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Paola Villa (1939–2024): “...the Super Important Archaeologist Most Have Never Heard of”

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Abstract

Paola Villa (1939–2024) was an influential archaeologist who contributed greatly to the field of Palaeolithic archaeology.

Keywords Palaeolithic · History of archaeology · Taphonomy · Site formation processes

Archaeologist Paola Villa passed away on October 30th 2024 in her home in Boulder, Colorado (USA), a week before she was to receive a lifetime achievement award in the Monrepos research center in Neuwied, Germany. She was looking forward to that “Human Roots” award ceremony. Still very active, 85 years old, flying back and forth from Boulder to Italy for work and to visit family, she had just started writing up the bone tools from Fontana Ranuccio, a 400,000 years old site south of Rome, and she was planning to finish her work on Grotta Guattari that (2024) fall. She had just received a new American passport (“...valid until 2034”), had an Italian

passport, “... also valid for a good number of years ...and the lawyer says it is perfectly legal (for USA and Italy) to have two nationalities. So I can now move across the planet and will see you in November for the ceremony”, she emailed last summer.

Born in Rome in 1939 and raised there, Paola Villa grew up surrounded by archaeology. After obtaining a doctorate in Classical Archaeology from the University of Rome, she became interested in Palaeolithic archaeology and, having moved to the United States in the 1970s, embarked on a PhD-trajectory under the guidance of Glynn Isaac at the University of California at Berkeley. After completing her PhD in 1978, she became a (temporary) Lecturer at the University of Colorado and started her life-long affiliation with the University’s Natural History Museum, alongside various teaching and research positions at other universities in the US. For a period of five years (1993–1998) she was a professor at the prestigious *Institut de Préhistoire et Géologie du Quaternaire* at the University of Bordeaux 1, France.

The Human Roots award she was to receive at Monrepos honours archaeologists or scientists from associated disciplines for achievements that have exerted extraordinary influence on our understanding of the development of the human niche. Richard Dawkins, Steven Pinker, Robin Dunbar and Mike Tomasello are all previous laureates of this award: distinguished scholars with a substantial impact within their field of expertise as well as well-known to the general public, authors of successful books, and, in short, big names in “Big History”. Paola Villa, the first female winner of this prize, was an outlier amongst the awardees thus far, as she was virtually unknown amongst the wider public, and even within the field of palaeoanthropology, especially with early career scientists. One colleague aptly called her “...the super important archaeologist most have never heard of”. She didn’t discover the oldest this or that or write papers with big claims which made

Editor's note - I am very grateful that Wil Roebroeks wrote something for JPA in memory of Paola Villa. Personally, Paola was an important figure in my early career, and for a few years, we would see each other each summer during visits to our respective sites in France. I was thrilled that Monrepos chose to honour her in 2024, and I was very much looking forward to seeing her there after some years when I then learned the sad news of her passing. Eventually in the back and forth over this piece, Wil kindly included me in the authorship and soon after it regrettably stalled on my desk (something some of my colleagues will identify with). However, after a summer pause, we have decided to move forward with this now-belated note, almost a year after her passing, to honour an excellent archaeologist who, we both feel, contributed greatly to our field—and yet was perhaps less well recognized than she deserved. I hope this short note helps to add to her recognition (SPM)

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the headlines and were promoted by social media. Her impact was of a different kind, resulting from an explicit source-criticism approach, rigorous testing of assumptions of Palaeolithic archaeology, in fact continuously examining the empirical strength of the narrative building blocks of the “big histories” mentioned above. And whereas a recent “Big History” book (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021) states that little can be gleaned about early human (social) behaviour from archaic human “...cranial remains and the occasional piece of knapped flint” and that hence in these authors’ view the history of everything only starts around 30,000 years ago, Paola’s temporal focus was a much larger one, stretching from the Lower Palaeolithic to the Neolithic.

Her 1978 PhD thesis (Villa, 1978) (published as University of California Publications in Anthropology, Vol. 13, 1983. Terra Amata and the Middle Pleistocene Archaeological Record of Southern France) is a great example of her approach and of the impact she made in Palaeolithic archaeology. Terra Amata (Nice, France) was already a famous Middle Pleistocene site when she started her thesis work in the 1970s. The site had been excavated in a rescue intervention by Henry de Lumley in 1966 and had become known to the wider public through reconstruction drawings of cozy huts on the Mediterranean beach, 400,000 years ago, nicely visualized in a 1969 *Scientific American* publication (De Lumley, 1969). Reconstructing huts requires a high degree of spatial integrity; however, Paola’s work, which included the refitting of stone artefacts from the site, unambiguously demonstrated that the spatial distribution patterns of lithic materials that formed the hut reconstructions were heavily influenced by natural formation processes, resulting in artefacts and large stones moving up and down through the beach deposits.



