

A new settlement of the Vhò Group at Isorella (BS): preliminary results of the 1997 research

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ABSTRACT - This paper summarizes the results of the first fieldwork season at the Early Neolithic site discovered near Cascina Bocche in the Po Plain. The pottery assemblage shows new forms and a strong influx of the neighbouring Fiorano Culture. From the excavated pit, a shallow structure of about 20m², there have also been recovered a large chipped flint assemblage, faunal remains and several ornamental objects, among which are one polished stone ring fragment and one Spondylus bracelet, the first so far found at an Early Neolithic site of the Po Plain. The results of the micromorphological analysis of one undisturbed soil sample from the filling of the pit are presented together with the petroarchaeometrical study of the greenstone ring.

Key words: Isorella, Vhò Group, Early Neolithic, Spondylus, Petroarchaeometry

Parole chiave: Isorella, Gruppo Vhò, Neolitico Antico, Spondylus, Petroarcheometria

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1. INTRODUCTION (M.P., E.S.)

The Neolithic site of Isorella, situated in the Brescia Province (Fig.1), was discovered in 1992, when ploughing brought to the surface lithic artefacts and faunal remains in a field near Cascina Bocche, revealing a dark spot of anthropogenic soil (PERINI & STARNINI, 1992-93). An unauthorized trench was excavated by some local amateurs in 1993. Because of this it was then necessary to organize a systematic excavation to recover the context of the finds collected during this occasion, among which there was one fragment of Spondylus bracelet and one of a polished stone ring. The first season of research was carried out in September 1997 during which the dark spot damaged in 1993 was excavated.

2. THE GEOGRAPHICAL SETTING (M.P., E.S.)

The Neolithic settlement is located on a river terrace, now flattened for cultivation purposes, in a territory that is rather flat, with an average altitude of 50-51m a.s.l. This part of the plain extends immediately south of the spring line, where the groundwater from the mountains is naturally rising to the surface and it is called Low Plain. It is shaped and cut by several water courses, among which the River Chiese flowing East from the site and the Gambara River to the West, that sometimes have steep slopes. The most important of the minor water courses, locally called "vasi", "seriole" or "scoli", is the Naviglio di Isorella, flowing deeply embanked in the river plain not far from the Neolithic site (Fig.1). In the past, large marshes existed and

very common were wet areas, locally called "lame", drained by the Benedictines starting in the VIII century AD (ERSAL, 1988).

The site is located in one area of gravelly-sandy alluvial deposits, related to the high energy depositional conditions subsequent to the de-glaciation of the Lake Garda ice sheet. Above these sediments are brown, calcareous soils with a very calcareous gravelly substratum, often appearing on the surface, and with good drainage, defined as Calcic Cambisols (ERSAL, 1988).

3. THE EXCAVATION OF 1997 (M.P., E.S.)

As mentioned above, the fieldwork season of 1997, 10 days long, explored the anthropogenic spot which was partly damaged by an unauthorized trench that did not expose its entire extension (Fig.2). The feature, after the removal of the plough soil with the aid of a machine, appeared as an oval structure of ca. 20m² in size, cut along its west side by a narrow channel. To the north side of the Neolithic structure appeared a larger channel containing Roman potsherds. The Neolithic feature was a shallow depression with a lenticular fill (Fig.3-4) of a very dark colour, only 30cm thick, covering the gravelly substratum concreted at its top. One sample of the filling has been analysed with the soil micromorphology method (see Chapter 4). To the South, the filling of the structure was bottoming out, indicating that the limit of the pit was very close. However it was not possible to verify the situation due to the presence of crops and the shortage of time. The type of soil that characterizes this part of the plain permitted a generally good state of preservation of the artifacts, among which are, besides the pottery, a rich chipped flint assemblage, bone tools and ornamental objects. A good collection of faunal and microfaunal remains, land snails and charcoals have been also recovered¹.

All the sediment coming from the excavation of the Neolithic pit will be wet sieved with a 2mm mesh. This operation, not yet concluded, already permitted the recovery of one charred seed determined by R.Nisbet as *Triticum cf. dicoccum* (a small caryopsis measuring 4.1mm in length, 2.6mm in width and 2.4mm in thickness, with traces of glume on the ventral surface), to which, more recently, other caryopsis of *Triticum monococcum*, *dicoccum*, and *aestium* must be added (STARNINI *et al.*, 2000).

4. MICROMORPHOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF A SAMPLE OF THE PIT FILL (C.O.)

Hereafter are presented the results of the micromorphological analysis conducted on one undisturbed

soil sample (MURPHY, 1986) of the Neolithic pit filling, collected from square B4. The description of the thin section was conducted according to BULLOCK *et al.*, 1985.

4.1. Soil description of the thin section

The porosity (15%) is composed of plane (maximum diameter - medium sands) prevailing on channels and chambres (maximum diameter - coarse sands). The microstructure is plany. The coarse fraction is composed of fine sands and medium/fine gravels, among which are:

- rounded clasts of fine limestone and, subordinately, fragments of acid rocks, probably volcanic, coming from the alluvial substratum;
- very rare and partly phosphatized bones;
- common pedorelicts of soils with clay coatings and fragments of clay coatings;
- common medium/very small charcoals, not very well preserved.

The fine fraction is composed of dark brown silt; the b-fabric is undifferentiated. The pedological features are composed of:

- frequent, limpid, clay coatings, both in relationship with the porosity and the groundmass; only very rarely they are intercalated with thin coarse coatings;
- scarce/frequent coarse coatings, always overimposed on the clay coatings and in relationship with the porosity;
- scarce microcrystalline calcite, sometimes in coatings superimposed on the clay ones.

4.2. Discussion

The pit filling is constituted partly of materials deriving from the substratum not anthropised, i.e. of rounded pebbles and soil fragments. This soil is characterized by clay coatings, on the basis of which it is classifiable as an Alfisol, evolved under a dense woodland cover and denoting a climatic phase with contrasted seasons (CREMASCHI, 1990).

The principal pedological features are the clay coatings over which coarse coatings are superimposed. These latter are connected to an environment characterized by the absence or the degradation of the forest cover (CREMASCHI *et al.*, 1992).

Thanks to these observations we can attempt to reconstruct the palaeoenvironmental evolution of the site: during the Neolithic the area had been cleared from the woodland and settled. Not the cultivation of the soils, which involved only the A horizons, but rather the excavations of pits and depressions caused the alteration of the Holocene soil that evolved before the Neolithic set-

tlement. Fragments of this soil are found in the pit filling. After the abandonment of the site, the vegetation probably grew quickly and, under unmodified climatic conditions, the pedogenesis started again in the same condition as previously. Over the anthropogenic deposits evolved again a soil which has the characteristics of one Entisol. This fact indicates that the consequences of the human impact caused by the presence of the Neolithic settlement were limited and not enough to disturb the surrounding ecosystem. The duration of the settlement should have been relatively short, due to the fast exhaustion of the cultivated soils, that demanded a frequent change of fields. For this reason the forest portion cleared should have been restricted to a glade (CARUGATI *et al.*, 1996).

Finally, the coarse coatings superimposed on the clay ones are connected to a different environment characterized by large, cleared and cultivated spaces, dating to a post-Neolithic period, and probably can be dated starting from the Bronze Age. To this latter phase is connected part of the porosity observed in the sample.

5. THE ARTEFACTS (E. S.)

As already mentioned above, the artefacts found in the Neolithic structure are in a rather good state of preservation thanks to the peculiarity of the soil in this part of the Po Plain, which allowed the conservation both of the surfaces of the potsherds and the bone remains. Among the rich pottery assemblage there are vessel shapes typical of the Vhò Group (Fig.5:5,7-8) (BAGOLINI & BIAGI, 1975; BAGOLINI *et al.*, 1977; BERNABÒ BREA, 1991; STARNINI, 1995, 1998), and new ones, such as one rather large carinated bowl with a strap handle and a very fine zig-zag decoration, made with impressed lines and dots, sometimes still preserving the white filling (Fig.5:1). There are numerous carinated bowl fragments, decorated with points and lines that recall the motifs of the Fiorano Culture (Fig.5:3-4). Some sherds with very fine scratched linear motifs also are present (Fig.5:2). Several very thin fragments of figulina pottery of a light colour fabric (10YR 8/5), also have been found, among which is one part of a round and handled small flask (Fig.5:6). The lithic industry comprises several fragments of abrasive stones and a large assemblage of chipped implements of Alpine flint. The flint assemblage is characterised by the presence of burins on a side notch (Fig.6:1), long end scrapers (Fig.6:2-3), straight borers (Fig.6:4), rhomboids of both long and short types (Fig.6:5-6,8), one trapeze (Fig.6:7), simple-retouched blades and a few sickle inserts (Fig.6:9-10). The use of the microburin

technique is testified by the co-occurrence of the “piquant trièdre” on the truncations and of the typical manufacture discards (Fig.6:11-12).

