

The Prehistoric Museum of Terra Amata (Nice, France), a medium for scientific and cultural dissemination

Bertrand Roussel
Jade Bolognesi
Jean-Marc Giaume

Musée de Préhistoire de Terra Amata, 25, boulevard Carnot. 06300 Nice (France). E-mail: bertrand.roussel@ville-nice.fr

ABSTRACT

The Prehistoric Museum of Terra Amata (Nice, France) opened its doors on September 16, 1976, in the Port district in Nice. It is a "site museum" dedicated to presenting the Paleolithic deposit of Terra Amata. The museum illustrates the behavior and lifestyle of the earliest inhabitants of Nice within their environment, between 400,000 and 380,000 years ago. Located directly on the archaeological site, the Terra Amata Museum preserves the remains left by *Homo heidelbergensis* niçois around 400,000 years ago. Visitors can explore the behavior and ways of life of these humans, at once so close and yet so distant from us, who built huts on a beach and hunted elephants, deer, and rabbits. They also kindled fires at the center of their successive dwellings, thereby creating hearths that are among the earliest ever discovered worldwide. Since its opening, the Terra Amata Museum of Prehistory has played an active role in disseminating knowledge of Prehistory through a wide range of initiatives.

Key words:

museum, Lower Paleolithic, Terra Amata, Nice, scientific culture.

RIASSUNTO

Il Museo di Preistoria di Terra Amata (Nizza, Francia), un mezzo di diffusione scientifica e culturale

Il Museo di Preistoria di Terra Amata (Nizza, Francia) ha aperto le sue porte il 16 settembre 1976, nel quartiere del porto a Nizza. Si tratta di un "museo di sito" dedicato alla presentazione del deposito paleolitico di Terra Amata. Il Museo illustra il comportamento e lo stile di vita dei primi abitanti di Nizza nel loro ambiente, tra 400.000 e 380.000 anni fa. Situato direttamente sul sito archeologico, il Museo di Terra Amata conserva i resti lasciati dagli Homo heidelbergensis nizzardi circa 400.000 anni fa. I visitatori possono scoprire il comportamento e le modalità di vita di questi uomini, allo stesso tempo così vicini e così lontani da noi, che avevano costruito capanne su una spiaggia e cacciavano elefanti, cervi e conigli. Essi accendevano inoltre fuochi al centro delle loro abitazioni successive, creando così focolari che figurano tra i più antichi scoperti al mondo. Fin dalla sua apertura, il Museo di Preistoria di Terra Amata ha svolto un ruolo attivo nella diffusione delle conoscenze sulla Preistoria attraverso numerose iniziative.

Parole chiave:

museo, Paleolitico inferiore, Terra Amata, Nizza, cultura scientifica.

INTRODUCTION

By definition, the prehistoric period, unlike other branches of archaeology, has not yielded any written records. This is one of the reasons why it remains relatively little known to the general public. Another contributing factor to the lack of awareness of this discipline in France is its insufficient representation in the school curriculum. It is paradoxical that the longest period in human history occupies only a marginal place within the French national education programs. In order to promote broader knowledge of our field, it is therefore essential that major institutions exist which combine the functions of col-

lection conservation, research, and the dissemination of knowledge.

Taking the Museum of Prehistory of Terra Amata in Nice (France) as an example, we will examine how this institution can serve as an important vector for the development of scientific culture as well as culture more broadly. Owing to its multidisciplinary nature, our field stands at the crossroads between the humanities and the so-called hard sciences. We will also explore how a museum of prehistory can play a major role in addressing contemporary issues, such as raising awareness of climate change or contributing to the fight against racism and social exclusion.

TERRA AMATA, A SITE, A MUSEUM

The history of the Terra Amata Museum cannot be recounted without first considering that of its eponymous site, which began in the mid-19th century (Lumley et al., 2009a, 2009b; Roussel, 2022, 2023). The prehistoric site of Terra Amata has a long and eventful history. Already in the mid-19th century, a rhinoceros molar and elephant remains were discovered near the Terra Amata property, which, nearly a century later, was subdivided to allow the construction of several apartment buildings (Valensi et al., 2009; Valensi et al., 2011). In 1958, sections visible in an abandoned construction site attracted the attention of geologists, who observed the presence of fossil animal remains and prehistoric tools (Bourcart & Siffre, 1958; Jaworsky 1959; Cauche et al., 2018). It was not until 1965, however, with the resumption of excavation work for a building project, that the Terra Amata site was fully revealed

by a young prehistorian, Henry de Lumley (Lumley, 1967), during a field survey of the construction area. Following intense negotiations with the developer, the building project was halted, and a rescue excavation was launched on January 28, 1966, under the direction of Henry de Lumley, then a young CNRS researcher (fig. 1). Initially planned to last one month, the excavation was extended in light of the importance of the discoveries and was only completed on July 5, 1966 (Lumley, 1966, 1969). The international resonance of the excavation and its discoveries found an echo in "Terra Amata", a book published in 1967 by the Nice-born novelist and Nobel Prize laureate Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio (Gallimard).

