

The Casal de Pazzi Museum: a Pleistocene deposit in the suburbs of the imperial city

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Abstract: *The Casal de' Pazzi Museum was built, starting from the 90s, on a Pleistocene deposit, dating to about 200.000 years ago. At the time the site was very different from now as evidenced by the finding of a Neanderthal skull fragment and the fossil remains of Elephas (Palaeoloxodon) antiquus, auroch, hippo, deer, etc. Since its birth, the Museum followed a strong communicative strategy. In addition to the traditional forms of exhibition, visual and/or interactive communication tools were preferred, with the aim to keep visitor attention. Its achievement is also due to the role played in upgrading an urban peripheral neighborhood through a network of relationships with the territorial, social and cultural background.*

Résumé: *Le Musée de Casal de' Pazzi a été construit, à partir des années 90, sur un dépôt du Pléistocène, qui remonte à il ya environ 200,000 années. À l'époque le site était très différent d'aujourd'hui, comme en témoigne la découverte d'un fragment de Neanderthal crâne et les restes fossiles de Elephas (Palaeoloxodon) antiquus, aurochs, hippopotame, cerf, etc. Depuis sa naissance, le Musée a suivi un forte stratégie communicative. En plus des formes traditionnelles d'exposition, ont été préférées médias visuels et / ou interactive, avec l'objectif de conserver actif l'attention des visiteurs. Son succès est aussi dû au rôle joué dans le développement d'un quartier urbain périphérique à travers un réseau de relations avec le contexte territorial, social et culturel.*

Patrizia Gioia graduated in 1979 from the University "La Sapienza" of Rome, with a thesis on the Early Upper Paleolithic in Italy, starting from the study of the lithic industry from the Aurignacian site of Fontana Nuova (Sicily). In 1987, she completed her Ph.D., whose topic was the transition from Middle to Upper Paleolithic in Italy. In 1994, she obtained the Bachelor in Prehistory, with a thesis on the lithic industry of Eneolithic site of Casale del Cavaliere (Rome). In 2014 he obtained the National Scientific Habilitation, becoming suitable to university teaching as associate professor.

From 1981 she is archaeologist for the Municipality of Rome, where she is responsible for the Prehistory and for the preservation and valorization of the Pleistocene deposit of Casal de Pazzi, then opened to the public as museum in 2015, receiving about 20,000 visitors so far.

She has also directed numerous studies, surveys and excavations in the territory of the city and mainly in the East suburb of Rome, also taking care of musealization of the most important archaeological sites discovered.

Since 2008 she is Adjunct Professor at the Department of Sciences of Antiquity of the University "La Sapienza" of Rome, teaching "Museology".

1. Introduction

The site of Casal de' Pazzi is located in the east Suburbs of Rome, today it is included in a densely populated urban area between the Aniene and Tiber rivers (Fig. 1). It is a fossil stretch of an ancient river, dated about 200,000 years ago. It was discovered in 1981 during the urbanization works at Rebibbia, a district north-east of Rome (Anzidei, 1983a; Anzidei, 1983b). The finding of a fossil tusk of elephant gave start to the archaeological investigation lasted to 1986. At the site it is possible to see what is left of an ancient river: the riverbed, with the bedrock and tufa blocks, transported by the once flowing river (Anzidei and Ruffo, 1985). The stratigraphic sequence is visible in the deposit as well as in a large display case: alternating lenses of sands, gravels and clays that slowly filled the river basin. The water incised at first the bed rock, the "Tufo Lionato", a volcanic rock dated about 353,000 years ago (Kerner and Marra, 1998; Kerner and Renne, 1998); then started filling it, alternatively with large blocks, gravels rich in volcanic materials, sands and clays. When the riverbed was totally filled, the river started to flow elsewhere (Segre, 1983).

