

Buried medical waste found in Renaissance-era landfill on site of ancient Roman forum

May 2 2023, by Bob Yirka



The brick-built cistern (context 1154) during excavation in 2021 (photographs and illustration by Sovrintendenza Capitolina—The Caesar's Forum Project). Credit: *Antiquity* (2023). DOI: 10.15184/aqy.2023.34

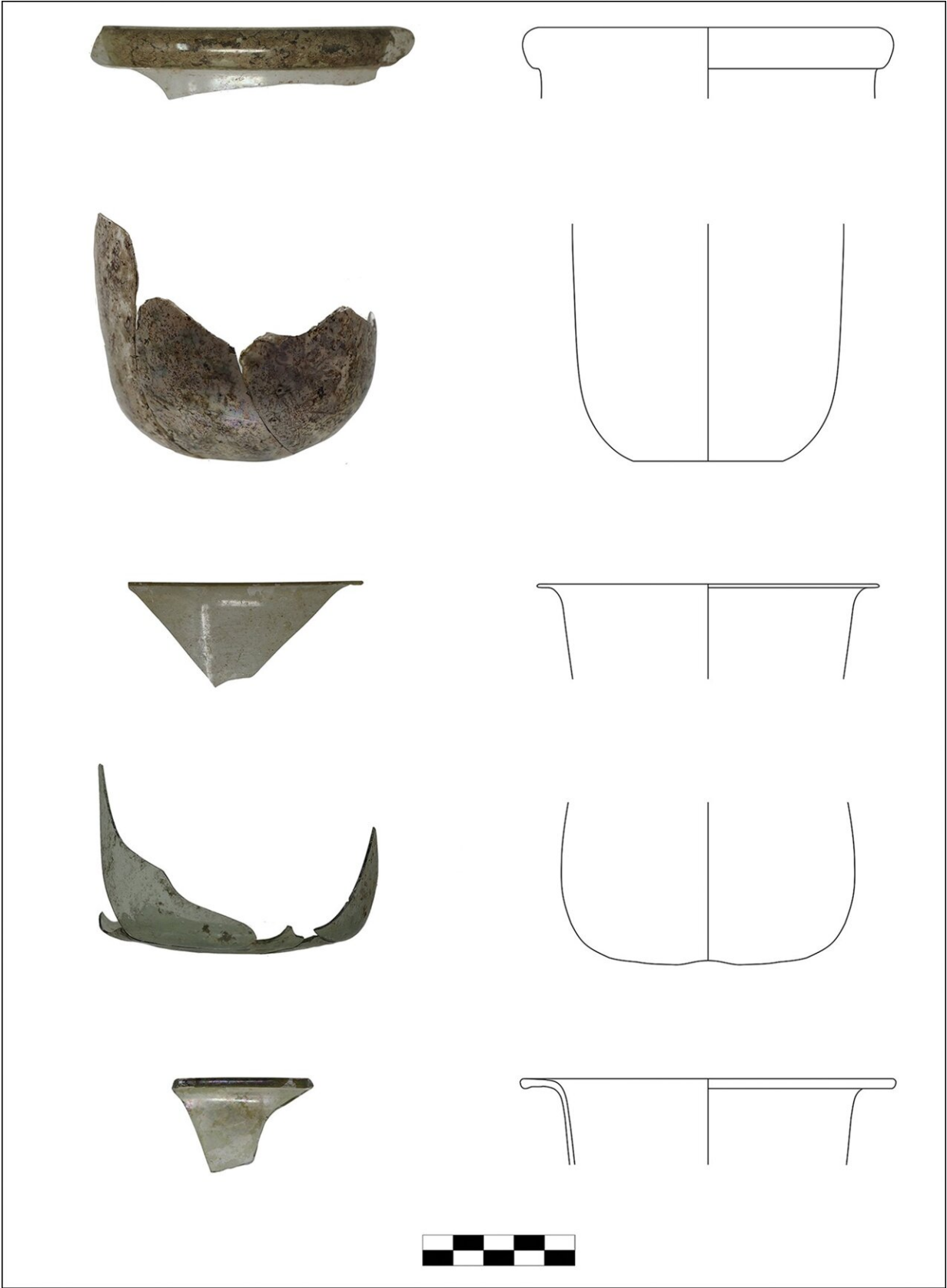
A team of archaeologists affiliated with several institutions in Denmark and Italy has found buried medical waste in a Renaissance-era landfill that was once the site of Caesar's Forum in Rome. In their paper published in the journal *Antiquity*, the group describes the origin of the landfill and its contents.

The Forum in Rome, dedicated to Julius Caesar, was completed in 46 B.C. as a site for conducting public business generally related to the Roman Senate. Much later, during the 16th century, the site was still usable—Renaissance-era people used it as a hospital. Doctors of the time

knew that diseases could be infectious, so they set up protocols for dealing with them and the clothes and tools used to treat ill patients.

Prior research has shown that doctors and [medical researchers](#) in Italy played a major role in establishing protocols, such disposal of instruments after a single use, and disposing of potentially contaminated belongings by burning or burying them. In this new effort, the research team found evidence of such protocols in practice—a landfill next to what was once a hospital where people of the time buried or discarded materials associated with caring for [sick people](#).

The landfill was discovered just two years ago, and since that time, teams of archaeologists have been slowly digging out the material discarded there to learn more about Renaissance-era [medical practices](#). The team in this new effort focused their efforts on a cistern that was found in the landfill.



Glass urine flasks excavated from the cistern. Scale in cm (photographs and illustrations by Sovrintendenza Capitolina—The Caesar's Forum Project).
Credit: *Antiquity* (2023). DOI: 10.15184/aqy.2023.34

The researchers note that the cistern had been intentionally sealed with a clay cap after it was filled with [medical waste](#). Removal of the cap showed that the cistern had been filled with a large array of beads, jars, figurines and even coins, but most notably, with matula—glass urine flasks. Prior research has shown that doctors used such flasks to examine [urine samples](#) to spot symptoms of diseases such as diabetes or jaundice.

The researchers also found lead clamps in the cistern, remnants from furniture that had been burned due to the suspicion of a patient infected with the plague.

More information: Cristina Boschetti et al, Disease control and the disposal of infectious materials in Renaissance Rome: excavations in the area of Caesar's Forum, *Antiquity* (2023). [DOI: 10.15184/aqy.2023.34](https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2023.34)

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