

My Experiences with Archaeological Excavations in Italy and Teaching Archaeology in the United States

by Dr. Luisa Benedettini Millington

Introduction

I was born and raised in Rome, Italy, and most of my experience is as a field anthropologist working on archaeological excavations in Rome, mainly dated in the Roman Imperial Age (2nd-3rd century, B.C.).

After earning my doctoral degree in Natural Sciences at the University “La Sapienza” in Rome, in 1999, I attended my very first international meeting of the Italian Anthropologists (the XIII of its series), presenting an article based on my own doctoral thesis. Later, I attended a few more international meetings, both in Italy and the United States, presenting other works and publishing several articles.

I moved to the United States after my marriage in 2004. Shortly after, I began teaching Math and Science classes at a local high school as well as adult education classes for the Career Development Center (CDC) in Bennington, Vt., and became a member of the Vermont Archaeological Society. In 2009, after being awarded the Vermont Chemistry Teacher of the Year Award by the New England Institute of Chemists (NEIC), I began cooperating with the US Army as an archaeologist dealing mainly with cultural property protection in areas of conflict. Currently, I am in the process of writing a book on this topic in cooperation with Dr. Laurie Rush of Fort Drum, N.Y. Dr. Rush has an extensive background in the subject of cultural property protection.

This research is flowing into a book about the protection of cultural heritage in the USA and areas of conflict worldwide. The book will analyze the remarkable example offered by the Italian Carabinieri, a branch of the Italian Army dedicated to the protection of the Italian historical heritage. Every year the Carabinieri protect and patrol all of the important archaeological and historical sites in Italy, trying to prevent and fight looting and counterfeiting. They also provide training for the police services of many foreign countries as well as deploy several of their units abroad to help other countries in protecting their cultural heritage.¹ The Italian Carabinieri are a valid example of how we can train U.S. soldiers to protect the U.S. heritage and the heritage of those countries with whom we are in conflict.

In the last one and a half years, Dr. Rush and I have spent a lot of time learning about the Carabinieri, their background, training, and experience. All of this information will be collected for the book.

Field experience

The experience of working as an archaeologist here in the U.S. has been really rewarding, although I have to say that I have never been part of a team in an archaeological excavation here, yet. I have seen a few sites of interest, but unfortunately Vermont doesn't have many excavations going on at this moment and the few active ones in the summer are usually around Lake Champlain (quite north from where I live). The difficult winter conditions are not suitable for excavations, while in Italy the winters are mild and do not affect the field work too much.

Archaeology in Italy is a very important part of daily life: one grows up surrounded by thousands of monuments and archaeological remains. Every corner of Rome, the city I grew up in, is loaded with ancient remains, old monuments, and Latin inscriptions. Every block has several old churches incredibly decorated with wonderful paintings, frescos, sculptures, and accessories. This happens throughout Italy: its cultural heritage is a true treasure for humankind.

The United States also has many important sites that need to be protected, but I was surprised to find less dedication here to protect them than I expected. In my humble opinion, I feel like there is still a lot more to do to make people understand how the preservation of Native American, early settler, and early industrial sites is key to understanding American cultural heritage.

My friend and colleague, Dr. Rush discussed with me how the approach to sites with human remains here in U.S. is very different to the one in Italy. “In ancient Roman times, people have believed that the spirit has left

¹ "EN – Mission Abroad." Arma Dei Carabinieri - Home. Web. 20 Nov. 2011. <http://www.carabinieri.it/Internet/Multilingua/EN/MissionAbroad/03_EN.htm>

the body, so that moving the bones, collecting them, and studying them doesn't appear to disturb anyone. In addition, there are so many ancient remains there that belong to people that are from so long ago that they are viewed as "different." The human remains are not seen as belonging to family, friends, or loved ones. In the U.S., the Christian remains, where the spirit is believed to be gone, are so recent that the loved ones are still part of family and community memory, they aren't really ancient ones. People here in the US, generally, would never consider digging up a European cemetery, unless the remains would be destroyed by a construction. It is my understanding that many Native Americans believe that the spirit is returning to the Earth Mother or the Creator along with the decomposing remains. Excavating and studying the remains affects the spirit, disorienting it and stopping it on its path, with serious and profound spiritual implications. Some also believe that a disoriented spirit can bring great harm to the people who have disturbed the remains." Dr. Rush explained that her opportunities to work with Native Americans has helped her to understand these issues in a far more empathetic and sophisticated way.

