

# Dealing with Complex Heritage: The Case of the Physical Anthropological Collections of the University of Bologna

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## **Introduction**

This essay focuses on the history and meaning of the anthropological collections of the Bologna University museums. It also investigates the influence of anthropology and other disciplines on the Italian political and cultural context from unification to the World War II. To this aim, the first section examines the emergence and decline of the concept of race in science, both in Europe and Italy. The second section highlights the intersection between Italian colonial policies and geographical and scientific explorations, and the conceptualisation of race by Italian anthropologists. Finally, we develop the case study of the Bologna anthropological collections, focusing on how they were assembled, used and perceived over time.

The main result of this analysis is the identification of a dialectic relationship between anthropological studies, colonialism and geographical explorations, which has also influenced the construction and narratives of the university collections. We can distinguish three main phases. During the first one, soon after the country's unification, explorers, scientists and adventurers tried to promote direct government intervention outside Italy and promote a colonial policy. Initially these efforts were unsuccessful, mainly due to lack of funding. The second phase, which gradually took shape from the 1880s until the onset of fascism, was characterised by a convergence of interests between the government, aiming to build and expand Italian colonies, and scientific explorers interested in investigating the nature and people of new lands. Finally, during the fascist regime the political dimension superseded the scientific one, so that exploration, new museums and scientific interpretation became the tools for building the Italian Empire and fascist culture.

What is left of this complex interaction between science and colonial and racist policies? Museums are a tool to explain new scientific interpretations, which are no longer based on the concept of race but are places of memory to make present generations aware of our dissonant past.

### **The Beginning of Anthropology in Italy and the Debate on Human Races**

The use of the term ‘human race’ has a long history and is related to emphasis on the phenotypic variability among human populations that pervaded all fields of knowledge, especially from the eighteenth century onwards, into the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Anthropology was officially founded as a scientific discipline in 1859 in Paris by Paul Broca (1824–1880), supposedly free of any philosophical or metaphysical approach. Starting from positivist pragmatism and a materialistic conception of reality, its intent was to pursue a scientific and biometrical approach aimed at creating and validating taxonomies and classifying human populations in almost immutable and hierarchically organised structures (by race, gender and state of health, but also in the psychiatric and criminological spheres, as well as aesthetic aspects).

During the second half of the nineteenth century in Italy, Darwin’s theory of evolution was disseminated by the naturalists Filippo de Filippi (1814–1867), Michele Lessona (1823–1894) and Giovanni Canestrini (1835–1900). Anthropology rapidly spread in various universities throughout the country. The first chair was established in Pavia in 1860, held by Cesare Lombroso, who was strongly influenced by Darwinism and its supporting evolutionary claims.<sup>1</sup> He spoke of different ‘evolutionary speeds’ and a more advanced evolutionary stage for the ‘white race’ than for the ‘coloured race’ (*‘L’uomo bianco e l’uomo di colore’*, 1871), the former having reached a level of perfection inferable from physical, intellectual and moral characteristics. In 1905 he created the chair of Criminal Anthropology in Turin.

In 1871 in Florence, Paolo Mantegazza (1831–1910), monogenist and positivist, founded the first school of anthropology in Italy, as well as the Anthropology and Ethnology Museum in 1879, and the journal *‘Archivio per l’Antropologia e l’Etnologia’*, continuously published since its founding as the first scientific journal wholly dedicated to anthropology. Giuseppe Sergi (1841–1936), Darwinist and polygenist, after some years at the University of Bologna where he had begun teaching anthropology, founded the Roman School of Anthropology in 1893, anchored to typological/racial assumptions and the search for the origins and identity of peoples, particularly Italics.

He also established the Museum of Anthropology and in 1893 founded the Roman Society of Anthropology, which became the Italian Society of Anthropology with the journal 'Atti della società romana di Antropologia'. He defined races as biological entities in continuous evolution and defined by somatic and, to a lesser extent, psychological traits.<sup>2</sup>

At the University of Bologna in 1873, the anatomist Luigi Calori (1807–1896) studied Etruscan and modern skull collections,<sup>3</sup> and some years later (1884–1904), Fabio Frassetto (1876–1953), a pupil of Cesare Lombroso in Turin and later of Giuseppe Sergi, began teaching anthropology in 1904 and in 1908 became the chair of anthropology.