The microscopic analysis of the microwear traces initiated by B.Voytek revealed the use of the burin blow technique for rejuvenating the worn edges of the blade tools, which was already noted during the study of other lithic complexes (BIAGI & VOYTEK, 1990-91; D'AMICO *et al.*, 2000). The study indicated also that the long rhomboids have been used as cutting tools and not as armatures. However a more complete evaluation of these data will be given after the conclusion of the analysis.

The bone tool assemblage comprises both finished instruments and manufacture waste (Fig.7:3). There is also one fragment of a probable pendant (Fig.7:4). Other ornamental objects are some small *Dentalium* shells and one fragment of polished stone ring (Fig.7:7) (see Chapter 6). However, the most interesting piece is one half of a *Spondylus gaederopus* bracelet², pierced at one extremity, probably in an attempt to repair it (Fig.7:1). This find documents for the first time the diffusion in the Po Plain of such ornaments during the Early Neolithic, and confirms the beginning of the circulation of *Spondylus* objects since this period, as the bead found at Ostiano was already suggesting (BIAGI, 1995:98). Also to be underlined is the presence of several fragments of bivalve shells, that are not identifiable as *Unio pictorum* as previously indicated (PERINI & STARNINI, 1992-93, 1997), but for the shape and dimension of the hinges they have been classified as *Margaritifera auricularia* (STARNINI *et al.*, 2000).

6. RESULTS OF THE PETROARCHEOMETRICAL ANALYSIS OF THE POLISHED STONE RING (C. D.)

The stone ring fragment attributable to type A2 according to TANDA (1977), measures 5.6cm of length, 2.4cm of width and 1.2cm of thickness; the maximum reconstructed diameter is of ca. 11cm, and that of the internal hole is slightly larger than 6cm (Fig.7:7). It is obtained from a very speckled and maculated rock, of a light green/ivory/blackish colour and it has been studied in thin section and XRD.

The texture is an unusual and rather complex one. Antigorite exceeds 50% as microfelty and interwoven microlaminae, associated with Mg-chlorite, tremolite and turbid diopside pyroxenes, each of them ranging about the 10%, magnetite and a few talc. Pyroxenes are altered into felty fibrous and diablastic tremolite, as well as into platy chlorite and antigorite.

The stone may be defined as antigorite-tremolite-chlorite serpentinite, bearing clinopyroxene remnants, deriving from a pyroxenes-rich peridotite. The abundance of non-serpentine minerals makes this stone different from the other serpentinites employed for the manufacture of the Neolithic rings studied so far, such as those of Sammardenchia (D'AMICO *et al.*, 1997), Brignano Frascata (D'AMICO *et al.*, 2000) and Azzano Decimo (FASANI *et al.*, 1994). Only with the latter one the present rock has some similarity in the abundance of chlorite.

However, the natural variability within serpentinites reasonably allows some connections between the Isorella serpentinite and the other ones employed in Northern Italy for making stone rings.

The provenance of this rock is still an open question. The presence of antigorite goes in favour of an Alpine, rather than an Appenninic, derivation. However the Western and Central-Eastern Alps may have been both sources of this raw material, and a more precise indication cannot be given until a systematic and statistic study of the Italian serpentinite rings is completed.

7. CONSIDERATIONS (E. S.)

More than twenty years after the definition of the cultural Group of Vhò given by BAGOLINI & BIAGI (1975), several aspects of this culture are still to be known.

There are various causes of these gaps, among which are: the lack of extensive excavations of settlements that can help to clarify the organization of the villages, the restricted number of excavated sites published in detail, the condition of preservation, usually very poor, of the Po Plain sites, that are disturbed by ploughing and soil erosion. No one clear, unquestionable dwelling structure has been entirely documented up to now (BAGOLINI *et al.*, 1987:456-459) and the materials contained in the refuse pits often are very fragmentary, which prevents reconstructing the complete shapes of the pottery. Finally there is still a scarce use of archaeometrical analysis that could help answer the unanswered questions.

