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Mesolithic settlements in the Bernese prealpine area

ABSTRACT

Mesolithic sites and traces in the Simmental (Bernese prealpine area)

The author describes some small sites, which show that Mesolithic hunters coming from the Jura area and the Swiss Plain must have infiltrated the prealpine region during the postglacial period.

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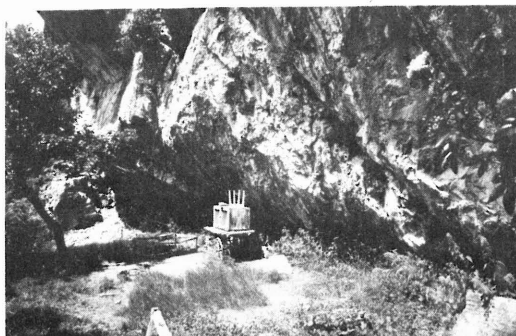
Whereas in Switzerland the late Upper Palaeolithic sites are chiefly restricted to the valleys of the Jura Mountains and only in few cases reach the Swiss Plain the Mesolithic settlers were well represented in the Jura as well as in the Plain and had a certain tendency to infiltrate the prealpine area from the North. There may be a similar movement in the south of Swiss Alps as indicated by the site of Tec Nev in the Mesocco valley.

The infiltration of the prealpine area north of the Alps is demonstrated by the results of researches conducted in the Simmental, an important valley reaching from the Lake of Thun to the Bernese Alps. In connection with their exploration of Middle Palaeolithic sites of cave bear hunters a group of amateur archaeologists – the brothers David and Albert Andrist together with Walter Flückiger – discovered traces of such a Mesolithic infiltration into this area many years ago. They published their discoveries in a monograph entitled «Das Simmental zur Steinzeit» and in a popular report in 1964. A recent re-examination of the sites as well as of the material has shown that additional explorations might meet with success.

One of these sites is that of *Riedli Balm* at the Mannenberg near Zweisimmen (coordinates: 595550/157620; altitude 950 m). This rockshelter (fig. 1 and 2) has a length of 43 m and a depth of 5-6 m. Though it appeared to be very suitable for an occupation by prehistoric hunters excavations in 1951 produced no results. Later, however, it



Fig. 1 (a, b) - The Riedli Balm. General view with the slope where the lithic material has been found (top) and the rockshelter from where it comes (bottom).



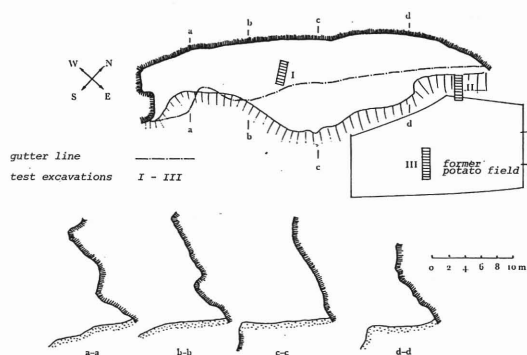


Fig. 2 - Riedli Balm: map and sections.

was found that on the surface of the slope in front of the rockshelter a lot of waste material and some artifacts could be collected. This can probably be explained by the fact that sometimes during the 19th century a farmer took soil from the rockshelter to fertilize a small potato field on the slope. We unfortunately have no information as to the stratigraphic position in which the cultural remains had been originally situated. Identification of the industry is only possible through the medium of typological criteria. This task is made more difficult by the fact that the raw material is of rather poor quality: radiolaritic chert, quartzite which can be found in the neighbourhood, and only a little flint. There is some suggestion of a core and blade technology which produced some more or less regular blades including a number of microblades. The corresponding cores are rather irregular and crude. A few «micro burins» and a single small but carefully retouched trapeze prove the existence of «Klingenzerlegung». There is also a number of rather small and more or less round scrapers as well as some crude scrapers on blades or flakes. The burins which have been published are not very convincing; the same is the case for a few items which have been labeled as drills. Furthermore there are notched flakes and blades. Finally we may mention the fragment of a blunted blade, which might be interpreted as a point (fig. 3 and 4).

