

Excavation of ancient well yields insight into Etruscan, Roman and medieval times

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These are bronze vessels from Nancy de Grummond's four-year excavation of an Etruscan well at the ancient Italian settlement of Cetamura del Chianti. Credit: Florida State University

During a four-year excavation of an Etruscan well at the ancient Italian settlement of Cetamura del Chianti, a team led by a Florida State University archaeologist and art historian unearthed artifacts spanning more than 15 centuries of Etruscan, Roman and medieval civilization in Tuscany.

"The total haul from the well is a bonanza," said Nancy de Grummond, the M. Lynette Thompson Professor of Classics at Florida State. De Grummond, who has performed work at the site since 1983, is one of the nation's leading scholars of Etruscan studies.

"This rich assemblage of materials in bronze, silver, lead and iron, along with the abundant ceramics and remarkable evidence of organic remains, create an unparalleled opportunity for the study of culture, religion and daily life in Chianti and the surrounding region," she said of the well excavation that began in 2011, which is part of a larger dig encompassing the entire Cetamura settlement.

A July 4 news conference at Italy's National Archaeological Museum in Siena drew a standing-room-only crowd as de Grummond and her team reported on their findings from the well excavation over the past four years. Among the most notable finds: 14 Roman and Etruscan bronze vessels, nearly 500 waterlogged grape seeds and an enormous amount of rare waterlogged wood from both Roman and Etruscan times.

The bronze vessels, of different shapes and sizes and with varying decorations, were used to extract water from the well, which has been excavated to a depth of more than 105 feet.

"One of the Etruscan vessels, actually a wine bucket, is finely tooled and decorated with figurines of the marine monster Skylla," de Grummond said. "Another was adorned with a bronze finial of the head of a feline with the mane of a lion and the spots of a leopard and, for handle attachments, had African heads, probably sphinxes."

The grape seeds, found in at least three different levels of the well—including the Etruscan and Roman levels—are of tremendous scientific interest, according to de Grummond.

"They can provide a key to the history of wine in ancient Tuscany over a period from the third century B.C.E. to the first century C.E.," she said. "Their excellent preservation will allow for DNA testing as well as Carbon 14 dating."



This image shows Nancy de Grummond and her team. Clockwise from top: Florida State University Department of Classics alumni Nat Coombes, Tyler Haynes and Ellie Margadant; Nancy de Grummond, the M. Lynette Thompson Professor of Classics at Florida State; and Cheryl Sowder, professor of art history at Jacksonville University. Credit: Florida State University

Many of the seeds excavated in 2012 and 2013 have been analyzed by Chiara Comegna in the laboratory of Gaetano di Pasquale at the

University of Naples Federico II, using a morphometric program originally devised for tomato seeds. The seeds are measured in millimeters and can be sorted into types. Thus far, three distinctive types have been identified, and very likely more will emerge from analysis of seeds found in Etruscan levels in 2014. The payoff could come with matching these specimens with modern grapes of known varieties.

Though the grape seeds are of a primary importance, they are put into context by the many objects associated with the drinking of wine—a wine bucket, a strainer, an amphora—and numerous ceramic vessels related to the storage, serving and drinking of wine.

The grape seeds often were found inside the bronze vessels, a curious detail that de Grummond says could be indicative of ritual activity. The remarkable amounts of well-preserved wood found at the bottom of the well also were most likely ritual offerings.

"Many of the pieces of wood were worked, and already several objects have been identified, such as parts of buckets, a spatula or spoon, a spool and a rounded object that might be a knob or child's top," she said. "The sheer amount of Etruscan waterlogged wood—with some recognizable artifacts—could transform views about such perishable items."

These and other finds—from the bones of various animals and birds to numerous worked and unworked deer antlers—suggest that the Cetamura well, like other water sources in antiquity, was regarded as sacred. In the Etruscan religion, throwing items into a well filled with water was an act of religious sacrifice.

"Offerings to the gods were found inside in the form of hundreds of miniature votive cups, some 70 bronze and silver coins, and numerous pieces used in games of fortune, such as astragali, which are akin to jacks," she said.

Besides being thrown into the well as part of a sacred ritual, some artifacts and items found their way in by intentional dumping or accidental dropping.

The well, dug out of the sandstone bedrock of Cetamura, has three major levels: medieval; Roman, dating to the late first century B.C.E. and the first century C.E.; and Etruscan, dating to the third and second centuries B.C.E. Not fed by a spring or other water source, the well would accumulate rainwater that filtered through the sandstone and poured into the shaft from the sides.

De Grummond's team included Florida State University alumna Cheryl Sowder of Jacksonville University, who served as the registrar in charge of keeping an inventory of the objects and organic remains as they came out of the well; Florida State alumnus Jordan Samuels, who served as foreman for the handling of the finds; Lora Holland of the University of North Carolina-Asheville, director of the Cetamura laboratory at Badia a Coltibuono, who processed the items for transport and storage; and Laura Banducci of the University of Toronto and Carleton College, who is organizing the ceramics for study, with particular attention to the pottery made in the region of Cetamura.

The actual excavation of the well, a spectacular engineering feat according to de Grummond, was carried out by the Italian archaeological firm Ichnos, directed by Francesco Cini of Montelupo Fiorentino. The bronze vessels and numerous other items are under restoration at Studio Art Centers International (SACI) in Florence, under the supervision of Nora Marosi.

Over the years, de Grummond's excavations at Cetamura have not only produced archaeological finds but myriad opportunities for student research at Florida State.

"Thus far, two doctoral dissertations, 18 master's theses and four honors theses have resulted from study of Cetamura subjects, and students have assisted with two exhibitions in Italy and the writing of the catalogs," she said.

De Grummond now is planning an exhibition of the new discoveries from the well and, once again, Florida State students will provide valuable collaboration.

Provided by Florida State University

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