity.<sup>22</sup>

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21 “Da sempre la chiesa di S. Salvatore ha alimentato una religiosità e una venerazione ammantate da un alone ricco di suggestioni evocatrici di quei riti misteri tipici dell’era pagana e dei quali non era scevro nemmeno il nascere del Cristianesimo [...] Intorno a S. Salvatore fioriscono religiosità e superstizione, leggenda e storia [...] Nell’ossario erano visibili, sino a non molto tempo fa, ossa dalle proporzioni eccezionali e per esse la popolazione ebbe un culto singolare. Era credenza diffusa infatti che quei teschi e quegli scheletri nell’ossario, situato sul lato sud della chiesa e accessibile a tutti, avessero poteri miracolosi per cui, quando si scatenavano i temporali estivi e i tuoni, il vento, i lampi e la grandine sembravano minacciare l’esistenza delle loro povere abitazioni, la donna più anziana della comunità scendeva nell’ossario, prelevava uno dei teschi più grossi e si recava nel vicino vangelo per un lavacro rituale” (Paganoni C., *San Salvatore: miti, riti, leggenda e storia*, in *Notiziario Banca Popolare di Sondrio* (num.71), pp. 111-112)

[English]: “The church of S. Salvatore has always nurtured a religiosity and veneration shrouded in an aura rich in suggestions evoking those mystery rites typical of the pagan era and of which even the birth of Christianity was not free [...] Around S. Salvatore, religiosity and superstition, legend and history flourish [...] In the ossuary, until not long ago, bones of exceptional proportions were visible and the population had a singular cult for them. It was in fact a widespread belief that those skulls and skeletons in the charnel, located on the south side of the church and accessible to all, had miraculous powers so that, when summer storms broke out and thunder, wind, lightning and hail seemed to threaten the existence of their poor homes, the oldest woman in the community went down into the ossuary, took one of the largest skulls and went to the nearby gospel for a ritual washing”.

22 “Nella chiesa di S. Salvatore, la più antica di Valtellina, son conservati certi grandi teschi di morti. In tempo di siccità, oppure quando il Livrio troppo ingrossato minaccia la campagna, i contadini salgono lassù, prendono i teschi e li vanno a bagnare e a lavare nell’ acqua del torrente, perché credono così di propiziarsi gli spiriti di quegli antichi defunti.” (*In Valtellina* 1898: 422)

Another attestation of this ritual can be found in the diaries of Bruno Galli-Valerio,<sup>23</sup> in which he documented his hiking expeditions between 1898 and 1910. In the preface of his memoir, the Professor recollects his ascent of the Liri Valley in the company of Dr. Carini, who selected the occasion to ascertain the dimensions of preserved crania and bones in the charnel of San Salvatore. Prior to resuming their journey, the local priest cautioned them against the risk of interchanging the two skulls that Galli-Valerio reports were placed on one of the three altars of the church. Indeed, it was made clear to them that, under the attentive observation of the local population, switching the crania was believed to have potentially fatal consequences. This was because, by bringing the appropriate skull close to a creek, one of them was specifically used to induce precipitation, and the other to evoke the sun.<sup>24</sup> These rituals, though, can be traced even further back in time.

Despite its lack of clarity and brevity, a notable reference to these local rainwater rituals can be found in a guide published in 1873 at the behest of the local section of the Club alpino italiano (CAI).<sup>25</sup> This publication reports on the existence of a distinctive cult centred on the colossal skeletons preserved in San Salvatore, practised by the villagers from nearby towns.<sup>26</sup> A further reference, concise yet more substantial, can be drawn from historian Cesare Cantù, an eminent figure in the intellectual realm of Risorgimental

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23 Bruno Galli-Valerio was professor at the University of Lausanne, where he had been teaching veterinary for 40 years. He published as a hiking enthusiast *Cols et sommets* in 1911, a collection of all the writings and descriptions about his crossings of the Alps. The first Italian edition would be published posthumous in 1993. Differently from all the other excursions, the episode here summarized has no date. In fact it is recalled in a list of folkloristic uses and customs in the preface of the book that is titled *Attorno a Sondrio*. But it's sure that the occasion nor did occur before 1888, the year of the first trek described, nor after 1910, year of the latest one.