In 1966, no legislation required developers to halt or slow down construction work to allow Henry de Lumley and his team to conduct a systematic excavation of the Terra Amata site. A collaboration was therefore established between the scientist and the

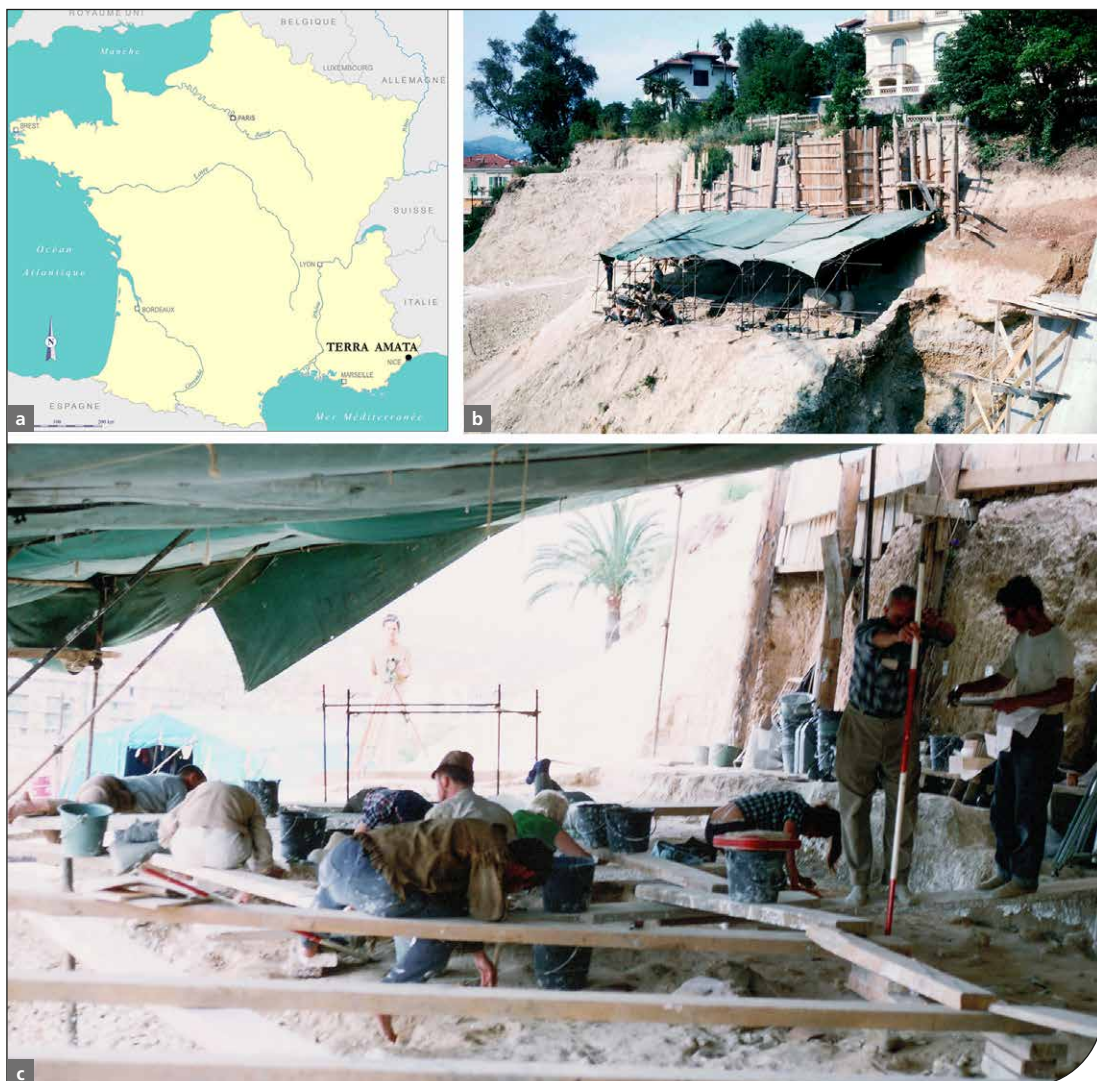


Fig. 1. Location (a) and views of the Terra Amata excavations site in 1966 (b and c).

developers to make the archaeological excavation possible. The Terra Amata case was later cited in 1975 by the ethnologist Jacques Soustelle in a report (Soustelle, 1975), which laid the foundations for what is now known in France as preventive archaeology—an approach that enables excavations to be carried out prior to construction work when archaeological potential is identified.

