

Experience of archaeological didactics and museal interaction on the Palaeolithic of the Pradis Plateau (Pordenone, Italy)

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Abstract: *The “Museo della Grotta” was opened to the public in 2001, in the small mountain village of Pradis (Clauzetto). Since that year, the activity of the museum has been deeply bound to the scientific research carried out by the University of Ferrara on the prehistoric sites of Clusantin and Rio Secco caves. In last years, the museum and the Municipal administration launched many new cultural and educational activities such as: the “Prehistory Days”, conferences and courses for local guides. Nowadays the museum activities of cultural enhancement of the territory and scientific research represent a key attraction to the Pradis Valley, acting in this scenario as a promotion hub for the whole territory.*

Résumé: *Le “Musée de la Grotte” a été ouvert au public en 2001, dans le petit village de montagne qu’est Pradis (Clauzetto). Depuis cette année, l’activité du musée a été profondément liée à la recherche scientifique menée par l’Université de Ferrara sur les sites préhistoriques des grottes du Clusantin et du Rio Secco. Au cours des dernières années, le Musée et l’administration municipale ont lancé de nombreuses nouvelles activités culturelles et éducatives telles que: les «Journées de la Préhistoire”, des conférences et des cours pour les guides locaux. Aujourd’hui, les activités du musée de valorisation culturelle du territoire et recherche scientifique représentent une des principales attractions de la vallée de Pradis, agissant dans ce scénario comme une plaque tournante pour la promotion de l’ensemble du territoire.*

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1. The setting

The Pradis plateau (Clauzetto, Pordenone, Italy) lies at 500 meter above sea level, at the southern edge of the Carnic Pre-Alps. The area is dotted with karstic cavities which in many cases have yielded important archaeological sequences spanning from the Palaeolithic to the historic epochs (Fig.1). Neanderthals and Sapiens exploited for millennia the natural resources of the plateau, sheltering in the caves along the Cosa and Rio Secco streams. Caves have become an important reference point for the study of the Palaeolithic, with many sites which have given evidence of multiple aspects of the life-ways of ancient hunter-gatherers populations. Rio Secco cave preserves an archive of potential interest for understanding the late Neanderthals in the northeast of the Italian Peninsula, between 49-42 ky cal BP and the diffusion of the Gravettian culture, dated between 33-31 ky cal BP (Peresani et al., 2012, 2014; Peresani e Gurioli 2007; Romandini et al., 2014; Talamo et al., 2014). Clusantin cave hosted small groups of Epigravettian specialized marmot hunters (Peresani *et al.* 2008; Peresani et al. 2011; Romandini et al., 2012). Similar evidence was found in the Grotte Verdi (or Pradis Caves): a complex of shelters and caves whose deposits were partly excavated in the 1970s (Bartolomei et al., 1977; Corai, 1980; Gurioli et al. 2004; Gurioli et al. 2011). The Pradis Plateau overhangs the Friulian plain, cut by the Tagliamento river. The Friuli region is particularly interesting for the study of ancient human peopling, as it has always worked like a transitional area between Eastern and Western European environments.

2. Museo della Grotta

The history of the museum and its role in fostering prehistoric research in the area

The history of the museum is deeply linked to that of the exploration of the Pradis caves. The speleological interest in the cave started in the 1920s with the explorations by the Parish priest Giacomo Bianchini and the first mapping of the cavities. In the Postwar period Speleologist from Trieste further explored the area. In 1964 the Parish Priest Tiziano Cattaruzza, with the people of Pradis di Sotto, started works for a devotional and tourist fruition of the caves.

The deposits under the three great shelters were totally removed and thus the possibility of an accurate investigation of this site was lost. However, during the emptying of the shelters, lithic and faunal material was recovered and in 1969 it was used to set up the first permanent exhibition of archaeological and ethnographic remains in Pradis di Sotto on behalf of the Speleological Society and the Cultural Association of Pradis. The beginning of archaeological research in the area is to be individuated in the two short excavation campaigns directed by professor Bartolomei from the University of Ferrara in 1970 and 1971 on the residual deposits still *in situ* in the Grotte Verdi. Researches in the area only started again 30 years later. This long period of inactivity is to be partly attributed to the catastrophic Friuli Earthquake of 1976 which had also brought to the closure of the small local museum (Cescutti 2013). At the end of the 1990s, a renewed interest in the prehistory of the area by the Clauzetto Municipality led to the project of a new museum which was opened in 2001 in a purpose-constructed building at the centre of the Village of Pradis di Sotto.

