

New data on the recent and final Neolithic period of the Central Eastern Veneto

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ABSTRACT - The new data supplied by the surface findings and excavation surveys allow to define a cultural picture of the Central Eastern Veneto area that had already been described in the works of Bernardino Bagolini with regard to the Recent and Final Neolithic.

Key words: Veneto area, Recent Neolithic, Square Mouth Vase Culture, Final Neolithic, Lagozza Culture
Parole chiave: Veneto, Neolitico Recente, Cultura VBQ, Neolitico finale, Cultura della Lagozza

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1. THE STATE OF THE RESEARCH

After Raffaello Battaglia's works titled "Preistoria del Veneto e della Venezia Giulia" (1958-59), a new cultural and chronological picture of the Veneto Neolithic in general was described by Bernardino Bagolini in 1984 in "Il Veneto nell'antichità - Preistoria e protostoria" (BAGOLINI, 1984:323-447), subsequently updated in the Records of the XXVI Scientific Meeting of the Italian Institute of Prehistory and Protohistory (BAGOLINI, 1987:189-196).

The various acquisitions that followed Bagolini's study, fruit of the surface findings and the excavations, had an important role in tracing the cultural outline of the Neo-eneolithic in the province of Verona¹ and helped find many missing links in the archaeology of the Central Eastern Veneto area in general (Fig.1:3,7).

As for the specific Central Eastern Veneto area, the data enriched the chronological and cultural picture not only of the Vicenza and Padova provinces, which had already been sufficiently described, but also of the cultural aspects of the recent and final Neolithic of the provinces of Belluno, Treviso and Venezia. In fact, with regard to the geographical aspects of these provinces, archaeological documentation is still as yet insufficient.

2. THE PROVINCE OF VICENZA

In the light of the information acquired, the best documented Central Eastern Veneto territory is as yet the province of Vicenza, thanks to the many excavations and researches undertaken (Fig.1). Along with the information already acquired there are also the two very important findings of Sarcedo - San Pietro in Bodo and Brendola - Soastene.

Fragments of Square Mouth vases were found in the entrance of the Lora Grotto (Fig.1:21) on the calcareous hill-slope of San Pietro in Bodo at Sarcedo, in the Upper Vicentino. Typical herringbone engravings are applied under the rim along with impressed dots on the handle of one of the specimens (Fig.2:1). There was also a small bowl (Fig.2:3) as well as many sherds of arched truncate cone-shaped vases with the characteristic digital cordon decorations and grooves applied on the rim (Fig.2:4-5). The most particular object of the finding was a heap of small marble beads that were stuck together by the calcareous encrustation as a result of leaching in the grotto (Fig.2:6), together with the bottom of a vase containing a mixture of carbonized seeds of cereals: (*Triticum dicoccum*, *Triticum aestivum*, *Hordeum vulgare* s.l.; *Panicum miliaceum*) and leguminosae (*Lens culinaris*, *Pisum sativum*, *Vicia faba minor*).

There were no human bones, which suggests that the grotto was not used for funereal rituals. The structure and the total lack of flint artefacts along with the structural elements also exclude that the grotto was lived in. Should the heap of more than a hundred calcareous beads and the vase of seed be considered as offerings, then it would seem that the place was used for ritual purposes. The carbonized seeds in particular suggest agricultural rituals.

There was a second finding in 1995, which was of great importance to the Vicentino, at Brendola-Soastene locality (Fig.1:18), at the foot of a hill in an area between the Berici and the Eastern Lessini Mountains, where a rescue excavation brought to light the traces of a road with gullies along the sides and activity surfaces, the oldest of which dates to the Recent Neolithic. The archaeological material of the Neolithic refers to the same cultural facies already identified by Bernardino Bagolini in the sites of "Le Basse of Valcalaona" and at Motton d'Asigliano, appropriately defined as "Berican-Euganean" (BAGOLINI *et al.*, 1979) characterised by fine ceramics with tiny and accurate bands with impressed dots, zigzags and bands of engraved lines usually forming various compositions of triangles.

3. THE PROVINCE OF PADOVA

A Recent Neolithic settlement was discovered in July 1997 at Maserà, South of Padova, during an archaeological control on the excavation of a trench for the gas system (Fig.3:2). The archaeological stratifications were detected at a depth of about 1.70m from the present ground. The site was situated at the far southern end of the highland plain, on a wide sandy terrace that was slightly higher than the surrounding area. Archaeological, paleobotanic and paleozoologic findings were uncovered both inside a silty anthropical layer of about 20cm, that subsequently became soil after the site had been abandoned (Fig.4) and inside negative structures such as post-holes (Fig.5) and also shafts rich in findings. The anthropic sequence was wrapped and sealed by a fluvial mound, probably formed by the ancient course of the River Bacchiglione or one of its branches. A preliminary test suggests that the ceramic material may refer to the Recent Neolithic and specifically to the initial style of "engraving and impression" of the Square Mouth Vase Culture (Fig.6:1-11).

4. THE PROVINCE OF TREVISO

A preliminary outline on Neolithic occupation in the Treviso area was sketched on the basis of the

analyses of the various Treviso collections and in particular the Krüll collection (BIANCHIN CITTON, 1989).

Subsequently an archaeological investigation carried out at Biancade of Roncade between 1992 and 1994, allowed to explore for the first time ever a lowland Neolithic site in Eastern Veneto on a stratigraphic basis (BIANCHIN CITTON, 1996) (Fig.7:15). The settlement was located downhill from the "Risurgent lines" in the Treviso sandy-clayey mid lowland plain, between the Rivers Sile and Piave. A wide strip of an alluvial plain of about 3000m² was explored between the present course of the River Vallio and its paleo-riverbed that was originally winding, but has now been converted into an agricultural canal. Considering there were no ancient pounding levels or primary structures, spatial, morphological and functional analyses were undertaken on about a hundred negative structures, including groups of shaft trenches and silos-shafts, dug out of the sterile silty clayey sediment of the ancient plain situated in three distinct areas (Fig.8).

Approximately ninety shaft trenches and eleven silos-shafts were identified. Structures with slanting walls, concave bases and ellipsoidal or oval openings were defined as shaft trenches. These were thought to have been small quarries that had been slowly filled up with natural sediments when they were still open (Fig.9:1-3). The substructures that, because of the shape and depth, were thought to have been ideal for stocking or conserving food were defined as silos-shafts (Fig.9:4). These are cylindrical or bell-shaped with narrow openings and deep or convex floors.

The very aggressive nature of the clayey deposits both of the shaft trenches and the silos-shafts determined a post-depositional selection of the different classes of materials, favouring the preservation of the mineral artefacts (flints and polished stone) rather than the ceramic mixtures and organic findings. The final part of the field survey consisted of the opening of two ditches at right-angles to the Vallio paleo-riverbed, where archaeological material and the vegetal remains covered with peat were recovered.

Even though the archaeological documentation was very little, three radiometric dates³ carried out on three different specimens of vegetal macro-remains mixed with the peat sediments of the Vallio paleo-riverbed confirmed that the area was occupied for the first time by a community contemporaneous with the Fagnigola Group between the end of the V and the beginning of the IV millennium BC.

The Early Neolithic site of Biancade of Roncade was then occupied by a community that conveyed the "engraving and impression" style of the Square Mouth Culture at the end of the IV millennium BC, in conventional chronology. Considering the archaeological documentation acquired, it is thought that most of the shaft trenches and the silos-shafts refer to the

Recent Neolithic facies. The loss of the primary occupation levels does not allow to establish whether all the investigated areas were situated within the settlement or if some groups of structures were on the fringes of the inhabited areas as the almost sterile deposit sediments of most of the shafts suggest.

