

The Mesolithic burial of Mezzocorona-Borgonuovo (Trento): some preliminary comments

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ABSTRACT – The archeological site in Borgonuovo, discovered in 1991, is located in the Adige valley north of Trento, at the foot of the rocky cliffs of the Monte di Mezzocorona. Two rescue excavation campaigns were conducted in 1991-1992 by the Office for Archeological Heritage of the Autonomous Province of Trento which exposed two burial sites dating back to the Bronze Age and some settlement levels attributable to the Neolithic period and to the latest stage of the Mesolithic (Castelnovian phase). During autumn 1995 a burial was exposed which is attributable to the latest/final stage of the Sauveterrian period.

Key words: Burial, Mesolithic, ¹⁴C Dating, Adige Valley, Trentino

Parole chiave: Sepoltura, Mesolitico, Datazioni ¹⁴C, Valle dell'Adige, Trentino

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1. INTRODUCTION¹

The Borgonuovo archaeological site is situated in the Adige Valley North of Trento at the foot of Monte di Mezzocorona. It consists of rather unstable Dolomitic terraces, as can be seen from the many clefts and landslides. The area of the findings is situated on a detritus cone, under the rockwall at an altitude of 250m a.s.l. and is characterised by small gauges (Fig.1).

The site was discovered in 1991 by Leone Melchiori and Remo Carli during works on the protection barriers against fallen rocks that had also cut into the prehistoric anthropic deposits. Two rescue excavation campaigns undertaken in 1991-1992 by the Ufficio Beni Archeologici della Provincia Autonoma di Trento brought to light two Bronze Age burial areas (preliminary information in NICOLIS, 1996) along with settlement levels attributable to the Neolithic period (BAZZANELLA *et al.*, 2000 and this volume) and to the recent phase of the Mesolithic period (Castelnovian). In autumn 1995, the archaeological investigations in the residual Mesolithic deposits continued in collaboration with the Museo Tridentino di Scienze Naturali.

A perpendicular trench was carried out (sq.8-13N/28E), by means of artificial cuts, as no distinct stratification could be detected macroscopically in the deposit. Each metre grid was divided in nine smaller squares, which were identified with the letters of the alphabet (Fig.2). Along the length of the rockwall the various stratigraphic units located during the excavation were allocated a number followed by the initials c.p. ("contro parete", i.e. near the rockwall). At the base of the fifth cut, near the rockwall, in sq.8N/28E, a burial structure was found². Work was consequently mainly concentrated on this area and it was necessary to widen the excavation sideways next to the rockwall.

2. HUMAN OCCUPATION

The archaeological evidence and the preliminary study of the typology of the lithic industry referring to the 1995-1996 works on the squares regarding the burial structure (sq.8-9N-29E, 8-9N/28E, 9N/27E) al-

lowed to identify at least three distinct occupational periods (Fig.3).

1 - Cuts I-II in sq.8/9N-27E and sq.8/9N-28E, referable to Stratigraphic Units (US) 131 and 132. Occupational phases referable to the Castelnovian phase. These levels represent the remaining part of the Castelnovian occupational levels excavated during the 1992 campaign. Lithic industry is abundant in the levels of cuts I and II of US131 and 132. The percentage of backed tools (30.4%) is slightly higher than tools (27.2%) (Tab.1). Among the common tools there are many endscrapers (48.1%). There are endscrapers on laminar supports, flake types, ogive endscrapers and frontal and side endscrapers, some of which are short and very short. These are followed by retouched blades (28.9%); in this group there are many notched and denticulated blades (Tab.2). The backed tools are represented by the same percentage of trapezes and triangles (36.7%), followed by points with two backs (16.7%) (Tab.3). The "segment" group is not represented. Scalene triangles prevail with the long forms with long and short bases, some of which have three retouched sides (Tab. 4-5). There is a large amount of debitage products, microburins and other knapping debris whereas cores are scarce. There is also a flake of rock crystal. The levels, that are characterised by the presence of notched and denticulated regular shaped blades and bladelets (with trapezoidal or triangular sections), and by various types of trapezes (Tab.2) featuring a typological association characteristic of the Castelnovian period. In squares 8/9N-29E the levels that presented Castelnovian industry had already been removed during the preceding excavation campaign and the presence of lithic industry of the recent or late Sauveterrian period can be found even from cut I.