From the very start, the existence of the museum has been bound to field research and popularization of the results. Two archaeological test-pits directed by one of us (Marco Peresani) were carried out in the Pradis area in 2001 and 2002, and led to the opening in June 2005 of the first “Archaeological research laboratory” in the Clusantin cave, just few hundred meters away from the museum.



Figure1: A) Location of the Pradis Plateau in the Italian peninsula and the new building of the “Museo della Grotta” opened in 2001. The museum holds the most notable finds discovered during the several archaeological campaigns in the cave sites as well as a collection of fossils. B) Image of the three Palaeolithic sites investigated.

This field project was inspired to the educational principles of the newborn museum network “Ecomuseo delle Dolomiti Friulane – Lis Aganis”, and the first two months of excavation recorded the attendance of more than 600 visitors. These achievements stimulated the setting-up, in spring 2007, of a new section of the museum, displaying the finds recovered in this shelter, and led in 2008 to the first popular/scientific publications. In 2013 a new season opened for the museum when it was partially reorganized with the display of the finds from Rio Secco Cave. This Palaeolithic site, still under excavation, is part of the “Last Neanderthal in Friuli” project which started in 2010, and it is scientifically headed by the University of Ferrara and carried out in collaboration with the Friuli Venezia-Giulia Region and the Clauzetto municipality, and also funded by the Province of Pordenone and the Eco-Museo Lis Aganis together with many private sponsors. In 2013 the educational activities were also re-organized, extending them to the whole year, and the connection to the visiting trail of the Grotte Verdi was made more effective.

The museum and its territory: collaborations with other local associations and institutions

The Pradis Valley is a rich and mixed territory, where archaeological sites are connected to naturalistic and speleological trails, historical monuments, and local traditions. This complex mosaic needs different knowledge and expertise for each of its elements, but at the same time needs a central point, a unique management organism to unravel, plan and develop the Valley's full potential. The museum was the perfect candidate for this role, for its position, facilities and personnel, as testified by the latest results in terms of feedback and visitors. Many institutions and associations were involved in this project, each bringing its own expertise and enthusiasm: The *Ecomuseo Lis Aganis*, the Clauzetto Municipality, the Speleological Group and the Cultural Association of Pradis, the archaeological association Archeo2000 are some of the partners with whom the activities have been created and organized.

3. Educational activities and festivals

The “Prehistory Days”

The *Giornate della Preistoria* (Prehistory Days) take place at the beginning of July, during two consecutive Sundays. Since 2010 they have been articulated into a “Neanderthal Sunday” and a “Sapiens Sunday” with three workshops each running five times a day. The workshops are designed and run by researchers and students of prehistory together with local guides (Fig.2). The theoretical explanations and practical activities are characterized by a philological accuracy, related to modern methodologies and discoveries in the field of archaeological research and human evolution. During the workshops for children, different activities, including guided tours to the museum and archaeological sites, are also offered to the public (Fig.2). In the prehistoric landscape of the Pradis Plateau, the cave and glade of Clusantin become a natural theatre where memories can be reacquired which had been

separated from us for millennia. This particular natural setting mediates the concepts and the practical gestures that are taught to the young participants.

The Prehistory Days are at the core of the scientific communication process of the museum and have grown into a cultural and tourist event which successfully promotes the Pradis territory, giving it a wide visibility not only limited to the summer event.



Figure 2: Educational and museum activities. Since 2010 many events have been organized in the Pradis area, as the successful “Prehistory Days”, guided tours for children, adults and families at the museum and archaeological sites, conferences and educational activities with local schools.

Archaeology, prehistory and territory all year around

The presence of the museum has made it possible to keep the educational activities and the public involvement the whole year around. Thanks to the collaboration with the local municipality and with the *Eco- Museo Lis Aganis*, a public competition was made for the selection, through a course and exam, of local guides. The local operators can now run the educational activities throughout the year. In the season 2012 – 2013 several new tourist and educational activities were carried out by this newly formed group of local guides, with the main goal of making the archaeological world known and appreciated by the population, teachers and students of the whole region. This is obtained through the explanation of prehistoric landscapes and cultures, scientific discoveries and latest results of the archaeological excavations in the Pradis sites. Brief courses are also organized during the winter months to provide the guides with updated information. The constant archaeological research in the Pradis Prehistory Valley also led to the publication of several scientific and educational articles and books, and to the participation at international congresses and the organization of local conferences.

