Italian Prehistory and the Emergence of the Civic Museum

Elisabetta Cova

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umass.edu/rasenna

Recommended Citation
Cova, Elisabetta (2009) "Italian Prehistory and the Emergence of the Civic Museum," Rasenna: Journal of the Center for Etruscan Studies: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 1. Available at: https://scholarworks.umass.edu/rasenna/vol2/iss1/1
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 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 PALENOLOGIA

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 achieved international prominence through his rigorous stratigraphic excavations, which allowed him to identify previously unknown prehistoric cultures in Italy, such as the lamiere. He also founded with Pigorini and Strobel the first Italian journal of Prehistory, the Bulletin di Paleontologia 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 positivist criteria, and all items 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.

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 Archeology 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.

In Bologna, the museum underwent considerable restoration and reorganization in the 1980s. At that time, 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.

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 Boni (1830-1894), the founder of the museum and its first director, as well as archaeological artifacts from 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, such as the Museo Nazionale Preistorico Etrusco 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 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.

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. Freezing in time and unchangeable 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 reinterpreted 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 the visitor 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.

Special Thanks: Dr. P. Macelari (Archaeological Inspector, Museo Civico, Reggio Emilia), E. Favioli (Director, Museo Civico, Reggio Emilia), Dr. P. Giovetti (Curator, Museo Civico Archeologico, Bologna), Dr. A. Cardarelli (Former director, Museo Civico Archeologico Etnologico, Modena) and Dr. L. Pulini (Director, Museo Civico Archeologico Etnologico, Modena). For more information, contact Elisabetta Cova at covae@uwm.edu.