The superimposed Acheulean occupation floors of Terra Amata are chronologically situated within a transitional period between a warming phase (Marine Isotope Stage 11) and a major global cooling episode (Marine Isotope Stage 10). Based on stratigraphic data, lithic technology and typology, biostratigraphy, and electron spin resonance dating, the coastal dune D of stratigraphic unit C1b can be assigned an age of approximately 380,000 years, corresponding to the onset of a marine regression (Marine Isotope Stage 11.3). The littoral marine formations (FML) of stratigraphic unit C1a can be attributed an age of around 400,000 years, corresponding to the end of a marine transgression (Marine Isotope Stage 11.24).

Eight species of large mammals have been identified at the Terra Amata site. These include one carnivore, *Ursus arctos*, and seven ungulates: *Palaeoloxodon antiquus*, *Stephanorhinus hemitoechus*, *Sus scrofa*, *Cervus elaphus*, *Dama dama* cf. *clactoniana*, *Bos primigenius* and *Hemitragus bonali*. In addition, there is a particularly significant presence of the European rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*), which represents, in terms of number of remains, a substantial proportion of the fauna recovered (Bailon et al., 2011).

The near absence of carnivores, with only three remains of brown bear, provides strong evidence for an anthropogenic contribution.

The limited number of species present at the site can largely be explained by the fact that it represents an open-air deposit. Another factor is the short duration of the different occupation phases. This situation also supports the interpretation of the site, at least in part, as a hunting stopover.

The paleontological study of the faunal remains recovered from the different occupation layers at Terra Amata shows a high degree of homogeneity in the relative proportions of the various taxa throughout the stratigraphic sequence. The biostratigraphic study of the Quaternary faunas from Terra Amata associated with Acheulean industries allows the site to be attributed to the Middle Pleistocene, particularly on the basis of the presence of the steppe rhinoceros and the tahr (Valensi et al., 2011).

The animal remains from the Terra Amata site provide insights into human–animal relationships between 400,000 and 380,000 years ago, both in terms of acquisition (hunting or scavenging) and in the processing and exploitation of carcasses. Finally, the treatment of animals may also be related to non-dietary purposes, such as tool production or the recovery of

hides (Valensi et al., 2011; Valensi & Lumley, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c, 2016d).

The lithic assemblage recovered at Terra Amata is characterized by the presence of a large number of modified pebbles. These are primarily represented by choppers of various types (fig. 2). Chopping-tools, which are relatively scarce in the marine beach deposits of stratigraphic unit C1a, become extremely rare in the coastal dune deposits of unit C1b. Another characteristic feature of the Terra Amata industry is the presence of picks. Handaxes are very rare and all display a cortex-preserved base. Cleavers, almost all made on pebbles and only exceptionally on flakes, are also noteworthy (Lumley & Cauche, 2016).

Traditional tools (micro-tools) are mainly flaked products (scrapers, denticulates, etc.). Analysis of the flaked products shows that the Levallois method is not represented in the Terra Amata assemblage. The main raw material used by humans was limestone pebbles, varying in silica content, which they could find di-