24 "...per un'altra serie di passi, si porti verso ovest nella valle del Liri al romantico eremo di S. Salvatore. Troverà là ampio ristoro alle sue fatiche nella Pensione Alpina, le cui finestre apronsi sul gran panorama del Bernina e del Disgrazia. Se egli s'interessa di antropologia, troverà nell'ossario della chiesupola degli scheletri interessantissimi. Ne ho misurato un gran numero con il dott. Carini, molti anni fa. Il curato, autorizzandoci, ci aveva detto: - Per amor del cielo, non mischiate i due crani che trovansi sull'altare. I contadini li portano di quando in quando vicino al torrente, l'uno per far piovere, l'altro per avere il sole. Uno scambio potrebbe aver delle conseguenze funeste -. Il brav'uomo non aveva l'aria di credere all'azione miracolosa dei due crani, ma essendovi dei realisti più realisti del re, vi son dei credenti più credenti del loro curato. E noi li vedemmo infatti fissare i loro occhi luccicanti nel mentre misuravamo i crani in questione, per ben sorvegliare che li rimettavamo nuovamente ai loro rispettivi posti! Ci parve non esserci sbagliati!" (*Punte e passi* 1993: 37-38)

25 Club alpino italiano (Italian Alpine Club) was founded in 1863 in Turin by Quintino Sella. The club's aim is to valorize the mountain climbing among the Alps "in all its manifestations, the knowledge and study of the mountains, especially the Italian ones, and the defense of their natural environment" (*Club alpino italiano: Statuto* : Title 1 - Article 1)

26 "La tradizione pretende che essa sia stata edificata da cristiani bergamaschi, quando ancora il culto pagano prevaleva nella regioni orobie, e che quivi, per salvarli dalle profanazioni, si trasportassero i cadaveri dei cristiani morti di là dei monti. Vi si conservano tutt'ora alcuni colossali scheletri, pei quali gli abitanti dei vicini villaggi hanno un culto singolare" (*Guida alle acque minerali della Valtellina*, 1873: 56)

and post-Unitarian Italy. It is noteworthy that the following reference dates to 1847; it is the oldest documentary attestation to the ritual available:

In a municipality near Sondrio, a peculiar method is employed during severely dry weather. A skull from a revered ossuary is taken and submerged in a stream until the desired rainfall occurs. Since this remedy is only used in emergencies, rainfall usually comes quickly.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, further evidence pertaining to the practice of these rituals has been recorded in the journal *Cenni statistici e notizie patrie*:

And before anything else it is up to them [the Teachers] to clear the minds of the young people of Valtellina of those prejudices that they have sucked from their birth, and direct them to those healthy readings [...] And to speak of the prejudices and superstitions that are common among the people, and always to their detriment, it should be made clear once and for all: how it is not true that the doctor has the ampoule for the deadly poison for cholera, and to prove it with facts; how dangerous it is to ring the bells when a storm is coming; *how false it is to dip the skulls of the dead in the water to obtain rain*; no less foolish is the belief in the apparition of souls. Furthermore, remove from their minds the idea of witches and their spells [...]<sup>28</sup>

These written testimonies do not constitute first-hand reports, since they were not compiled while or after assisting the rituals. Nevertheless, they prove the existence of this practice, at least as far as the nineteenth century is concerned. Their temporal distribution not only demonstrates continuity of the rituals throughout the entire century, but also suggests the possibility of its practice in preceding ones. This hypothesis, however, remains largely unsubstantiated by historical evidence, precluding a definitive confirmation or further speculations about the origins or relations of the rituals with similar ones.<sup>29</sup>

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27 “Un altro strano rimedio è usato in un comune vicino di Sondrio. Quando la stagione corra pericolosamente asciutta, prendono un teschio da un ossario venerato, e lo sommergono in un rigagno, finché la pioggia desiderata non arrivi. Poiché il rimedio si fa ne’ casi estremi, di rado l’acqua importata si fa aspettare.” (*Racconti* 1847 : 246)