The site of Isorella, even though the explored area is very limited, offers the possibility to document new aspects of pottery production, that without doubt received influences from the neighbouring Fiorano Culture. In this respect an important comparison exists with the complex found at Lugo di Grezzana in Veneto (MOSER & PEDROTTI, 1996), that shows strong affinities with the Vhò Group, suggesting the existence of a very subtle boundary line between these two cultural groups.

Long distance contacts are demonstrated by the presence of the serpentinite polished ring, a rock of alpine origin, and by the Spondylus bracelet. This last opens the question about the exchange directions from which it arrived in the Po Plain. In fact, if on the one hand Spondylus ornaments are commonly diffused in the danubian area (SÉFÉRIADÈS, 1994, 1996), on the other hand we should consider now that this shell was surely also available, from the beginning of the Atlantic period, along the coasts of the Western Mediterranean Sea, as the data from recent studies of the marine malacofauna of the Arene Candide Cave have demonstrated (GHISOTTI, 1997; CADE, 1999). Thus we cannot exclude, beside the well known way of the Eastern Mediterranean, a western direction for the procurement of such shells.

Finally, as concerns the precise chronology of the complex found at Isorella, the result of the radiocarbon analysis of one charcoal sample, made at the laboratory of Groningen (NL) gave the following date: 5850±80 BP (GrN-23645; STARNINI, 1998).

NOTES

1 - In the study are involved: Dr. M.Bon and Silvia Zampieri for the archaeozoology, A.Girod for the malacology, Dr. R.Nisbet for the palaeoethnobotany, Dr. B.A.Voytek for the traceology.

2 - We are grateful to Dr. C.Fiocchi, of the University of Ferrara for having verified our determination.

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SUMMARY - A preliminary report of the first fieldwork season at the Early Neolithic site discovered near Cascina Bocche is given. The rich pottery assemblage shows new forms and a strong influx of the neighbouring Fiorano Culture. From the excavated pit, a shallow structure of about 20m², there have also been recovered a large chipped flint assemblage, faunal remains and several ornamental objects, among which are one polished stone ring fragment and one Spondylus bracelet, the first so far found at an Early Neolithic site of the Po Plain. The results of the micromorphological analysis of one undisturbed soil sample from the filling of the pit are presented together with the petroarchaeometrical study of the greenstone ring. From the wet sieving of the soil filling the Neolithic pit, caryopsis of *Triticum cf. dicoccum*, *monococcum* and *aestivum* have been recovered. One charcoal sample sent to the laboratory of Groningen (NL) gave an absolute date of 5850±80 BP.

RIASSUNTO - Il lavoro presenta i risultati della prima campagna di scavi al sito scoperto in località Cascina Bocche, in Comune di Isorella. L'abbondante ceramica recuperata mostra forme inedite e un forte influsso della Cultura di Fiorano. Dalla struttura scavata, una macchia lenticolare di circa 20m², proviene caratteristica industria litica, fauna, industria su osso e vari oggetti d'ornamento, tra cui un frammento di anellone in pietra levigata e un bracciale di Spondylus, il primo conosciuto per il Neolitico Antico della Val Padana. Vengono presentati anche i risultati delle analisi micropedologiche di un campione di suolo indisturbato prelevato dal riempimento della struttura neolitica e di quelle petroarcheometriche eseguite per determinare la roccia dell'anellone in pietra levigata. Infine, con la setacciatura ad acqua del deposito si sono recuperate cariossidi carbonizzate di *Triticum cf. dicoccum*, *monococcum* e *aestivum*.

