

Some comments on the Vlaška Group or “Gruppo dei Vasi a Coppa” of the Trieste Karst in the light of recent data

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ABSTRACT - In the 1960-70's there was an increase in both field research and theoretical interpretation on the main Neolithic facies of the Trieste Karst. New developments in the 1990's allow a critical review of the state of knowledge, largely based on a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the pottery components of some of the main cave complexes, recently thoroughly revised. This analysis clearly separates the pot always identified as the basic component, the “vaso a coppa”, from all the others, either the few regularly associated with it or those only seldom associated. The possible implications as to the time and nature of the use of caves are also discussed in the light of recent geoarchaeological analyses and preliminary results of the excavations under way in the Edera cave.

Key words: Trieste Karst, Neolithic, Vlaška Group/“Gruppo dei Vasi a Coppa”, Analysis of the pottery components

Parole chiave: Carso triestino, Neolitico, Gruppo Vlaška/Gruppo dei Vasi a Coppa, Analisi delle componenti ceramiche

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1. INTRODUCTION

The new developments of research in the Trieste Karst since the 1990's stimulate a critical review of the theories concerning the long period lasting from the Neolithic to the Early Bronze Age. The aim of this paper is to re-examine the Neolithic known either as Vlaška Group, according to the definition given in 1972 by L.H.Barfield, who used the slovene name of one of the first sites discovered already in the XIX century, or as “Gruppo dei “vasi a coppa”, a definition introduced by B.Bagolini and P.Biagi at the end of the 70's to stress the role of the main ceramic component of the facies.

Findings considered as Neolithic date from the last decades of the XIX century and in 1890 C.Marchesetti, a scholar renowned in Central European archaeology, presented the first historical reconstruction of the local Neolithic, which still holds true from many points of view (MONTAGNARI KOKELJ, 1997). The activity of R.Battaglia in the 1920's (BATTAGLIA, 1926)

resulted in the collection of new materials but it was only in the 60-70's that a renewed interest in cave exploration brought about a substantial increase in archaeological data. The increase in theoretical evaluations of the local Neolithic is likely to be a direct consequence: some authors subdivided the Neolithic into stages and all stressed the cultural connections with the Dalmatian Danilo Culture, though interpreting them as indicators of either close derivation or looser links (KOROŠEC, 1960; LEBEN, 1967; LEGNANI, 1968; BARFIELD, 1972; STEFFÉ & DE PIERO, 1978; BAGOLINI & BIAGI, 1978-1981; BATOVIĆ, 1979; STACUL, 1983; RADMILLI, 1987; BIAGI *et al.*, 1993; BIAGI, 1996).

2. THE OLD DATA

A comparative analysis of these theories would be of great interest but is beyond the scope of this paper, where I want to discuss a basic point of di-

vergence among them which, in my opinion, has not been taken into due consideration so far and which the new studies help to clarify. I refer to the fact that the artifactual components listed by the different authors as representative of the local Vlačka Neolithic do not usually coincide, a part from the very main elements. These differences might be due to two principal and closely related reasons: the nature of the various authors' papers and the state of published data. With the partial exception of F. Leben's article, all the others are syntheses, not analyses of the neolithic data: as such they draw attention basically on those elements which, according to each scholar, allow comparisons with other cultural entities useful for setting them into a chronological and cultural frame. These syntheses are based on contemporaneous literature, often integrated by the scholars' personal knowledge of unpublished materials, with the obvious implication that the unpublished materials seen by each of them do not necessarily coincide. As to contemporaneous literature, most, but not all of the 60-70's new excavations were published, usually including only a selection of all the artifacts found.