28 “E prima d’ogni altra cosa incumbe ad essi [i Maestre e le Maestre] di sgombrare dalla mente de’ giovani valtelinesi que’ pregiudizi che succhiano dal loro nascere, e dirigerli a quelle sane letture ... E per dir de’ pregiudizi e delle superstizioni che corrono fra il popolo, e sempre a suo danno, dovrebbero una volta chiarirlo: come non sia vero che il medico abbia l’ampollina pel mortifero veleno pei cholerosi, e provarlo coi fatti; come pericolo il suonar le campane al giungere di un temporale; falso il tuffare nelle acque i teschi da morto per ottenere la pioggia; non meno che sciocca la credenza nell’apparizione delle anime. Toglierli inoltre dalla mente l’idea delle streghe e de’ loro malefici” (*Cenni statistici e notizie patrie: strenna per l’anno 1856*. pp. 77-78)

29 Since Roman times, Valtellina was inhabited by Celts, Bradley’s report may be noteworthy: “Among the most intriguing objects unearthed at what has come to be known as Coventina’s well at Carrawburgh

## The role of elderly women

It is imperative to acknowledge the feminine aspect of the ritual at this juncture; the use of *maschile sovraesteso* (overextended masculine) in the available written accounts obscure the issue.<sup>30</sup> With the exception of Cantù's decision to opt for the impersonal form, the rite is generally described by employing the terms *abitanti*, *contadini* and *giovani valtellinesi*, that is to say, words in the masculine plural.

Nevertheless, the role of women is highlighted in two local oral testimonies, albeit in a problematic manner. The accounts of water-related rituals in Albosaggia were collected decades after the remembered events, and it is reasonable to assume that they pertain to one of the last performances, or, paradoxically, the final one. In the 1980s, Ms. Candida Mattarelli, an 89-year-old woman, recalled an event that seemingly marked the shift in the rite's reception, from acceptance to rejection. She was in her youth during this account:

During a particularly dry summer, it had not rained for about two months and the meadows were parched by drought, the farmers were very worried about the survival of their livestock and themselves. The rogations had been made, but everything was useless, the sun continued to shine, not even a shadow of rain. An old peasant woman then thought of those miraculous skulls as an extreme remedy. She went down to the ossuary, carefully chose the largest

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are a collection of small bronze heads and a human skull. The Celts were well known as a head hunter and for believing that the head was the most important part of the body, being the source of prophecy and wisdom and symbolizing divine power. The discovery of human skulls at a number of wells and springs has led to speculation that there may have been a close association between this head cult and the Celts' veneration of sacred waters" (*Water: A Spiritual History* 2012 : 43) About the head cult, see also Clarke, D., *The head cult: tradition and folklore surrounding the symbol of the severed human head in the British Isles*, PhD thesis, University of Sheffield, 1998. In his research, Clarke examines the findings of human skulls in locations characterised by the presence of water, with a particular focus on wells. This analysis suggests a potential association between ritual decapitation and the consecration of these sites. By enlarging the focus from mountainous Valtellina to lowlands in Lombardy, a strong resemblance with a rite in the community of Cornaredo during the 16th century has been documented. In the volume *Archivio Spirituale, Sez. XIV, vol. 67*, which was dated between 1576 and 1579 and found in the *Archivio Vescovile* by Antonio Lurati in the 1960s, there are references to various superstitions of the whole region. More specifically, regarding the aforementioned town, it reads "per far piovere, si pigliono teste e altre ossa di morto, e si buttino ne i fontanili" [English]: "to make it rain, heads and other bones of the dead are taken and thrown into the water springs" (Lurati, o., *Superstizioni lombarde (e lev-entinesi) del tempo di San Carlo Borromeo*, in *Vox romanica* (vol. 27), 1968, p. 245

<sup>30</sup> Use of the Italian expression *maschile sovraesteso* (overextended masculine) is meant to problematize the fact that Italian historical disciplines seem to be indifferent or unaware of their present chauvinism and its representational force and normative power in documents of the past. At that time, and still today, for example, there is a linguistic convention for Italian speakers to refer to a group of people as men regardless of the genders of its members.

skull, and went to wash it in the nearby valley sure of obtaining the result desired by everyone. [...] Then finally the rain began to fall. Everyone was overcome with sudden joy. 'The dead have given us grace', they said to each other. They had spoken too quickly. The rain turned into a hurricane, the wind uprooted the trees, some roofs were blown off, the streams and streams swelled fearfully and then the hail fell [...] People then thought that all that chaos had been caused by the sacrilegious act that had upset the peace of the ossuary.<sup>31</sup>

Two local historians have also retrieved a memory of a similar incident. It is possible this represents the same event, recalled by different individuals, but it is cited by Bracchi without acknowledgement of Tassoni's contribution.

