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**Peter F. Biehl,
Alexander Gramsch, Arkadiusz Marciniak (Hrsg.)**

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ALESSANDRO GUIDI

An Italian perspective

“Let me remind you that Marxism does not mean a set of dogmas as to what happened in the past (such would save you the trouble of excavating to find out) but a method of interpretation and a system of values” (Childe 1952, 25).

“Indeed, my two main further impressions of European archaeology concern the overall acceptance of the centrality of historical inquiry and the widespread incorporation of Marxist theory. In these two ways again European archaeological theory differs from its North American counterpart. Because of these various characteristics, European archaeology has a distinctive role to play in wider archaeological debates” (Hodder 1991, 22).

After a long period in which little interest was paid to what was considered a minor aspect of the discipline, the past fifteen years have been characterized by a sudden burst of interest in the history of the Italian *paletnologia*, or the science of ancient peoples. This is the academic “label” in our country for prehistoric archaeology (Desittere 1984; 1988; 1995; 1996; Cardarelli / Pulini 1986; Cuomo di Caprio 1986; Guidi 1987; 1988; 1996; 1996 a; 1996 b; 1998; D’Agostino 1991; Peroni 1992; Bernabò-Brea / Mutti 1994; Peroni / Magnani 1996; Pacciarelli 1996, 11-70; Bernabò-Brea / Cardarelli / Cremaschi 1997, 59-103).

In 1999, I was invited to give a paper at a conference in Siena on theoretical archaeology (Guidi 2000). On that occasion, I proposed a diachronic development of Italian prehistoric archaeology which is outlined here in five main phases (*fig. 1*):

1. The exciting pioneer period (1860-1900) was characterized by a very high standard of research and a progressive centralization of prehistoric archaeology. The leading figure was Luigi Pigorini and at its beginnings, the discipline was dominated by civic museums and local experiences in the State Antiquity Offices (*Soprintendenze*). These scholars were very aware of the importance of collaborating with geologists and palaeontologists, and in this period it is possible to draw a distinction between a tradition of studies dominated by an archaeological perspective (the “Roman” school) and another in which the natural sciences played a large role (the Florence school). A clear positivist theoretical perspective is the main feature of the second half of the 19th century in most developed European environments.
2. The next phase (1901-1921) was characterized by a sort of involutive process of the “archaeological” tradition, dominated by the idealist reaction against the “positivistic” prehistory of the preceding period. At the same time, scholars interested in Palaeolithic archaeology created the Human Paleontology Research Committee (1912), consolidating a “schism” between the two main traditions of Italian prehistoric archaeology that has still not been resolved.

3. In the Fascist period (1921-1945), classical archaeology (for obvious ideological reasons) acquired a predominant position in the academic world, one which it still maintains. Here, for the first time, the mainstream historical tradition has lost his primacy in favor of the specialists of Palaeolithic studies (see the transformation in 1927 of the committee in the Italian Institute of Human Paleontology) and, as regards the Iron Age, of the new emerging discipline of Etruscology. These two sectors were allied for many years in the academic milieu of the post-war period. However, the only scholar able to create a “bridge” between the two main traditions of Italian prehistoric archaeology was Luigi Bernabó Brea, who was famous for his exceptional research in Liguria and in the Aeolian islands. In the 1940s and 1950s, Brea never acquired an academic position equal to his undisputed scientific reputation in Italy and abroad. In comparison with other European experiences, the alarming decline in the standards of field research seen in this period (with the exception of the Palaeolithic school) is a peculiar characteristic of Italian prehistoric archaeology.
4. The post-war rebirth of the discipline (1946-1970) was characterized (as in the first years of the unitary state, the beginnings of my phase 1), by the flourishing of local research and by the creation of many chairs in prehistory (Siena, Florence, Pisa, Ferrara, Cagliari etc.). The creation in Florence in 1954 of the Italian Institute of Prehistory and Protohistory is again proof of the vitality of the “natural sciences” tradition.
5. In the last phase (1971-2001) in the 1980s, processual archaeology enjoyed a brief spell of popularity. We could define the present situation as a sort of “methodological anarchy”, characterized by different perspectives and issues in various parts of Italy. This is seen, for example, in the mainstream “sceptical” approach, grounded in natural sciences, of the North and of Tuscany, the pronounced interest for data explanation and theoretical archaeology of the “Roman” school, the processual items of the prehistorians of Northeast Italy, or the Naples “postprocessual” circle and/or by the progressive integration between different theoretical positions.

As a general comment, three main points of interest, shared by other European traditions of prehistoric archaeology, must be emphasized:

- a. The difficulties of a discipline in isolation and the need to confront theoretical, methodological and “political” problems of the Italian archaeology in its entirety.
- b. The “colonial” attitude of many foreign archaeologists who work in our country; see, for example, the problem of language (a lot of colleagues seem practically to ignore any publications that are not written in English).
- c. The peculiarity of Italy, which at this moment perhaps has a more open intellectual environment compared to the two main “schools” of prehistoric archaeology, the Anglo-Saxon and the Central European schools, dominated respectively by an anthropological and an historical approach to the discipline.