The need of complete editions, containing the drawings of all the typologically identifiable items, was consequently strongly felt, and since the beginning of the 90's systematic revisions of previously excavated complexes have been accomplished as part of a broader project aimed at a general review of the Karst cave deposits. The observations presented in this paper derive directly from these revisions, namely those of the Ciclami (GILLI & MONTAGNARI KOKELJ, 1993), Gallerie (GILLI & MONTAGNARI KOKELJ, 1994), Zingari (GILLI & MONTAGNARI KOKELJ, 1996), Mitreo (MONTAGNARI KOKELJ & CRISMANI, 1997), Ansa (VISENTINI, 1993), Edera caves (VISENTINI, 1990-91), and Monrupino shelter (BERTOLDI, 1996). These observations are consistent with a non-quantitative survey of the previously published deposits as well as of those just under study: Orso, Gigante, B. Lanza.

The analytical studies of the 90's have brought about a remarkable qualitative and quantitative increase in data, mainly those concerning pottery, certainly the best documented class of materials, on which the present study is based. Moreover, these new data have also contributed to the control of the stratigraphical situation of the deposits, sometimes modifying opinions previously held, as in the case of the Ciclami cave, where the lowest level with pottery, cut 8, can now be attributed without problems to the Neolithic of Vlačka type. Layers 8 in the Mitreo cave, layers 5 in the Zingari, Ansa and Edera ones and cuts 17-11 of the Monrupino shelter are representative of the same facies (the analyses that follow are based on materials from these layers). Unfortunately the stratigraphical situation of the Gal-

lerie cave is totally upset and consequently the very interesting, often unique neolithic materials cannot be used to verify neither the basic association nor the quantitative parameters.

3. THE NEW DATA

These are in fact the two areas where new features have emerged from the comparative analysis of the recently revised complexes. As far as the composition of the Vlačka Group assemblages is concerned, what has become clear is that there are few elements almost always associated versus others which are present only seldom, usually once and in only one item.

The stable components are obviously the eponymous pot, the "vaso a coppa" (Fig. 1:1-6), then a troncoconical dish (Fig. 1:7), a large carinated bowl (Fig. 1:8), less well characterized bowls, with profiles from hemispherical to inflected (Fig. 1:9-10; see BORRELLI, 1984, for terminology), and the *rhyton*, an open mouthed pot on four legs (Fig. 1:11).

The occasional components are the following: pots which are "vasi a coppa" from a typological point of view, but are characterized by peculiar decorations, different either in technique or stylistic design (Fig. 1:12-17); deep pots with spherical or inflected profile (Fig. 1:20-21, 26); bowls of quite various shapes, from conical to composite to inflected again (Fig. 1:18-19, 22-25, 27-28). At present what we see is that these occasional components may be either totally lacking (Ansa, Edera, Monrupino) or be represented by one single pot (Mitreo) or by many (Zingari). The Zingari cave is rather peculiar in this regard, as it has the highest number of *unica*, 12, half of which are actually atypical "vasi a coppa", that is with different decorations; here the large carinated bowls are missing among the stable components, while the typical "vasi a coppa" show the highest internal variability, which almost certainly indicate chronological differentiation.

There is a second set of new results emerging from the comparative analysis of the recently revised complexes, those concerning the quantitative data. The quantitative data do not only confirm and further stress the opposition between stable and occasional components, but also indicate a high unbalance within the basic association itself.

When we look at the figures, we have to take into account the incidence of undeterminable materials (fragments and/or atypical sherds) that may reach 21% at most, in the case of Edera, but is usually considerably lower. In spite of this, we see (Fig. 2) that *unica*, when present, always show low percentages, ranging from 1.83% to 6.18% in the case of Zingari, where

nevertheless half of them are atypical “vasi a coppa”; on the contrary, the components of the basic association altogether always exceed 77%, and even 90% in two cases out of five (Ansa, Monrupino). In this context the incidence of “vasi a coppa” is always high, whether related to all other groups - with values ranging from 64% to 83% (Fig.2) - or considered within the stable, basic association, where it averages about 80% to 90% (Fig.3).