Ol Marii di Furtii, also known as Marinàal, because she was short, once took one of those skulls and brought it to the Valley to wash it. It hadn't rained in a long time. It was worth trying to wash a *cràpa da mòrt*, to see if a little water came out, as had happened other times. But that time a storm broke out, causing damage. Then everyone scold her!"<sup>32</sup>

The evidence suggests that this ritualistic practice had been a long-standing remedy for drought and that the responsibility for collecting one of the 'miraculous' skulls at San Salvatore was assigned to elderly female figures.<sup>33</sup> The negative perception can be attributed to a diluted version of heartfelt beliefs and prejudices related to female sorcery

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31 "Durante un'estate particolarmente secca, non pioveva da circa due mesi e i prati erano arsi dalla siccità, i contadini erano molto preoccupati per la sopravvivenza del bestiame e per loro stessi. Erano state fatte le rogazioni, ma tutto fu inutile, il sole continuava a splendere, della pioggia nemmeno l'ombra. Una vecchia contadina pensò allora, come estremo rimedio, a quei teschi "miracolosi". Scese nell'ossario, scelse con cura il teschio più grosso, e andò a lavarlo nella vicina valletta (Val dela Gésa), sicura di ottenere il risultato tanto desiderato da tutti. "Vedrete che pioverà", assicurò. Infatti all'improvviso il cielo si oscurò, tuoni e lampi squarciavano l'aria. Poi finalmente cominciò a cadere la pioggia. Tutti furono presi da un'improvvisa allegria. "I morti ci hanno fatto la grazia", si dicevano l'un l'altro. Avevano parlato troppo in fretta. La pioggia si trasformò in uragano, il vento sradicò gli alberi, alcuni tetti furono scoperti, i torrenti e i ruscelli si gonfiarono paurosamente e poi cadde la grandine. La gente era terrorizzata, se ne stava chiusa in casa a pregare, qualcuno buttava manciate di sale sul sagrato della chiesa per scongiurare il pericolo; furono suonate anche le campane ma il nubifragio imperversò per giorni e giorni. La gente pensò che tutto quel finimondo fosse stato causato dal gesto sacrilego che aveva sconvolto la pace dell'ossario." (*Albosaggia, appunti di storia e di arte. Vita contadina. Tradizioni e leggende* 1987 : ) It is necessary, firstly, to underline that the Italian translation reported here is, in its turn, a transcription of what the woman interviewed said in her local dialect, and secondly, that it is a relatively partial account.

32 "Ol Marii di Furtii, detta anche Marinàal, perché era piccola, una volta ha preso uno di quei teschi e l'ha portato nella Valle, per lavarlo. Era tanto che non pioveva. Valeva la pena provare a lavare una *cràpa da mòrt*, per vedere se veniva un po' d'acqua, come era successo altre volte. Ma quella volta è scoppiato un temporale, che ha fatto danni. Allora tutti a sgridarla!" (*La vita sui monti di Albosaggia* 2004 : 40)

and supernatural powers. These beliefs and prejudices endured over centuries until the days in which these rituals were lastly enacted. By acknowledging this dynamic, one can begin to comprehend the ecological perspective that underlies the ritual.

As in many parts of Modern Europe, Valtellina engaged in persecutions of individuals accused of practising malignant activities. Women, in particular, were often accused of summoning storms through the use of malefic dust (Bracchi 2010 : 3).<sup>34</sup> Francesco Angiolini's report, compiled in 1812 during his period of service as Prefect of the Adda Department, provides evidence of the endurance of witchcraft beliefs over the nineteenth century.<sup>35</sup> In common with the other heads of the twenty-four administrative subdivisions of the Napoleonic Kingdom of Italy, Angiolini was mandated to ask a series of questions based on the *Questionnaires Généraux* of the Celtic Academy as modeled by Giovanni Scopoli. His answers concerning religious and popular belief in his region are particularly notable; it is needless to state that exercising authority as the most prestigious administrator of the region does not guarantee more objectivity. However, his report likely contains more accuracy about how detrimental these preconceived and unfounded opinions could have been on a social level.

