

# The Historical Development of Italian Prehistoric Archaeology: A Brief Outline

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## Foreword

Twenty-five years ago Marcel Desittere, a Belgian prehistorian who works and lives in northern Italy, published the first important monograph about the origins of Italian prehistoric archaeology (Desittere 1985). Beginning with the history of one of the main prehistory museums, Reggio Emilia, created in the second half of the nineteenth century, Desittere tried to reconstruct a socio-political and intellectual biography of the pioneers of the discipline.

Over the following years since 1985, many scholars have dedicated monographs, articles, papers in congress proceedings and exhibition catalogues, to the subject of the history of Italian prehistoric archaeology (see, among others: Bernabò and Mutti 1994; Cuomo Di Caprio 1986; Desittere 1988, 1996; Del Lucchese *et al.* 2008; Guidi 1987, 1988, 1996a, 1996b, 2000, 2008, forthcoming; Peroni 1992; Skeates 2000; Tarantini 1998–2000, 2000, 2000–2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2004, 2005).

All of these works contributed to the profile of a discipline that, in our country, comprises some peculiar characteristics that I outline below:

- 1) the never-ending dialectic between the two main trends (Figure 1), that I define as ‘archaeological’ and ‘natural sciences’ traditions (Guidi 2000);
- 2) the deep influence of Luigi Pigorini, the first Professor of Prehistory (Rome 1877) who, until his death in 1925, prevented the creation of other academic chairs;

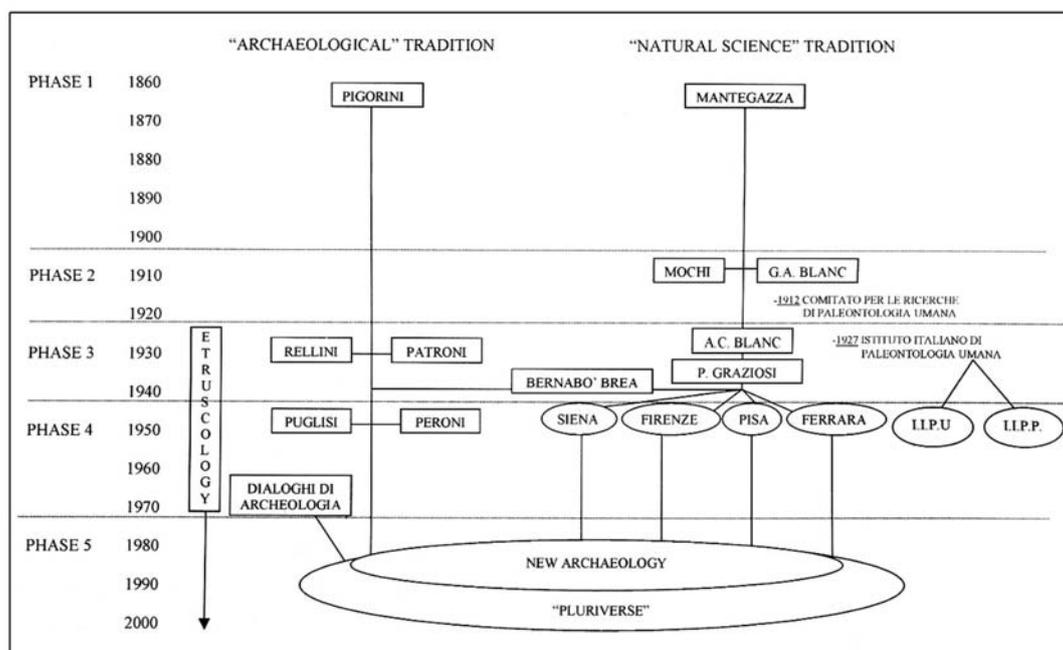


Figure 1. A chronological scheme of the evolution of Italian prehistoric studies.

- 3) the obvious pre-eminence (as in university chairs, excavations, funding, etc.) of Classical archaeology, so different a discipline from prehistory, and also different from the point of view of its 'social actors' or interactions (i.e. the aristocracy's interest in Classic traditions, in comparison with the emerging nineteenth century bourgeoisie's interest in prehistory);
- 4) the localism pervading all the social and intellectual (and more recently also political) climate of our country, a fact that prevented the acceptance, by the scientific community, of any shared paradigm.

