



The incised bone points from the Early Aurignacian of Potočka zijalka (Slovenia), hafting system or ornament?



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ABSTRACT

The Upper Palaeolithic site of Potočka zijalka, located in the Carnic Alps at 1630 m a.s.l. in northern Slovenia has yielded a conspicuous amount of fauna throughout its 8 main layers. The faunal spectrum is mainly composed of *Ursus speleaus*, although a few Ungulates such as *Cervus elaphus* and *Bos/Bison* have been identified. The lithic industry is very poor and only one Dufour point was discovered. In layer 7 at the front of the cave, seven combustion structures were identified.

The cave also contained, in its main 8 layers, 125 hard osseous artefacts, mainly made of bone (only three elements were identified as antler and the raw material of two is unidentified). Typologically, the corpus is composed of 12 points, two throughout of spear points and 111 elements of spear points. From the faunal reconstitution, it is probable that most are made out of *Ursus* sp. shafts, as is also partially confirmed by the DNA analysis previously conducted. This paper aims to reconstruct the *chaîne opératoire* of the simple-based spear points from a technological standpoint and to propose a functional interpretation for the incised pieces that were recovered in the cave.

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1. Introduction

The technological analysis of the osseous industry provides very useful insights on the cultural aspects of the populations who used to live in Europe during the transition between Middle and Upper Palaeolithic. Once thought to be a radical change on all accounts, various recent studies have shown that this was not totally the case (Jéquier et al., 2012; Soressi et al., 2013; Tejero, 2014) and that osseous materials were already used by Neanderthals, although not the same extent. The complexity and variability of the techniques used during the Upper Palaeolithic imply very important changes at a behavioral and cultural level.

In a broader context, the transition between Middle Palaeolithic and Upper Palaeolithic has been the object of numerous discussions about the authors of the different technocomplexes that were present between 40 and 30 ka BP (see for example Benazzi et al., 2011; Higham et al., 2012; Banks et al., 2013; Wood et al., 2014). It seems, however, that from the Early Aurignacian onwards, these various technocomplexes can be attributed to *Homo sapiens*, as attested by the human remains dated 35 ka from Pestera cu Oase Cave in Romania (Zilhão et al., 2007; Hublin, 2010). Most recently,

the Proto-Aurignacian seems to have been produced by Anatomically Modern Humans, according to the genetic analysis of two teeth from the Bombrini shelter and Fumane cave, in Northern Italy (Benazzi et al., 2015).

The present study aims to reconstruct the technological *chaîne opératoire* of the bone points from the Early Aurignacian site of Potočka zijalka, in the Karavanke Alps in Slovenia. Moreover, we bring forward some considerations about the function of the incisions that were found on some of the points. This type of incisions is unique in the Slovenian Early Aurignacian context. Moreover, the very high number of osseous industry discovered in the site allows for a good statistical understanding of the technological aspects that lead to the production of the pieces. The spear points will be put into context and confronted with other elements from the Early Aurignacian, such as Fumane Cave and Mokriška jama (Brodar, 1985; Cilli, 2002; Broglio et al., 2006; Jéquier, 2014).

1.1. Potočka zijalka cave

Potočka zijalka is a large cave located at 1630 m a.s.l. in the Karavanke Alps, facing south (Fig. 1). The cave is known for its archaeological contents since the beginning of the 20th century. The main campaigns were led by M. Brodar between 1928 and 1935

