

Eighth-century skeleton found at Torcello

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The skeleton discovered during the excavation in Torcello Island, Venice, Italy.
Credit: Ca' Foscari University of Venice

On the island of Torcello, at the Ca' Foscari University of Venice excavation site, some protagonists of the island's thousand-year history have begun to emerge. A tomb datable to around 700 A.D. has recently been unearthed by the site's team of scholars hailing from universities throughout Italy, under the scientific direction of archaeologist Diego Calaon (a Marie Curie Fellow).

"The subject is a young adult, whose burial—not far from the area we imagine was used as a cemetery adjacent to the Basilica during the Early Middle Ages—maintained nearly the entire skeleton intact, with the exception of the head. We mustn't be misled, however: The discovery of the residual parts of the right side of the skull and of the perforation coming from above (probably due to a construction pole) which occurred during modern times, indicate that the burial was complete and that the defects we see today resulted from activities which occurred later on in the area."

The discovery is an important one. During the archaeological digs that took place on Torcello in the 1960s and 70s, cemetery sites were excavated, but for the most part, only relatively modern ones pertaining to the High Middle Ages. Being able to analyze the biometric data of those who lived on Torcello from the sixth to the ninth centuries presents a unique opportunity. Who were the ancient island residents who lived in the well-constructed wooden houses that were densely present in the area? Free workers? Slaves? Was this a community which already had deeply Christian roots, or not? If the burial site was isolated, or not connected directly to the Church, multiple hypotheses may arise. DNA and biometric analyses should reveal important interpretative data.

The burial has been excavated in an area which is particularly interesting in terms of stratigraphy, at the head of an ancient lagoon canal that separated the island of the Ancient Church of Saint Mary from the inhabited area of the medieval settlement. Over time, the channel was fortified with hundreds of wooden poles, indicative of a "hunger for space" on the part of homes and craft businesses that required the enlargement and creation of new living spaces.

As the excavation has expanded, it has revealed how the eighth and ninth centuries were significant and demonstrative of the island's population explosion. The researchers found dense wooden houses, docks,

fireplaces and production facilities, proven by hundreds of ceramic fragments from kitchen pottery (including many covering basins, the dishes of yesteryear for cooking breads and cakes in fireplaces on the ground), amphorae for oil and wine, and soapstone vessels for cooking soups and stews.

The inhabited area includes a large number of warehouses active in the two previous centuries, from 500-600 A.D. Diego Calaon says, "Torcello became a hub of movement within the lagoon precisely at this moment. Altino was no longer feasible as a port, and the warehouses that we are excavating on the island are revealing that long before the 'imagined' or 'legendary' barbaric destruction occurred, the local elite had fully invested in creating an efficient shipyard precisely in the littoral area of the time. Warehouses were built with reused Roman bricks, some with markings on them, fashioned with stones taken from ancient Rome. The porticoed harbor warehouse visible on Torcello nowadays is exceptionally well preserved. We will be able to clean up the interiors within five to 10 days of work."

Meanwhile, there is another project underway at a different location, where a construction of more than 25 meters in length, possibly a boat garage and warehouse datable to the 14th century, is currently undergoing excavation and study. The structure, with a solid stone foundation (again, "pieces" from Altino which were salvaged for use here in the lagoon) sits opposite a very old and sturdy stone-laid riverbank, which was subsequently reinforced by an outward-facing jetty reaching where the Sile river used to flow. Between the riverbank and the warehouse are the obvious characteristics of a medieval shipyard for organizing and holding boats, probably for fishing, with traces of poles for hauling, for lateral mooring and, probably, for preparing pitches.

Provided by Università Ca' Foscari Venezia

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