



Short note

Excavations at the high altitude Mesolithic site of Pian de La Lóra (Val Civetta - Venetian Dolomites, Italy)

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Key words

- Late Mesolithic
- Venetian Dolomites
- hunting station
- seasonal mobility

Parole chiave

- Mesolitico Recente
- Dolomiti Bellunesi
- stazione venatoria
- mobilità stagionale

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Summary

The author describes the preliminary results from the excavations at the high-altitude Mesolithic site of Pian de La Lóra (Val Civetta - Venetian Dolomites, Italy). As showed, the systematic wet sieving of the archaeological deposit led to the discovery of a significant lithic assemblage, made of flint from the southern Prealpine belt and composed by more than a thousand unretouched artefacts, almost a hundred microburins, a few exhausted cores, well represented common tools and several armatures. Field research also brought to light a rare fire pit structure, whose charcoal remains were sampled for paleoenvironmental studies and radiocarbon dated at 7920 ± 50 uncal BP (GrN-31265, 6230-6020 cal BC). Researches, still in progress, allowed the author to identify a Late Mesolithic hunting station, whose ephemeral occupation fosters new reflections on the last hunter-gatherers of northern Italy.

Riassunto

L'autore presenta i risultati preliminari degli scavi effettuati nella stazione venatoria d'alta quota di Pian de La Lóra (Val Civetta - Dolomiti Bellunesi). L'applicazione sistematica del vaglio ad acqua dei sedimenti scavati ha condotto alla scoperta di una ricca e variegata collezione litica prodotta su selce delle Prealpi Venete e culturalmente inquadrabile nel Mesolitico recente sud-alpino, comprensiva di migliaia di manufatti non ritoccati unitamente a nuclei, strumenti comuni, armature microlitiche e numerosi microbulini. Le ricerche hanno inoltre restituito una rara struttura di combustione a pozzetto, il cui contenuto è stato campionato per l'analisi archeobotanica e per l'ottenimento di una datazione radiocarbonica pari a 7920 ± 50 uncal BP (GrN-31265, 6230-6020 cal BC).

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Site location

In July 2007, the Department of Humanities of Ca' Foscari University (Venice) in partnership with the "Gruppo Archeologico ARCA" of Agordo and the "Associazione Amici del Museo di Belluno", carried out the first season of excavations at the site of Pian de La Lóra, an open-air Mesolithic station located at 1930 m a.s.l. in the western fringe of the Civetta Group (Venetian Dolomites - Alpe di Siusi, Belluno Province) (Franco 2008) (Fig. 1). Field research, coordinated by the author, focused on a marginal moraine in southern Val Civetta, a spot surrounded by sandstone outcrops of the *Raibliano* formation (Castiglioni 1931), boulders, marshes and a seasonal basin (the eponymous "Lóra") where previous surveys had led to the collection of a few flint artefacts preliminarily attributed to a Late Mesolithic tradition (Gesco-Frere & Mondini 2006) (Fig. 2). This stage progressively entailed the opening of a 12 square meters trench at coordinates 46°22'15" N - 12°01'02" E (WGS84).



Fig. 1 - Pian de La Lóra. Excavation area at the western fringe of the Civetta Group (photo by the author). / Pian de La Lóra. L'area degli scavi ai piedi del versante occidentale del Gruppo del Civetta (foto dell'autore).



Fig. 2 - Pian de La Lóra site location in Val Civetta (photo by the author). / Localizzazione del sito di Pian de La Lóra in Val Civetta (foto dell'autore).