In 1861 the Kingdom of Italy was proclaimed. This historical moment of the peninsula's unification involved a kind of biopolitics of national identity with the aim of constructing a common racial and cultural background. Once Italy was created, Italians had to be created, as the patriot Massimo D'Azeglio (1798–1866) claimed. The peoples at the origin of the nation were to be investigated in their alleged irrepressible biological–moral specificities, on the basis of distinctions of 'race' ('Aryan' and 'Semitic'). Within this framework, cranial morphology played a crucial role in the search for the origins and antiquity of the Italic people and influenced certain psychological, intellectual and moral features.<sup>4</sup> Sergi described a 'Mediterranean race' as the basis of the classical Greek and Roman civilisations, and the ethnic basis of the contemporary Italian population.<sup>5</sup> These approaches were adopted by scholars such as Frassetto, who were mostly dedicated to the study of human morphology with specific attention to the anatomical features of the cranium and its ontogeny. Frassetto's research focused on the classification systems of the human cranium, and he integrated this approach with specific attention to the somatology of the human body, aiming to establish a relationship between human morphological and physiological features among different human groups and individual body configurations. This approach was aimed at formulating a human 'normality' system with a person's fundamental anthropometric features, recalling Adolphe Quetelet's (1796–1874) theory of the 'average man' that described the physical, moral and health-related characteristics of humankind according to the model of an abstract and ideal individual. This approach methodologically supported Francis Galton's (1822–1911) eugenics, which was being rapidly implemented by governments in the first decades of the twentieth century in order to improve the human population through selective breeding. This approach could support and optimise practical aspects such as clinical practices or the military draft.<sup>6</sup> Frassetto may be considered one of the first pioneers of racial studies, celebrated as such by an article in the magazine 'La difesa della razza' (III, n. 11) in 1940.

From this perspective, Frassetto studied Dante's bones, exhumed in 1921 on the occasion of the 600th anniversary of the poet's death, applying a biometric approach and using for the first time stereoscopic photography, an innovative methodological technique at the time.<sup>7</sup> He wanted to demonstrate that the poet's genius – and, to some extent, that of Italians – resided in the morphometry of the skull that recalled the 'Mediterranean type' (as opposed to the 'Aryan type'), considered typical of Italic people. Dante's skull was classified as dolichomorphic (relatively elongated skull) and 'the most authentic and glorious type of the Mediterranean lineage',<sup>8</sup> belonging to the same race (or 'lineage', used as a synonym) as Etruscans (Fig. 4.1). Indeed, he compared Etruscan skulls from museum collections with Dante's skull to demonstrate his protohistoric ancestry. By using craniology and aligning himself with Sergi's position, he classified Etruscans as predominantly Mediterranean dolichocephalic, with a brachycephalic minority of Eurasian origin, as he stated at the



Fig. 4.1 Reproduction of Dante's bust after the work of Fabio Frassetto. (Photograph courtesy of M. Milella, © Anthropological collections of the University of Bologna)

International Etruscan Congress in 1928. This classification served to justify the denial of the northern origins of the poet symbol of national culture, proposing the Italic peoples' different origin from the 'Aryan' one that Mussolini and fascist biological racism wanted to affirm.<sup>9</sup> In 1930 the endocrinologist and fascist senator Nicola Pende (1880–1970) created a new science, biotypology, which combined anatomy, endocrinology, neurology, ethics and psychology to study humans as a psychosomatic complex, a kind of holistic, constitutional medicine, aimed at identifying and classifying 'biotypes' with certain psycho-physical characteristics within the population. With the consent of the fascist regime, these theories were used to classify the population according to biotypological principles.<sup>10</sup> Pende argued that the regime should preserve 'the blood of the ancient Italic Mediterraneans' that produced classical civilisation in the past. This would still be possible, thanks to the persistence in the Italian regions of the 'physical and spiritual characters of the various original lineages'.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, in a Eurocentric vision and with a fascination tinged with sympathy for the multiformity of 'others', endocrinology, phrenology, racial and psychiatric systematics, and ethnography, but above all, the polyhedral synthesis of them all – anthropology – were the new forms of science guaranteed by a 'positivist method' that professed to be 'exact', through precise calculations and tautological experimental confirmation.<sup>12</sup>

Between the two world wars the theme of origins and ethnic identity converged in a dramatic and complex political and social phase with the emergence of nationalism and totalitarian regimes. The introduction of state racism in fascist Italy was marked by the publication, in July 1938, of the 'Manifesto degli scienziati razzisti' (better known as manifesto of race),<sup>13</sup> signed by ten Italian scientists: three physicians, two zoologists, a physiologist, a psychiatrist, a demographer and two anthropologists, Guido Landra (1913–1980) and Lidio Cipriani (1892–1962).

A profound revision of the concept of race within the human species started in the second half of the twentieth century, when Julian S. Huxley's (1887–1975) book from 1943 entitled 'Evolution: The Modern Synthesis', integrating Darwinian theory, mathematics and population genetics, opened up new theoretical perspectives, helping to empty the word race of meaning. Indeed, nowadays we know that we are 99.9 per cent genetically the same and there are no identifiable characteristics that separate the biological variability of human populations into discrete categories. That residual portion of variability is due to geography, environment and ecology. Skin colour, so widely used to construct racial differences, varies gradually, becoming lighter and lighter as one moves away from the equator, and is a classic example of genetic adaptation to

the environment that lies in that 0.1 per cent. In addition, it has been accepted that human origin and the evolution of our species (*Homo sapiens*) occurred in Africa and that the peopling of Eurasia occurred through many dispersions and migrations (the so-called ‘Out of Africa’ models).<sup>14</sup> Thus, since prehistory, continuous migrations have contributed to shaping and reshaping humans’ biological and cultural layers.

