



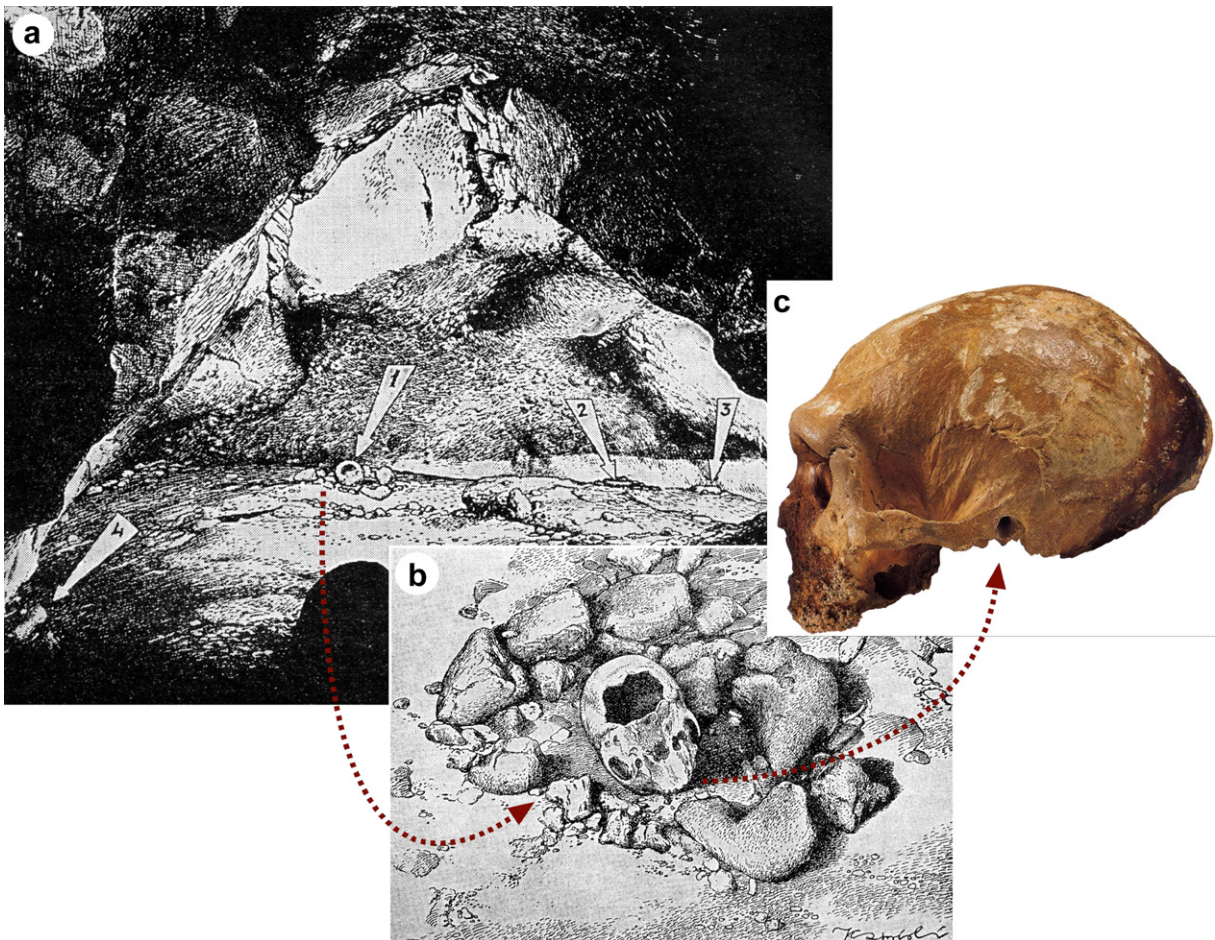
## Book Review

**Le Iene del Circeo, A. Pennacchi. [The Hyenas of Circeo] Editori Laterza, Bari, Italy (2010). 211 pp., € 10, ISBN: 978 8842092841**