Researches

Since the beginning, research process involved systematic wet sieving of the excavated soil through 1,5 mm sieve mesh, taking advantage of an artificial stream flowing next to the site from a rainwater container at a higher elevation. After removing the topsoil, the archaeological deposit showed a maximum depth of 15-30 cm, depending on the excavated sector. Such variability was directly linked to the natural profile of the sterile base layer, made by an incoherent bed of limestone cryoclasts (Fig. 3). The whole excavation area then showed a basic pedo-stratigraphic profile: a very dark brown and clayish upper level (US1) and a light brown, thinner and slightly coarser lower level (US2). Almost all the finds, represented only by charcoal fragments and lithic artefacts, emerged from the second one, which was referred to a single short-term occupation. Creating the conditions for later refitting and spatial analysis, flint artefacts recognized at sight in the trench were recorded according to their precise planimetric coordinates and depth, while all the other finds recovered through wet sieving operations were simply recorded according to their 0,5 meter square of provenance.

Preliminary results

The accurate methodology applied in the excavations led to the discovery of a significant flint assemblage, whose richness and variety went far beyond expectations. Preliminary results from a detailed typological and typometrical analysis still to be published show the presence of more than 1200 unretouched lithic artefacts, most of which burnt or fragmented. As regards the complete specimens, they are mainly composed by microlithic and ipermicrolithic very flat modules, along with a few blades/bladelets whose features (regular, thin, sub-parallel edges) are clearly attributable to a *Montbani* style of production (Rozoy 1978). No pre-cores were found in the assemblage, while it is possible to count at least 5 small polyhedral or prismatic cores with one or two prepared platforms, generally exhausted. Retouched artefacts are equally shared between common tools and armatures. Significantly, the first group consists of 10 end-scrapers on a bladelet or blade-like flake, a single burin on a thick blade with simple *biseau*, one scraper on a flake with a bilateral retouch, a truncation on a bladelet and, most of all, 16 notched or retouched blades/bladelets. Along with them, the toolkit is completed by at least 10 asymmetrical trapezes on a blade/bladelet, 7 hypermicrolithic scalene triangles, one backed segment, one double-backed point and a few other microliths with a steep, abrupt retouch. Furthermore, the artefacts includes a couple of flint spherical hammer-stones and more than a hundred discards from the preparation of geometric projectile points (trapezes and triangles), divided into 89 microburins, 7 bladelets fractured at the notch and other typical residues of trapeze manufacturing/repairing (*chevrons*) (Franco 2013) (Fig. 4).

Supporting the chronological and cultural position of the surface finds earlier collected in the same area, the lithic collection recovered during excavations homogeneously belongs to the Late Mesolithic tradition that spread in Northern Italy between 7900 and 6600 uncal BP, during the Early Atlantic climatic phase. Recently, such preliminary attribution has been proved by radiocarbon dating a small fire pit (Structure 1) unexpectedly brought to light in the last days of the campaign and whose content, fully packed with charcoal fragments of different sizes, was sampled apart for further paleoenvironmental studies. The date obtained is 7290±50 uncal BP (GrN-31265, 6230-6020 cal BC) (Franco 2011), while first results from the archaeobotanical analysis suggest a clear proximity to an open spruce/larch woodland (Nisbet 2008, *pers. comm.*).



Fig. 3 - Pian de La Lóra. The excavation trench till the sterile base layer (photo by the author, from Franco 2008). / Pian de La Lóra. La trincea di scavo sino al livello sterile di base (foto dell'autore, da Franco 2008).

Discussion

Despite the total lack of faunal remains and bone/antler artefacts due to pedogenetical factors, the overall features of the flint assemblage reveal a strong specialization of the camp, where the local production of geometric arrowheads on blade/bladelet with the *microburin technique* seems to have been a regular activity in support of a hunting expedition. Observing this fact in the light of site location at the beginning of the Atlantic, namely in a high-altitude district rich in water sources and natural shelters, next to the ecotonal upper tree belt and crossed by strategical alpine routes (as nowadays), it is clear that Mesolithic hunter-gatherers settled in Pian de La Lóra during the good season, expanding their hunting-ground in phase with the annual upward migration of some gregarious ungulate species. This functional interpretation is shared with the close Mondeval de Sora VF1 site and many other coeval finds lately discovered in the same region (Alciati *et al.* 1992; Fontana & Pasi 2002; Fontana 2006).