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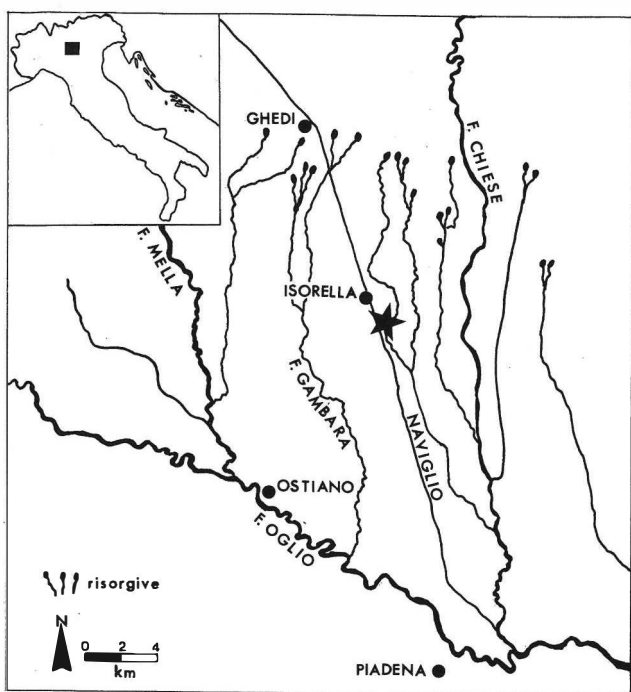


Fig. 1 - Isorella (BS), loc. Cascina Bocche. Location of the Neolithic site (asterisk) (drawn by E.Starnini)

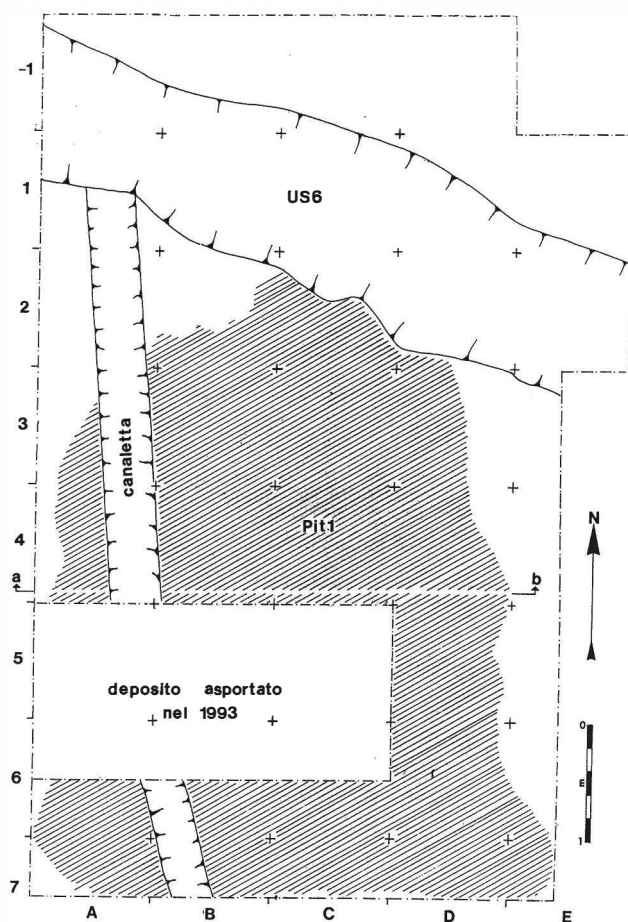


Fig. 2 - Isorella (BS), loc. Cascina Bocche. Plan of the Neolithic structure (Pit 1) after the removal of the plough layer, and the Roman channel (US6) (drawn by E.Starnini).

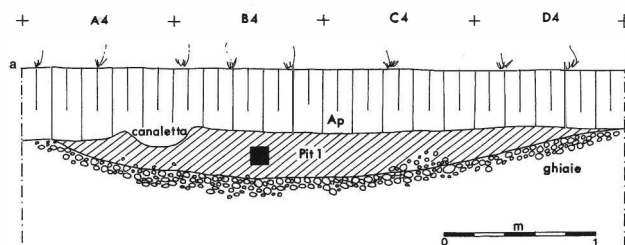


Fig. 3 - Isorella (BS), loc. Cascina Bocche. Profile of the Neolithic structure (Pit 1) (Ap= plough layer; the black square indicates the position of the sample for the micromorphological analysis) (drawn by N.Vallotto and E. Starnini)