The paradigms of anthropology have shifted over the last century from a self-referential discipline at the service of controversial views of groups holding power, to a multidisciplinary, strongly empirical science, totally devoted to an evolutionary approach. But despite the fact that genetics has clearly and repeatedly demonstrated that racialised groups do not constitute biologically meaningful categories, and that racial purity is pure myth, the legacy of the invention of race is still present; the term race is still used in scientific forensics to describe populations and in stereotypes associated with the folk taxonomies of race.<sup>15</sup> In addition, illiberal and xenophobic impulses legitimise nationalist policies, posing questions about the state of health of western democracies. In Italy and elsewhere, these issues are giving rise to reactions of alarm, dismay and statements from Italian anthropologists,<sup>16</sup> with concerns about changes in the political framework and debates about national ethnic and cultural identity.

### **Italian Colonialism and the Role of Scientific Bodies**

The onset of anthropology and the building of new scientific collections are strictly connected to the colonial experience, in Italy as elsewhere. Therefore, it is difficult to understand the former without knowing the latter. The Italian colonial experience lasted for sixty-five years, from 1882 when the Assab area<sup>17</sup> (Eritrea) came under Italian government control, until 1947 when Italy relinquished its claims on its former colonies, consequent to the peace treaties signed at the end of World War II.<sup>18</sup> Its possessions, while less extensive than those of other European nations, included Italian Eritrea (1882–1947), Italian Somalia (1889–1947), Ethiopia (1936–1947) and Libya (1911–1947) in Africa, the Dodecanese Islands (1912–1947) and Albania (1917–1920; 1939–1947) in Europe and a portion of Tianjin (1901–1947) in China.<sup>19</sup>

Italian colonialism had its own features, which could be associated on the one hand with the country’s late unification and economic backwardness and on the other, to the intense flows of migrants who left Italy during the last three decades of the nineteenth century. The Kingdom of Italy was proclaimed on 17 March 1861, but another decade was necessary to complete the process by annexing the north-eastern regions (1866) and the city

of Rome (1870). From the middle of the nineteenth century to 1870, foreign relations as well as the financial resources of the former Kingdom of Sardinia and the new Kingdom of Italy focused on completing unification rather than exploring and conquering new lands outside Europe. Moreover, for at least two decades the ideals of the *Risorgimento*, which had shaped the unification process, contributed to anticolonial feelings both in Parliament and in Italian society.<sup>20</sup> According to these sentiments people should have been left free to build their own country and choose their own government. This conceptualisation contrasted with the project of conquering new lands and imposing a foreign government on native populations. In addition, during the 1870s other priorities led the Italian government's agenda, including furthering the country's industrialisation, building the necessary infrastructure (roads, railways) and raising the population's literacy rate.<sup>21</sup> Even foreign minister Pasquale Stanislao Mancini, who in 1882 initiated the policy of colonialism by transforming the Assab area into a colony, in 1884 stated in Parliament: 'I will always consider it dangerous and damaging to stimulate such a young nation as Italy in need of peace, security, prosperity [...] to launch itself in expensive and dangerous adventures in distant lands to start what is called colonial policy.'<sup>22</sup> Therefore, until the mid-1880s, not only racist views but also colonial policy remained at the margins of Italian government strategies.

In the first two decades after unification, Italian scientific communities played a role in shaping colonial culture and discourse by providing geographical knowledge and conceptualisations (which then became the narratives for museum collections), although they did not impact the Italian government or parliament.<sup>23</sup> In 1867 the Italian Society of Geography and the Italian Society of Anthropology and Ethnology were established, followed by the Italian Society of Phreniatry (Psychiatry) in 1873.<sup>24</sup> The Italian Society of Geography became particularly influential during the first stages of Italian colonialism. Daniele Natili's 2008 analysis of the Italian Society of Geography concluded that it went beyond purely scientific aims to play a role in the economic and social life of the country. The first president of the society, Cristoforo Negri, was an officer in the Foreign Service and by 1863 had already published many articles, which were then collected in a book to promote Italian missions abroad. In his writings he complained that:

We therefore do not come second, but last in the countries where we were first. Our war flag is unknown in Asia: the commercial flag is not unknown everywhere, but everywhere it is rare, or forced to disguise itself as another better known or more specific one. Yet we see a hundred German ships...<sup>25</sup> [...] In the face of the example of all maritime and non-maritime

nations, which sent expeditions to study Asian trade, stipulate treaties, and found consulates, the indefinite delay, or rather abandonment of the Italian expedition, is highly deplorable...<sup>26</sup>