Although site specialization can be easily understood, it does not seem to be as extreme as commonly seen in other Mesolithic high-altitude open-air stations. As seen above, along with armatures and microburins, other tools like end-scrapers and retouched blades/bladelets are in fact well represented in the lithic finds, fostering the idea that various support activities were carried out at the camp, like butchering or arrow crafting/repairing. In this case, the episode of occupation would result less ephemeral than usually thought but, following the research methods successfully applied at the Late Mesolithic alpine site of Laghetti del Crestoso (Bovegno, Brescia) (Baroni & Biagi, 1997), only use-wear analysis of the whole toolkit could solve the question.

So, where did those hunters come from? It's hard to say, but good hints are coming from the preliminary analysis of raw material used for lithic production. In fact, there are no traces of rock quartz in the whole assemblage, while good quality flint from the eastern Venetian Prealps and the Piave alluvial plain is the most represented. This indicates that either site inhabitants crossed those sectors along the year or they had an exchange relationship with groups who had direct access to southern flint outcrops. Both hypotheses are supported by dozens of Late Mesolithic sites already known from the Venetian prealpine/foothills belt to the plain "spring line", including the Montello area (Gerhardinger 1984-1985; Broglio & Paolillo 1989; Fontana *et al.* 2002; Cesco-Frere & Mondini *op. cit.*). By the way, raw material was collected as nodules or pebbles, probably from secondary deposits, and carried out in such a shape up to Pian de La Lóra, as suggested by the presence of decortication waste among chipped artefacts.

Human presence in Val Civetta during the Early Atlantic has therefore to be analysed as a part of a much broader logistic system, reasonably extended from the Piave alluvial plain to the Dolomitic district (Grimaldi 2005) (Fig. 5). Within this system, conceivable as a wide tribal territory, all the Late Mesolithic finds suggest the existence of efficient social networks and non-random routes across seasonal supply areas and buffer zones. Besides, scientific results from Pian de La Lóra and the growing number of trapezoidal armatures collected in the surrounding region call into question the common idea of an unavoidable desertion of the Alps at this cultural stage, due to an increasing mountain forestation and consequent evolution of hunting strategies. As a matter of fact, latest archeological evidence from the Venetian Dolomites proves that Late Mesolithic bands