Taking everything in consideration there is little doubt that we have here a Mesolithic industry. But there are too few typological characteristics to allow it to be attributed with certainty to one of the Mesolithic cultures represented in Switzerland; perhaps the most persuasive similarities are to be found in the Tardenoisian complex. As we have no information on the original stratigraphy in

the Riedli rockshelter, nothing can be said about the date of its occupation by Mesolithic man.

A second site of this area which has been attributed to the Mesolithic period is the rockshelter called *Oeyenriedschopf* in the Diemtigtal, a tributary valley of the Simmental (coordinates: 604650/161100; altitude: 1180 m). Its length is 20 m, its depth 1-5 m (fig. 5 and 6). A small test excavation in 1938/39 revealed the presence of a stratigraphic section containing nine different layers. The so-called «upper coal layer» (fourth from top) contained only a few artifacts; the «lower coal layer» (seventh from the top), somewhat more. Again, the quality of the raw material is poor. Although the cores are rather crude they show that a blade technique was used. However not a single typical artifact has yet been excavated (fig. 7). The hypothesis that we are dealing with Mesolithic remains based upon two facts: first, there is no question of a Middle Palaeolithic industry at this place and we cannot expect in this area traces of Upper Palaeolithic hunters; secondly, the few animal bones found in association with the stone industry (mainly in the «upper coal layer») show a rather recent fauna of which ibex is the most significant species. No C14-dating has yet been made.

In the Simmental area there are three additional sites, which were occupied periodically by cave bears during the Würm glacial. Their discovery is also due to the Andrist brothers and their colleague Flückiger. They were later studied by specialists in sedimentology and pollen analysis (Schmid 1958, Müller 1979). The *Ranggiloch*, above the village of Boltigen (coordinates: 592375/164925; altitude: 1845 m) is a small cave, 14 m wide and up to 11 m deep. Two «cave bear layers» were discovered. The lower one can be assigned to the early Würm; the higher seems to be a mixture of late Pleistocene and postglacial material including some fireplaces. As the few and rather undiagnostic stone artifacts (for which raw material similar to the Riedli Balm industry was used) all come from this mixed layer, is believed that they might be intrusive i.e. of postglacial age and therefore Mesolithic (fig. 8A).

A similar situation was observed in another small cave, the so called *Chilchli* above the village of Erlenbach (coordinates: 605325/170925; altitude 1810 m). A lower «cave bear layer» dating from the early Würm contains an industry of Middle Palaeolithic aspect; a somewhat higher «cave bear layer» is recognized to contain a mixture of Pleistocene and postglacial sediments, the latter coming from outside the cave. The few artifacts