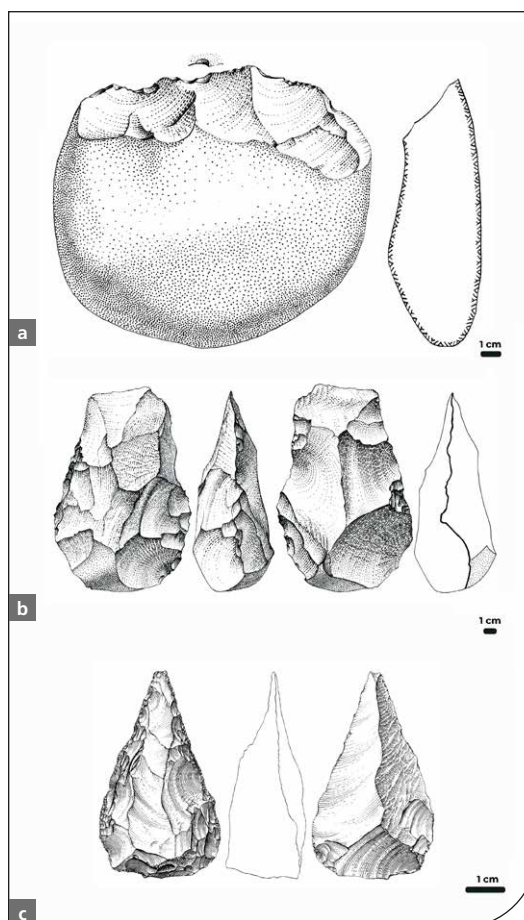


Fig. 2. Limestone chopper from layer M3 (Archaeostratigraphic Unit M3), Acheulean site of Terra Amata (a); Siliceous limestone biface from layer P4b (Archaeostratigraphic Unit P4b), Acheulean site of Terra Amata (b); Quinon point in rhyolite from layer DM (Archaeostratigraphic Unit DA4), Acheulean site of Terra Amata (c).

rectly on the beach. Humans mainly used limestone pebbles, more or less siliceous, which they could collect directly from the beach. However, certain high-quality rocks, such as specific flints, originated from much more distant sources, for example the Haut-Var region, over sixty kilometers (as the crow flies) from the site of use (Lumley et al., 2016b). At Terra Amata, 26 superimposed archaeostratigraphic units have been identified (Lumley et al., 2013a). Certain evidence uncovered during the exca-

vation suggests that dwellings made of perishable materials were constructed by humans for protection (fig. 3). These structures were identified through the presence of postholes and stake impressions, as well as alignments of stones. They are further indicated by the distribution of tools and food debris scattered across the habitation floors. The huts, consistently oval in shape, may have measured between 7 and 15 meters in length and 4 to 6 meters in width (Lumley et al., 2013a; Lumley et al., 2013b).

