



The Casal de' Pazzi Museum and the ancient "roots" of a territory: how to be included by being inclusive

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ABSTRACT - For a place often perceived as incomplete and disconnected from its territory, the opening of the Casal de' Pazzi Museum to the public - eight years ago - was crucial in reversing the perception that residents had developed over years of waiting. A historic relationship with the school, involving the local community in turn, has been fundamental in progressively promoting the Museum beyond the borders of the eastern outskirts of Rome. Through an empathetic and focused approach, using narrative, multimedia, and sensory supports, schools of all levels regularly rely on visits and numerous workshops and initiatives aimed at understanding the earliest prehistory and its related themes. The adult audience is engaged through traditional visits, themed conferences, book presentations, and other interactive and multidisciplinary events. Inclusivity has always been one of the Museum's top priorities. Categories of people often on the "margins" or at the "periphery" of society, such as immigrants, prisoners, as well as individuals with temporary or permanent disabilities of physical, sensory, or cognitive nature, have found a welcoming place of active participation in the Museum, enriching it considerably in turn. The use of the web and social media platforms has also gained increasing importance for the Museum, especially following the pandemic. This powerful medium is employed to experiment with different modes, styles, and languages in order to reach and interact with increasingly larger audiences. The integration of the Museum within its territory, which continues to inspire initiatives and proposals - including the expansion of museum spaces - by local citizens and institutions, and the constantly widening network with other national and international institutions, aims to further strengthen the role of the Museum as a promoter and catalyst for scientific and cultural activities.

Keywords: Prehistory museum; community archeology; inclusivity; museum research; museums and social engagement.

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1. INTRODUCTION: A LONG HISTORY OF COMMUNITY AND INSTITUTION INTERACTION FOR A UNIQUE PREHISTORIC SITE IN THE SUBURBS

The accidental discovery of the Casal de' Pazzi site (Fig. 1) in 1981, during the construction of a suburban neighborhood in northeast Rome, marked the beginning of a remarkable chapter in the interaction between the community and the relevant public institutions. The site turned out to be a Middle Pleistocene fluvial deposit, presumably dated to be around 200,000 years old, specifically belonging to the Marine Isotope Stage (MIS) 7. This period was characterized by a temperate climate, and the area was inhabited by early human species, along with African-like fauna including straight-tusked elephants, rhinos, hippos, hyenas, and a lush vegetation.

This rich prehistoric landscape has been revealed by the thousands of fossil remains and artifacts discovered at the site (Anzidei et al., 2001; Gioia, 2020a; Palombo, 2023; Pandolfi et al., 2023).

At the time of the discovery, Dr. Anna Paola Anzidei, one of the first prehistorians appointed by the government through the Sovrintendenza Archeologica del Ministero dei Beni Culturali, played a pivotal role in shaping the destiny of prehistoric heritage in the Italian capital, allowing for the first instance of Pleistocene rescue excavations in the history of archaeological research in Rome. While previous limited and/or non-systematic fieldwork had taken place in different areas of the city as part of specific research projects, often managed by academic institutions (Anzidei et al., 2004; Gioia and Zanzi, 2020), the Casal de' Pazzi site presented a unique opportunity for continuous monitoring and an extensive

