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**THE VHO' CULTURE IN NORTHERN ITALY:  
ARCHAEOLOGY AND VENUS FIGURINES**

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*Preface*

The problem of the neolithisation of northern Italy has been studied in increasing detail during the last thirty years. It is actually known that, in this region, the first neolithic farmers settled along the coasts of western Liguria and Romagna, where two different aspects of the Impressed ware Culture developed in a slightly different period of the seventh millennium B.P. (Bagolini & Biagi, 1990).

The data actually available indicates that the neolithisation of the Po Valley and the south Alpine arc, took place in the last centuries of the same millennium. Two affined cultures developed in the Po Valley during this period namely that of Vhò, in Lombardy, southern Emilia and Piedmont (Bagolini & Biagi, 1975), and that of Fiorano, in the eastern territory of the Plain and extending further to the south in north-western Tuscany.

The first early Neolithic sites of the south Alpine arc are known from rather limited territories, that is from the Adige Valley, whose importance as a transalpine route has been emphasized (Bagolini, 1980, p. 81), and from northwestern Lombardy and the Ticino Canton (CH) (Donati & Carazzetti, 1987), which probably played a similar role towards the Valais and Switzerland.

*The Vhò Culture*

The excavations carried out at the end of the last century in southeastern Lombardy (Vhò di Piadena) and in the province of Reggio Emilia, revealed several, large archaeological sites characterized by pits of various shape and size containing potsherds, flint artifacts and faunal remains whose age is undoubtedly neolithic.

The research resumed in 1974 at Vhò di Piadena revealed a Neolithic tradition that had not been defined before (Bagolini & Biagi, 1980). Only a few of the 69 pits excavated between 1974 and 1979 gave a ceramic assemblage characterized by pedestalled, tulip-shaped pots, sometimes decorated with fine scratched lines; double-handled conical pots and large vessels with finger-impressed cordons. The chipped stone industry, obtained from flint of Lessinian pede-alpine origin, was characterized by narrow bladelet instruments among which were burins on a side notch, straight borers, rhomboidal geometrics and blades with a sinuous profile (Bagolini & Biagi, 1987).

During the last fifteen years, other excavations demonstrated that the Vhò Culture expanded well beyond the Piadena region and reached, to the west, the Emilian north-Appennine fringe and the Piedmontese pre-Alps (Biagi *et al.*, 1993b). Thanks to the excavation of seven sites of this culture and to surface finds from other sites, we know that the Vhò Culture villages were preferably located close to the edge of the river terraces or on very low hills surrounded by marshes. The geomorphological and pedological analyses from two Lombard settlements, namely Vhò di Piadena, Campo Ceresole and Ostiano-Dugali Alti (Biagi, 1995b), both along the course of the River Oglio, have shown that they had been built on highly hydromorphic soils (Biagi *et al.*,

