
Overcoming physical and figurative walls: social, cultural and pandemic-related challenges of public outreach in a suburban Pleistocene Museum in Rome

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Résumé

The Pleistocene Museum of Casal de'Pazzi (Rome, Italy) is characterised by peculiar history and features. Officially opened in 2015, it was originally built to preserve a portion of an important archaeo-palaeontological deposit found during urbanization works, and has progressively become a cultural and social landmark, thanks to the efforts of the institutions that have promoted its constitution.

The Middle Pleistocene site of Casal de'Pazzi (ca. 350-200 ka BP), discovered in the early 1980s, consists of a dry palaeoriver that has yielded thousands of fossil faunal remains and lithic artefacts, as well as plant fossils and a single skull fragment of a hominin species. Among the most striking finds are many intact or sub-intact straight-tusked elephant's tusks, that are often mistaken for mammoth remains by the general public.

In a way, the Museum could be considered as "doubly marginal": on one hand, it is located in the socially-problematic NE suburbs of the city, far from the main tourist routes and from Rome's traditional centers for cultural activities; on the other, it is one of the few prehistoric-themed attractions in the capital of the - somewhat cumbersome - ancient Roman civilization, making even more difficult to correctly communicate the characteristics and meaning of the prehistoric deposit preserved, not to mention Prehistory in general.

Nonetheless, or perhaps precisely because of this, the Museum of CDP has always stood out for the quantity and quality of innovative methods of public outreach experimented throughout the years. Starting from the involvement of local street artists and cartoonists, to the development of 3D, sensory and virtual reality reconstructions, including an educational video-game inside the display room; from the promotion of activities with socially and

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culturally disadvantaged locals, to the realization of sign-language translations and tactile scale-models, this institution has never ceased inventing and re-inventing new ways to become more and more accessible to all sorts of public.

In this context, the pandemic has represented a big challenge, making impossible to physically visit the Museum and to interact directly with schools, inhabitants of the neighborhood, groups of people with special needs and tourists. This crisis, however, has not stopped the will to communicate Casal de'Pazzi's prehistoric heritage effectively and widely, leading the Museum staff and collaborators to engage more in the use of social media, online meeting systems, and digital innovation technologies.

This paper will seek to analyze and reflect on the effectiveness and usefulness of such methods of public outreach in prehistory-related cultural heritage, both in a context of forced distance and in a "new normal" condition, with the aim of becoming ever more successful in communicating prehistoric contents, prehistoric-related research issues and their overall cultural and social value, in a world that often tends to dichotomize the knowledge of the past and the reality of the present.

Mots-Clés: Pleistocene, suburbs, accessibility, Rome, museum, prehistory