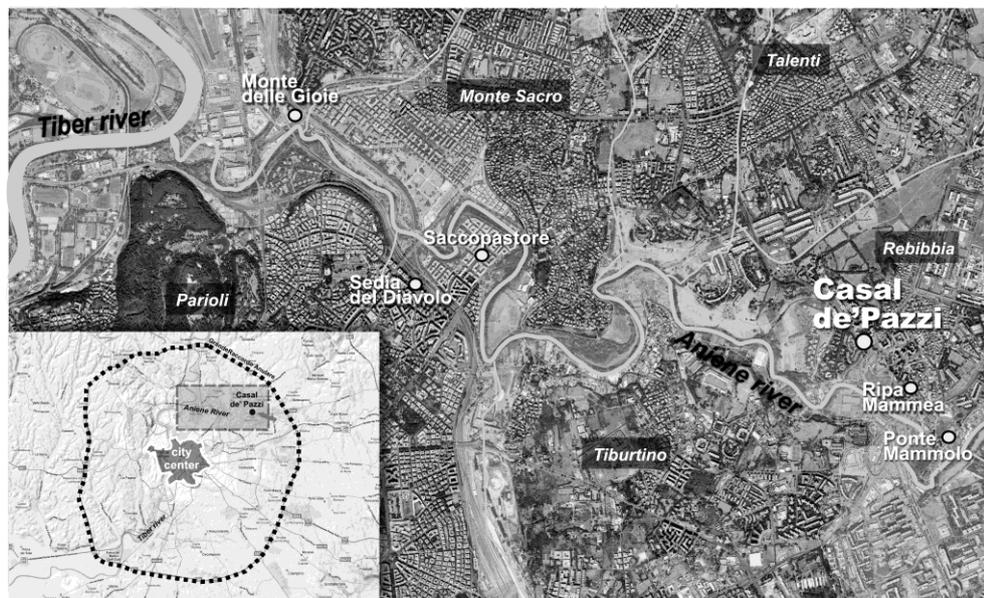


Figure 1. Localization of Casal de' Pazzi site and the lost Pleistocene sites in the lower Aniene valley (Rome).

The finds are very rich although, being in a river environment, all the remains were reworked by water and were not in an original position.

The remains of *Elephas (Palaeoloxodon) antiquus* strike the imagination of most visitors because of their size and quantity: some thirty tusks were found, together with molars, skull and basin fragments, as well as some long bones. But many other species of mammals and birds have been found totaling about 2200 remains. Furthermore

the fossil leaves of a species of elm (*Zelkova crenata*), now extinct in Italy, were found in a layer of clay. At last in 1983 the fragment of a human parietal bone was discovered under a tufa block (Manzi et al., 1990); According to the suggested chronology, this is the time period when the Neanderthals peopled Europe (Mellars, 2004). In addition to, more than 1,500 lithic tools were collected, made on small pebbles, as it is usual in coastal central Italy (Anzidei and Gioia, 1990) (Fig. 2).