Fig. 1 Paola Villa visiting the Fontéchevade (France) site in 1996, during her professorship at Bordeaux (wearing a University of Colorado Museum bag). Around her, from left to right, are Lawrence Bartram, Phil Chase, April Nowell (her back to the camera), Harold Dibble, and Shannon McPherron

She showed that the inferred “living floors”, with stone artefacts and arrangements of large stones, were better seen as palimpsests of artefacts from different time periods and were hence not to be taken as blueprints for any dwelling structure: these “huts” had literally no ground to stand on. This study was before its time and in some quarters deeply unpopular (spoiler alert: the huts still feature prominently in the *Musée de Préhistoire* Terra Amata, more than four decades later), but Villa, throughout her career, put archaeological rigour first.

In a series of studies in the 1980s, Villa repeatedly demonstrated the importance of studying the role of post-depositional processes in the formation of any archaeological site. Her systematic study of the causes of bone breakage, for example, enabled her to identify fracture morphologies and fragmentation indices for distinguishing green (fresh, possibly anthropogenic) from post-depositional bone breakage such as sediment pressure. This allowed unambiguous identification of butchery marks and breakage for marrow extraction on human bones, proving cannibalism at the cave site of Fontbregoua in France, dating to around 4000 BC, a finding she published in *Science* in 1986 (Villa et al., 1986). The methodology she developed to distinguish the various bone fragmentation processes is still widely used in archaeozoological studies today and represents her most cited paper (Villa & Mahieu, 1991).

While a Professor at Bordeaux (1993–1998) (Fig. 1), she set out together with Lawrence Bartram to excavate the Upper Pleistocene hyena den of Bois Roche in southwest France. The goal of the excavation of this site, where a few stone artefacts perhaps testified to an occasional presence of humans, was to carefully excavate a large faunal assemblage to document a “hyena-signature” that could be used by archaeologists to identify the collector species responsible for the accumulation of faunal assemblages and to show what kinds of pseudo bone tools could be made by carnivores. In a subsequent paper with Marie Soressi (Villa & Soressi, 2000), she also showed that the stone tools were unrelated to behaviours in the cave and had a formation process separate from the bones.

Her time at Bordeaux was formative for the institute and for a whole generation of researchers there who took very seriously her call for a critical reading of the archaeological record and of past excavations with a renewed emphasis on reconstructing site formation through the study of existing collections and targeted new excavations (Fig. 2). Her influence is also seen in her emphasis on the totality of the archaeological record. It would be difficult to say, for instance, whether Villa was a specialist in fauna or lithics. In our current age of scientific specializations, she was a Palaeolithic archaeologist.

Nor was Villa confined to a region or a time period within the Palaeolithic. Her research career covered a wide range of varied countries and sites, aided by her knowledge of English, French, Spanish, and Italian. While she did some fieldwork herself, she mostly studied existing collections, delving into detailed assessments of Lower and Middle Palaeolithic



Fig. 2 Paolo Villa visiting the 2002 excavations at Pech de l'Azé IV (France). In addition to Villa, from left to right are Jean-Guillaume Bordes, Jacques Pelegrin, and Harold Dibble

archaeological sites (e.g. Ambrona in Spain), became involved in the hunting and scavenging debate, studied the evidence for the earliest uses of fire, addressed many aspects of Neanderthal behaviour, Middle Stone Age technologies in South Africa, Lower Palaeolithic bone tools, etc., very often in collaboration with local archaeologists and with the support of granting agencies like the Wenner Gren, the Leakey Foundation, and the US National Science Foundation.

And from the beginning of her career, she was not afraid to go against the grain: especially as an early career researcher working on a flagship site like Terra Amata. It must have taken guts to go against the popular “huts”, but “guts” was one of Paola’s many qualities, a quality that at times could be pretty intimidating to early career researchers as well as to “established” scholars. She was refreshingly outspoken in all aspects of life, submitting her co-workers to a continuous forceful review, in the scientific domain and elsewhere.

This could make working with her hard at times, but Paola was also very supportive, helping scholars, young and old, with her knowledge, improving manuscripts through her meticulously detailed reviews, and helping early career researchers by writing countless recommendations (including for one of us).

Her critical attitude and her prominent role in the study of site formation processes are still as relevant today as it was when she tackled the Terra Amata record. Critical assessment of spatial proximity, whether it is about the anthropogenic character of fire proxies such as heated bones in early Pleistocene sites in Africa, the currently debated inferred association between a (possibly) “modern human” tooth and “Neronian” artefacts at Grotte Mandrin in France, or countless other examples that could be listed here, including the new items in our archaeological toolbox such as the retrieval of sedimentary DNA: how did the material analyzed get into the sediment, what does its spatial proximity to something we are interested in (tools, human remains?) imply? Questions we need to answer in order to build solid building blocks for big histories, as Paola put it in her PhD-thesis,

“... no useful purpose is served by exaggerating the resolution of the data” (1978: 45).

In retrospect, John Wymer’s (Wymer 1984) review of her published PhD thesis (Villa, 1983) for the *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* already reads like a good summary of what Paola was to accomplish during her long career. Paraphrased slightly here, Wymer writes.

‘...For anyone wishing to study the Palaeolithic, Paola Villa’s work is essential. It brought a gust of scientific thought to a subject that has so often degenerated to emotive assessment and personal acrimony.’

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Declarations

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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