Teaching children the importance of site preservation will ensure the survival of these sites for the future of a community. When we do not encourage children to see and visit historical sites in the area they live and teach them about their importance, we undermine the commitment to site preservation. How can they understand and commit to protect something they do not know about?

One class I teach that is very well received by my young students at Arlington Memorial High School at Arlington, Vt., is an Archaeology/Anthropology class. It is amazing to see how the students love learning about world history. I cannot stress enough how important it is to train young minds to understand the past by studying and analyzing past civilizations, their achievements, their successes, and sometimes even their struggle for survival. In my archeology class, they learn how to make ceramics, build 3-D models of monuments or *agoras*, or *fora*, while they research the life style of the people that built them. At the high school level, there was not an archaeology/anthropology class taught before, but I didn't have any difficulty introducing it in the school's curriculum. I believe my passion for this subject is so evident that it is seen as a great addition to the school's offerings. Since it has been offered, I have had quite a few students enrolled every year, even though our school district is not a large one.

Archaeological Excavations in Italy

As I have stated, most of my professional experience was on archaeological excavations in Rome, Italy. Italy's incredible archaeological wealth over the years has required many laws and regulations for protection. Some of these laws do not have any corresponding legislation here in the United States. For example, in the U.S. there is no protection for discoveries of archaeological remains on private properties. Several articles of law in the Italian Constitution and Code of Civil Rights explain how archaeological findings on private property do not belong to the land owner, but to the Italian State no matter what.² The owner of private property where important sites are found will be asked to desist from building any structure on that site and/or will be requested to sell the property in question to the State for a minimal amount of money (land will be paid as the correspondent value of agricultural land), as the laws dictate.³

In the case of important construction works such as a highway, a tunnel, the T.A.V. (treno alta velocita') fast speed train tracks, etc., the government may ask for a deviation from the original pathway, just to protect a newly found mausoleum or necropolis, or any important remains.

These situations are so common in Italy that public works progress very slowly. In the attempt to protect Italian heritage, many projects have been modified over and over again and many more have been put on hold waiting for more surveys and analysis to be completed to find an alternative path.

Usually land owners conduct a series of surveys (trenches, wells) of a given area before building any structure to ensure that the foundations of the new structure are not going to cross any major archaeological site. These surveys are conducted at the owner's expense by a designated contracted enterprise that has all the necessary accreditation, workforce, equipment, and works under the supervision of a team of archaeologists designated by the local Archaeological Superintendence.

² "La proprietà'- Limiti ed obblighi relative alla proprietà' privata". Infube - Articoli, Documenti, Appunti e Analisi Online. Web. 16 Nov. 2011. <<http://www.infube.com/diritto/LA-PROPRIETA'-LIMITI-ED-OBBLIGHI11131.php>>

³ "Libro Terzo della Proprieta' ". "Il Portale Dei Giuristi" - Facoltà Di Giurisprudenza & Dipartimento Di Scienze Giuridiche - Università Degli Studi Di Trento - Italia. Web. 09 Nov. 2011. <http://www.jus.unitn.it/cardozo/obiter_dictum/codciv/Lib3.htm>

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If anything relevant emerges from the surveys, the owner will have to face all the expenses for the protection of the material, its excavation, documentation, and possible removal under the Superintendence regulations and *modus operandi*. When the removal is not suitable, then the public or private work will need to be moved to somewhere else nearby and the new project will have to be submitted to the Superintendence for a new approval. This whole process may take a long time and heavy fees or criminal charges may be faced by the land owner who doesn't respect the laws in the terms of protection of cultural sites (and ultimately, the loss of the property). These extreme rules became necessary over the years to protect Italian historical heritage from excessive and wild expansion of urban areas.

All of the most important archaeological investigations are usually followed by publications. These publications often take the form of detailed reports of the years of excavations for the local Superintendence's archives. In luckier cases, a publication in a specific magazine can follow this last process. In general, important sites with a lot of important materials found require the study of the materials in a lab (this may take a few years, depending on the workforce) and the final results will be presented in an exhibit. In the exhibit all the restored materials will be displayed and explanatory posters and panels will show the different stages of the excavations (campaigns). In even luckier cases, there is enough material for a book. Of course all of this happens when the site is very important and extra funding is available.

In my experience, I found that large business enterprises were often willing to finance the publication of the results of the excavations conducted on their properties. I like to see this as the will of "illuminated people" to protect important sites for the benefit of the whole community. Of course their financial assets allow the nurturing of philanthropic interests as well.