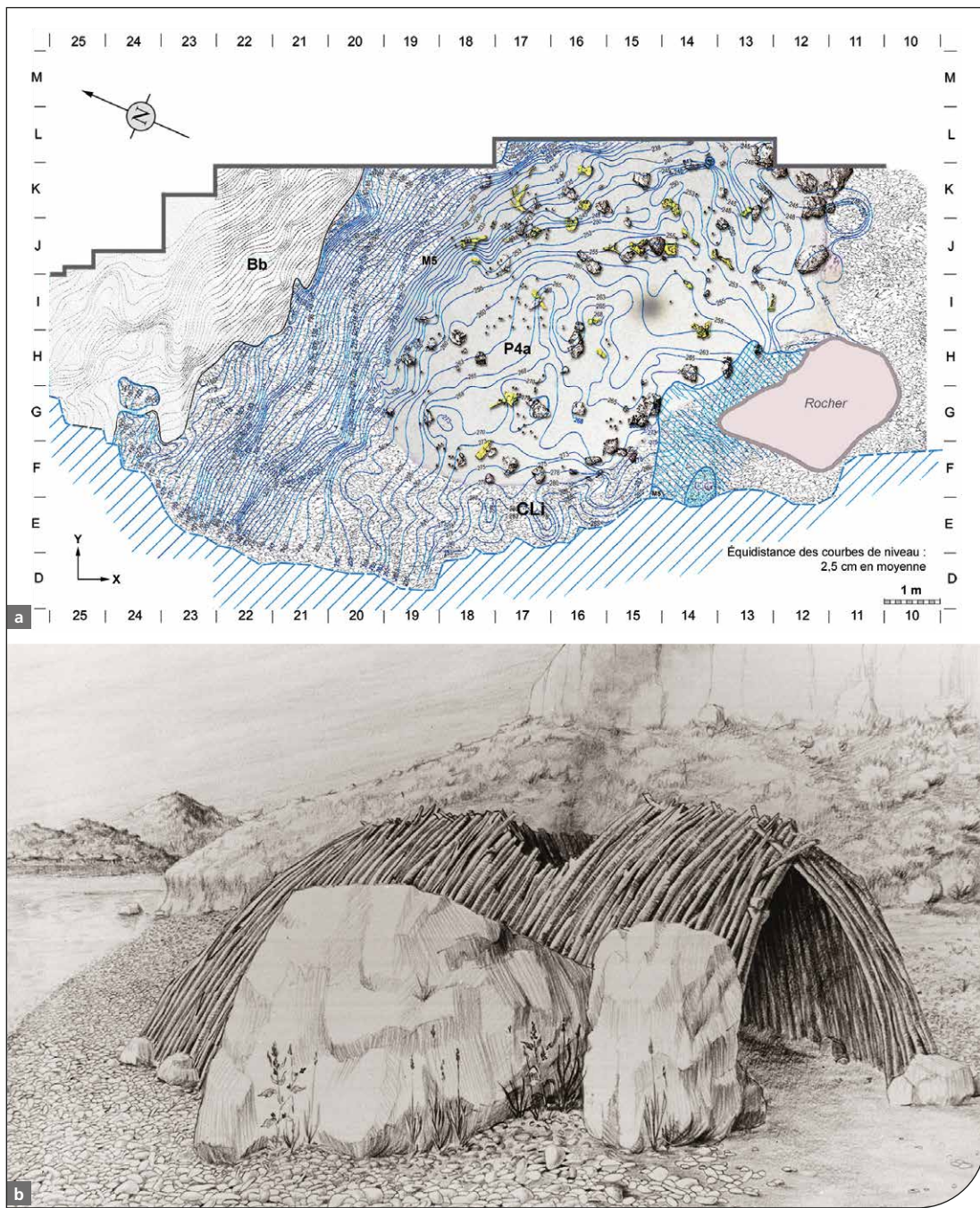


Fig. 3. Plan (a) and reconstruction proposal (b) of the habitation unit from layer P4a (Archaeostratigraphic Unit P4a), Acheulean site of Terra Amata.

There is no indication that long-term camps existed at this site. Humans appear to have settled periodically in the small cove of Terra Amata, either at the end of spring or the beginning of autumn (Valensi & Lumley, 2016b).

In addition, the Terra Amata site has yielded constructed hearths that provide evidence for the early stages of fire domestication by humans (fig. 4). In the dwellings of the coastal dune D of stratigraphic unit C1b, these hearths were located at the center of the huts. Their construction involved either paving the ground with pebbles beforehand or digging pits measuring 30–50 cm in diameter and about 15 cm deep. Each hearth featured on its northwest side a small wall made of stones or pebbles, probably intended to shield the fire from air currents, particularly from the northwesterly winds, which still dominate today. These hearths were relatively small in size. In the beach levels, combustion traces were limited to ashes and charcoal, without any clear evidence of organized hearth structures (Roussel & Cauche, 2006; Lumley et al., 2016c).

Given the global scientific and heritage significance of the discoveries made at Terra Amata, the City of Nice decided, on the proposal of Professor Henry de Lumley, to establish a museum on the site of the deposit. An agreement was reached with the developers to acquire the ground floor of the building (Lumley & Roussel, 2009). However, the construction and completion of the building were delayed due to difficul-



Fig. 4. Hearth from layer DK (Archaeostratigraphic Unit DA3), Acheulean site of Terra Amata.

ties related to the terrain and financial issues. After a change of developer, the foundation stone of the Terra Amata Museum was laid by Jacques Médecin, then Mayor of Nice, on January 11, 1971.

The Terra Amata Museum opened its doors on September 16, 1976, during the 9th Congress of the International Union of Prehistoric and Protohistoric Sciences (UISPP). It was inaugurated by Madame Alice Saunier-Séité, Minister of Higher Education and Research, and Monsieur Jacques Médecin, Secretary of State for Tourism and Mayor of Nice, in the presence of numerous dignitaries (Lumley & Roussel, 2009; Roussel, 2022, 2023).

It was the first site museum dedicated to Prehistory to be opened in France (Roussel, 2023) (figs. 5 and 6).



Fig. 5. Large cast of layer DM (Archaeostratigraphic Unit DA4) at the Terra Amata Prehistory Museum, 1976.



Fig. 6. Room dedicated to lithic industries at the Terra Amata Prehistory Museum upon its opening in 1976.

In 1998, the museum was closed for renovation work on the ceiling of the main hall. The museographic layout was then completely redesigned and transformed (fig. 7). In accordance with Law No. 2002-5 of January 4, 2002, concerning the museums of France, the Terra Amata Museum of Prehistory was granted the designation "Musée de France".

In 2012, the consolidation of the two municipal archaeology museums (the Terra Amata Museum of Prehistory and the Nice/Cimiez Archaeology Museum) was decided.

These two "Musées de France" were brought together within a joint institution known as the "Archaeology Museums of Nice."



Fig. 7. View of the large cast of layer DM (Archaeostratigraphic Unit DA4) at the Terra Amata Prehistory Museum after the 1998 renovation.

A SCIENTIFIC UPDATE

The year 2016 marked the 50th anniversary of the excavation of the Paleolithic site of Terra Amata in Nice and the 40th anniversary of the opening of the Prehistory Museum to the public (Roussel, 2018). To celebrate this double anniversary, the institution closed its doors for four months of renovation in order to redesign its exhibition, integrating the latest discoveries and offering visitors an updated museography with an interactive and engaging experience.