4. CONCLUSION

All data presented so far lead us to make some considerations as well as some hypotheses to test in future research. The presence of the commonest “vasi a coppa” (excluding those of the Zingari cave which are *unica* due to their decoration), of the other components of the basic association, and of *unica* are likely to reflect episodes of human frequentation of caves which are certainly different in time and probably in use. From this point of view the presence of troncoconical dishes, large carinated bowls and *rhyta*, but probably not that of more generic bowls, might be assimilated to the presence of *unica* rather than to the one of “vasi a coppa”. The latter might be indicative of prolonged and/or repeated episodes, while the former might suggest short and/or single episodes.

This hypothesis is based on the qualitative and quantitative data presented so far; on the typological variability within the group of “vasi a coppa”, first recognized in the Zingari complex but present also in other complexes and still to be analyzed in its almost certain chronological implications (we must remind that the few C14 datings available indicate that “vasi a coppa” were present already around the middle of the VIIth millennium BP uncal. - Edera, layer 2a: 6300 +/- 285; Ciclami, cut 8: 6300 +/- 50 - down to the first half of the VIth millennium - Mitreo, layer 8: 5770 +/- 60); on the presence of “vasi a coppa”, but not of other components of the association as defined in this study, in layers superimposed to those considered as representative of the Vlaška Group. In cut 7 of Ciclami cave, for instance, “vasi a coppa” and pots with slightly inflected profiles, probably belonging to the same group, a carinated bowl and other more generic bowls amount to nearly 50% of the whole pottery and might indicate a later stage of the same Vlaška Group, as supported also by the presence of two square mouthed pottery sherds with typological parallels in the first half of the VI millennium uncal. BP (square mouthed pottery was once included in the Vlaška Group, but the present study shows that this is almost certainly not true). Moreover, the hypothesis is based on stratigraphical obser-

vations in the caves under study, which correspond well to those made in the Edera cave, during the excavations now in progress (BIAGI *et al.*, 1993) and in other cavities where recent geoarchaeological analyses have demonstrated a repeated discontinuity in use (BOSCHIAN & MONTAGNARI KOKELJ, 2000).

The last point arises the other fundamental problem of site use, i.e. its motivations. Recent geoarchaeological analyses have suggested that certain caves, throughout long periods including the Neolithic, were probably discontinuously used by shepherds with their flocks of sheep and goats. On these grounds we have made the hypothesis of a selection of artifacts directly connected with the activities performed during the stays in the caves and the needs of transportation. This hypothesis implies that these artifacts do not represent the whole cultural complex of the communities of which shepherds are a specialized branch.

The data on the Vlaška Group presented here seem to be consistent with this hypothesis, in so far as they highlight a basic, mainly quantitative, opposition between the occurrence of “vasi a coppa” and that of vessels of other typology, an opposition which might even be used to dispute the definition itself of Vlaška Group as an autonomous cultural entity. Nevertheless these data concern only a limited number of caves, though among the most important ones, as well as only the pottery (as already said, other classes of materials, mainly lithics, have not been included in this study as their numbers are insufficient for a quantitative analysis, although a cursory survey of published data supports the observations on the discontinuity in the use of caves and on the presence of foreign elements). Therefore the analysis must be expanded in order to test these and other possibilities, such as the use of caves for cult activities or for meetings maybe of groups of different provenance.

The data already obtained in recent reviews of cave complexes as well as those presented here do actually show a good potential for testing these hypotheses. I refer to data suitable for the analysis, already in progress, of the possible function of all different types of pottery of the Vlaška Group and in particular of “vasi a coppa”, which show a variability in shape and especially in size which seems to be directly related to this variability in use. I refer also to a specific fact somehow underestimated so far, i.e. that the shape of “vasi a coppa” is very simple in itself, atypical, and therefore ambiguous from a cultural point of view. Good comparisons can in fact be found in different cultures - Adriatic Impressed Ware Culture, Danilo, Kakanj, Starčevo - spread over different and wide territories. The technique and style of decoration help to restrict these comparisons, but still to wide territories as Dalmatia and Bosnia, where in any case there are also good parallels for most of the other components of the Vlaška

Group. Whether these typological connections might foreshadow actual imports of pots is still to be proved, though differences in clay texture and surface treatments have been observed between the commonest "vasi a coppa" and the simplest bowls, on the one hand, and nearly all the other pots, on the other, which would further support the differences in the nature of their

respective presence, as indicated in this paper. Unfortunately recent archaeometrical analyses on a small sample from the Edera cave have not given convincing results (SPATARO, 1999). Differences that, in my opinion, have to be evaluated also in view of the possibility of disputing the definition of the Vlaška Group as an autonomous cultural entity.

