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Mesolithic Exploitation of the Highland Zone: a Case Study for the Southern Alps

ABSTRACT

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This article considers the watershed comprised between Val Camonica, Val Trompia and Val Sabbia in the province of Brescia (Lombardy, northern Italy). The surveys produced several mesolithic stations three only of which have been excavated so far. Two of the sites are attributable to the Sauveterrian Culture and one to the Castelnovian. The Author also provides preliminary information on the sites distribution, on their 14C chronology and on the environmental studies carried out in seven years of research.

Parole chiave: Mesolitico, Zone montane, Alpi meridionali.

Key words: Mesolithic, Highland Zone, Southern Alps.

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Preface

This paper is a preliminary report of the results of a long-term research project carried out by the Natural History Museum of Brescia along the watershed that separates Val Camonica from Val Trompia and Val Sabbia in the central alpine arc of Lombardy. The watershed extends for some thirty kilometres between Lake Iseo to the west and

Lake Idro to the east (fig. 1). This territory is deeply modelled by glacial action and characterized by the presence of small lakes sometimes delimited by morainic cordons. The surveys of the last ten years have led to the discovery of more than twenty sites, three only of which have been excavated since 1987. The sites are often scattered around small lakes or peat-bogs close to high altitude passes, with the exception of two middle elevation sites.

The Mesolithic Sites

The site of Vaiale lies in Val Sabbia at an altitude of 830 metres on a terrace of the right bank of the River Abbioccolo at its confluence into the river Valle della Spina, some seven kilometres, as the crow flies, to the west of Lake Idro. Just to the north of the site is a small peat-bog from which a pollen core 1.10 metres deep, was taken. The northern and eastern shores of this basin show traces of prehistoric occupation, most probably Mesolithic, given the presence of strongly weathered flint artefacts including backed instruments, microburins and cores (fig. 2).

The prehistoric site was explored, mainly because of its singular geographic location, over a surface of 36 square metres. It produced evidence of two periods of occupation. The former of Early Mesolithic date, probably Boreal, characterized by hypermicrolithic scalene triangles, backed points, microburins and cores; the latter to be attributed to the Iron Age on the basis of several potsherds recovered from an erosional canal cutting the mesolithic surface. The mesolithic site gave no man-made features, such as pits or fireplaces. The only finds are 138 tools of exotic flint recorded *in situ*, mainly consisting of manufacturing debris such as core fragments, core trimming flakes and shatters as well as many small fragments of charcoal. Two only instruments, one triangle and one microburin show traces of wear (VOYTEK, pers. comm., 1992).

