

# The Valcuvia Bioarchaeological Archive: an example of human remains conservation, valorization and fruition

*Claudia Bressan, Caterina Pangrazzi*

Department of Biotechnology and Life Science, University of Insubria

**Abstract:** Within the project “Landscapes of Valcuvia. Environmental requalification through an archaeological path: valorization, protection and fruition of the Cultural Heritage” (*Paesaggi della Valcuvia. Riqualficazione ambientale attraverso un percorso archeologico: valorizzazione, tutela e fruizione del Patrimonio Culturale*), the bioarchaeological archive has been created by the physical anthropology team of University of Insubria. The archive is located in Caravate and in preserves the human remains recovered in the archaeological sites of Lombardy. It will be destined for the conservation, valorization and fruition of the anthropological heritage of the Varese province, and it will house a dedicated laboratory for bioarchaeological analysis.

**Keywords:** Valcuvia, bioarchaeological archive, bioethics, anthropological collection, digital catalogue.

## The Valcuvia bioarchaeological archive: structure and goals

The physical anthropology research team at the University of Insubria, chaired by Dr. Marta Licata, is realizing a biological archive within the project “Landscapes of Valcuvia. Environmental requalification through an archaeological path: valorization, protection and fruition of the Cultural Heritage” financed by Fondazione Cariplo and Fondazione Comunitaria del Varesotto. The archive, developed in agreement with the archaeological superintendencies, will collect the human osteological samples recovered throughout the years in some of the archaeological sites in Varese province, Italy. The Valcuvia archive stands as the conclusion of a project of environmental requalification, exploration and valorization. It aims to represent an added value to anthropological research and the community that inhabits those territories from which new projects may originate with the involvement of other bioarchaeological realities in the area. Developing new proposals can increase the research aimed to deepen issues that are not yet comprehensively investigated.

The Valcuvia archive is located in Caravate (Varese province), Italy, on the premises of the old municipal library, whose building was donated to the project by the municipality of Caravate. It hosts a scientific collection composed of the skeletal remains excavated in the archaeological sites of the “Valcuvia archaeological route”, such as San Biagio’s church in Cittiglio, Sant’Eusebio and Antonio’s church in Azzio, Sant’Agostino’s church in Caravate, and some other locations in the province of Varese. The anthropological material which will be stored in the Valcuvia archive is mostly recovered from occasional finds and intervention of emergency archaeology and they cover a very long chronological period, from the Early Middle Ages to Modern Times (Licata, 2016). Different foundations and public institutions supported the research activity of our university anthropological team throughout the years giving us the opportunity to investigate some of these archaeological sites in their entirety and the anthropological material have been carefully studied. In the coming years, the archaeological area of new sites in the region will be the focus of research and the osteological material will be included in the Valcuvia archive. Human remains are considered

archives themselves; the single analysis of a skeleton, as well as the study of an entire sample can help to reconstruct the anthropological features, the nutritional aspects of a population and the demographic dynamics which characterize an archaeological site. The historical data can be enriched with new information which would be difficult to obtain through the use of other sources.

The growing interest in human remains of archaeological value, whether they are skeletal, mummified or cremated and even more if well preserved and properly recovered from various types of archaeological contexts, such as necropoleis, common ossuaries, crypts or urns, enabled to reach unexpected research levels. This has been possible thanks to the awareness that they are the only concrete elements of those who have built history, and they are able to return a lot of information. For this reason, physical anthropology has entered into dialogue with many disciplines, not limiting itself only to paleopathology, an ancillary discipline within this field of research. The data obtained are increasingly able to confirm or not the reliability of the information already available through material culture (Larsen, 2002). With anthropological and paleopathological analysis, information related to variability at all levels of the individual such as sex, age at death and height, allows the reconstruction of the biological profile of the skeleton itself. If the sample is numerically representative, information on lifestyle, presence or absence of nutritional deficits, diseases, subsistence strategies, and physical and work activities carried out, can serve to delineate characteristics, activities and feeding regimes of the single human group as well as entire populations. From this type of data, it is possible to elaborate also models of migration, commerce and customs. Therefore, archaeologists and historians, increasingly appreciate the bioarchaeological analyses which are seen as a complement and integration of the research aimed at the reconstruction of cultures of the past. Accordingly, physical anthropology is proving to be a bridge between purely humanistic and strictly scientific disciplines. The information that can be obtained through bioarchaeological investigations is not always deductible from written sources and iconography, which can also return different visions of the same period, creating uncertainties. Similarly to artefacts,

human remains contribute to the knowledge of ancient populations and to the reconstruction of history.