For decades after its accidental discovery in 1939 (*Science News*, 1939; *Nature Research Items*, 1940), the Neanderthal skull from Guattari Cave (known as the Guattari I skull; Fig. 1) at Mt Circeo, central Italy, has been the most important piece of the puzzle concerning Neanderthal cognitive and behavioral expression. The skull, in fact, very well preserved and characterized by an enlarged occipital foramen (Fig. 1b), was interpreted as the witness and object of ritual cannibalism by Neanderthals during middle Paleolithic

time (Blanc, 1939). In 1989, this long-held interpretation was wholly overturned during an international meeting held for the 50th anniversary of the skull's discovery, attributing the skull's occurrence in the cave to the work of denning spotted hyenas (Stiner, 1991; White and Toth, 1991), thus conclusively killing the myth of cannibal Neanderthals from Mt Circeo. Pennacchi's book reflects on this invective, which is more topical than ever, in a time when evolution of humans and their closest evolutionary relatives are under rapidly advancing investigation (e.g., Reich et al., 2010).

In short, on February 24th, 1939, a few workmen accidentally discovered the entrance of a cave buried beneath a landslide, close



**Fig. 1.** (a) The inner chamber of the Guattari Cave (Mt Circeo) as drawn by Blanc (1958). Arrow 1 indicates the Guattari I Neanderthal skull amid a circle of stones, whereas arrows 2, 3, and 4 indicate bones of vertebrates. (b) The Neanderthal skull lying on the floor of the cave amid a circle of stones as drawn by Blanc (1958). (c) Lateral view of the Neanderthal skull from the Guattari Cave (Mallegni, 1991).

to the Guattari small resort hotel at Mt Circeo, a promontory on the Tyrrhenian Sea, 100 km southeast of Rome. In the cave, a Neanderthal skull, subsequently dated around 50 000 BP (Schwarcz, 1991), was found on the ground amid a circle of stones (Fig. 1). The next day, Prof. Blanc, a geologist from University of Rome, visited the cave, interviewed the workmen who had discovered the skull, and took the skull away to analyze it at the Institute of Anthropology of his university with Prof. Sergi. Years of studies by Prof. Blanc and co-workers followed, arriving at the conclusion that the circle of stones around the skull as well as the skull's artificially-enlarged occipital foramen and other finds constituted robust evidence of a cannibal ritual celebrated by Neanderthals in the Guattari Cave during the twilight of the Middle Paleolithic (Blanc, 1962).

At the end of the 1980s, a reappraisal of all finds from Guattari Cave by American and Italian scientists reached the conclusion that the Neanderthal skull had been brought into the cave and damaged by hyenas that had been occupying the cave for a long time, as demonstrated by the occurrence of stratified coprolites and of several gnawed bones of vertebrates (Stiner, 1991; White and Toth, 1991). Damage to the skull was also defined as consistent with gnawing by hyenas (White and Toth, 1991) and Blanc's circle of stones was reinterpreted as merely a 'jumble of stones' (Stiner and Kuhn, 1992). Despite there being several unsolved questions in connection with both hypotheses, since 1989 the hyena theory has largely eclipsed the Neanderthal ritual alternative, in the scientific literature and in the Prehistoric Pigorini Museum of Rome, where the skull is still exhibited.

In this book, Pennacchi critically and thoroughly chronicles the story of the Circeo skull, from its discovery and early interpretation by Prof. Blanc to the more recent interpretation concerning spotted hyenas. Although the author expressly takes the cannibal Neanderthals' part in narrating the skull's story, the book contains a number of astute observations and objections to both hypotheses and rekindles a series of unsolved issues that otherwise would have been overlooked as a consequence of the general and uncritical acceptance of the hyena hypothesis. At the very least, readers' curiosity about the Guattari I skull will be stimulated, perhaps leading to new impetus for its study.