Geo-sedimentological observations also proved that both the Early Neolithic and the Recent Neolithic settlements were abandoned as a result of a hydrogeological unbalance of the area caused by the level of the waters of the paleo-Vallio River. Furthermore, the lack of anthropic materials and organic substances in the colluvial sediments, that completely filled the structures, suggests that the Early and Recent Neolithic occupations were brief. The Recent Neolithic settlement must have covered a vast area. The vegetal macro-remains found in the peat sediments of the paleo-Vallio River were the only paleobotanical evidence found and supplied vague information on the environment surrounding the Early Neolithic site. The forests were characterised by mixed oak woods predominantly with broad-leaf oak trees, as well as ash and maple trees along with species that live on riverbanks but there was no sign of cultivated species. The abundant querns and lithic millstones were most probably used for milling cultivated plant seeds as well as wild fruit. The archaeozoological picture is more complete. There were more domestic animal species (pigs, goats-sheep, oxen) than hunted ones (deer).

Other important elements on the Recent and Late Neolithic in Northeastern Italy are supplied by the investigations that are being carried out in the humid-type settlement of Colmaggioro of Tarzo and Stret of S. Maria of Lake Revine, in the area between Treviso and Pordenone provinces (Fig.7:13).

Interdisciplinary investigations that were carried out on and off from 1989 onwards allowed to identify a humid-type final Neolithic site of more than 2000m² in an area between the two lakes (BIANCHIN CITTON, 1994a).

The settlement situated on reclaimed land was founded between the end of the IV and the beginning of III millenium BC, in conventional chronology. During a regressive phase of the level of the two lakes an isthmus emerged and the shores became a peat bog. This settlement was abandoned during the II millenium BC when the waters rose and lake lime formed above the anthropic stratum transforming the site into a lake habitat.

While the interdisciplinary investigations were carried out on the shores of the two lakes and the land between these, systematic excavations were undertaken in the Stret of S.Maria, in the Commune of Lake Revine, on an area of about 500m². Lithic elements and wooden structures with at least two constructive phases were documented: the oldest structure was situated

on a peat bog and supported by a few vertical posts thrust into the lake silt (Fig.10) and rather large stones (mainly limestone, flint, sandstone and porphyry) (Fig.11); the more recent one consisting of only lithic elements was also situated on a vast area that was higher and drained with fluvial, glacial gravel deposits. The archaeological material associated to the two constructive periods is particularly fragmented even though it is equal in amount to the zoological and paleobotanical material. A preliminary control confirms the lithic and ceramic typologies that had already been identified among the materials recovered (BIANCHIN CITTON, 1994a, fig.3-10). Traditional Chassey-Lagozza ceramic shapes are more abundant than the engraving and impression style of the Square Mouth Vase Culture.

At this precise moment of the research the humid type settlement of the Revine Lakes can be dated to the final Neolithic period and it is attributed to a cultural aspect that is distinguished predominantly by Lagozza Culture traditional elements and also by elements of the final phase of the Square Mouth Vase Culture.

5. THE PROVINCE OF BELLUNO

The most ancient stable colonization of the Belluno area apparently took place from the Recent Neolithic onwards by a community of Square Mouth Vase Culture transmitters and consolidated in the Late Neolithic and during the Eneolithic periods. Neo-Eneolithic sites were identified in Belluna Valley (many of which were in the Commune of Ponte nelle Alpi) and on higher lands in the Feltre and Agordo areas (Fig.7:1-7). The humid site of Ponte nelle Alpi-Palù district can be added to the findings already documented in the catalogue "Immagini dal tempo: 40.000 anni di storia nella Provincia di Belluno" (BIANCHIN CITTON, 1992:103-121). Here, lithic elements were recovered from the shore of an ancient morainic lake, which is now a peat bog (Fig.12). There is a double structure of altered calcareous slabs separated by an occupational level that provided flint debitage and potsherds, which due to the high fragmentation, generally refer to a late phase of the Neolithic.

6. THE PROVINCE OF VENICE

Our knowledge of human presence in the Neoeolithic Age in the Venice area is completely based on the surface findings. Most of these are lithic arte-

facts⁴ and considering their distribution, an outline of the research can be made (BIANCHIN CITTON, 1994b:25-27) (Fig.7:16-21). Their date range is between the Recent and Late Neolithic. They were mainly concentrated North of Venice between the outlets of the Sile and the Livenza Rivers, in a lagoon area that was probably stable since the Holocene period. The total lack of findings in this part of the lagoon between Venezia and Chioggia and in the lowland sandy area in general, may be connected with an intensive activity of the sedimentation of the rivers. Among the recent recoveries in the Venice area the Meolo in the Fossa vecchia district, Toninato propriety finding is of particular interest (Fig.7:18). During the excavation of a shaft trench, parts of a square mouth vase with the traditional herring-bone engraving along with another round mouth vase with impressed grooves on the rim were uncovered (Fig.2:7-8).

7. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The excavations carried out in the recent years in the Central Eastern Veneto area, the complexes of which are partly still being investigated allow to widen the diffusion area of the early aspects of the third phase of the Square Mouth Vase Culture beyond the strip of lowlands between the Berici Mountains and the Euganean Hills. New researches have also documented how the Northeastern Veneto area was involved in the rather widespread colonization by communities that

transmitted the late aspects of the Square Mouth Vase Cultures throughout the Recent Neolithic. Apparently this colonization became more stable during the Final Neolithic with the occupation of different habitats, both with permanent lowland settlements and with seasonal highland ones. As for the cultural material, it must be underlined that most the lithic implements and the ceramics are represented by traditional elements of the Lagozza Culture. This traditional culture is also probably connected to the diffusion of settlements near lakes, characterised by the reclamation of wooden and lithic elements.

NOTES

1 - Please see the various works of L.SALZANI in *Quaderni di Archeologia del Veneto* II-VI, VIII-IX, XII

2 - For the findings predating 1997 please see Bagolini's works and the bibliographic references in: "Il Veneto nell'antichità - Preistoria e protostoria" (BAGOLINI, 1984:323-447); "Storia di Vicenza" (BAGOLINI, 1987:71-83). Kindly also see the contribution of the underwritten author in "Storia dell'Altipiano dei Sette Comuni" (BIANCHIN CITTON, 1994c:143-156)

3 - C¹⁴-AMS dates carried out at the Istituto di Fisica del Politecnico Federale di Zurigo and calibrated with the programme CalibETH published in 1992, *Radiocarbon* 34,3:483-492: 5149-4908 BC cal. (2s -83,5%); 5348-5199 BC cal. (2s-75,7%); 6334-5202 BC (2s -80.2%)

4 - These materials are preserved in the prehistoric collection of the Museo Archeologico Nazionale of Altino, the Museo Provinciale of Torcello and the Museo Nazionale Concordiese of Portogruaro.

