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Sébastien Plutniak, Massimo Tarantini

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An Influential Outsider. Georges Laplace between French institutions and Italian Prehistory

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Abstract

This paper scrutinises the relationship between Georges Laplace and Italian prehistoric research during the second half of the 20th century. The intellectual and institutional consequences of Laplace’s scientific mobility are analysed both as regards the evolution of Italian Palaeolithic research and Laplace’s own professional career. This individual-centred perspective also

appears as a relevant proxy to depict the institutions and actors that formed the French-Italian part of the internationalised scientific prehistoric archaeology community, as well as some effects of the scientific policy of each country.

Keywords: prehistory, Italy, scientific migration, international relations, science studies

Résumé

Cet article examine les relations tenues entre Georges Laplace et la recherche préhistorique italienne au cours de la seconde moitié du xx^e siècle. Les conséquences intellectuelles et institutionnelles de sa mobilité spatiale sont analysées tant du point de vue de l'évolution de la recherche paléolithique italienne que de celui de la trajectoire personnelle de Laplace. Cette approche centrée sur un individu est également un moyen de rendre compte des acteurs et institutions qui constituèrent la partie franco-italienne d'une communauté archéologique internationalisée, ainsi que de certains effets des politiques scientifiques de chacun de ces deux pays.

Mots-clefs : préhistoire, Italie, migrations scientifiques, relations internationales, sociologie des sciences

Introduction: mobility in scientific activities

Social and historical studies of science have proposed numerous ways to account for mobility as a prominent property of scientific activities and their dynamics. When taken into consideration, spatial mobility is frequently perceived either as a normal and transhistorical “brain drain” (Laudel 2005) or as an effect of the hegemony and domination of central scientific nations over those on the periphery (Keim 2008). Some authors also link mobility to nationalisation and denationalisation processes (Crawford et al. 1993), producing a persistent tension throughout the history of scientific development.

Most of these studies aim to capture the mobility of scientists at a macroscopic level of analysis. In this paper, we propose a biographical approach focusing on French prehistorian Georges Laplace (1918–2004) and his relations with archaeology in Italy. Starting in the second half of the 1950s in Italy, Laplace developed a statistically-based method which he first called *typologie analytique* and later changed to *typologie analytique et structurale*¹.

This research programme later became a standard for decades in that country, although it was hardly ever used in France. This paper aims to describe a scientific migration in its multiple dimensions from an individual-centred perspective. Focusing on an individual gives us a starting point for depicting the relationships between the multiple institutional and personal actors that formed the Italian and

¹*Typologie analytique dynamique et structurale* has sometimes been used as well. See biographical and bibliographical data on Laplace in (Cabon 2004).

French prehistoric research communities, while considering their respective science policy, social and intellectual features².

In this particular case, spatial mobility will be thus analysed when it also relates to international mobility. What can impel a scientist to cross the borders of his nation³? In terms of social position, what does working abroad imply for a scientist? What possibilities of action are facilitated or made harder? And, ultimately, do national borders have any effective consequences on the evolution of a scientific field? Our analysis of Laplace's scientific migration career will start before his departure from France with an examination of his position in the French academic institutions. His relationships and scientific agreements with several key French prehistorians will be emphasised. We will then turn to the state of Italian prehistoric archaeology while Laplace was involved in it and finally we will look at how the reception of his work there evolved.

1 The French research institutions and Laplace's position

1.1 An unstable position at the CNRS

It is necessary to start with some background to the scientific situation in France during the formative years of Laplace's career. The establishment of the Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS) in 1939 was a crucial step in the development of a national policy concerning scientific research in France. During the post-war period, it became increasingly a matter of national interest (Guthleben 2009). The government supported the development of the CNRS, whose budget showed a constant progression (Marnot 2010). Furthermore, Frédéric Jolliot-Curie, head of the CNRS from 1944, wanted to pay greater attention to scientific research in the regions outside Paris. The project for creating several *Centres Régionaux d'études préhistoriques* proposed in 1947 by Henri Breuil, Louis-René Nougier and André Leroi-Gourhan appeared as an avatar of this policy concerning prehistory (È. Gran-Aymerich and J. Gran-Aymerich 1990). This situation of national effort in scientific development was highly favourable for the recruitment of young researchers from the south of France like Laplace.