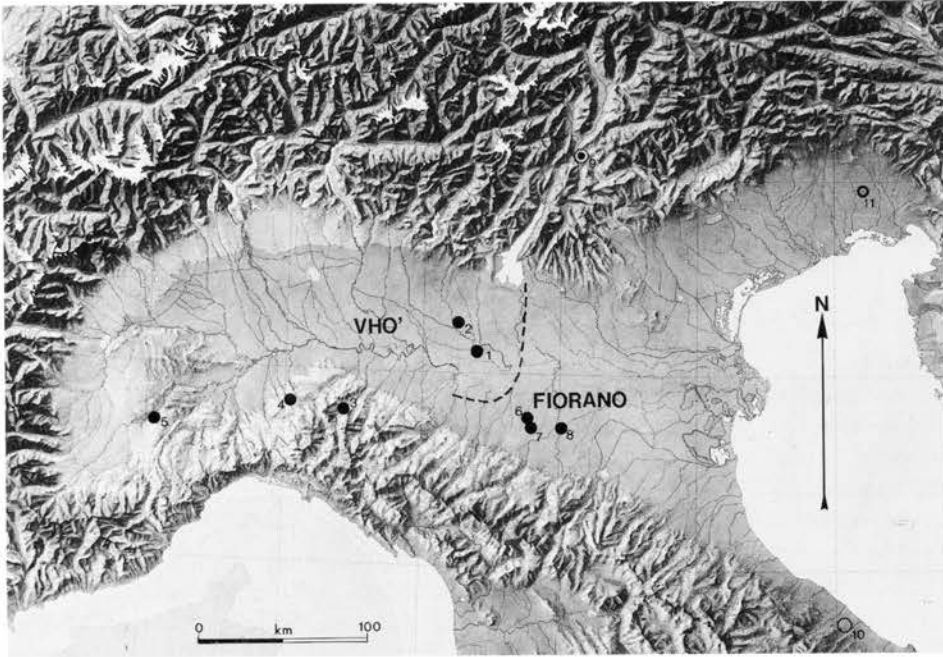


Fig. 68. Distribution map of the Vhò and Fiorano sites with remains of ceramic figurines: 1) Vhò di Piadena, 2) Ostiano, 3) Travo, 4) Brignano Frascata, 5) Alba, 6) Albinea, 7) Rivalentella, 8) Savignano. Number 9 is Riparo Gaban, 10 is Ripabianca di Monterado in the Marche and 11 is Sammardenchia in the Friuli Plain. The broken line indicates the possible boundary between the Vhò and Fiorano Cultures, approximatively corresponding to the courses of the Rivers Mincio and Po (drawn by P. Biagi).

1993a). The identification of the bones has revealed that the hunting of red deer and boar was still of great importance in the subsistence strategy of the Vhò Culture communities (Clark, 1995) whose agriculture is testified both by material culture remains, such as upper and lower querns and sickle blades, and by domesticated seeds of barley, emmer and einkorn (Castelletti & Maspero, 1992).

### ***The clay figurines from Vhò and Fiorano***

Five Vhò Culture sites yielded clay figurines. The best preserved is the double-headed female specimen from Pit VI at Campo Ceresole. Two more fragments were recovered from Pit XVIII at the same site, while a fourth one comes from another Vhò site excavated around the end of the last century (Bagolini & Biagi, 1977, p. 57).

Two pieces of leg and one of body were found during the excavation of Pit III at the nearby site of Ostiano, Dugali Alti (Biagi, 1994). Other finds include a piece of a leg from Travo, in the Trebbia Valley (Bernabò Brea, 1991, p. 39), two other leg pieces from Brignano Frascata (Traverso, 1993, p. 29) and one head from Alba, in Piedmont (Venturino Gambari, 1992).

The best preserved specimen from Vhò di Piadena shows very peculiar characteristics such as mushroom-like heads with zig-zag, incised ornamentations to indicate the hair, the presence of necklaces or pendants around the neck, the ring-like arms and the squat, cylindrical body and legs. The Fiorano Culture figurines are not well known, but the presence of fragments of cylindrical legs from Albinea, Rivalentella (Bagolini, 1978) and Savignano (Bernabò Brea *et al.*, 1990, p. 121), indicate their belonging to very similar or identical types.

As regards the Vhò Culture site of Travo, of particular importance is the recovery of

a potsherd from an open cup, the internal surface of which shows the schematic relief of a human figurine of rather different shape from that of the clay venuses so far described (Bernabò Brea, 1991, p. 38). Its arms and legs are slightly open and the head is just indicated above a narrow body.

It is worth noting that all the above-mentioned fragments of figurine have been collected from rubbish pits together with other materials such as potsherds, exhausted flint tools and food remains. In fact, the evidence for habitations from the early Neolithic Vhò and Fiorano Culture is extremely scant due to the peculiar geomorphological history of the landscape (Biagi, 1995a).