[...] It is a common belief that sorcerers, malice, and envy are responsible for charms, illnesses, and misfortunes of all kinds. [...] Furthermore, this persistence in such prejudice is mainly due to the terrible preaching [...] and ignorance of the courts. [...] Such deep and tenacious prejudices against the existence of sorcerers exist that some families believe the profession is hereditary. Unfortunately, even a beautiful and morally excellent girl who possesses such talents risks being rejected by the lowest of beggars despite her ability to bring them fortune and happiness.<sup>36</sup>

33 The utilisation of skulls and human remains, specifically from ossuaries in the Alpine region, for medical purposes or as amulets, has been documented during the period spanning from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. This phenomenon, which is of particular interest, is discussed in Farrow, T.J., *Relics of (the) people: Ossuary Remains in Postmedieval European Folk Practice*

34 The most infamous local trials against women accused of practicing sorcery were held in Bormio between 1629 and 1632. For further details, see Silvestri's essays at the website <https://www.lombardiabeniculturali.it/bormio/saggi/>

35 Another account of this kind of belief, for a later period (1850's), has already been cited. See the extract from *Cenni* previously cited.

36 "Di qui nasce che generalmente si crede ai fattucchieri, alla malignità ed invidia, de' quali vengono attribuiti i fascini, le malattie e le disgrazie d'ogni genere. [...] Dippiù, questa persistenza in siffatto pregiudizio devesi anche attribuire per la massima parte alla pessima predicazione, che già da tanto tempo trovasi in possesso di questi pergami, e all'ignoranza de' tribunali. I preti ed i giudici, lungi dal combattere sì perniciosi errori, sembrano anzi sanzionarli coll'apporvi i primi il suggello della religione, i secondi quello della giustizia. Quegli esercitavano, questi facevano abbruciare. Questo pregiudizio dell'esistenza degli stregoni ha gettate sì profonde e tenaci radici, che se ne suppone ereditaria la professione in alcune famiglie; ed una fanciulla che abbia la disgrazia di appartenervi, sia pur bella e di eccellenti costumi, ella rischia di vedersi rifiutata dal più vil pezzente di cui potrebbe fare la fortuna e la felicità." (*Rapporto del Prefetto Angiolini in Arti e Tradizioni* 1973 : 133-34)



At the time Ms. Candidelli was in her youth – that is to say, the first and second decades of the twentieth century, during which the episode she recalled had taken place – the severe repercussions of being labelled as a witch or wizard had been progressively reduced. This is probably the reason that the rite is labeled as a *sacrilegious act* instead of a magical one. At the same time, perhaps, it could have been considered a ritual violation compared to the standardised formula rather than in its strict sense; it seems on that ritual occasion, a generic skull retrieved from the charnel was used instead of one of the intended two left on the altar of San Salvatore.

While it remains unclear whether the ritual conducted on each occasion was deemed successful, it is evident that the negative outcome led to the officiant (and the rite itself) acquiring a negative connotation in the collected memories, rather than the reverse.

### **The reverence for the dead and the cult of Madonna**

Angiolini's report also facilitates a reconstruction of the ecological perspective that informed the rituals. Firstly, it illustrates the lasting and costly reverence paid to the deceased by the inhabitants of Valtellina, as well as how their contribution to agricultural labour was considered to be active in daily life. Concerning the spiritual connection between the living and the dead, he observed that:

The people of Valtellina are very inclined towards piety and veneration towards the souls of the deceased. No attention is paid to economy in providing them with respite services; and the farmer advises them of his needs, and among the dangers that sometimes appear to help their friends and neighbors, to take care of the overwhelming agricultural chores, or when a loaded donkey falls to them, to lend a hand to raise it again.<sup>37</sup>

Secondly, he reported two singular opinions about regarding the relationship between the living and the dead. The first of these is of particular relevance:

The former is that some of the ancient cemeteries are believed to have preferentially received the mortal remains of people who were generally more grateful to God than the others.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> “Il popolo valtellino è assai inclinato alla pietà ed alla venerazione verso le anime dei trapassati. Non si bada ad economia per procurar loro dei servizi di requie; ed il contadino si raccomanda loro de' suoi bisogni, e fra i pericoli si pretende che alle volte appariscono ad aiutare i loro amici e vicini, per isbrigarli delle soverchie faccende dell'agricoltura, o quando cade loro un giumento carico, a porger mano per rialzarlo.” (*Rapporto del Prefetto Angiolini in Arti e Tradizioni* 1973 : 134)

