

Asbestos risk in archaeology

Asbestos has been used since prehistoric times (1). The most ancient relics date back to about 4,000 BC; in the Savo area, south-eastern Finland, asbestos (antophyllite) was used in making pottery (4). Asbestos clothes found in some tombs of several sites in Thailand date back to the Neolithic and Bronze Ages (2).

Asbestos use in the Classical Era is testified by various authors. In the 1st century Pliny the Elderly reported that regal sudaria were made with this mineral, so that the ashes of the corpse were separated from other ashes (6). Pliny's statement has been confirmed by archaeological studies. Starting from the 17th century asbestos clothes were found in some Roman tombs in Italy (5, 8). Recently, the catalogue of Roman asbestos artifacts has been substantially enriched. Besides the pieces that have already been subjected to analysis (3, 7), others remain under study.

The data available at the beginning of the 20th century (5) suggested that for archaeologists the possibility of encountering an asbestos artifact was quite remote. However, the series of recent discoveries indicate that such findings might be more frequent than previously believed.

Among archaeologists the problem of a possible exposure to asbestos has already become a matter of concern and debate (3). Once that the nature of the material is identified it is relatively easy to take the necessary steps to avoid exposure. However, during excavations as well as in the work that follows, the archaeologist may be quite unaware of the presence of asbestos. Consequently a precautionary approach should be taken in all archaeological investigations regarding prehistoric and historic sites.

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