Georges Laplace was born in 1918. Before the Second World War he had worked as a teacher. After his demobilisation in 1947⁴ he benefited from legal regulations aimed at helping students who were keen to continue their studies after the war⁵. Laplace obtained his UG degree at the University of Toulouse in 1950. In the same year he obtained a position as an *attaché de recherche* at the CNRS, thanks to the support of Henri Breuil⁶. Louis-René Nougier, a professor at

²The potential of a biographical approach for the history of science is well stressed by Marc-Antoine Kaeser in his methodological reflections based on his study of Édouard Desor (Kaesernodate).

³These questions are answered, although from a different perspective, by Margarita Díaz-Andreu in her study of Lluís Pericot and his trips to the United Kingdom (Díaz-Andreu 2012).

⁴École française de Rome Archives: Laplace files, document entitled "*états de service*".

⁵Arrêté du 9 août 1945 "fixant le régime des études et examens de certaines catégories d'étudiants et élèves victimes de la guerre de 1939–1945" and Ordonnance du 4 août 1945 "relative à l'exonération des droits scolaires et universitaires et à l'aide aux étudiants victimes de guerre".

⁶In a letter to Breuil dated 19 October 1951, Laplace thanked Breuil for "*votre intervention en*

Toulouse, was his scientific supervisor. Starting in October 1956 he stayed for two years at the *École française de Rome* as a “member”.

1.2 Science and international relations in Rome: a view from the Palazzo Farnese

Established in Rome in 1875, the *École française de Rome* was mainly devoted to hosting the most legitimate French academic elites from Paris. Several factors help to explain why, nevertheless, a researcher from the southern mountainous region of France, lacking a prestigious academic background, was sent to Rome.

The *École française de Rome* played – and still plays – an important role in the French cultural and scientific presence in Italy. As is well-demonstrated by the annual reports of Jean Bayet (1882– 1969), director of the institution from 1952, the *École* operated in Rome in a context of international competition, alongside the conventional statements sketching an ideal international scientific city. A few years after Laplace’s arrival, Jean Bayet submitted a “note” to the French Minister of National Education:

*Mais il suffit de comparer ce “séminaire” de 8 membres [...] à l’équipement scientifique que toutes les nations développent à Rome et en Italie pour se rendre compte de la nécessité de considérer la question d’un point de vue plus général et plus conforme aux exigences de la science moderne.*⁷

After this he gave a detailed description of the German, American and Swiss scientific institutions in Rome and contrasted them with the poverty of the French presence. With that international comparison, Bayet put forward the argument of “French backwardness”⁸, a rhetoric commonly used by French politicians and decision-makers since the 18th century (Bouchard 2008).

At that time, prehistoric archaeology was a growing field in Italy. Bayet was in touch with one of its most prominent figures in Italy, Alberto Carlo Blanc (1906– 1960), an internationally known scholar with important political connections (particularly among the higher echelons of the Vatican). Blanc was able to convince Bayet of the importance of Palaeolithic research. Despite having been trained as a classical Latinist, Bayet was sensitive to Blanc’s arguments and managed to create a strong position for France in Italian prehistoric archaeology. Explaining his choice, he later wrote:

While Italian prehistory is booming, it seems appropriate to establish links between [Italian] scholars working in this field (Baron Blanc in particular) and the young French School.⁹ (our translation).

ma faveur auprès du CNRS” (Breuil Archives, BR 35, Paris MNHN).

⁷“One only has to compare this 8-member ‘seminar’ [...] to the scientific equipment that all nations are developing in Rome and Italy to be aware of the need to consider this issue from a more general point of view and more in line with the needs of modern science.” Bayet 1959, Note à l’attention de Monsieur le Ministre de l’éducation Nationale (EFR Archives, Bayet files).

⁸In French: *retard français*.

⁹“À un moment où la préhistoire italienne est en plein essor, il a paru opportun d’établir des liens entre les savants qui s’en occupent (M. le baron Blanc en particulier) et la jeune école française.” Bayet, 1958, Rapport sur l’activité de l’Ecole française de Rome. 1956–1957 (EFR Archives).

1.3 The Roman disciplinary strategy of Jean Bayet

The École française de Rome hosts several disciplines (philology, history, archaeology and art history). Balancing these disciplines is a point of crucial importance for the École's policy. At that time, it was dominated by classical history and philology¹⁰, and Bayet wanted to enlarge the fields of expertise of his institution. He stressed the process of specialisation in scientific practices¹¹ and the École's need to adapt itself to this evolution. Because of the members' historical education, Bayet observed that archaeological remains were still often considered as documents for history rather than as sources in themselves (Bayet 1959 in Gras 2010, p. 247)¹². In his opinion, there was a crucial need for improvement in archaeological methods and education. This issue was also a primary concern in France: only one training excavation was available for classical archaeology (the oppidum of Glanum in Provence). By encouraging the opening of prehistoric training excavations, the prehistorians were particularly innovative in methodological terms. One of these places, for example, was Leroi-Gourhan in Arcy-sur-Cure from 1946 (É. Gran-Aymerich and J. Gran-Aymerich 1990).