It is clear that over the past forty years, prehistoric research has made enormous progress. Despite a few additions and various adjustments, the museographic program of Terra Amata had never been completely redesigned. It, therefore, became necessary to integrate the most recent discoveries made at Terra Amata and place them in the broader context of the evolving understanding of prehistoric humans. Indeed, since the excavation of the site, extensive research has been carried out based on the collections and excavation records, either within academic work or by multidisciplinary teams. Over the last ten years, a program for the publication of the site's monograph has been implemented under the direction of Professor Henry de Lumley, with the goal of publishing one volume every two years. This major research endeavor formed the basis for a thorough revision of the exhibition program, which profoundly reshaped the thematic organization of the exhibition spaces in order to improve the

coherence of the collection's presentation. The new display highlights the environment of these humans (Valensi et al., 2011), who hunted rhinoceroses in the marshes of the Paillon River during a temperate Mediterranean-type period, their tools, including the renowned bifaces (Lumley et al., 2015), as well as their successive wooden hut dwellings (Lumley et al., 2016a). Surrounding the large cast of one of the site's occupation floors, visitors are also offered new exhibition program installations and a renewed presentation of the collections.

A RENEWED SCENOGRAPHY

The large cast of the archaeological floor DM (UA DA4), which showcases one of the twenty-six archaeological levels of the site over more than 70 m² (Lumley et al., 2009a; Lumley et al., 2009b; Lumley et al., 2009c; Lumley et al., 2013b), is an integral part of the museum's identity—indeed, it can be considered its very DNA. It was therefore out of the question to alter or remove it, even though its presence strongly defines the visual identity of the place. Around it, however, all other scenographic elements on both levels were redesigned in order to create new spaces. This innovative new presentation was entrusted to Kristof Everart for scenography and Marcel Bataillard for graphic identity (Roussel, 2018) (fig. 8). The aim was to develop a visual concept that is both elegant and resolutely contemporary, while maintaining a scientific and

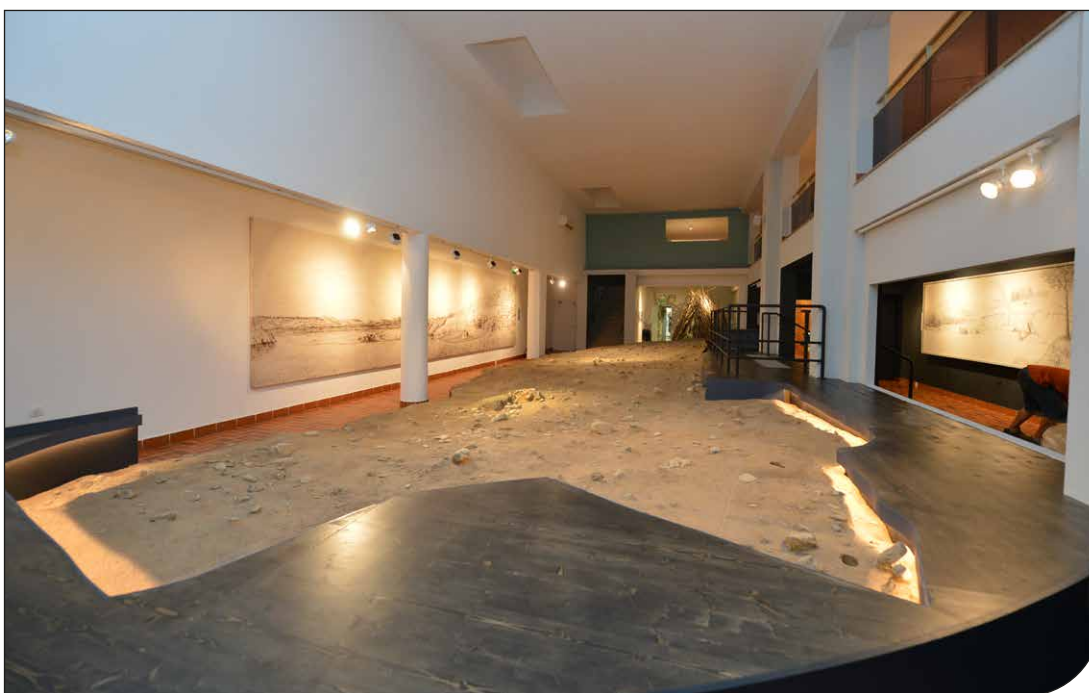


Fig. 8. View of the large cast of layer DM (Archaeostratigraphic Unit DA4) at the Terra Amata Prehistory Museum after the 2016 renovation.