In the majority of the cases though, this doesn't happen for small land owners: they usually face the basic mandatory expenses required to survey their land and obtain the approval by the local Superintendence to continue their project and the material found doesn't receive any further interest and lays in the storage of the local museums waiting for future studies and funds. The long time spent on studying materials, preparing and hosting an exhibit, and the cost of a formal publication, would indeed be too much for the owner of a small property.

Other major works and relative publications are usually sponsored by grants, for not much of the public

money (because of the current economic crisis) can be used for research purposes at this time in Italy.

In Italy there are also many excavations led and financed by foreign research associations (universities, museums, etc.). These projects usually have their own grant funds and publish their results in specific magazines. Even these associations though, while working in Italy, need to have all the approvals and supervision of the local Archaeological Superintendence.

The archaeological techniques here and in Italy for what I have seen and read about, are very similar and a thorough documentation of the excavation campaigns is provided in both cases.

In Italy, given the enormous amount of material found, unfortunately not all of the pieces receive the attention they need and often they are stored away. Materials or structural remains are usually well documented, photographed, and drawn to scale in situ. When opportunely removed, if possible, they are individually catalogued and wrapped with special care. Pottery fragments are then carefully washed, dried, and possibly glued together to restore the original shape of the artifact. Coins receive special attention for their historical importance and value. Wall structures are usually covered if they do not undergo any restoration, with a special fabric and are then buried under a layer of several meters of *pozzolana* (volcanic soil, very common in Italy) that will protect the remains pretty much forever. This soil and the fabric can be easily removed when needed. At this point in Italy there are so many wall structures covered that it is very important for the Archaeological Superintendence all over Italy to maintain accurate and up-to-date maps of the main findings. This documentation is invaluable when planning for the expansion of adjacent urban areas or for the planning of new infrastructures.

Background

During the two and a half years of collecting data for my thesis, while in Rome, I was trained on current lab techniques for studying human osteological remains (paleodemography, cranium and post-cranium measurements and indices, Arizona State University Dental System or ASU traits, paleo-pathologies, etc.), and I was able to carry over my own research for the thesis. These years proved to be highly useful when I was later dealing with my own contracted jobs for the Archaeological Superintendence of Rome (ASR). After completing my doctoral degree I began my in-the-field experience, which would later lead me to participate in almost 40

different excavations. My first “training” experience was on a very large necropolis named Via Basiliano – Via Della Serenissima, in Rome, where previous excavation campaigns had re-exhumated about 3,000 burials, several chamber tombs, and three mausoleums. This area apparently had been densely used for burials for several centuries. Given the huge amount of burials in this necropolis, I quickly learned the basic excavating techniques needed for exposing skeletal remains.

This necropolis isn't the only one in or around Rome that has so many intact burials. In fact, the abundance of well-preserved burials in Lazio, Italy, has been attributed to the fact that the area has a volcanic origin and these tombs were dug in the tuffaceous rock which is very acidic and helps to quickly decompose flesh and preserve osteological remains. Tuff is an extrusive igneous rock that is very easy to carve and mine, and because of its abundance, Romans used much of it for construction and as a bed for the burials. In the Via Basiliano necropolis, all of those thousands of burials were dug into the tuff mother rock and many of them overlapped. I spent a few days working on this necropolis and immediately realized how my extensive lab training was a precursor for any kind of field work. Rome's area represents a very lucky situation for an archaeologist; because of its geological background, an enormous amount of burials can be found intact and they can provide an incredible amount of information with their content, assortment, orientation, skeletal data, etc. In all of the time I have spent in the field supervising the anthropological excavations, I believe I have exposed the



Figure 1. Dr. Luisa B. Millington standing inside a 2nd century B.C. chamber tomb in Via Romanina, Rome, in 2001. The chamber tomb is shown with a circular perimeter dug several inches into the tuff.

remains of just about 3,000 individuals (more or less complete), not counting all the specimens I have analyzed in lab from my colleagues' excavations.

From the very first day I loved the field work, even though it was challenging at times, especially if the weather conditions were not so friendly. But it always was rewarding and interesting in many of its aspects, even the long time spent recording data.

A team of archaeologists always has one team leader. It is usually the one with the most experience in the field or on the specific area, helped by one or two more archaeologists, depending on how extensive the excavation is. Others involved are a professional sketch artist, a photographer, and a physical anthropologist if there are human burials on the site, and several workers.