Thus Bayet recruited two archaeologists: a prehistorian, Georges Laplace (1956–1958) and a specialist in classical pottery, Colette Bémont (1957–1959). It was clear that his interest in Laplace's work included its methodological concerns. As he put it, the recruitment of Laplace

is justified by [...] the interest raised from the comparison between different excavation and typological methods.¹³

During the 1950s, the best recruitment recipe was considered to be a balanced mixture of the most prestigious Parisian schools: one "agrégé" from the École normale supérieure, one archivist from the École des chartes and one graduate from the École des hautes études. A fourth member was included at the director's discretion (Bayet 1959 in Gras 2010, p. 245): Laplace benefited from this last option. This choice was sufficiently unusual to compel Bayet to make his reasons explicit in his annual report:

A novelty may seem audacious: the choice (as a recent graduate) of a prehistorian, M. Laplace. This is justified by the recent progress of the prehistoric sciences in Italy, concerning the issues related to the proto-history prelude...¹⁴

¹⁰The situation was quite similar at the École française d'Athènes: during the period 1919–1952 classical archaeology and art history strongly dominated (Treuil 1996, p. 416).

¹¹Bayet 1959, Note à l'attention de Monsieur le Ministre de l'éducation Nationale (EFR Archives).

¹²"Les 'Romains' sont plus portés à utiliser le matériel archéologique comme documentation de l'histoire qu'à l'étudier pour lui-même. [...] la complexité croissante de cette science [l'archéologie] recommande une formation plus poussée des futurs 'Romains' en ce sens (et surtout pour l'architecture)." (Bayet 1959, in Gras 2010, p. 247).

¹³Bayet 1958, Rapport sur l'activité de l'École française de Rome. 1956–1957, p. 2 (EFR Archives).

¹⁴"Une nouveauté peut paraître audacieuse: le choix (au titre de jeune qualifié) d'un préhistorien, M. Laplace. Il se justifie par le progrès récent des sciences préhistoriques en Italie, les problèmes proto-historiques auxquels elles servent de prélude..." (our translation) Bayet, J. 1958. Rapport sur l'activité de l'École française de Rome. 1956–1957. EFR Archives.

2 Reaching an honourable position: research topics, personal networks and academic kinship

2.1 A Mediterranean perspective

Laplace's research objective fitted in well with the research subjects at the *École française de Rome* from another point of view. Between 1953 and 1955 Laplace made many research trips to Algeria¹⁵ and Tunisia¹⁶, where he both carried out excavations and studied artefacts. Among the numerous lithic tool facies he studied was the Romanellian industry, named after the Romanelli Cave in southern Italy. Laplace aimed to link the North African and Italian data and, at the same time, verify the validity of his new method of analysing lithic industries over a large area. This comparative perspective appears as an important reason for justifying Laplace's place at the *École française de Rome* and it was heavily stressed in a 1958 report by Jean Bayet:

Mr Laplace's research for a doctoral thesis in the humanities forced him to criticise and test theories on the relationship between coastal industries in the Maghreb, Italy and on the Ligurian coast during the Upper Palaeolithic and early Neolithic.¹⁷

Laplace's interest in Africa converged with the *École's* own research interests. The institution had been undertaking archaeological fieldwork in North Africa since 1890 (Bayet 1959). In the CNRS structure, research on Italy and Africa was bound together. The 16th *commission* was dedicated to excavations in foreign countries and included a section labelled "Athènes-Rome" which also oversaw research in Tunisia and Morocco (É. Gran-Aymerich and J. Gran-Aymerich 1990). The presence of the *École* in North Africa was an important issue. Laplace's arrival in Italy also appears to have been the result of a convergence between his own research concerns and those of French scientific foreign policy in which the CNRS and the *École française de Rome* were embedded.

2.2 International support among prehistorians

Another factor helps to explain why the *École française* decided to open a door to prehistory and summon Laplace. As we have mentioned, Palaeolithic research experienced strong growth in Italy in the 1950s. In 1953, for example, Alberto Carlo Blanc organised the IV International Congress of the International Quaternary Association (INQUA) in Rome, a grand event with around 300 participants from 42 different nations. Opening the *École* to prehistory at that moment was perhaps also a way to reinforce the strong influence that France had always exercised over Italian prehistoric research.

