The discarded infants of ancient Poggio Civitate horrify, provoke and fascinate 2,500 years later

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(Phys.org) —More than 2,500 years after tiny infant bones were scattered, perhaps offhandedly, amid animal remains on the floor of an Etruscan workshop, recently-discovered fragments of those bones are causing a stir far beyond Italy's Poggio Civitate Archaeological Project.

University of Massachusetts Amherst archaeologist Anthony Tuck recently told an Archaeological Institute America annual meeting in Seattle that the bones discovered in the ancient Etruscan town of Poggio Civitate were "simply either left on the floor of the workshop or ended up in an area with a heavy concentration of other discarded remains of butchered animals."

It is an image that has, in ensuing weeks, resonated powerfully, if not always accurately, in the international press as everyone from religious fundamentalists to luridly invasive tabloids has scrambled to assemble narratives for the baby bones that might be either more or less appalling to modern sensibilities – narratives, notes Tuck, that tell us more about ourselves than they do about perinatal death in ancient Italy.

"Romans may have dumped remains of dead kids with their rubbish," screamed an Asian News International headline; "Grisly discoveries reveal unsympathetic attitudes," wrote a Daily Mail reporter. Other news outlets placed the excavated site on a timeline that might have associated it either with BCE cave dwellers or alternatively in the path of seventh century CE invaders.

In fact, Poggio Civitate, notes Tuck, was located about 10 miles south of the Tuscan city of Siena, and was neither Roman nor primitive. It was inhabited from approximately 900 - 550 BCE, and is characterized by the remains of lavish aristocratic dwellings and highly stylized fine ceramics and carvings. Particularly significant, was the discovery of a workshop pavilion built in mid-seventh century BCE and measuring over 150 feet in length – "considerably longer," says Tuck, "than anything known in the contemporary Greek world" and decorated with opulent terracotta. While no kiln has been discovered, ceramics appear to have been produced there, along with other manufactured goods.

And then, beginning about two years ago came the discovery of human bones among the detritus, the arm bones and ilium of what appears to be several newborn or perinatal infants.

"The fact is simply this," says Tuck. "We found elements of neo-natal human skeletons in refuse areas."

"One element of a human pelvis comes from an area with an

exceptionally high concentration of butchered animal remains, suggesting that an infant corpse was thrown into an area already filled with discarded, decaying animal parts. Other portions of a skeleton were found resting directly on the floor of a workshop area and elements of a third child were found pushed or swept up against the interior wall of an aristocratic residence."

This is where Tuck and his team started to encounter pushback following January's AIA presentation in Seattle. How could Tuck so casually treat infant mortality, or, even worse, infanticide, asked some evangelicals? Why not just describe the bones and leave it at that, asked some paleoanthropologists? Couldn't the bones have been placed at the site as a result of some later catastrophe or disruption, asked a biological anthropologist? Wasn't this just another example of how nasty, brutish and short life was in the savage past, declared the tabloids? Let's not go blaming the Romans, demanded Roman archaeologists.

The bones themselves, says Tuck, limit the possible narratives. It remains highly likely that the bodies "were simply discarded within the debris associated with other bone and unused animal material." As in much of the ancient world, infants in Poggio Civitate – and especially the infants of slaves and workers – were not accorded the death rituals accorded to adults, and do not generally appear in cemetery plots.

"Troubling though it may be to modern sensibilities, it seems probable that a rigidly hierarchical social system at Poggio Civitate is reflected in the discarding of this infant's remains," Tuck told the Seattle gathering. "If workers there were slaves or even a free population drawn from elements of the community's lowest social orders, it is entirely possible that an infant born to a woman within that class group would not have merited even the limited ritual treatment reserved for perinatal deaths."

The only narrative that Tuck rejects categorically is the one that

dismissively ascribes superiority to modern societies. We may be more like the Etruscans than we like to believe to disparate value to we attach to the lives of children.

"Any modern discomfort at treatment of these infants at Poggio Civitate is a little misplaced," Tuck says. "What we should find more offensive to our modern sensibilities is really the profound manner in which societies maintain systems of caste and ranking that allow one group to effectively dehumanize another. This is exactly what happens when an infant's corpse is discarded in the trash – the child is treated in a manner that reflects the communities' perception of it as something other or less than fully a person.

"It's hard to argue that we don't place different cultural values on children's lives and assign greater or lesser value upon their deaths - for any number of subtle, nuanced and culturally complex reasons. We just don't like to admit it."

Provided by University of Massachusetts Amherst

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