



ROCKY ENCOUNTERS IN THE SACRO BOSCO OF BOMARZO

Thalia Allington-Wood

Abstract

The sculptures of the Sacro Bosco of Bomarzo (c. 1550–80) are all made from one type of stone: peperino. It is an unusual substance for sixteenth-century sculpture, yet the physical makeup of the Sacro Bosco is rarely discussed in detail. This essay brings the material of these statues into focus through an art-historical consideration that deliberately embraces the author's physical encounter with the objects. The immersive experience of Bomarzo is thus investigated through the indivisibility of scholarly and sensory engagement. Exploring contemporary contexts that would have informed how the matter of these sculptures was understood by a sixteenth-century visitor – from natural history to geology and topography – it will be argued that the Sacro Bosco's rock would have invited the historical beholder to engage imaginatively with the generation of stone and the region's local history.

Keywords: materiality, material, sculpture, geology, topography, natural history, Bomarzo, stone

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Biographical note

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Banner image: Photogram of maggots, larvae and flies on bacteria culture in Edgar Lissel's *Bakterium – Vanitas* from his *Bakterium-series* (1999–2001). (Courtesy Edgar Lissel)

ROCKY ENCOUNTERS IN THE SACRO BOSCO OF BOMARZO

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Preface

11 October 2016. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art. I am standing under *Levitated Mass* (2012), a 340-ton lump of diorite granite that rests, as if dropped from the sky, over a corridor cut into the ground. This pathway, the dense boulder directly above, pens me in. The rock seems strange, almost flat, against the cloudless Californian sky. In the afternoon light, its uneven and chipped surface is the same creamy grey as the polished concrete walls either side of me. It appears so much smaller than I know it to be, diminished by the expanse of blue. It could crush me, but it feels distant – physically, emotionally, I cannot reach this monolith. But as I look up, I think of different stone. Memories flood back of touch and surface. I remember Italy and rough rock carved centuries before.

Touching stone

The Sacro Bosco of Bomarzo (c. 1550–80) is an Italian sculptural site nestled in a wooded valley roughly 55 miles north of Rome, commissioned by Pier Francesco (Vicino) Orsini. It is a space that contravenes many expected conventions of Italian renaissance sculpture gardens: comparatively informal, wooded, detached from the villa and filled with colossal, monstrous statues – fighting giants, dragons, sirens and harpies, three-headed dogs and open-mouthed sea creatures (Figs. 3.1 and 3.2).¹ To wander its paths is to enter a different spatial and temporal register; a fantasy made of ‘tante meraviglie’ (‘many wonders’).² It is also to walk in a site dominated by rock. Every sculpture in the Sacro Bosco is hewn from one type of stone: peperino, a dark tufo that is mottled with flecks of basalt, minerals, limestone and black peppercorn-like scoriae that give it its name. Many are carved from boulders

as large, if not larger, than *Levitated Mass*. At the Sacro Bosco stone surrounds you, towers over, accosts and entreats you.

Few critics touch the Sacro Bosco’s peperino in their writing, especially not in depth (a recent exception is Morgan, 2015). But in contrast to *Levitated Mass*, the rock at Bomarzo beckons the touch. Brushing my hands over their forms, I trace the grooves where unknown artists’ chisels chipped away rock, press palms against surfaces and brush fingers along carved shapes. The last time I visited the Sacro Bosco it was a hot and thunderous day in September. Rain made the forest leaves glisten and the stone deepen until almost black. The air smelt wet and earthy. Reaching out for the sculpted surface, my fingers met damp, rough rock. I closed my eyes – the world was cool and coarse.

This paper is about this meeting with stone. How am I to register this rock? Or rather, how would this rock have been understood in the sixteenth century? The two are connected but separate. I seek the possible visceral and intellectual response felt by a humanist-educated cinquecento beholder, historically specific and distanced from my own reaction by centuries, while also wishing to acknowledge the personal context and experience from which art history is invariably researched and written.

My answer to these questions, my grasping at the Sacro Bosco’s rock, and for a period eye and body, has been shaped by new materialism, and the agency – or better, life – it gives to substance (Miller, 2005, pp.6–15; Ingold, 2007; Coole & Frost, 2010; Bennett, 2010; Cole, 2010).³ Lorraine Daston writes that things ‘communicate by what they are as well as by how they mean’, ‘their utterances are never disembodied’ (2007, p.20). Jeffrey Jerome Cohen notes that ‘when matter exerts its right to be the protagonist of its own story, epistemological frames shift’ (2015, p.39). Caroline Walker Bynum, writing from a historicist view, asserts that materials can allow an object to refer beyond itself (2011, p.30).