However, Laplace's position was also the result of a real scientific partnership between Italy and France in Palaeolithic studies. It is appropriate to mention here

¹⁵1953: Faïd Souar; 1954: Djebel Sidi Rgeiss and Aïn Zitoun.

¹⁶1954: Mansourah; 1955: Aïn Kouka, Djebel Long and Sidi Bou Dzer.

¹⁷Bayet J., 1958. *Rapport sur l'activité de l'École française de Rome. 1956–1957*. EFR Archives, p. 9 (our translation).

that the main institution in the field was the Italian Institute of Human Palaeontology (IPU), which had been founded in 1913 and modelled on the *Institut de Paléontologie Humaine* founded two years earlier in Paris on the scientific initiative of Henri Breuil (Tarantini and Parenti 2011). Laplace's main supporter was Abbé Breuil, with whom Alberto Carlo Blanc had enjoyed a close relationship since the 1930s. In 1935 they jointly discovered the second Neanderthal skull at Saccopastore (Breuil and Blanc 2010) and afterwards they maintained a continuous correspondence¹⁸ in which we can see a scientific partnership and a sincere mutual affection. In 1955 Breuil wrote a letter of support to Jean Bayet in which he mentioned the existing relationship between his “*ami*” Georges Laplace (“*très zélé, méthodique, intelligent préhistorien – l’un de nos meilleurs jeunes*”) and Alberto Carlo Blanc¹⁹. Once Laplace had arrived in Italy, as expected Alberto Carlo Blanc was his main point of reference, although Luigi Cardini (1898–1971) was also important to Laplace because he managed almost all the practical aspects of the IPU²⁰.

2.3 The prehistoric research field in Italy

At that time Blanc was the heart and soul of the IPU. He made Laplace a member of the Institute²¹ and placed all its lithic collections at his disposal. However, Blanc ran the IPU much as a family business and in 1954, precisely for that reason, after a decade of tension a deep split developed in the Italian scientific community (Tarantini 2004). Nevertheless, the contrast between Blanc and the other Italian scholars did not prevent Laplace from accessing the collections. Neither did he come up against any obstacles in studying other Italian collections, including unpublished ones; for example the lithic industries under study by A. M. Radmilli (Fig. 1). Thus in his 1966 monograph he published the lithic industries related to 41 Italian sites (Fig. 2).

Openness towards foreign students was a constant feature of Italian prehistorians: although they closely guarded their finds from their fellow countrymen, they did not hesitate to open the drawers of their collections to foreign scholars (during the same period, for example, Hermann Müller-Karpe was assembling his large proto-historical corpus). The presence in Rome of sixteen foreign institutes involved in archaeological research was surely an important factor in creating this attitude. On the whole, foreign colleagues were not considered primary competitors on the academic level.

More generally, in Italy, Laplace's analytical typology became in a very short time a widely-shared means of analysis for characterising and standardising Italian research on the Palaeolithic. This development led to the formation of a common language and the definition of a series of very specific issues to be explored

¹⁸Under study.

¹⁹Only the year is written. We wish to warmly thank Arnaud Hurel for his help in deciphering Breuil's handwriting. Breuil Archives, BR43, MNHN, Paris. However, there are no references to Laplace in the letters of A.C. Blanc in the Breuil Archives.

²⁰The letters between Cardini and Laplace show Cardini's central role in “mediating” the relationship between Laplace and Blanc—sometimes he wrote on behalf of Blanc himself... (IPU Archives).

²¹Letter from Laplace to Breuil, 29.1.1957, Breuil Archives, MNHN, Paris.