Even more motivated to connect geographical exploration with economic development was Cesare Correnti, the second president of the society.<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, in the last three decades of the nineteenth century the society organised expeditions to north Africa (present day Eritrea, Morocco, Tunisia, Somalia and Ethiopia) combining scientific, political and commercial goals. The governance of the Italian Society of Geography (where scholars represented only 10 per cent of its membership) believed that a colonial policy was necessary to promote Italy's economic and political renaissance in the international arena.<sup>28</sup> The explorations they organised contributed to choosing colonial sites and building relationships with the local authorities. At times they were also instrumentalised by the Italian government.

However, the most important contribution in terms of the conceptualisation of colonial culture and native populations was made by other groups of scholars, including anthropologists. As highlighted by Zagatti,<sup>29</sup> the first book introducing the idea of superior and inferior human races in Italy was published in 1864 by the anthropologist Filippo Manetta, with the title 'La razza negra nel suo stato selvaggio in Africa e nella sua duplice condizione di emancipata e di schiava in America'.<sup>30</sup> Manetta, who had lived for six years in the United States, collected comments by foreign anthropologists and explorers and proposed his own theory on the inferiority of the 'negro human races' due to reduced brain development.<sup>31</sup> This was the first in a long list of publications on the topic.

The government's attitude towards expansion abroad changed rapidly at the end of the nineteenth century. In 1885 Italy negotiated the occupation of Massawa with the United Kingdom, moving a step forward in the conquest of Eritrea. Only one aspect of the past attitude towards colonialism remained, i.e. the conviction that Italy did not have the financial resources to invest in it. Consequently, the country tried to adopt an inexpensive strategy. The compromise between *Risorgimento* ideals and colonial culture was the application of a racial system, due to the distinction between the civilised population (Italians) and the others (Africans). The latter needed to be civilised and therefore European domination would be an opportunity for them. Since the 1880s, several commentators described expansion into Africa as a civilising mission, 2,000 years after that of the Ancient Romans.<sup>32</sup> However, it is worth noting that at least in the beginning, in the Italian debate the degree of civilisation was not directly linked to the superiority or inferiority of specific

racas. In this context, colonial policy gradually gained favour in almost all the Italian parliament. Very few deputies maintained a clear anti-colonial position, such as the socialist Andrea Costa, who on occasion of a government request for new funds after the Dogali defeat, claimed: 'To continue the African madness, we will not give you, I repeat, neither a man nor a penny.'<sup>33</sup>

Italy's colonial policy then radically changed due to the interaction of foreign relations and economic factors. The opening of the Suez Canal (1869) had increased the interest of European countries in the Red Sea and East Africa, and Italy did not want to be excluded. The Berlin conference of 1884–1885, which paved the way for the partition of Africa among European nations, gave France the opportunity to take over Tunisia, a country very close to Italy in which a large community of Italian migrants were living, having set up farms there.<sup>34</sup> The 'Slap of Tunis' produced two consequences. On the one side it raised the importance of the colonies in the Red Sea, and on the other it stimulated the search for an Italian base in the Mediterranean Sea. This culminated in 1911 with the occupation of Libya and the Italo-Turkish war.<sup>35</sup> Since the 1880s, Italian governments and the King had clearly pursued the idea that colonial policy would enable Italy's inclusion in the club of leading European countries.

On the economic side, two phenomena provided new support for territorial expansion outside Europe. First, mass migration, whereby millions of Italians settled all over the world in the last decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>36</sup> As the Italian poet and university professor Giovanni Pascoli wrote in 1911: 'There [in the African possession] workers will be not the low paid, low qualified, poorly regarded foreign labour but farmers in their homeland.'<sup>37</sup> However, as some economists of the time clearly stated, the Italian colonies required financial capital and entrepreneurship more than labour, as unqualified labour was already abundant.<sup>38</sup> Despite the rhetoric of ministers and deputies, the colonies never became an important destination for Italian migratory flows. The second factor that contributed to the formation of pro-colonialist attitudes was industrialisation and the emergence of the first generation of entrepreneurs in search of export markets. Quite surprisingly for a country poor in raw materials, colonial expansion was seen as an opportunity to sell Italian products instead of stocking up on coal or other minerals. Take for instance 'Società di esplorazione commerciale in Africa' (1879–1928), set up in 1879 by a group of Milan entrepreneurs to explore northeast Africa and eventually commercialise their products; a year later it was joined by the 'Società italiana di commercio con l'Africa' (1880–1882).<sup>39</sup> These were the first of many colonial societies that took shape at the turn of the century.<sup>40</sup>