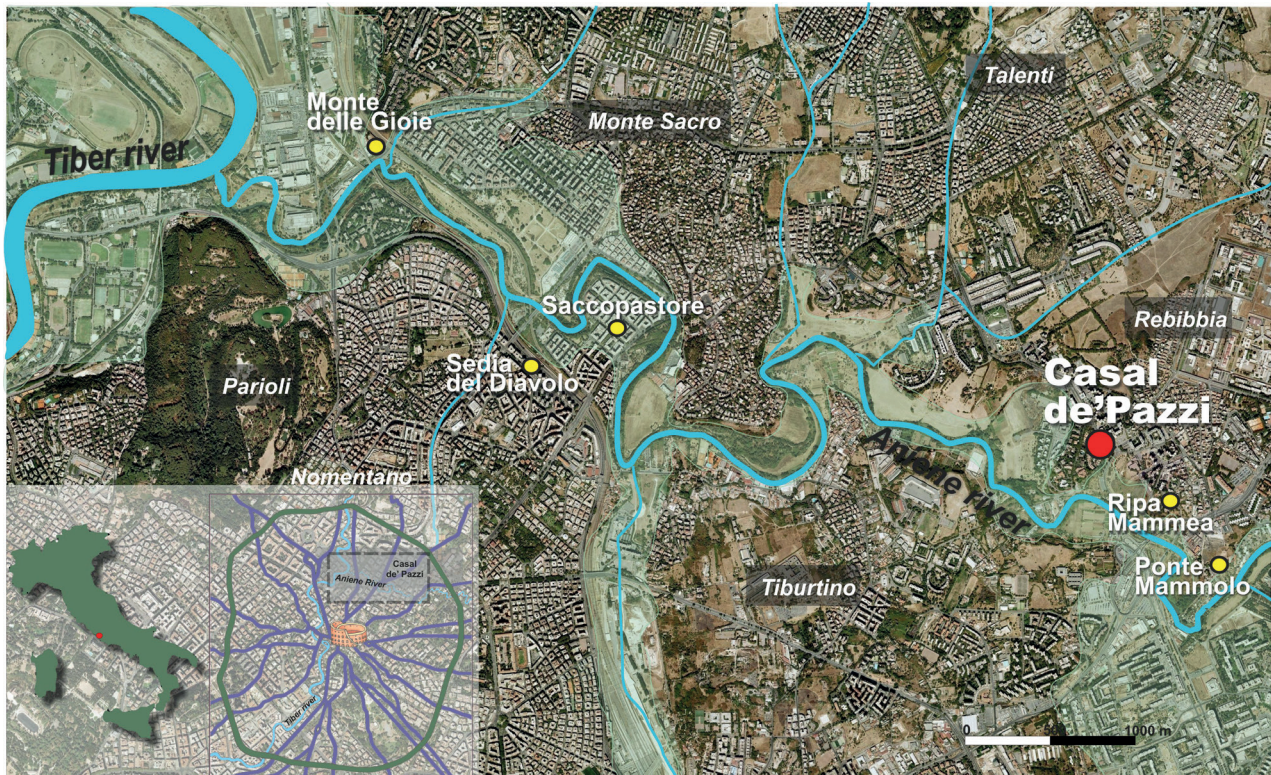


Fig. 1 - Location of the site of Casal de' Pazzi, now a museum (red dot), in the context of other Pleistocene sites (yellow dots) of the Lower Aniene River Valley in NE Rome.

five-year excavation campaign employing state-of-the-art scientific methods available at that time.

Massimo Ruffo, who was responsible for the investigations, began a tradition of community involvement during those early years. He welcomed numerous residents, enthusiasts, and school classes to the site, as documented in his diaries and contemporary newspapers (Ruffo et al., 2023).

In the 1980s, it would have been unimaginable to envision an innovative prehistory museum of international significance in one of the city's most socially troubled districts. However, following the completion of the excavations, a protective structure (Anzidei and Morganti, 1988), soon nicknamed "the bunker" by locals, was hastily built to safeguard the site. Unfortunately, this structure ended up concealing the site from the public's view (Zerocalcare, 2011).

Due to a lack of funding and coherent development plans, the partially preserved deposit was left abandoned, subject to decay, illegal occupation, and ultimately forgotten by most residents in the neighborhood. This unfortunate situation resulted in the site's neglect and its exclusion from public awareness (Fig. 2).

Between the 1990s and the early 2000s, the Municipality of Rome came into play, maintaining synergy with the Ministero dei Beni Culturali. A strong bond was created with the local communities, in need of building a socio-cultural identity and pride in belonging to a place that, finally, was no longer only characterized by the nearby (in)famous Rebibbia prison. Archeology curators and

the future museum staff, together with the institutions and the citizens, worked stubbornly towards the shared objective of creating a new cultural landmark in this problematic district (Gioia, 2015). Despite the ongoing restoration and musealization work at the site, which has seen numerous construction projects over the years aimed at creating the Museum, the involvement of local schools turned out to be crucial in this process, as it was an ante litteram "social media bombing" (mainly via postcards, letters, and sit-ins) by the school kids that ultimately convinced the Mayor and city administrators to open the Museum in 2015 (Fig. 3), after more than 30 years from the site's discovery.

