

The Neolithic Age in Trentino Alto Adige

ANNALUISA PEDROTTI

ABSTRACT – The Author presents an overview about the Neolithic Age in Trentino Alto Adige

Keywords: Trentino Alto Adige, Early Neolithic, Gruppo Gaban, Middle Neolithic, Square mouthed pottery culture, Linear geometric style, Spiral Meander style, Young Neolithic, impressed and Incised style, Late Neolithic, Funerary rites.

Parole chiave: Trentino Alto Adige, Neolitico antico, Gruppo Gaban, Neolitico medio, Cultura dei vasi a bocca quadrata, Stile geometrico-lineare, Stile meandrospiralico, Neolitico recente, Stile ad incisione ed impressione, Neolitico tardo, Riti funerari.

Annalisa Pedrotti - Dipartimento di Scienze Filologiche e Storiche - Università di Trento, via S. Croce 65, I-38100 Trento, E.mail: annalisa.pedrotti@lett.unitn.it

1. INTRODUCTION¹

The research carried out over the last ten years in Trentino Alto Adige to clarify the formative processes of the first communities of farmers and herders has essentially confirmed the report edited by Bernardino Bagolini during the XXVI Scientific Meeting of the IIPP (BAGOLINI, 1987) and provides new up-to-date elements.

2. EARLY NEOLITHIC

Currently the Gaban Group is considered responsible for the spread of Neolithic in Trentino Alto-Adige. This group was defined for the first time by BAGOLINI & BIAGI in 1977. The neolithisation process seems to occur in our region slightly behind that of the Po Valley. Currently available radiocarbon dating fixes this time as being between the end of the 6th and the beginning of the 5th millennium BC². A certain amount of caution in drawing this conclusion is suggested by the finding of a barley seed in a pollen core sample taken

from a level of the Isera marsh that was radiocarbon dated to between 5.520 and 5.320 cal. BC (CALDERONI *et al.*, 1996:31-32)³.

Up-to-date elements have been provided by the rock shelters at Gaban (PEDROTTI, 2001) and Mezzocorona-Borgonuovo (BAZZANELLA *et al.*, 2000), and from the open air sites at La Vela (excavations in 1987-88) and Villandro/Villanders (DAL RÌ & RIZZI, 2001; RIZZI LARCHER, 2001).

Stratigraphical elements documented at the Gaban Shelter seems to reveal a chronological division within the homonymous group. It evidences an older moment that is characterised by the presence of impressed Adriatic tradition pottery, incised pottery, Vhò and Fiorano type pottery and rare scratched samples (D9-D6) and to D1 a more recent moment from levels D5 it is characterised by an increase in scratched decorations⁴.

At Riparo Gaban, the study of the fauna of the Neolithic complex (D9-D2) documented in sector IV attests to a Mesolithic economic tradition in the lower levels (D9-D6), while in the most recent early Neolithic levels (D5-D2), the first evidence of the presence of domestic animals appears: sheep, goats and oxen⁵. This has also been confirmed by the recent micro-morphological analysis carried out by Diego Angelucci,

Gilberto Artioli, Giovanni Boschian and Silvia Frisia, which evidenced the presence of goat and bovine coprolites starting at level D5. Further data was provided by botanic and faunistic analysis carried out on samples from the open-air sites which would seem to suggest a new colonisation⁶. At La Vela, for example, the preliminary study of faunistic remains from the Early Neolithic levels carried out by Marta Bazzanella, indicates that the amount of domestic remains, mainly composed of goats/sheep, followed by bovines and pigs, are slightly greater than that of wild animals. These latter are mostly represented by deer and wild goat is completely absent (BAZZANELLA, 2001). The recent botanic analysis carried out by Lanfredo Castelletti and Mauro Rottoli on samples taken from the same levels, also revealed the presence of cereals (CASTELLETTI & ROTTOLI, 2001). The existence of a productive economy based on the cultivation of leguminous plants and cereals has been confirmed at the open air Altoatesino sites at Villandro and Aica di Fiè, by the research carried out respectively by Evans (DAL RÌ & RIZZI, 1989: 207) and Renato Nisbet (BAGOLINI *et al.*, 1982: 18-19).