In conclusion, the combination of geographical explorations and anthropological interpretations contributed to the diffusion of a pro-colonial view. Moreover, with the development of a colonial policy, the government and public administration began to directly coordinate and guide expeditions.<sup>41</sup>

The passage to the fascist regime in 1922 did not change the pillars of Italian colonial culture: the sense of a civilising mission, efforts to obtain new land for Italian migrants, attempts to improve Italy's positioning among the great European nations, and the conceptualisation of a difference between Italians and the native populations continued to motivate colonialism. Also in terms of geographical areas, the fascist regime retained continuity. During the 1920s it completed the occupation of Somalia through violent repression. From 1929 to 1933 in Libya, where some groups continued to resist the Italian occupation, it organised cruel repression with the building of concentration camps (called death camps). Finally, in 1935 and 1936 it launched the second Italo-Ethiopian war to conquer Ethiopia and avenge the defeat at Adua in 1887. Violence against natives was not a new feature: the conquest of Libya in 1911 had been accompanied by roundups and the shooting of thousands of civilians, after which the international press strongly criticised the Italian army.<sup>42</sup>

Yet there was also discontinuity. Under fascist rule the legitimisation of racism reached unprecedented levels.<sup>43</sup> The conceptualisation of race as a driving factor of countries' civilisation was key to identifying native populations as inferior human races. This justified special legislation for colonies which promoted their exploitation without providing them any opportunity 'to be civilised'.<sup>44</sup> This cultural framework probably also influenced the use of violence, which during the fascist period became systemic, not occasional as in the past, and included the use of gas and chemical substances.<sup>45</sup> Also, propaganda about colonial adventures was particularly intense and was able to create a consensus among the population that was missing before World War I. The greatest discontinuity was the relationship between scientific (and colonial) bodies and the government. The fascistisation of society and culture did not save universities and scientific societies: Royal decree 2102 (November 1923) gave the Minister of Public Education the power to choose university rectors and deans, from 1931 onwards university professors were asked to swear loyalty to fascism, and from 1933 onwards to join the fascist party to keep their positions at the university.

Colonial and scientific associations became tools for implementing government policy, and only fascist party members could head them.<sup>46</sup> New associations tightly linked to the government were set up, such as the 'Centro Studi per l'Africa Orientale Italiana', in 1936. This society organised the most important exploration of the 1930s – the study mission to the Tana River

basin, co-funded by a private foundation and the government. As claimed by Gianni Dore: 'Research routes, disciplinary methods of inquiry, data selection, collection and classification [of this multidisciplinary mission], were developed within a specific historical situation and in intimate relation with the plans of the colonial regime.'<sup>47</sup>

### **The History of the Anthropological Collections of the University of Bologna**

When anthropology emerged as a new scientific discipline, anthropologists, physicians and anatomists all over Europe – and in the United States as well – started amassing series of skeletal remains, anatomical specimens and mummies, along with ethnographic materials, artefacts and instruments, in scientific museum collections. These are the result of more than two centuries of collecting and scientific study,<sup>48</sup> and facilitated the study of so-called phrenology and racial typology, besides providing instruction in surgical anatomy.<sup>49</sup> Phrenology assumed that the shape and size of individuals' craniofacial structures may be associated with their personality traits.<sup>50</sup> Racial studies, with a western-centred vision, aimed at distinguishing human groups based on their physical or phenotypic features, establishing the supposed inferiority of some of them and justifying colonial expansion and domination.<sup>51</sup> Under these auspices large series of human osteological remains were amassed through scientific exchanges, donations, archaeological expeditions, cemetery exhumations and occasionally robberies.<sup>52</sup> Most of the human remains in these collections in Italy come from archaeological excavations of Italic, Roman and medieval samples. A few series refer to Italian modern (nineteenth and twentieth centuries) documented (for age-at-death, sex, cause of death, occupations) skeletal remains, collected in the first part of the twentieth century. We refer to those housed at the University of Bologna (namely 1,000 skeletons) coming from cemetery exhumations carried out in the Italian regions of Sardinia and Emilia-Romagna.<sup>53</sup> Recently, a large modern (from 2017 to today) documented collection has been assembled by the University of Milan for forensic purposes.<sup>54</sup>

Between the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Fabio Frassetto and his student Elsa Graffi Benassi (1901–2000) put together a large part of the anthropological collections, including many human osteological remains: the previously cited Italian documented collections, some other complete skeletons from Corse localities, and several isolated skeletal elements collected from ossuaries from different Italian cemeteries.<sup>55</sup> The collection also includes human skeletal remains from archaeological sites, especially from

local prehistory, original samples of non-human primates, six documented skeletons (by age, sex and cause of death) of Bantu individuals who died between 1924 and 1925 at a hospital in Johannesburg (South Africa) and were donated to Frassetto by Raymond A. Dart (1893–1988), the discoverer of *Australopithecus africanus*. Items of ethnographic interest are also housed in the museum: a shrunken head of the Jivaros from Ecuador, acquired in 2017 from an Italian donor, not on display, and for which the authentication process (ceremonial versus commercial) is currently in progress, and a yurt, a traditional nomadic dwelling from the Eurasian steppe. This was acquired in 2000 through scientific exchange between anthropologists from Bologna and Almaty (Kazakhstan).