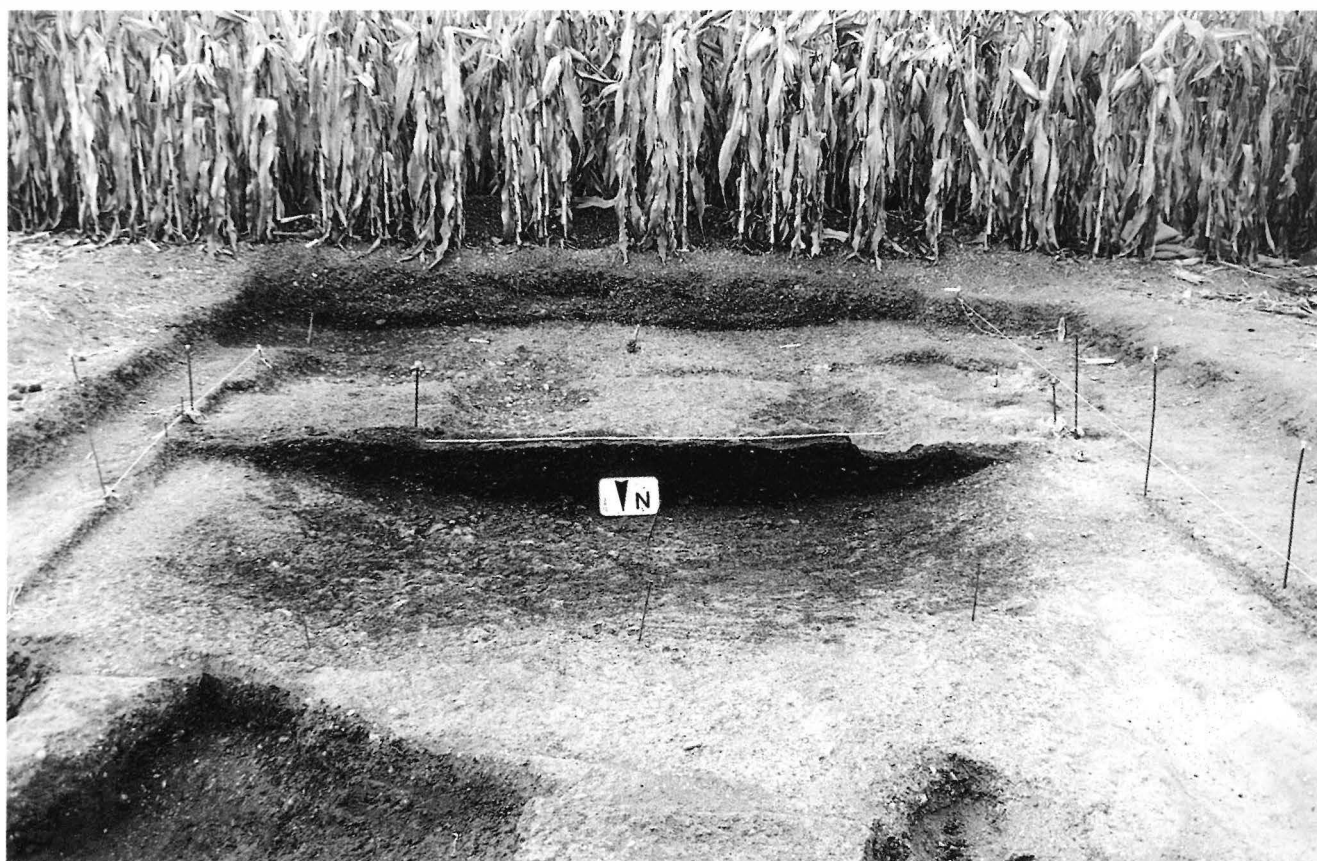


Fig. 4 - Isorella (BS), loc. Cascina Bocche. The Neolithic structure at the end of the excavation, before the removal of the profile witness. In the foreground, part of the roman channel (photo by E. Starnini)