SUMMARY - The increase in cave explorations in the Trieste Karst in the 1960-70's brought about a general increase in archeological data and a specific one in Neolithic evidence. Many new interpretations were put forward, though necessarily based on editions of materials which were often quite selective. The recent systematic revisions of some of the main complexes, followed by their complete publications, allow a preliminary qualitative and quantitative re-evaluation of the Neolithic known as Gruppo Vlaška or "Gruppo dei Vasi a Coppa", which highlights a basic contraposition between stable and occasional pottery components and, within the former, a predominance of "vasi a coppa". Stratigraphical evidence in some of the caves under study, in others where geoarchaeological analyses were performed and preliminary results of the excavations under way in the Edera cave would support a basic discontinuity in use over a long span of time, including Neolithic. The geoarchaeological data would link this use to the presence of shepherds with their flocks of sheep and goats.

RIASSUNTO - L'aumento delle ricerche nelle grotte del Carso triestino negli anni 1960-70 produsse un generale incremento dei dati archeologici e specificamente di quelli relativi al Neolitico. Conseguentemente furono proposte numerose nuove interpretazioni di questa fase culturale, sebbene necessariamente basate su edizioni dei dati spesso parziali e selettive. Le recenti revisioni sistematiche di importanti complessi da vecchi scavi, seguite dalle pubblicazioni pressochè integrali dei materiali, consentono oggi un riesame qualitativo e quantitativo del Neolitico locale noto come Gruppo Vlaška o Gruppo dei Vasi a Coppa. Da questo riesame, per quanto preliminare, si evidenzia una contrapposizione di base fra componenti ceramiche stabilmente associate e componenti solo occasionalmente associate e, fra le prime, una netta prevalenza del vaso a coppa. Questi dati, evidenze stratigrafiche in alcune delle grotte prese in esame in questo studio e in altre in cui sono state recentemente effettuate analisi geoarcheologiche, nonché i risultati preliminari degli scavi in corso nella grotta dell'Edera sono sostanzialmente concordi nell'indicare una sostanziale discontinuità d'uso delle grotte del Carso per periodi lunghi che includono anche il Neolitico. I dati geoarcheologici collegherebbero quest'uso alla presenza di pastori con le loro greggi di capre e pecore.