Still, too often the figure of the physical anthropologist in the field is considered unnecessary, especially in emergency excavations where those who intervene have to deal with short time and poor funding. To avoid the risk of damaging human remains in archaeological contexts, it would be important to emphasize this scientist's fundamental role. A solution to this ambiguous situation would be for the Minister of Culture to promote the presence of the expert in contexts where there is the possibility of recovering human remains. Alternatively, it would be interesting to aim for the anthropologists' independent practice. The use of different sources for the reconstruction of the past is certainly an added value; a way to deepen and enrich knowledge, in an attempt to eliminate preconceptions and simplified visions of a given historical period and on the contrary, to highlight the complexity that usually distinguishes it. The intention is precisely to provide data for a greater characterization of the past and illuminate some areas of shadow present within the knowledge of social and economic processes that occurred over time, especially for some historical periods that require, in some respects, greater clarity due to the gap of the archaeological and written sources available.

The strength of this archive is further represented by the presence of a workshop space in the same building, which wants to be the natural continuation of the laboratories set up in the churches involved in the archaeological excavations within the Valcuvia Project for the period of its duration. Although preliminary, the bioarchaeological study of human remains *in situ* contributes to the enhancement of the historical context and allows physical anthropologists to understand immediately the diagnostic potential of recovered remains from the *corpus* of data collected at a macroscopic level. In the case of the Valcuvia Project, to have allowed the participation of university students, trainees, students of schools of different order and grades and the entire communities in various activities organized on the excavations, has given them the opportunity to get closer and get in touch with a world that is still unknown outside the academic and scientific world, hoping to increase the sensitivity towards human archaeological finds.

## The reasons for a bioarchaeological archive

Since the heritage of human remains in the archaeological field is the concrete testimony of individuals who lived in the past, in Italy they are protected by the Constitution. For this reason, they cannot and should not be considered “owned” by an individual or any public or private body. The institutions can only store and preserve the cultural heritage since the property is indisputably owned by the State (MiC, 2022). However, it is up to those who recover, study and analyze this precious biological heritage, to ensure their adequate conservation that allows future research. Often, however, they pass directly from the excavation in the warehouses of the Superintendence or museums without even being cleaned or properly packaged. If forgotten on dusty shelves or handled by inexperienced hands that impair the testimonial potential, they may lose the interest for which they were recovered and, in some cases, mostly in the past, they may be placed in the ossuary of cemeteries. That just described is a practice to be discouraged because the resettlement of the finds represents an important loss for the research. This habit is also helped by the limited number of exhibition spaces in museums and the financial resources needed to put them on display. For this reason, the Valcuvia Project, where possible, was able to partially relocate some skeletons to their original position; namely, in the site of San Biagio in Cittiglio, selected skeletons have been placed back in the place of the discovery where they are still visible for the public thanks to glass panels placed on the floor of the church. The rest of the material, instead, was placed in Caravate. Here the biological Archive of Valcuvia will be created, which is consistent with the ideals laid down by the Italian “Istituto Centrale per l’Archeologia” (ICA) and the “Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo e la Documentazione” (ICCD) in their document “I resti scheletrici umani: dallo scavo, al laboratorio, al museo”, published in 2022 and available online.

In order to achieve this, the anthropological material will preserve in a dedicated place in individual boxes which are labelled with an identification number and a tag showing the site and the name of the osteological remains preserved in it, allowing easy and fast detection of the skeletal material. In the laboratory, provided with the necessary equipment for the macroscopic analysis

of osteoarchaeological remains, the researchers have the possibility to carry out their anthropological investigations even after time helped by the many techniques and thanks to the methods constantly improved. When necessary, the involvement of experts in other disciplines related to bioarchaeology will provide a multidisciplinary study that can be exhaustive and acquire value in the international scientific community. The data collected must be stored and managed in such a way that it can be used and therefore shared, implementing it with continuous updates. This is why the material has been inventoried on virtual support in order to have a clear idea of the size to which the anthropological insights are added. Here the information about the cataloguing criteria is listed with all the archaeological details related to the context of the discovery, the burials and the individuals. In addition, when the human bones have already been analysed, the raw anthropological insights are described clarifying the methods adopted and the diagnostic process so that the analyses can be replicated. Furthermore, significant images may also be attached when available.