SUMMARY - The new data supplied by the surface findings and excavation surveys allow to define a cultural picture of the Central Eastern Veneto area that had already been described in the works of Bernardino Bagolini with regard to the Recent and Final Neolithic. In particular, the excavations carried out in the recent years, the complexes of which are partly still being studied allow to extend the diffusion area of the early aspects of the third phase of the Square Mouth Vase Culture beyond the plains between the Berici Mountains and the Euganean Hills. New research has also documented how the North-Eastern Veneto area was involved in the widespread colonization by human groups who transmitted the mature aspects of the Square Mouth Vase Culture during the recent Neolithic. This colonization became stable in the final Neolithic, both with permanent lowland settlements and with seasonal highland camps. The cultural material was represented by a very large amount of lithic implements and ceramic vases in the tradition of the Lagozza Culture. This was also linked to the diffusion of settlements in areas near lakes characterised by the reclamation of wooden and lithic elements.

RIASSUNTO - I nuovi dati, provenienti sia da recuperi di superficie sia da indagini di scavo, consentono di precisare per il Veneto centro-orientale un quadro culturale già tracciato per il Neolitico recente e finale nelle opere di Bernardino Bagolini. Più nello specifico gli scavi condotti in anni recenti e i cui complessi sono nella maggior parte dei casi ancora in corso di studio consentono di estendere l'areale di diffusione degli aspetti iniziali della terza fase VBQ oltre la fascia di pianura compresa tra i Monti Berici e i Colli Euganei. Le nuove ricerche hanno inoltre documentato come nel corso del Neolitico recente il Veneto nord-orientale sia stato interessato da una colonizzazione alquanto capillare da parte di gruppi umani portatori degli ultimi aspetti della Cultura VBQ. Tale colonizzazione si sarebbe consolidata nel Neolitico finale sia con insediamenti di pianura a carattere permanente sia con siti a frequentazione stagionale anche a quote elevate. Per quanto riguarda la cultura materiale va sottolineata la massiccia presenza nello strumentario litico e nel vasellame ceramico di elementi di tradizione della Cultura della Lagozza. Alla stessa tradizione culturale va verosimilmente connessa la diffusione, in prossimità di bacini lacustri, di insediamenti perisondali caratterizzati da opere di bonifica in elementi lignei e litici.

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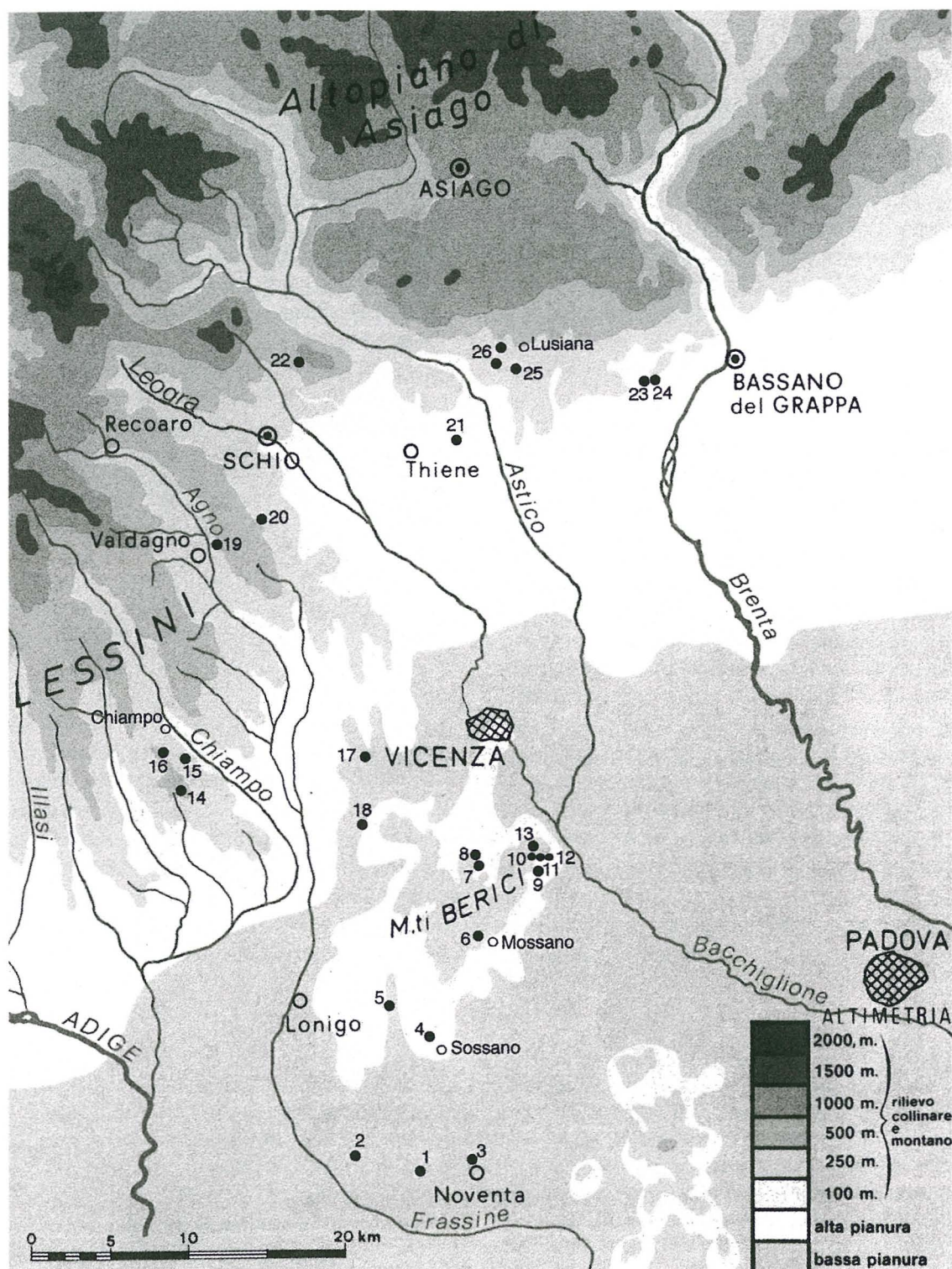


Fig. 1 - Scatter plot of the most important findings of the recent and late Neolithic periods in the Vicenza area (elaborated by I. Bettinardi).

1) Poiana Maggiore-Ca' Bissara; 2) Asigliano-Motton district; 3) Noventa Vicentina-Capo di Sopra; 4) Sossano-Monte della Croce; 5) S.Germano dei Berici-Villa del Ferro-scolo Liona; 6) Villaga-Monte Tondo; 7) Arcugnano-Capitello district; 8) Arcugnano-Le Fratte district; 9) Lumignano-Mura Grotto; 10-12) Covoli of Sengia Bassa of S. Cassiano: Alvise Grotto of Schio, stratum B; Ferrara Rockshelter, stratum B; Perin Grotto, strata C-B; 13) Longare-Castellon del Brosimo; 14) Chiampo-Mount Calvarina; 15) Chiampo-Mount Parnese; 16) Chiampo-Mount Madarosa; 17) Sovizzo-S.Daniele; 18) Brendola-Soastene district; 19) Novale-Rive; 20) Mount Malo-Buso della Rana Grotto; 21) Sarceto-S.Pietro in Bodo, Lora Grotto; 22) Santorso-Mount Summano, Bocca Lorenza Cave; 23-24) Marostica-Piazzette and Erta district; 25-26) Lusiana-Velo, Covolo and Mount Corngon.