In this story, the principle character is stone. Peperino hogs the lines and takes centre stage. It is an attempt to think with and through materials, to move art-historical discussions beyond what these sculptures depict, into territory less concerned with iconography (e.g. Tilley, 2008). In doing so, despite a propensity to see the lithic as unchanging and passive, I draw upon renaissance natural history to see the rock at Bomarzo as mutable and the Sacro Bosco as materially concerned with geological forces. If in scholarship

¹ The pervasive formal construct of an ‘Italian renaissance garden’ has been questioned in recent years and linked with the nationalist political agenda of early twentieth-century Italian fascism. See, for example, Dümpelmann (2005), Lazzaro (2005) and Giannetto (2011).

² This quotation comes from an inscription found within the Sacro Bosco which reads: ‘You who enter here, put your mind to it part by part, and tell me if these many wonders were made as trickery or as art’.

³ It is important to acknowledge the feminist roots of the material turn in critical theory and the humanities, see Ahmed (2008) and Alaimo (2010, pp.6–11).



Figure 3.1: Two Fighting Giants, c. 1550–80. Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. (Photo by the author)



Figure 3.2: Fighting Dragon and Lions, c. 1550–80. Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. (Photo by the author)

today there is a material turn, a wish to acknowledge that things have lives, it is a turn that, touching stone at Bomarzo, connects us with those who, no doubt, reached out to feel the same stone over 400 years ago.⁴ These peperino sculptures of the sixteenth century offered an imaginative and physical encounter with

rocky movement, growth and generation. Like my touching of the Sacro Bosco's sculpted stone, these words are geophilic.

Source

Have you ever looked into a quarry? Felt the vertigo? Seen the ground ruptured into a cavernous crater as giant pieces of stony matter are wrenched from it?

⁴ On touch and early modern sculpture see Johnson (2002, 2013).

A quarry makes you realise how ‘the lithic inhabits the secret interiors of the earth’ (Cohen, 2015, p.19). The chipped rock of *Levitated Mass* travelled 106 miles to reach LA. It journeyed at night to avoid traffic disturbance, at a speed slower than walking pace – a colossal, nocturnal pebble. People camped out to watch it pass, as its epic, snail-paced, journey became part of its mythology (*Levitated Mass*, 2013).

In sixteenth-century Italy a statue’s natural source could similarly capture people’s imagination. Cosimo Gaci, writing about the twisted bodies of Giambologna’s marble *Rape of the Sabine* (c. 1579–83), felt compelled to construct a transportation myth for its marble block in which Hercules used a magic rope to carry the precious stone from Seravezza all the way to Florence (1583, pp.23–40). Families, including the Medici, owned their own quarries, where sculptors would select marble for their commissions, lithic lumps that would then, in the words of Bartolomeo Ammannati, be ‘quarried and transported with the investment of much time and not a little expense’ ([1582] 1962, p.118; trans. Cole, 2011, p.93). When visiting renaissance ‘sculpture gardens’ writers would comment on where materials came from. Agostino del Riccio, describing the stony fountains at the garden of Pratolino, spoke of how one saw ‘spugne quarried from the Radicofani region’ along with others ‘that form in the underground conduits at Siena’; at the Boboli gardens, he noted stalactites that had been collected from as far away as Hungary ([1597] 1996, pp.129–30). In the grotto of Villa di Castello near Florence, carved animals made from a dazzling array of stones were installed: a lion from ancient Sienese marble, a rhinoceros from grey granite, a monkey from a veined marble only recently discovered. Just as these exotic animals symbolically travelled from Africa and Asia, their many different stones had travelled from various quarries, their different lithic beginnings displaying their patron’s wealth through material diversity (Lazzaro, 1995).

In an illustration from Jacques Besson’s *Theatrum instrumentorum et machinarum*, first printed in 1571, the connection between stone sculpture and source is made visual as a group of men drag colossal relics – part of a capital, a classical column and an obelisk – out of a mountain covered in craggy stone (1578, plate 30). But you will not find this divorcing of material from its source, required for the sculptures of Villa di Castello, Pratolino and the Boboli gardens, at the Sacro Bosco. At Bomarzo there is no quarry, no painstaking journey. Instead the sculptures are carved directly into colossal boulders naturally embedded into the landscape. The garden is designed using these giant local stones as and where they occur; their size and location determining,

or at least influencing, what was sculpted and where. Rock ‘exerts its right to be the protagonist’. This use of un-quarried stone is striking. I know of only one other sixteenth-century Italian site that uses rock in this way, another Orsini garden, this time at Pitigliano, constructed after work on the Sacro Bosco had begun (Portoghesi, 1955). One of the only surviving sixteenth-century texts to reference the sculptures at Bomarzo focuses on this unusual element. In an agricultural treatise written in the final decades of the sixteenth century, Giovanni Vittore Soderini states:

Nor should one forget to mention that in some palaces of India, in the meadows which surround them, issue out of the earth some lumps of natural rock from which they have carved their idols and some figures of statues of their very fantastic animals ... as at Bomarzo are seen those carved out of natural rocks of more than a huge pebble.

