Excavations at the high altitude mesolithic site of Plan de La Lóra (Val Civetta – Venetian Dolomites)

New data on the last hunter-gatherers of northern Italy

by Carlo Franco*

In July 2007, the Department of Humanities of Ca' Foscari University (Venice) in partnership with the “Gruppo Archeologico ARCA” of Agordo and the “Associazione Amici del Museo di Belluno”, carried out the first season of excavations at the site of Plan de La Lóra, an open-air mesolithic station located at 1930 m a.s.l. in the western fringe of the Civetta Group (Venetian Dolomites). Field research, coordinated by the author, focused on a marginal moraine in southern Val Civetta, a spot surrounded by boulders, marshes and a seasonal basin (the eponymous “Lóra”) where previous surveys had collected a few first artefacts attributed to a Late Mesolithic tradition. This preliminary sondage progressively enabled the opening of a 12 square meters trench at coordinates 46°22’15” N – 12°01’52” E (WGS84). Since the beginning, research process involved systematic wet sieving of the excavated soil, taking advantage of an artificial stream flowing next to the site from a water container at an higher altitude. After removing the topsoil, the archaeological deposit showed a maximum depth of 15-30 cm, depending on the excavated sector. Such variability was directly linked to the natural profile of the sterile base layer, made by an incipient bed of tephra-cumulic. The whole excavation area then showed a basic pedo-stratigraphic profile: a very dark brown and clayey upper level (US1) and a light brown, thinner and slightly coarser lower layer (US2). Almost all the finds (limited to charcoals and lithics) emerged from the second one, which was referred to a single short-term occupation. Creating the conditions for later refitting and spatial analysis, first artefacts recognized at all sight in the trench were recorded according to their precise grid coordinates, while all the finds recovered through wet sieving operations where recorded following the square of provenance.

The sterile layer at the bottom of the excavation trench.

The “Lóra” depression below the site (red arrow), still flooded at end of the spring.

The manual: “blindless” wet sieving of the archaeological deposit.

The sterile layer at the bottom of the excavation trench.

The accurate methodology applied in the excavations led to the discovery of a significant first assemblage, whose richness and variety went far beyond expectations. Preliminary results from a deeper typological and typomorphological analysis still to be published show the presence of more than 1200 unretouched lithic artefacts, most of which burnt or fragmented. As regards the complete specimens, they are mainly composed by microblades and microcored very flat modules, along with a few blades/bladelets whose features (regular, thin, sub-parallel edges) are clearly attributable to a flabelliform style of production. No pre-cores were found in the collection, while it is possible to count at least 5-7 small polyhedral or prismatic cores with one or two prepared platforms, generally exhausted. Retouched artefacts are equally shared between common tools and armatures. Significantly, the first group consists of 10 end-scrapers on bladelet or blade-like flakes, a single burin on thick blade with simple or complex retouch, a burin on bladelet, a truncated on bladelet and, most of all, 16 retouched blades/bladelets. Along with them, the toolkit is completed by at least 10 geometrical trapezoids on bladelet/bladelet, 7 hypermetric scales triangles, one backed segment, one double-backed point and a few other microliths with a steep, abrupt blade/bladelet, 7 hypermicrolithic scalene triangles, one backed segment, bladelet or blade-like flake, a single burin on thick blade with simple polyhedric or prismatic cores with one or two prepared platforms, generally exhausted. The so-called microlithic and ipermicrolithic flakes and bladelets whose features (regular, thin, sub-parallel edges) are composed by microlithic and hypermicrolithic very flat modules, along with a presence of more than 1200 unretouched lithic artefacts, most of which burnt or fragmented. This functional assemblage was collected during the last days of the campaign and whose features, particularly the presence of a number of fire-related artifacts, suggest a clear proximity to an open campsite/outdoor workshop.

So, where did those hunters come from? It’s hard to say, but good hints are coming from the preliminary analysis of raw material used for lithic production. From this point of view, there are no traces of hyaline quartz in the whole assemblage, while good quality flint from eastern Venetian Prealps and the Piave alluvial plain is the most represented. This means that site inhabitants necessary crossed those regions along the year or they had an exchange relationship with groups who had direct access to southern flint outcrops. Both the schemes are supported by dozens of Late Mesolithic sites already known from the Venetian prealps/foothills belt to the plantal “spring line”, including the Montello area. In any case, raw material had to be collected as nodules or pebbles, probably from secondary deposits, and carried away in such a form up to Plan de La Lóra, as confirmed by the presence of decortication waste among chipped artefacts. Human presence in Val Civetta during Early Atlantic has therefore to be analyzed as a part of a much broader logistic system, reasonably extended from the Piave alluvial plain to the Dolomitic area. Within this system, conceivable as a wide tribal territory, all the Late Mesolithic finds suggest the existence of efficient social networks and non-random routes across seasonal supply areas. Besides, archaeological results from Plan de La Lóra and the increasing discoveries of trapezoidal armatures in the Venetian Dolomites call into question the common idea of an insubstantial dispersion of the alpine regions at this cultural stage, due to increased mountain forestation and consequent evolution of hunting strategies. If at all, it's now coming to light that Late Mesolithic bands exploited new high-altitude districts compared to Bowd hunters.

Nevertheless, many are the unsolved questions about Late Mesolithic of north-eastern Italy, where the archaeological visibility of hunter-gather societies seems to fade long before a stable settlement of Neolithic communities in the landscape. In such a context, researches in progress foster new reflections on this key phase, allowing to believe that other mesolithic camp-sites are just waiting to be discovered in Val Civetta.