



New evidence of human frequentations in the western Alps: The project “Survey Alta Valsessera (Piedmont–Italy)”

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ABSTRACT

The Sessera valley is an under-populated Italian alpine valley located in the north-eastern Piedmont (northwest Italy) between the provinces of Biella and Vercelli. We discuss the data obtained during the first and the second year of the project “Survey Alta Val Sessera” held in 2013 and in 2014 under the scientific direction of Soprintendenza Archeologia del Piemonte in collaboration with Associazione Culturale 3P – Progetto Preistoria Piemonte and DocBi – Centro Studi Biellesi that had as its main purpose the identification of new prehistoric human frequentations in the valley. The theoretical scheme employed starts from the one developed for Trentino and the South Tyrolean region (north-eastern Italy) by Broglio and Improta. During the campaigns, surveys in the Sessera and in the neighbouring Dolca valley have been carried out using the patterns of settlement and mobility in the alpine environment developed by Kompatscher and Kompatscher, in order to identify the most interesting areas to investigate. The most important results obtained during the first two survey campaigns indicate that the Sessera valley was occupied by human groups using knapped lithic industries made of local vein quartz. Another important result is the identification of a Late Ancient site located at high altitude (1642 m a.s.l.) along one of the ridge paths investigated. Even if the lithic findings have no diagnostic elements for a precise chronological positioning, the importance of the data obtained consists mainly in having successfully tested a method of research aimed at identifying human frequentations at high altitude in this part of Piedmont, where no comparable research has been carried out until now.

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1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the 1960s, not considering the sporadic and unreliable nineteenth-century information, there was not any evidence supporting a human presence in Piedmont (north-

western Italy) during the Palaeolithic and the Mesolithic. At that time, this lack of evidence was attributed to the persistence of hostile environmental conditions during the whole Pleistocene (Fedele, 1985). As it would be unlikely that a region like Piedmont, habitable and rich in natural resources, was not occupied by Palaeolithic and Mesolithic hunter-gatherers (Guerreschi and Giacobini, 1998), nowadays it is possible to state that the scarcity of data is certainly due to the lack of systematic research concerning these periods. Particularly concerning the Mesolithic, the data available are scarce, with the exception of the Alpe Veglia site

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(north-eastern Piedmont), where the studies carried out by A. Guerreschi during the 1980s and the 1990s led to the discovery of a lithic industry dated to the ancient Mesolithic and mainly made of local hyaline quartz (Gambari et al., 1989). Some other sporadic findings are those from the Piedmontese localities of Pratomorone (Mottura, 1993), Agrate Conturbia (Biagi, 1988) and Boira Fusca (Fedele, 1990). In such an incomplete framework, it is clear how difficult is to understand the modalities and the peculiarities of the Mesolithic peopling of the Piedmont.

The project “Survey Alta Valsessera” was born in 2013 with the aim to partly fill the existing gap in the scientific research concerning the prehistoric peopling of Piedmont. The research is part of the multi-year “Project Alta Val Sessera” promoted by DocBi – Centro Studi Biellesi since 1992, concerning different issues about this territory such as geology, flora and fauna, archaeology, history, toponymy and transhumance, thus allowing the survey campaigns to start shortly and with a good knowledge of the area.

According to the methodology employed (Broglia and Improta, 1995; Kompatscher and Kompatscher, 2007), the choice of the high Sessera valley as the starting point for this kind of research was based on an accurate analysis of the available regional cartography in order to identify all the areas that, from a geomorphological point of view, could have been interesting for the research. The first two campaigns were realized in 2013 and in 2014 under the scientific direction of Soprintendenza Archeologia del Piemonte in collaboration with Associazione Culturale 3P- Progetto Preistoria Piemonte and DocBi – Centro Studi Biellesi and led to the identification of twelve sites characterized by the presence of lithic industries made of local vein quartz and of a Late Ancient site with abundant pottery remains and two fragmented iron artefacts (Rubat Borel et al., 2014, 2015).