2 - From cut III of US131 in sq.9N/28E and 9N-27E there is a change in the lithic assemblages in correspondence with the transition to the recent or final phase of Sauveterrian period (Tab.1-3). These levels cover the archaeological layers that document the burial structure.

3 - At the base of cut V in sq.8/9N-28E, a burial structure was found. In sq.8-9N/28E of cut V and from the base of cut III of sq.8/9N-29, a paleosurface numbered US148 came to light. US148 is stratigraphically closely connected to the deposition because the cut of the burial pit starts from there. It is characterised by the presence of many domestic tools, microlithic tools, cores, knapping debris and faunal remains, most of which were in horizontal position. On the basis of the lithic typology, US148 suggests one or more settlement periods referable to a recent or final phase of the Sauve-

terrian period, according to the Mesolithic sequence of the Trento basin (BROGLIO & KOZLOWSKI, 1984).

In squares 8/9N-29E the area was excavated up till paleosurface US148. The US of the artificial cuts IV-VII of sq.8/9N-28E are considered as one because of the homogeneity of the industry. The following preliminary typological observations can be made on the lithic tools. From cuts III-IV microlithic backed tools are clearly more abundant than tools (40% in Cut III and 61.4 % in the remaining cuts) (Tab.1). With regard to backed tools, the triangle group prevails with scale-like long forms with long and short bases, also with three retouched sides (cfr. *Montclus*) (Tab.3-5). Points with two backs are generally long. There are types of endscrapers on laminar supports, other ogive flake types and some side and frontal endscrapers. The flake endscrapers are short or very short. There are not many retouched flakes and blades. Debitage products are quite abundant: microburins, other knapping debris and some cores. A rock crystal flake and two flint percussors were also found in these levels.

3. THE BURIAL (Fig. 4-5)

The burial consists of a shallow pit (about 20cm), 159cm max. length by 56cm max. width with a major E-W axis. The East and West sides are vaguely sloping while the North and South walls are almost vertical. There is a rockwall at the northern end of the pit and the southern end coincides, towards the East, with the perimeter of a fallen rock and an alignment of stones that mark out the tomb. The bottom of the pit is deeper towards the middle than at the ends. The grave (US139) cuts into a paleosurface with Sauveterrian industry towards the West (US148), and a deposit of breccia towards the East (US143).

A skeleton, probably of a woman of over thirty was laying supine (US145)³ in an East-West direction with the face towards South, the arms slightly bent and the hands placed on the abdomen; the right hand was placed on the far end of the left forearm and the left hand was on the pelvis. The legs were close together. The feet were partly overlapped and were partly laying directly on a paleosurface with Sauveterrian industry (US148). The head and the feet were in a higher position than the pelvis.

In the fill-up deposit of the pit various small pieces of red ochre were found on various parts of the skeleton and particularly on the thorax.

There were no burial goods. The first observations made on the site, on the well preserved skeleton, revealed that there were no molar teeth and that the

alveoli were closed and that there were probably bone pathologies of the limbs.

The burial was covered with a heap of more than forty dolomitic stones of various sizes placed directly on the body but mainly on the upper part. They were neatly arranged in order to form a small burial mound (Fig.6); some of them had traces of red ochre. A large slab of rock was placed directly on the skull (Fig.7).

Outside the burial structure, to the East of the skull, there was a level (US151) without any lithic industry whatsoever but where chosen faunal remains represented by a horn and a few deer mandibles with traces of reddish colouring were present (Fig.4). These are probably associated with the burial rite.

4. CONSIDERATIONS

The discovery of the Mezzocorona-Borgonuovo burial is of great interest because it widens our knowledge on the Mesolithic populations of the southern slopes of the Alps that was only based on the well-known findings of Vatte di Zambana (Trento) (CORRAIN *et al.*, 1976) and Mondeval de Sora (Belluno) (ALCIATI *et al.*, 1992; FONTANA & GUERRESCHI, 1998).

