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A First Pompeii: the Early Bronze Age village of Nola–Croce del Papa (Palma Campania phase)

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In May 2001, in the immediate outskirts of Nola (an important city some 25 km from Naples), an Early Bronze Age village was discovered buried by an unexpected eruption of Vesuvius (the Pomici di Avellino eruption of 3550 BP). Three huts were found 6 m from the surface, originally part of more extensive settlement, next to an enclosed area which included a threshing floor, some covered structures and an animal pen made out of wattle and daub (FIGURE 1). The humidity of the soil had conserved not only human footprints, but the hoof marks of domestic animals (sheep, goats, cows and pigs) in the enclosures whence they had fled at the time of the eruption (FIGURE 2). Nine 4-months pregnant goats were discovered in the animal pen, and four others were tied to the fence. An adult dog had taken refuge under the eaves of the thatch of one of the huts. All other inhabitants had fled at the time of the eruption, perhaps taking with them their most precious possessions, since some personal items were not found (bronze arms in particular); one exception was a headdress made from plaques cut from the distal end of young pig tusks (FIGURE 3). This must have been a typical local style, as other partly finished plaques were found in the two other huts or abandoned in the animal enclosures.

The discovery recalls Akrotiri, Pompei or Ceren (Salvador) — three sites devastated by a volcanic eruption, where the image of daily life has been captured. At Nola, after the fall of grey pumice that covered the huts without causing their collapse, a wave of mud penetrated slowly within the structures, providing a counterforce to the pumice accumulated on the outside and allowing their preservation to a height of *c.* 1·30 m (FIGURE 4). The consolidated mud has produced a cast of the inside of the huts and a negative of everything found there: some wood and wickerwork containers, some cloth or the ties which either suspended containers or linked together the elements of construction. Additionally, the bundles of straw which covered the huts, the leaf impressions of oak and fern and the casts of cereals and other vegetable remains (including mushrooms) were perfectly understandable, all fossilized by the mud of the eruption.

The living structures, orientated northwest–southeast, had a horseshoe shape, with the opening in the straight side, partly projecting above the entrance in a sort of porch. They had varied dimensions: hut 4, 15·6x4·6 m and 4·3/4·5 m high; hut 3, 15·2x9·0 m and 5 m high; hut 2, 7·5x4·5 m and 4·3/4·5 m high. The door, hung on the south wall, opened inwards. The walls were continuous with the roof because of its very steep incline (45%). They were constructed of small posts placed about every 40 cm, reaching down to the ground, with small wooden joists placed horizontally every 25 cm. The small posts and the joists were tied together with cords, which still remained visible in the ashes. Some axial posts supported the roof. Some posts were placed laterally all around the internal wall, which held in place a vertical trellis made of panels of wooden branches placed lengthwise that allowed the roof to distribute some of its weight. Between the trellis and the true and proper wall the cavity was used as a storage area separated from the living area. There might have been a loft in at least one of the huts, reached by means of a triangular ladder. Internally, one or two partitions divided the area into two or three inter-communicating zones. In the longest hut, a narrow opening separated the living area from an apsidal storage area, while a second opening led to an open entrance area. In the other two huts, there was a single opening between the principal area and the smaller storage area. There were some containers used for the storage of foodstuffs while daily life took place around the oven (FIGURE 5).

Complete assemblages of ceramic objects survive; the larger two huts had almost 100 coarse pots, some decorated with parallel incisions and netting, others with excised triangles. Sometimes a white paste was employed to infill the decoration, as in the later Apennine style. Some vessels still had their contents: almonds, flour and grain. Near hut 4, two pre-term foetuses of 4·5 and 6 months respectively were buried in a crushed pot. Earlier level huts, on the same orientation, and metalworking were found under the settlement.

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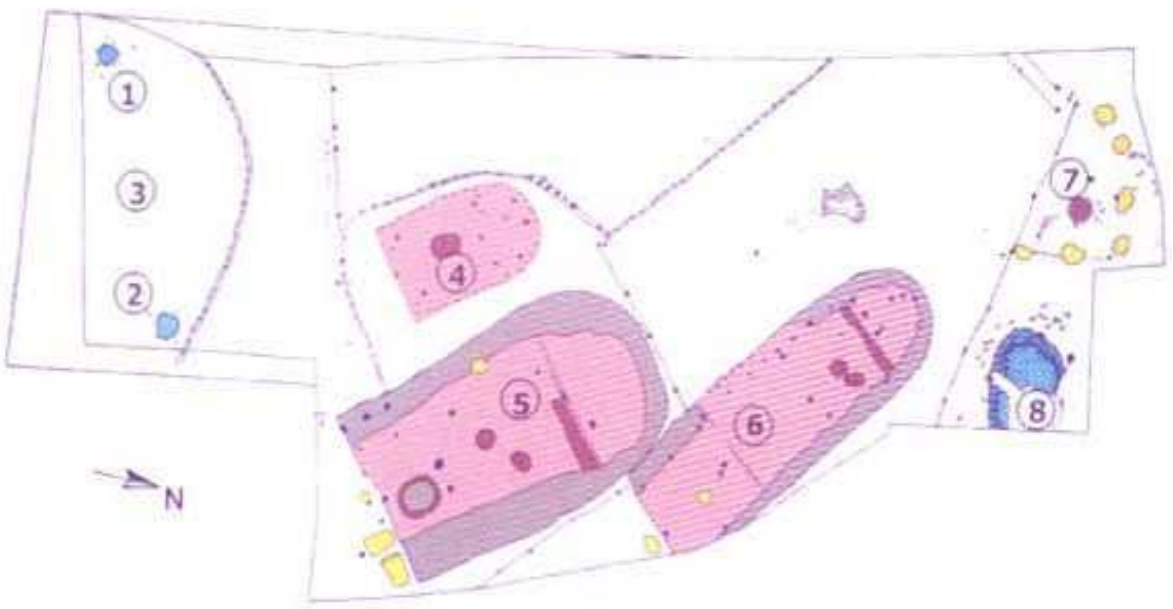