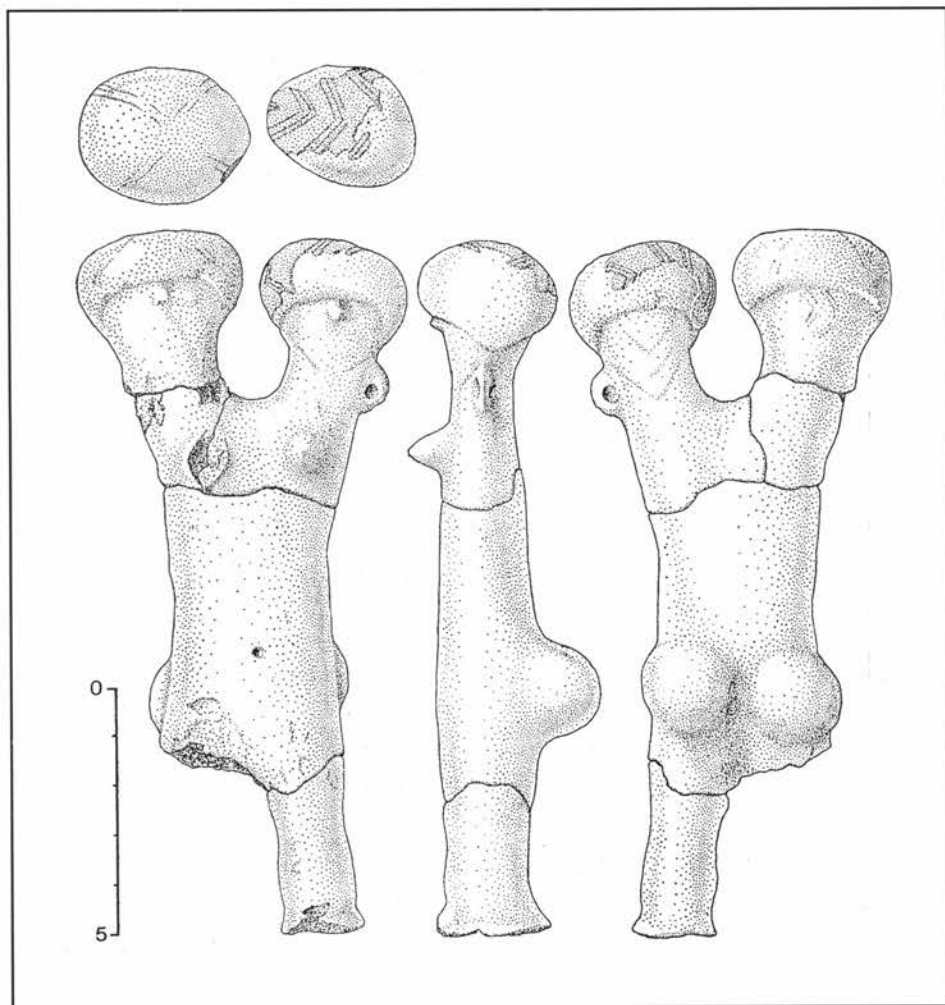


Fig. 69. Double-headed clay figurine from Vhò di Piadena, Campo Ceresole, Pit VI (after Bagolini & Biagi, 1977).

### Considerations

As already pointed out (Bagolini & Biagi, 1985, p. 52) the venus figurines are almost absent from the Impressed Ware sites of the north Italian Ligurian and Adriatic coastlines. The only exception is Ripabianca di Monterado, in the Marche, an open settlement with a lithic assemblage and imported vessels strongly recalling those of the Fiorano Culture (Broglia & Lollini, 1963).

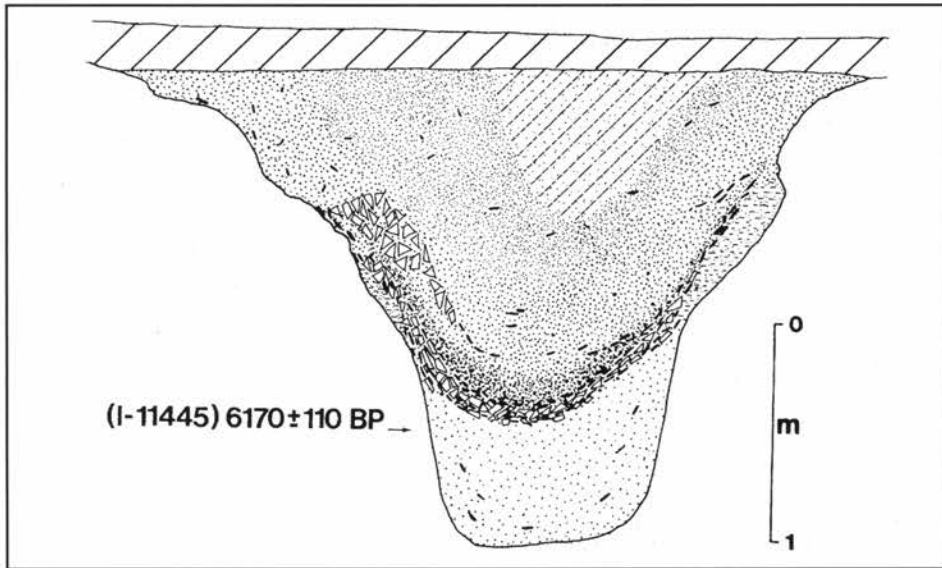
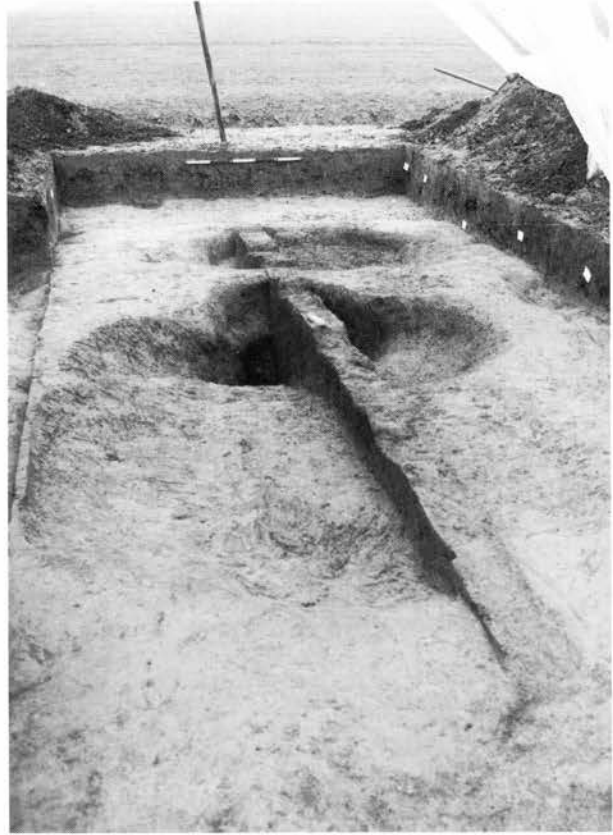


