

Palaeontology and prehistory in Central Italy: an historical summary

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SUMMARY: Knowledge on prehistory and pleistocene palaeontology from the 16th to the 20th centuries in Central Italy Latium is hereafter described. The first identification of middle palaeolithic flint tools of human origin took place around 1550. In the middle of the 17th century the first macromammals fossil bones were observed. Only on or about 1850 the scientific organization of palaeontology and archaeology started in Southern Latium beginning with the lower palaeolithic (Acheulean). A substantial number of research studies were realized after the end of the 19th century.

It is in the 16th century that the attention toward palaeontology and prehistory, as critical evaluation of the concrete evidence concerning the past, increased and prevailed on the medieval beliefs. Michele Mercati, at the court of Pope Clemente VIII, clearly recognised the human origin of retouched flints (Mercati 1574) and, afterwards (1664), Virgilio Romano was exhibiting in his private museum in Rome a massive canine tooth of Hippopotamus major found in the Pleistocene gravels along the Via Nomentana - one of the main roads that run from Rome (toward the North East in this case) and cuts the old alluvial sediments of the lower valley of the river Aniene, tributary of the Tiber. In 1644, an erudite French voyager, de Mancony, noticed some bones of an ancient elephant from the foundations of the Vatican; in 1688, Giovanni Ciampini recognised and described bone of *Elephas antiquus* in Vitorchiano, in North-Western Latium. To this earlier stage of palaeontological and prehistoric knowledge also contributed, during the 17th century, the activity concerning ancient Latium by the encyclopaedic Jesuit Atanasio Kircher (1665, 1671).

However, the more properly scientific beginning of the vertebrate palaeontology and paleolithic archaeology has to be attributed to the pioneers that in the first half of the 19th century started systematic explorations and researches,

that were developed in the so-called Campagna Romana (the country area around Rome) and, more in general, in Central Italy. Particularly we recall: G.B. Brocchi, for the first surveys on the Plio-Pleistocene of Rome (1814); Frère Indes (1872), for the Quaternary paleontology and corresponding stratigraphy of the surroundings of Rome; Abbot C. Rusconi, for the fossil faunas and middle Paleolithic findings in Montecelio, near Rome. But a special mention has to be devoted to Luigi Ceselli and Gustav Bleicher, for their first acute and relatively modern observations and studies on the stratigraphy, fossil vertebrates and Paleolithic evidence (that they called "Archaeolithic") of the Middle Pleistocene terraces of the lower Aniene valley, now Rome urbanized area.

Subsequently, we are already in the second half of the same century, when Giuseppe Ponzi covered the first chair of Geology at "La Sapienza" University of Rome, established by Pope Pio IX. His inaugural lecture dealt on the "prehistoric antiquity of human kind", and was followed by several researches on Pleistocene localities and mammal fossil faunas in Latium. His contemporary paleoanthropologist and prehistorian Giustiniano Nicolucci, on the chair of Anthropology at the University of Naples (Regno delle Due Sicilie), was the first to find and recognise the Acheulean levels and relative faunal assemblages in Southern Latium. At the

same time, Michele Stefano De Rossi reported about Paleolithic, Neolithic, and prehistoric localities and faunal remains in the region, while the baron Anca from Palermo was the first that clearly distinguished the chronological difference between the fluvial gravels respectively below and above the volcanic horizon constituted by the so-called “tufo litoide” (i.e. rocky tuff), consolidated ash-flow from the Latian-Albano volcano, near Rome.

Between the end of the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries, it has to be recalled the vast amount of efforts representing the foundations for the development of our knowledge on the Pleistocene in Italy. Particularly we cannot forget to mention the work made by Terrigi, with his micropaleontological analysis of the first well-drillings made within the soil of Rome; by Cerulli-Irelli, for the Plio-Pleistocene malacology of Monte Mario (Rome); by Tuccimei, Mantovani, and Portis, that produced paleontological and stratigraphic studies of the Campagna Romana and the Sabina (Northern Latium); as well as on Villafranchian faunal remains in sites North and North-West of Rome. A special mention has to be done of the huge geo-paleontological literature produced by R. Meli (1868-69), E. Clerici (1888), and G. De Angelis d’Ossat, the well known “trio” of geologists and palaeontologists of the Pleistocene in Latium, who we are in debt with for the innumerable data on several localities and geo-paleontological deposits. We recall, in particular, the intense scientific discussions between Terrigi and Clerici about their diverse interpretations given to stratigraphic subjects. And we do not forget the studies by both Don Vito Zanon, on diatoms in the surroundings of Rome, and Ugo Rellini, that was the first to recognise the great antiquity of the Paleolithic without bifaces that preceded the Acheulean. In 1932, he associated these archaic artifacts with the well differentiated and more ancient faunas than those of the Middle Pleistocene: he referred to this Paleolithic facies as “Preamigdaliano” (i.e. before the bifaces, or “amigdale”).

In addition, G. d’Erasmus left extensive paleontological studies on the large mammals con-

temporaneous of the Acheulean assemblages in the valleys of the rivers Liri and Sacco in Southern Latium. Even more widespread are the researches by Aldobrandino Machi, Gian Alberto Blanc, Carlo Alberto Blanc, and Luigi Cardini, about paleontology and prehistory in various Italian regions (Liguria, Tuscany, Apulia, etc.), including Latium; by both Giuseppe and Sergio Sergi and by Antonio Ascenzi, ancient human fossil specimens (particularly Neandertals); by Livio Trevisan, for the paleontology of the Elephants of Latium and the associated geo-stratigraphy; by Ezio Tongiorgi, for his paleobotanical studies. The list could follow, but this brief historical profile has to be concluded bringing to our memory that all these individual explorations and studies found a common home - already at the beginning of the last century - with the institution of the “Committee for the Research of Human Paleontology in Italy” in 1912, that gave a clear indication in terms of scientific and naturalistic planning of Quaternary researches in our country. In 1927, this committee became the present “Italian Institute of Human Paleontology”, whose activity is mainly devoted to excavations and researches in Italy, abroad, and particularly in Latium, Southern Latium being now its main interest.

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