

Living in the wind: Upper Pleistocene loess and human peopling in the Po Plain (Northern Italy)

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Upper Pleistocene (MIS 4–2) loess sequences occur in most of continental Europe and in Northern Italy along the Po Plain Loess Basin. Loess outcrops are common along the flanks of the Po Plain and along the shorelines of the Adriatic Sea. Wind-blown deposits accumulated on top of glacial deposits, fluvial terraces, uplifted isolated hills, karst plateaus, slopes, basin of secondary valleys, and in a few cases inside rockshelters. Loess bodies are generally thin and affected by pedogenesis; in a few cases, deposits are slightly reworked by slope processes and bioturbation (including human-induced pedoturbation). Notwithstanding, loess in the Po Plain is an important archive of paleoenvironmental record providing crucial information on the Upper Pleistocene environmental setting of the region. Along some loess-palaeosoil sequences, investigated from a geochronological and pedological point of view, frequentation by Mousterian Neanderthal groups is attested. Archaeological findings, compared with those from rock shelters, confirm the sporadic frequentation of marginal open areas during the cold/arid and highly fluctuating climate of the MIS 3, providing a more complete picture of the human occupation, mobility, and exploitation of natural resources of Northern Italy.