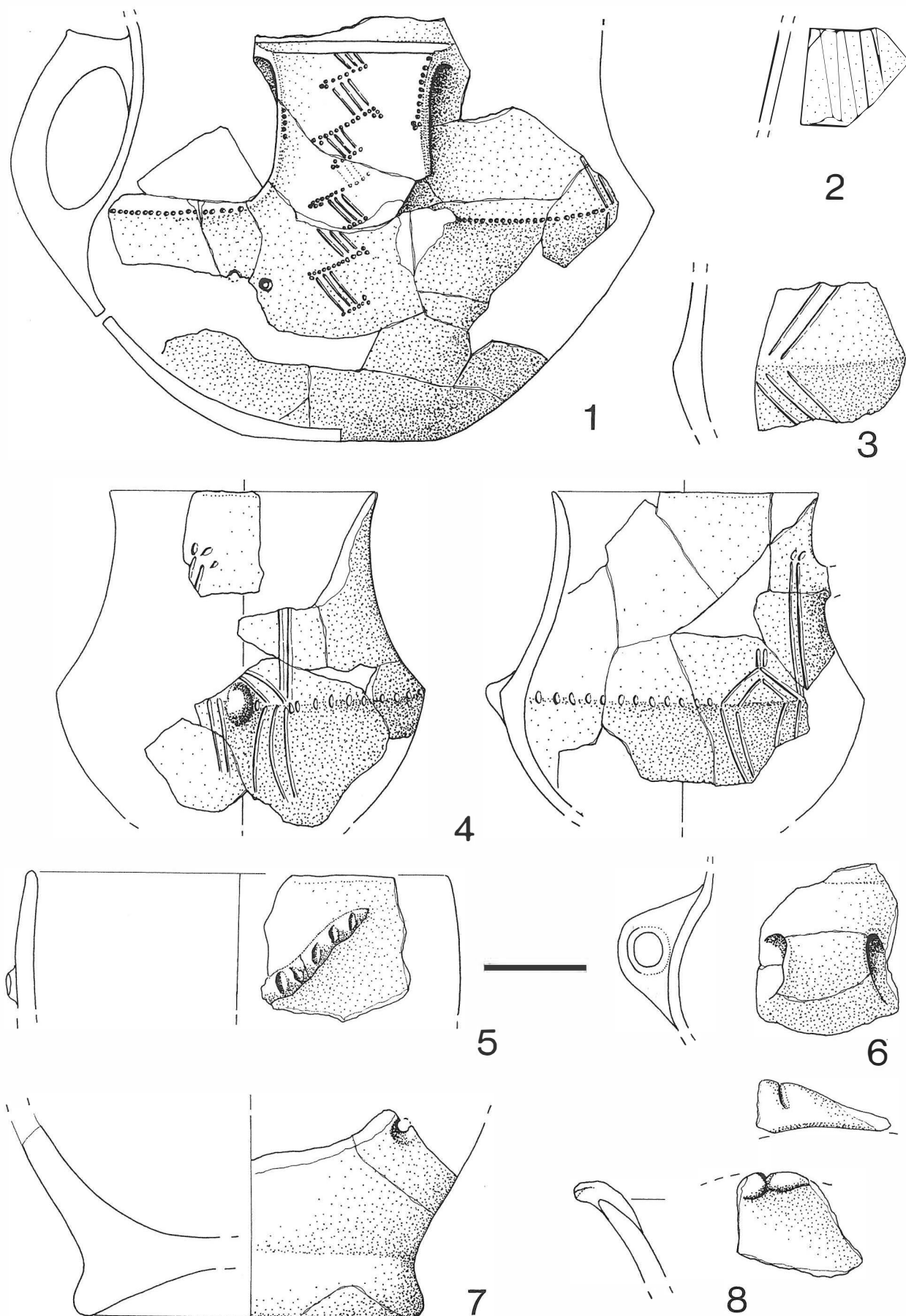


Fig. 5 - Isorella (BS), loc. Cascina Bocche. 1,3-4) carinated bowls with incised and impressed lines; 2) fragment with scratched decoration; 5) fragment with plastic cordon; 6) fragment of figulina vessel; 7) ring base with repairing hole; 8) rim sherd with plastic decoration (drawn by E. Starnini)