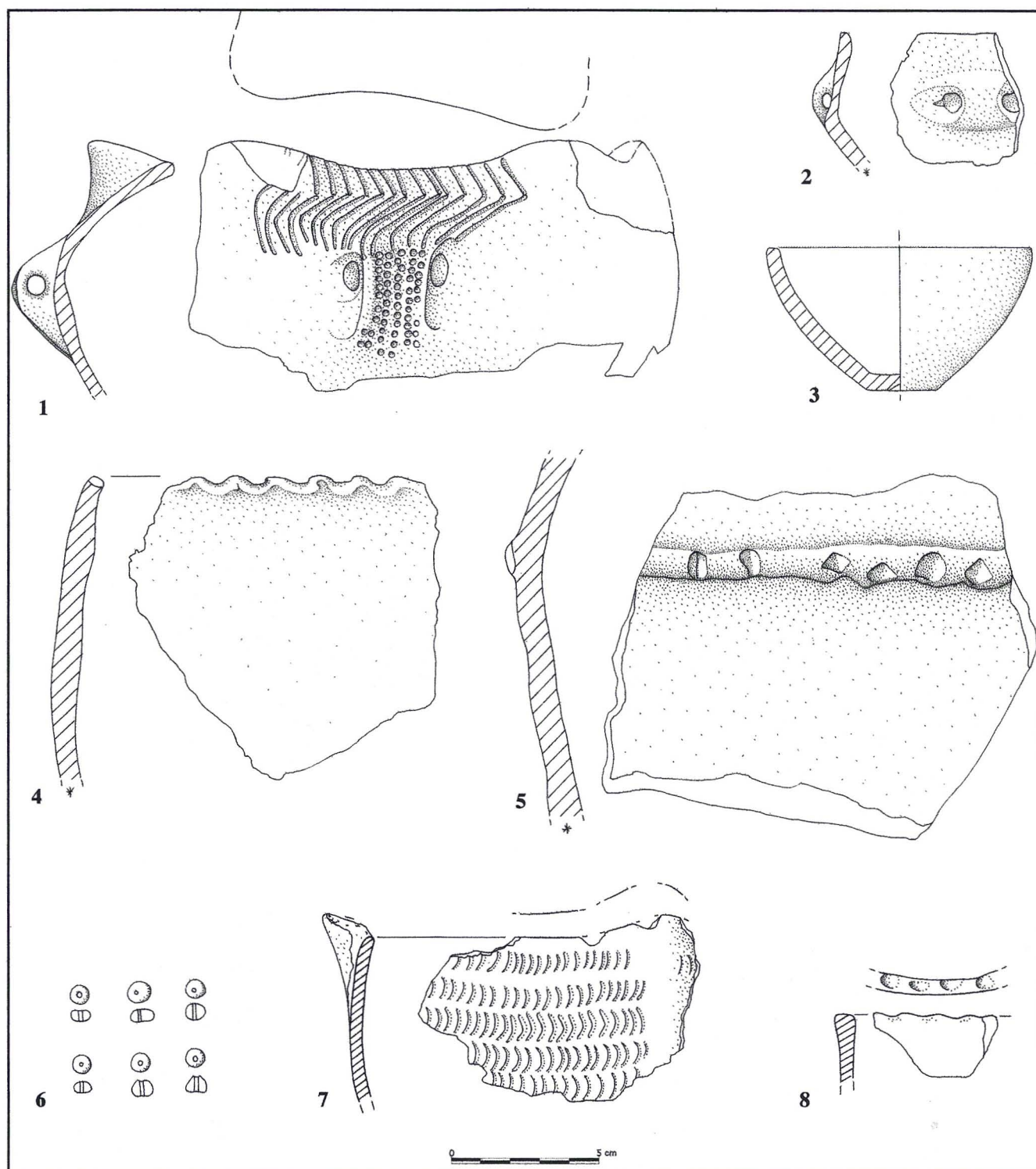


Fig. 2 - Sarcedo (VI)-S. Pietro in Bodo, Lora Grotto: 1-5) ceramic; 6) beads of limestone. Meolo (VE)-Fossa Vecchia district: 7-8) ceramic (drawings by S. Tinazzo, E. Gilli; 1-5, 7-8: 1/3 natural size; 6: 1/2 natural size)

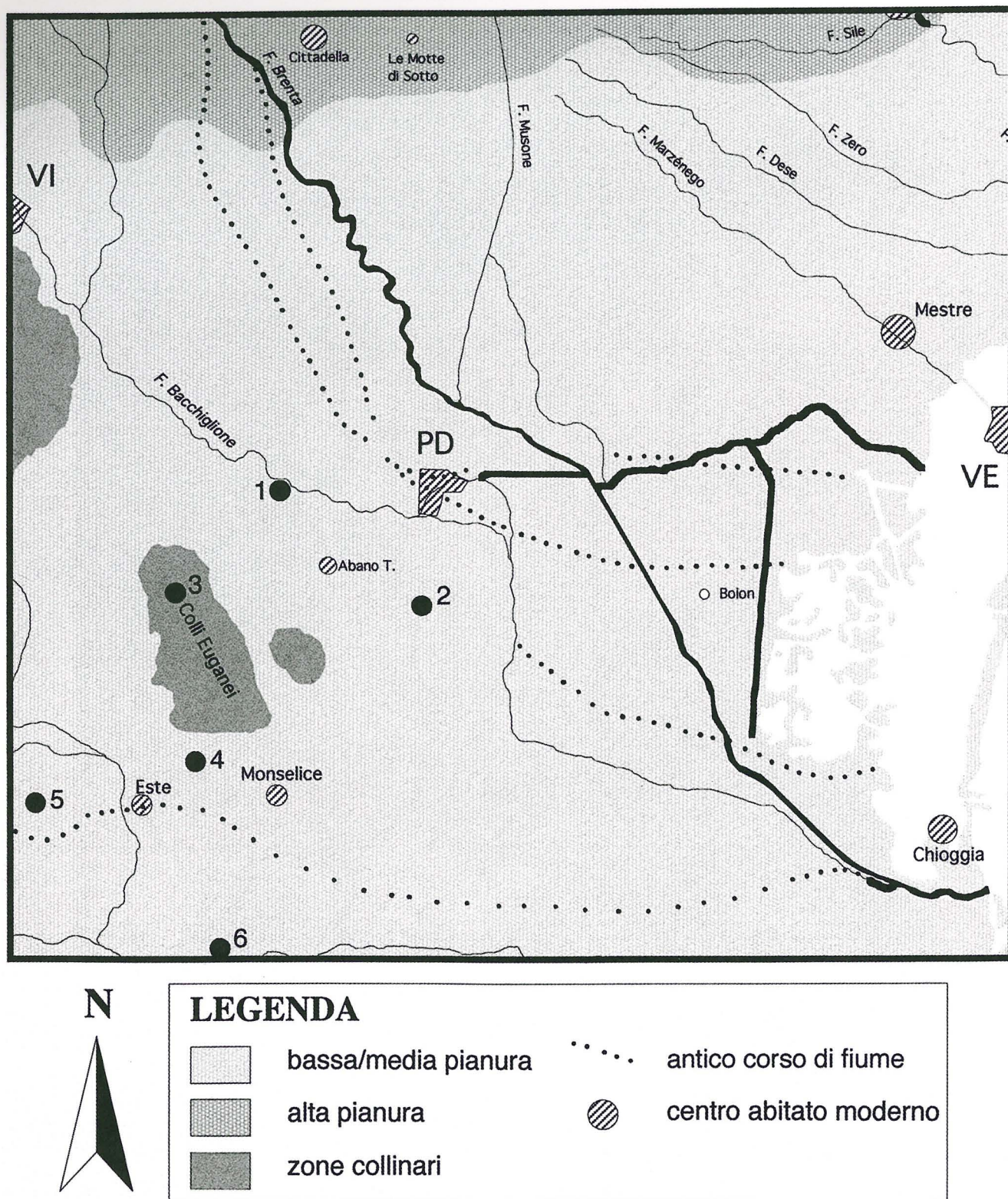


Fig. 3 - Scatter plot of the main findings of the recent and late Neolithic in the Padova area (graphic elaboration by I. Bettinardi)