Fig. 9. Room dedicated to the environment at the Terra Amata Prehistory Museum after the 2016 renovation.

engaging approach. Both levels of the museum benefited from these improvements, which not only modernized the spaces but also enhanced the display of the collections. The objects were mounted by the François Ourth workshop, and the display cases were completely rethought to improve the clarity and readability of the collection's presentation (fig. 9). In addition, a glass wall now allows visitors to view the museum's remarkable storage facilities, thereby creating a link between the public display of the collections, their conservation, and the world of research (Roussel, 2018).

PREHISTORY AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES

Around 400,000 years ago, the humans of Terra Amata maintained the first hearths, marking the beginnings of fire domestication. At the time, this was cutting-edge technology! It was therefore fitting to pay tribute to these "high-tech" early Niçois by offering their museum modern presentations. The new museum features audiovisual and digital installations that provide a renewed approach to the collections. Researchers who have studied the site and the archaeological material are present through large screens, allowing visitors to see them at life-size and follow their explanations. In the areas dedicated to stone tools, films featuring a specialist experimental

knapper, Olivier Notter, demonstrate the production methods of the objects on display. This dynamic approach enables visitors to understand the sometimes complex technical "operational chains" employed by humans 400,000 years ago to produce their tools. Holographic systems further complement the presentation of flakes, showing how they "refit" into certain cores, thus giving the public a better understanding of these archaeological pieces. Finally, on the ground floor, an interactive installation designed by the company Edikom accompanies the exploration of the large cast of floor DM (UA DA4). To create this console, the cast was digitized and modeled in 3D. The resulting digital model allows visitors to explore the floor from all angles and understand the various activities carried out there by prehistoric humans (Roussel, 2018).

The museum visit concludes with a video art installation created by Lucie Pagès and produced by the audiovisual artistic creation center L'Éclat. The work evokes fire in its sensory dimensions, drawing a parallel between human mastery of fire since its domestication and its purest form, the sun. This contemporary artistic intervention resonates with the prehistoric collections, positioning the museum within an innovative framework where art and science complement each other. It offers visitors a renewed perspective on the archaeological collections and brings this 400-millennium-old site into the 21st century.

CULTURAL STRATEGY AND VISITORS

From its opening, the Terra Amata Prehistory Museum implemented a robust cultural policy aimed at all audiences, designed to promote the Terra Amata archaeological site and its collections, as well as Prehistory in general. The museum has developed a program of temporary exhibitions, both within the institution and “outside its walls”. Since its establishment in 1976, the museum has organized numerous temporary exhibitions, at a rate of one or two per year, depending on the period. The themes of these exhibitions have covered the entire span of Prehistory and are not limited to the Terra Amata site or the Lower Paleolithic. In total, from 1976 to 2025, 50 temporary exhibitions have been presented at the museum (fig. 10).

The exhibitions are relatively small, as the room dedicated to them measures only 80 m². Their objectives include:

- introducing the public to Prehistory in all its forms,
- highlighting research conducted on the collections,
- covering the various themes or periods represented by the collections,
- presenting items that are otherwise not accessible to the public, among others.

Whenever possible, each exhibition is accompanied by a publication. When this is not the case, the museum provides a free brochure outlining the main points of the exhibition.

Since 2010, temporary exhibitions have showcased the work of contemporary artists, most often created in connection with the museum’s collections or Prehistory more broadly. Examples include “En continuité” by Henri Maccheroni at Terra Amata, with intervention by Michel Butor (fig. 11), “Les Hydro-pithèques” by Joan Fontcuberta, and “Bruit originaire” by Charlotte Pringuey-Cessac (Pringuey-Cessac & Roussel, 2021, 2024). The main objective of these exhibitions is to create a dialogue between contemporary art—and, by extension, society—and the collections, as well as Prehistoric archaeology in general. They also help open the museum to new audiences who might not otherwise visit a site dedicated to Prehistory.

MEDIATION AND ARTS AND CULTURAL EDUCATION

The Terra Amata Prehistory Museum has always benefited from the presence of mediators within its team. Since 2012, two mediators have welcomed all audiences, both within the museum and “outside its walls”.



Fig. 10. Exhibition “Conquering Fire! From the Terra Amata hearths to gas lighters: 400,000 years of fire ignition history” held at the Terra Amata Prehistory Museum in 2007.



Fig. 11. Exhibition "In Continuity: Henri Maccheroni at Terra Amata, Michel Butor's Intervention" held at the Terra Amata Prehistory Museum in 2010, at the Henri Maccheroni Center.

Since the early 2000s, the museum has also had a teacher seconded from the French Ministry of Education, under the Academic Delegation for Arts and Cultural Education (DAAC). This teacher has developed exhibition guides, educational dossiers for teachers and school groups, and regularly organizes training sessions for educators in collaboration with the mediation team within the framework of the DAAC. This arrangement continues today, although the number of hours made available remains limited, approximately ten hours per year.