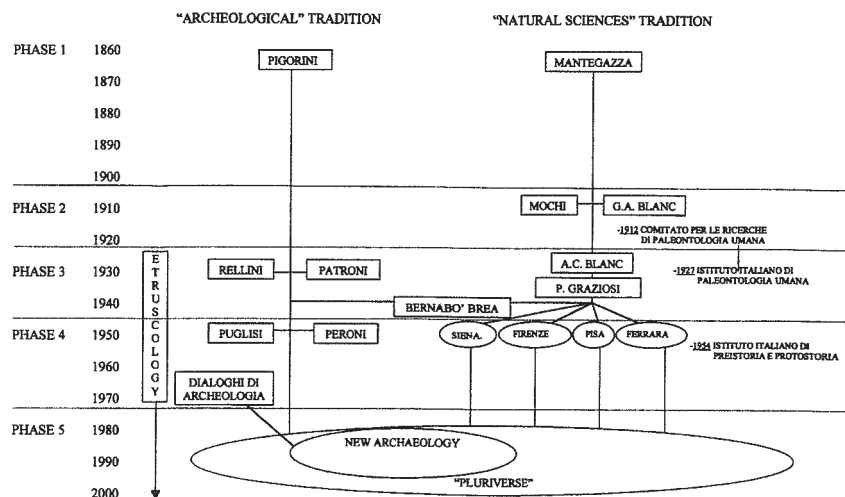


Fig. 1. Schematic outline of the historical developments of the two main traditions of study of the Italian prehistoric archaeology (graph by O. Colazingari).

A more careful insight in the history of Italian prehistoric and classical archaeology demonstrates how the main theoretical debates of the last 40 years originate in the left-wing (Communist and Socialist) intellectual environment – a situation shared by other countries of Mediterranean Europe – particularly in the *Dialoghi di Archeologia* circle, characterized by the elaboration of a Marxist approach to archaeology (Carandini 1979; D'Agostino 1991; Barbanera 1999).

This circle was formed on the initiative of the pupils of a great scholar of classical art history, Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli. Some of the pupils (like Andrea Carandini, Mario Torelli and Filippo Coarelli) became leading figures of present Italian archaeology. The *Dialoghi di Archeologia* group and the review of the same name, founded in 1967 and directed by Bianchi Bandinelli until his death in 1973, were for many years the only critical voices against the academic and bureaucratic establishment of Italian archaeology.

Prehistorians were a minority in this circle and were mostly represented by specialists in protohistory. It's to one of them, Renato Peroni, that we owe the first organic reconstruction of the economic and social organization of the Italian protohistoric communities, a study published in the aforementioned review in 1969 (see Peroni 1979 for an English translation).

In the 25 years of its life, *Dialoghi di Archeologia* remained the "avant-garde" of Italian archaeology. Just to cite some examples: the journal included the first open debate on the use of quantitative methods (Bietti / Cazzella 1976-1977); an important article by Anna Maria Bietti Sestieri that like Peroni, used a Marxist paradigm, pro-

posed an alternative model for the development of Italian protohistorical communities, inspired by the substantivist school of Polanyi (Bietti Sestieri 1976-1977); the publication of the papers given in two congresses held in Rome in the 1980s, characterized by a diffuse use of processual methods and theoretical items (Roma 1982; 1986).

The long-lasting success of the *Dialoghi di Archeologia* is based, on a more general level, on the undisputed cultural hegemony of the left (particularly of the ex-Italian Communist Party) in our cultural life.

The "Italian" perspective, apart from its parochial dimension, has certainly something to do with the importance of Marxist theory in European archaeology today. Paradoxically (or probably thanks to the new political situation) after 1989, this approach (with all its variants) remains extremely useful for the interpretation of our past, especially regarding one of the main topics of archaeology: the emergence, development and collapse of pre- and protohistorical complex societies.

In the "long-term" history of Marxist approaches to archaeology, the cornerstone is, undoubtedly, the theoretical formulation, in the 1930s of Childe's famous revolutions. At the same time, we must recognize our debt to some Eastern European scholars who, often at the edge of the mainstream dogmatic approach, made an important contribution to the development of archaeology in the post-war years and in the 1950s.

Among other experiences, I would like to recall the pioneering studies of S. A. Semenov on prehistoric technology (1957), an impressively early application of "mortuary analysis" in the famous study on the Leubingen graveyards by Otto (1955) and, of course, the establishment in 1953, in Poland, of an Institute of Material Culture.

In the 1960s and in the early 1970s, Marxist theory acquired a predominant position in Western European archaeology, largely due to a new political situation. France and Italy were the privileged intellectual laboratories where such thinking emanated. For political and ideological reasons a similar process affected Spanish and Greek archaeology in the late 1970s and 1980s (Cleziou / Coudart / Demoule / Schnapp 1991; Vázquez Varela / Risch 1991; Kotsakis 1991).

In the 1980s, a decade of bitter critique against New Archaeology methods and theories, Marxist theory played a central role in the Anglo-Saxon countries (Guidi 1988, 230-241; Trigger 1993; McGuire 1993).