1) Cervarese S.Croce-Monticello district; 2) Maserà; 3) Teolo-Castelnuovo; 4) Baone. Le Basse of Valcalaona; 5) Montagnana-Busi district; Stanghella-various districts

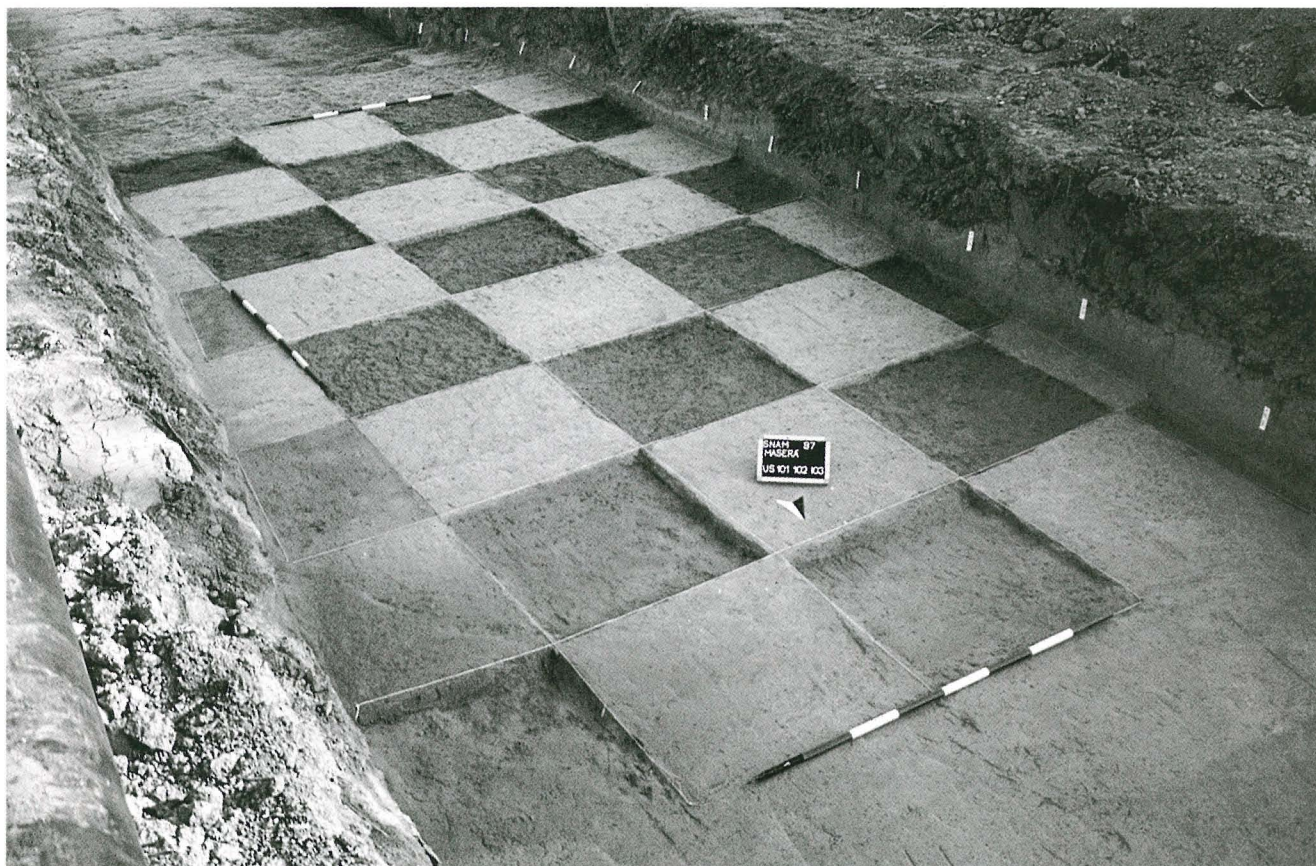


Fig. 4 - Maserà (PD): excavation trench with the recent Neolithic paleosol (photo by S. Felisati)

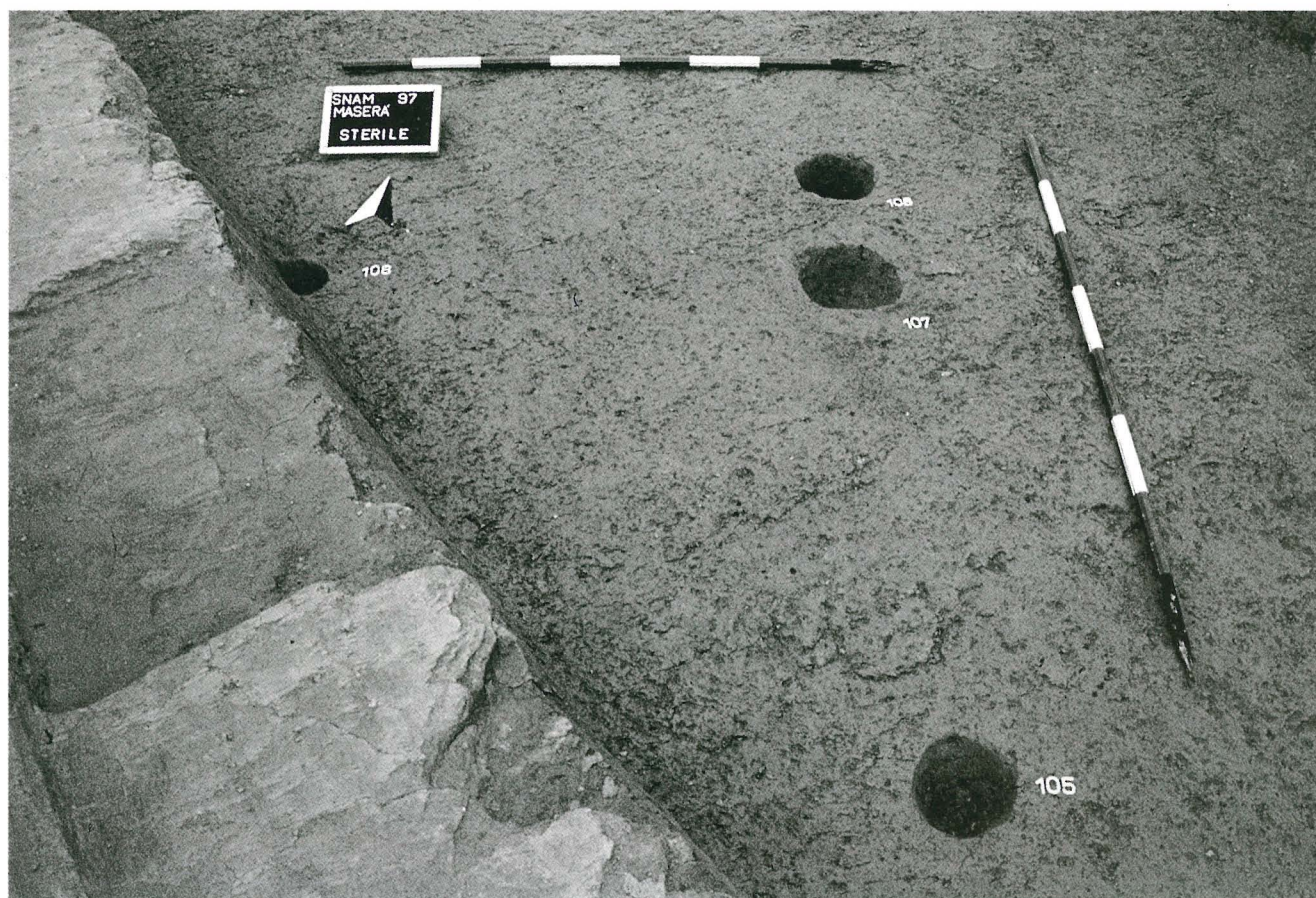


Fig. 5 - Maserà (PD): excavation trench with aligned post-holes at the recent Neolithic site (photo by S. Felisati)