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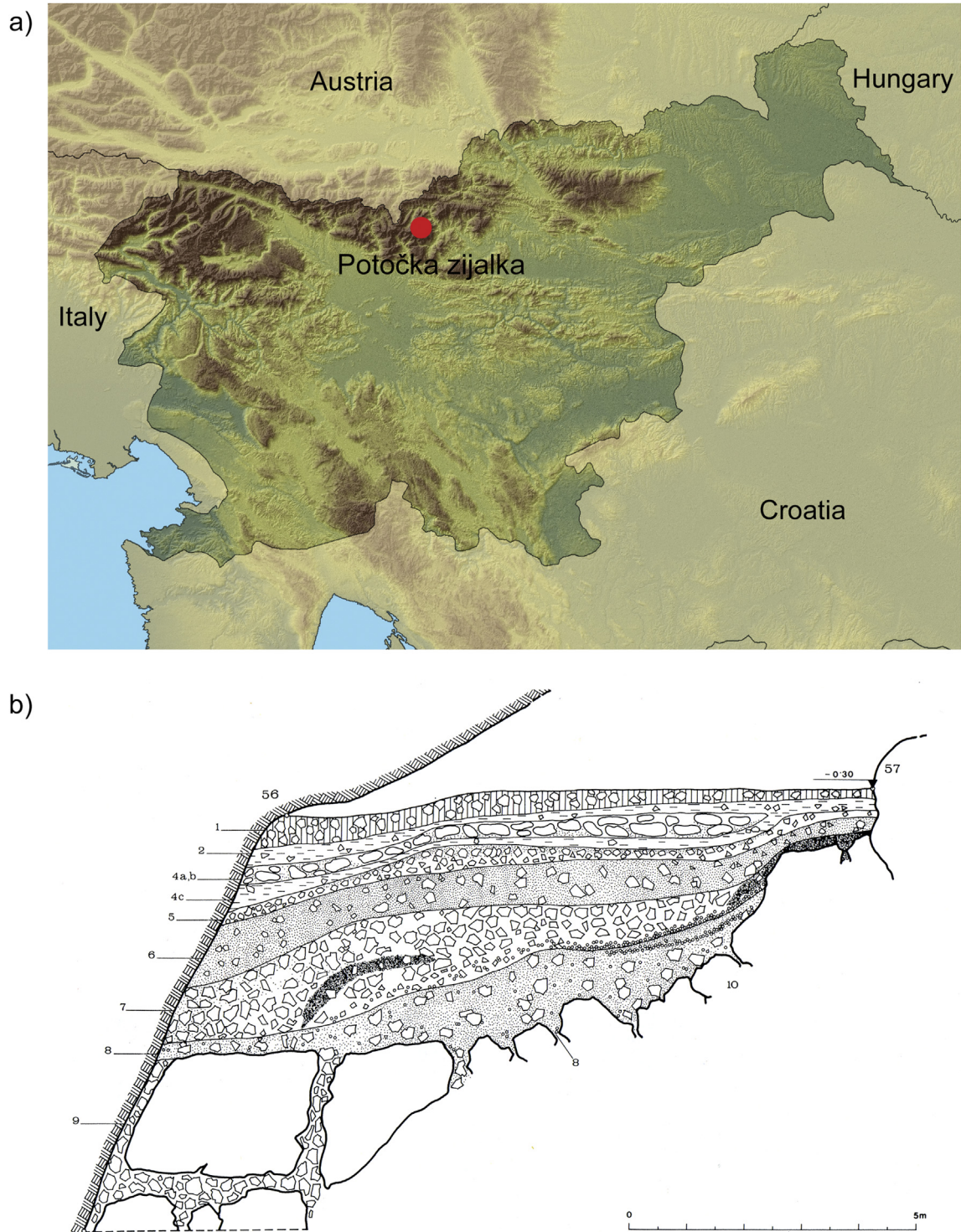


Fig. 1. a) Geographical position of Potočka zijalka; b) Section of the stratigraphy from the front of the cave (modified after Brodar and Brodar, 1983).

(Brodar, 1929, 1985; Brodar et al., 1983). This team managed to find a rich stratigraphic context, in which they identified 10 layers from the Late Pleistocene (Weichselian) to the Holocene (Brodar and Brodar, 1983). The excavations were conducted in the front and in the back of the cave, but its extent prevented proposing a convincing correlation between both areas. In particular, layers 5 and 7 in the front and 4 and 5 at the back are very rich

archaeologically. Hard osseous material was discovered in both parts of the excavations. Moreover, the lithic industry, attributed to the Early Aurignacian and recently published, is only found in the front part of the cave (Moreau et al., 2015).

The bone points discovered at Potočka zijalka, as well as charcoals, have been the object of dating in the last decade (Rabeder and Pohar, 2004; Rabeder et al., 2004; Moreau et al., 2015) and seem to

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