In fact, in 1976 Matthew Spriggs organized an international conference in Cambridge that marked an awakening of interest of English-speaking archaeologists using a Marxist approach (Spriggs 1977). This was the first in a series of congresses and interdisciplinary experiences with other European and North American colleagues (between them Mike Rowlands, Kristian Kristiansen, Antonio Gilman, Philip Kohl and Maurizio Tosi) that culminated in the collective work on *Marxist perspectives in archaeology* (Spriggs 1984). In the literature of that period it's possible to appreciate the elaboration of theories rooted in the Neo-Marxist and Structural Marxist currents of thought or the application to archaeology of the (now fashionable) Wallerstein's "World System Theory".

At the same time, the postprocessual school also chose to utilize various Marxism-derived theories (Foucault, Derrida, the Frankfurt Critical Theory, gender studies, etc.).

After the 1989 events and the end of the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe, one of the most curious consequences of the new political and cultural climate – dominated

everywhere by the neo-liberist ideology – was the strengthening of a Marxist approach to archaeology in the United States (McGuire 1992; 1993). This is further evidence of the importance of critical and dialectical theories in the “globalized” world.

But let’s return to Europe! The creation in 1992 of the *European Association of Archaeologists* had political significance. The newly shaped “common house” of Western and Eastern European archaeologists offers to everyone involved in the profession the opportunity to exchange his/her experiences for the sake of a mutual enrichment of methodologies and theories.

It is not by chance that, following a decade of horrible civil wars in the Balkans, “ethnic cleansing” and the formation of new states throughout the ex-Communist world, nationalism and its relationships to the birth of different national archaeologies attained a pivotal position in the present debate (various articles in the EAA review, actually *European Journal of Archaeology*; see also Díaz-Andreu / Champion 1996; Graves-Brown / Jones / Gamble 1996; Atkinson / Banks / O’Sullivan 1996).

A typically Marxist perspective pervades books and articles dedicated to the topic. The archaeology of each European state is seen, in this light, as a powerful tool of the emerging nationalism that constitutes one of the primary ideologies of the modern bourgeoisie.

If we return to Italy, the link between the evolution of the political systems of the last 150 years and the history of prehistoric archaeology in the same period is clear.

In the post-unitary period, prehistory was the best candidate for the ideological claim of a unification of the country preceding the Roman world. This is the origin of the famous Terramare theory of Pigorini, which is based on a development of prehistoric Italy through movements of population from the North. This hypothesis agreed extraordinarily well with the civilizing and unifying aims for the peninsula proposed by the new northern bourgeoisie. At the same time, the social and ideological origin of many prehistory scholars, liberal Catholics of the upper middle class, made easier a lasting flourishing of the discipline in the second half of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century.

In the Fascist period the picture changed; Luciano Canfora has rightly observed that the obsessive idea of a continuity between Roman and Fascist Italy represents the only original contribution of the regime to the cultural policy of our country (Canfora 1989). In exchange for the ideology created by historians and classical archaeologists, these scholars had a kind of cultural control and an effective position of academic power in the field of studies on the ancient world which they still retain.

After 1945, the Christian-Democrats and their allies exerted a new form of centralized power that made room for the development of local initiatives (for examples, in the “red” regions, governed by the Communist Party), a trend that resulted, in archaeology, in a multiplication of academic positions, local museums and employment of State archaeologists, along with some real attempts at creating “unifying” methodologies.

In 1992, this apparently invincible system of power fell, overtaken by political scandals (another not secondary by-product of 1989 upheavals!). The change was accompanied by the emergence in the North of an openly secessionist movement, with the centralized State weakening: this is a prerequisite in our field of study for the

methodological “anarchy” or “pluriverse” (Tosi 1985-1986) that characterizes present Italian prehistoric archaeology.

Even such a rough application of a Marxist analysis as the one here proposed suggests how the history of archaeology in our country can be interpreted as a substantial reflection of the struggles between different factions of the dominant power bloc. It is in agreement with the conclusions of a famous and well-argued essay on the history of American archaeology by Tom Patterson (Patterson 1986).

Distorted and misunderstood as they were, the ideas of Karl Marx still deserve a serious critical re-examination. Far from being a unified theory (and probably thanks to the liveliness of different critical approaches), Marxist thought characterizes itself as a continuous, often quarrelsome debate between scholars whose main point of convergence is the historical materialist perspective. The idea is that the driving force of human evolution isn't the relationship between culture and environment, but, primarily, the dialectic confrontation between the main types of categories (ages, sexes, classes) in which men and women are organized.

It would be easy to object that the archaeological record (especially in prehistory) can offer only a poor and defective picture of ancient societies; to this purpose, it is important to underline how the recent improvements in survey and excavation methods and, at the same time, computer technology allow us to handle ever more meaningful sets of data on past “complexity”.

A sound-minded analysis of the interrelations between forces and modes of production and ideology in the ancient world or in the current creation of scientific knowledge is still, even for scholars politically far-off from the left, one of the main methods of inquiry. At the dawn of a new millennium, notwithstanding a tragic history of practical applications, Marxist theory remains one of the best candidates for connecting theory (and practice) in European archaeology.

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