The museums offer guided tours and workshops, usually combined, allowing visitors to explore the collections first theoretically and then practically (fig. 12). All activities related to arts and cultural education (EAC) are developed in close collaboration with the museum's scientific staff.

Currently, in addition to the general museum tour, there are six thematic tours. There are also six workshops dedicated to Prehistory. Cross-disciplinary workshops are organized in collaboration with the Nice/Cimiez Archaeology Museum. Furthermore, a thematic archaeology tour program is offered in partnership with the Archaeology Museum of Antibes. These various programs are offered to teachers through a website called "Grandir en Culture," developed by the City of Nice, which brings together the full range of municipal initiatives in arts and cultural education (EAC). The mediation team participates



Fig. 12. Educational workshop on experimentation with prehistoric Venus figurines, held at the Terra Amata Prehistory Museum.

in several national programs, including "La classe, l'œuvre" and "Le musée hors les murs." Over time, various partnerships have been established with local schools, notably the Terra Amata school, located less than 100 meters from the museum. During school holidays, the museum welcomes numerous children from leisure centers in Nice and the surrounding area. Specific activities are organized in collaboration with the nearby leisure center "Portes du temps," which is dedicated to exploring the history of the city of Nice.

Each year, training sessions for secondary school teachers are organized by the teacher seconded from the Ministry of Education, within the framework of the Academic Delegation for Arts and Cultural Education (DAAC). These sessions take place either entirely or partially at the museum. The mediators and the museum's scientific staff participate through thematic presentations and inform teachers about the museum's arts and cultural education offerings. The Terra Amata Prehistory Museum offers guided tours, by reservation, for groups of visitors, covering both the permanent exhibition galleries and the various temporary exhibitions. Individual visits are also possible by reservation.

The museum systematically participates in various national events, both on-site and off-site, including:

- Spring Museums, followed by Night at the Museums;

- National Archaeology Days;
- European Heritage Days;
- Science Festival.

Since its opening, the museum has initiated numerous programs aimed at audiences facing obstacles, such as those with disabilities or social vulnerabilities. These initiatives are carried out in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, associations specializing in disability support, and the University Hospital Center of Nice (CHU). Mediation activities often take place within the museum but can also be conducted off-site, particularly in partner institutions when the target audience cannot travel. For example, over several years, the Terra Amata Prehistory Museum collaborated with the Nice/Cimiez Archaeology Museum to implement cross-institutional projects with pediatric hospitals in Nice (CHU-Lenval). Both museums offered off-site mediation activities at Archet 2, within the Lenval child psychiatry department, and at the CPJA (Centre Psycho-dynamique de Jour pour Adolescents). Additionally, an off-site project with the IES (Institut d'Éducation Sensorielle) Clément Ader, part of the PEP 06 association, culminated in an exhibition within the IES.

Since its opening, the museum has organized numerous cultural and scientific outreach events, including lectures (fig. 13), panel discussions, concerts, and performances, either as part of specific programs or initiatives implemented by the City of Nice. For



Fig. 13. Public lecture held at the Terra Amata Prehistory Museum.

many years, lecture series have been held on a monthly basis in collaboration with the museum's Friends Association, the Terra Amata Center for Prehistoric Studies (CEPTA). The museum's scientific staff also participate in numerous activities—lectures, panels, conferences, etc.—either by invitation or in partnership with other research and scientific outreach organizations, in order to promote Prehistory and the museum both within the city and beyond Nice.

CONCLUSION

The Terra Amata Prehistory Museum stands as an emblematic example of how an archaeological site can become a dynamic center for research, conservation, and knowledge dissemination (Roussel & Boyer, 2018, 2025). Born from a rescue excavation in the heart of Nice, it has, over the decades, established itself as a key player in scientific and heritage culture. The evolution of its museography, the integration of new technologies, the inclusion of contemporary art, and the attention given to school groups, disadvantaged audiences, or those distant from culture, all reflect a continuous commitment to adaptation and innovation.

Through its collections, exhibitions, and mediation activities, Terra Amata does not merely recall a distant past: it encourages reflection on contemporary issues, such as humanity's relationship with the environment, cultural diversity, and the necessity of dialogue between science and society. Prehistory, long confined to a fixed and stereotypical image, here takes on its full dimension: that of a constantly evolving field of research at the intersection of the humanities and the exact sciences, capable of shedding light on our present and inspiring our future.

In this respect, the Terra Amata Museum fully exemplifies the mission of the "Musées de France": to make universal heritage accessible to all, to foster critical thinking, and to contribute to the development of an informed and engaged citizenship.

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