(Soderini, [c. 1580–90] 1902, p.276)

Soderini finds the statues remarkable, even exotic, because they are carved from rocks that are ‘huge’ (‘grandissimo’), ‘natural’ (‘naturali’) and that ‘issue out of the earth’ (‘escono fuor della terra’). The stone in the



Figure 3.3: Mask of Madness, c. 1550–80. Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. (Photo by the author).

Sacro Bosco is extraordinary because it is rooted, still connected to its source.

The sculptures emphasise this material groundedness. There are numerous moments where parts of the boulders are left visible and un-carved, where the sculptures are refused plinths and emerge directly from the ground: the 'mask of madness', carved from a rock embedded into a grassy slope (Figs. 3.3 and 3.4), the female figure that doubles up as a bench, whose body turns into rough boulder (Fig. 3.5), the gaping ogre (also known as the hell's mouth) where you can sit inside a hollowed out stone (Figs. 3.6 and 3.7), the wide-mouthed sea creature by the stream (Fig. 3.8) and the harpy, whose wings remain attached to rock, appearing in relief (Fig. 3.9). Even the often overlooked boat fountain, with its dolphin-like creatures at either end, morphs visibly into the raw moss-covered stone from which it is carved (Figs. 3.10 and 3.11). These moments puncture the visitor's experience. Michel Jeanneret was also stuck by how the statues in the

Sacro Bosco, are 'carved right in the rock as if they were just emerging' (Jeanneret, 2001, p.126). From the sculpture's subject matter, attention is drawn to material, to the rock's physical properties, to the fact that these stones are rooted to the earth.

When thinking of Bomarzo's sculpted, anchored rock, the work I return to repeatedly is the reclining woman (Fig. 3.12). Walking around her you can see where her boulder arises out of the earth, where her body merges with this hunk of matter – stone turning into carved form – where her left hand becomes the rock it grasps (Fig. 3.13). There is something particularly touching about her shapely forms appearing out of this lithic mass 'of more than a huge pebble'. Perhaps it is that she is human, compared to the fantastical beasts of the other sculptures. Or that, unlike statues such as the two-tailed siren, which meet the gaze with dispassionately staring eyes, the reclining woman throws her head back, face turned towards the sky. Her body curves on its hard resting place, knees bent,



Figure 3.4: Mask of Madness (detail), c. 1550–80. Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. (Photo by the author)



Figure 3.5: Female Bench, c. 1550–80. Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. (Photo by the author)



Figure 3.6: Ogre (exterior), c. 1550–80. Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. (Photo by the author)

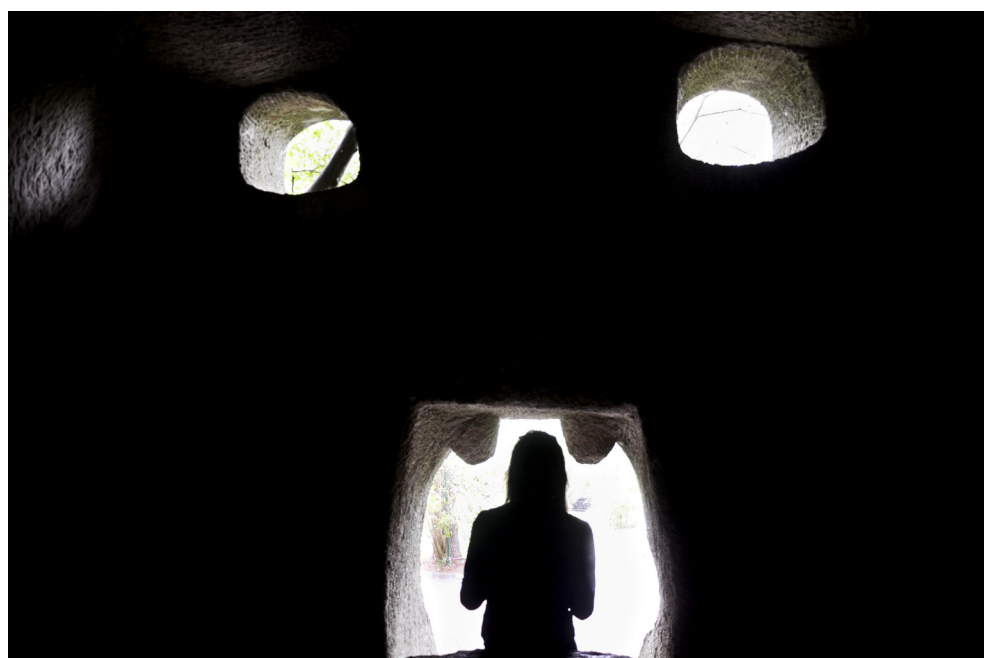


Figure 3.7: Author seen standing in the Ogre's interior in front of the entrance, c. 1550–80. Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. (Photo: Benedict Mortimer)