Finally, Angiolini's report demonstrates an evident attachment by the people of Valtellina to the figure of the Madonna, to the extent that the popular devotion seems to defy the religious norms of the time:

The people pride themselves on a great devotion towards the Blessed Virgin, to whom a declared partiality for this valley is attributed. She is venerated everywhere, nor is there a parish church in which She does not have an altar and sometimes three, under different denominations - for example of Carmelo, of the Rosary, of the Snow, of the Addolorata, of the Good Counsel, of the Girdle, of the Immaculate, of the Assumption, and so on. The rudeness and simplicity of the plebs is such that it often happens that they commit irreverence at the high altar to address that of the Blessed Virgin.<sup>39</sup>

These are very significant elements, insofar as it was believed that the ossuary of San Salvatore was the oldest in the region and that the phenomenon of religious devotion to the Madonna seems to recall that of the cult of the black Madonnas, linked to ancient deities of fertility or water (Jorio 2008; van Cronenburg 2004). Therefore, a correlation between womanhood and the element of water may stand as a relevant cultural fact in regards the rituals of Albosaggia: not only were elderly women the ones to perform the rainfall rite, but also one of the altars in the church of San Salvatore was dedicated to the Immaculate Virgin Mary.

### **Around, behind, and beyond the morphology of the rite**

The rainfall rituals described herein are similar to the processions referred to by Petrucci, as they are both performing acts with allegedly ecological consequences. However, their goals differ: indeed, as Marchesi and Galli-Valerio reported at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the objective of making it rain was as important as the objective of stopping it. It can be ruled out that the same dual function existed before, since previous sources mention only the former. The discrepancy can be explained by hypothesizing a possible ritual adaptation to the changed environmental conditions of Valtellina.

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38 “La prima si è che alcuni degli antichi cimiteri sono a preferenza creduti aver ricettate le spoglie mortali di persone generalmente più grate a Dio, che non gli altri.” (*Rapporto del Prefetto Angiolini in Arti e Tradizioni* 1973 : 134)

39 “Il popolo si picca di una grande divozione verso la beata Vergine, a cui viene attribuita una dichiarata parzialità per questa valle. Dessa è venerata da per tutto, né avvi chiesa parrocchiale in cui non abbia un altare e talvolta tre, sotto differenti denominazioni – per esempio del Carmelo, del Rosario, della Neve, dell'Addolorata, del Buon Consiglio, della Cintura, dell'Immacolata, dell'Assunzione, e così discorrendo. La rozzezza e semplicità della plebe è tale, che spesso accade che commettansi delle irriverenze all'altar maggiore per rivolgersi a quello della beata Vergine.” (*Rapporto del Prefetto Angiolini in Arti e Tradizioni* 1973 : 135)

Regarding the malleability of cultural phenomena related to an ecosystem, it has been recently observed in various areas that ritual performances are adopting new meanings and functions due to altered environmental and meteorological conditions caused by climate change (Ombati 2021). Despite the differences today, Valtellina of the nineteenth century faced progressively exponential deforestation that began to accelerate during Napoleonic era: the forest coverage hit its lowest point of extension around the 1860s (Agnoletti et al. 2003; Zoia 2003). It is reasonable to assume that the resulting higher hydrological risk throughout the region put a well-known threat to a new level of danger.<sup>40</sup> The awareness or even the fear of floods is likely to have inspired the addition of an option for stopping rain (existing or threatened) to the already-existing function of producing it. The function of stopping the rain must therefore be considered complementary, but certainly not secondary.

Both the number of participants in these rituals and the frequency of their performance are uncertain due to the lack of detailed descriptions, but it is certain that the decisive gesture for inducing or repelling rain was the contact of human skulls with surface water. It is impossible to determine whether the required cranium had been always collected directly from one of the altars of the church of San Salvatore, or from its charnel. In fact, there is no record of two crania being used for decoration on one of the three altars, which may have been intentionally left unreported by local clergy.<sup>41</sup> Galli-Valerio's account, however, suggests that the ritual had undergone some form of standardization by the time he visited the church.