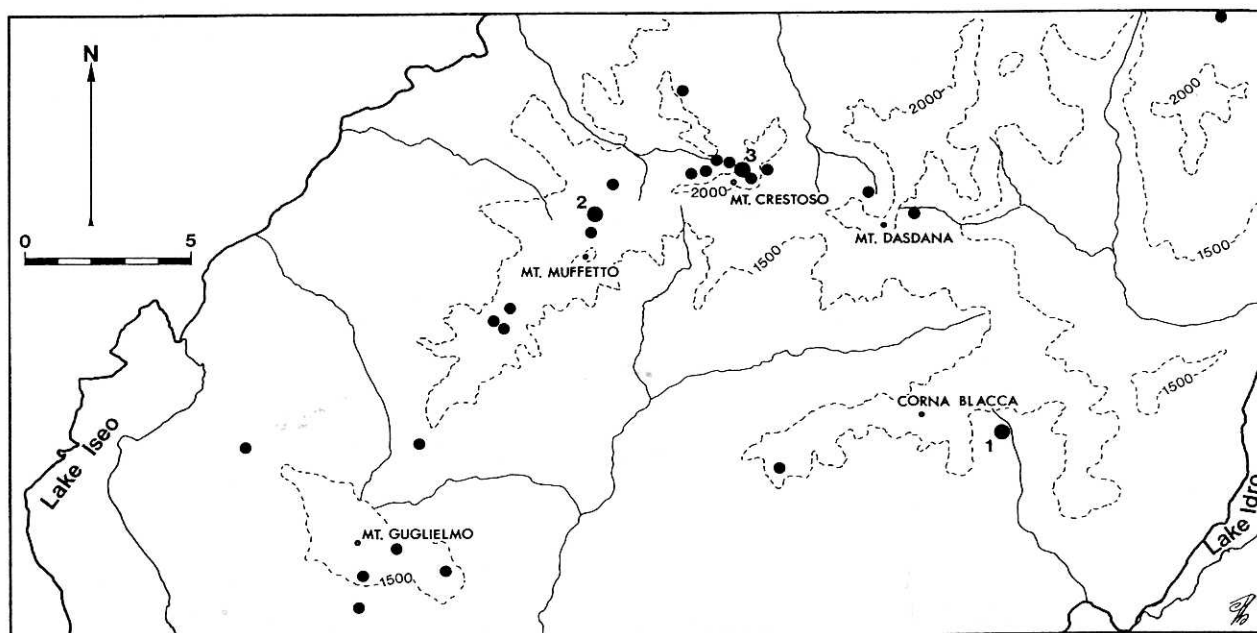


Fig. 1 - Distribution map of the Mesolithic sites in the study area (dots). 1) Vaiale, 2) Rondeneto, 3) Crestoso (Drawn by P. Biagi).