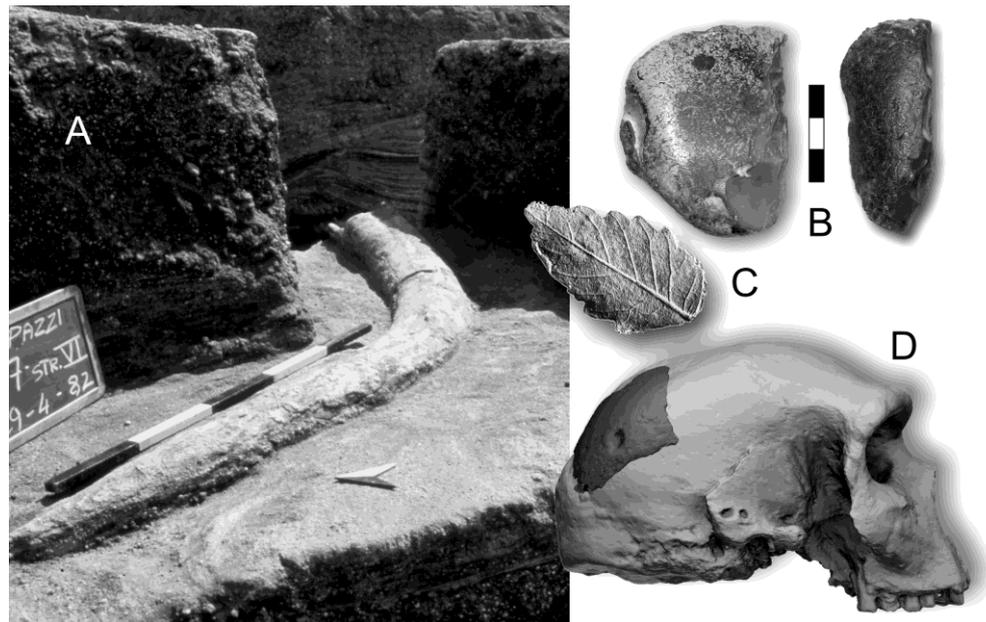


Figure 2. Some of the findings at Casal de' Pazzi. A: elephant tusk found during the excavations in the 80s; B: two lithic tools; C: fossil leaf of *Zelkova crenata*; D: fragment of human skull.

The set of findings makes the site of Casal de 'Pazzi a really significant Pleistocene deposit: it is exceptionally well preserved, in the heart of a modern city; it allows to reconstruct and figure an ancient landscape; it evidences the presence, since early times, of human groups in the future territory of Rome, who followed a hunter-gatherer way of life.

At last it is the only Pleistocene site, of the many once existing in the lower Aniene valley (Anzidei et al., 2004), to be preserved and visible today (Fig. 1). Indeed many sites, known already from eighteenth century, are disappeared today, among these the most famous was Saccopastore, in which were found, in the '20s and' 30s, two Neanderthal skulls dating to about 125,000 years B.P. (AA.VV. 1983).

The significance of findings goaded the protection and the promotion of the site, and the partnership among many institutions has made possible the realization of the current museum.

2. Materials and Methods

preserving the site

Many actions are followed to the excavation to carry out at first a full protection of the site. Unfortunately, in the 80s, only 300 of the 1,200 square meters excavated, were preserved. In 1986, at the end of excavation, was built a preliminary protection with foamed clay, plaster and wood. At the same time a permanent cover was planned. This first project was aimed mainly at protecting the deposit from natural hazards and from vandalism (Anzidei and Morganti, 1988).

Just few partial works were then carried out and in the following years, up to 1995, the site was totally neglected (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. The decay of the site in the early '90s.

In 1996 the project was modified by architects of the Municipality of Rome, and transformed into a museum on the site, adding exhibition areas. Architectural barriers were also removed. In 2000 the protective building was completed and in 2001 the deposit was restored in partnership with the Istituto Centrale per il Restauro. In 2007 a new monumental fence was built, and a light structure was also added to cover the visitor path. In the same year were relocated the exhibits that had been stored in archaeological warehouses (Gioia, 2004; Gioia, 2005).

Valuing the site

As well as carry out the work needed to protect the site, museological and museographic actions followed to make it understood.

Two ways were chosen to promote the site: the selection of effective communication tools in addition to the founding of a network of relationships with the surrounding territory and with the whole city.

Because valorization does not mean extract value from cultural heritage, but to count on their cultural and educational value, we have chosen to focus on appropriate media.

Objects contained in a museum are signs, especially in an "archeological" museum where what we see often has lost its original function to become a tool of knowledge of the ancient ways of life. Consequently a new communication circuit must be activated because new are the meanings of the objects.

Therefore crucial task of the exposure must be to provide the tools to enable communication, offering "a code" that allows visitors to understand the information and to reconstruct the original context of the object (Antinucci, 2014).

In the case of Casal de' Pazzi, the context is visible just in the museum, because there the site itself has become a museum. But troubles of communication are due to the far distance in time of the displayed objects. It was necessary to find the "code" suitable not only for an informed public, able to understand on its own the message provided the exhibition, but above all for the common visitors, who should be able to understand the contents of the museum.

For this reason, in addition to the traditional forms of exhibition, communication tools more direct, like those of visual and/or engaging type, were preferred. We have used new educational techniques based on interactive tools such as real and virtual reconstructions and hands-on labs. The aim is to make the visitor interact and to keep his/her attention.

