

Review of IinteR-La⁺B 2024 Cooperation Beyond Conventions

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The 11th IinteR-La⁺B in Milan considered the subject of palaeoanthropology from an interdisciplinary point of view. Participants discussed a great deal of issues, including the interdisciplinary approach itself. Why is it important to be concerned with matters outside our immediate field of interest or that change our conception of something? Why are events like the IinteR-La⁺B important for the scientific system, as well as for ourselves as individuals?

«*Homo sapiens* is a very invasive species.» This statement was uttered during one of the discussions at IinteR-La⁺B 2024, and, ever since I heard it, I can't stop thinking about it. Am I really that harmful, that invasive? Invasive species are undesirable in the vast majority of cases, as they threaten «native» species and cause major damage to ecosystems. These are not exactly attributes I would like to be associated with. But, as I learned during the course of IinteR-La⁺B, the human species has always been invasive, and so we probably all share this characteristic. However, being invasive does not mean that our actions are only detrimental, and this fact became particularly clear towards the end of the symposium. But first things first.

The seemingly bizarre acronym IinteR-La⁺B is derived from its full name, **I**nternational **I**nterdisciplinary **R**esearch **L**aboratory, a symposium of the Accademia Nazionale dei **L**incei, the Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences (**a**⁺), and the International **B**alzan Foundation. The eleventh IinteR-La⁺B was held on 10 September 2024. The theme of the event was *Evolution of Humanity: Palaeoanthropology*, with two of last year's Balzan Prize winners –

Jean-Jacques Hublin (Palaeoanthropology) and Eske Willerslev (Ancient DNA) – as keynote speakers. Every seat in the hall of the Società Svizzera di Milano was taken. Many of those present knew each other, resulting in a lot of handshaking and exchanges of conversation. Shortly after 9:00, Alberto Quadrio Curzio, the founder of IinteR-La⁺B, opened the symposium with a short speech. This was followed by Hublin's presentation. Specifically, it was about researching our origins, *Homo sapiens*, a journey that can be traced back to North Africa. Hublin explained that modern humans are an extremely homogeneous species. The fact that we have different skin colours, eye colours, hair colours, facial features, and other morphological differences is irrelevant, because genetically we are not very different. That was interesting to hear, especially as human history has been repeatedly marked by conflicts in which affiliations based on external characteristics have played a role.

Conflicts between people due to morphological differences were probably not unknown thousands of years ago. However, in the past there were actually different species of humans on earth at the same time –Neanderthals as well as *Homo sapiens* – and these were marked by both morphological and DNA-related differences. It can be asserted with a great degree of certainty that different human species interacted with each other, and not only in a warlike manner. DNA traces of a human species that indicate a mixing of Neanderthals and *Homo sapiens* have even been found. Young scientists Raija Heikkilä's and Zeliko Rezek's presentations on their discoveries in this area were enthralling and thought-provoking. For me and as it turned out for many others present the idea that several species of people lived at the same time is rather curious. However, when it comes to other creatures, we take it for granted that different species exist in parallel. Findings of this nature characterise symposia such as IinteR-La⁺B, whose participants think outside the conventional box.

In science, however, it is not always easy to introduce unconventional results or to think outside the confines of current research. Those who do this anyway may even jeopardise their own research career. This was made clear to those present during Eske Willerslev's presentation. While searching for the oldest DNA ever, a scientist discovered traces of DNA from plants in Scandinavia. What was special about these DNA findings was that they dated back to a time when Scandinavia was covered in ice and no plants grew there, so some plant species apparently survived under the ice as the dating was unequivocally

authentic. However, his colleagues in research disparaged his work and insisted that the DNA could not have originated from this era. They even went so far as to accuse him of discrediting current research in this regard. The scientist's findings were only accepted by the community many years later. Such stories provoke both reflection and astonishment.

If one wishes to think beyond the conventional, it helps to exchange ideas with people. IinteR-La⁺B offers an excellent opportunity for this, and participants actively took advantage of it. In particular, the representatives of the Swiss and Italian platforms for young scientists used this occasion to get to know each other. For example, the Swiss Young Academy, a platform of the Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences which has been in existence for around five years was represented by two women. Three representatives of the Centro interdisciplinare Linceo Giovani, a recently established platform of the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei was also present. Two aspects stand out in this respect. Firstly, both platforms enable their members to pursue projects that are interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary in nature. Secondly, neither platform has existed for a very long time, which is true of many interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary forums. IinteR-La⁺B has also only existed for 12 years, which is a very short time when compared to other scientific institutions, some of which have existed for hundreds of years. The Network for Transdisciplinary Research (td-net), which is also a platform of the Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences, celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2023.

Recently, there has been a growing understanding that interdisciplinary meetings like this forum provide important insights into complex topics. The Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences are also aware of this, which is why they support the Swiss Young Academy or td-net and provide conceptual support for events like IinteR-La⁺B or the biennial Interdisciplinary Forum of the Balzan Prizewinners. Since 2021, the latter has been in my area of responsibility which, in addition to my work as Communications Manager at the Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences, gives me the opportunity to focus more intensively on interdisciplinary developments.

The issues that are discussed in interdisciplinary forums and the problems that are tackled are extremely diverse. The list of topics addressed at past IinteR-La⁺B alone shows this: Experiment (2012), Energy and Megacities (2013), Time (2014), Utopias (2015), Innovation (2016), Science and Technology (2017), Collective memory

(2018), Brain (2019), Pandemics (2021), and Environment (2022). The «Experiment» in the title of the first IinteR-La⁺B was programmatic in nature. In this year's final discussion of IinteR-La⁺B, Alberto Quadrio Curzio indicated that he started the forum as an experiment. There are now many other similar meetings, but when IinteR-La⁺B was first organised, hardly any comparable events existed.

Although awareness of the importance of interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity has increased, a few challenges that need to be addressed by the scientific community still exist. All those present at IinteR-La⁺B agreed in this respect. One aspect is the «penalising» of scientists if they do not pursue a monodisciplinary career – in other words, if they abandon conventions. They find it more difficult than their monodisciplinary colleagues to obtain funding or with regard to promotions. But science does not remain idle. For example, the Swiss Young Academy is involved in several projects that are examining how interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary collaboration can be better promoted. By working together, current multiple crises can be overcome more effectively and across disciplinary boundaries than if everyone remains in their own field, and this, too, elicited the agreement of all those present at IinteR-La⁺B. In conclusion, who knows? If we work together to find solutions to problems and occasionally leave our direct field of interest, we may end up being less invasive and, indeed, contribute to a better world.