It is therefore possible to hypothesise that the spread of the Neolithic in the Adige Valley can be attributed to the penetration of small communities with productive economies that, when they came into contact with the resident local communities, especially those at rock shelters⁷, they developed the "facies Gaban". This data also seems to be confirmed by the spread in open air sites of new settlement models represented at La Vela by the presence of a ditch (DEGASPERI & PEDROTTI, 2001; PEDROTTI, 2001: 135) at Villandro by an apsidal house (RIZZI LARCHER, 2001), and at Aica di Fiè/Völseraicha by an area terraced for agricultural purposes (BAGOLINI *et al.*, 1982).

3. FULL NEOLITHIC

The appearance of the Square Mouthed Pottery Culture in the Adige Valley slowly led to the complete cancellation of those aspects that in the Gaban group are explained as elements acquired from the technological knowledge of their Mesolithic ancestors. For example, in the lithic industry, microlithic weaponry disappear and are replaced by arrowheads obtained by flat retouching and the rich production of horn axes is supplanted by the efficient technical performance offered by polished stone. Pottery with handles was succeeded by square mouthed forms. These changes seem to have been accepted by local populations in a gradual manner. At the old settlements, that is the rock shelters, evidence of the SMP culture is found in stratigraphic continuity with that referable to the Gaban

group at: Moletta Patone (BAGOLINI *et al.*, 1984, fig.27:51-52), Romagnano (PERINI, 1971: 106), Doss Trento (BAGOLINI *et al.*, 1985: 216, tav. 1:1-2), Riparo Gaban (BERGAMO DECARLI *et al.*, 1972, fig. 24). This continuity is also found in the open-air sites at La Vela and Villandro.

New data comes from the study of the open air site at La Vela (excavations in 1987-88). With the affirmation of the Linear Geometric Style, the most common decorative technique becomes that of scratching followed by incising⁸. Rare, however, is the impression technique used exclusively to impress notches on the rim. The most common forms are represented by deep square mouthed, and necked vases and beakers. The bottoms are mostly flat, versions with feet are rare. In the lithic industry burins are present including one example of the Ripabianca type. Scrapers are particularly numerous with a prevalence of elongated end-scrapers. Foliated arrowheads begin to appear with a flat face and are divided into one type with a straight base with marginal retouching found mainly, as Bernardino Bagolini has highlighted several times, in the North Alpine area since the linear band pottery period and a tanged type found in the South Alpine region.

Study of the fauna indicates a progressive change in the economy. In general hunting assumes a secondary role. However deer is always the object of the hunt. The domesticates represent the main source of meat. The species most representative is oxen followed by goats/sheep and at a certain distance by pigs (BAZZANELLA, 2001). The spread of the Spiral meander style in Trentino signals a distinct change in habitation choices. Almost all the rock shelters have been abandoned. One exception is the rock shelter at Romagnano (PERINI, 1971, fig.16,33,44,52). However the abandonment of the rock shelters must have preceded the second style. Very probably this choice was dictated by economic necessity: the new farmers/herders needed more open space to practice their activities. In Alto Adige habitation continuity is evidenced at Villandro, while it would seem that at the same moment the colonisation of the imposing promontory with strategic defensive position site at Sabbiona/Säben (LUNZ, 1986: 100)⁹ took place. The site at La Vela documents that during this period the habitat underwent its moment of maximum expansion and its occupation is more stable and enduring than the previous phase. The high degree of sedentariness attained by this group is also suggested by the existence of a necropolis, one of the most important found in northern Italy¹⁰.