During the creation of the bioarchaeological archive, particular attention was paid to the ethical aspects since human remains are a “culturally sensitive material”. This anthropological collection, in fact, cannot be considered a mere ensemble of biological remains, and it needs to be treated as material of scientific and cultural relevance as reported in the ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums. The conservation and the fruition of the anthropological material are the keys to reaching its valorization, three purposes that from the beginning the Valcuvia Project has emphasized and that distinguishes the physical anthropology research team at the University of Insubria. Collecting and making accessible to the public the broad osteoarchaeological findings recovered in Lombardy throughout the years allows the remains themselves to acquire value for both research and cultural purposes. The valorization of the past creates awareness in the present, increasing the understanding of our cultural heritage and the urge to spread its values as part of our own background.

Another goal, which this research group intends to reach, is the transfer of all the information contained in the inventory in the appropriate tabs in SIRBeC - Information System of Cultural Heritage of the Lombardy

Region, a system of cataloguing the cultural heritage of the Lombardy region; public and private, preserved inside the museums, part of private collections or guarded by cultural bodies and in general, present in the territory. The cataloguing path can be effectively concluded when all the data collected and entered in this platform will be transferred to the national catalogue of heritage in the category of movable property, which is organized based on the subdivision of Italy into Regions, each of which has been assigned a unique code (MiC, 2022). Only in this way, the data can effectively be consulted at an increasingly wide level by the different branches of research, allowing the fruition to become concrete.

The need to create a bioarchaeological archive in the context of the Valcuvia project finds its roots in the broad topic of bioethics. In the scientific community, there is a growing need for the protection of the dignity of the individual, whose identity is now represented by the sole skeletal remains. The value and respect owed to human remains are strongly connected with the person to whom the body belongs in order to dignify its life and identity (Licata et al., 2020). Nonetheless, this consciousness is developed and spread in some countries more than others and is mostly limited to scientific institutions (Monza & Licata, 2015). In this context, the development of a code of ethics is a must for the discipline of physical anthropology since human remains are inscribed with symbolism as well as cultural and political significance (Alfonso & Powell, 2015). Anthropological material is often considered in an intermediate condition between what is left in the present, that is the value and the experience of a person who was once alive, and what it represents, namely, evidence of scientific interest (Luca Sineo, 2022). It is then evident the necessity of combining the research activity with an approach of respect and gratitude towards the osteological remains, always bearing in mind their dignity as human beings.

The osteological material that is now part of the Valcuvia archive was previously stowed directly in the archaeological sites, storerooms and laboratories unsuitable for their proper preservation and valorization. These storage solutions were not consistent with the idea of ethical treatment, and they did not dignify the value of the individuals. Throughout the years this material has been studied and handled by several archaeologists, interns, biologists and physical anthropologists, which not

always have received the right training in the treatment of archaeological remains. This resulted in a situation of chaos among the osteological material, characterized by the lack of identification tags and the presence of skeletal remains incorrectly labelled. This caused a struggle for scientific research and represented a case of neglect and absence of ethical principles. On these premises, the purpose of the Valcuvia archive is to reorganize the osteological material based on the archaeological documentation, trying to make up for the damages and losses which happened throughout the years. New and more suitable equipment, clearer identification tags, and storage boxes were used to conserve the skeletal remains. What we achieved from the creation of the archive is not only an improvement in the state of preservation of the anthropological material. The entire project was able to bring back the dignity and the values to the individuals and to restore the ethical principles which are needed in scientific research.

## References

- Alfonso, M. P. & Powell, J. 2015. Ethics of Flash and Bone, or Ethic in the practice of Paleopathology, Osteology, and Bioarchaeology. In V. Cassman, N. Odegaard, J. Powell (Ed.), *Human Remains: Guide for Museums and Academic Institutions* (pp. 5-19). Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Larsen C. S., 2002. Bioarchaeology: The lives and lifestyles of past people. *Journal of Archaeological Research*, 10, 119-166.
- Licata, M., Bonsignore, A., Boano, R., Monza, F., Fulcheri, E. & Ciliberti, R. (2020). Study, conservation and exhibition of human remains: the need of a bioethical perspective. *Acta Biomedica*, 91(4). 10.23750/abm.v91i4.9674.
- Ministero della Cultura, ICCD & ICA (2022). *I resti scheletrici umani: dallo scavo, al laboratorio, al museo*. Ministero della Cultura, Roma.
- Monza, F. & Licata, M. (2015). Anatomical preparations in museums a special category of cultural heritage. *Med Secoli*, 27(2), 615-28.
- Sineo, L. (2022). Prefazione. In M. G. Belcastro, G. Manzi, J. Moggi Cecchi (Ed.), *Quel che resta. Scheletri e altri resti umani come beni culturali* (pp. 9-11). Il Mulino.

---

## Correspondence:

Claudia Bressan  
Department of Biotechnology and Life Science, University of Insubria  
Email: claudia.bressan@uninsubria.it