The Neolithic decorative vase syntax of the middle Isarco/Eisack valley

LORENZO DAL RI & GIOVANNI RIZZI

ABSTRACT - The increase in archaeological excavations in the mid-valley of the Isarco (Eisack), South Tyrol, over the last twenty years resulted in a large sample collection of decorated Neolithic pottery. The decorative aspects, created by engraving and graffiti, are mainly represented by geometric patterns, such as diamonds and triangles. In addition to the rich ceramic collection, a Neolithic clay figurine was found at Bressanone-Stufles/Brixen-Stufels, on the Stablum property. The figurine represents the most precious and unique find within the area of the Dolomites.

KEY WORDS: Neolithic pottery, decorative techniques and patterns, Neolithic clay figure.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Neolitico, Sintassi, Decorazioni, Ceramica, Insediamenti

Lorenzo Dal Ri - Ufficio Archeologico Soprintendenza ai Beni Culturali Prov. di Bolzano, Via A.Diaz 8, I-39100 Bolzano.
Giovanni Rizzi - Società Ricerche Archeologiche s.n.c. Bressanone (BZ), Via Marconi n.8, I-39042 Bressanone. E-mail: archeo@dnet.it

During the past twenty years a large number of Neolithic deposits has been discovered, giving rise to various archaeological excavations in the mid-valley of the Isarco. Research has brought to light a large quantity of decorated pottery.

The most productive mid-valley sites - at an altitude of 750-850 m - are Villandro-Plunacker, Barbiano and Veturno-Tanzgasse. The Bressanone-Stufles site (540 m), which had already yielded Neolithic materials at the beginning of the century (Adrian Egger & Oswald Menghin research), was brought once again to attention (1997) and has recently produced an important fictile figurine (Fig. 1). With regard to the decorative techniques, both raw engravings and graffiti motif techniques on hardened surfaces were adopted. Both these techniques were found in slightly different percentages in the same stratigraphical layers of the various sites. A chronological distinction of the pottery is therefore difficult. The decorative motifs as well as the preparation of the surfaces and the choice of clay (nearly always very fine and lean) are common to all the sites (Fig. 2).

The elements of the decorative designs are basically the same and are mainly represented by triangles and diamonds. Furthermore, there are "ladder-shaped" patterns and the "barbed wire" designs are also documented. Patterns created by fingernail scratching and blind holes are less common. Other patterns such as "musical notes", "fish-scales" and "imprinted" decorations are not present. In a very limited number of cases the meander-spiral motifs, typical of the Middle Neolithic are anticipated with applications of decorative elements, mainly graffiti.

Decorations are applied at random on the whole surface of the vessels, without displaying real symmetry. The pottery, recovered from various sites, displays a great uniformity and leads to believe that there were actual pottery manufacturing centres, probably situated close to the rich clay deposits of the valley bottom.

SUMMARY - The proliferation of archeological excavations performed in the middle of the Isarco (Eisack) Valley, South Tyrol, over the last twenty years resulted in a large sample collection of decorated Neolithic pottery. The majority of the ceramics was found at Villandro-Plunacker (Villanders-Plunacker), Velturno-Tanzgasse (Felthurns-Tanzgasse), and Bressanone-Stufles/Brixen-Stufels (province of Bolzano/Bozen), at an altitude of approx. 750-850 meters. A chronological distinction of the pottery according to the decorative techniques applied is impossible, because the various techniques appear in the same stratigraphic layers, even though in slightly differing proportions at the various sites. Decorations tend to cover the whole surface of the vessels, without displaying real symmetry Fig. 2. The decorative designs, created by engraving and graffiti, are mainly represented by geometric patterns, such as the diamond and the triangle. Furthermore, a ladder-shaped pattern and a barbed wire design are frequently observed. Patterns created by fingernail scratching and blind holes occur rarely, while the fishscale design and imprinted decorations are absent. The Neolithic pottery, collected from various sites, displays a great uniformity concerning the type of clay, and the decorative techniques and patterns. This leads to believe that there existed proper manufacturing centres for pottery which were probably situated in the valley, close to rich clay deposits. In addition to the rich ceramic collection, a Neolithic clay figure was found at Bressanone-Stufles/Brixen-Stufels, on the Stablum property. The figure represents a precious and, so far, unique find within the area of the Dolomites Fig. 1.