Since its establishment, the Museum of Casal de' Pazzi has gained a significant reputation as one of the most cherished small museums in Rome. It opens its doors daily and offers free admission, focusing primarily on providing educational and entertaining experiences for students who are learning about prehistory through a wide range of interactive and multisensory activities and events. Additionally, the Museum is actively engaged in research and initiatives aimed at promoting accessibility and inclusivity (Miglietta, 2017).

The 40th anniversary of the site's discovery provided an opportunity to reflect on the Museum's communication and research strategies over the past four decades, as well as to contemplate future perspectives. These reflections not only serve as valuable insights for professionals in the field who seek to explore innovative methods for disseminating knowledge about prehistoric subjects to diverse audiences



Fig. 2 - The Pleistocene deposit of Casal de' Pazzi during the years of neglect.

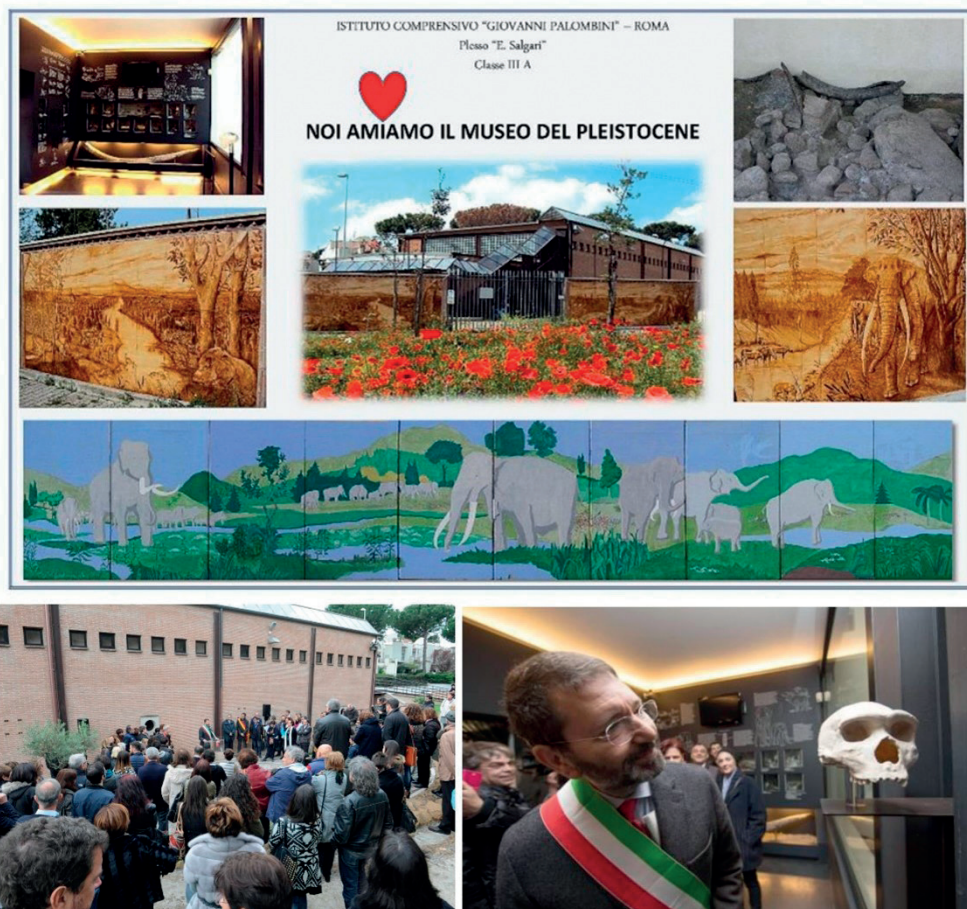


Fig. 3 - One of the postcards (top) that was produced by the children from the nearby school and massively sent to Mayor Marino, leading to the subsequent inauguration of the Museum in 2015 with his participation (bottom left and right).

but also highlight the potential of prehistoric themes as powerful tools for social engagement.