Essentially all the stages of the visit contribute to build the path of a digital storytelling museum, adopting a set of strategies and techniques as more engaging and inclusive, taking advantage of today's technology, which represents a powerful tool to implement this strategy (Palombini, 2012; Pujol et al., 2013).

“Storytelling is the vivid description of ideas, beliefs, personal experiences, and life-lessons through stories or narratives that evoke powerful emotions and insights” (Serrat, 2010, p.361).

In this perspective we have thought the Museum as a place in which there is an interrelation between the virtual component and the physical presence (Handler Miller, 2013). It is a narrative habitat where the person is supposed to play an active role and where a collective enjoyment is preferred in order that the story proceeds through the effect of more than one decision and so that as well as the human relationship with technology, there also remains a powerful interpersonal relationship. The set up interactive system react both with the use of technological intermediaries or through traditional methods of communication- touch, the voice, a gesture, etc.- so as to create a more natural situation. The museum becomes more a dynamic place, not just a place for collecting and exhibiting: this is a distinguishing feature in the passage from an idea of a museum as a collection to that of a museum as narration.

This approach implemented at Casal de' Pazzi Museum has shown that storytelling is a valid framework for the exhibition's conceptualization, it is also a practical support for the contents' display, it is a relevant educational method to convey the “museum message”. Hence, the use of textual and digital tools can live together and overlap, modifying the typical mechanism of the cultural promotion and creating a trait d'union among the archaeological context, exposed objects, curator's viewpoint, etc.

These the communication choices.

We then wished a museum connected to territory, a cultural landmark for people who live there. A place of participation. A place of active inclusion of our stakeholders (inhabitants, specific audiences, etc.), in order to make the museum a forum for dialogue, interaction, construction of shared contents, projects, knowledge, social inclusion, adoption of cultural heritage (Satta, 2005).

The Museum can even become a place where participation, in the broadest sense of involvement in the planning and in the changes of own territory, is built.

This perspective, although revisited in modern terms, is inspired by the concept of eco-museum theorized in France in the 60s (Rivière 1989).

Since then, and after many years, the idea that the cultural heritage can be the basis for building of a new citizenship that accepts in person the responsibility for the preservation and transmission to future generations of cultural Heritage, begins to emerge. The community, feeling this burden of responsibility, initiates actions in favor of their own territory and become the engine of development proposals.

The museum thus becomes a promoter of the formation of the civic conscience of the community. It, once elitist storage place, reserved for a minority, limited to its container, now opens to the territory as a whole. It becomes an expression of a community seen as the entire population who lives those places. It 'an integrated project to protect and valorize; its action is directed to the cultural heritage as a whole and not limited only to store a collection of objects (Riva, 2008).

3. Results

The communication choices described above is already perceptible by the outside visibility of museum that is provided by two large panels with artistic reconstructions of the Pleistocene environment (Fig. 4). This project was realized by the artist Vincenzo Montini and involved a social cooperative that makes working current and former detainees.



Figure 4. The two panels created in artistic majolica placed at the entrance of the Museum, with the reconstruction of Pleistocene landscapes.

The visit itinerary includes, as a first step, the view of the deposit from the top of a footbridge (Fig. 5). Natural lighting shows big pinkish rocks and fossil remains: up to 4 meters elephant tusks, teeth, vertebrae. It is the "archaeological" landscape, what survived after excavation (Gioia and Persiani, 2011).

Then, a darkening installation "unhooks" the visitor from an objective reading of the remains. A voiceover and related lights give simple answers to the questions raised by this fossil landscape, unexpected in the dense urban texture around it, enclosed by walls.

Henceforth, the visitor is carried to imagine what is not there anymore. Through computer technology the riverbed is filled with "virtual" water, making understanding, almost physically, that we are in a river. In this step the suggestion prevails. On the large wall located opposite the runway, a reconstruction of Pleistocene landscape appears: a short movie, which contains both animation sequences that fragments of actual shots (Palombini et al., 2013).



Figure 5. An overview of the Pleistocene deposit.