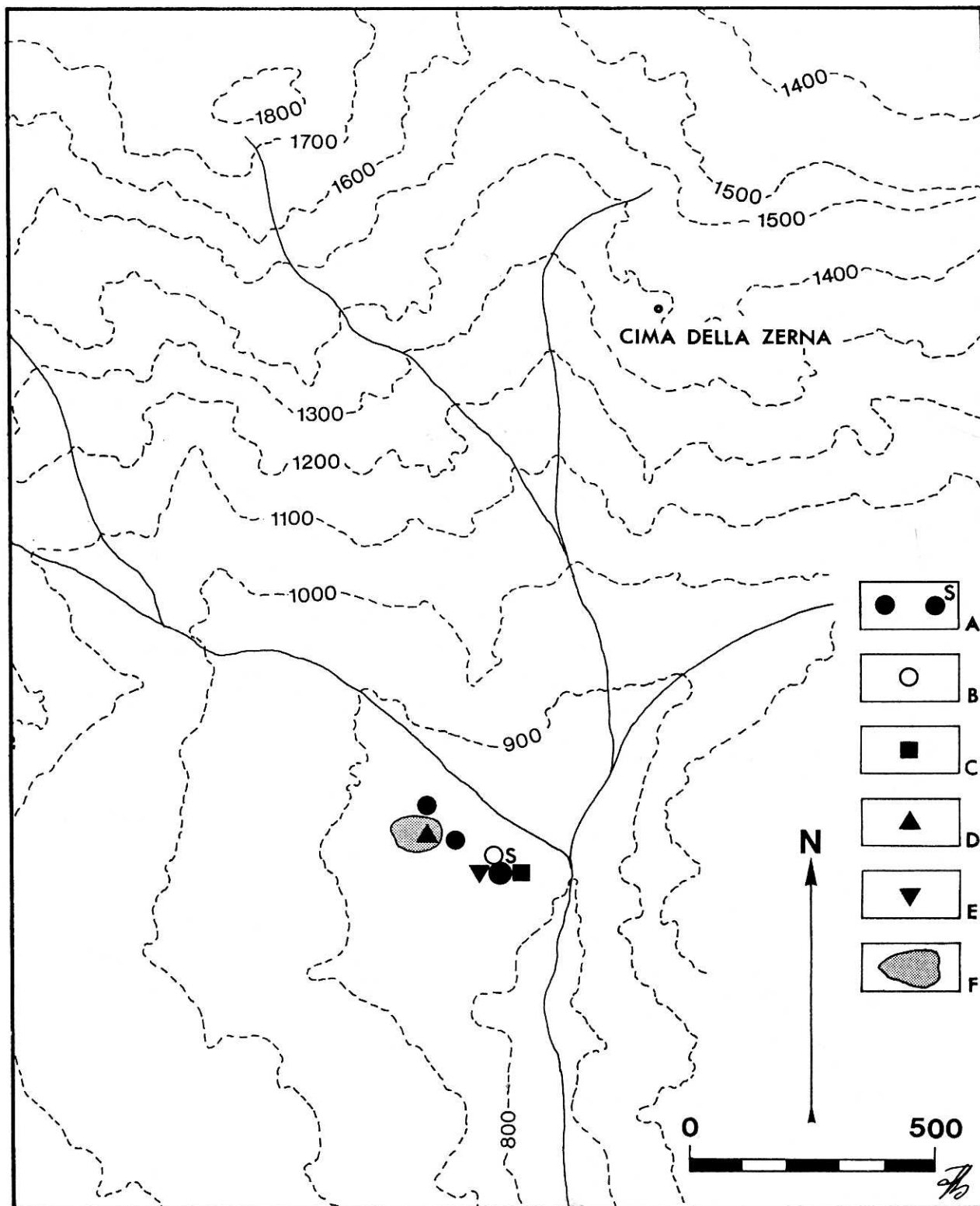


Fig. 2 - Vaiale. A) Sauveterrian site and Mesolithic flint scatters, B) Iron Age site, C) Palaeopedological, D) Palynological, E) Anthracological analyses, F) Peat-bog (Drawn by P. Biagi).

The site of Rondeneto is situated in middle Val Camonica at an altitude of 1.780 metres, in a region deeply modelled by glacial action. The site was discovered in 1987 and excavated in the summer of 1992. The digging was carried out on 12 square metres covering the entire surface of the site. The flint artefacts were almost exclusively scattered over 6 square metres around a small concentration of charcoals of *Larix/Picea*

(fireplace?) (fig. 3). The artefacts lay on a podzolic horizon or on the striated *roche moutonne* covered by a deposit of peat some 15 centimetres thick. 165 tools were recorded *in situ*. They comprise one microflakelet core, five hypermicrolithic scalene triangles, four hypermicrolithic backed blades and points, four side scrapers and twelve microburins (fig. 4). The archaeological deposit was water sieved at 0.5 millimetres. This led to the recovery of dozens of pieces of shatter, most probably *débitage* from armatures manufacture, scattered around the concentration of charcoals. Rounded, carbonised seeds, some 1 millimetre in diameter were also found. Even though they have not been identified so far, they will be of great importance for defining the season the site was settled. The wear traces analysis has demonstrated that most of the triangles, as well as a few unretouched square shaped microflakelets, had been hafted, even though they do not show any evidence of use. It is feasible that they were employed as armatures but never used. Two flakes had been used on wood, but no artefacts indicate use in butchering or preparing hides (VOYTEK, pers. comm., 1992).

The small assemblage of Rondeneto, all obtained from exotic flint, clearly is the product of a chipping station, the purpose of which was the manufacture of armatures for hunting.

A few metres to the north of this site a thick deposit of peat was discovered in 1990. The deposit lies on a sequence of lacustrine silts above which the peat contains the remains of a well preserved spruce forest (NISBET and SCAIFE, pers. comm., 1991). Samples for pollens and insects have been taken from this series as well as samples for radiocarbon dates, some of which are already available. Of extreme importance are the dates obtained from two wooden pieces of spruce that attribute the forest to the Atlantic period, namely GrN-18252: 7710±50 BP and GrN-18253: 7175±50 BP.

