

A prehistoric necropolis at Barbiano (Barbian), South Tyrol

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ABSTRACT - In 1994, archeological surveys were performed on a slope in the centre of Barbiano/Barbian (province of Bolzano/Bozen) and confirmed the presence of anthropogenic strata from medieval, Roman and prehistoric times. Remains of a necropolis were found above a thin Neolithic layer. The small grave pits contained calcined bones, potsherds, chips of flintstone, and objects collected from the funeral pyre. Only few of the graves were confined by stones. Radiocarbon dates amount to 3717-3493 \pm 83,9 BC and prove the simultaneous use of two different funeral rites during the Eneolithic: the burial as well as the cremation of the dead.

KEY WORDS: Barbiano, Alto Adige, Necropolis, Calcined bones

PAROLE CHIAVE: Barbiano, Alto Adige, Necropoli, Cremazione, Ossilegio

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In 1994 a survey was carried out on a sloping terrace situated in the centre of Barbiano, 150 metres north of the parish church in a residential development area (fondo Gostner) (Fig.1). The surveys prepared by the Soprintendenza Provinciale ai BB.CC. confirmed the presence of anthropogenic strata the top part of which had been eroded by recent and less recent colluvial events. These events with their cycles of debris sealed the earlier anthropogenic strata (dating back to medieval, Roman and prehistoric times). The prehistoric series includes the presence of a Neolithic layer of gravel detritus hidden by another sterile layer of paleosol. On top of this a cremation necropolis was discovered (Fig.2). Part of the northern end of the necropolis, measuring 10 square metres, was explored. The unexplored southern part of the necropolis is less than a hundred metres away from a settlement datable between the Recent Neolithic and the Early Copper Age was partially explored in 1997. The necropolis occupied a small slightly sloped terrace which is now completely covered

by a steep slope. The layer containing the graves was almost completely lost to erosional impacts. The only remains of the structure of all the graves are the graves pits.

The limited quantity of calcined ashes and bones which were found were mixed to ceramic fragments (in some cases there were traces of combustion) and to flint flakes. 14 graves and 3 groups of calcined bones without ceramic remains (Fig.3) were identified. In some cases the more recent graves intersected the older ones. The limits of some of the more recent graves were defined by stones, and were dug out of the muddy sandy soil and featured subcircular grave pits, which were more or less flat (Fig.4). About 15 troves containing ceramics, siliceous and bone archaeological findings outside the burial ground area at a slightly higher level than the grave pits, testify the deflation of the upper parts of the graves caused by the natural erosion of the slope or by tree roots or animals burrowing holes. A straight-cylindrical handle dating back to the Recent Bronze Age should

at this point of our research be considered as coming from the upper strata and was brought about by the same phenomenal events. The analysis of the characteristics of the deposits in the graves has made it clear that the bones were not placed in ossuaries, but mixed together with potsherds, charcoal and sometimes with chips of flintstone and put in the graves. In only one case the bones had

been placed with care into the belly of a fragmentary urn. The radiocarbon analysis of one particular grave provided us with the dates 3717-3493±83,9 BC. It is assumed that there were two parallel rituals. On this spot traces were found of the symbolic burial of limited portions of burnt materials from funeral pyres ("ossilegio"). The actual position of the funeral pyre was not identified.

SUMMARY - In 1994, archeological surveys (conducted by the Bolzano Cultural Assets Service) were performed on a sloping terrace in the centre of Barbiano/Barbian (province of Bolzano/Bozen) (Fig.1). The site was located approximately 150 meters North of the present parish church. The surveys confirmed the presence of several anthropogenic strata from medieval, Roman and prehistoric times. On top of a thin Neolithic layer and a sterile paleosol, the remains of a necropolis were found. Fourteen small, round grave pits were discovered, containing calcined bones, potsherds, chips of flintstone, and objects collected from the funeral pyre (Fig.2-3). Another three graves only held calcined bones (Fig.4). Due to erosional impacts, only the flat bottoms of the graves were well preserved in the muddy-sandy matrix. Some of the graves were confined by stones. Remarkably, the necropolis was located approximately 100 meters off a settlement from the Late Neolithic/beginning of the Eneolithic. Radiocarbon dates of the graves amount to 3717-3493±83,9 BC and prove the simultaneous use of two different funeral rites during the Eneolithic: the burial as well as the cremation of the dead.