The river, the plants, the animals appear, the focal point is the 3D reconstruction of straight-tusked elephant (Fig. 6). In the background the voice of a man who two hundred thousand years ago, lived right there tells his world. The video "breaks through" the wall, alternating the vision of the past (the Rome of Pleistocene through the reconstruction of the landscapes and of the elephant) with images of the present (sequences of animals still exist, albeit in habitats other than those of current Rome).



Figure 6. A scene of a movie shown during the visit with the reconstruction of an elephant herd (*Elephas (Paleoxodonta) antiquus*).

After this full immersion, different levels of deepening are provided. In a covered outdoor space, some educational panels "tell" the evolution of the landscape and life in the Roman Campagna, starting from when on Rome there was the sea (about 3 million years ago), until reaching to the present. They are characterized by a number of landscape reconstructions and by bright colors: each color features a topic (Fig. 7).

In the little exhibition hall, which overlooks two large glass windows on deposit, some of the discovered findings are shown. The itinerary starts from environmental topics to a close with human activities (Fig. 8). The showcases are equipped with reconstruction drawings. In this space there is also a touch screen, where the visitor can deal with the issues provided by the exposure in a playful and interactive way. In this "Pleistostation" they can use questionnaires, video games, movies, and hypertexts. Also a specific video game was created. It compares the life of a child today with that of a Neanderthal one. All the steps of a day are analyzed and the visitors are encouraged to look for similarities between the current technological and daily life and the Paleolithic one (Fig. 9).