Italian sites studied in Laplace 1966 and their authorities

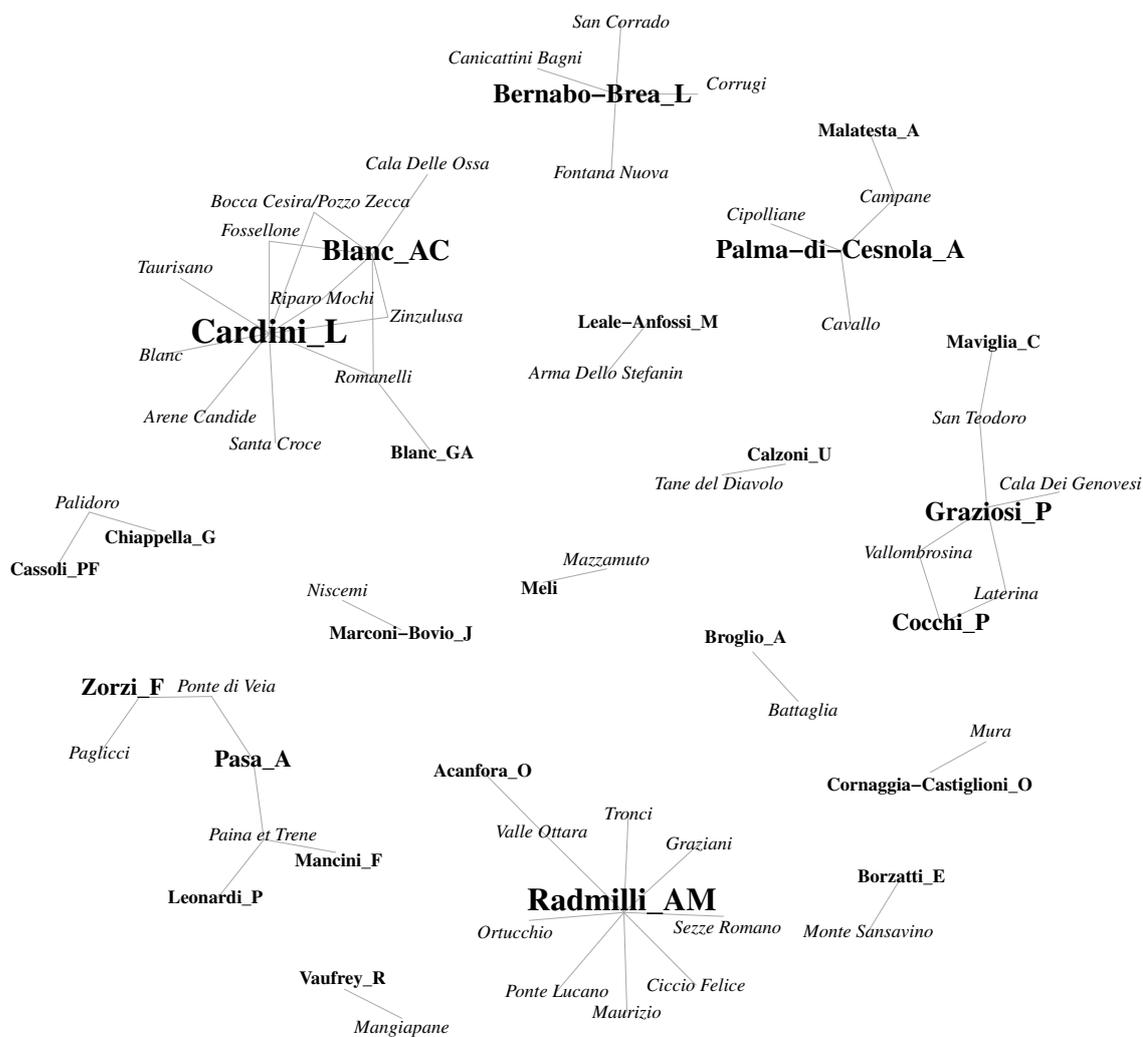
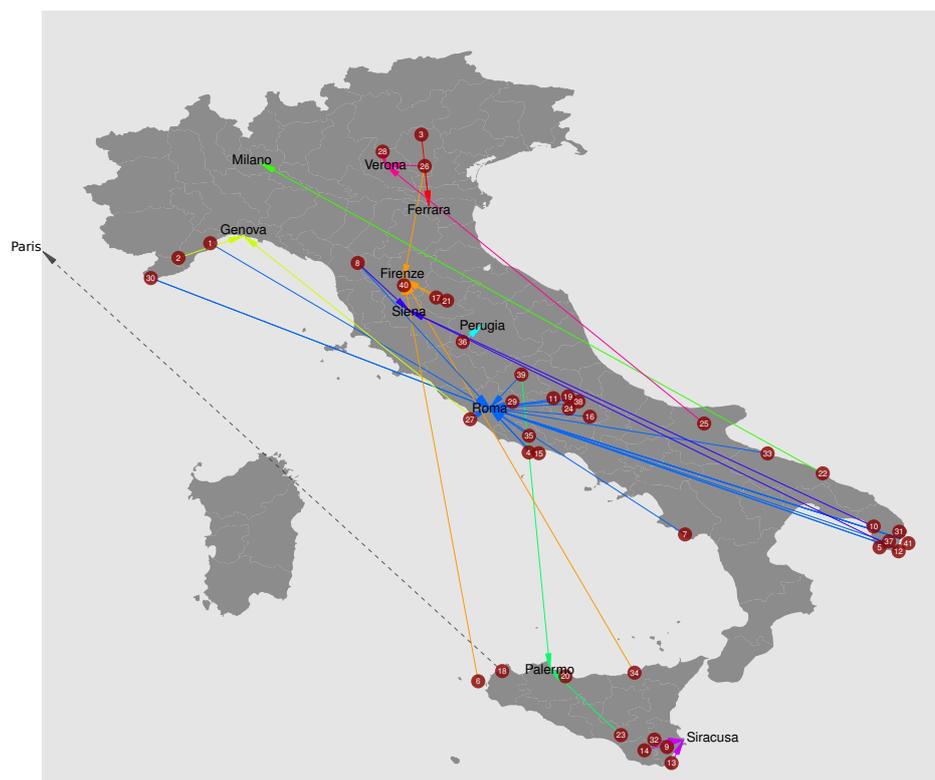