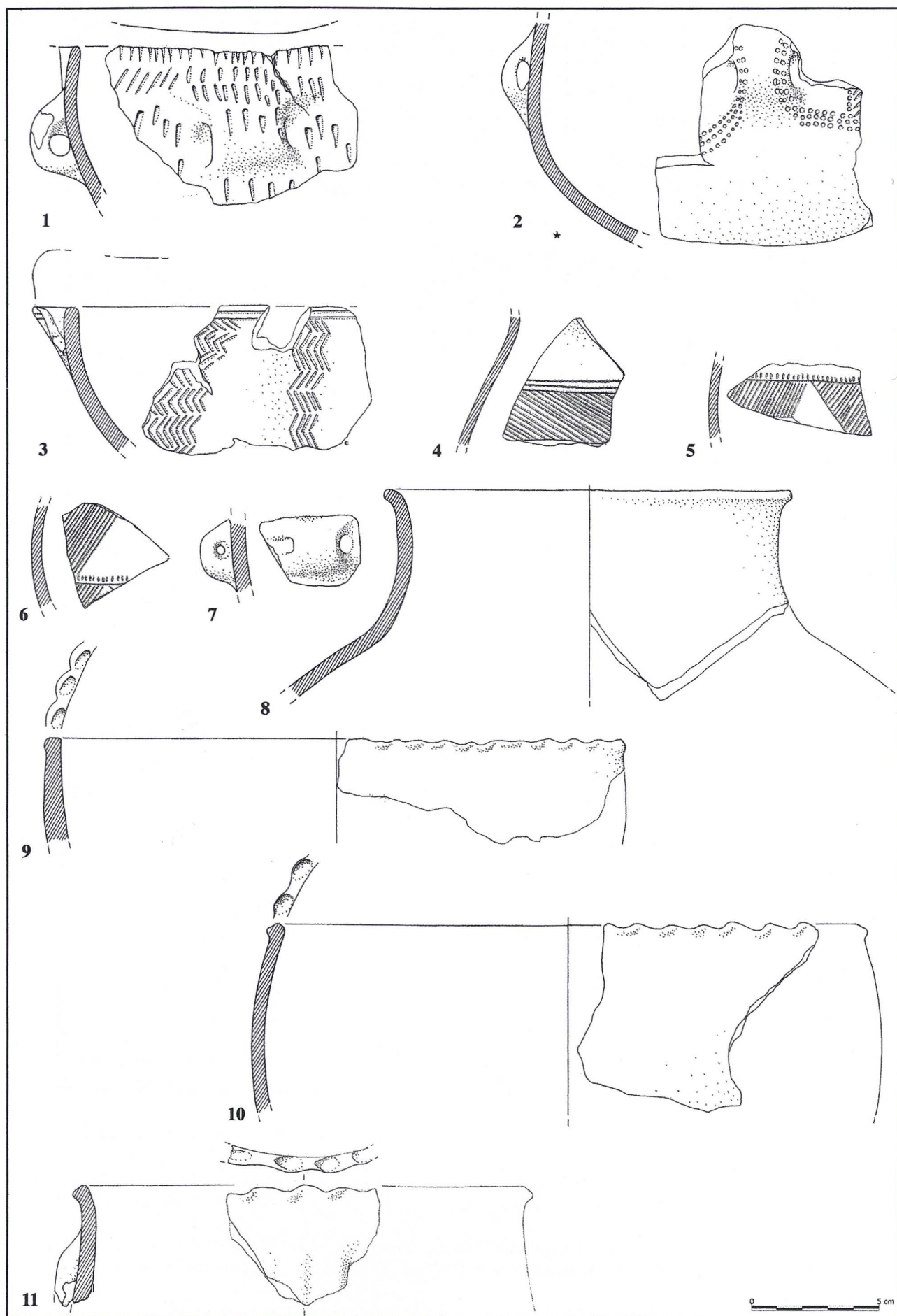


Fig. 6 - Maserà (PD): ceramic of the recent Neolithic site. 1-8) US123; 9) US117; 10-11) US119 (drawings by E. Gilli)

