 Connecting the Museum with the Landscape: a Geographical Solution for the Pigorini Museum, Rome

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Abstract

The Prehistoric Ethnographic National Museum “Luigi Pigorini” holds one of Europe’s most important collections of prehistoric archaeological material excavated since the end of the nineteenth century. This paper illustrates the first steps towards a digitised model of the archives and of the Museum collection with the aim of refreshing the Museum’s memory by restoring lost connections between the landscape context and the historical documents of archaeological research (including old photographs, registers, notes and sketches).

The methodological approach begins with the experience of the project SITAR, the web-based GIS of the Superintendence for the Archaeological Heritage of Rome. It intends to develop geographically-focused solutions to share the knowledge of the Museum with local communities and to highlight the connections between prehistoric finds and the current landscape, thus contributing to the formation of the community’s identity. This process will move the Museum towards a dynamic dimension and make it more accessible and meaningful for contemporary users.

Keywords: Museum, Archives, Landscape, Public Archaeology, Crowd-Sourcing

Introduction

The Prehistoric Ethnographic National Museum “Luigi Pigorini” holds one of the largest and most important prehistoric collections of Europe. The activities of collecting, cataloguing, archiving, studying and exhibiting finds from prehistoric and proto-historic contexts began in 1875 thanks to the vision of the pioneer and founder Luigi Pigorini. The institution represents the first and still the only Superintendency for prehistory in Italy. In the opinion of Luigi Pigorini, it was important to safeguard the archives to build catalogographic knowledge of every discovery and investigation on Italian territory. At that time, the General Director of the Ministry of Education, Giuseppe Fiorelli invited the scientific directors of the prehistoric excavations to send samples of archaeological findings to the Museum.

Since its inception, the MNPE Pigorini has catalogued and studied thousands of findings and carried out research in the field and in the laboratory providing a wide dataset with a high scientific profile, including everything from excavation reports to monographic publications, technical drawings and high resolution images. The Museum collection includes historical documents representing the birth of prehistoric science in Italy: original letters from Luigi Pigorini and other contemporary academics, the documents related to the early stages of growth of the Museum collection and historic photographs which portray the first pioneering explorations.

In particular the Museum collects samples of prehistoric and proto-historic data from Central Italy and can facilitate the encounter between a wide range of museum users [mainly schools] and the territory seen through the lens of the archaeological landscape. One could think of the Museum as a door opening on to the landscape, a starting point for the exploration of the present day landscape with awareness of its archaeo-
logical heritage as represented by a prehistoric collection linked geographically with the original places of discovery. This geographical approach could be in agreement with current research about the definition of models for digital archives, part of the debate about new concepts of museum as a ‘network attractor, bringing various elements, ideas and people together, enabling different types of interactions with collections, and with a border zone where different systems of representation meet’ (Cameron, 2008).

Archiving and Urgency

The Museum’s prehistoric collection and its related scientific documentation are currently digitally archived in four different databases: a general topographic archive of the finds, an archive of images, an archive of drawings and an archive dedicated to the hard-copy of historic documents and old photographs used, for instance, in the *Bulletino di Palenontologia Italiana*, the scientific journal published by the Museum since 1875 (Mineo, 2014). The implementation of these archives, the systematisation of the datasets and the creation of relations between them have been made possible by the experience and commitment of the Museum’s archaeologists, along with great efforts to compensate the endemic lack of funding for cultural institutions in general. Their efforts might not be enough to recover and restore the memory of the Museum before it is lost by a shortage of human and economic resources. There is an urgent need to restore old connections and supply...
new links between the objects in the collection and historical documents and between the archaeological knowledge held in the Museum as a whole and its original context; for example piles of material contained in boxes are losing their hand written labels of reference.

An answer to this issue could be to create a geo-database for all types of documentary sources using topographic references to connect one element to another. A new model of the digital archive is most interesting because the material contexts of the pre- and proto-historic artefacts are not fully displayed and those objects displayed are often only a small part of the whole. Moreover digital archives don’t have the same storage problems as the material ones, nor the same costs. The perspective is to open up the archaeological heritage of the museum through the virtual exploration of the territory. This is in agreement with a new concept of archives, not only a digital version of the material one, but a virtual research environment focusing not only on files but on their logical relationship. The proposed solution could permit users to consult the datasets in a dynamic way: from file-oriented archives to the use-oriented “dynarchive” (Noordegraaf, 2011).