On the basis of the stratigraphic evidence, the lithic typology and the parallels with the Vatte di Zambana burial, the dating expected for the Mezzocorona burial was supposedly around the middle of the VII millennium BC cal. However, the dating of the bones of the skeleton (US145) and faunal remains of the paleosurface US151 refer to the second half of the VI millennium BC cal (Tab.6).

For want of correspondence between the archaeological and the radiometric datings and until we obtain the results of further investigations that would help define the burial evidence within the Mesolithic period, we feel that it is necessary to expose the following considerations:

1 - At least three radiometric dates refer to the beginning of the Early Neolithic period of the Adige region⁴; these are however incompatible with the evidence of the Early Neolithic levels of the Borgonuovo deposit, where the industry can be attributed only to the recent period of this cultural phase (BAZZANELLA *et al.*, 2000 and this volume).

2 - Even though it was not possible to distinguish a definite stratigraphic sequence because of the actual characteristics of the deposit covering the burial pit, it was possible to recognize the transition from the Castelnovian to the Sauveterrian thanks to the clear changes in lithic typology in the artificial cuttings of

US131. This transition is stratigraphically documented before the burial episode. If the cut of the burial pit were in phase with the Neolithic levels above and had therefore not been distinguished properly, then there should have been mixed elements from various levels of the cuts (Neolithic pottery and lithics, Castelnovian and Sauveterrian industry) in the fill-up deposit of the pit and also in the levels that cover the pit. As already mentioned, the results of the excavation with artificial cuts brought to light a regular distinction of the main cultural changes and a mainly horizontal distribution of the lithic industry.

3 - Another bias in favour of contemporary dating of the Sauveterrian surface US148 and the burial structure, is the position of the feet of the skeleton that are practically placed on the surface, out of the burial pit.

4 - The burial can be also attributed to the Mesolithic (Sauveterrian) if we consider that the rite of the Borgonuovo burial corresponds perfectly to the one of Vatte di Zambana: the shallow pit, the stones covering the pit including one placed directly on the skull, the head positioned slightly higher than the body, the supine position with the hands placed on the pelvic area, the legs in an extended position but close to each other, faint blotches of ochre and the lack of burial goods. All these aspects reflect one particular tradition, probably intended for adult women.

5 - Two of the four dates of the skeleton match (ETH-15981 and UtC-7202), whereas the other two refer to the extremes of the early and recent periods. We do believe, however, that the four radiocarbon date samplings are not representative enough to be elaborated statistically in order to obtain more accurate absolute dating.

In our opinion the date obtained from the animal bone of US151 (ETH-15984), characterised by the presence of intentionally chosen bones, above all of deer mandibles, and blotches of ochre, is much more significant. It corresponds perfectly to the date obtained from the skeleton (UtC-7201). This is further evidence as to high probability that the two episodes are contemporary and connected to each other by the burial rite as was already hypothesized during the excavation. In this case, however, such a recent dating would not be possible for a sample that does not belong to the burial pit but to a structured level first covered with Castelnovian and then Sauveterrian levels. We believe that as a result of this, the Early Neolithic attribution of the Borgonuovo burial would be completely incongruous.

In conclusion, the formal similarities with the Vatte di Zambana burial, the recurrence of a similar

burial rite in the two sites, the many fleeting parallels, the absence of more recent elements placed above the Borgonuovo burial, the lithic industry, the feet laying on the Sauveterrian surface, the dating of the deer mandible of US151, the proof of the archaeological dates incongruous with the radiometric dates⁵ all lead to the conclusion that the Borgonuovo burial is attributable to the Sauveterrian period and that the radiocarbon dates do not correspond to the real age of the samples.

NOTES

1 - The present contribution is the result of the work and constant discussion carried out by the three authors. The typological charts were elaborated by Giampaolo Dalmeri according to the classification suggested by BROGLIO & KOZŁOWSKI (1984).

2 - Investigations began in September 1995. After locating the burial on 3 November 1995, excavations went on without interruption until 12 March 1996. The following people took part in the research along with the writers: Monica Bersani and Giuseppe Mezzena of the Ufficio Beni Archeologici di Trento, Roberto Avanzini, Alberto Bernardi and Luisa Moser. The drawings and the photos are by Alberto Bernardi.

