



PREHISTORIC PILE DWELLINGS AROUND THE ALPS

“In the lake [...] a small island emerges from the water; on that small strip of pebbly soil, supported by large wooden piles, [...] the men of that tribe had built their village [...]. About twenty or so wooden huts with straw roofs formed the central nucleus of the settlement, the one on the island. [...] Another ten or twelve huts [...] were suspended two arms’ length above the water, supported by piles driven into the bed and connected to one another by wooden walkways.”

Il villaggio sul lago, Racconti, Mauro Neri

The pile dwellings in the Alps are linked to humid environments: rivers, lakes and small lakes, many of which today have dried up or have become peat bogs. It is precisely thanks to the water, and above all to the anaerobic characteristics of mud and peat, that prevent the proliferation of bacteria, that the sites have been preserved in an exceptional manner, returning to the archaeologists not only the forests of piles that supported the platforms on which the homes stood, but also a huge amount of organic finds thrown into the water: for those who lived there, it was rubbish, for us an extraordinary source of information on the daily life in the village and the network of social and commercial relations that connected it to others. These communities, which were anything but primitive, were able to find technological solutions to complex problems, such as that of planting a pile several metres long into the soft and elastic bed of a stretch of water. The UNESCO site is transnational and comprises 111 villages in Switzerland, Austria, France, Germany, Italy and Slovenia. The 19 Italian villages are in the areas of Lake Garda, Lake Varese and in other parts of Lombardy, Veneto, Piedmont, Friuli-Venezia Giulia and Trentino-Alto Adige.



CULTURAL, SERIAL AND TRANSNATIONAL HERITAGE
UNESCO DOSSIER: 1363
PLACE OF INSCRIPTION: PARIS, FRANCE
DATE OF INSCRIPTION: 2011

CRITERIA FOR SELECTION: The series of pile dwelling settlements in the Alps is one of the most important archaeological sources for the study of the first agricultural societies in Europe, between 5000 and 500 B.C. The conditions of preservation in a wet environment have allowed the survival of organic material which contributes to understanding the significant changes that took place during the Neolithic and Bronze Ages in Europe in general and the interactions between the human groups in the regions around the Alps in particular.





“The waves of the small lake lapped monotonously, bathing the stony beach and crashing into the piles that supported the village huts suspended above the water. Bacmore, sitting on the edge of the wooden platform, could only just touch the waves that rippled below him with his feet [...] And in the end, in the dazzling reflection of the last rays of the sun that were reflected onto the water of the lake, he was able to distinguish a canoe coming. The fishermen were coming home with a good catch.”

The opening lines of the novel *Il destino di Bacmor* splendidly render the calmness that still reigns today on the beautiful Lake Ledro in the province of Trento.

Far from the more beaten tracks, the **1 Lake Ledro** is forbidden to motorboats, therefore it is home only to canoes, SUPs and swimmers, who at the centre of the lake can enjoy the spectacle of the surrounding mountains, covered in woods and dotted with grazing cows. The small but exceptional **2 Lake Ledro Pile-dwelling Museum** stands on the shore, displaying important finds preserved by the loam, such as fabrics and bronze objects, weapons and brooches. The remains of the pile dwellings of Ledro emerged in 1929, when the hydro-electric power station in Riva del Garda was being built. On the southern shore of the lake, an expanse of 10,000 piles surfaced from the lake, revealing how it was a

real city on the water, the largest in Italy. Alongside the exhibition, there is the reconstruction of four huts, complete with furnishings and trinkets. About thirty kilometres north of Ledro, there is a vast clearing where other piled dwellings can be seen at a certain distance. This is the **3 archaeological site of Fiavé**, still in the province of Trento, which develops around an ancient lake, now a peat bog; as was the case for many pile dwelling sites, it was also discovered in the middle of the 19th century, as a consequence of the exploitation of peat, which at the time was used as fuel. The village is very ancient, inhabited with seasonal camps from as early as the 7000 years B.C. The first stable huts however, date back to

3000 years later, during the Neolithic Age, and the site was inhabited until the Bronze Age. The archaeological area of Fiavé is very pleasant to visit, with the wooden walkways and five reconstructed pile dwellings, where in the summer various workshops for children are held. The **4 Museum of Pile Dwellings of Fiavé** is also very interesting, displaying a selection of materials, including objects deliberately thrown away or which accidentally fell into the water: broken cups and vases, but also bronze, amber and gold jewellery, sickles, and bows and arrows. A whole floor of the museum is dedicated to the reconstruction of daily life in the pile dwellings.



IN THE LABORATORY

“[...] the inhabitants of that time filled the gaps of this palisade with various material, rubbish, and kitchen utensils, broken or not, or anything else, which encumbered the homes and the adjacent areas so that they formed a solid bank which kept the water under control in periods of flooding.”

*Le palafitte nel cassetto dei ricordi 1929-2009,
edited by Alessandro Fedrigotti*

The pile dwelling sites return a surprisingly large amount of archaeological material, considering that the oldest ones are dated back to 5000 B.C. In particular, the state of preservation of the wooden beams that form the skeleton of the villages is so good that at times during excavations,

doors, locks and even remains of homes that are still whole but which collapsed and were sealed by the wet layers, have been found. It is exactly thanks to the damp that the organic material has been preserved over the millennia, and the archaeologists have to pay the greatest attention when excavating because the process of deterioration starts the very moment the item is taken out of where it was deposited. In order to maintain the degree of hydration, the pieces are first of all sealed in bags together with their water, then transferred into vats or cold chambers and, once in the laboratory, plunged into a solution of polythene glycol which replaces the water in the cellular structure of the tinted wood and that, after solidifying by drying in lyophilisation systems, prevents the wood fibres from deforming and cracking. For the preservation of such fragile and precious finds, 20 years ago the Archaeological Heritage Department of Lombardy established the Wet Wood Treatment Centre.