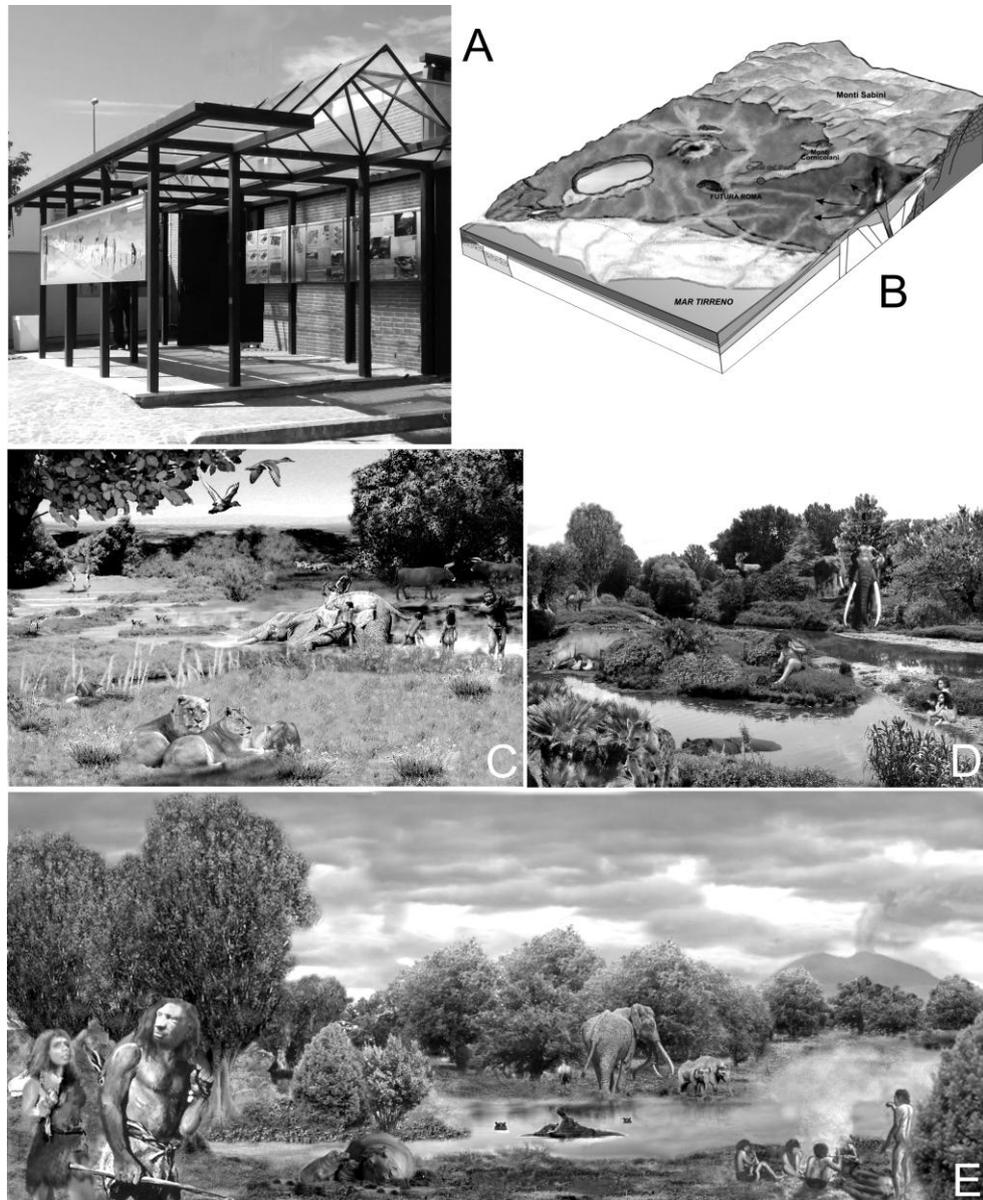


Figure 7. A: overview of educational panels placed outside the museum; B: one of the geological reconstructions (the explosion of the Albano Volcano); C: reconstruction of the landscape in the coastal area of Rome about 300,000 years ago; D: reconstruction of the landscape along the lower Aniene valley about 200,000 years ago; E: reconstruction of the landscape of the Saccopastore site (about 120,000 years ago).



Figure 8. The showcases in the exhibition room.



Figure 9. A stage of the videogame shown in the “Pleistostation”.

The last step of the visit takes place in the outdoor area and proposes a flora reconstruction that characterized the banks of a river about 200,000 years ago. Visitors can relive the ancient landscapes along a path that invokes a river route (Fig. 10). Three rest areas, designed to achieve educational laboratories, were built. Here a range of events can be also held, useful for promoting the Museum and to create close relationships with the people and the territory.

This is the visit itinerary created. But the museum is also active through many educational activities. Since many years, although the museum was in progress, many internships were held. Many students of "La Sapienza", University of Rome, and sometimes even from other universities, have worked, with passion, at the museum.

Whenever possible, they lead guided tours and lessons to primary school children. They have also drafted texts for small publications, and have welcomed visitors during guided visits on Saturdays and Sundays.

Their passion has generated new ideas to enhance the museum image, such as the creation of a profile on the social network "Facebook", which has reached over 5,000 friends around the world in a few months. This outcome has encouraged us all to open a page, which grows by the day: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Museo-di-Casal-de-Pazzi/224375934292562>.

Another important result was the establishment of a network of relationships with the territorial, social and cultural background.

An important link has been created with the nearby school "Palombini", which has joined the project "The school adopts a monument", choosing the Museum for more than ten years. This project involves every year many schools of Rome who "adopt" monuments, landscapes, historic and natural sites, relevant in the local context in which they are (<http://www.lascuolaadottaunmonumento.it/index.php>).

The pupils, with the help of their teachers and experts, studying the sites adopted, becoming their "guardians".

The project has so far achieved significant results and has been enthusiastically received by schools and children, helping to spread in the city love and respect for the artistic, cultural and landscape, promoting a sense of community that underlies of civil society.

The students, in addition to studying the prehistory through what is displayed in the Museum, during a special week dedicated to cultural heritage, become their own small guides, explaining to their parents and friends all that is visible and the significance of preserving the remains of the past for generations to come (http://www.icscuolapalombini.it/ICP/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&id=62&Itemid=143) (Fig. 11).

The network of relationships with the territory does not concern only schools. The Museum is located at the margins of an important nature city park: the Aniene Park. In the area there are many organizations and cultural associations with which the Museum has close relationships, sharing actions and visitors.

Finally, a very important presence in the neighborhood is constituted by Rebibbia prison, located very close to the Museum.