3 - The anthropological analyses are being carried out by Prof. Giancarlo Alciati of the University of Padova together with his team.

4 - We only have one ¹⁴C dating for the early phase of the first Neolithic in the Adige Valley obtained from a charcoal sample from level AA 1-2 of Romagnano Loc III in which Castelnovian type lithic elements appear along with a Ripabianca burin and other impressed potsherds: R-1136: 6480±50 BP corresponding to 5440-5335 BC cal 1 sigma (BAZZANELLA *et al.*, 2000: 165, and this volume).

5 - By way of example, we would like to point out the case of the female burial of Birmatten-Basisgrotte (CH). The revision of the materials and the documents of the Lüdín collection carried out by J.Sedlmeier and B.Kaufmann allowed to correct the preceding interpretations (uncertain chronological attribution between Sauveterrian and Neolithic, male sex of the buried individual, cfr. BANDI,

1963; ROZOY, 1978:1374; BAY, 1963) and to place the burial in an archaeological Sauveterrian context. Even the date obtained from the skeleton of Birmatten (OxA-2238: 6290±80 BP uncal.), similar to the Mezzocorona-Borgonuovo ones, does not correspond to the archaeological data, possible due to the substances used for consolidating the bones (SEDLMEIER & KAUFMANN, 1996:145, note 14). It must be clear however that all the dates from the Mesolithic deposit of Birmatten "... ont en effet été réalisées sur des os dont l'activité du C14 a probablement été rajeunie par les infiltrations diverses." (LE TENSORER, 1986:125).

6 - Calibration was calculated using the programme published by STUTVER, REIMER, BARD, BECK, BURR, HUGHEN, KROMER, MCCORMAC, PLICHT & SPURK, 1998a: *Radiocarbon* 40:1041-1083. The calibrated dates used were obtained with Method B and the highest percentage in the "relative area under probability distribution". The calibrations obtained with Method "intercepts" (Method A) always have two sigma, are slightly wider but basically reflect the Method B structure.

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SUMMARY - The archaeological site in Borgonuovo, discovered in 1991, is located in the Adige valley North of Trento, at the foot of the rocky cliffs of the Mezzocorona Mountain at a height of app. 250 a.s.l. Two rescue excavation campaigns were conducted in 1991-1992 by the Office for Archaeological Heritage of the Autonomous Province of Trento which exposed two burial sites dating back to the Bronze Age and some settlement levels attributable to the Neolithic period and to the latest stage of the Mesolithic (Castelnovian phase). During autumn 1995, with the collaboration of the Museo Tridentino di Scienze Naturali, the archaeological works were resumed to perform stratigraphic excavation of the residual Mesolithic deposits. On the occasion, next to the rocky cliff, a burial was exposed which is attributable to the latest/final stage of the Sauveterrian period. The structure consists of a shallow pit, with the longest axis having east-west orientation. The human skeletal remains, probably of a woman of more than 30 years of age, were in supine position with the face oriented to the south, the hands resting on the womb. No grave goods were found in the grave. The burial structure had been covered with more than 40 stones of variable sizes which were directly laid on the body - mainly on the upper part - which were regularly arranged as if a small mound. Outside the burial structure, east to the skull, another layer was brought to the light and an

antler and some jaw bones, most probably of deers, with some traces of red ochre were found: they are most probably proof that special burial rites had been conducted there. ^{14}C datings made so far bear no correspondence with the archaeological evidence.

