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ITALIAN PREHISTORY AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE CIVIC MUSEUM

Elisabetta Cova (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee)

The latter half of the nineteenth century witnessed the establishment of prehistorical archaeology as a scientific discipline in Italy, as well as the founding of the modern Italian nation state. Evolutionism, positivism and a strong sense of national identity informed prehistoric research and the activities of individuals such as Strobel, Pigorini, and Chierici, who are regarded as the ‘founding fathers’ of Italian prehistory. In nineteenth century Italy and throughout Europe prehistory was used to trace the roots of a nation back to a very remote past, thus reinforcing the idea of national identity. It was in this dynamic cultural and political climate, after the creation of the Kingdom of Italy in 1861, that the first Italian civic museums were founded in an effort to establish national identity by promoting local history and archaeological activity. In fact, it was the need to find a proper place to preserve and display locally excavated material, as well as document the history and cultural identity of local communities, that led to the foundation of several civic museums in Northern Italy, such as those at Reggio Emilia, Bologna and Modena. As a consequence, these civic museums were not only the first museums of prehistory and pre-Roman cultures in Italy, but also the products of the cultural and political climate of late nineteenth century Europe. This poster explores the circumstances surrounding the foundation of these three museums and considers how each museum’s own institutional past continues to impact its role in the present.

Bologna: Museo Civico Archeologico

The Chierici Museum in Reggio Emilia was founded by Gaetano Chierici in 1862. Chierici was a local priest, passionately involved in the political movement that led to the unification of Italy and one of the fathers of Italian prehistorical archaeology. He attained international prominence through his rigorous stratigraphic excavations, which allowed him to identify previously unknown prehistoric cultures in Italy, such as the lemene. He also founded with Pigorini and Strobel the first Italian journal of Prehistory, the Bulletin di Preistoria Italiana, initially printed in Reggio Emilia.

Later, a collection of prehistoric material from different regions of Italy and Europe was added for comparative purposes in what was called the ‘sale dei confronti preistorici.’ The archaeological museum became one of the most visited institutions in Italy, a model for other important museums, like the Museo Nazionale Preistorico Etnografico Luigi Pigorini (1876) and the Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia (1889) in Rome.

In Modena, the museum underwent considerable restoration and reorganization in the 1980s. At that time, curators decided that the original display of the Archaeology Gallery should be restored, as evidence of nineteenth century museology. The old cases were reused and the criteria implemented preserved as an artifact of Chierici’s work, as well as evidence of late nineteenth century archaeological research and theories. Instead of dismantling the old display to incorporate newly excavated material, curators created new archaeological sections, which interpreted and presented the findings according to modern museological and archaeological approaches.

In Bologna, the museum retained its nineteenth century Villanovan-Etruscan display, with the exception of transferring some objects among cases and updating the information that accompanied them. Today, the layout of the space, the position of the cases and the frescoes on the walls are virtually the same as they were at the time of the museum opening in 1881.

Pulini (Director, Museo Civico Archeologico Etnologico, Modena). For more information, contact Elisabetta Cova at covae@uwm.edu.