Many items in the collections are closely related to the racial concept of human variability – plaster face casts, skin and hair colour charts, along with a series of posters that show these alleged racial types, realised following the work of Swiss anthropologist Rudolf Martin (1864–1925) (Fig. 4.2). There is also a wide variety of anthropometric and osteometric instruments to pursue



Fig. 4.2 Two posters of the larger series (24 posters) of ‘racial types’ by Rudolf Martin. (© Anthropological collections of the University of Bologna)

a biometric approach.<sup>56</sup> More specifically, the plaster face casts were originally used as research and teaching tools to show these alleged racial types, to portray all the different human features that would not be accessible otherwise through pictures or measurement tables.<sup>57</sup> They may depict only faces or entire busts, as in the case of the Paris and Vienna collections, and they can be unpainted or polychrome. Of the various plaster cast collections, the museum hosts ninety-five polychrome reproductions of the original plaster face casts made by the anthropologist Lidio Cipriani – mentioned above as a signer of the ‘Manifesto degli scienziati razzisti’ (1938) – made on living people during his scientific missions in Africa (especially Ethiopia, Eritrea, Congo) and Asia (Yemen) during Europe’s colonial expansion under the fascist regime and first stored at the anthropology and Ethnology Museum of the University of Florence.<sup>58</sup>

Lidio Cipriani was an Italian naturalist and anthropologist who studied in Florence under the guidance of Aldobrandino Mochi (1875–1931), successor of Paolo Mantegazza. He graduated in 1923, obtained certification to teach anthropology and began working at the Anthropology and Ethnology Museum of Florence in 1926. In 1939 Cipriani was appointed director of the Anthropology and Ethnology Museum of Florence, and in 1940 he was removed from his office on a charge of selling plaster face casts to other anthropological institutions on his own account. From 1927 to 1930, Cipriani had the opportunity to participate in one of the most important Italian expeditions in Africa organised by Attilio Gatti (1896–1969), member of the Italian Royal Society of Geography and Anthropology, from Cape to Cairo.<sup>59</sup> From then on he took part in several expeditions in Africa and Asia, collecting a large amount of anthropological data, but also a huge quantity of ethnographic, geological and botanical materials, and taking more than 2,000 photographs. The collected materials were delivered to the same museum in Florence.<sup>60</sup>

The cast procedure seems to have been rather complex and uncomfortable for the individuals, as is demonstrated by the expressions of the resulting casts, with closed and squeezed eyes. They were supposed to remain perfectly still with straws inserted in mouth and nostrils while the anthropologist poured a layer of gypsum on their faces for some long minutes. After it was solidified, the negative could be removed and filled with a new flow of liquid gypsum. Then, the negative was detached in order to obtain the positive face cast, ready to be painted employing skin colour tables, such as the most famous one by Felix von Luschan,<sup>61</sup> also stored in the anthropological collections of the University of Bologna. To convince them to be subjected to cast procedures, Cipriani proposed some sort of payment consisting of ornaments, clothes, weapons and cigarettes.<sup>62</sup> In any case, some episodes of actual coercion may be assumed.

Frassetto acquired these casts in three different batches in 1928, 1932 and 1936 for 23–35 Italian lire per cast, each one labelled with the name of the population group, provenance, age and sex of the individual. They are still displayed in the museum in two different groups: the first one with the casts from an expedition to Africa datable to 1927, mostly pertaining to the Zulu population group, and the second one with casts from different missions to Africa between 1927 and 1932 (Fig. 4.3), and two missions to Asia in 1927 and 1935, to which the mask of one Sardinian from Italy has been added.<sup>63</sup>

Finally, the building where the anthropological collections have resided since 1933 recalls the fascist regime, having been built between 1932 and 1934 (X–XII years of the fascist era) and inaugurated by King Victor Emmanuel III, under the rectorship of Alessandro Ghigi (1875–1970), zoologist and Italian senator, in support of fascist racial ideas. The building is located in the historic university district and originally hosted the university institutes of Zoology, Comparative anatomy and Physiology, Histology, Anthropology and the museum collections.