RIASSUNTO - Il sito archeologico di Borgonuovo, scoperto nel 1991, è localizzato in Valle dell'Adige a nord di Trento, ai piedi della parete rocciosa del Monte di Mezzocorona ad una quota di circa 250 metri s.l.m. Due campagne di scavo di emergenza condotte nel 1991-1992 dall'Ufficio Beni Archeologici della Provincia Autonoma di Trento hanno messo in luce due aree sepolcrali dell'età del Bronzo e livelli insediativi attribuibili al Neolitico e alla fase recente del Mesolitico (Castelnoviano). Nell'autunno del 1995, con la collaborazione del Museo Tridentino di Scienze Naturali, sono riprese le indagini archeologiche finalizzate alla verifica stratigrafica dei depositi mesolitici residui. In tale occasione, in prossimità della parete rocciosa, è stata messa in luce una struttura sepolcrale attribuibile alla fase recente-finale del Sauveterriano. La struttura è costituita da una fossa poco profonda, con asse maggiore est-ovest. All'interno di essa era deposto in posizione supina lo scheletro di un individuo di probabile sesso femminile, di età superiore ai trent'anni, con lo sguardo rivolto a sud, le mani poste sul ventre e i piedi leggermente sovrapposti. Non è stata riscontrata la presenza di alcun elemento di corredo. La struttura sepolcrale è completata da una copertura di più di quaranta pietre di varie dimensioni poste direttamente sopra il corpo, in prevalenza nella parte superiore, e disposte con regolarità in modo tale da costituire un piccolo tumulo. All'esterno della struttura sepolcrale, nella zona ad est del cranio, è stato messo in evidenza un piano caratterizzato dalla presenza di un corno e di alcune mandibole, probabilmente di cervo, con tracce di ocre rossa; tali evidenze sono con ogni probabilità da collegare alla ritualità funeraria. Le datazioni al radiocarbonio finora effettuate, non trovano corrispondenza con l'evidenza archeologica.

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| MEZZOCORONA BORGONUOVO 1995/1996 | I - II Taglio | | III Taglio | | IV - VII Taglio | | US 138 Riempimento fossa | |
|-------------------------------------|------------------|------|---------------|------|--------------------|------|-----------------------------|---|
| | n. | % | n. | % | n. | % | n. | % |
| Strumenti (comp. fr.) | 52 | 27,2 | 15 | 15,8 | 19 | 14,4 | 3 | - |
| Armature (comp. fr.) | 58 | 30,4 | 38 | 40,0 | 81 | 61,4 | 7 | - |
| Microbulini e altri residui | 78 | 40,8 | 40 | 42,1 | 28 | 21,2 | 6 | - |
| Prenuclei e nuclei | 3 | 1,6 | 2 | 2,1 | 4 | 3,0 | 1 | - |
| Totale | 191 | | 95 | | 132 | | 17 | |

Tab. 1 - Number and frequency of tools, backed tools, microburins and cores.

| MEZZOCORONA BORGONUOVO 1995/1996 | I - II Taglio | | III Taglio | | IV - VII Taglio | | US 138 Riempimento fossa | |
|-------------------------------------|------------------|------|---------------|---|--------------------|---|-----------------------------|---|
| | n. | % | n. | % | n. | % | n. | % |
| Grattatoi | 25 | 48,1 | 7 | | 8 | | - | |
| Schegge ritoccate | 4 | 7,7 | 2 | | 4 | | - | |
| Bulini | 1 | 1,9 | - | | 1 | | - | |
| Lame troncate | 1 | 1,9 | 1 | | 2 | | 1 | |
| Lame ritoccate | 15 | 28,9 | 4 | | 3 | | 2 | |
| Becchi e perforatori | 1 | 1,9 | - | | - | | - | |
| Coltelli a dorso | - | | - | | - | | - | |
| Punte | 1 | 1,9 | - | | - | | - | |
| Pezzi scagliati | - | | - | | - | | - | |
| Compositi | - | | - | | - | | - | |
| Diversi | - | | - | | - | | - | |
| Frammenti indeterminati | 4 | 7,7 | 1 | | 1 | | - | |
| Totale strumenti | 52 | | 15 | | 19 | | 3 | |

Tab. 2 - Number and frequency of tools divided in groups.