Fig. 70. Section through the deposits of Pit XVIII of Campo Cersole at Vhò di Piadena, from which the fragments of two clay figurines were collected (after Biagi & Voytek, 1992).

Two peculiar specimens are also recorded from the Friuli Plain settlement of Sammardenchia (Ferrari & Pessina, 1996, p. 60), whose  $C^{14}$  dates mainly fall around the mid seventh millennium B.P. (Biagi, 1996). This site also yielded one fragment of clay phallus (Ferrari & Pessina, 1996, p. 62) almost identical to a specimen from the Danilo Culture site of Bribir (Korošec & Korošec, 1974, T. VII/4). These so-called “cult” objects are in fact characteristic of the Dalmatian coast Danilo Culture from which over 150 specimens are presently recorded (Batović, 1968, p. 45) among which one from the Grotta delle Gallerie in the Trieste Karst (Batović, 1975, T. 5/4). The clay figurines are almost unknown to the Danilo tradition (Korošec, 1964), whose earliest dates fall into the middle of the seventh millennium B.P. (Müller, 1984). Similar dates are accepted also for the the local Trieste Karst Vlaška aspect of the same Culture as indicated from the series of Early Neolithic overimposed fireplaces excavated at the Edera Cave (Biagi *et al.*, 1993b). On the basis of such data it is reasonable to suggest that the clay figurines do not belong to the ideological world of Neolithic coastal Dalmatia, where the only expressions of artistic value are the four-legged *rhyta* whose distribution spreads from the Peloponnese to the Trieste Karst as a heritage of various cultures (Montagnari Kokelj & Crismani, 1993), and the funnel-shaped cups with phallus appendix mainly distributed in the coastal region comprised between Bosnia and Friuli (Benac & Marijanović, 1993). Similar conclusions can also be drawn for the southwesternmost, Malo Korenovo aspect of the Linear Pottery Culture of Slavonia from which no female figurine is so far known (Težak-Gregl, 1993).

In northern Italy, apart from the Po Plain, only the site of Riparo Gaban (Bagolini, 1980) near Trento, in the Adige Valley, yielded early Neolithic female figurines. The site is a rock-shelter that opens along the western side of a hidden, hanging valley quite invisible from the lower course of the Adige. The great number of artistic pieces from this site, including figurines carved from bones, pig teeth and stones (Clark, 1989, pp. 15-17), would suggest a special function for such a peculiar site if compared with the other Adige Valley settlements of the same period excavated in the surroundings of Trento, from which no piece of art has ever been collected.