The methodological approach for the creation of the geo-database of the MNPE Pigorini starts from the experience of the project SITAR, the web-based GIS of the Superintendence for the Archaeological Heritage of Rome (Sertorenzi, 2011) under the direction of the Superintendent of the Museum, Francesco di Gennaro (di Gennaro, in press). Its first function will be to connect the four existing archives using the database model proposed in SITAR (De Tommasi et al, 2011): a systematisation for four different classes of objects: objects, parts, contexts and landscapes. These classes can hold the data sets related to the finds and also the files of the documents both scientific and historic.

1) “Objects” represents the class of finds exhibited in the museum including those not on display but in the catalogue. In this class it will be possible to associate artefacts with the documents specifically relevant to each piece in the collection: images, technical drawings, reports and analysis and also historical documents regarding their acquisition by the Museum.

2) “Parts” gathers each single item of archaeological evidence for a find’s provenance (structures, tombs, surfaces, layers, etc.) which, similarly to SITAR, could be distinct in function and chronology (Cecchetti & Ruggeri, 2011).

3) “Contexts” on this level would provide associations for a wide range of documents, in particular the excavation reports, the bibliography related to each site and the historical documents such as old photographs and sketches.

4) “Landscapes” is the class chosen to represent ancient landscapes, with the opportunity to link the contexts that characterise an area during the same period. In this class it is possible to describe a particular ancient landscape or – why not – part of the current one. The same context could connect with a prehistoric land-
scape but also have a role in the contemporary landscape.

Why the Landscape? – Public Archaeology and Crowd-Sourcing

It has been said that the Pigorini Museum could represent the place where communities meet the archaeological heritage of their own territories. From this point of view it seems interesting to insert the class of the landscape. The Museum collection can easily be read as the preservation of materials that represent a remarkable part of ancient cultures inhabiting the same territory as Museum visitors. This may be most meaningful for the schools of Rome and of the nearest regions such as the Tiber Valley, Tolfa Mountains, Etruria or South Umbria. With the landscape component of the database it will be possible to explore the Museum starting with knowledge of the contemporary landscape before turning to the past and its landscape through the medium of Museum objects: from the single object to the landscape. This kind of experience could contribute to a real explo-
ration of the territory by its citizens. The acknowledgment of the cultural value of the territory, the discovery of undisclosed archaeological contexts and a more direct knowledge of the evidence of a common past are the basis of this re-discovery of common identity (Francovich & Valenti, 2005; Ricci, 2006; Vannini, Nucciotti & Bonacchi, 2014).

Communication to a community about its archaeology could be a considerable advantage in representing the dataset of the Museum through a web-GIS application such as those used elsewhere in Italy (Gualandi et al, 2012; Serlorenzi, 2011; Serlorenzi & Valenti, 2011). One of the outcomes of this project could be the realisation of a digital version of the collection, capable of being explored by a virtual map of the contemporary urban and rural territory that allows visitors to visualise the different classes of objects and the associated files. This perspective could be in agreement with the principles of public archaeology that have recently been introduced in Italian archaeology (Bonacchi, 2014a).

Archaeological heritage must be made more accessible to the public and by offering a chance to experience the Museum collection relocated to a contemporary landscape context and logically connecting to its set of documents, it goes in this direction. For instance it will be possible to create new meanings and new interactive experiences in the laboratories activated for schools, exploring the diverse logical interlinking of the map in a dynamic way as theorised in other museographic domains (Noordegraaf, 2011); following not only the diachronic paradigm but, to offer only two examples, the proximity of the context to each school community or the chronologies of the surveys to...
retrace the history of research.

In a crowd-sourcing perspective it should be possible to test different activities. In this sense it is useful to look to the more advanced experience in other countries, such as the United Kingdom, which involve the public with researchers and archaeologists alike in projects of great cultural value (e.g. Bonacchi, 2014b). In focusing attention on schools and expert users of the Museum (such as archaeologists, anthropologist, historians) it is possible to think of uploading new contents from these categories in the database. The schools would upload the didactic and laboratorial material or simply upload images of the activities experienced during the visit; indeed the Pigorini organises daily laboratories of pottery or cave art for children. In this case the contents may not represent only their scientific contribution but may constitute an informative set of didactic experiences useful to socialising the visitors and inspiring other institutions. The scientific communities could take advantage of this systematisation of the dataset, not only by using the digital archaeological content but, for instance, by uploading their own free access publications or bibliography references related to each context displayed. Similar planning phases are known in Italian prehistoric science (Parenti, 2007) and encourage a stronger interaction between students and data. The perspective is to create a virtual research environment for prehistory, a sort of happy ending to retrace, with digital-era applications, the idea of the Museum’s founder, Luigi Pigorini. In conclusion, the virtual collection thus represents a remarkable opportunity for the diffusion of knowledge and is a natural complement to the centre of knowledge represented by the physical museum.

References


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