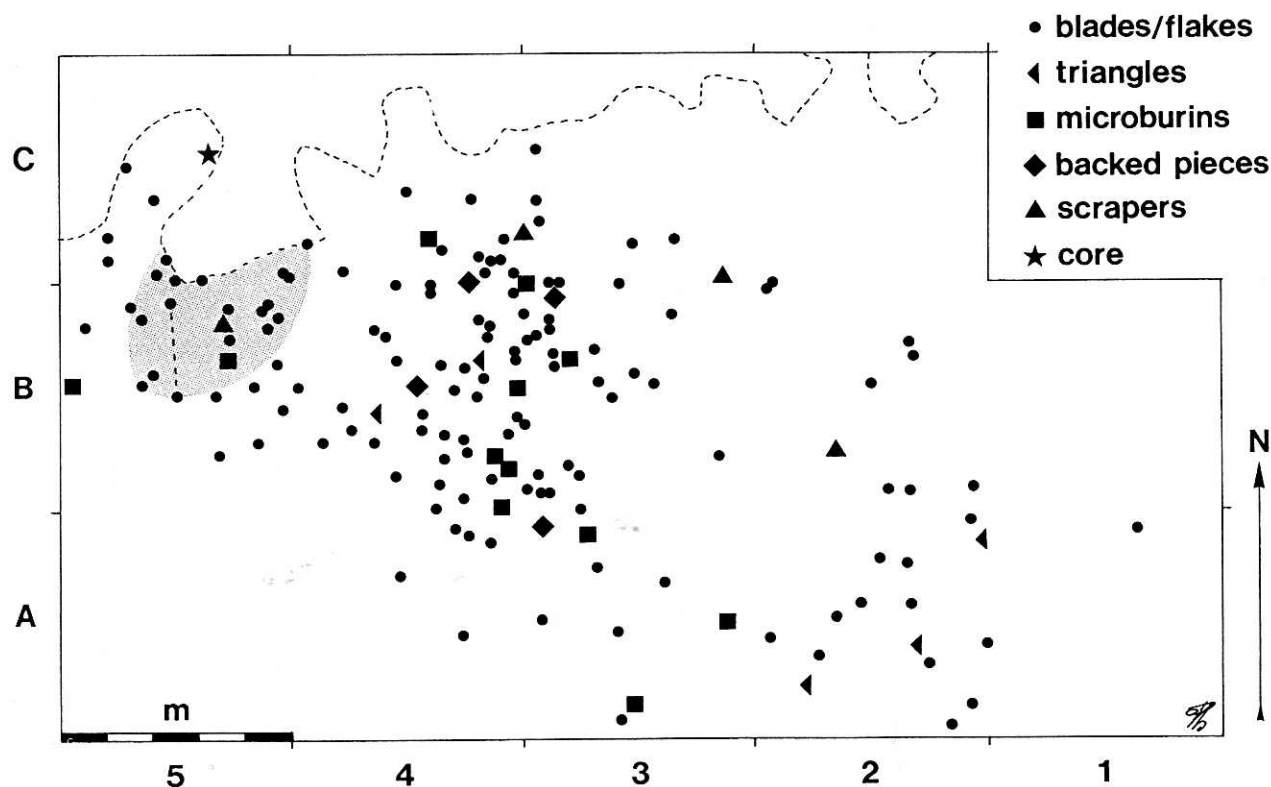


Fig. 3 - Rondeneto. Distribution map of the flint artefacts recorded *in situ* (Drawn by L. Cristini and P. Biagi).