Figure 1: Bipartite network showing the relations between the sites (in italics) studied by Laplace in his 1966 PhD thesis and the prehistorians (bold font) who had authority over their archaeological materials (as excavator, curator, administrator, etc.). The size of the archaeologists' names is proportional to their rank (number of adjacent lines). Note that the only French archaeologist is Raymond Vaufrey, Laplace's CNRS sponsor until 1960.

Sites studied in Laplace 1966 linked with the location of their authorities



1: Arene Candide	8: Campane	15: Fossellone	22: Mura	29: Ponte Lucano	36: Tane del Diavolo
2: Arma Dello Stefanin	9: Canicattini Bagni	16: Graziani	23: Niscemi	30: Riparo Mochi	37: Taurisano
3: Battaglia	10: Cavallo	17: Laterina	24: Ortucchio	31: Romanelli	38: Tronci
4: Blanc	11: Ciccio Felice	18: Mangiapane	25: Paglicci	32: San Corrado	39: Valle Ottara
5: Bocca Cesira/Pozzo Zecca	12: Cipolliane	19: Maurizio	26: Paina et Trene	33: Santa Croce	40: Vallombrosina
6: Cala Dei Genovesi	13: Corrugli	20: Mazzamuto	27: Palidoro	34: San Teodoro	41: Zinzulusa
7: Cala Delle Ossa	14: Fontana Nuova	21: Monte Sansavino	28: Ponte di Veia	35: Sezze Romano	

Figure 2: Sites studied by Laplace in this 1966 PhD thesis linked to the location of the archaeologists who had authority over their archaeological materials. Rome and Florence clearly appear as two hubs of this network.

according to the logic of the “puzzle”, typical of what Thomas Kuhn called “normal science”. These included such issues as the significance of the statistical relevance of a type, and the analysis of a site at the level of primary or secondary types.

3 Laplace’s reception in Italy

Why did Laplace’s analytical typology enjoy so much success in Italy, in contrast to its reception in France? Among several factors, we emphasise the fact that Laplace’s typology filled a large void. Typologies of lithic industries on a regional or national level had been established in other European countries in the 1950s, and particularly in France, whereas Italy had not yet adopted shared descriptive criteria. Furthermore, the deep rift between the scholars mentioned above did not favour the elaboration of a common language and the periodisation of the Italian Palaeolithic had not progressed beyond the attempts of the 1920s. Thus in Italy there was great need for a rigorous standard for the study of lithic industries. This fact helps to explain the ready reception of a universal typology directly applicable to Italy. Laplace’s typology allowed the systematic analysis of lithics, wherever they had been found.

3.1 A weak debate in Italian Palaeolithic studies

The success of Laplace’s typology did not give rise to an open controversy. Of course, in Italy it did not have to overcome typological proposals that had already been consolidated from both a scientific and an academic point of view, as in France. But the substantial absence of controversy depended also on the fact that Laplace’s reception was limited to typology considered as a means of analysis. The reception of Laplace’s typology as a mere means of analysis, and not as part of a broader scientific view, is also confirmed by the fact that the subsequent and also profound revisions proposed by Laplace were not accepted, with the paradoxical result that Italian scholars have continued to refer to the typology developed in 1964, ignoring the changes of 1968 and 1971. This refusal arose from the fact that adoption of the new typological proposals meant complicating the comparison with the lithic industries already studied (Arturo Palma di Cesnola, pers. comm. 7.4.2014, interviewed by the authors).