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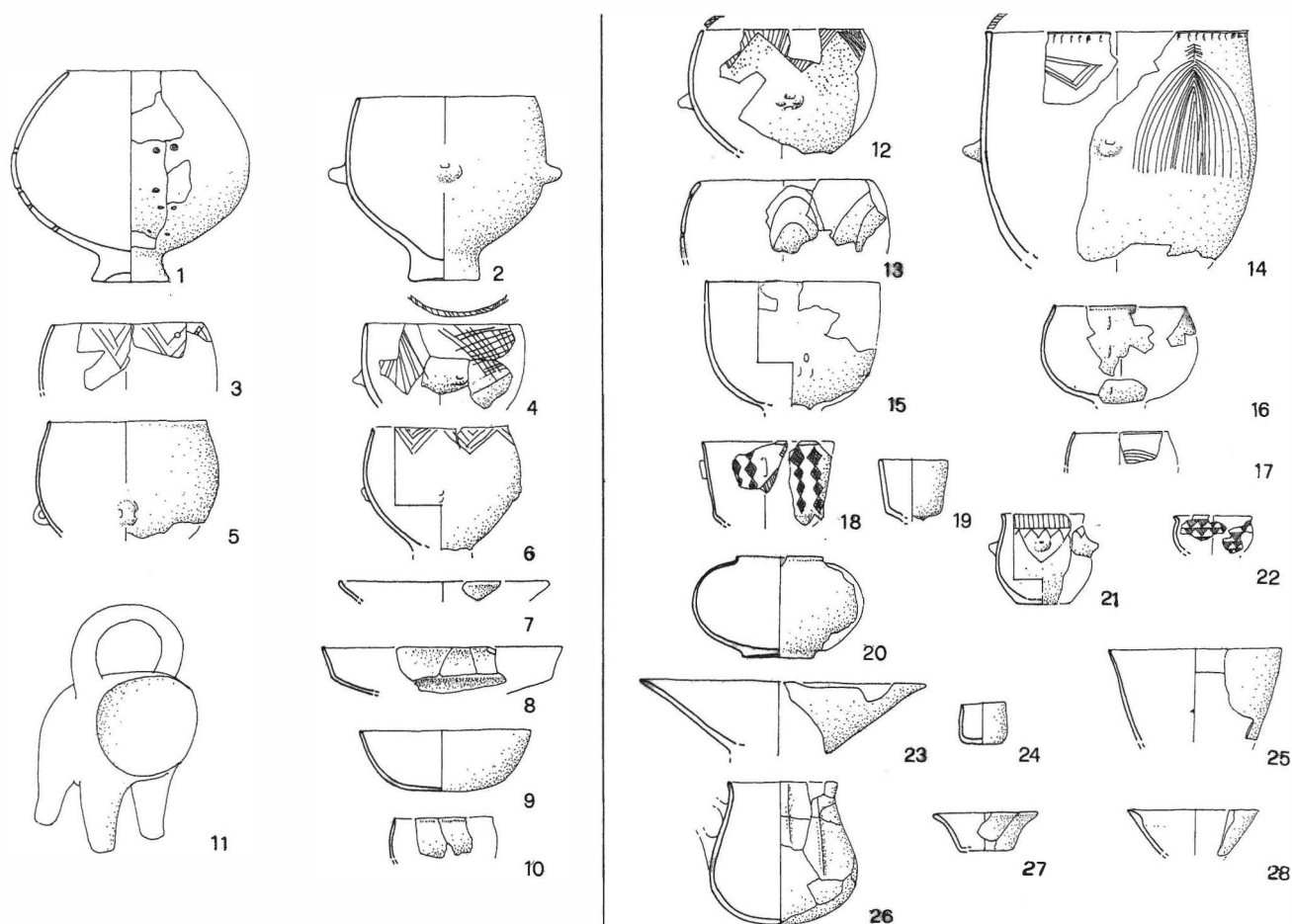


Fig. 1 - Neolithic of the Trieste Karst, Vlaška Group or "Gruppo dei Vasi a Coppa": pottery components regularly associated (1-11) vs. occasional components (12-28).

	CICLAMI	ZINGARI	EDERA	ANSA	MITREO	MONRUPINO
VASI A COPPA	78,89	69,58	64,28	78,18	76	83,1
PIATTI TRONCOCONICI	1,83	4,63	2,85	5,45	2	1,35
SCODELLE CARENATE	2,75	0	1,42	0	0	1,35
ALTRE SCODELLE	5,04	4,63	8,57	14,54	4	5,4
RHYTA	0,45	0,51	0	0	2	0,67
UNICA	1,83	6,18	0	0	2	0
CUCCHIAI	0	2,57	1,42	0	0	0
NON DETERMINATI	9,17	11,85	21,42	1,81	14	8,1