RIASSUNTO - Il moltiplicarsi negli ultimi vent'anni di interventi di scavo nella media Valle Isarco ha reso una vasta campionatura di ceramica neolitica soprattutto nei siti di Villandro Plunacker, Velturno Tanzgasse e Bressanone Stufles. La sintassi decorativa, realizzata sia con la tecnica ad incisione che con quella graffita, è per lo più rappresentata da motivi che richiamano le forme geometriche del rombo e del triangolo; si riscontrano però anche lo stile "scalariforme", a "filo spinato" e più raramente motivi formati da unghiate e i fori non passanti, mentre assenti sono la decorazione "a squame" e "ad impressione". Tecniche e sintassi decorative coesistono in medesimi strati. La grande uniformità riscontrata nei vari siti sia nella scelta delle argille, che nella trattazione delle superfici e nella decorazione induce ad ipotizzare l'esistenza di veri e propri centri produttivi.
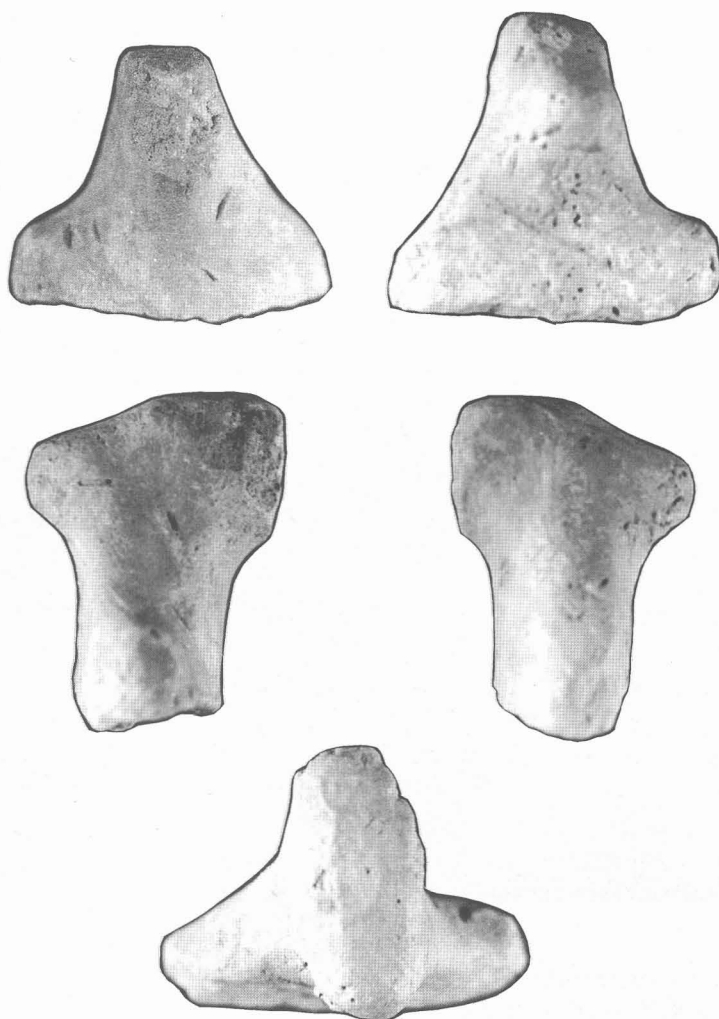