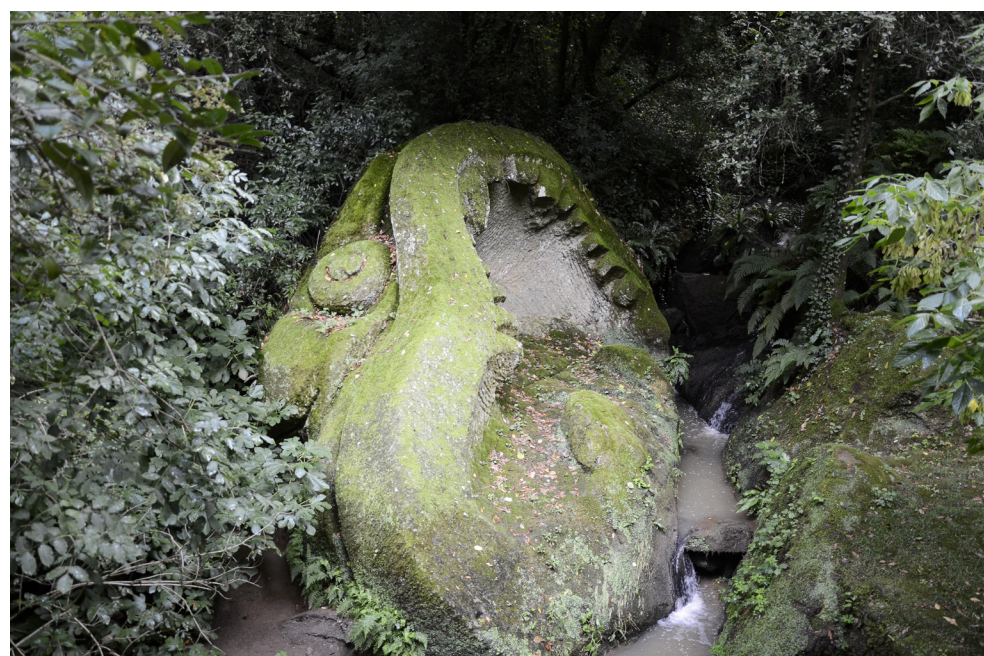


Figure 3.8: Sea Creature by the natural stream, c. 1550–80. Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. (Photo by the author)



Figure 3.9: Harpy, c. 1550–80. Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. (Photo by the author)



Figure 3.10: Boat Fountain, c. 1550–80. Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. (Photo by the author)



Figure 3.11: Boat Fountain (detail), c. 1550–80. Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. (Photo by the author)



Figure 3.12: Reclining Woman, c. 1550–80. Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. (Photo by the author)



Figure 3.13: Reclining Woman (detail), c. 1550–80. Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. (Photo by the author)



Figure 3.14: Reclining Woman (detail), c. 1550–80. Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. (Photo by the author)

right hand clutching the fabric that begins to fall from her lower body. She appears, like the other sculptures that admit their rootedness and natural stone, to be in transformation. I reach out and hold her rocky hand, as if to steady this change from boulder to body, but she is so large I can only grasp one cold, rough finger (Fig. 3.14). At such proximity stone comes to the fore: earthy and mottled with different greys and the dark greens and pale mints of dry lichen. The surface hurts my skin.

Growth

According to dominant theories in renaissance natural history, the rootedness of the Sacro Bosco's sculptures meant its stones were considered 'living'. A rock was alive until removed from its source. Albertus Magnus, in his *Book of Minerals* printed in at least six Latin editions between 1476 and 1569, wrote that 'the specific form of individual stones is mortal, just as men are; and if [stones] are kept for a long time, away from the place where they are produced [*extra loca generationis*]', they perish' ([c. 1250–60] 1967, p.66 (II:1:4)).⁵ Echoing this sentiment at the end of the fifteenth century, Italian philosopher Marsilio Ficino wrote that while many animals 'remain alive even when they are not in contact with the earth, stones and plants (deriving life as they do from the soul of the earth, not their own) do not' ([1482] 2001, pp.264–5). Stones in renaissance Europe required the earth and its ecology to remain animate. Quarried rock was dead. In Los Angeles, I stood beneath a corpse, its graveyard an urban sprawl. The Sacro Bosco's sculptures, on the other hand, thrum with life. Touching them a sixteenth-century visitor met stone that was fertile and dynamic.

This adds a vital layer to the theme of metamorphosis in Italian renaissance gardens. Metamorphosis in the Sacro Bosco is not just the changing seasons – the autumn leaves falling off branches, the scent of flowers in spring; it is not just Ovid's transformations as iconographical source. That the sculptures consist of living rock means that their very material takes part in a physical transformation, a stony process of growth.