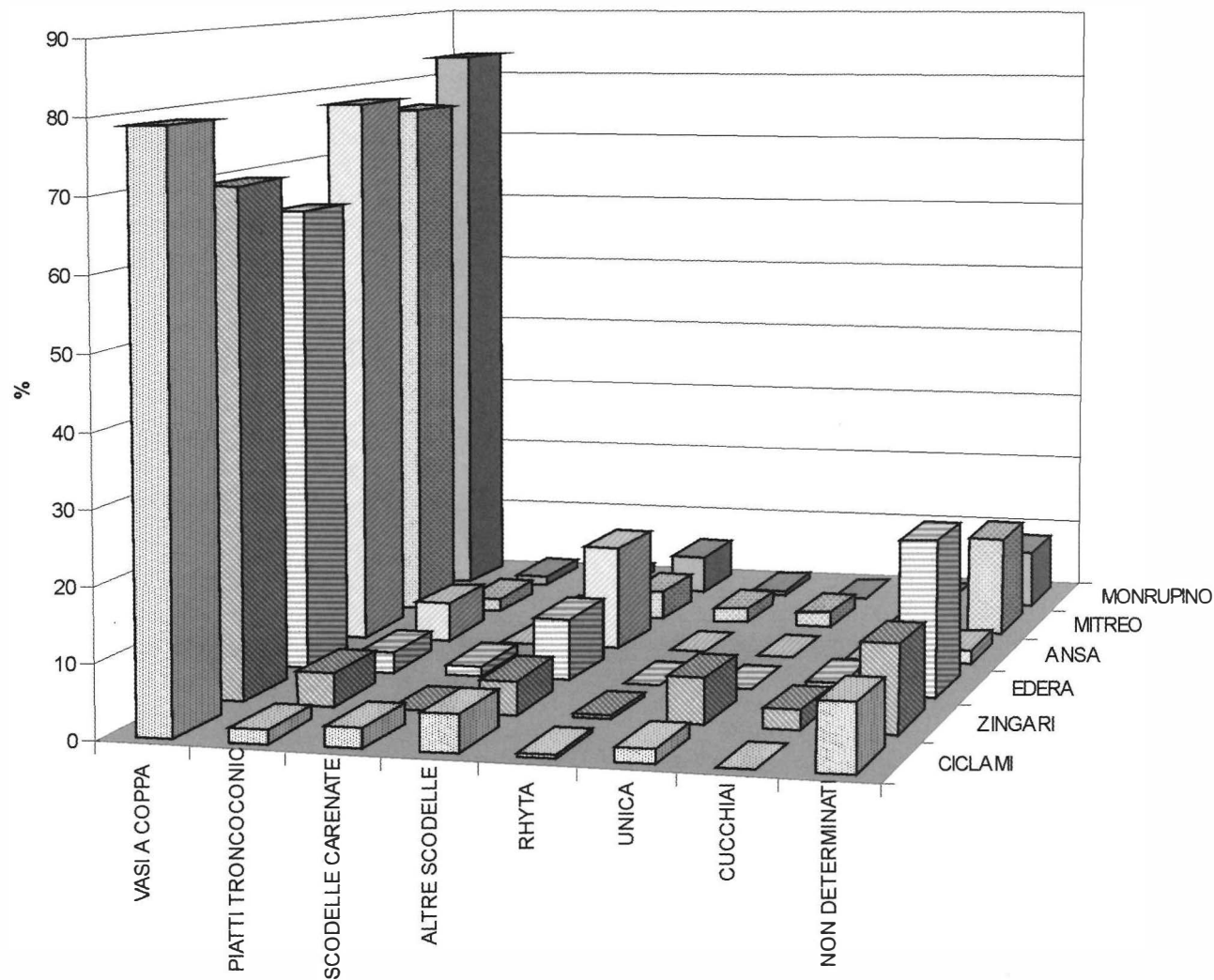


Fig. 2 - Quantitative data (in percentage) of the pottery components of Gruppo Vlaška in the caves under study.