Fig. 1 - Small man-like clay figur found at Bressanone-Stufles-Stablum (Brixen-Stufles-Stablum); scale 2:1
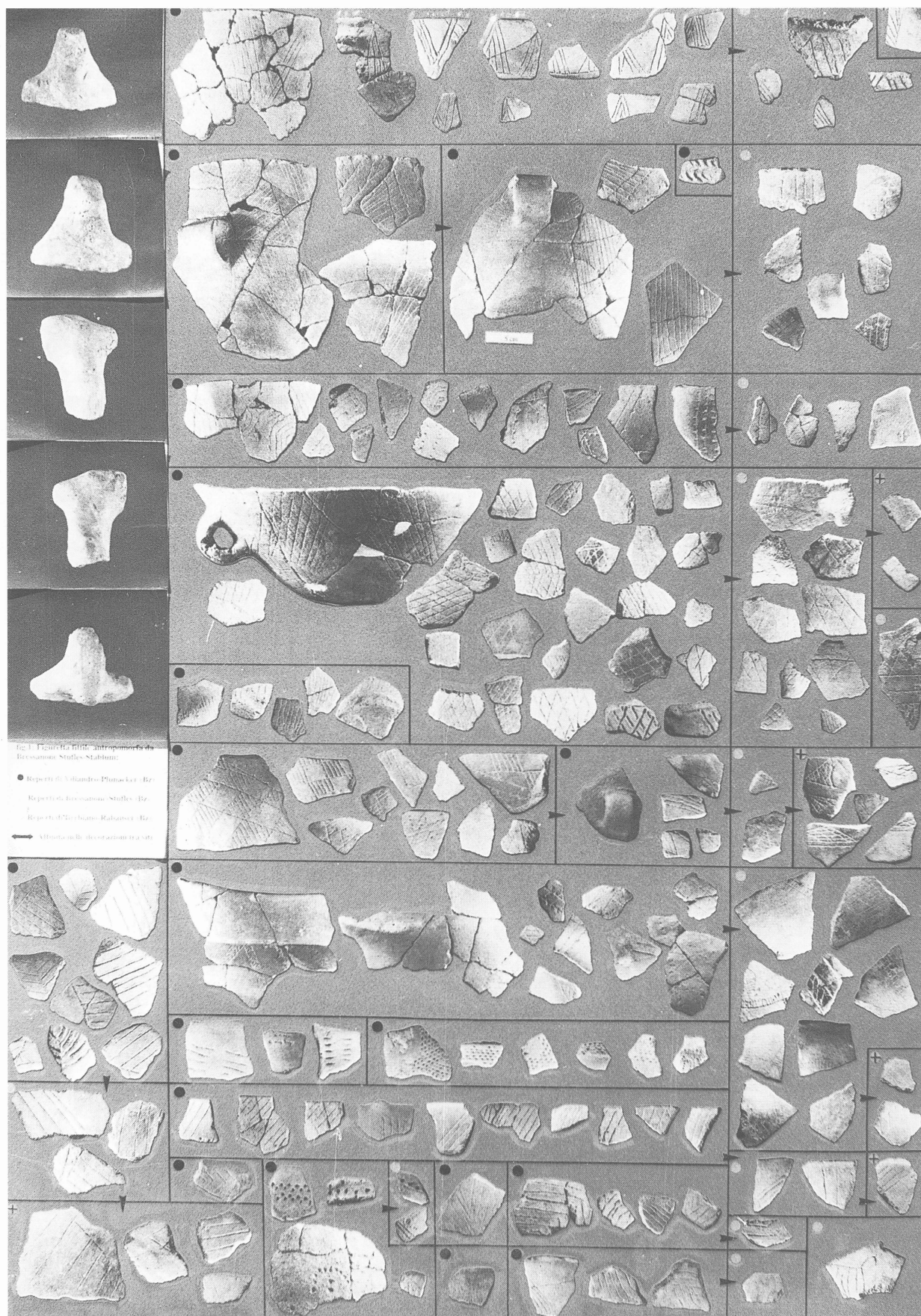
Fig. 2 -
● Findings of Villandro-Plunacker/Villanders-Pl. (BZ).
○ Findings of Bressanone-Stufles/Brixen-Stufles (Bz).
⊕ Findings of Barbiano-Rabanser/Barbian-Rabanser (Bz).
⟷ Similar decorations on postsherds collected from different sites.