2. Geological background

The Sessera valley is located in the marginal land between the north-eastern part of Piedmont and the Aosta valley (Fig. 1) and it is characterized by the presence of the tectonic Canavese Line and two large lithological complexes: the Ivrea-Verbano Zone and the Sesia-Lanzo zone (Fig. 2).

The Canavese Line, oriented NE–SW, consists of a series of fractures stretching through the two main depressions that link the Sessera valley with the Biella territory and the Sesia valley, located near Bocchetto Sessera (1373 m a.s.l.) and Bocchetta della Boscarola (1423 m a.s.l.). This tectonic lineament represents a western portion of the wider tectonic system, the Insubric Line (Compagnoni et al., 1977; Dal Piaz, 2001; Zucali and Spalla, 2011; Roda et al., 2012). The Canavese Line connects two very different rocky complexes. The outcrops on the left of Bocchetto Sessera are the igneous rocks of

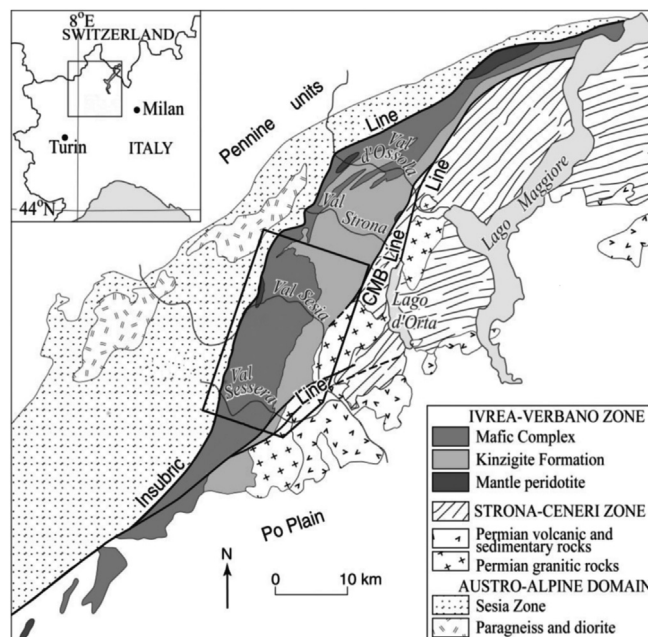


Fig. 2. Geological and structural map of the Alpine region. In the box, detail of the Sessera valley (modified from Peressini et al., 2007).

the Sesia-Lanzo series and represent the European continental margin known as Austroalpine nappes. Downstream, on the right of Bocchetto Sessera, there is the wide rocky series of the Ivrea-Verbano zone that represents the equivalent continental margin of the African lithospheric plate (Southalpine nappes). In the Sessera Valley, there are only rocks of the basic–ultrabasic complex (Sesia-Lanzo zone), and the prevailing lithotype is a gabbro-diorite medium-large grained, made up of basic plagioclases and pyroxenes that belong to the Penninic nappes and are present in the eastern part of the Sessera valley.

The Sesia-Lanzo Zone belongs to the Austroalpine nappes and it can be related to the Sesia-Lanzo series, made up of polymetamorphic rocks present in the north-eastern part of the Pennine Alps, including the heads of the main valleys and the highest peaks. It is divided in different lithological complexes (Dal Piaz et al., 1972; Compagnoni et al., 1977) and locally, in the neighbouring of Alpe Isolà (1560 m a.s.l.) and Alpe Piovale (1507 m a.s.l.) up to Cima del Bonòm (1877 m a.s.l.) (Fig. 4), there is a wide area with syenite outcrops. Eastwards, from Bocchetto Sessera along the Canavese Line (Fig. 4), there is a small belt of diabases, amphibolite porphyrites, calcareous outcrops. The Biella pluton, visible on the



Fig. 1. Localization of the Sessera valley.

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