In this article I will try to reconstruct a brief history of the discipline, using the five phases periodization outlined in Figure 1.

### **Phase 1 (1860–1900)**

In 1850 Giuseppe Scarabelli, described by De Mortillet as 'the alpha and omega of Italian prehistory' (Desittere 1996: 10), published the first note about Palaeolithic tools found in Italy. It marked the beginning of a marvellous excavation and research season, one which, especially in the second half of the eighteenth century, was to become a strong focal point in the relationship between scholars from other European countries. At the same time, and since 1846, Count Giovanni Gozzadini (who would have become famous in 1853, for the discovery of a large Iron Age cremation burial site at his estate of Villanova) established a significant political, scientific and literary circle of European scholars, who met in his house in Bologna, and which would, in the decades to come, be attended by great archaeologists such as Chantre, Evans, Hildebrand, Montelius, De Mortillet and Schliemann.

In 1860 (a year before political unification), Gastaldi identified a *palafitta* (or lake-dwelling) site at Mercurago. The two great foreign, liberal intellectual, archaeologists, Gabriel De Mortillet and Eduard Desor (the latter a student of Ferdinand Keller and both refugees in Switzerland because of their political support of the 1848 Revolution) visited the site, and encouraged him to carry on with his research. With support from Desor and De Mortillet, and with the contacts established with the Emilian naturalist Pellegrino Strobel (who discovered the real nature of the *Terramare* sites) reports about the naturally defensive Bonze Age settlements of the Po plain, were soon published by Gastaldi, Strobel and Pigorini (then only a very young student who knew Strobel), and were subsequently translated into German in 1863 and, in 1865, into English. During these same years, in the first work (comprising overall reports on cave explorations) published by Tuscan scholars (Tarantini 1998–2000, 2000) we can detect a strong naturalist tradition.

The first pioneers of Italian prehistory were all liberal intellectuals, more or less deeply involved in the political fight for independence, and comprising a lively scientific community with frequent contacts with other foreign scholars. At the first meeting of The Italian Society of Natural Sciences, held in La Spezia in 1865, there was a decision, the result of the influence of the French academic tradition, to call the study of prehistoric antiquity 'paleo-etnologia', a term later abbreviated in *paletnologia* (still used in Italian universities). At that same meeting, De Mortillet solemnly proposed, and the majority approved, the creation of an International Congress of Anthropology and Prehistoric Archaeology (UISPP), the first meeting of which took place in Neuchatel the following year. The fifth of these international congresses, held in Bologna in 1871, became a landmark year for Italian prehistory.

If one excludes the group of naturalists who founded the Archive for Anthropology and Ethnology in Florence, directed by the naturalist Paolo Mantegazza, 1871 was also the year that Luigi Pigorini (Figure 2) became predominant in Italian Prehistory. After the foundation of the National Museum in Rome in 1876, and after receiving the Chair of Paletnology in 1877, he continued to predominate the discipline for nearly half century.

During the following years, 'Pigorini's theories', already outlined in 1875 by Chierici, and further developed by Helbig, (a foreigner well integrated into Italian paletnological world) continued to evolve.

These theories, later known as 'eorìa pigoriniana', comprised such essential ideas:

that at the beginning of the Bronze Age a first wave of people, coming from Central Europe, arrived in north-western Italy (which was then occupied by an autochthonous people, at least from the Neolithic period onwards) carrying the new settlement model of lake-dwellings;

that a second wave of more skilled populations from the Northern side of the Alps came into North-eastern Italy, later crossing the Po River and creating the Emilia Terremare;

that in the late Bronze Age, the Terramare people crossed the Apennines, occupying central Italy and beginning the Villanovan and Latial civilizations;

and these people would be responsible for the birth of Rome.

Renato Peroni (Peroni 1992: 32–33) noted

how this historical reconstruction conveniently coincided with the succeeding stages of Italian political unification. From 1879, Pigorini intensified his contacts with, and influence on, scholars from Central and Northern Europe, who adhered ideologically to the Triple Alliance (further perfected, and notice the coincidence of dates, between 1879 and 1882) i.e. among scholars from Italy, Austria and Prussia, another powerful ideological explanation for the birth of his theories.