Fig. 4.3 Face cast of a male individual from Cameroon realised by Lidio Cipriani. (Photograph courtesy of T. Nicolosi © Anthropological collections of the University of Bologna)

Over time, as a result of various university reforms, the scientific institutes merged into departments, bringing together different disciplines and reducing the previous scientific fragmentation, but also resulting in a loss of cultural specificity. The above institutes, except for Histology, are now part of the Department of Biological, Geological and Environmental Sciences (BiGeA), and all the anthropological collections are centrally managed by the museum system of the University of Bologna along with other scientific collections (e.g., botanical, zoological and geological collections).

### **Current Management of the University of Bologna's Anthropological Collections**

The anthropological collections, as with other scientific and naturalistic ones (botanical, zoological, comparative anatomy, geological, et cetera), were closed to the public for many years until the 1990s, when university rector Fabio Roversi Monaco (b. 1938) financed the reorganisation and revision of the old collections' exhibition space, the acquisition of new items and the reopening of the museums. On that occasion, considering that the discipline had been reformed on the basis of new evolutionary paradigms, with the discovery of many hominine fossils from throughout our evolutive history, and with the advent of heuristic biomolecular technologies applied to human evolution in the 1990s, new paleoanthropological and primatological corridors have been opened up. Thus, over time the collection has been enlarged by human fossil cast specimens acquired in the second half of the twentieth century. These casts were collected by Professor Fiorenzo Facchini (b. 1929), Emeritus of anthropology, who was in charge of the collection until his retirement in 2004. Since then Maria Giovanna Belcastro has been the scientific referent for the anthropological collections that today represent a goldmine of information for reconstructing environmental, demographic, behavioural and cultural aspects of humankind in past and present times, with great implications for the understanding of evolutionary processes and the history of the discipline, with many new combined fields (e.g., bioarchaeology, genomics, proteomics, forensics, archaeology, cultural anthropology and virtual anthropology). Thus, the display traces an attempt to separate the items' scientific and historical value. The Cipriani collection, unlike other historical collections, was not removed and placed in an aesthetically pleasing way in two old showcases without any kind of explanation. The current exhibit is basically what was assembled in the 1990s.

In 1992 the University of Bologna established the 'Centro Interdipartimentale di servizi per i musei e gli archivi universitari' (CISMA), and in 1999 the 'Sistema Museale d'Ateneo' (SMA)<sup>64</sup> replaced the previous

organisation.<sup>65</sup> This type of organisation is quite common in Italian athenaeums, even though each collection may have a different assemblage of items reflecting the scientific directions of each older institute. Regarding financial resources, with a few exceptions these collections do not have permanent staff and museum visits are conducted by National Civil Service volunteers, recently supported by a cooperative dealing with cultural tourism. These personnel come from various scientific or social science backgrounds and are trained briefly and at no cost by the scientific referent, a full professor responsible for managing the collections (namely Maria Giovanna Belcastro for the anthropological collections) and without dedicated financial resources. These personnel are in charge of opening and closing the museum and organising guided tours and laboratories for elementary school students, whereas the occasional visitor enters free of charge and without a guide. There are about 3,000 visitors a year.<sup>66</sup>

This type of organisation does not allow for the necessary, continuous maintenance and updating of the museum space, given the current situation of the management, roles and sustainability, factors which will ultimately determine the fate of the museum of anthropology.

### **How to Deal with Decolonialism and Dissonance of the Lidio Cipriani Collections?**

Even though on an academic level racial discourse has definitively been abandoned, many anthropological museums fail to promote a new and updated evolutionary perspective of humankind, and to address new, emerging issues related to racial and colonial matters. The anthropological collections of the University of Bologna, as do others in Italy, still display ethnographic and historical items (plaster casts, instruments, pictures, et cetera) from old and outdated anthropological studies and methods. Even though other items (human remains, fossil casts, et cetera) may reveal new evolutionary perspectives in addressing the study of human variability, these different (but historically connected) paths are often unclear and poorly explained. Failure to address the dissonant meanings of some of the items we have inherited, related to western racial and colonial studies, that may contradict or be in open opposition to values commonly shared today, means to fail in our role and responsibility of educating.

Although it would be incorrect to dismiss as racist all the anthropological research and the anthropologists of the interwar period, these scientists and their research were undeniably used by the fascist regime as a reservoir of scientific – but also ethical and aesthetic – justification for the racist and

colonial policies of the time. Dore<sup>67</sup> points out that there was no other country like Italy, where in that period anthropologists' and ethnologists' support of colonialism was unquestioned. In those years, with the expansion of colonialism and the development of dialogue about race, ethnic and cultural identity became linked with the concept of biology or 'blood'. Europeans believed that they represented the highest achievements of human technical, cultural and intellectual progress.<sup>68</sup>