| MEZZOCORONA BORGONUOVO 1995/1996 | I - II Taglio | | III Taglio | | IV - VII Taglio | | US 138 Riempimento fossa | |
|-------------------------------------|------------------|------|---------------|------|--------------------|------|-----------------------------|---|
| | n. | % | n. | % | n. | % | n. | % |
| Punte su lama e scheggia laminare | 1 | 3,3 | 1 | | 1 | 2,2 | - | |
| Punte a dorso | 2 | 6,6 | 1 | | - | | - | |
| Segmenti | - | | - | | 1 | 2,2 | - | |
| Dorsi e troncature | - | | - | | 1 | 2,2 | 1 | |
| Triangoli | 11 | 36,7 | 13 | | 34 | 73,9 | 3 | |
| Punte a due dorsi | 5 | 16,7 | - | | 6 | 13,0 | - | |
| Trapezi | 11 | 36,7 | 2 | | 1 | 2,2 | - | |
| Punte e lamelle marginali | - | | - | | 1 | 2,2 | - | |
| Diversi | - | | - | | 1 | 2,2 | - | |
| Totale armature determinate | 30 | 51,7 | 17 | 44,7 | 46 | 56,8 | 4 | |
| Totale armature non determinate | 28 | 48,3 | 21 | 55,3 | 35 | 43,2 | 3 | |
| Totale complessivo armature | 58 | | 38 | | 81 | | 7 | |

Tab. 3 - Number and frequency of microlithic backed tools, divided in groups.

| | |
|---|----|
| MEZZOCORONA-BORGONUOVO 1995-1996 | N. |
| Triangoli | |
| Triangoli scaleni lunghi a base lunga | 19 |
| Frr. triangoli scaleni lunghi a base lunga | 4 |
| Triangoli scaleni lunghi a base corta | 19 |
| Triangoli scaleni lunghi a base corta, con estremità ottusa | 1 |
| Frr. triangoli scaleni lunghi a base corta | 5 |
| Triangoli scaleni corti | 1 |
| Totale | 49 |

Tab. 4 - Classes within the triangles group (Cuts I-VII).

| | |
|--|----|
| Mezzocorona-Borgonuovo 1995-1996 | N. |
| Triangoli | |
| Triangolo scaleno lungo a base lunga con terzo lato ritoccato totalmente | 12 |
| Triangolo scaleno lungo a base corta con terzo lato ritoccato totalmente | 14 |
| Triangolo scaleno lungo a base corta | 2 |
| Frr. triangolo scaleno lungo a base corta | 2 |
| Frr. triangolo scaleno lungo a base lunga con tre lati ritoccati | 8 |
| Triangolo scaleno lungo a base corta ed estremità ottusa | 1 |
| Frr. triangolo scaleno lungo a base corta con tre lati ritoccati | 6 |
| Frr. triangolo scaleno corto | 1 |
| Totale | 46 |

Tab. 5 - Number of triangles, divided in type (Cuts I-VII).

| Sample Name | Lab. No. | Analysed Fraction | US | AMS- ¹⁴ C Age [y BP] | $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ [0/00] | calib. Age [BC 2 σ] ⁶ |
|-------------|-----------|-------------------|-----|---------------------------------|------------------------------|--|
| MBN-208 | ETH-15980 | human bone col. | 145 | 6005 \pm 75 | -21.0 \pm 1.2 | 5067-4714 |
| MBN-209 | ETH-15981 | human bone col. | 145 | 6170 \pm 70 | -22.0 \pm 1.2 | 5296-4940 |
| MBN-186 | ETH-15984 | animal bone col. | 151 | 6410 \pm 75 | -24.1 \pm 1.2 | 5492-5249 |
| MBN-254 | UtC-7202 | human bone col. | 145 | 6210 \pm 60 | -23.3 | 5304-4999 |
| MBN-255 | UtC-7201 | human bone col. | 145 | 6380 \pm 50 | -23.8 | 5472-5293 |

Tab. 6 - List ¹⁴C of measures.