Traces attributable to this phase have been found at the La Vela site in practically all sectors of the excavations¹¹. Particularly important documentation is provided by the 1987-88 excavations (Vela VII). The economy is practically the same, the practise of agriculture continues. They cultivated cereals, barley and whe-

at, they gathered wild fruit: nuts and raspberries¹². With regards herding, the data confirms what was observed for the first aspect of SMP. Only deer hunting seems to undergo a certain increase (BAZZANELLA, 2001). The study of material culture shows the appearance of new forms such as lids, bowls/dish with pronounced rim, vases with bead rim. Amongst the square mouthed forms bowls prevail, that are often of large dimensions. The bottoms are always flat. Practically absent are those with feet. The decorative syntax mainly found are those of the dynamic type (meanders, spirals). However geometric-linear motifs continue (stepped bands, grids and triangles). The decorations are normally situated on the edge, on the brim, below the brim, often below the spout and on the wall. Amongst the techniques used, scratching dominates, incising persists and that of impression slightly increases always in the form of notches on the edge and fingernail dragging. Also for the first time the excision technique appears (PEDROTTI *et al.*, 2001). Also present are small ollas with necks in the Serra d'Alto style (MOTTES, 2001). Contacts with Serra d'Alto is also suggested by the presence of a distal truncated bladelet with made of obsidian that comes from Lipari (AMMERMAN & POLGLASE, this volume). Substantial changes are not noted in the lithic industry. The preceding types continue, arrowheads with flat faces and marginal retouching decrease. The stratigraphy at Romagnano documents the appearance of the ogival type with a slightly concave base and bifacial foliated retouching (PERINI, 1971, fig. 45:10). The polishing stone industry is well represented. Axes and chisels are present, often deposited as part of grave goods (PEDROTTI, 1996). Points of goat/sheep metapodial bones that conserve the epiphysis in their bases as well as triangular shaped spatulas are evidence of the bone industry (BAZZANELLA, 2000; BAZZANELLA & AIMAR, 2001). Traces of paving with postholes were found in practically all the sectors in which pottery decorated in the Spiral meander style was found. The most important data comes again from the excavations carried out in 1987-88 (Vela VII). In this phase there was a wide ranging restructuring of the area with the reuse of first Neolithic ditch for the placement of a series of large poles with stone filling and the placement of extended paving on top of a thick layer of gravel which, due to the presence of many sharp edged stones, could represent drainage work to avoid periodic flooding, rather than alluvial filling¹³. It is at this moment that the area of La Vela VII became a burial ground¹⁴. Analysis of the grave goods from the cemetery at La Vela gives the impression of a society that was anything but autarchical, and in all probability was part of a circuit devoted to the distribution of tools and prestigious goods. Indeed there are many objects/substances of exotic origins: cinnabar, the Serra d'Alto vase, *Spondylus* pearls, the jade axe, the chisel *Schuh-*

leistenkeil Type. The presence of miniaturised forms also leads one to believe that there existed a production of objects to be used exclusively in burials. The low number (about 15) of the burials found at La Vela would seem to indicate that only some individuals could enjoy the privilege of a true burial and particular objects could indicate their social position. The presence of the inhumation of males and females of different ages, of an infant and especially children with particularly rich grave goods, suggests that this position was not reserved to any particular class of individual selected for example on the basis of age, but to particular groups of persons. Perhaps the organisers of long distance trade belonged to two different lineages¹⁵, in view of the existence of two different burial types – cist and stone ring. Therefore the type of society that is emerging is similar to that already described by other authors¹⁶ for the late phases of the Linear Band Pottery culture and the Middle Neolithic (Rössen 4700-4400 cal BC), that is a society characterised by the first signs of social differentiation where “power” is held by one or two families and *status* was hereditary. These are elements that seem to anticipate characteristics until now believed to be typical of the Copper Age that followed.

The study of the horizontal stratigraphy of the site at La Vela shows that the establishment of the burial ground was carried out at a time when the area was not inhabited: none of the tombs cut through the anthropic levels that follow, which, on the contrary, in the best conserved cases, cover the grave with their filling (DEGASPERI & PEDROTTI, 2001). The burials are therefore referable to the Spiral meander phase as demonstrated by the find in the filling of tomb 2 of a fragment decorated with a meander and by a beadrims shaped brim (PEDROTTI, 2001, fig. 15:11,12). C14 dating also confirms this attribution, placing the establishment of the burial ground to between 4500-4400 cal BC. We can therefore conclude that the graves were dug in an area outside the habitat and only later were they enveloped by the living area, as clearly shown by the excavation in tomb 6 of a posthole¹⁷. It is clear that also the habitat underwent several periods of restoration and expansion. It seems to have been abandoned after a flood and in view of the find of a fragment decorated in the incised and impressed style during excavations made in sector V in 1977, at least one part was still inhabited when the last aspects of the Square Mouthed Pottery culture appeared in our region (PEDROTTI, 1990, fig. 6:9).

