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# ITALIAN PREHISTORY AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE CIVIC MUSEUM

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The latter half of the nineteenth century witnessed the establishment of prehistoric 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.



## REGGIO EMILIA: MUSEO CHIERICI DI PALETOLOGIA



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 prehistoric archaeology. He attained international prominence through his rigorous stratigraphic excavations, which allowed him to identify previously unknown prehistoric cultures in Italy, such as the *terramare*. He also founded with Pigorini and Strobel the first Italian journal of Prehistory, the *Bullettino di Paletoologia Italiana*, initially printed in Reggio Emilia.



The museum represented the results of Chierici's research. The collection, which included material from the Neolithic period to Pre-Roman times, maintained a local character; artifacts from other regions were included only as comparanda for the archaeological material from Reggio Emilia. Objects were grouped chronologically and typologically in accordance with contemporary positivistic criteria and all finds were displayed. Ethnographic material from Asia, the Americas and Africa complemented the archaeological collections as typical of the comparative approaches of prehistoric studies of the time.



Photo ca. 1886

## Bologna: MUSEO CIVICO ARCHEOLOGICO

Bologna was at the forefront of archaeological research in Italy with the discovery of the Villanovan culture and the Etruscan town of Marzabotto, among others. The great interest raised by these discoveries determined the appointment of Bologna as the site for the fifth International Congress of Prehistoric Anthropology and Archaeology in 1871. It was the choice of Bologna as the site of the congress that led to the creation of the museum in the same year. After a general reorganization, the museum officially reopened in 1881.



Photo ca. 1881



Later, a collection of prehistoric material from different regions of Italy and Europe was added for comparative purposes in what was called the 'sala dei confronti preistorici'. The archaeological museum became one of the most respected 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.

## MODENA: MUSEO CIVICO ARCHEOLOGICO ETNOLOGICO

The museum was established in 1871 to coincide with the International Congress in Bologna and to provide a suitable place for the preservation and display of prehistoric material recently excavated. The core collection consisted of local *terramare* material excavated by Giovanni Canestrini (1835-1900), a professor of Zoology at the University of Modena and one of Italy's first expounders of Darwin's evolutionary theory.



Photo ca. 1886

The display of archaeological material followed the positivistic scientific criteria of the time; Carlo Boni (1830-1894), the founder of the museum and its first director, arranged archaeological artifacts in chronological and geographical order, and then grouped them typologically. Like in Reggio Emilia, in 1875 the museum was enlarged by the addition of an ethnographic collection intended to present the culture and life of peoples, who could be compared to the prehistoric inhabitants of the Modena territory.

After 1900, despite an enthusiastic start, Italian Civic museums suffered a period of stagnation and paralysis. For decades the collections of these museums were neglected. In the 1970s and 80s, a renewed interest in museums brought resources for reorganizing and updating the collections. At that time, museum professionals realized that the gap between the interpretation of the original archaeological collections and current archaeological research had widened, while new museological approaches rendered the existing presentation of the archaeological material anachronistic. After considering the nature and history of these museums, curators at each institution decided that the original nineteenth century displays should be maintained and restored in order to preserve evidence of the museums' history and the cultural climate which led to their creation.



Photo 2007



Photo 2007

In Reggio Emilia curators decided that the original layout of the Chierici Museum was to be restored and 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



Photo 2008

Bologna 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.



Photo 2007

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 by the first directors were followed. Today both original and new materials dating from the Palaeolithic to the Middle Ages are displayed in the original cases and ordered according to chronological, geographical and typological classifications.

In all these museums it was decided to put the original curatorial practices, as well as the archaeological theories that informed them, on display. The nineteenth century display with its cases, mountings, labels and classification system became an 'object' to be preserved, restored and presented to the public. Frozen in time and unavailable for new interpretations, the museum underwent a process of objectification becoming an artifact itself – in essence, creating a 'museum of the museum'. The museum has been interpreted not only as a repository of objects, a place for preservation, and a mediator of the past to the community, but also as a site of memory, where the museum's history and identity could be preserved and re-interpreted in the present. If the museum is the result of ideas and meanings 'stratified' throughout its history, the need for the preservation and intelligibility of these 'strata' is better explained. In this light, the choice of preserving nineteenth century installations can also be understood. The nineteenth century galleries can be interpreted as one of the layers of the museum's stratigraphy, and therefore an essential part of the modern museum, crucial to its present role. The choice of conserving and making intelligible to the visitors the history and therefore the nature of the museum, even by 'objectifying' old displays, may be worthy of consideration and potentially applicable to other museums. This approach may not be generally accepted, but the reasons behind it should be considered and evaluated as a different way of thinking about the museum as a reflection of its own institutional past.