FIGURE 1. *General plan of the site of Croce del Papa (drawn by Emilio Castaldo).* 1, 2 *Wells;* 3 *Subcircular enclosure, threshing floor;* 4 *Hut 2;* 5 *Hut 3;* 6 *Hut 4;* 7 *Cage with goats;* 8 *Waterhole.*

FIGURE 3. *Reconstruction of the pig's tusk head-dress.*

FIGURE 2. *In the foreground, prints left by men and bovines; in the background, an animal pen with pregnant goats.*

FIGURE 4. *General view of Huts 3 and 4 under excavation.*

The first archaeobotanical analyses have produced carbonized macro-remains and impressions in the ash of cereals (*monococcum*, *dicoccum* and barley), fruit, nuts (almond *Amygdalus communis*) and other vegetable matter (olive stone and acorns). Numerous remains of carbonized woods belong to beech, black hornbeam and fig; these give the impression of a human landscape with fruit trees, pasture and cultivated fields not far from a mixed beech woodland.

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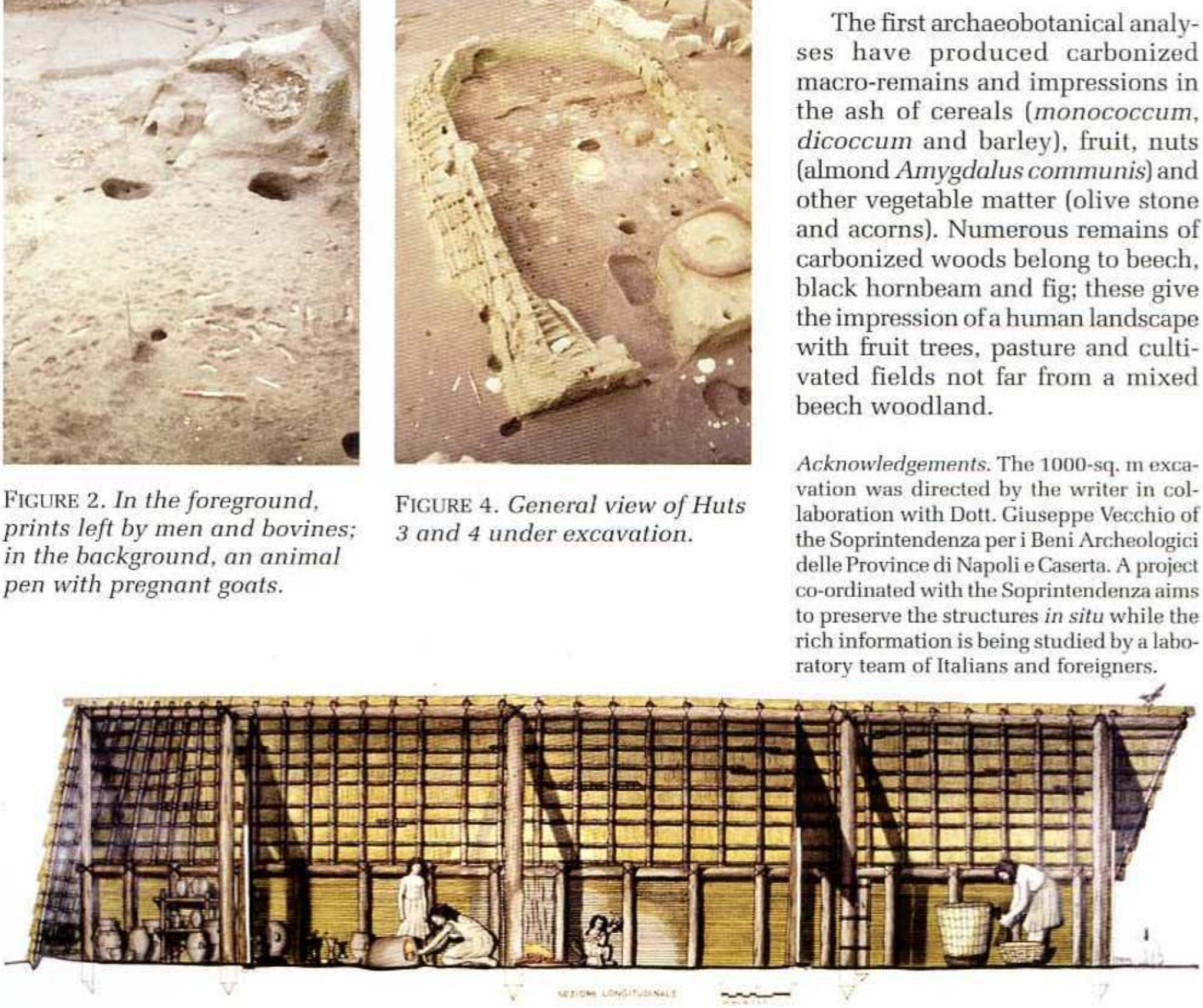

FIGURE 5. *Hypothetical reconstruction of the inside of Hut 4 (drawn by Emilio Castaldo).*