

Ancient sewer excavation sheds light on the Roman diet

June 17 2011, by Lin Edwards



Image credit: Herculaneum Conservation Project

(PhysOrg.com) -- Archaeologists working in a system of connected sewers and drains under the ancient town of Herculaneum in the Bay of Naples area of Italy have analyzed the human excrement found there and discovered the diet of ordinary Romans included a lot of vegetables and fruits, especially figs, and protein sources such as sea urchins and dormice.

Herculaneum and its neighbor [Pompeii](#) were among the towns destroyed by being buried under [volcanic ash](#) by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD.

The archaeologists, from the British School in Rome, have been working their way through over 770 bags of compacted human waste from a 86-meter long sewer system under the remains of a three-storey apartment block in the city. The system was in effect a large septic tank with wastes from the building above being tipped into it via a series of

chutes. Along with compacted excrement they have also found objects such as coins, rings, precious stones, beads, and bone hairpins.

The archaeologists working on the [Herculaneum Conservation Project](#) found the drains by accident while searching for a way to prevent the site from being flooded during heavy rain periods. The system contains the largest deposit of organic matter dating from Roman times ever found. Director of the project, Professor Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, said the discovery was the largest find of Roman waste, but had it been found the past it would have been thrown away because archaeologists did not have the technology available today to analyze it.

Archaeologists have been working on the site for ten years and have discovered a wide variety of objects such as glassware, crockery, pots and pans. A number of human skeletons have also been unearthed. Among the objects discovered were pots of “ingenious construction,” which Wallace-Hadrill said might have been used to fatten up dormice for eating.

The estimated 150 inhabitants of the block belonged to the lower and middle-classes, but analyzing their compacted waste has shown their diet was much more varied than scientists had previously thought. Their diet was essentially a typical Mediterranean diet that included plenty of fish and vegetables, eggs, olives, walnuts, spiky [sea urchins](#) and figs. They used the olive pips for fuel.

The deposits tell [archaeologists](#) a great deal about what ordinary people ate 2,000 years ago. Until now much more was known about what rich people ate, and there was little information on the [diet](#) of people in lower and middle classes.

Jane Thompson, the project manager, said the team has so far merely scratched the surface, and there are still eight tons of material to sift

through.

The discoveries will be exhibited in 2013 at the British Museum in London.

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Citation: Ancient sewer excavation sheds light on the Roman diet (2011, June 17) retrieved 1 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-06-ancient-sewer-excavation-roman-diet.html>

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