In something of a scoop, at the end of the book (in the addendum) the author has discovered, quite by accident, that one of his long time friends, Mr. Finestra, former senator of the Italian Republic and now 90 years old, had visited the Guattari Cave in the very first hours after its discovery, before the arrival of Prof. Blanc. Mr. Finestra confirmed Blanc's description of the Neanderthal discovery. He saw the skull on the cave floor amid what he is sure was an artificial circle of stones. Pennacchi interviewed Mr. Finestra and the interview is now available on YouTube: (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bMyTqkRS-5k>). If this account is trustworthy, what was discovered in 1939 was not a jumble of stones and the hyena hypothesis is thus significantly weakened. If we were paleoanthropologists, we would rush to interview Mr. Finestra.

The book is in Italian; we hope that this review will convince the editor to commission an English translation. An English translation of the Finestra interview appears in the supplementary material.

## Appendix. Supplementary material

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:10.1016/j.quascirev.2011.05.008.

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## Appendix 1

### Interview of Ajmone Finestra by Antonio Pennacchi

The following is an English translation from the original Italian, of this interview, concerning the discovery, in 1939, of a Neanderthal skull in the Guattari Cave, Mt Circeo, central Italy. Mr. Finestra is probably the last living eye-witness of this discovery. The original interview is available on YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bMyTqkRS-5k>) and on the Editori Laterza web-site ([http://www.laterza.it/index.php?option=com\\_laterza&Itemid=97&task=schedalibro&isbn=9788842092841](http://www.laterza.it/index.php?option=com_laterza&Itemid=97&task=schedalibro&isbn=9788842092841)).

**P.:** Well, here is Ajmone Finestra, Senator of the Italian Republic and Mayor of Latina since ..., since what year?

**F.:** I was Senator and Mayor of Latina [...] Senator during the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> legislatures and Mayor from 1993 to 2002.

**P.:** Well, today is July 27<sup>th</sup>, 2010.

**F.:** Tuesday.

**P.:** Tuesday. You are 89 years old, since you were born in nineteen ...

**F.:** ... twenty-one [Mr. Finestra was born in 1921].

**P.:** Well, this morning you were telling me that ..., so you were born in Todi. In which year did you [and your family] come to Latina, which was named Littoria at that time?

**F.:** My father came in 1932–1933. I came subsequently. My mother came in 1933–1934 while I was still studying in Todi, so that I used to come here [Latina] only for Christmas, Easter, and summer vacations.

**P.:** So when did you first live here [in Latina]?

**F.:** I came to live here in 1934.

**P.:** Your brother and yourself?

**F.:** Yes, my brother also.

**P.:** Concerning the Circeo's skull, this morning, you were telling me that you had seen it at the time it was discovered.

**F.:** I saw it when an employee ..., not an employee indeed, but a workman for the Laziale Company.

**P.:** The Laziale Company is the electrical power company of Rome. Hence, this workman was an electrician.

**F.:** Yes. This workman went to do some work close to Guattari. Guattari was a small restaurant. After Guattari, there, the large Neanderthal Hotel was built. He [this workman] told me that ...

**P.:** Wait a moment. Where were you [and your family] at that time?

**F.:** We were at Colonia Elena, where there was a centre of Motomeccanica [a motor mechanical institution], an operations centre for all mechanical vehicles of Opera Combattenti [the combatant institution].

**P.:** Since your father ...

**F.:** Since my father used to work for Opera Combattenti.

**P.:** So, did your father work for Motomeccanica?

**F.:** My father was an employee of Opera Combattenti and was one of the people in charge of Motomeccanica at Colonia Elena.

**P.:** My father also worked for Motomeccanica. He used to drive the Pavesi [vehicles].

**F.:** So your father worked here in Latina. There were two centers, one here [in Latina] and one at Colonia Elena.

**P.:** Do you remember my father?

**F.:** Of course I do.

**P.:** Well, you [and your family] were at Colonia Elena close to Torre Olevola and you heard about this affair [about the skull's discovery in the cave].

**F.:** I heard about it because this workman used to come very often to Colonia Elena for a small electrical power station that existed there. He told me that, while he was working close to the Guattari Restaurant, he had discovered a cave when a few stones had fallen down, and so he had found a skull. He knew nothing about the age of the skull and its meaning. When he told me this story, I asked him whether I could go and see the skull, and he encouraged me to go and see it. So I took my bicycle and went to see it. I went through the small entrance [of the cave]. There was this tiny cave and, on the ground, there was the skull and, close to it, there were some stones. I watched it and identified it as a skull.