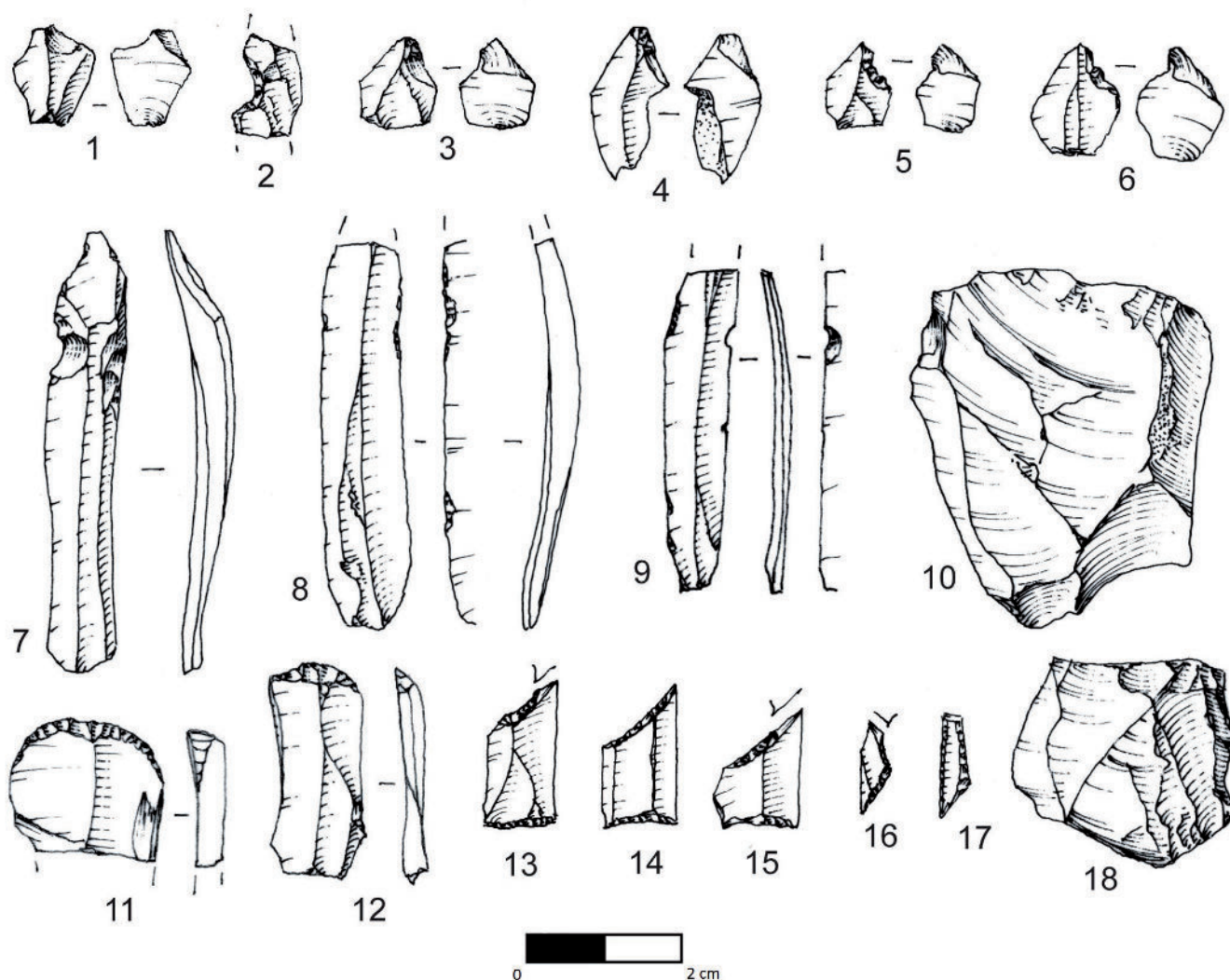


Fig. 4 - Samples from the lithic collection discovered during 2007 excavations: microburins (1, 3-6), bladelets fractured at the notch (2), retouched blades (7-9), end-scrapers (10-11), trapezoidal armatures (12-15), triangular armatures (16-17), cores (10, 18) (drawn by Almerigogna G. & Franco C., from Franco 2008). / Alcuni esempi delle industrie litiche rinvenute nella stagione di scavo 2007: microbulini (1, 3-6), incavi adiacenti a frattura (2), lame ritoccate (7-9), grattatoi (10-11), armature trapezoidali (12-15), armature triangolari (16-17), nuclei (10 e 18) (disegni di Almerigogna G. & Franco C., da Franco 2008).

still regularly exploited high-altitude hunting-grounds at the end of the VIII millennium uncal BP, moreover settling a territory where, at this point of field researches, lithic assemblages clearly attributable to Preboreal/Boreal hunters seem to be uncommon (Franco 2011). Nevertheless, many are the unsolved questions about the Late Mesolithic of North-Eastern Italy, where the archaeological visibility of hunter-gatherers societies seems to fade long before a stable settlement of Neolithic communities in the landscape (Biagi 2001, 2003). In such a context, Pian de La Lóra site fosters new reflections on this key phase, allowing to believe that other Mesolithic camp-sites are just waiting to be discovered in the examined area.