The dramatic relationship between science and politics, and between anthropology and 'state racism' (and colonial ideology) is masterfully expressed by the figure of Lidio Cipriani, who of all Italian anthropologists, tried to document the 'racial' differences between populations. His plaster facial casts are the most iconic items.<sup>69</sup> They 'are objects that exist at the intersections of art and science, and they merge individual, cultural, political, as well as colonialized bodies. [...] They are fluid, shifting, and ambiguous, and at the same time, they maintain multiple levels of meaning.'<sup>70</sup> Their uncertain semiotic status and ambiguous (human remains versus objects) nature encapsulate the memory of colonial violence and imprinted faces, but also that of a domesticated body politic, which becomes a sign of 'material and epistemological violence'. Is there anyone who has the right to claim them? Does a symbolic or material ownership of this kind of item exist?<sup>71</sup>

The process of decolonising museum heritage, a cultural and political movement that increasingly pushes museums to question their own role and responsibility for the narratives, items and representations that respect the historical trauma related to colonialism, remains largely invisible and unquestioned in the display of this heritage in Italy. In addition, in our country this collides with a very limited awareness of colonialism, understood as a 'minor' phenomenon compared to other European countries, leading to the removal of colonial history.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, in Italy the debate on the use and fate of the anthropological and other critical collections, for educational and research purposes, and the attempt to free them from their racial and colonial legacy, has only been addressed in the last decade at the academic scientific level, unlike in other western countries, where this started in the 1990s. This deficiency becomes more pronounced when considering the role of museums, and mainly scientific university museums, as the primary, strategic sites for examining debates and proposing concrete solutions. This educative role and the implementation of a process of permanent education are far from being achieved.

In the current landscape, museums are facing a growing challenge in preserving their authoritative standing, as more pressing ethical concerns come to light. Given their nature as 'privileged agents of civil society', museums have a fundamental obligation to take a stance in the struggle over identity;

likewise, they have the potential to sustainably and equitably shape the world.<sup>73</sup> Therefore, these institutions must be aware of the cultural and ethical responsibilities they bear, the transmission of knowledge they exercise, and the controversial events with which they may be complicit. The myth of neutrality, and the unconditional trust in notions of truth and universality that conceal an ethnocentric perspective, hinders the ability of museums to fully explore their potential.<sup>74</sup>

So, how do we deal with the dissonance of the Cipriani's plaster casts still exhibited in the anthropological collections of the University of Bologna? They may be considered highly 'culturally sensitive material' (ICOM 2017: 2.5) and it is debatable whether they should be displayed or hidden in the warehouse. This choice was made in the 1990s by the University of Bologna and the strategy to show the casts was based simply on their aesthetic nature, presenting the public with this historical and anthropological heritage without any kind of reflection at that time on its critical value. In recent years other museums (in Rome, Padua, Florence and Naples) have adopted different strategies (hiding in warehouses versus displaying), postponing a definitive choice or trying to place the casts in a new framework,<sup>75</sup> a possible alternative solution to explore.

In our case, we had to consider the absence of financial resources to undertake relevant structural changes in the physical museum space, and obstacles to revolutionising and updating the exhibit given the previously cited management issues. In an interdisciplinary approach we have used the example of Cipriani's plaster casts as one of the most controversial collections, to promote reflection and debate on these items with Italian and foreign students from different MA and PhD programs (in science, history, tourism, economics, et cetera). Professor Belcastro's course Scientific Museology, and the courses organised by Professor Battilani to promote lectures, discussion and projects using service design methodologies, are all aimed at creating new solutions to place the Cipriani collection in a new narrative space that we are designing. Other research activities (e.g., thematic meetings, workshops and collaborative projects<sup>76</sup>) have enabled us to focus critical attention on this heritage, discussing the collection's significance in a scientific, historical and social framework in an attempt to reconceptualise it, and laying out a path to cope with similar issues for other critical anthropological collections.

We have tried to think about a decolonial *space* as a solution which could alter the historically and strongly affirmed assumptions and reiterated racist stereotypes, instead of removing the casts from display. We envision the value in keeping this asset visible, as for many other similar items, and allowing them to promote a continuous educational *space* with proper, adequate

and new narratives for better framing the colonial interwar period in a historical-scientific perspective and contributing to the promotion of inclusive human communities. We believe in this.

### Final Remarks

An anthropological museum is a privileged setting where science, the humanities and civil society can converge to co-create a public discourse to promote the understanding, value and respect of human biological and cultural diversity, transcending outdated notions of human categories and race. This is no small challenge. Today, fostering and strengthening the ethical and cultural foundations of cohesion, shared values and mutual accountability often seems like an insurmountable task. Politics, ideologies and economic power, conveyed through the influence of rampant technological forces, shape and drive the trajectories of human destiny much more than a scientific discourse ever could! Nonetheless, it is essential to continue promoting education, dialogue and collaboration between the scientific community and civil society; it is necessary to affirm that all humans are part of a whole, in order to counter the resurgence of dangerous forms of nationalism and racism.

### Notes

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