

LETTER TO EDITOR

THE “EMERGENCY ARCHAEOLOGY” AND THE OSTEOARCHAEOLOGICAL STUDIES. THE NORTHWEST LOMBARDY RESEARCH ON FUNERARY SITES

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Dear Editor,

When construction works are excavating in areas deemed to be “at risk”, it is not unusual to come across ancient human remains, most of which are skeletonised. In this regard numerous graves of both medieval and modern origin have been discovered in the territory of Varese over the past twenty years. Only having recently been considered as archaeological finds, the skeletons of the individuals who inhabited our territory during ancient times have proved to be a vital importance to revealing certain aspects of life in the past. This information would not have been possible to obtained from material sources and written documents. Like other national universities, which have been studying the anthropological and paleopathological remains of ancient humans for quite some time, the University of Insubria has also recently shown an interest for the study of osteological remains of this region.

An agreement stipulated with the archaeological Heritage of Lombardy and the Centre of Research of Osteoarchaeology and Paleopathology of the University, now receives the skeletal remains unearthed by archaeologists on an ongoing basis in order to perform anthropological identification studies⁽¹⁾ (in term of age, sex, height and physical activity), as well as studies aimed at determining the disease that plagued our ancestors in the past (including CT scans)⁽²⁾. The Osteoarchaeological collection of Varese is completed by a number of “random” mummified remains belonging to various subjects, including those of a child, which have

been unearthed in the Sacro Monte area. There are several archaeological sites of necropolis, which, still today, have not been completely investigated under the archaeological and anthropological profiles. Now we are starting a research project that involves, where possible, these archaeological realities. In particular, at this moment, we are studying the cemetery area of Cittiglio. Here, the medieval burials are very interesting in respect to the anthropological remains. It has also revealed a very high percentage of infancy mortality. We want to extend our archaeological investigation in to the near necropolis of Caravate that was partially investigated in the past⁽³⁾.

In 2002, the restoration and recovery work being performed around the church of San Agostino in Caravate unearthed a necropolis adjacent to the religious building itself. The Archaeological Heritage of Lombardy decided to carry out a more in-depth analysis of the discovery, by performing a systematic excavation of the entire cemetery area. The excavations unearthed a complex area of fourteen burial tombs, which based on the archaeological stratigraphy, dated back to the 8th or 9th century A.D. Thanks to the environmental development project, the tombs are still visible today. The ancient burial were originally covered with stone slabs. Inside them, the skeletal remains were placed in supine position, some of which were perfectly preserved⁽⁴⁾. The skeletons were brought to the our Centre in order to proceed with anthropological analyses. The skeletons of men, women and children, revealed how the population’s average height

did not exceed 1,65 meters. The life expectancy rarely reached beyond 45 years of age and there was a high infant mortality rate. The bone injuries discovered on several subjects may indicated a possible traumatic event could have affected the ancient community of San Agostino⁽⁵⁾.

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