'I LIVE IN A PILE DWELLING WITH MY PARENTS TÙ AND TÀ, GRANDFATHER GÙ AND GRANDMOTHER GÀ. WE ARE THE PEOPLE OF THE LAKE. THE PILE DWELLING IS A HOUSE ON WATER WITH ALL THE COMFORTS OF THE MODERN AGE, THE SUN GIVES US LIGHT DURING THE DAY AND THE MOON LIGHTS US UP AT NIGHT [...]. AS IN ALL MODERN HOMES WE HAVE WATER PRACTICALLY UNDERNEATH WHICH

MEANS THAT IF MUMMY TELLS ME 'GET WASHED!' AND I IGNORE HER, SHE ONLY HAS TO GIVE ME A LITTLE PUSH OF ENCOURAGEMENT AND I END UP IN THE WATER BELOW.'

In *Tipù delle palafitte* by Cosetta Zanotti, Tipù lives with her family in a pile dwelling village on the shores of a lake: try and imagine these youngsters of prehistory, who would dare one another in diving from the platforms or playing in the woods. The small lakes,

with the pile dwellings built on their shores, have mostly dried up over the thousands of years, while the large lakes, for example Lake Garda, are still there, so that the kids of today can have as much fun as the kids of the Bronze Age.

Begin your visit from the **1 Rambotti Archaeological Museum** in Desenzano del Garda, which has many finds from the pile dwelling village of Lavagnone, where the exceptional find of a **wooden plough** was made in 1977. The tool was found in the oldest strata of the pile dwelling, dated to 2067 B.C. thanks to dendrochronology, the science that studies the rings of growth of trees. The curious thing is that on the rocks in the archaeological parks of the rock engravings in Valle Camonica, which are also a UNESCO Heritage Site, ancient images of ploughs, identical to the one of Lavagnone, have been found. The Rambotti Museum organises workshops and educational courses for children. After the visit, have a walk through the narrow streets of Desenzano and maybe even have a swim in the lake, season permitting; then go to Gavardo, to visit the **2 Archaeological Museum of the Valle Sabbia**, which has the finds from the excavations of the pile dwelling village of Lucone and organises many workshops of experimental archaeology, which are useful to learn how to work flint, a stone which in prehistoric times was used to craft sharp blades.

After the visit, go to the beautiful morainic hills of Lake Garda, where the two pile dwelling villages of **3 Lavagnone** and **4 Lucone** are. Both are open and can be visited during the excavation campaigns, which makes the visit, conducted by archaeologists, definitely fascinating.



KIDS



PREHISTORIC PILE DWELLINGS IN THE ALPS in books

Reading suggestions to get to know about daily life in the pile dwelling sites of the Alps.

• **Il destino di Bacmor**, Mauro Neri (1985). In the Recent Bronze Age (3200 years ago), young Bacmor, who has arrived in the pile dwelling village of Ledro, is involved in a sinister fact that takes place in the pile dwelling community.

• **Racconti**, Mauro Neri. Five short stories set in the pile dwelling village of Fiauvé. The stories have also been published in the book by Mauro Neri and illustrated by Pierluigi Negriolli *Racconti di archeologia trentina* (2005).

• **Le palafitte nel cassetto dei ricordi 1929-2009: 80 anni di archeologia a Ledro**, edited by Alessandro Fedrigotti

(2010). Published by MUSE – Museo di Scienze Naturali di Trento Valle di Ledro, it contains the account quoted by Francesco Zecchini (1943).

• **I ragazzi delle palafitte**, Renzo Mosca (2018). A novel which describes the life of the pile dwelling community of Ledro. The heroine is Dana, the daughter of the village chief, accompanied by a black wolf that she herself has tamed.

• **Quando a Fiauvé c'era un lago**, Donato Riccadonna (2018). This is the story of the excavation of the pile dwellings of the Lake of Fiauvé, found in the 19th century as a consequence of the excavations to extract peat, which at that time was used as fuel.

• **Gando il cestaio e Arcto l'ubriaccone. Una storia dell'età del Bronzo a Fiauvé**, Giuliana Borghesani (2023). This tells the story of the historical events that have taken place in the archaeological site of Fiauvé-Carera.

Children's books:

• **La prova di Keira**, Giorgia Cappelletti (2014). A story that draws its inspiration from the archaeological events of the village of Molina di Ledro, the excavations of which have restored accounts of fires, destruction and reconstruction, pottery artifacts, weapons, instruments for weaving and spinning, jewellery and a canoe dug out of a tree trunk.

• **Tipù delle palafitte**, Cosetta Zanotti (2021). Tipù, the small inhabitant of a pile dwelling village, due to a series of unfortunate events will have to go into the mountains to the village of the Men of Signs, facing the dangers of the forest; she will be helped by the teachings of her grandparents and the voice of the trees.