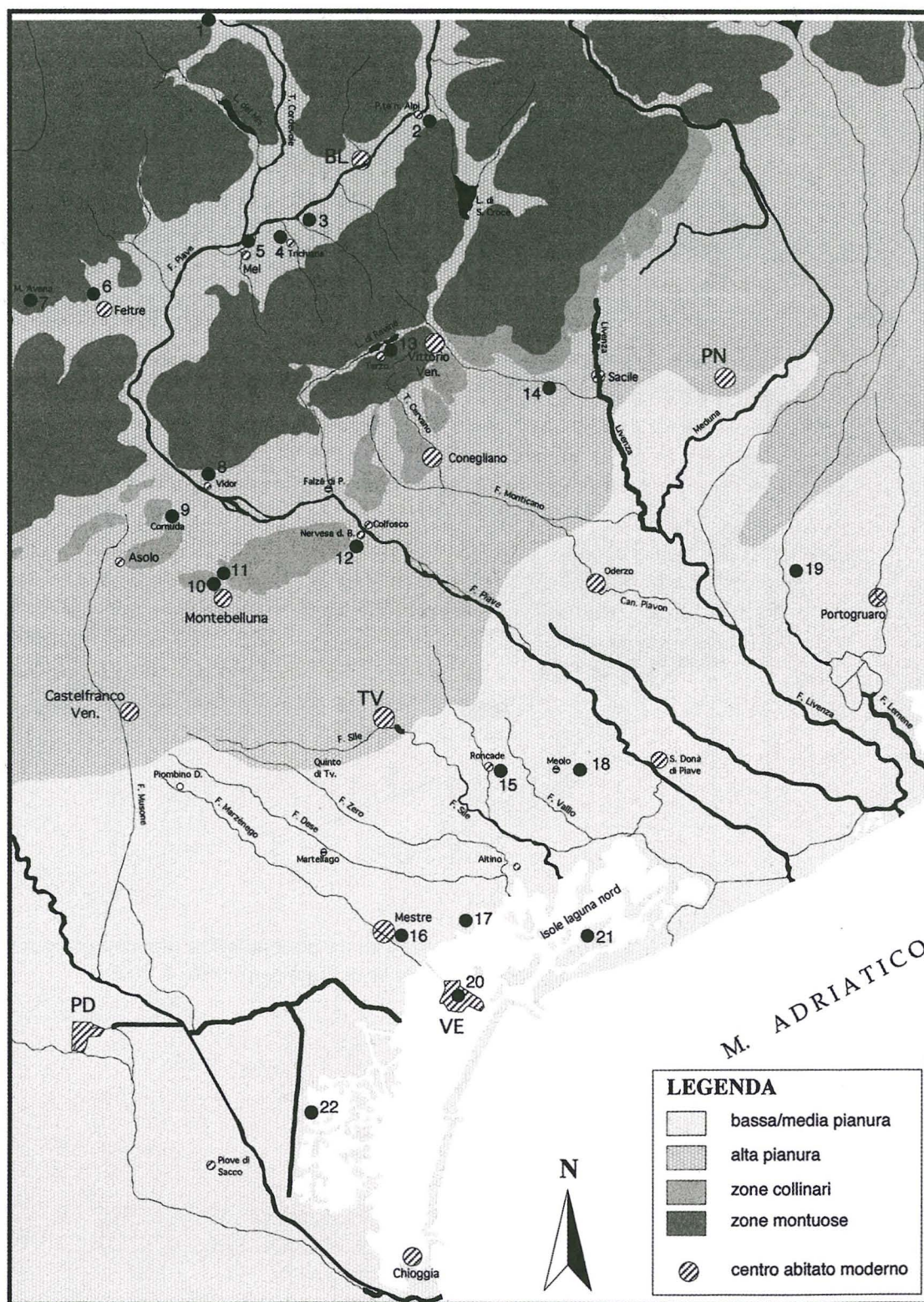


Fig. 7 - Scatter plot of the most important findings of the Recent and Late Neolithic in the Eastern Veneto area (graphic elaboration by I. Bettinardi)

Province of Belluno: 1) Selva di Cadore-Mandrizz district; 2) Ponte nelle Alpi-Cugnan district, Lusego, Casan and Palù; 3) Limana-Salce district, Trichès and Cesa; 4) Trichiana-Nareon district; 5) Mel-Farra; 6) Pedavena-Vignui district; 7) Fonzaso-Mount Avena

Province of Treviso: 8) Vidor-Palù district; 9) Cornuda-S. Lorenzo Valley; 10-11) Montebelluna-Capo di Monte and Pederiva di Biadene; 12) Nervesa della Battaglia-Taveran Lungo; 13) Revine Lakes; 14) Cordignano-Palù district; 15) Roncade-Biancade hamlet.

Province of Venice: 16) Venezia-Mestre; 17) Altino-various districts; 18) Meolo-Fossa vecchia district; 19) Pramaggiore; 20) Venezia Fondaco dei Turchi and Tiepolo-Papadopoli building; 21) The isles of the North Lagoon (?); 22) Lova-Campagna Lupia

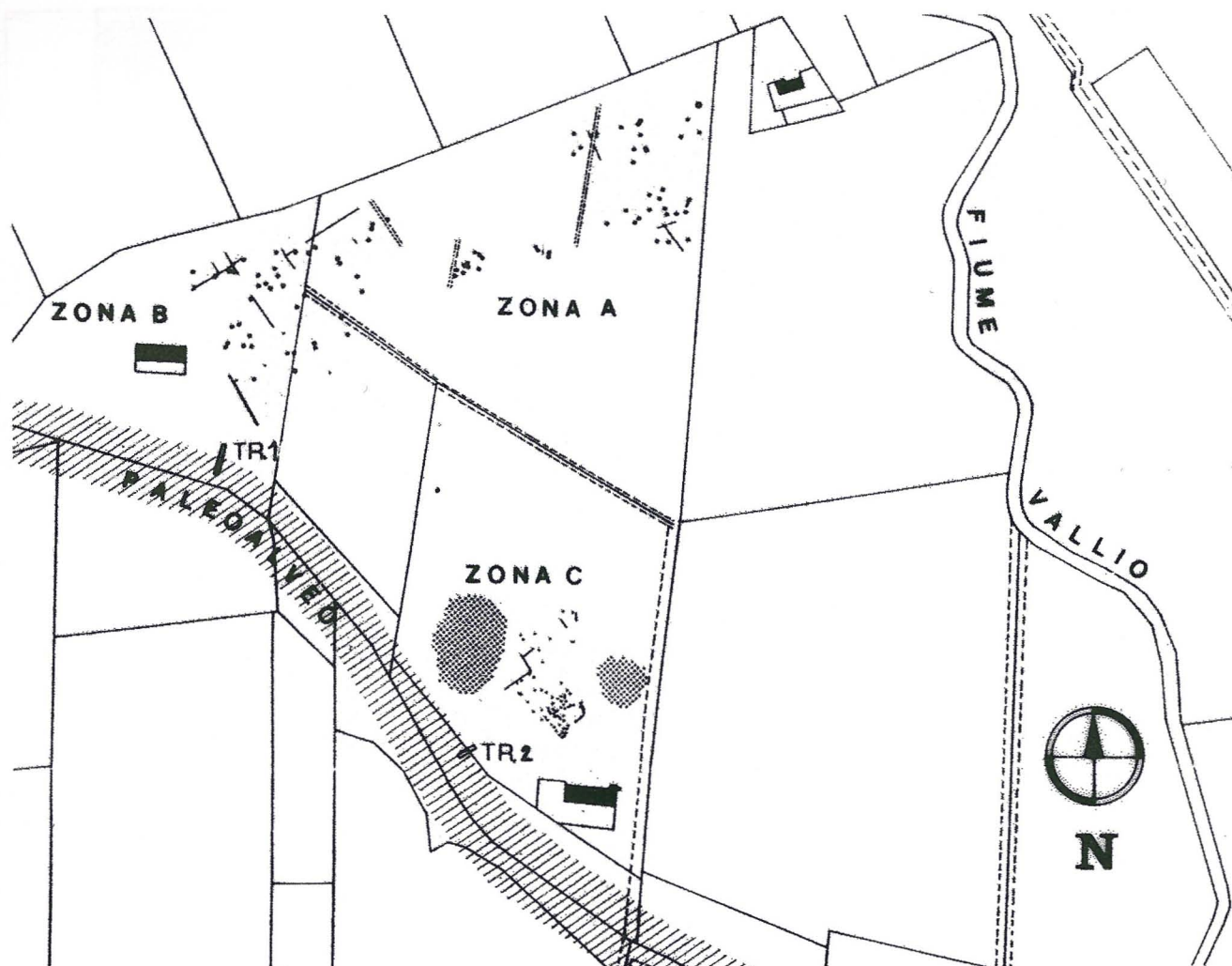


Fig. 8 - Roncade (TV). Biancade hamlet: general layout of the site with the position of the different groups of structures and the paleo-valley bottom of the River Vallio (graphic elaboration by N.Degasperi) (scale 1: 5000)