2. FROM RECONSTRUCTIONS TO MULTIMEDIA, TOWARDS “SIMPLEXITY” AND UNIVERSALITY IN A PREHISTORY MUSEUM FOR PEOPLE

The easily accessible nature of the site itself can be considered an exceptional occurrence, since there are very few Pleistocene sites worldwide that are both situated within an urban context and can be visited on a daily basis, for free. This decision aims to make the Museum more appealing to visitors, despite its suburban location and its focus on non-mainstream topics such as Prehistory in the homeland of Ancient Rome and the Papacy.

The Museum of Casal de’ Pazzi has employed a variety of strategies to effectively communicate and engage visitors with its multidisciplinary content. These methods range from traditional approaches to more innovative and experimental ones, often yielding valuable insights for future improvements (Gioia et al., 2023; Gioia, 2020b).

A crucial aspect of the museum’s approach is the proximity of the remains to the site itself. Although only a small fraction of the thousands of finds discovered during the excavations are currently on display, efforts are being made to secure a larger location near the current museum. This would allow for the study and exhibition of a greater number of materials.

However, the deliberate choice to display a limited number of representative remains, accompanied by reconstructive illustrations, clear captions, and virtual reconstructions (Milano and Sciacchitano, 2015), is not solely due to mere space constraints but also serves as a strategic communication device, aimed at enhancing the understandability of the context. (Antinucci, 2014).

In addition, the large window facing the deposit creates an immersive experience, connecting the visitors with the context of the findings intellectually and emotionally (Fig. 4).

The museum also incorporates real reconstructive elements, such as the museum garden, which accurately reproduces Pleistocene vegetation from the Roman



Fig. 4 - Two large windows in the exhibition hall allow a view of the deposit from which the exhibited artifacts originate.

countryside during MIS 7 (Magri, 2020). This enables a multisensory exploration that is accessible even to individuals with sensory and cognitive disabilities (Fig. 5).

The hall dedicated to the fluvial deposit includes a multimedia narration enhanced by light and sound effects, video and 3D reconstructions, as well as compelling storytelling (Palombini, 2012; Palombini et al., 2013) (Fig. 6).

The narration is available in English as well as in Italian sign language. Additionally, the museum area features a



Fig. 5 - The “Pleistocene” garden.





Fig. 6 - Multimedia narration with light and sound effects, and some scenes from the video featuring 3D reconstructions.

wheelchair ramp alongside the main pathway, accessible to individuals with physical impairments. Tactile reproductions of the deposit, as well as dedicated artifacts and raw materials, cater to the needs of visually impaired visitors (Bellagamba and Tuccinardi, 2020) (Fig. 7).

These efforts demonstrate the museum's commitment, since its inception, to accommodate international tourists and individuals with various disabilities, even though these groups may be less inclined to visit the Museum. The emphasis on accessibility and inclusivity reflects the museum's dedication to providing a meaningful and enriching experience for all visitors.

3. THE PANDEMIC INPUTS - WHAT DOES NOT KILL YOU MAKES YOU STRONGER

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented challenges to the Museum of Casal de' Pazzi as well as to any other cultural institution, but it has also provided opportunities for innovation and growth. During the lockdown, the museum intensified the use of social media, particularly Facebook, as a key communication tool. The Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/museocasaldepazzi>) became a hub for sharing updates on museum events, global Pleistocene-related discoveries, and interactive activities such as contests and quizzes (Gioia, 2021) (Fig. 8).

Recognizing the need to reach a wider audience, the museum volunteers from the National Civil Service also created an Instagram page in 2023 (https://www.instagram.com/cronache_dal_pleistocene/).



Fig. 7 - Some moments from a tactile tour for blind individuals.



Fig. 8 - Some Pleistocene-themed online initiatives organized during the pandemic: a drawing competition, a game for Earth Day, a Christmas bingo, and a storytelling contest.

In response to the limitations imposed by the pandemic, the Museum quickly adapted by organizing various online and streaming events for different age groups. These events initially started in an improvised manner but were well-received by the audience, as many museums had not yet begun offering such services. As time went on, the Museum invested in professional equipment and setups, ensuring high-quality online experiences for participants. One notable example was the successful hybrid International “40 Years of Casal de’ Pazzi” Conference held in 2022.

