The origin of human populations in Italy

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Within the present project, a considerable number of prospections have been carried out in the eastern part of the Po Valley and along the Adriatic coast, with particular attention to the regions of Veneto, Emilia Romagna, Marche and Molise. Collaboration on the part of both Italian and foreign researchers was essential to the success of these investigations. Results revealed the series of events leading to the first phases of population, not only in the area examined but throughout Italy.

The oldest findings of the presence of man in Italy come from the Emilian area. About ten sites, including Ca' Belvedere di Monte Poggiolo, Forlimpopoli and Covignano (province of Forlì) and Ca' Romanina and Ca' Poggio (Bologna) provided large quantities of material indicating the presence of humans: numerous flint artifacts (choppers and chopping tools) and rarer flake tools. At Ca' Belvedere di Monte Poggiolo, many artifacts could still be refitted, so that the original pebble used to make them could be reconstructed almost entirely. Ca' Romanina provided bone fragments, too small for specific identification.

These findings lie inside deposits attributed to at least the final part of the regressive cycle of the Lower Pleistocene. At Monte Poggiolo, the characteristic deposits are gravels covering the underlying marine series, representing the lateral passage of the beach formation called «Sabbie Gialle» (Yellow Sands). Instead, at Ca' Romanina, the deposits were collected from the top of this formation.

The importance of the Emilia Romagna settlements lies in their age and the technical and typological characteristics of the industries.

The first phase of population in Italy, still poorly defined in detail, follows the phase of Isernia la Pineta (Molise). This settlement, discovered in 1978 and dated at 736,000 years, has provided an enormous quantity of information. Age was determined with absolute methods (potassium/argon and paleomagnetism), stratigraphic, paleontological, palynological and paletnological data all being in good agreement.

Funds from the Italian Ministry for Public Education in particular allowed us to study the complex inhabited structures which had been explored by means of systematic field excavations. These belong to at least three separate archeological levels.

The most recent field excavation (sector 2, covering an area of about 68 sq.m.) yielded numerous flints: denticulated tools were particularly frequent. A few small bone fragments of various animal species were also found, including bear, bison, elephant and rhinoceros. The many stone findings and the absence of

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limestone tools or remains of large animals indicate that this site may have been used for special activities.

The two inhabited sites of the first excavation sector, older than the second, are separated by a layer of sterile fluvio-lagoonal silt. The older was explored over an area of 48 sq.m., the more recent over about 200 sq.m. They yielded stone tools (flint denticulates prevailing) and limestone artifacts including many choppers and rabots. Very similar bone fragments from large animals (elephant, rhinoceros, bison) were also found, together with fewer fragments of bear, hippopotamus, megacer and thar. Too small an area of this older paleosurface of sector 2 has been explored so far, so that information on its significance is still incomplete; instead, the younger surface represents a complex inhabited structure. In particular, the 1985-87 excavations provided more details on its organization. Five sites have been distinguished in it:

Site 1: due to neotectonics, the paleosurface overlaps the older one without any stratigraphic discontinuity; the bone remains show that they were deformed and fractured after deposition;

Site 2: mainly decimetric limestone pebbles in direct contact with the underlying sterile silt, covering an area of about 2 m in diameter;

Site 3: bone and limestone remains cover silt; pebbles tend to cover bones;

Site 4: maximum concentration of animal remains; pebbles sometimes cover bones uniformly;

Site 5: progressively fewer findings, also inclusions in underwater sediments.

Systematic exploration thus revealed a site of anthropogenic activity (sites 1-4) in which the pebbles and large animal remains all define an inhabited complex sloping to another part (area 5) which was definitely deposited in an underwater environment. The latter may have been used as a dumping area at the edge of the inhabited area, along the shores of a wet environment.

Many settlements belonging to at least three chronological phases have been attributed to the Middle Pleistocene:

A) *Deposits with flake artifacts showing proto-Levallois, sometimes Clactonian and bifacial techniques:* these artifacts come from alluvial fans at the foot of the Apennines (S.F.R.A. Chiuse d'Idice quarries, province of Bologna) or from the Monti Lessini sites (Monte Gazzo, brown series, and Lughezzano). Their stratigraphic position sets them in the earlier Middle Pleistocene. In Emilia Romagna, the top of the gravelly deposits containing this industry are weathered by a paleosoil, very homogeneous throughout the area, which began to develop from the Middle Pleistocene. At Lughezzano, remains are contained in a paleosoil of the «Terra Rossa» type.

B) *Deposits yielding artifacts showing Clactonian technique, with frequent flake tools and presence of bifaces:* these belong to the Middle Pleistocene, but are in any case more recent than complex A. They mainly come from beds 7 and 6 (Leonardi, 1942) of the Quinzano (Verona) quarries and bed I of Monte Conero (Ancona) and are contained in «Terra Rossa»-type paleosoils which represent their *ante quem* boundary.

C) *Deposits with Levallois and bifacial techniques:* these are mainly found along the foot of the Apennines in Emilia Romagna. The most significant sites are: Ghiardo Cave, Borzano and Prattissolo (Reggio Emilia), Scornetta, Due Pozzi and Ca' S. Carlo (Bologna), and Pergola, Oriolo, Petrignone, Castiglione and Torrente Conca (Forlì). Very similar industries in type and stratigraphic position come from the Quinzano quarries (bed 5 of Leonardi 1942), Monte Gazzo (white series) and Monte Conero (bed G). Artifacts are systematically associated with loess deposits which, according to their stratigraphic position and pedogenetic features, are directly connected with the glacial period at the end of the Middle Pleistocene (Riss in Alpine stratigraphy). Industries are characterized by frequent Levallois artifacts, scrapers, scraping blades and points. Denticulates are almost completely absent. It is noteworthy that bifaces are occasionally found. The overall geological framework, high density of settlements and the presence, at least in some cases (e.g., Quinzano and Torrente Conca), of animal remains provide a complete picture of the lifestyle of these human groups, which had adapted to a steppe-type environment where they hunted large herbivores.

The last stages of the Lower Palaeolithic in the Po Valley show progressive evolution towards Middle Palaeolithic complexes, with the definite affirmation of all features characteristic of Mousterian complexes. This is particularly evident at Erbarella (Jesi) and Ponte di Crispiero (Macerata).

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