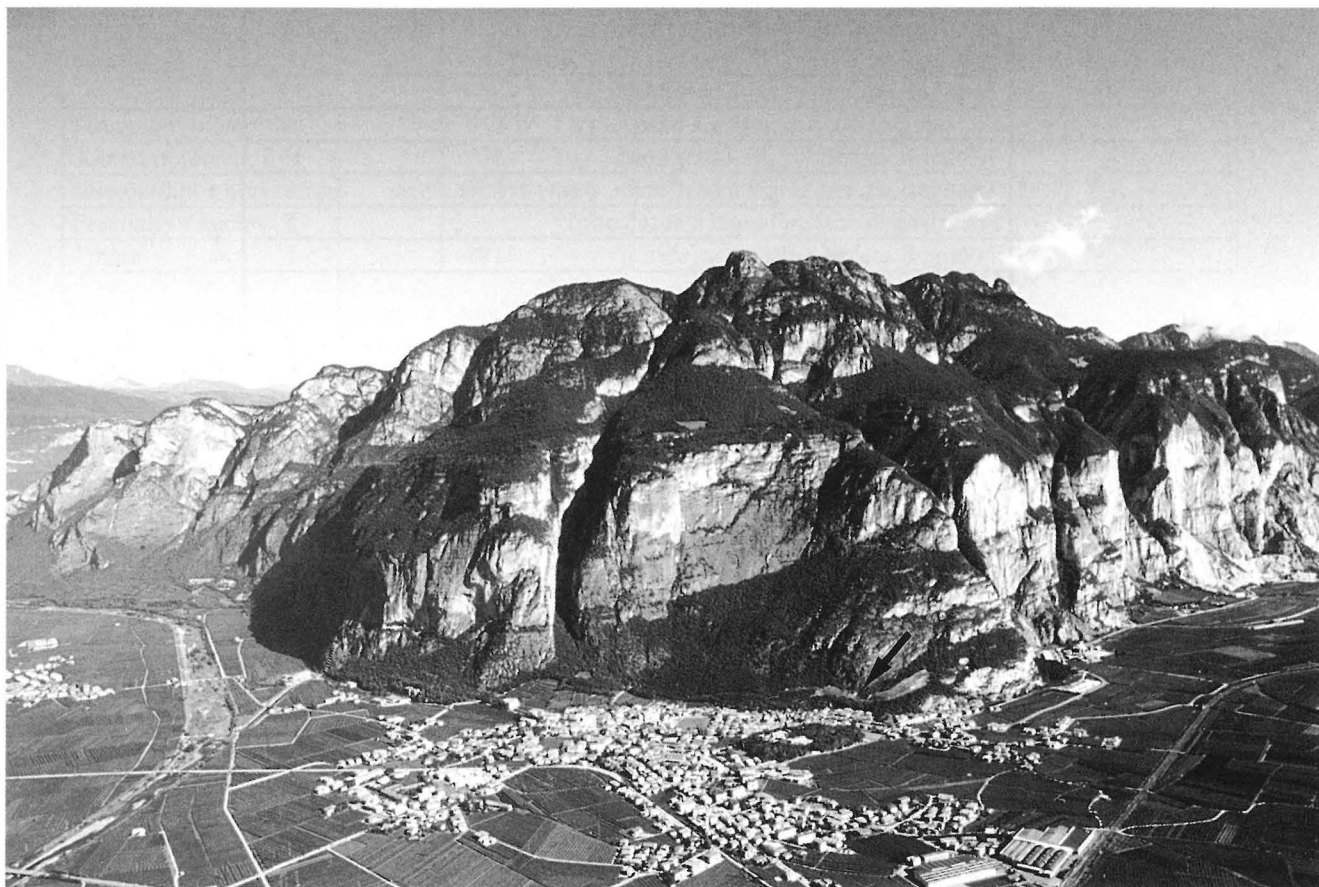


Fig. 1 - Aerial view of the Adige Valley from South; Mezzocorona in the centre (Archivio Ufficio Beni Archeologici – P.A.T.; Gianni Zotta photo; S.M.A. – N° 12-117 of 13.IX.1994 concession).