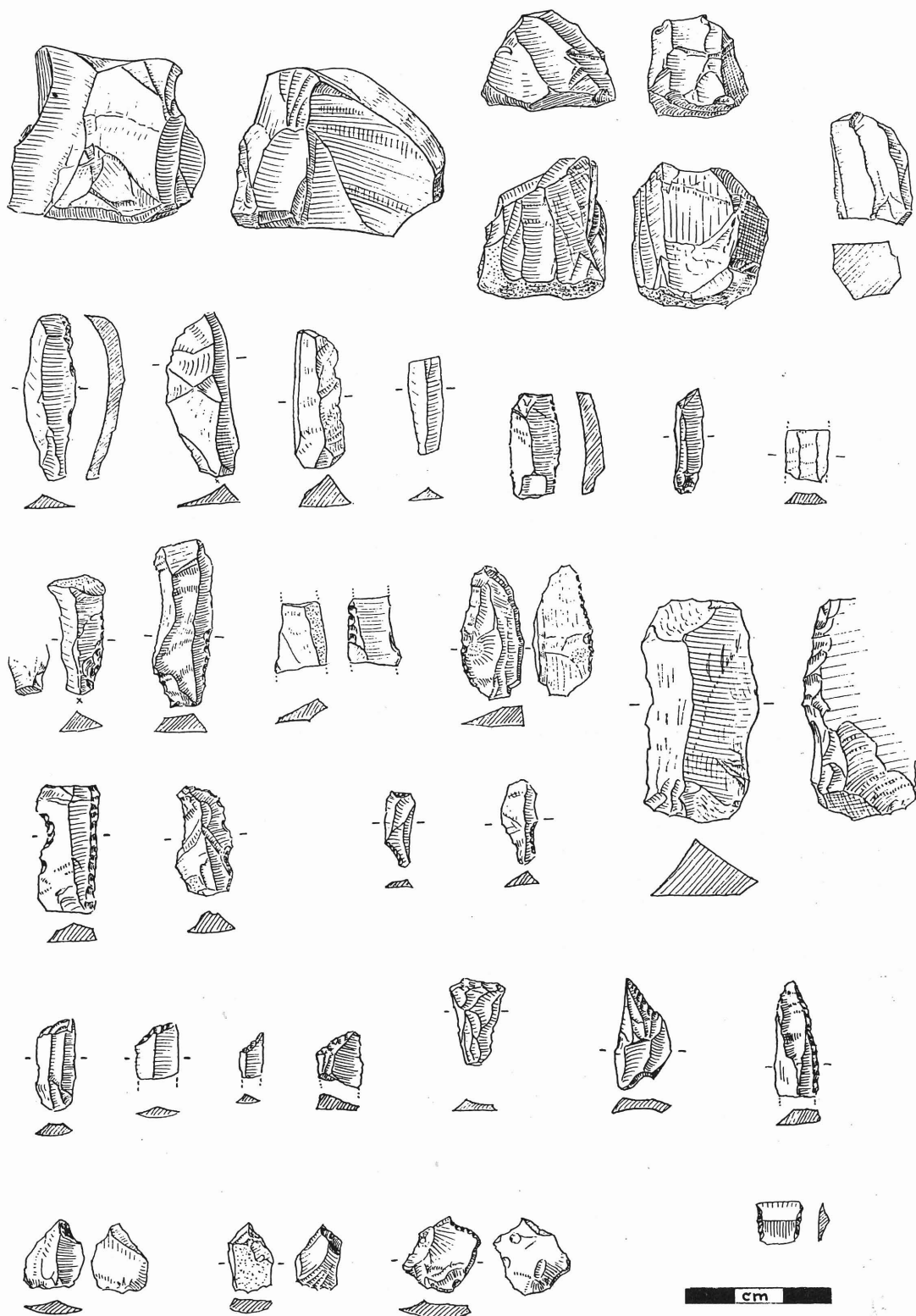


Fig. 3 - Riedli Balm: stone industry.