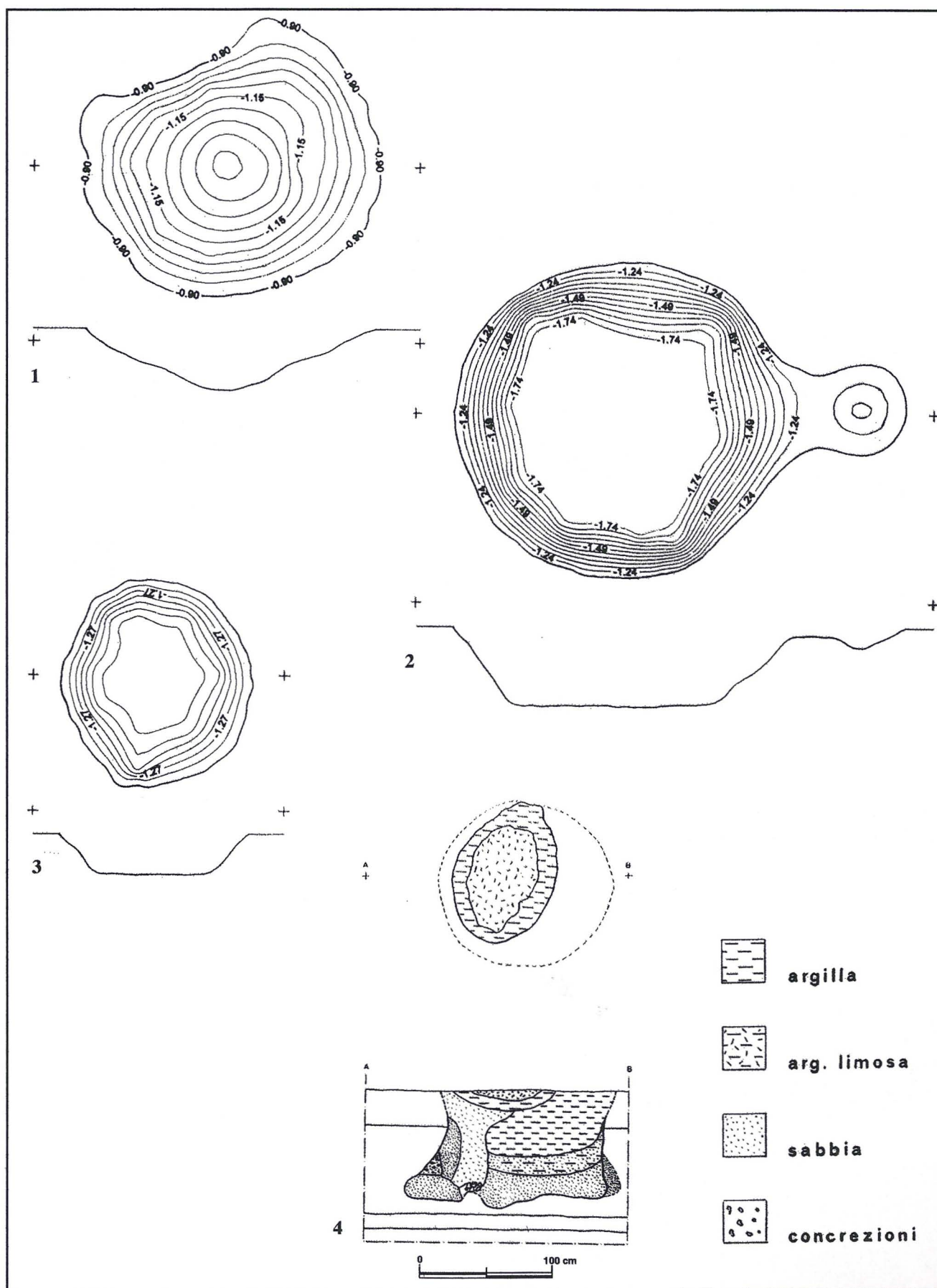


Fig. 9 - Roncade (TV). Biancade hamlet: 1) tomb pit with concave bottom; 2) tomb pit with flat bottom; 3) tomb pit with side steps; 4) section of a silos-shaft with various deposits (graphic elaboration by N.Degasperi)



Fig. 10 - Revine Lakes(TV). Stret di S. Maria district: post made of alder stuck in the lake mud (photo by N. Degasperi)



Fig. 11 - Revine Lakes (TV). Stret di S.Maria district: sector of the excavation with structure of lithic elements of the Final Neolithic site (photo by N.Degasperi)

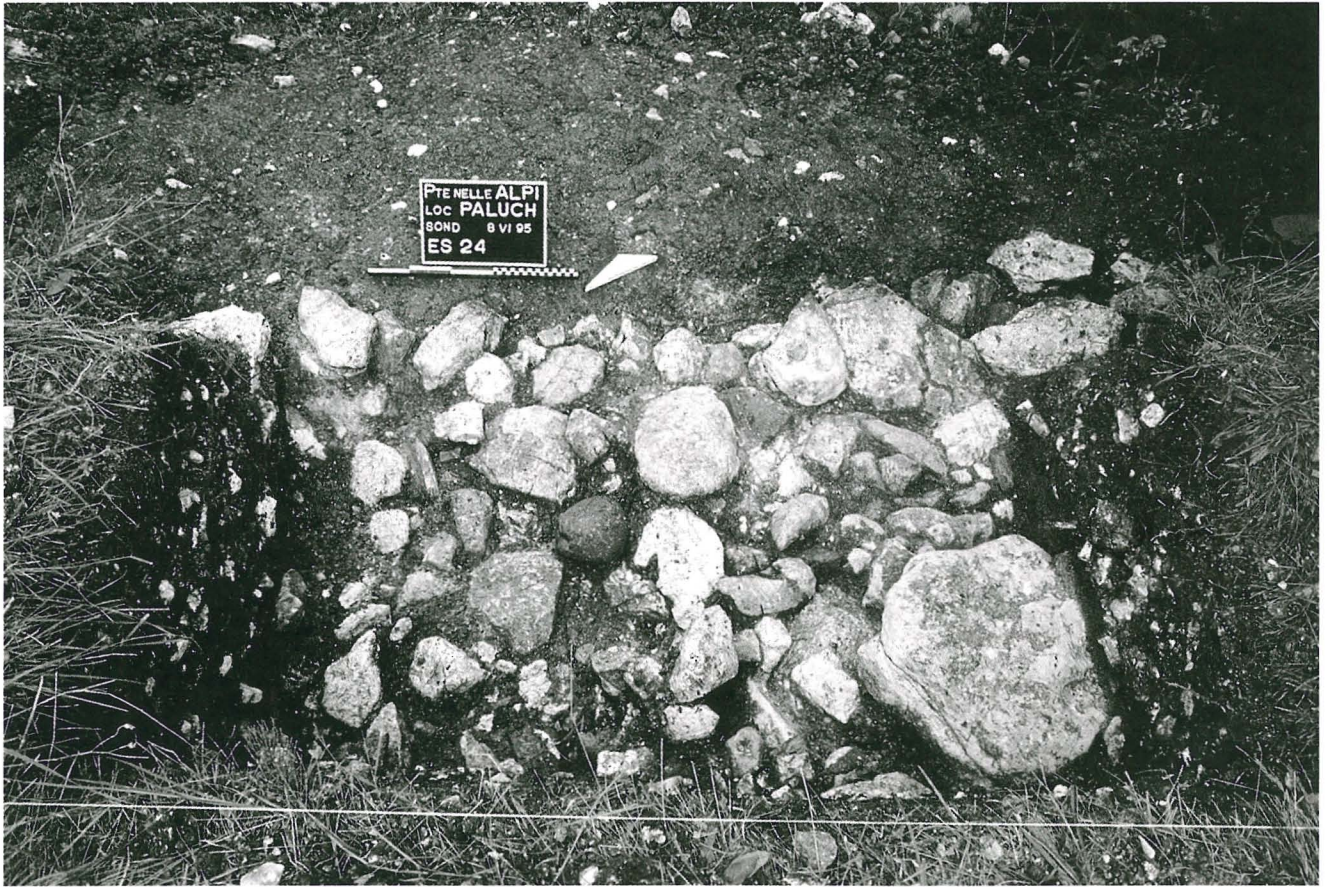


Fig. 12 - Ponte nelle Alpi. Palù district: structure of lithic elements (photo by N. Degasperi)