**P.:** And what about these stones?

**F.:** They were stones arranged in a semi-circle or circle around the skull.

**P.:** At the time you saw them, did these stones seem arranged in a casual manner or ...? Did you ask yourself about these stones?

**F.:** In my opinion, the stones had been [artificially] arranged in that manner. They were as they had been for centuries [in my opinion].

**P.:** What was there around the stones? Some sort of sand or silt?

**F.:** There was a natural ground around. I could watch it.

**P.:** Did this happen the same day in which he [the workman discovered the skull] ...?

**F.:** [Yes] the same day he [the workman discovered the skull].

**P.:** What was the name of this [workman]?

**F.:** Well, I do not remember whether his name was Bastiano or whether he was from Bastiano [a nearby village].

**P.:** According to the [historical] sources, his last name was Bevilacqua [his full name was Damiano Bevilacqua].

**F.:** I think so.

**P.:** And he was from Roccagorga [a nearby village].

**F.:** Then not from Bastiano?

**P.:** Yes, not from Bastiano.

**F.:** Then, maybe his first name was Bastiano.

**P.:** Maybe his first name was Bastiano.

**F.:** I knew him well because he was always there, at Colonia Elena.

**P.:** So this happened that day and then, the day after, [Prof.] Blanc [the geologist who arrived the following day and, in the following years, carried out the first studies on the skull and on the Guattari Cave] came and took it away [the skull].

**F.:** I do not know what happened the day after.

**P.:** Do you remember other people coming into [the cave] to have a look?

**F.:** No, no, no, I was alone when I entered [the cave].

**P.:** What time was it?

**F.:** What time was it?

**P.:** Yes.

**F.:** Afternoon. Afternoon for sure.

**P.:** Did your brother come also?

**F.:** No, no, no. At that time my brother was not there.

**P.:** I see.

**F.:** My brother was not there.

**P.:** Then [as you said], there was this cave and, into the cave, there was the skull and there were a few stones arranged in a circle or in a semi-circle.

**F.:** Well, I do not remember whether it was truly a circle or a semi-circle. I do not remember whether there were one or two stones beyond [the skull]. It's a lot of years ago.

**P.:** I see.

**F.:** ... but I am sure I saw it. Afterwards, I heard that it was from a Neanderthal.

[Short interruption]

**P.:** Concerning the skull's cave, when did this episode happen?

**F.:** I do not remember whether it was in 1938 or in 1939.

**P.:** So you remember that you were 16 or 17 years old.

**F.:** I was 17 years old. I was in the first year of academy.

**External voice:** Can you report again on the stone arrangement?

**F.:** In those days, I was on leave [from the academy].

**P.:** So you were on leave when you heard about this story from Mr. Bevilacqua [the workman] and you went to see it.

**F.:** Yes, I went to see. It was accidental. As luck would have it, I was the first one to see it [the skull].

**P.:** Do you remember the skull's arrangement?

**F.:** No, I remember a skull arranged as so, but I cannot tell whether it was oblique or else.

**P.:** Was the base [of the skull] upward or downward?

**F.:** No, I could only see the skull that was rather large and this fact impressed me. No, I could only recognize it as a skull.

**P.:** I see. How were the stones arranged around it?

**F.:** I do not remember whether it was a circle [made of stones]. Rather, I think it was like a horse shoe [made of stones]. Arranged like this [drawing a horse shoe in the air with his arms], three or four stones. Afterwards [the following day], [Prof.] Blanc found it as so, because nobody moved it. The workman [Mr. Bevilacqua] did not touch it. He saw it ...

**P.:** It is said, indeed, that many people entered the cave before the arrival of [Prof.] Blanc.

**F.:** When I entered the cave there were no people. Maybe someone from the Guattari Restaurant entered the cave [before the arrival of Prof. Blanc]. [I reaffirm that] When I entered the cave there were no people.