Recognizing the importance of providing educational resources to schools unable to visit the museum physically, the Museum designed three online tours and workshops as part of its permanent activity catalogue for schools. Additionally, the 2020-21’s Civil Service volunteers produced short, animated documentaries on prehistory and museum-related topics that are still freely available for download by teachers and parents, serving as complementary educational tools for elementary school children (Fig. 9).

The pandemic-related restrictions posed challenges to organizing school trips and outdoor experiences for children. However, the Museum of Casal de’ Pazzi found a unique opportunity in its proximity to local schools, particularly kindergartens - a nice addition to the usual target of primary and secondary schoolers (Salomone, 2023). As walking-distance outings were still permitted, under strict health and safety guidelines, the Museum’s

“Pleistocene Garden” became an ever-more popular destination.

4. DE-MARGINALIZING THE SUBURBS, THE DISADVANTAGED AND PREHISTORY THROUGH MUSEUMS - SOME WORKING EXAMPLES

The Museum has placed great importance on engaging children, particularly those in primary school, in the study of prehistory. Various educational initiatives have been developed specifically for school classes and teachers, aiming to complement their curricular activities and challenge the prevalent prejudices and misconceptions surrounding our ancestors and human evolution.

These projects have been implemented in collaboration with local schools, with the goal of strengthening the connection between the Museum, the community, and the families of the children.

By working closely with schools, the Museum not only fosters a sense of affection toward the institution but also promotes cultural awareness and pride of belonging among the children and their families.

The novel involvement of pre-schoolers (see previous paragraph) led to an additional positive consequence, i.e., the engagement of immigrant children from developing countries, who constitute a significant percentage of the local kindergarten classes. These children, who often come from families that have not yet established connections with the local community and face feelings



Fig. 9 - Covers some of the animated video-documentaries produced by the young Prehistory and communication specialists, still available for download under request for teachers and students.

of estrangement, have found a sense of common ground and identification with the universal themes explored at the Museum.

Despite the language barriers, these children have demonstrated a remarkable understanding of the themes discussed, including knowledge of the animal species found at the archaeological sites. Their enthusiasm and comprehension were evident in their drawings (Fig. 10), showcasing their pride and engagement with the experience. In some cases, they even influenced their families to participate in other museum events, fostering opportunities for integration within the local community.

The Museum's relationship with the local residents has been further strengthened since 2019 through its formal inclusion in the "Comunità Educatrice de' Pazzi," a non-profit organization focused on combating school drop-out rates and promoting community involvement in cultural activities (<https://abitarearoma.it/la-comunita-educante-de-pazzi/>).

This collaborative effort involves volunteers, teachers, cultural associations, and institutions working together to create a more inclusive and vibrant community. Indeed, the projects described have the potential to play a vital role in breaking down barriers and promoting inclusivity and social cohesion.

In line with this perspective, the Museum has actively embraced its civic role by engaging with various overlooked or non-conventional visitor groups.

Recognizing the importance of reaching out to the communities associated with the Rebibbia prison, over the last decade the Museum has also undertaken initiatives such as involving former inmates in the decoration of

its entrance and extending its hospitality to the children of female inmates. Furthermore, in 2022, the museum curators and volunteers from the National Civil Service ventured into the prison to deliver a virtual guided tour to the inmates, which was received with great appreciation. This unique initiative required extensive preparation, including the careful design of a presentation that struck a balance in language and themes, as well as psychological training to ensure a positive and meaningful experience for both the visitors and the museum staff involved, providing educational opportunities to a marginalized population.

The Museum's social commitment also led to organizing visits to hospitals, where patients are entertained and educated through special programs (Fig. 11).

In all these initiatives, as well as many others designed for the public, the Museum has greatly benefited from the dedicated contributions of volunteers from the National Civil Service. These volunteers, who are young specialists, students, or local citizens under the age of 29, join the Museum's team for a year, bringing their enthusiasm and expertise to enhance the Museum's programs and services (Brunelli et al., 2020).

5. INCLUSION OF NEURODIVERGENT AND COGNITIVELY DISABLED VISITORS AND THE IMPORTANCE OF NEXT GENERATION EU - A WORK IN PROGRESS TOWARDS A MUSEUM FOR ALL

In recent years, the Museum of Casal de' Pazzi has prioritized efforts to improve the inclusion of people with cognitive disabilities, recognizing it as



Fig. 10 - Drawing made by the little visitors from local kindergartens after participating in interactive visits and workshops at the Museum.