But I am getting ahead of myself. Natural history, a fast-growing field eager to collect, study and outdo its ancient forbears, held different theories of rock formation for different types of stone during the renaissance (see Rudwick, 1985; Findlen, 1994; Ogilvie, 2006; McHam, 2013); and it is here that the Sacro Bosco's peperino becomes important. One concept, for example, linked to the then popular pumice-and-spugne-filled garden grotto, was that slow congealing

water drops created rock. Scipione Capece's *De principiis rerum* (1548) described a cave where 'we may observe that the moisture oozing there has turned to hard stone' (quoted in Szafranska, 1989, p.79). This petrification formed the brittle matter of pumice and spugne. The grottos that installed these rocks in elaborate decorations and fountains could therefore be seen as a 'staging of mineral nature's generation' (Morel, 2006, pp.127–8). But peperino is not *spugne* and you will find no grotto at Bomarzo. We need to look to other theories of lithic creation to understand the use and presentation of rock in the Sacro Bosco.

If the peperino is 'living', how was it born? When, in 1482, Marsilio Ficino presented the earth as a mother that gave birth to rock it was more than a metaphor. 'We even see the earth grow stones like teeth', he wrote, 'and plants like hair as long as they stick to their roots, but stop growing if we pull them out. How can it be said that the womb of this female is not living? This womb that spontaneously gives birth and cares for so many offspring, that sustains itself and carries teeth and hair on its back?' (quoted in Jeanneret, 2001, pp.43–4). In this image the surface of the ground is a soft, fertile gum from which sharp protruding rocks emerge: the earth a birthing and growing body, forming stones in its womb-mouth. Accordingly, renaissance natural history understood stones to be created deep within the earth, as well as by water drops.

Central to this idea was Aristotle. In *Meteorologica* (printed in more than 125 editions across Europe before 1601), Aristotle argued that the earth produced metals and stones (along with various other natural effects) via underground 'exhalations' (Martin, 2011, pp.1–20). The movement and changing characteristics of these subterranean winds produced metals when vaporous and stones when smoky. That stones were formed from smoke explained why many of them could not be melted (Eichholz, 1949). This theory was widely adopted in the sixteenth century (Mottana, 2006; Schmitt, 2013). Soderini, who noted Bomarzo's natural rocks, argued in his *Trattato di Agricoltura* that dry hot exhalations trapped beneath the earth turned mixtures of mud into stone when heated by fires further below (1902, pp.192–3). Georgius Agricola likewise positioned himself in relation to Aristotle in *De ortu et causis subterraneorum*, one of the first treatise dedicated to geology in the sixteenth century (see Morello, 2006). Initially printed in Latin in 1546, and then translated into Italian in 1550, Agricola stated that 'all these things [stones] are in a certain way made of a dry and smoky exhalation' (Agricola, 1550, p.40v). Mixing Aristotelian theories with those of ancient author Avicenna, Agricola posited that stones were generated from a

⁵ For early theories on living stone see Plumpe (1943).

mixture of earth and water, either dried by the hot air of subterranean fire or cooled to solidity (pp.32v-34v).

It is this mix of rock theory that is encountered materially in the Sacro Bosco. The fact that the peperino sculptures protrude naturally out of the earth implies an extension of rock below. Looking at and touching these sculptures, left grounded, raw and at points uncarved, a sixteenth-century visitor was invited to imagine how far each sculpture sank and the forces at play beneath their feet – the mud and water deep underground, the fire and smoke. Beholding the peperino of the Sacro Bosco, its craggy surface dappled with different minerals, a cinquecento spectator would have been reminded of, would have encountered, nature's stony generation.

Look for descriptions of peperino in sixteenth-century printed texts and consider the topography of Bomarzo, and this subterranean theory of rock formation only becomes more assertive. Take Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*: one of the most influential ancient authorities in the renaissance and translated into Italian in 1561 by Lodovico Domenichi, a friend of Vicino Orsini. Under the heading of tuff (a broad category of stone that included tufo/peperino), Pliny writes:

The best silex [hard Italian tufo] is the black variety, although in certain localities it is the red that is best, and in several places even the white, as in the Anician quarries round Lake Bolsena near Trachina, or, again, in the neighbourhood of Statonia, the stones from these two places being immune even to fire. The same two varieties are, moreover, used for sculptures on monuments, where they offer the added advantage of remaining untouched by the ravages of time.

(Pliny, 2012, p.200 (XXXVI:49))⁶

To find peperino in this passage we must turn to geography (for as we know, the source of a stone is important). Pliny mentions Statonia, an Etruscan city identified with Bomarzo (Landfester et al, 2008, p.861). The description of stone at Statonia is thus a description of peperino. It is fitting that Pliny notes these rocks are perfect for use in monuments, and, significant in relation to rock formation, that they are 'immune even to fire'. A point that suggests this lithic material was heated within the bowels of the earth. This possibility is bolstered by a second source:

⁶ It can be a tricky task to pin down particular materials in renaissance and classical natural-history texts as names for different rocks alter and are interchangeable. Peperino is a tufo, but it is also found in books from the period under tufa, tuff, tofo and silex.

chapter seven of Book Two of Vitruvius's *Ten Books on Architecture*.⁷ Discussing 'Stone for concrete masonry', Vitruvius writes:

Several quarries in the territory of Tarquinii called Anician, about the same as the Alban stone in colour, whose workshops are mostly around the Lacus Volsiniensis and the prefecture of Statonia. Now these have endless virtues. For neither freezing storms nor the touch of fire can hurt them, they are firm and last to a great old age because they have ... a moderate amount of water and a very great deal of earth. Thus consolidated by dense texture, they are harmed neither by harsh weather nor the power of fire. This can be concluded especially from the monuments around the town of Ferentum.