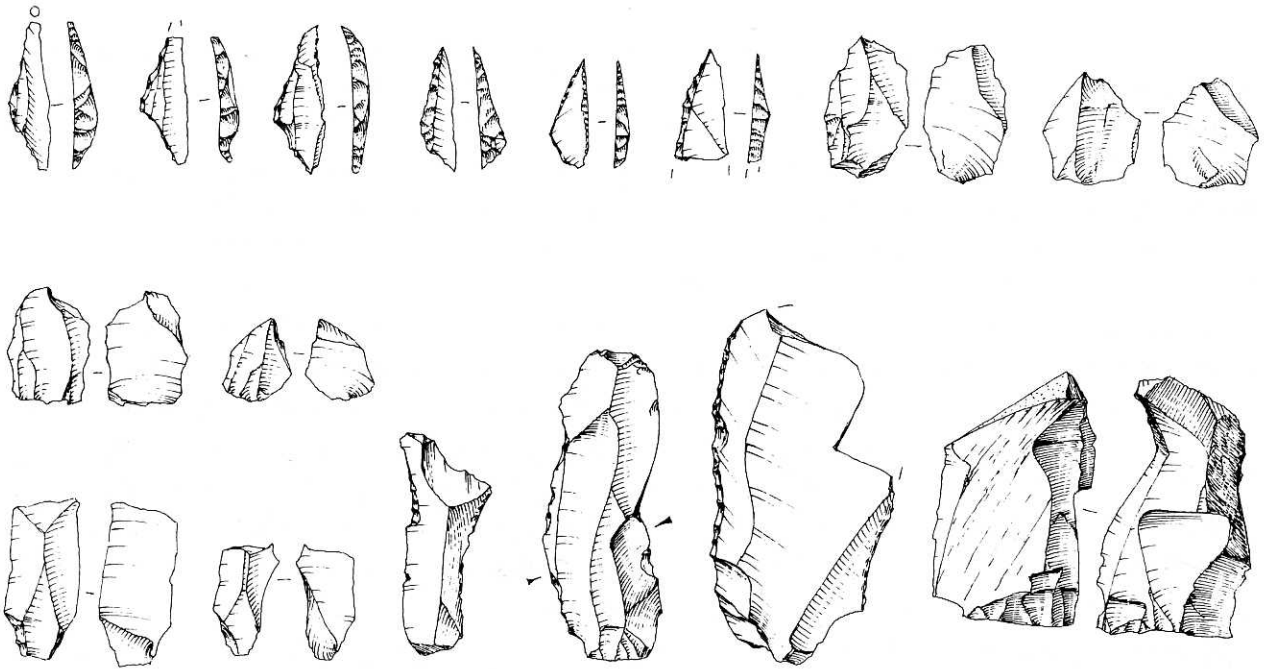


Fig. 4 - Flint artefacts from Rondeneto (1:1) (Drawn by G. Almerigogna).

The site of Laghetti del Crestoso is along the northern shore of the lower lake at an altitude of 2.000 metres, close to a pass that links Val Camonica with Val Trompia (BARONI *et al.*, 1990). It was excavated between 1987 and 1989 over a surface of 40 square metres. It is supposed that the site covers an area of some 70-80 square metres. The year before the excavations started a pollen core was taken from the lake which revealed a deposition 3.20 metres thick. The core has been analysed by Dr R.G. Scaife of Southampton University and accurately dated providing the best evidence for the vegetational history in the area between the Late Glacial and modern times. Small fragments of charcoal from the core connected with human activity along the shore have been recognized from a depth of 230-236 centimetres and dated to 6680 ± 180 BP (Beta-35217).

The site lies on a podzolic soil. It produced many structures including pits rich in charcoals, various hearths and probable postholes. Some 450 artefacts were recorded *in situ*, mainly scattered in the western part of the site around a large and shallow fireplace dated to 6790 ± 120 BP (HAR-8871). The charcoals from pit 10 gave the date of 6870 ± 70 BP (GrN-18091) almost identical to the preceding one and to that obtained from the lake core. The site was later covered by some 20 centimetres of peat, the lowermost level of which has been quoted as 1960 ± 60 BP (HAR-8872).

The site was inhabited during the Atlantic climatic period as supported by the flint assemblage that includes two varieties of trapezes, narrow bladelets and microburins chipped from at least eight cores of exotic source, as well as one flint fabricator. The encampment had a slightly more complicated and longer story than the preceding ones, even though also in this case the flint assemblage is quite specialised. The microwear has been studied by Miss LEMORINI (pers. comm., 1990) who recognized impact traces on some hafted trapezes and other tools linked with butchering practices. The general impression is that a mesolithic band of the late Castelnovian Culture settled for a short pe-

riod, most probably during the summer, bringing with them a few nodules for preparing their armatures and other instruments strictly connected with hunting activities.

Considerations

The survey and excavations so far conducted along the watershed in question have shed some light on the Mesolithic exploitation of the territory. Pre-Boreal, Boreal and Atlantic sites have been identified and are being studied. Up to now eight pollen cores have been extracted from lake basins close to Mesolithic camps and two peat sequences with evidence of buried Atlantic forests have been sampled for pollen and insect climatic columns. All these series have been chronologically correlated with fifty 14C dates. The final purpose is that of a reasonable, even though fragmentary, understanding of the effects of human impact on a specialized mountain environment between the Late Glacial and the beginning of the Historic Period.

RIASSUNTO

Il presente lavoro riguarda lo spartiacque Val Camonica-Val Trompia-Val Sabbia, nelle Alpi meridionali Bresciane (Lombardia). Una serie di ricognizioni archeologiche ha portato al rinvenimento di numerose stazioni per lo più attribuibili al Mesolitico. Tre di queste sono state oggetto di scavo. Due appartengono al Sauveterriano ed una al Castelnoviano. L'autore fornisce inoltre alcune informazioni circa la dislocazione dei siti, le datazioni radiometriche ottenute e le analisi archeoambientali svolte sinora.

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