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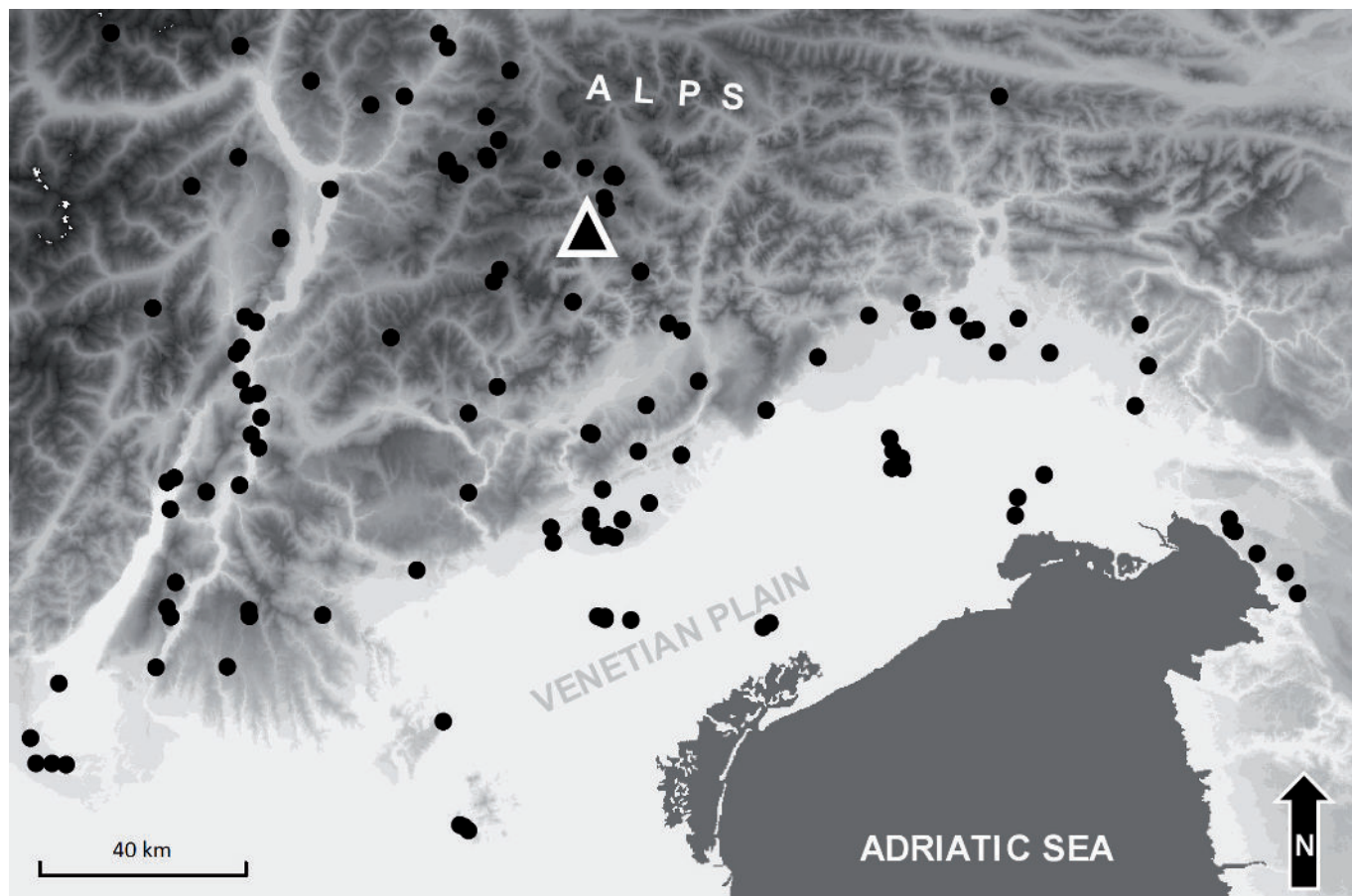


Fig. 5 - Pian de la Lórá (triangle) in the context of the Late Mesolithic sites in North-Eastern Italy (dots) (graphics by the author). / Localizzazione di Pian de La Lórá (triangolo) nel contesto dei siti del Mesolitico Recente dell'Italia nord-orientale (cerchi) (elaborazione grafica dell'autore).

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