(Vitruvius, 1999, p.39 (II:7:3–4))

Vitruvius, like Pliny, talks of Statonia, as well as 'Tarquinii' (Tarquinia), also near Bomarzo, and 'Ferentum' (Ferento), now an archaeological site. In fact, Ferentum is a mere 12.5 miles from Bomarzo. If we are trying to find out how the peperino would have been understood by a sixteenth-century visitor in the Sacro Bosco, it is this rock, described by ancient sources: rock that was quarried and so came from *within* the earth, rock used for monuments and rock that was resistant to fire and thus created by hot and smoky subterranean geological forces.

But enough of texts about stone. Let us now cast our gaze beyond the parameters of the Sacro Bosco, remove our hands from its rock and lift our heads from the pages of aged books. Bomarzo is in the region of Alto Lazio. Mario Praz, introducing the Sacro Bosco in 1949, describes its setting as 'bathed by the golden dust of the October sky, profiled against the distant mountains that seem engraved in a sweet sapphire ... the brown houses line up along the cliff shining here and there like venturine' ([1949] 1975, p.81). It is hard, surveying this landscape, not to fall into such poetics. The mist rises like a gauze veil each morning, revealing hazy blue mountains that slumber across the horizon. The forests are deep and tangled. The rock faces that the towns cling to and the boulders that pepper the woods are truly monolithic (Figs. 3.15 and 3.16). The Dutch painter Bartholomeus Breenbergh, who provides some of the most detailed surviving depictions of the Sacro Bosco, captured this lithic topography in pen, brown ink and wash in 1625. In a drawing held in the

⁷ When referencing Vitruvius it is of note that Vicino Orsini was associated with the Accademia della Virtù and its study of Vitruvius, as were many of his friends and acquaintances.



Figure 3.15: Author in the forest on the way to the Etruscan Pyramid, Bomarzo (Photo: Benedict Mortimer)



Figure 3.16: The town of Bomarzo, with rocky cliffs (Photo by the author)



Figure 3.17: Stairwell, Palazzo Orsini, Bomarzo (Photo by the author)

National Gallery of Art in Washington DC, the Orsini castle can be seen in the central distance, while the left foreground is entirely dominated by a colossal cluster of peperino boulders. These giant stones reach high into the sky, their pockmarked surfaces cast in sunlight, as they tower above two miniscule figures that walk on scrubby ground next to a small gabled roofed structure on the other side of a wide dirt path. To the right of this building the view gives way to an expanse of sky and undulating hills covered in loosely sketched trees. This landscape can be surveyed from the Orsini castle at Bomarzo captured by Breenbergh. Standing at the corner staircase of Vicino's residency, an incredible panorama of tree-cloaked hill mounts and valleys reaches into the distance (Fig. 3.17); the tall trunks, branches and leaves of the trees are also hiding the sculpted forms of the Sacro Bosco from view.

When considering the kinetic material of the Sacro Bosco's sculptures, however, there is more than

poetic description at stake. The land of Bomarzo has a visibly violent geological history that correlates to the theories of rock formation discussed above. The lakes – Bolsena to the northwest, Lago di Vico to the south – fill extinct craters, and the ground spurts boiling water. Drive around the region today and signs point to thermal baths, where springs gush sulphurous steaming water into large pools in which humans loll, their skin slowly turning prune-like. In the sixteenth century, Leandro Alberti knew these thermal springs. In his *Descrittione di tutta d'Italia*, in the section 'Terra falisci': another name given to Alto Lazio, Alberti mentions that '[t]here are many rivers in this territory' and 'no shortage of fountains nor bubbling springs of hot water' (1553, p.70r). Visited by disorderly crowds for their healing properties (Bacci, 1571, p.80), including Michel de Montaigne (Montaigne, [1581] 1774, p.336), these boiling natural waters, bursting out of fissures in the ground, provided physical evidence of the burning fires and hot vapours that created stones such as peperino beneath the earth (Vermij, 1998). Vitruvius stated that hot springs 'are created by nature in the following way: when fire is stirred up deep within the earth ... its burning warms the earth above it to a white heat. And thus if any sweet-water springs arise in the places above, when struck by this vapour they boil within the pores of the earth and flow forth' (1999, p.99 (VIII.3.1)). Agricola in *De Ortu* similarly argued that thermal springs were proof of 'hidden fires [*abstrusi & reconditi*]' which heat the waters' (quoted in Vermij, 1998, p.336). The topography of Bomarzo speaks of subterranean stone-making, flames and gusts.