*Fig. 71. Pit I of Campo Ceresole at Vhò di Piadena (Photo: P. Biagi).*

To conclude, it is generally accepted that the Vhò and Fiorano figurines developed from models deeply rooted in the Balkan cultural heritage (Bagolini & Biagi, 1977; Kozłowski, 1990, p. 71), excluding coastal Mediterranean and Linear Pottery Culture spheres of influence. Nevertheless it is difficult to follow the network pattern that led to the development of such an ideological stream that reached northern Italy during the second half of the seventh millennium B.P. Recent researches have demonstrated that trade routes were undoubtedly active between east-central Europe and the Friuli Plain by the middle of the seventh millennium B.P. (Biagi 1996). The C<sup>14</sup> chronology also shows a good range of contemporaneity between Late Starčevo and Vinča A-B (Horváth, 1991, p. 265; Horváth & Hertelendi, 1994) and the early Neolithic Cultures of Continental Italy (Biagi, 1991, p. 47). Even though closer affinities can be observed with the schematic, simplified female representations of the Starčevo Culture in Croatia (Minichreiter, 1992, p. 22), it is nevertheless widely accepted that Vinča is the Balkan neolithic Culture from which comes the greatest number and variety of figurines (Gimbutas, 1984), including double-headed specimens (Stalio, 1986, fig. 4), even though their shape greatly differs from the north Italian ones. Whether or not these clay objects are to be considered artistic expressions, has been debated mainly on the basis of their aesthetics (Pavlovič, 1990). In my opinion, and from an archaeological point of view, their location inside the settlement as well as the function of the structure they come from, are both to be considered to provide a reasonable answer to this question.

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*Riassunto:*

Il presente lavoro riguarda alcuni aspetti della Cultura neolitica del Vhò che si sviluppò nella regione occidentale della Pianura Padana negli ultimi secoli del settimo millennio B.P. Grazie ai dati attualmente disponibili sappiamo che i siti di tale cultura erano dislocati lungo i margini dei terrazzi fluviali, spesso impostati su suoli idromorfi, certo non ideali per l'attività agricola. La maggior parte delle strutture portate alla luce riguarda pozzi e pozzetti di scarico, mentre mancano quasi del tutto documentazioni di resti di abitazioni. I materiali raccolti nei pozzetti comprendono resti faunistici, frustoli di carbone, reperti ceramici, litici e ossei. Da alcuni di questi pozzetti provengono anche frammenti di figurine fittili, rinvenuti al Campo Ceresole del Vhò di Piadena (CR), Ostiano-Dugali Alti (CR), Brignano Frascata (AL), Travo (PC) e Alba (CN). In questo articolo vengono discussi questi ultimi rinvenimenti che, in Italia settentrionale, trovano confronti in alcuni reperti analoghi raccolti in stazioni dell'attigua Cultura di Fiorano. Vengono inoltre sottolineate le influenze del mondo ideologico balcanico sul Neolitico antico della Valle Padana.

*Summary:*

*This article concerns the north Italian Early Neolithic Vhò Culture that developed during the last centuries of the seventh millennium B.P. The evidence currently available indicates that the Vhò Culture villagers preferably settled on hydromorphic soils not particularly suitable for agriculture. Their sites always lie along the edge of river terraces or on very low hills surrounded by marshy areas. Agricultural activities are nevertheless attested by the presence of barley and wheat seeds as well as by sickle blades and querns. Their habitations are still almost unknown. Most of the features so far excavated are rubbish pits of various shape and dimension. The materials from these structures include faunal remains, charcoal pieces, potsherds, flint, stone and greenstone artefacts. A few clay figurines have been recovered from the Vhò di Piadena sites (among which that of Campo Ceresole), Ostiano, Brignano Frascata, Travo and Alba. This article discusses such finds that in Italy have parallels with those from the Fiorano Culture and points out the peculiarity of these figurines which nevertheless seem to derive from models deeply rooted in the neolithic Balkan cultural heritage.*

*Résumé:*

Cet article concerne la Culture néolithique de Vhò en Italie du Nord, qui se développe durant les derniers siècles du septième millénaire B.P. Les données actuellement disponibles indiquent que les villageois de la Culture de Vhò s'établissaient de préférence sur des sols hydromorphiques, pas particulièrement favorables à l'agriculture. Leur sites sont toujours implantés sur les bords de terrasses fluviales ou sur des collines de faible hauteur émergeant de terrains marécageux. Les activités agricoles sont néanmoins attestées par la présence de grains d'orge et de blé, ainsi que par des lames de faucilles et des meules. A l'heure actuelle, on ignore presque tout de leurs habitations. La majeure partie des structures fouillées à ce jour sont des puits d'ordures de formes et de dimensions diverses. Le matériel provenant de ces structures comprend des restes d'animaux, des morceaux de charbon, des tessons, des artifacts en silex, en pierre et en os. Quelques figurines d'argile ont été découvertes dans les sites Vhò di Piadena (dont celui de Camp Ceresole), d'Ostiano, de Brignano Frascata, de Travo et d'Albe. Cet article discute ces trouvailles qui, en Italie, peuvent être comparées avec celles de la culture de Fiorano. L'auteur souligne la singularité de ces figurines, qui semblent cependant dériver de modèles profondément enracinés dans l'héritage culturel balkanique.