## Phase 2 (1901–1921)

The beginning of the new twentieth century was marked by a foolish polemic, by Pigorini and his followers, against the Florentine naturalist group led by Aldobrandino Mochi, who were 'guilty' of imagining an Italian Palaeolithic sequence similar to the French one. In 1913 Pigorini and his followers also criticised the founder, Gian Alberto Blanc, of the Committee for Human Palaeontological Research, based in Florence, an institution primarily devoted to the reconstruction, through the excavations of cave sites, of the chronotipological sequence of the Italian Palaeolithic. These criticisms would be the origin of an increasingly bitter split in Italian prehistory that would become even more profound during the Fascist period.

The most typical features of the Italian prehistory during these years (except for the yet mentioned group of Tuscan Palaeolithic scholars) were the decay in the standards of field methods, as well as a growing isolation of Italian scholars from the international prehistory scholarly milieu.

It was not by chance, that the first real syntheses on pre- and proto-historic materials and their chronology, appeared in volumes, the most important of which were published between the end of the 1800s and 1910 by the Swedish prehistorian Oscar Montelius, well known for his role in the elaboration of the typological method (Montelius 1894–1910).

During these years only a few scholars stand out, and only two of them were well known internationally: Paolo Orsi and, in particular, Giacomo Boni (see Figure 3). The latter was a great archaeologist, an atypical Italian, and well known for his international contacts, from Apollinaire to Ruskin (the latter being the English architect with whom he established a strong relationship). In the first two decades of the twentieth century Boni directed the Rome Superintendance, the first stratigraphical excavations



Figure 2. Luigi Pigorini.



Figure 3. Giacomo Boni, sitting near an Iron Age grave in the Roman Forum.

in the field of Classical archaeology, that comprise the outstandingly well documented exploration of the pre-Roman necropolis in the Forum. Boni also wrote and published a booklet on the methodology of excavations, which remains surprisingly modern in its strong advocacy for the ‘deductive’ approach to archaeological interpretation.

### Phase 3 (1922–1945)

The current idea that prehistory was suppressed, for political reasons, while the regime gave funds and academic chairs to Classical archaeology (Manacorda 1982; Manacorda and Tamassia 1985), was only part of the explanation of what actually happened to Italian archaeology during the Fascist period.

Within the ‘Roman School’ of archaeology, the sole exponent worthy of any interest, even though he had his ups and downs (especially with regard to his fieldwork), was Ugo Rellini (see Figure 4). He was the successor to Pigorini’s chair, and the ‘soul’ of almost all of issues in the *Bullettino* during the Fascist period, whose activity is marked by a cautious willingness to renew Italian prehistoric studies.

Members of the group of Palaeolithic scholars with the naturalist background, in particular Paolo Graziosi, remained immune to the isolation and provincialism which affected Italian palaeontological research during this period. They worked, primarily, in the new Italian colonial territories in Africa, and included among them were Gian Alberto Blanc (a member of the Fascist Party who held many public offices) and his son Alberto Carlo, who often collaborated with Raymond Vaufrey, author of the first book on the Italian Palaeolithic in 1928 (Vaufrey 1928). To these scholars we owe the foundation, in 1927, of The Italian Institute of Human Palaeontology, in Rome.

During the same time, in Florence, the then young discipline of Etruscology celebrated its first national and international congresses (Tarantini 2002b), during which a very original collaboration with the naturalists began. From this time onwards Massimo Pallottino became a leading figure in Italian archaeology, and he went on to become one of the most important archaeologists in post-war years.

The period between the two World Wars was dominated by works of synthesis on Italian prehistory, written by foreign scholars, such as the already mentioned volume by Vaufrey on the Palaeolithic, and including: the first volume of *Italische Graberkunde*, on funerary customs in the proto-historic period by von Duhn (fondly dedicated to Pigorini) in 1923; *Villanovans and Early Etruscans* (1924) and *The Iron Age in Italy* (1927) by Randall McIver; *Der geometrische Stil in Italien* by Ake Akerstrom and *Die alteren italischen Fibeln* by Sundwall, both published in 1943. The well-known



Figure 4. Ugo Alberto Rellini, in the ‘Museo delle Origini’ that he created at Rome University.

volume on *Terramare* sites by Gosta Saflund published in 1939, was a special case, and was based on a criticism of Pigorini's theories, that went as far as to question conclusions about the character of embanked settlements excavated during the previous century. However, it took another half a century to understand that, to the contrary, the theories of Chierici, Pigorini and Strobel about the *Terramare* were, overall, valid.