Remembering these warm waters and the smell of sulfur, I see tendrils of steam connecting them with sixteenth-century theories of rock formation and the sculptures of Vicino Orsini's wood. Or perhaps it is better to think of them as mineral veins – the geography of Alto Lazio, peperino and theories of underground lithic creation – coursing through rock and meeting in the Sacro Bosco's artworks: rooted and connected to their source, and carved roughly from living stone. Allow the site's peperino to take centre stage and a story of mutable matter and rocky generation emerges. It is a haptic narrative that would not have been lost on sixteenth-century visitors. They would have thought of these lithic forces at play deep within the ground and felt the sculptures' vitality.

Touching time

Stones are old. How are we to comprehend their vastness? As Cohen states: 'If a stone could speak, what would it say about us? Stone would call you transient, sporadic' (2015, p.30). Paleobiologist Jan Zalasiewicz

(2010) shows the almost boundless past contained in rock when he traces the earth's history in a small disk of gray slate collected on a beach in Wales; in this single stone, Zalasiewicz finds a history of 13.7 billion years.

A sixteenth-century visitor to the Sacro Bosco, their hand pressed against carved peperino, might not have had the scientific context to comprehend the time we see in rock today, but they understood the lithic to contain truly epic history. Thomas Aquinas stated that stones 'have something in them of the nature of the stars' (quoted in Murphy, 2010, p.67). Albertus Magnus looked into a sapphire and saw a story of the 'sand banks in ancient India and mines in Provence' (Cohen, 2015, p.15; for Magnus on sapphires see, 1967, p.115–16 (II.2.17)). Although Christianity dictated that the world began with God's creation, and many found shells discovered on mountains to evidence the biblical flood, this did not stop scientists and writers conceiving of a stony past that stretched across deep, almost unfathomable, history (Connell, 2011; Dal Prete, 2014). In his *Meteorologia* (1542), Fausto da Longiano explained the origins of mountains (the very largest of rocks), describing how they were continually changing – growing, eroding and being reformed by winds, earthquakes and water over 'so to speak, an almost infinite length of time' (1542, p.33v). Explaining that the mortality of stone was not always visible to the human eye, Magnus, too, turned to this idea of extended lithic time. Only after 'a long drawn out change', he wrote, does a rock or mineral suffer death, 'grows dull and begins to disintegrate' (*Meteora* (III:4:7), as quoted in Magnus, p.66 (II.1.4n7); see also Riddle & Mulholland, 1980). To touch the living stone in the Sacro Bosco, then, was to touch a metamorphosing substance that belonged to deep time. It was to touch history.

One historical territory that a sixteenth-century visitor beholding rock at Bomarzo would have recalled is ancient Etruria. The use of peperino for sculpture is surprising in view of artistic treatise of the period, which describe it as a common and functional building material (Vasari [1550], 1907, p.55), but not when considered alongside the region's Etruscan past. Journey into the woods immediately beyond the Sacro Bosco and you will soon find a historic precedent for this material. The land is littered with ancient mausoleums, tombs and crumbling edifices carved into the local tufo (Figs. 3.18 and 3.19). Within a forty-minute walk from the Orsini castle at Bomarzo and within Vicino's territory, a giant structure known locally as the *Piramide Etrusca* rises out of the earth (Fig. 3.20). Formed from one colossal peperino boulder about two stories high the *Piramide* is a triangular mass covered in incised steps and channels or drains, topped by a



Figure 3.18: Boulder with remnants of carved basins and steps. Etruscan: date unknown. Peperino. Near the ruins of Santa Cecilia, Bomarzo. (Photo by the author)



Figure 3.19: Etruscan Ruins, Santa Cecilia, Bomarzo (Photo by the author)



Figure 3.20: *Piramide Etrusca*, Bomarzo (Photo by the author)



Figure 3.21: Author standing before a Fake Etruscan Tomb, c. 1550–80. Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. (Photo by the author)



Figure 3.22: Tomba a Fossa, c. 1550–80. Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. (Photo by the author)



Figure 3.23: Faux-Etruscan stair fragment, near the Giant Tortoise, c. 1550–80. Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. (Photo by the author)



Figure 3.24: Faux-Etruscan carved boulder, with recess and basins, near the Mask of Madness, c. 1550–80. Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. (Photo by the author)

flat, levelled surface that provides a viewing platform over the treetops. In sixteenth-century Italy there was huge interest in this lost civilization, revived with the unearthing of treasures such as the Chimera of Arezzo in 1553 (Cristofani, 1979; Pallottino, 1977; Collins, 2001, pp. 113–15). This passion was especially strong in the region around Bomarzo, with authors such as Giovanni Nanni (Annio of Viterbo) writing fictional Etruscan histories for the area (Baffioni, 1981; Grafton, 1990; Collins, 2000; Stephens, 2004). It seems highly likely, given this context and their physical proximity, that the giant ancient structures and many smaller Etruscan remains around Bomarzo would have been known to Vicino and his guests.