	VASI A COPPA	ALTRE COMPONENTI STABILI
CICLAMINI	88.65	11.35
ZINGARI	87.66	12.34
EDERA	83.3	16.7
ANSA	79.62	20.38
MITREO	90.47	9.53
MONRUPINO	90.43	9.57

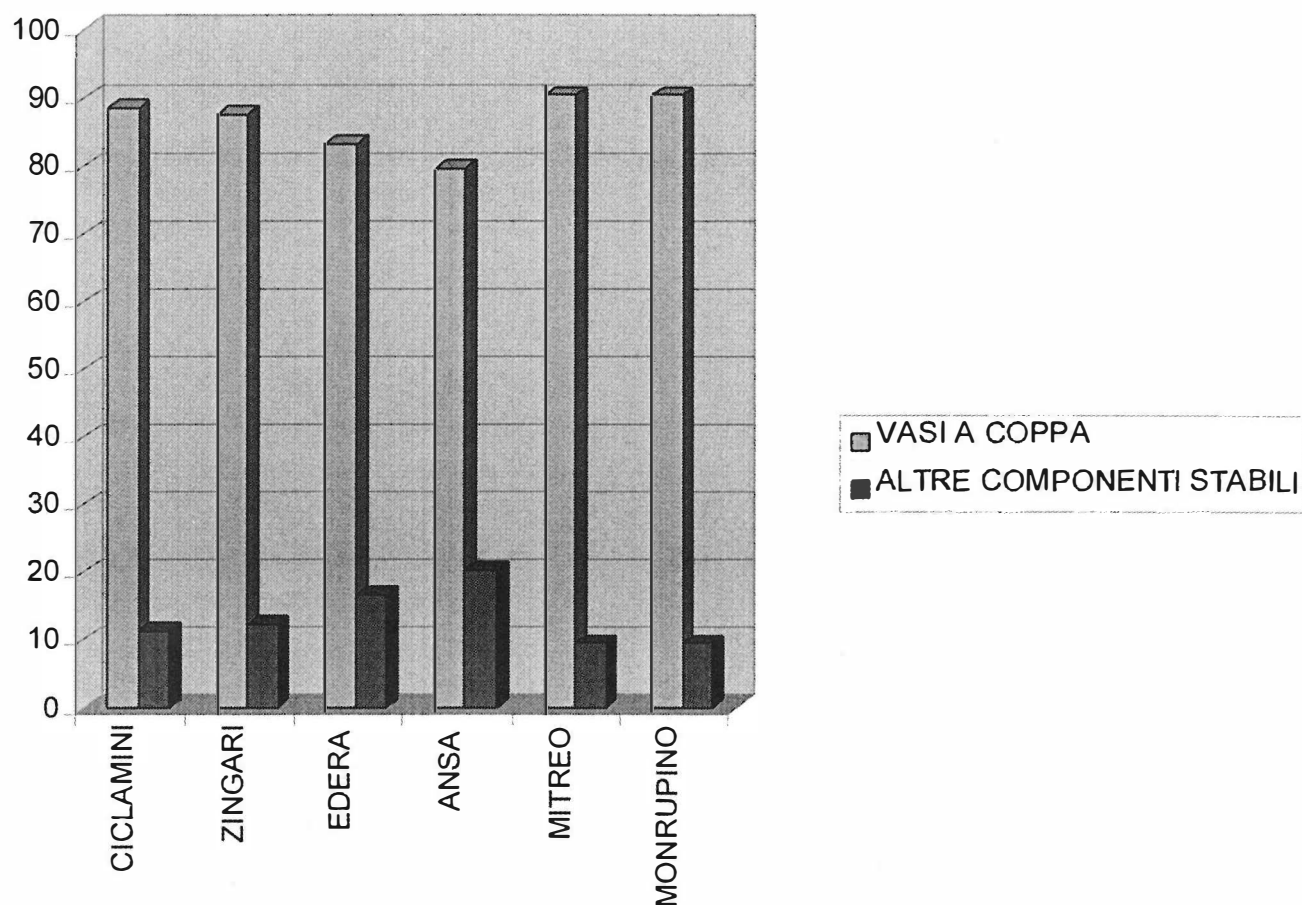


Fig. 3 - Relationship (in percentage) between the "vasi a coppa" and the other elements of the basic association.