4. THE END OF NEOLITHIC

The partial contemporaneousness of the Spiral meander aspect with the last aspects of the square mouthed pottery culture has been confirmed by three

C14 dating examinations made on samples taken from three huts found at Isera La Torretta which contained material referable to the incised and impressed pottery styles and dates their construction to between 4500 and 4300 BC.

In this period there is a prevalence of settlements situated on morphologic rises that are often very steep and this is a sign that in selecting settlement locations the strategic situation began to play an important role. In Alto Adige the main sites are represented by Punta San Giovanni/Johanneskofel (NIEDERWANGER, 1984), Sabbiona/Säben (LUNZ, 1986), Castel Juval/Schloss Juval (DAL RI, TECCHIATI, 1995), and in Trentino by Calodri (BAGOLINI & MATTEOTTI, 1973) and Isera La Torretta (DE MARINIS & PEDROTTI, 1997). No evidence exists of the occupation of rock shelters. The Isera settlement, like that of Calodri is a new colonisation. In both sites meander-spiralic pottery is absent.

New data regarding the last aspects of the Neolithic has been provided by the excavations at Isera la Torretta which brought to light the three huts mentioned above¹⁸, an impressive stratigraphic sequence that is a fundamental reference sequence for the definition of cultures and sequence of evolutionary trends in Trentino Alto Adige from the young Neolithic to the Copper Age. Preliminary examination of the excavation data and the typological study of the materials has led to the identification of 5 phases of occupation for this site, referable to the young Neolithic, Square Mouthed Pottery Culture, incised and impressed style (*Isera 1* 4500-4300/4200 BC cal) and the Impressed and Incised style with Chassean elements (*Isera 2* 4200-3900/3800 BC cal); late Neolithic horizon Fiaavè 1 (*Isera 3* 3800-3600 BC cal) and Castellaz di Cagnò (*Isera 4* 3600-3400 BC cal); Copper Age 1 horizon with plain pottery of the Tamins-Carasso type (*Isera 5* 3300-2900/2800 BC cal).

Typological study of the materials has evidenced that from the middle of the 5th millennium BC pottery production suffered the same bad workmanship as that noticed North of the Alps and is identifiable in a progressive reduction in vase forms represented at end of the 4th millennium BC almost exclusively by cylindrical vases. The links with the north Alpine area become closer and are documented by the importation, for example during Isera 2, of pottery with Furchenstich decorations of the Münchshofen type and by small copper leaf. North of the Alps these contacts are evidenced by the presence of south Alpine flint and square mouthed pottery¹⁹. These contacts become particularly evident during Isera phases 3 and 4 attributable to the Late Neolithic, that is the time when the north Alpine influence of the Altheim and Pfyn environments became ever more evident along with those west of the Lagozza, which, in Trentino Altoadige region is also marked by the appearance of new settlement models

(humid area site). During Isera 4 this brought about the complete collapse of the square mouthed pottery culture (Castellaz di Cagnò, Barbiano, Tisens St. Hippolyt) and the resumption of the occupation of rock shelters (Romagnano) and of high altitude sites (BAGOLINI & PEDROTTI, 1992).

The same bad workmanship and reduction in the vase shapes is also seen in pottery north of the Alps and brought about the creation of a single vase shape during the Early Copper Age. These changes, as the site at Fiaavè shows, were probably caused by the arrival of new people, the origins of who have not yet been clearly identified. Continuation of the study of the site at Isera could provide clarification of this question and more importantly should attempt to understand whether this site was inhabited without interruption or whether there were periods of abandonment, as we have learnt from the study of other sites north of the Alps.