The questions raised by the theory of the *synthétotype*, as well as the evolutionary perspective inherent in Laplace’s theories, were largely ignored. Even the deep differences between Laplace’s approach and that of the school of François Bordes were largely neglected, so much so that the same researchers applied Laplace’s typology to the Upper Palaeolithic and Bordes’ to the Lower and Middle Palaeolithic. The aim was mainly to create chrono-typological reference series.

This point of view is clearly evident in the article by Palma di Cesnola (1962), which was the first application of Laplace’s typology in an Italian context. For Palma di Cesnola, the many typological lists developed during the 1950s were all “similar in general principle”. In his view, if preference was given to Laplace’s, it was because it seemed the “simplest” and especially the most suitable for comparative statistical evaluations of the lithic industries. The statistical approach used by Laplace, as well as by Bordes (see e.g. [Bordes 1950](#)), was the central point.

3.2 The claims for more rigorous methods

Above all, the statistical approach had all the appearance of science: it transformed archaeological data into scientific fact that was considered neutral and measurable. In doing so, it took part of that “‘new mentality’, based on the rigour and accuracy of mathematics, from which it cannot be divorced in the investigation of the modern spirit” (Palma di Cesnola 1962, p. 2). After all, these were the years when Italy experienced a real infatuation with science crossing all cultural and political orientations and no different to the neo-positivist perspective popular throughout the West, including the USA²². The search for general laws of progress is inherent in Laplace’s approach, as also observed by A. Broglio (Broglio 1962, p. 261). For him, Laplace’s method led, positively, to a realisation of “the existence of general laws that seem to regulate the evolution of lithic assemblages”.

In addition, Palma di Cesnola believed that statistical comparisons were a necessity for the Italian Upper Palaeolithic which, unlike the European Palaeolithic, did not have index fossils that made it easy to distinguish between the different chronological layers (Palma di Cesnola 1962, p. 2: unlike in Italy, “in Western Europe there were cultures [...] whose index fossils are unmistakable”). Although we may be slightly forcing the argument, we can say that Laplace’s typology was adopted as a substitute for index fossils (see some critical examples in Bietti 1978, pp. 14–15). We are therefore far from the universalist perspective of Laplace. From this point of view, the spread of the use of Laplace’s typology in Italy becomes a clear example of the fact that, in analysing the spread of archaeological theories, it is necessary to take into account the distortion of the theory itself. It is sufficient to consider that Laplace himself was a critic of what he called “the fetishism of the ‘fossil director’” (“*le fétichisme du ‘fossile directeur’*”), considered the lowest level of the traditional typological nomenclature (Laplace 1968, p. 15)²³. Nonetheless, many Italian researchers of the generation following Palma di Cesnola attended the summer seminars organised by Laplace in Arudy²⁴, and the reception of analytical typology in Italy grew rapidly. A journal entitled *Archivio di tipologia analitica* was founded in 1973 at the University of Siena; it was devoted to the publication of raw lithic data following Laplace’s system and was published until 1998. Another important example of the success that the Laplace approach had in Italy, also in the following generations, is the volume in memory of him edited by F. Martini (Martini 2005).

²²See Broglio 1962, pp. 260–262, who was open to Laplace’s theory even while cautiously awaiting further evidence. Radmilli instead criticized the idea that “the history of culture follows processes and is done with mechanisms substantially similar to those identified in evolutionary biology” (Radmilli 1974, p. 186). For a comparison with the Spanish discussions, see Estévez Escalera and Vila i Mitjà 1999, pp. 130–132. With all due differences, the need for a scientific approach expressed by Palma di Cesnola is not so different in spirit from that which motivated New Archaeology in the United States (is it the success of Popper’s logic?).

²³This point was nevertheless perceived by A. Broglio in his broad review of Laplace 1966 (Broglio 1962).

²⁴Throughout the history of the Arudy Seminar (1969–1986), 22 Italian archaeologists participated a total of 44 times. Most of these appearances (75%) occurred before 1975 (Laplace archives, Musée national de Préhistoire, Les Eyzies; data cross-checked with various sources): i.e. until the time these young scholars obtained academic positions in Italy (Broglio in Ferrara in 1970, Gambassini in Siena in 1971, who was joined by Martini in 1971).