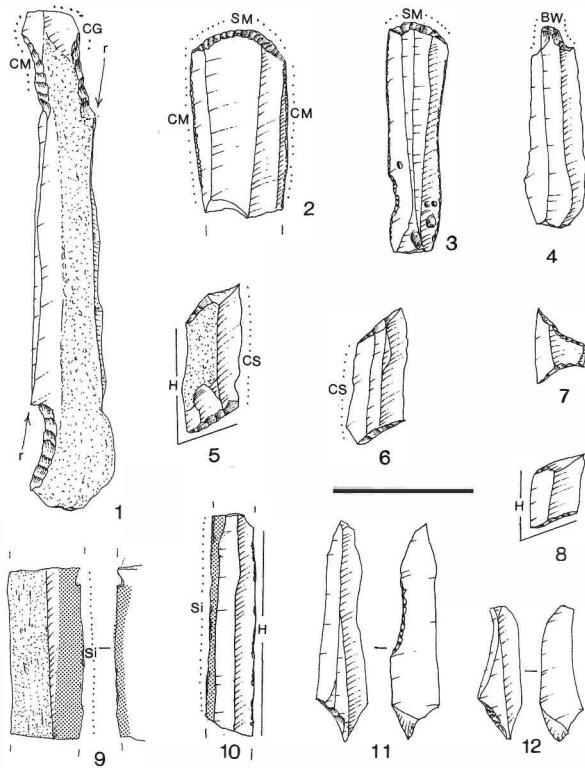


Fig. 6 - Isorella (BS), loc. Cascina Bocche. Chipped stone industry: 1) double burin on side notch; 2-3) long end scrapers; 4) straight borer; 5-8) geometrics; 9-10) blades with sickle gloss; 11-12) distal microburins (BW= bore wood; CG= cut grass; CM= cut medium; CS= cut soft; H= haft traces; Si= sickle gloss; r= rejuvenation; SM= scrape medium (drawn by E. Starnini)

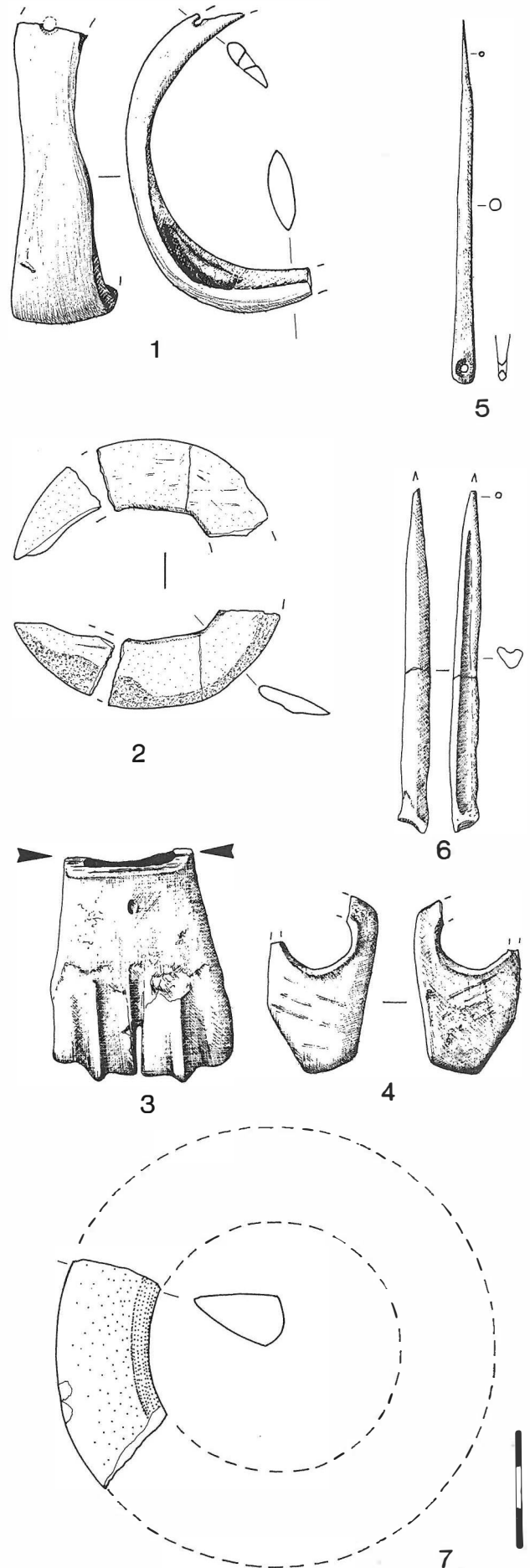


Fig. 7 - Isorella (BS), loc. Cascina Bocche. 1) Spondylus bracelet; 2-5) bone tools; 6) fragment of polished stone ring (drawn by E. Starnini)