NOTES

1 – The summary we propose here with regards the data from Trentino has been taken from A. PEDROTTI (2001), which should be referred to for more detailed information, graphs, photographic documentation and bibliography. The Alto Adige data has been taken from the publications and bibliography cited in the text.

2 – The presence amongst the pottery forms of types similar to that of the Vhò group and scratched pottery would seem to confirm the dating of the Gaban Group.

3 – New palaeobotanic finds in the north Alpine area attests to the presence of cereals in profiles dated to the first half of the 6th millennium cal. BC, demonstrating that in this region the beginning of agriculture seems to be much older than believed to date. See ERNY-RODMANN *et al.*, 1997: 29-31. It is therefore probable that also in Trentino future research could modify what has been reported above.

4 – This data comes from an ongoing review of the materials found in the Neolithic levels of the Rock Shelter. See PEDROTTI, 2001: 135. At the settlement at Vela, preliminary study of the materials (excavations in 1987-88) documents that several fragments of square mouthed pottery are already present during the last aspects of the Gaban Group (PEDROTTI, 2001: 140).

5 – The presence, although sporadic, of wild goats in the fauna of the Early Neolithic at Shelters Gaban and Mezzocorona Borgonuovo (BAZZANELLA *et al.*, 2000: 157) testifies to the continuation of visits to high altitudes by the people living in rock shelters up to the beginning of the first phase SMP.

6 – At the open site at La Vela in there was in reality signs of the bivouacs of Mesolithic hunter gatherers. However this evidence was covered by an alluvial level, and therefore it does not seem to be correct to talk of habitation continuity. (BAZZANELLA *et al.*, 2001).

7 – These populations seem to acquire new technical knowledge regarding agriculture and cattle raising, as evidenced by B. Bagolini and confirmed by the micromorphological and faunistic analyses at Riparo Gaban, through a slow and gradual process of acculturation. In the stratigraphic series uncovered in the rock shelters, the Early Neolithic levels are always in stratigraphical continuity with the Castelnovian levels of the Late Mesolithic.

8 – The incised motifs substantially remain the same as in the absence of sure stratigraphical data it is difficult to separate this class of pottery from that present in the Gaban group. For data regarding the percentage of the techniques used see PEDROTTI *et al.*, 2001.

9 – Material attributable to the meander-spiralic aspect in Alto Adige is also attested to at Feldthurns Tangasse (BAGOLINI & DAL RI, 1987), and at Stufles (LUNZ, 1984).

10 – For a detailed analysis of funerary rites see BAGOLINI, 1990, for updates see note 14.

11 – For the excavation before 1987-88 good documentation is provided by AAVV, 1977, pp.28-39. Also see PEDROTTI, 1990.

12 – This data is deduced from the report by Lanfredo Castelletti regarding samples taken during excavations in 1975 cfr. AA.VV, 1977, p. 59.

13 – DEGASPERI, *La Vela VII: scavo 1987-88. Il substrato del sito e alcune considerazioni sulle dinamiche evolutive dell'area.* (La Vela VII: excavations 1987-88. The substrate of the site and several considerations regarding the evolutive dynamics of the area). Unpublished report at the laboratory of Paleontologia del Dipartimento di Scienze filologiche e storiche of the University of Trento.

14 – For an up-to-date description of the grave goods and funeral rites see DEGASPERI & PEDROTTI, 2001; DAL RI *et al.*, 2001: 145-152.

15 – Of particular importance would be an anthropological study of the epigenetic characteristics to evidence any kinship between the two groups.

16 – See CH. JEUNESSE, 1996 and bibliography therein cited.

17 – See DEGASPERI & PEDROTTI, 2001: 32, fig 5. Unfortunately the captions for the figures on this page have been inverted.

18 – For a more detailed analysis of these structures see DEGASPERI & PEDROTTI, 2001; PEDROTTI, 2001: 153-158.

19 – For more details about the relations between the two sides of the Alps see PEDROTTI 2001.

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