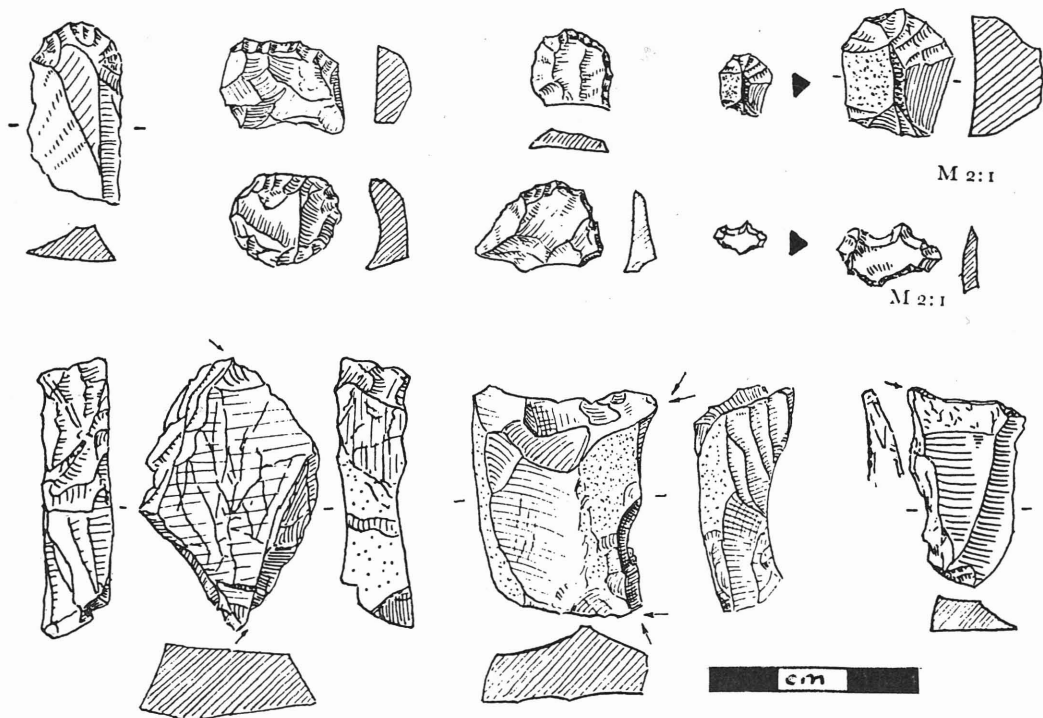


Fig. 4 - Riedli Balm: stone industry.



Fig. 5 - Oeyenriedschopf

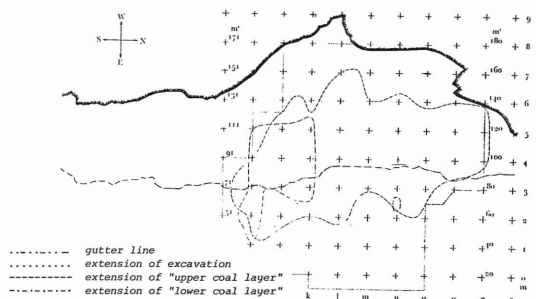


Fig. 6 - Oeyenriedschopf: map.

discovered in this level have been attributed to the Mesolithic though it is not possible to connect them with a specific group (fig. 8B).

The third of these cave bear sites is the *Schnurenloch* above the village of Oberwil (coordinates: 601100/168650; altitude: 1230 m). There was a thick layer of cave bear remains, divided on the basis of soil colour into four horizons. The two horizons on top, as well as the lowest, contained artifacts of Middle Palaeolithic aspect. The highest of the four horizons yielded a small blade which the excavators thought could be related to the presence of man also during the Upper Palaeolithic. This is very improbable because the ice must have reduced the accessibility of the Simmental very much at the end of the Würm glaciation. But it might be that here again there is evidence of a visit of this small cave by Mesolithic hunters during the Postglacial (fig. 8C).

Figures 1: photographs by the author; Figures 24, 6-8 after Andrist D., Flückiger W. and Andrist A. 1964.