The Sacro Bosco is also teeming with Etruscan references: a faux half-buried tomb (Fig. 3.21) (see Oleson, 1975), the ‘*Tomba a Fossa*’: a rectangular hole, edged with a carved linear trim, that suggests an Etruscan sepulchral pit (Fig. 3.22), along with a host of indentations, fragments of stairs and abstract fissures that paraphrase the remains of ancient dwellings and structures found nearby (Figs. 3.23 and 3.24). When peperino is used in the Sacro Bosco, it is the same living material as found in the local Etruscan monuments. This means that the site’s fictitious Etruscan sculptures are playful objects of trickery, but also that there is a deeper doubling taking place in their physical substance. The material is, in itself, a historic relic of the very past the sculptures echo.

The Etruscans were bound to the mythical historical origins of the Sacro Bosco’s surroundings. Nanni’s fictional origin story for Alto Lazio, first published in 1498, was presented via a collection of (forged) ancient manuscripts. Translated by Vicino’s friend Francesco Sansovino in 1583, these texts claimed

that the Etruscans who founded nearby Viterbo were descended from a race of giants born of Noah (Nanni, [1498] 1583, ‘Delle Antichita di Beroso Babilonico, Libro Primo’, pp. 1r–4r). While in his 1565 *L’Historia di Casa Orsina*, Francesco Sansovino claimed the Orsini were one of the oldest families of Etruria, from ‘the paternal blood of King Lycaon of Arcadia’ (Sansovino, 1565, bk. I, p. 2v) – ruler of a colossal race of men spawned from the blood of giants that had assaulted Mount Olympus (Ovid, 1979, bk. I, pp. 33–5). To add physical weight to such stories, fossilised dinosaur remains discovered in the area – including a gigantic skull near the church of Santa Rosa in Viterbo – were frequently thought to be the bones of giants (Feo, 2008, p. 24). There is even talk of Vicino displaying a gigantic bone at Bomarzo (Calvesi, 2009, p. 143).

These giants, recalled literally in the two colossal figures locked in mortal combat found on the lower level of the site (Fig. 3.1), tell important stories about temporal vastness. Giants represent beginnings, the time of Noah, the Flood and Arcadia. If the Etruscans were also bound to this deep and gigantic past then so too, it follows, were the living rocks used to carve their dwellings and tombs. The ancient lithic remains found in the woods of Bomarzo, as such, bear witness to how old these living boulders are, binding them by myth as well as geological theories to the Sacro Bosco’s landscape. When a visitor wandering through Bomarzo in the late sixteenth century saw sculptures still strangely tied to their source, they encountered an ancient substance. The artists having carved into a living material history of a colossal timescale. This material duplication is poignant, creating a space where a sixteenth-century beholder physically interacted with a kind of temporal merging, where real Etruscan

ruins and those of the sixteenth century shared physical matter, as well as iconographical content and geographical context. Touch the rock at the Sacro Bosco and you travel in time. It is a tactile encounter with temporally epic, geological metamorphosis, as well as a local history contained in stone.

Conclusion

From Bomarzo to LA and back again, I recall another contemporary artwork. Deep in the forest hills of Brazil, in the expansive Instituto Inhotim, a privately owned park, is Doug Aitken's *Sound Pavilion* (2009): a round, enclosed glass room, accessed only by an isolated trail. Once inside, however, the visitor hears noises strange and unfamiliar. In the middle of the room is a narrow circular shaft covered by glass. This hole travels deep into the ground, where microphones pick up the slow groaning of the Earth's interior, its shifting forms found hundreds of meters below. These reverberations then lead me to sounds heard in an operatic adaptation of a novel set in Bomarzo, composed by Alberto Ginastera and which premiered in 1967. In this opera, the Sacro Bosco's stone sculptures have inarticulate, mournful voices, as the chorus produce guttural sounds using the consonants L, J, G, K, P and N (Hume, 1967). In both rock sounds ancient, painful and slow. At the Sacro Bosco you might not be able to actually hear the shifting growth of stone, but the constant lithic change happening beneath the ground, and the history and epic time contained within rock, is evoked through other means: through the use of living, rooted peperino, through its presentation: left raw and with rough carving, and through texture and touch. It is a site materially concerned with its local topography and geologic forces, entwined with history and myth as well as natural science, and which offers an encounter with stony metamorphosis that would have been palpably felt by a sixteenth-century visitor. Peperino as protagonist of the Sacro Bosco infers haptic contexts beyond subject matter.

Note

Renaissance is uncapitalised throughout this article as per *Open Arts Journal* style.

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