During such a critical period for the development of prehistoric studies, the only real novelty came in 1940, with the start of the excavations at Arene Candide in Liguria, by an archaeologist with a Classics background, who had excavated the well known Aegean site of Poliochni. This was Luigi Bernabò Brea (see Figure 5). His close and fundamental work with the naturalist Luigi Cardini, was the first example of a collaboration between the two dominant 'traditions' of Italian prehistory (see Figure 1).



Figure 5. Luigi Bernabò Brea.

However, on the basis of a correct stratigraphical excavation of the Arene Candide cave site, Bernabò Brea, for the first time, designed a correct chronotipological sequence for the Neolithic and Bronze Ages, beginning modern Italian prehistoric archaeology.

#### Phase 4 (1946–1970)

The post-war period, marked by a sudden national renewal in all the fields of social and cultural life, after the long 'sleep' of the Fascist years, was characterized by the emergence of a large number of scholars, and with the establishment of prehistory chairs at many Universities (among them at Siena, Firenze, Pisa, Ferrara, Cagliari). In 1954 Paolo Graziosi, with the crucial collaboration of Massimo Pallottino, created The Italian Institute of Prehistory and Protohistory (Tarantini 2004), a still extant free association of all Italian scholars of prehistory and proto-history, based in Florence.

From a scientific point of view, the most relevant archaeological enterprise of this period was the Lipari village excavation, undertaken by Bernabò Brea together with the French scholar, Madeleine Cavalier. In addition Bernabò Brea completed his reconstruction of the Neolithic and Bronze Age sequence, with the incorporation of southern Italian and Sicilian data into his original chronotipological framework.

The extent of Brea's knowledge of European archaeological literature, and how he viewed it, was revealed by his famous reply, several years later, to Glyn Daniel, who asked him why he had dedicated *La Sicilia prima dei Greci* (later translated in English with the title *Sicily Before the Greeks*) to Vere Gordon Childe: 'Because I did not understand European prehistory until I read *The Dawn of European Civilization* and *The Danube in Prehistory*' (Daniel 1958).

The 1950s saw the emergence of two scholars, Salvatore Maria Puglisi (who in the early 1960s took over the Rome chair of Palaeoethnology) and Renato Peroni, advocates, respectively, of the English and of the German approaches to prehistory.

Notwithstanding this, the most important scholar, from a political point of view, was Massimo Pallottino. It was not by chance, during the UISPP congress of 1962 in Rome, while Arturo Carlo Blanc took the opportunity to illustrate the outstanding progress of Palaeolithic archaeology, that Pallottino gave a 'seminal' paper in which he outlined (the still accepted terminology for) all of the periods of Italian Bronze and Iron Ages.

In the 1960s, a period of methodological 'revolution' in Anglo-American prehistory studies, the only real advance in Italy was the introduction of statistical methods in Palaeolithic studies. A far

more important revolution took place in Classical archaeology, with the application of Marxism to studies by young scholars, destined to become leaders in the field. These include Carandini, Torelli and Coarelli, who joined the great ancient art historian Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli in the cultural association (and later in the review) *Dialoghi di Archeologia*. The only prehistorian in this group was Renato Peroni, and he provided the first real ‘explanation’, in Marxist terms, of Italian proto-history (Peroni 1969; later translated in English in Ridgway and Ridgway 1979).

### **Phase 5 (1971–2000)**

During the 1970s, many events brought new ideas and methods into Italian prehistoric studies, including:

- 1) a growth in collaboration, especially in northern Italy, with English archaeologists, bearers of new theoretical approaches and of an up-to-date excavation methodology (in the same years Andrea Carandini discovered and imported into our country the Harris matrix);
- 2) a larger use of mathematical and statistical methods, and the first use of computers, with overall thanks to Amilcare Bietti (Bietti and Cazzella 1976–77);
- 3) the entrance, into many State Offices for Antiquities (Soprintendenze), of prehistory scholars;
- 4) the activity of amateur archaeologists, responsible for the discovery of many prehistoric sites.