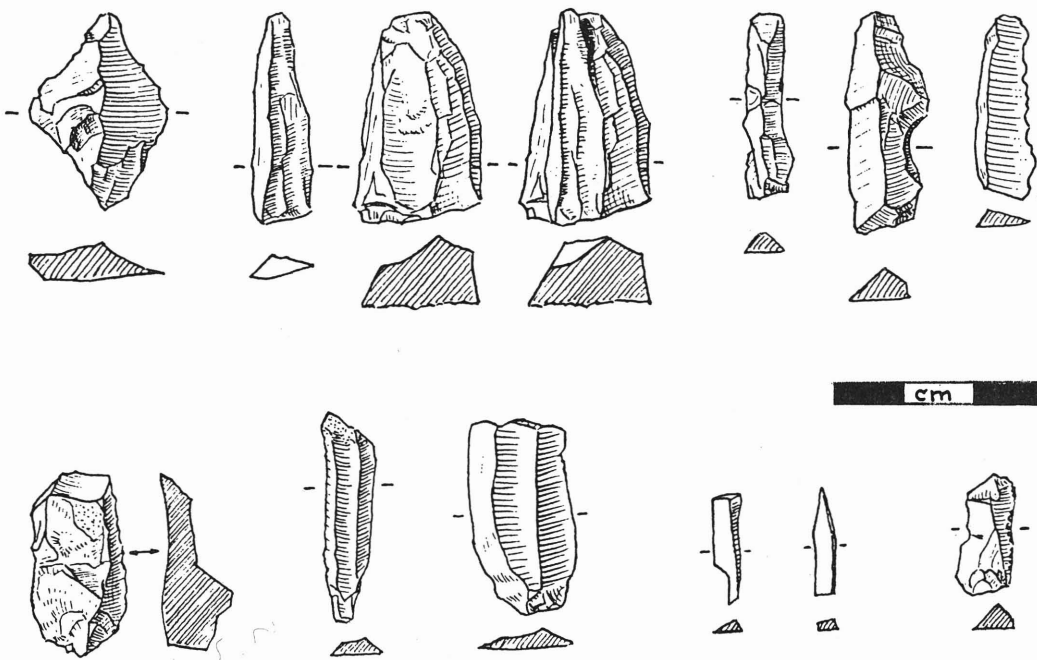


Fig. 7 - Oeyenriedschopf: Stone industry.

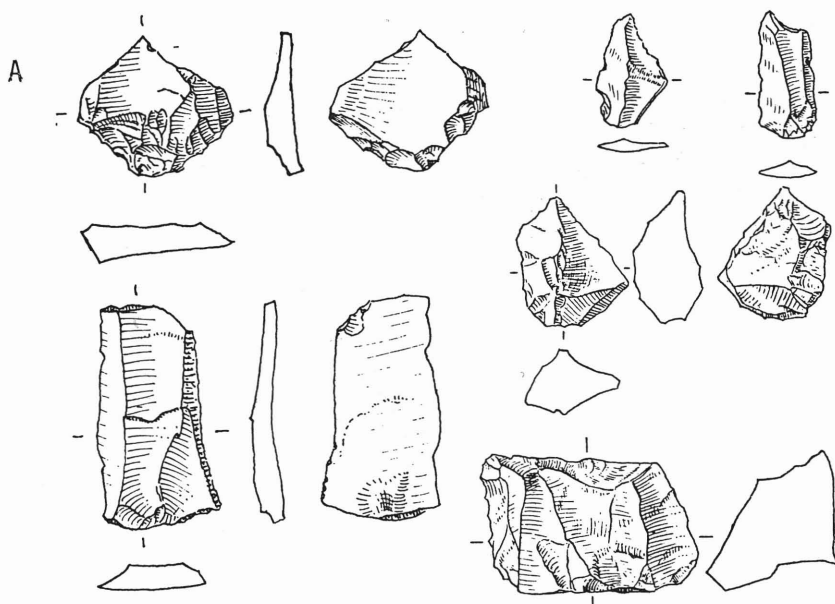


Fig. 8 (A) - Stone industries attributed to the Mesolithic period from the Ranggiloch