After my first experience in the field, I was assigned to many more excavations, just by myself, other times as part of a team of scientists. During harsh weather we would spend time in the laboratory, cleaning specimens and studying those remains for which a grant was available or for the part that was contracted by the ASR for publishing purposes. Unfortunately the amount of remains (not only skeletal, but ceramics) way exceeds human possibility to study every single piece found on an excavation and the studying of materials is usually concentrated on specific and interesting portions.

The condition of the skeletal remains of an individual can tell an incredible amount about his/her life including physical conditions, age of death, and sometimes cause of death (in the case of prolonged infections, deep wounds or serious injuries that left mark on the bones, food deficiencies like anemia, etc.).

When collecting data for my doctoral thesis, I specialized in the study of different paleo-pathologies of the human dentition, as well as their shape, which has a genetic component (hereditary) transferred from parents to children.

In the lab, any object found in the excavation and previously recorded had to be cleaned well, catalogued, and then assigned to a context. In the case of human remains, after the thorough cleaning and cataloguing, we analyzed them from a metric and non-metric point of view. Metric traits refer to the dimensions, length, diameter, and non-metric traits would be discoloration, presence of abnormalities, pathologies, fractures, signs of infections, food deficiencies, bone consistency, etc. It took several days to complete all of the analysis required by the ASR standards, and over the years we improved and modified those tables to better adapt to new features found and studied.

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Catacombs

I worked mainly on excavations of Roman Imperial Age, but I also came across an Etruscan chamber tomb and a chamber tomb connected (indeed a side access to) with the Saint Domitilla's Catacombs (Christian) which is one of my dearest memories, (as peculiar as this may sound to a person who doesn't work in this field).

I was working on a series of burials that emerged during road work in that area of Rome called Esposizione Universale Roma or EUR. After initially cleaning the area, two other archaeologists and I began collecting information about the burials. A few days later we were able to remove the skeletal remains and we realized that the dirt floor of the area opened up in a staircase leading to another floor downstairs. It took us a couple of days to dig the narrow staircase and reach the chamber underneath the ground level. It was a chamber tomb entirely dug in the tuff with beautiful but incomplete frescos on the walls. It was certainly the burial of a rich family, not just because of the private setting (which is sign of distinction), but for the presence of the frescos that were very expensive at the time. The chamber was semicircular with three beds carved in the rock hosting the human remains. Again, it took us several days to describe, collect data, preserve, and document every possible aspect of the burial. One puzzling detail about this tomb: the floor was left as dirt when usually rich tombs were very well decorated in every aspect. Usually, a family rich enough to have a private place for their beloved, embellished with frescos on the walls, would have had at least a floor made of mosaics (as I have found in other settings). This was not the case, though. A very rough dirt floor was in the tomb and I convinced my colleagues to go further in cleaning it and try to expose the mother rock. The dirt floor seemed never ending, until a hole opened up in it, showing a very dark empty large area underneath. We opened the hole in the floor just enough to see that the tomb we were in had been used as side access to the local Catacombs of Saint Domitilla! The tourist access to these Catacombs in fact is near the area we were working and Catacombs are so particular in their aspect and details that every archaeologist would recognize one at first sight.⁴ As protocol demands, we contacted the Vatican Archaeological Committee (VAC, Commissione Pontificia di Archeologia), because in Italy the Early Christian Catacombs are protected under the Vatican and not under the ASR anymore and we were not authorized to go any further.

Early Christians had been ferociously persecuted

Figure 2. Dr. Millington in Via Bompiani, Rome. The chamber tomb entrance connected to Saint Domitilla's Catacombs, 2nd-3rd century A.D. in 2003.



(tortured, enslaved, and killed) by pagan Roman Emperors until Emperor Constantine accepted the Catholic religion as religion for the Empire (313 A.D.).⁵

Until then, Christians secretly met in the catacombs, entirely dug into the tuffaceous rock, where they would also bury their beloved. Over the centuries, these catacombs had a huge extension; the Saint Domitilla burials extended over several floors and for several miles in length. We had just found one of the secret side accesses: who in fact would have thought to use a Roman Imperial Age chamber tomb as access to the Catacombs? Some desperate Christian did, to be sure he would not be followed by Roman soldiers. We just happened to have had enough time (several centuries later) to make this amazing discovery for ourselves.⁶

Going back to what happened that day, the representative group of scientist from the Vatican arrived at the excavation site very quickly, asking all of us to actually move away from the area, so that they could evaluate the situation. I had the opportunity to talk a little bit with the leading archaeologist of that group, a very nice person, who was listening very carefully to the indications I was providing. I was so excited about our findings that I asked her if I could possibly go with her team in the Catacombs. She said that she would see if this was possible, being that the access we discovered was indeed leading to a section of the Saint Domitilla's Catacombs not open to the public because it was not entirely excavated yet.