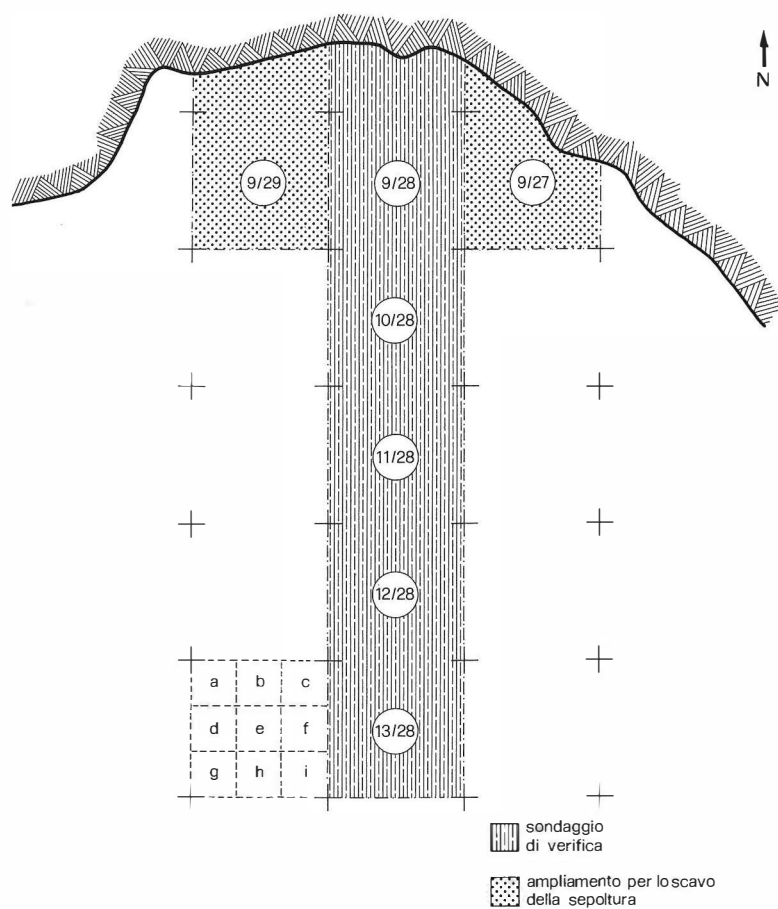


Fig. 2 - Mezzocorona – Borgonuovo (Trento). Scheme of the 1995-1996 excavation area.

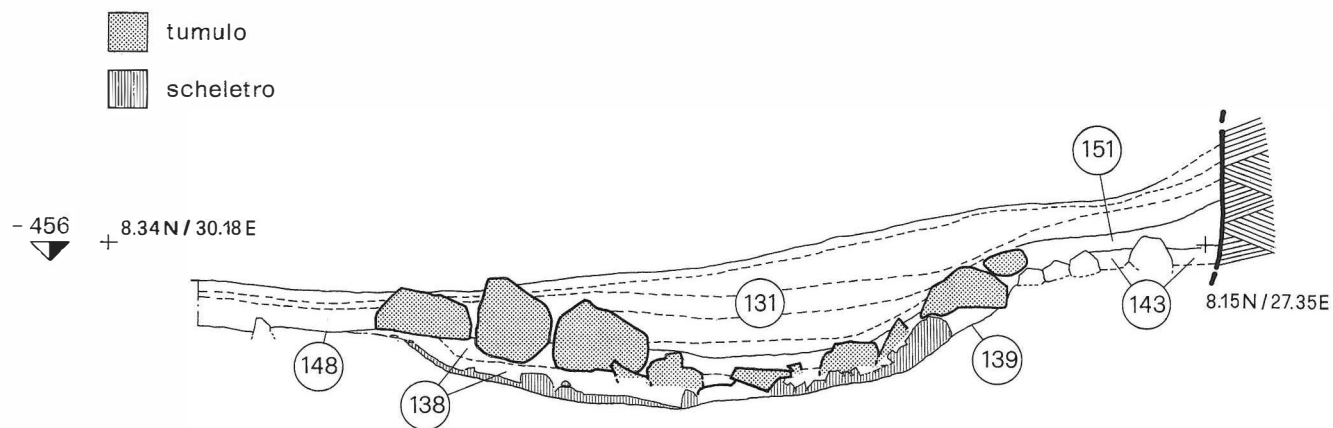


Fig. 3 - Mezzocorona – Borgonuovo (Trento). East-West section of the burial structure deposit.



Fig. 4 - Mezzocorona – Borgonuovo (Trento). Plan of the squares of the burial structure after the mound was taken away.



Fig. 5 - Mezzocorona – Borgonuovo (Trento). The burial after the stone covering was taken away.



Fig. 6 - Mezzocorona – Borgonuovo (Trento). The stone covering on the burial.



Fig. 7 - Mezzocorona – Borgonuovo (Trento). Detail of the slab placed on the skull.