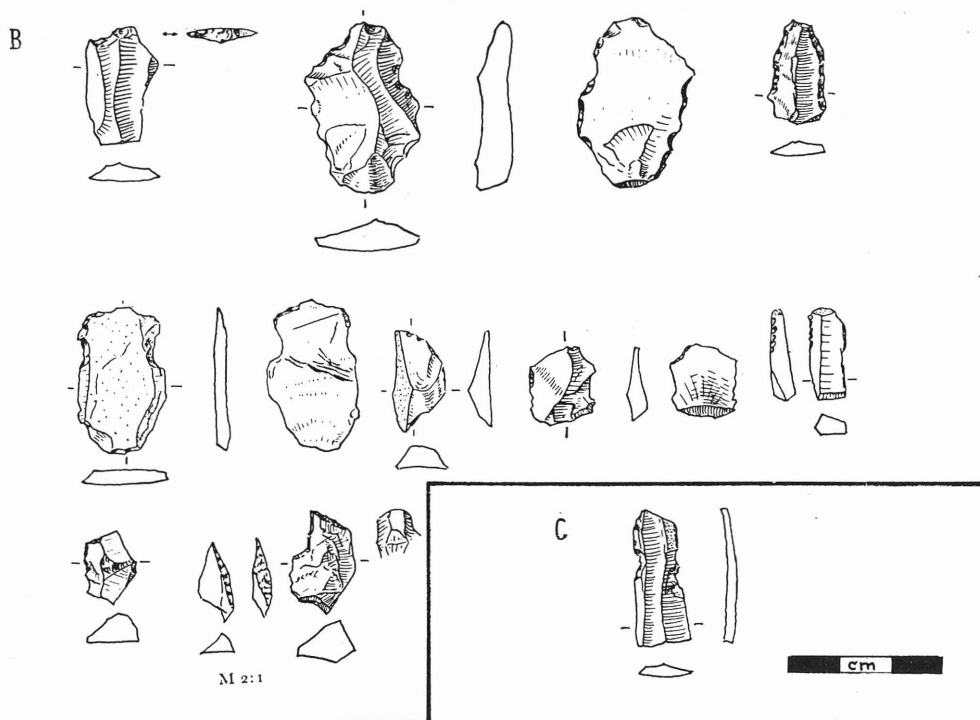


Fig. 8 (B-C) - Stone industries attributed to the Mesolithic from the Chilchli (B) and the Schnurenloch (C).

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SUMMARY

Mesolithic settlements in the Bernese prealpine area. The author deals with the sites Riedli Balm near Zweisimmen in the Simmental and Oeyenriedschopf in the Diemtigtal, a tributary valley. In 1951 respectively in 1938/39 small test excavations have been made. Though the results were limited they are sufficient to show that an infiltration of this area by Mesolithic hunters happened during the Postglacial. This is supported by observations at the sites Ranggiloch, Chilchli and Schnurenloch, all of them at a considerable altitude; the two latter showed also traces of a Middle Palaeolithic occupation.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Mesolithische Siedlungsstellen im voralpinen Gebiet des Kantons Bern.

Der Autor behandelt die Fundstellen Riedli Balm bei Zweisimmen im Simmental und Oeyenriedschopf im Diemtigtal, einem zugehörigen Seitental, wo 1951 bzw. 1938/39 kleine Sondierungen durchgeführt wurden; die relativ dürftigen Resultate lassen immerhin die Folgerung zu, dass in der Postglazialzeit eine Infiltration dieses Gebietes durch mesolithische Jäger erfolgte. Dafür sprechen auch Beobachtungen in den hochgelegenen Fundstellen Ranggiloch, Chilchli und Schnurenloch, von denen die beiden letzteren im unteren Teil der Stratigraphie mittelpalaeolithische Spuren aufwiesen.

RIASSUNTO

Siti mesolitici nella regione prealpina del Cantone di Berna. L'autore presenta i siti di Riedli Balm presso Zweisimmen nel Simmental e di Oeyenriedschopf nel Diemtigtal, valle secondaria del Simmental. Qui, rispettivamente nel 1951 e nel 1938/39, furono eseguiti scavi limitati. I risultati, piuttosto esigui, sono stati però sufficienti per dimostrare che la regione era stata interessata dalla presenza di cacciatori mesolitici durante l'epoca post-glaciale.

Tale fatto è confermato nei tre siti di Ranggiloch, Chilchli e Schnurenloch, ubicati ad una notevole altezza. In questi depositi sono state trovate tracce di frequentazioni mesolitiche in due casi sovrapposte a livelli del paleolitico medio.