Notwithstanding this real progress and the publication, by Anna Maria Bietti Sestieri, of the first article on Italian prehistory, based on functional and substantivist theories (Bietti Sestieri 1976–77), the main approach of Italian prehistory studies of the period can be described as ‘cultural-historical’.

Only in the 1980s was it possible to detect real innovation, with the sudden spread of ‘processualist’ theories, in articles devoted primarily to method, theory and settlement archaeology, but also in articles about burial analysis and exchange patterns (for a detailed analysis, see Guidi 1996a, 2000). A thorough examination of this work demonstrates that more than 90% of the papers, published between 1982 and 1988, were written only by scholars working in Central Italy (many of them in Rome), or in the North-east (Veneto), while in the rest of the country these approaches were ignored.

In Italian prehistory it is possible to detect the absolute lack of one of the pillars of the processual school: the attempt to create a ‘scientific community’ (in Kuhnian terms), with shared methodological and theoretical approaches. However, the situation in Italian prehistory, in the late twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries, can only be described, following a good definition by Maurizio Tosi (Tosi 1985–86), as an archaeological ‘pluriverse’ (see Figure 1), with at least six different traditions:

- a ‘practical’ approach, based mainly on data publication and organization of local museums and regional congresses, very strong in southern Italy and in the islands;
- a ‘mainstream’ approach, based on a high level of fieldwork and on the updated version of the integration between archaeology and natural sciences, normally sceptical about the explanation of data, well represented in Northern Italy and Tuscany, not by chance the richer part of the country, where a strong political movement, claiming for a sort of secession from the rest of country uses politically a mythical ‘Celtic’ past against the hated Roman government;
- the ‘Roman’ school that, notwithstanding the differences between historical and anthropological approaches, considers data explanation to be one of the first research objectives; many of these prehistorians work in Central Italy and share a prevailing Marxist orientation;
- the ‘processual’ school of north-eastern Italy, characterized by a strong interest in Middle Range Theory and intensive computer applications, and by the use of an often complex and initiatory jargon;

- a 'post-processual' circle, based in Campania, mainly constituted by the Naples pupils of Bruno D'Agostino, one of the best scholars of the Southern Italian Iron Age;
- the Etruscologists and Classical archaeologists, often considering themselves perfectly able to deal with proto-history (specially with the Iron Age), and often without contacts with prehistorians.

## Conclusions

The present state of prehistoric studies in Italy is really difficult to define.

On one side, the level of fieldwork and of many publications and congresses is considerably high, there is an impressive spread of research, and a great number of local museums, primarily exhibiting prehistoric materials.

On the other side, the imbalance of funds and academic chairs between Prehistory and Classical archaeology is particularly discouraging.

After many years of existence in different academic sectors, a recent law unifies all the 'archaeologies', with the obvious consequence of an always more indisputable 'political' prevalence of Classical archaeology. For this reason, an even larger group of Palaeolithic specialists chose to align themselves academically with the natural scientists.

In 2011 we will celebrate 150 years of the Italian state. Italian prehistory grew up alongside of it; we must hope that it will resist the current political climate of progressive deterioration of national identity.

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## Iberian Crossroads: Archaeology and Dictatorships

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'Mucho pudo hacerse con la cooperación de prehistoriadores de ambos países. [...].  
Lo que se acuerde de prehistoria y sobre todo las reuniones científicas,  
una vez en un país y otra en otro donde nos conozcamos  
y tratemos mas íntimamente los geólogos de las dos naciones  
y en general los naturalistas y especialistas en las demás ciencias,  
redundará seguramente, en beneficio de ambos países.'<sup>1</sup>

### Beginning(s)

The Iberian political regimes of Portugal and Spain were unable to completely ignore each others' political or cultural agendas. In reality, there was a convergence of interests and intellectual efforts, especially when these concerned science and technology, and involved the exchange of ideas,

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from E. Hernández-Pacheco to Joaquim M. Fontes, reproduced in Cardoso *et al.*: 195–321).