

Prehistoric Italy

Men and Culture from the Stone Age to the Iron Age

The earliest human settlements within the territory of present-day Italy date almost certainly to the initial phase of the Quaternary era (Pleistocene). This period was characterized by frequent alternation in climatic conditions, with consequent phases of expansion and retreat in the Alpine and Apennine glaciers and relative variations in sea level.

These settlements were generally situated in coastal caves, in shelters at the base of rock walls or near lake shores. They date to around 500,000 years ago and correspond to the Lower Palaeolithic, the longest period of human prehistory, which was dominated by the notable diffusion of tools made from flaked stone and ended some 10,000 years ago. Among the earliest sites of this period are Pineta di Isernia, recently discovered and dating to some 730,000 years ago, and Quinzano (Verona), from over 400 000 years ago. Other important Lower Palaeolithic sites have been found near Imola (Valle del Correcchio), in Lazio (Torre in Pietra, Fontana Liri, Anagni, Arce), in Abruzzo (Teramano, Maiella), in Basilicata (Venosa), in Puglia (Gargano), in Campania (Capri), in Liguria (Balzi Rossi).

Although rich in tools and animal bones, only some of these sites have provided a small quantity of human skeletal remains resembling those from the more recent sites of the Middle Palaeolithic, dating to the Riss-Würm interglacial period and part of the succeeding Würm glaciation (circa 120 000 to 36 000 years ago). These bones belong to a species named 'Homo Sapiens Neanderthalensis', who lived in the caves of Circeo (Lazio), the terraces of the Tiber Valley (Rome), the coasts of the Salento (Grotta Romanelli) and the Gargano (Puglia), those of Western Liguria (Balzi Rossi and Finalese) and many other sites. Here they left traces of an industry known as Mousterian and characterized by the presence of scrapers (flakes of flint retouched only on one side).

During the Upper Palaeolithic, the successive period covering from circa 36 000 to 10 000 years ago, the Neanderthals gave way to the present species of man 'Homo sapiens sapiens' during the final phases of the Würm glaciation. The numerous traces from this period are particularly rich in burials, animal bones and tools, the latter having been worked with increased precision. The first examples of rock art now appear (engravings and graffiti in the caves of M. Pellegrino and Levanzo in Sicily, in Grotta Romanelli on the Salento Coast and the Balzi Rossi in Liguria) and statues like the small female ones from Savignano and Chiozza di Scandiano in Emilia and the Venus figurines from the Balzi Rossi.

In the few thousand years of the following Mesolithic period (circa 10 000 to 6 000 years ago) the climate continued to grow milder. Tools became very small (microliths) and inhumation came into use. Sites from this period have been found throughout the entire Italian peninsula, principally at the Balzi Rossi, Arene Candide, in the Colli Berici (Covolo della Paina), on Capri (Grotta delle Felci) and at Positano (Grotta La Porta), being along the coasts in the plains and on the mountains.

With the Neolithic period, from circa 6000 BC to 2800 BC, the traditional hunting and gathering economy was replaced by the introduction of agriculture, stock rearing, weaving and pottery. This new cultural influence came particularly from the Eastern Mediterranean and the Near East. Using the pottery productikon above all, it has been possible to reconstruct fairly accurately the various phases of this complex period. Initially it was characterized by Impressed Ware, such as that found on the Tremiti Isles, in Sicily (Stentinello) and Liguria (Arene Candide) and then by the painted forms (Southern Italy). Among the noted Neolithic cultures are those of Lagozza (Varese), Fiorano, Chiozza and Pescale (Emilia), with their square-mouthed and scratched decorated pots. Some interesting Neolithic

traces have remained in the hut villages of the lower Brescian area, in Emilia and the Teramo area (Valle della Vibrata) or in the rock dwellings and tombs of Pulo di Molfetta (Puglia), Stentinello, Megara Iblea and Matrensa (Sicily).

The second half of the third millennium BC is characterized by the use of copper, introduced into Italy from the Eastern Mediterranean, alongside stone. The Copper Age has produced interesting pottery types from Rinaldone (Viterbo), Gaudio (Paestum) and Remedello (Brescia); these were pastoral settlements with rock-cut tombs or trench graves. The working of flint, as still practised by the Campignians in parts of the Gargano and Veneto, declined. Instead, the Camunian culture, which has left its traces in the rock engravings of the lower Val Camonica (Brescia), began the development that was to continue throughout the Bronze Age.

Also in the Copper Age appeared the first examples of palafitte or villages of pile dwellings built on the pre-alpine lakes. These reached their maximum development in the subsequent Bronze Age (corresponding to the second millennium BC), which was characterized by the widespread growth of metallurgy. The type site for this culture is Polada (Lake Garda), contemporary with which there flourished on the southern margin of the Po Plain the Terramare culture of sedentary agriculturists. The pastoral way of life is instead represented by the Apennine culture that developed especially in Central-Southern Italy and was also characterized by a war-like spirit.

The Bronze Age also saw the flowering of true regional groupings, with highly organized social structures and territorial ranges. This can be seen from the remains of their permanent settlements and respective megalithic constructions, like the nuraghi in Sardinia, the castellieri in the Eastern Alps, and the dolmens and menhirs on the Salento, of clearly Middle Eastern derivation. The rock engravings on M. Bego (Maritime Alps, now in France) belong to the late Bronze Age, as do the urnfield cultures that spread so rapidly and mark the change of rite from inhumation to cremation. The Iron Age then followed with the beginning of the first millennium BC.

During all this period there were increasing contacts with the Phoenician and Greek colonists: the former being largely present on the coasts of Sardinia and western Sicily and the latter in Southern Italy. These colonies had a considerable influence on the development of local cultures (from the Picenian to Campano-Samnite and the Apulian to Bruttio-Lucanian). Among the main Iron Age cultures are those of Golasecca (Varese) in north-west Italy and Atestine (Adige Valley) mainly in the Veneto, while the Villanovan culture, direct heir of the urnfield cultures (indicated as proto-Villanovan) spread throughout Emilia and the remainder of Central Italy, even reaching Campania (Pontecagnano). This was the cultural base on which the Etruscan civilization was to develop.