At the same time, there is little doubt that the two skulls were alternately submerged into the waters of the Livrio creek, most likely in its upper branch. Not only due to its proximity

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40 Despite the fact that uncontrolled deforestation had already begun to impact the hydrological levels of much of the Italian peninsula by the late eighteenth century, and despite the fact that the side effects of this practice were widely recognised and often disregarded (Vecchio 1978 : 198), it took over fifty years for the intellectual and scientific classes of Lombardy to properly address the causal link in alpine regions such as Valtellina. Trees are vital for absorbing excess rainfall and maintaining the stability of steep terrain through their root systems. Petrucci's *Effemiridi* are valuable not only for their documentation of one of the earliest episodes following the widespread deforestation of the Valtellina region, but also for their role in highlighting the pervasive concern over this issue among previous generations and legislators.

“L’indolenza de’ rappresentanti Comunali all’epoca della Rivoluzione sino presente nel contenere i contadini nel taglio delle Piante nei Boschi Tensi fu il motivo di questa luttuosa disgrazia, mentre non fu la quantità d’acqua, ma le rovine che seco l’acqua traeva nel Bosco così detto della Beccaria. Bosco, che i nostri Vecchi lo consideravano come Santo, e che nessuno si sarebbe azzardato tagliare un sol legno [...]” (ASSo, Raccolta Romegialli, b. 18, fasc. 16, f. 26r). In summary, he ascertained that the flooding of the Torchione river in December 1807 was not attributable to the higher-than-average amount of rainfall; rather, it was a consequence of the destruction of the wooded areas that had been intentionally left intact in the past to avoid water-related environmental hazards. To emphasise their inviolability, as a religious man, he describes the woods as *sacred*, whereas the common term was *boschi tensi*.

41 As previously outlined in note 19.

to the church's site, but mostly because it is the main watercourse that runs throughout the surrounding *alpeggi* [high altitude pasture meadows]. From comparing the sources, it is unclear whether the skull was simply immersed or carefully washed, but from the few oral testimonies available, it is certain that the ritual act should be performed only by elderly women. Ultimately, one could argue that a deep connection between femininity, death, and water had been established.

This multiple associative crossing and linking can be decoded both in terms of similitudes by analogy and of symbolic proximity by opposition or juxtaposition. The skull is considered one of the most expressive physical remains of a dead person and, therefore, the interface through which is possible to reach out to their spirit, as Marchesi points out. Additionally, according to the common beliefs about death outlined by Angiolini, those spirits were felt to be closer to God than others since their mortal remains were buried into the ossuary of San Salvatore, which, at that time, was already considered to be one of the most ancient churches of the entire valley.

Old age was the condition that granted ritual use of the skulls to the performer, since it is the closest condition to death (with the exception of disease), even if it corresponds to infertility in women. In other words, only those who once had been able to conceive life were empowered to handle death. As a result, female-ness must have been the *conditio sine qua non* for performing such an important ritual around the rain; womanhood is strongly associated with life and with the element of water, as the devotion to the figure of the Madonna seems to suggest.

### **Final remarks: archival silence, women's agency, and *eco-rituals***

As previously noted, neither Bernardo Petrucci nor his predecessors or successors commented on this ritual. When Petrucci was asked about possible *abusi* [non-compliant behaviour] among his parishioners, he replied that there were many and incorrigible. He identified the consumption of wine on Sunday and other religious festivities as the worst.<sup>42</sup> His response was vague and incomplete, which is puzzling given the fact that he was an attentive observer. His silence, and that of all parish priests, is remarkable, but can be explained by several non-exclusive hypotheses.

While it is plausible some priests never attended such rituals due to the remoteness of the church, it is more likely true to say that others may have remained intentionally silent

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42 "Abusi ve ne sono, ma in questi tempi non si saprebbe come rimediare, il maggior abuso è la frequenza all'Osteria anco ne tempi di sacri Vesperì, e della Dottrina, ma la maggior parte sono Artigiani di Sondrio, che vengono a diporto. L'Osteria è però lontana dalla Chiesa" (ASDC, Curia, Visite Pastoralì, cart. 207, fasc. 2, f. 55)

before their superiors.<sup>43</sup> Between 1892 and 1908, for example, Albosaggia received three pastoral visits and questionnaires from the diocese of Como. These questionnaires included a specific question on the management of storms, which, however, he did not answer (except for a reference to the *baiona* and collective prayers, above). The period in question coincides almost exactly with that in which Galli-Valerio carried out his numerous alpine expeditions, so that it can be said that the rite, although known to the local religious authorities, was never deliberately reported to diocesan representatives. It should also be noted that the rite had been probably ignored during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, even if known, because the diocese of Como was mainly concerned with the spread of Protestantism in Valtellina. Calvinism particularly flourished there, thanks to the religious tolerance of the Grisons.