Over the years we have tried to build a relationship with this institution, involving current and former detainees in some work. For a year, some operators were attended in museum, executing upkeep in the garden and other activities are in progress.



Figure 10. The garden of Museum: a pathway in the shape of a small river is surrounded by Pleistocene plants.

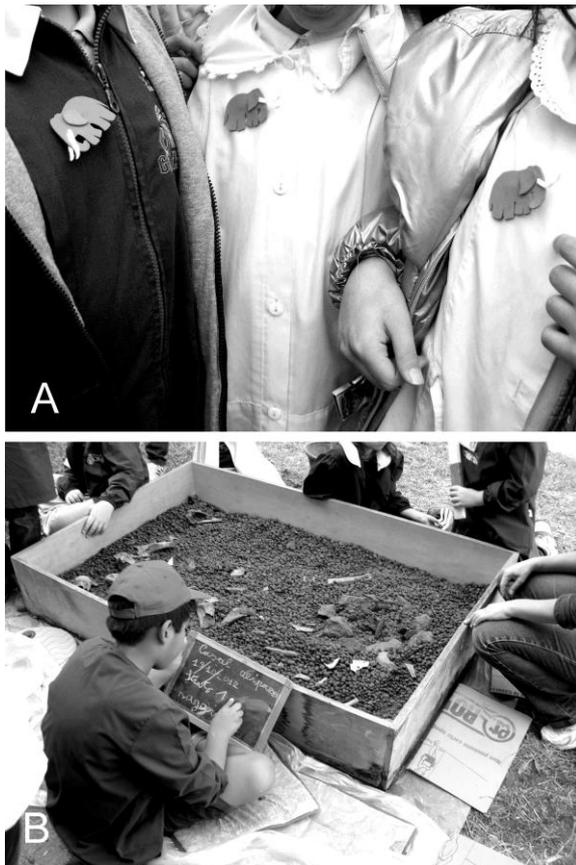


Figure 11. The young students of the Palombini school that adopted the Museum. A: small guides; B: children engaged in an excavation lab.

4. Conclusions

Starting from an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the Museum, a museological path was built and then realized.

The strengths consist of the oneness of a site so ancient in full urban texture of the city and of the fascination of topics related to the earliest prehistory (Fig. 12).

The weak points consist of the importance and the weight that the classical archeology has always played in the capital of the Roman Empire. In addition, the museum is located in an urban outskirts yet to redevelop.

The narrative approach supported by advanced technologies seems so be particularly significant for a museum related to ancient prehistory, whose ability to tell his story is low and where communication is very challenging.

The ease of understanding of the complex issues that the museum offers and the creation of a network of relationships with the territorial, social and cultural background, has led to a significant presence of public. Many ongoing activities are designed and planned inside the framework of the close relationships established with the urban study and research centers, mostly the neighboring ones. The ongoing public opening, Which took place from April 2015, is confirming the effectiveness of museological choices made over the years. In fact, almost 20,000 people have so far visited this small museum, reaching the outskirts of Rome, not only from all over the city, but Also from many other Italian and foreign cities.

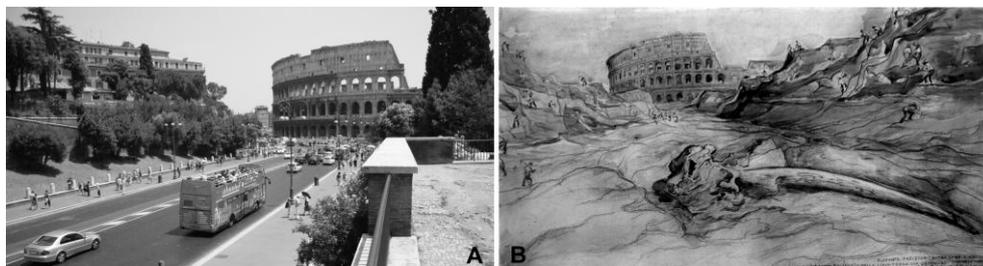


Figure 12. A: the Via dei Fori Imperiali at Rome today; B: the same road in the thirties when, during its building, the remains of an straight-tusked elephant were discovered.

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