⁴ "The Catacombs of Saint Domitilla." Domitilla Catacombs - SOVERDI. Web. 09 Nov. 2011.

<<http://www.domitilla.info/idx.htm?var1=docs/it01.htm>>

⁵ "Cristianesimo-Editto di Costantino (313 d.C.). Editto Di Milano" Web. 20 Nov. 2011. <<http://www.313dc.com/>>

⁶ "Le Catacombe Cristiane." Vatican: the Holy See. Web 20 Nov. 2011. <http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_commissions/archeo/documents/rc_com_archeo_doc_20011010_cataccrist_it.html>

Many hours passed by, while we were continuing our work on a nearby area and a man (a worker that came with the Vatican Committee) tapped my shoulder and asked me to follow him to his team leader, (the nice person I mentioned). She was in the chamber tomb underground and told me that she had been given approval for me to follow her into the catacombs, but we had to move quickly because they were going to seal that access that same day to prevent looting. I was tied around my legs with some cords and lowered through the hole in the dirt floor of the chamber tomb while the archaeologist and one of her workers were already in the catacombs waiting for me. After untying my legs, I followed them into the most absolute darkness: each one of them had a flashlight and was showing me the way. The worker was an older man who, I was told, had worked in those catacombs for more than 35 years and knew them inside out. He had led us through a *dedalo* of pathways, in the dark, following details he could remember off the top of his head, but not written on any map whatsoever. While walking in the catacombs, I was impressed by the amount of burials on the walls, most of them still with skeletal remains, some with inscriptions, and some without. Every niche was dug in the tuff, and there were burials all the way from the floor to the ceiling as high as 12 feet. Hundreds and hundreds were buried there, and this was only one section of one of the several floors of these catacombs. Impressive and unforgettable, even for an anthropologist used to seeing thousands of burials.

At one point the Vatican archaeologist told me that she was going to show me a very important burial located in this section of the catacombs and she brought me to what is called the Bakers' Tomb (Tomba dei Fornai).⁷ This was a circular room with several burials dug in the bed rock. Frescos all over the walls were representing the trade of the family that "owned" or "reserved" the use of this space in the catacombs: some of the scenes represented people baking bread in a large brick oven. I was told that the tomb hosted the burials of a family who owned a bakery, and they were wealthy and influential enough to afford a distinctive area in the catacombs for the whole family. We then proceeded into the area accessible to the tourists, and I was brought back to my excavation. I never saw those nice people again.

Many years later (and this is where being married to my husband played a big role), my husband and I were in Rome visiting my family. My husband heard a story from me so many times that he wanted to visit the Saint Domitilla's Catacombs. With disappointment, we went



Figure 3. Dr. Millington in Via Serenissima Est, Rome, where 2nd century B.C. remains of a Roman road emerged during road work in 2002.

through the usual itinerary reserved for the tourists, very different from what I remembered. All the niches and the burials had been excavated and removed and we only saw empty spots. I expressed my disappointment to the tour guide, a very young girl, and I asked her to visit the Bakers' Tomb. The girl looked amazed at me like I had two heads, wondering how in heaven I knew about it. She herself had been allowed to visit that area only a couple of times in the five years she had been working at the site. She also doubted that I had really been there and I patiently described to her what I remembered of it with the details of the frescos and the disposition of the burials. She admitted that I had been there but being that the area was not open to the public, she couldn't bring anybody there. So, with my husband disappointed as well, we left the catacombs wondering when they would open that area to visitors. Being the enormous amount of burials still laying there, it will take several decades to be totally cleaned.

Finally I understood what a great gift that archaeologist from the Vatican had given me. I will always be grateful to her for this: I think she understood my passion for archaeology and the true dedication to my job as we both shared a true deep interest for it.

⁷ "L'Osservatore Romano". Vatican: the Holy See. Web. 09 Nov. 2011. <http://www.vatican.va/news_services/or/or_quo/cultura/2011/056q04a1.html>

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Conclusion

I will always remember that experience and it is indeed one of my dearest memories. I tell this and other episodes of my life to my students as examples of how fascinating working on an archeological excavation can be: you never see all the possible connections and implications until the very end and this may take many years of fascinating research.

Acknowledgments

I thank Mrs. Melissa Smith and Dr. Laurie Rush for their invaluable help in editing this paper, and my husband, Robert Millington, for encouraging me in all of my endeavors.

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