Fig. 11 - Prehistory games and workshops conducted at hospitals with young patients.

an important accessibility frontier for museums. As part of this commitment, the Museum participated in the experimental project “Museums and Autism,” spearheaded by MA graduate Michela Maffongelli (Maffongelli 2022). Through this project, a protocol was developed to actively engage neurodivergent visitors, resulting in the creation of an “inclusive diary.” This diary serves as a valuable resource that can be provided to all visitors, particularly those in school classes, who are on the autism spectrum. The inclusive diary acts as both a preparation tool when sent in advance and a practical aid during the museum tour. It serves as a guide for museum staff, caregivers, and visitors themselves, helping to create a more inclusive and supportive experience for individuals with autism.

In the perspective of expanding the Museum’s inclusivity, a partnership has been established with associations caring for individuals with cognitive disabilities, creating opportunities for customized visits and workshops that cater to their specific needs and interests. This partnership not only provides access to the Museum but also allows them to become active participants in the museum activities.

Through extensive preparation and collaboration between the museum staff, association caregivers, and cognitively impaired participants, the latter have been trained and supported to lead tours of the museum. This effort has required dedication, passion, and a deep

commitment to inclusivity.

Audiences attending these initiatives, such as on the occasion of the European Heritage Days - All Inclusive event in 2021, have been amazed by the participants' knowledge, passion, and their distinctive point of view in conducting the museum tours (Fig. 12).

Directly engaging with individuals with disabilities is essential to creating a truly accessible and inclusive museum environment. The concept of Universal Design (Arengi, 2007; Steinfeld and Maisel, 2012), which emphasizes designing for the widest possible range of abilities, guided the development of a project submitted to the Ministry of Cultural Heritage in 2022 as part of the PNRR (Recovery Plan). The project was awarded a significant grant of € 500,000, which will be utilized by 2026 to implement various accessibility measures.

The funding will be allocated to several areas of improvement, including enhancing signage to make the Museum more visible and easily accessible. Multimedia and visual/textual narrations will be renovated to increase cognitive accessibility, and International Sign Language translations will be added. Efforts will also be made to eliminate architectural barriers in the "Pleistocene Garden" and the deposit area, while incorporating tactile aids to create a single pathway that can be used by all visitors at the same time, including those with physical and sensory impairments. Priority booking services for disabled visitors will be established, and social media platforms will be utilized to engage with typically hard-to-reach teenagers. The Museum also plans to organize more inclusive community events.

6. FINAL REMARKS - THE SOCIAL ROLE OF MUSEUMS AND PREHISTORY

The journey through the initiatives and actions undertaken by the Museum of Casal de' Pazzi serves as a reminder of the diverse ways in which disciplines like Prehistory and cultural institutions like museums can transcend their elitist nature and embrace a more inclusive role in society. Following the principles of the Faro Convention (FARO, 2015), the Museum strives to become a tool for inclusion, a vehicle for social engagement, and a valuable asset for the entire community.

While not every experiment may yield success, each endeavor offers valuable lessons. Improvements can only be achieved through rigorous and ongoing research, accompanied by genuine motivation and passion. The examples presented demonstrate how a museum can forge connections with the local community (Coppini and Iannuzzi, 2020) and disadvantaged individuals, fostering a shared cultural identity that evolves through mutual exchange rather than one-way paternalism.

Furthermore, the perceived distance and irrelevance of Prehistory to the present reality can be debunked by focusing on common themes of social importance. These themes can bridge the gaps between different people while attracting a diverse audience to learn valuable lessons from our ancestors and the events and transformations that occurred hundreds of thousands of years ago.

In conclusion, the Museum of Casal de' Pazzi serves as a beacon for museums and cultural institutions, inspiring them to embrace their social role, foster inclusivity, and



Fig. 12 - Guided tour (left) and preparatory educational activities for children (right) carried out by individuals with cognitive disabilities.

engage with communities in meaningful ways. By doing so, museums can become powerful agents of education, connection, and positive change.

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