Some numbers to sum up

The 2013 edition of Prehistory Days was attended by 452 participants, in 2014 the attendances doubled with a total of 910 participants. Moreover, the number of visitors at the museum and Grotte Verdi of Pradis in the recent years has increased. Even if the 2014 data only records the admissions from April to August, it is possible to observe that the number of visitors in both the sites are increasing. The creation of a combined ticket between the Pradis Caves and the museum was therefore really successful, in particular in the case of the museum, that in 2014 almost doubled the presences of 2013 with 1.490 combined tickets out of 2.759 total visitors (Fig. 3).

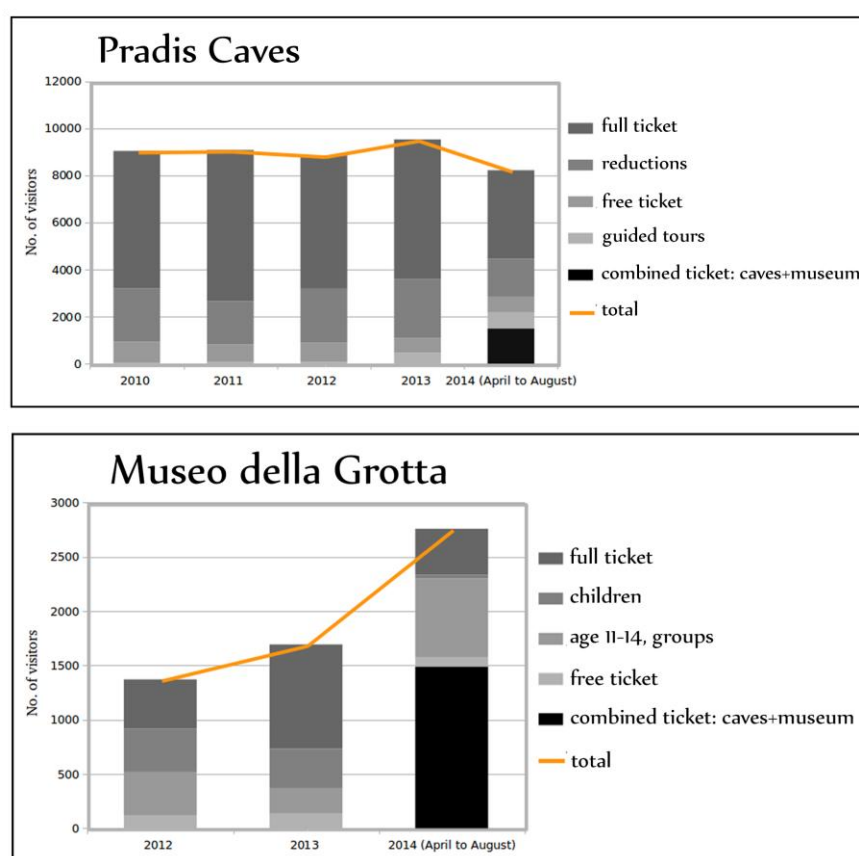


Figure 3: Number of visitors to the site of the Pradis caves (archaeological and naturalistic trail of the Cosa stream's gorge) and to the museum. The data shows the tickets sold until August 2014. It is possible to notice the high number of visitors for the year 2014, in particular for the museum, which doubled the total number of entrances due to the introduction of a combined ticket with the Pradis caves and the increase of school activities (age 11-14 and children). The year 2014 was a real turning point for the Pradis Plateau as the results of years of work and planning finally met, and exceeded, the expectations.

4. Conclusions and perspectives

That of the Pradis plateau is an excellent example of the ways in which prehistoric research can positively interact with a territory, stimulating multiple feedbacks. The research led by the University of Ferrara, developing in an organic way has left behind the tendency to retrieve archaeological data with little consideration of the present day social, cultural and economic contexts in which they are placed. The excavation laboratories have functioned as cells capable of nourishing other cells in need of new energy (as the museum of Pradis and the local associations were before archaeological research restarted), and to form together an organism adapted to the specific local context. Once set in motion, this organism is growing at an exponential rate. The facilities of the museum, the periodic presence of archaeologists and local guides in the territory, together with the organization of many public events, bought to the formation of a deep link of interest and trust between the local population and the archaeological enterprise, as testified by the current archaeological laboratory at the Rio Secco cave, and by the presence at the entrance of the Clauzetto Municipality of a a sign which welcomes the visitors to the “Valley of Prehistory”(Fig.4).

At the same time, all of this public attention has built a solid ground for the development of new scientific research projects, promotion events and educational activities.



Figure 4: Pradis, the Valley of Prehistory. The sign at the entrance of the municipality and the new promotional poster underline the distinctive characteristic of the territory as felt by the population. The museum and the archaeological sites are now part of the landscape and of the history of the Valley.

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