In the end, it could be assumed that any priests who were aware of these unorthodox rain rituals did not remain in silence from a disinterested tolerance, but rather out of a desire to avoid attracting unwanted attention or annoyance from the bishop's authority, or even out of a self-interest in preserving the good name of their religious work. Whatever the explanation may be, the historicity of these rituals cannot be disregarded or misconstrued as a mere collective fantasy or memory. As seen, the testimonies collected in the 1980's can be supported and solidified by assembling brief descriptions from different sources from the nineteenth century.

This ritual of *making and stopping* rain near the church San Salvatore was intentionally intended to affect material reality. More specifically, the threefold connection between womanhood, death, and water structured a common ecological vision in which rainfall could be influenced by elderly women asking intercession from the most venerated spirits of the valley through a ritualistic interaction of human skulls with surface water. Unquestionably, an ability to manipulate rainfall was highly valued, since both the lack and excess of water made similar impacts, albeit by different means, due to the absence of any irrigation or storage systems.

During dry summers, the scarcity of water created a heightened risk of starvation for all residents of the communities on the Orobian side of Valtellina where San Salvatore is located: the *alpeggi* would become overly dry, jeopardising the livestock being grazed. This would also bring about significant issues in the valley floor, where seasonal restrictions for any grazing activity accompanied agricultural use. On the contrary, extensive and prolonged rainfall could cause the Livrio - or Torchione - to swell, posing a dangerous threat of overflow and destruction to downstream households and fields. The

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43 In relation to social and religious practices that did not conform to post-Tridentine dictates, which were articulated in sacred spaces dedicated to the dead in the region, such as cemeteries, read Della Misericordia, M., *Altari dei morti: spazio sacro, sepulture e celebrazione degli edificatori fra Basso Medioevo e prima Età Moderna (a partire da chiese alpine)*, in (a cura di), Arcangeli, L. & al. *Famiglie e Spazi Sacri nella Lombardia del Rinascimento*, Milano, Scalpendi editore, 2015 pp. 345 - 405

ritual of weather modification in the vicinity of the church of San Salvatore specifically concerns rainwater, and can be regarded as complementary to both irrigation systems and flood management strategies, if not even somewhat compensatory, given the fact that the community of Albosaggia, as well as the surrounding area, was lacking in both. It appears that the rituals documented herein were a last resort, in that they were not performed on a designated fixed date or any set calendar, but rather whenever necessary, during prolonged periods of drought or stormy weather. Therefore, they embody two distinct aspects of a unitary concern in the Alps: the need for an optimal amount of rainwater, on the one hand, for irrigation and, on the other, a need to avoid succumbing to landslides or floods. For these reasons, and since their dual functionality precludes them from being categorised as either rainmaking or fertility rites, they might be designated as *eco-rituals*.

The prefix *eco-* is employed in this sense to denote a ritualistic practice that is beneficial to an economy that is consonant with and subordinate to the principles of ecology. In this context, the term *eco-ritual* refers to a symbolic practice that aim to have a beneficial effect on the local ecosystem and, consequently, on the economic activities taking place in it and simultaneously to protect the community.<sup>44</sup>

Finally, in this case, the concept of women's agency can be extended as a socially and culturally presumed capacity to influence meteorological conditions and obtain a well-balanced amount of rainfall. This ability exerted a dual influence, both ontological and existential, since it was believed to have an impact on the environment's equilibrium, a factor vital for the survival of entire communities. This implies that in a cultural world such as that of the Alps of the past, where the rural economy was embedded in society<sup>45</sup> and both developed within environmental limits imposed by topography and weather conditions, the *eco-ritual* of Albosaggia demonstrates that the role of women was considered crucial to the survival of the whole community, beyond their economic role, marital status, or reproductive status.

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<sup>44</sup> To better understand what the term *eco-ritual* signifies here, it may be helpful to delve into its etymological root: the Greek word *oikos*, meaning 'household.'

<sup>45</sup> Polanyi's critical concept of *embedded economy* describes a human society not economically and socially subordinated to the market and its values (See *The Great Transformation*, 1944).

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