3.3 Criticisms

In the 1970s and 1980s the Laplace typology did not only meet with praise but also endured some criticism. Some were internal to the typological paradigm and supported the greater validity of Bordes' typology (see [Bietti 1978](#), who analysed the scientific logic of the Laplace typology in depth); others criticised (rarely) the epistemological foundations of the typology. The most influential critic in this respect was Antonio Mario Radmilli (1922–1998), a leading scholar in Italy, professor at the University of Pisa and president of the UISPP from 1991 to 1996. Radmilli mainly criticised the fact that typological statistical data derived from a single site were considered valid on a large scale, a criticism that clearly shows a superficial understanding and poor application of Laplace's method in Italy.

More generally, Radmilli considered the objective of prehistoric research to be the reconstruction of the economic bases of subsistence in relation to the specific environmental context and its transformations. So while Radmilli considered the Mesolithic, on the basis of faunal remains, as a case of cultural adaptation to new environmental conditions (the last post-glacial period), Laplace argued, on the basis of the lithic typology, for the need to “dismiss as illusory and misleading the concept of Mesolithic” ([Laplace 1968](#), p. 16, our translation), even if he conceived cultures as an evolutionary response to the pressures exerted by the environment ([Lippé 2010](#), pp. 312–313). But Radmilli criticised radically the idea that it was possible to arrive at cultural conclusions on the basis of the statistical typology of lithic industries. Discussing Laplace's interpretation of the Polesini Cave, Radmilli argued that “in this way lithic industry [...] is pigeonholed in a pattern that has a meaning of relative chronology, but is unimportant in terms of culture” ([Radmilli 1974](#), p. 71).

4 Return to France: institutional effects of a migration abroad

Laplace officially left the *École française de Rome* in September 1958, although he continued to visit Italy and publish in Italian journals on a regular basis. His stay at the *École française de Rome* was actually a peculiar academic migration: he was geographically abroad, but still in a French institution that was very well connected to the metropolitan academic institutions. In France, he was again employed by the CNRS as an *attaché de recherche*, but was unable to immediately obtain a better academic position. This situation garnered protests from Jean Bayet, who wrote to the CNRS suggesting implicitly that refusal to promote Laplace challenged the scientific authority of the *École française de Rome*²⁵. This makes clear how, although Laplace's position in the elitist club of French academic archaeology was strengthened by his stay in Italy, in the long term it did not have a positive

²⁵“J’exprimai le vœu que ce savant, Attaché de Recherches depuis 9 ans, pût être reclassé par promotion au grade de Chargé de Recherches. Dans l’ignorance de la jurisprudence intérieure du CNRS je m’étonne qu’il n’ait pu être donné satisfaction à une demande qui me paraissait si naturelle. Considérant que l’Ecole Française de Rome est au plus haut degré un institut de Recherches Spécialisées et qu’ainsi un chercheur qui y est détaché remplit éminemment sa fonction.” Letter to the CNRS by J. Bayet, 3th April 1959 (EFR Archives).

effect on his academic promotion. The École française de Rome was the first and the last prestigious academic appointment he received during his career.

As Elizabeth Crawford and her colleagues have stated, “assessing the effects of migration on the transplantation of ideas, intellectual approaches or whole specialities” is a thorny issue (Crawford et al. 1993, p. 26). Thorny does not mean that it is an impossible task, but that the effects of migration are probably easier to capture at the actor level of analysis. In Georges Laplace’s case, these effects can be clearly identified, and there is no doubt that national boundaries matter in archaeological activities. Clearly he benefited from being a foreigner and, somehow, an outsider, in terms of the conflicts within the community of Italian prehistorians. However, the spread and success of his method in Italy also implied its standardisation, which Laplace always regretted since he made continuous improvements to it once back in France. Thus Laplace’s reception in Italy appears as further confirmation that the spread of a theory or a method is also the history of its reinterpretation, as is proved for example for the reception of Darwin in Italy (Pancaldi 1991). In the last few decades, scholars have stressed the dilution of national frameworks in general and in science especially²⁶ Georges Laplace’s experience and the evolution of his method clearly show that national boundaries still matter in scientific activities, at least in the field of archaeology, as is also demonstrated by K. Kristiansen (Kristiansen 2001) from bibliographic citation data. This result urges us to examine the empirical effects of such borders, rather than addressing their ontology and (rhetorically?) asking if they still exist.

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²⁶See, for instance, works by – and related to – Ulrich Beck, Bruno Latour or Michael Gibbons. The latter contributed to the “mode2”, “new production of knowledge” thesis.

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