RIASSUNTO - Nel 1994 un pendio nel centro di Barbiano (BZ) è stato oggetto di sondaggi, i quali accertarono la presenza di stratificazioni antropiche d'età medievale, romana e preistorica. A quest'ultimo periodo appartiene un livello di frequentazione neolitica di potenza limitata, al tetto del quale venne impiantata una necropoli ad incinerazione. La maggior parte delle sepolture, scavate nel suolo limoso-sabbioso, conserva solo il fondo della fossa contenente ossa calcinate, frammenti vascolari e schegge di selce, oggetti di raccolta nel rogo e depositi già rimestati nelle fossette, di cui solo alcune erano delimitate da pietre. La datazione fornita da analisi radiometriche al 3717-3493±83,9 testimonia l'esistenza in età neolitica di due riti funebri paralleli: non solo quindi ad inumazione ma anche ad incinerazione.



Fig. 1 - Panoramic view of the excavation taken from the North



Fig. 2 - The aspects of some of the grave pits found still including their contents

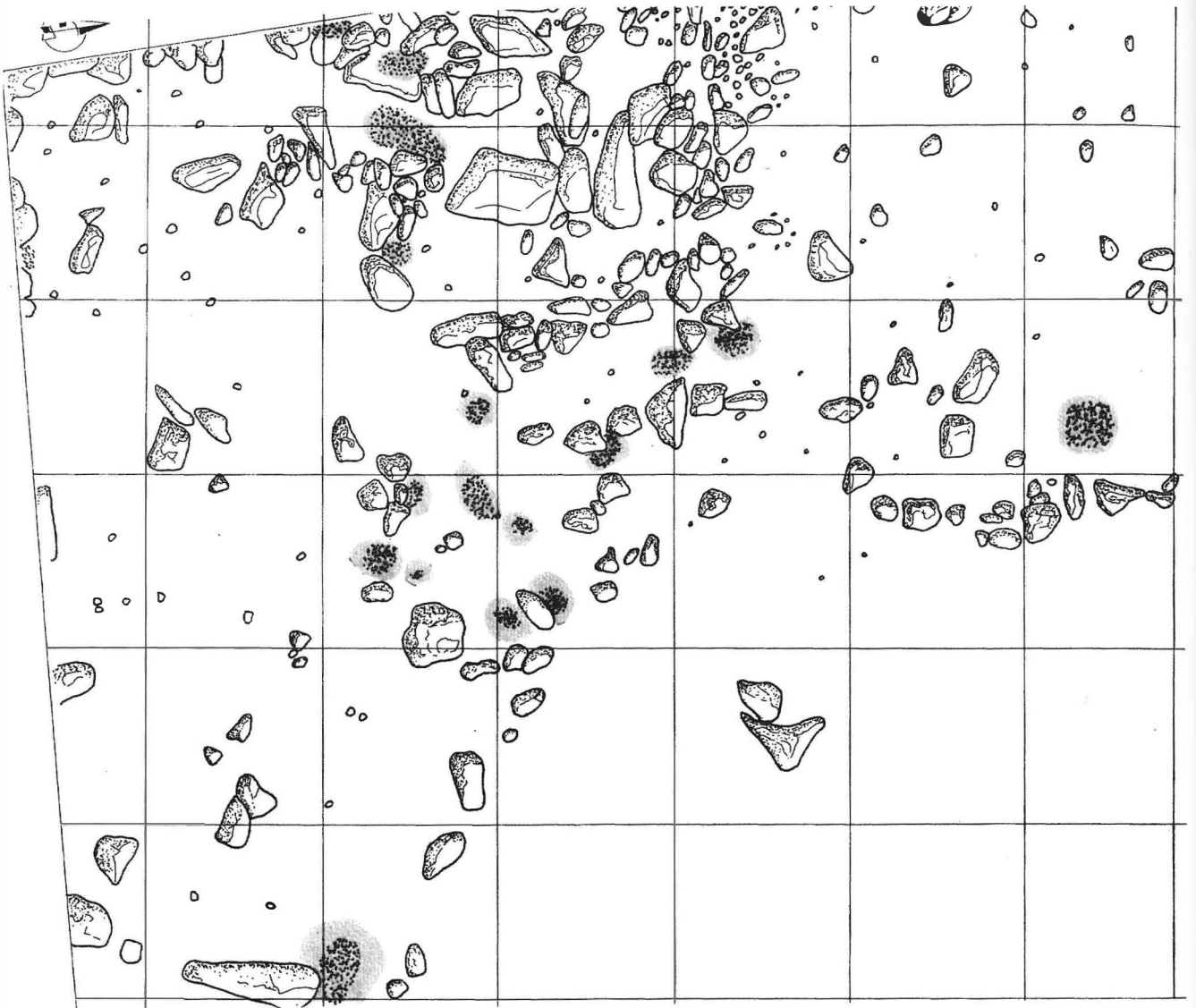


Fig. 3 - Layout of the composition of the calcined bones, potsherds and chips of flintstone in the pit



Fig. 4 - Detailed view of grave pit n.3/8