

# Companions in eternity. The historical practice of burying pets

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**Abstract.** In the underground cemetery of Santa Maria Maggiore in Vercelli, the recovering of an ossuary chest unveiled the remains of a cat, together with human remains of some individuals of a noble family. The practice of burying pets has deep historical roots, offering insights into the intricate relationship between humans and their animal companions. The presence of the cat in the caisson, which dates before the establishment of cemeteries dedicated to domestic animals in Italy, raises questions about the meaning of this deposition. Despite incomplete data, we can hypothesize that the cat was intentionally translated from a previous burial.

**Key words:** hypogeal cemetery, human-animal relationships, animal burial, companion animal

The co-cathedral of Santa Maria Maggiore in Vercelli was built around the eighteenth century, together with the underground cemetery, opened for funerary use in 1777 until the initial decades of the nineteenth century, accommodating both new burials, but probably also those transferred from the cemetery of the old cathedral (Tibaldeschi, 1996; Destefanis, et al., 2022; Fusco, et al. 2023).

Among the funerary structures of the cemetery, in the northwest corner there is a private chapel belonging to the Mella family, presenting the family coat of arms, also remembered in an epigraph inside the church, to commemorate their burial in the crypt (Figure 1B and 1C).

The emblem is mounted upside down, probably as a result of the translation of the structure from the old cathedral to Santa Maria Maggiore, above the upper jamb of the entrance and on the sides the date 1776 is composed, thus suggesting the initial date of the use of this space and of the translation.

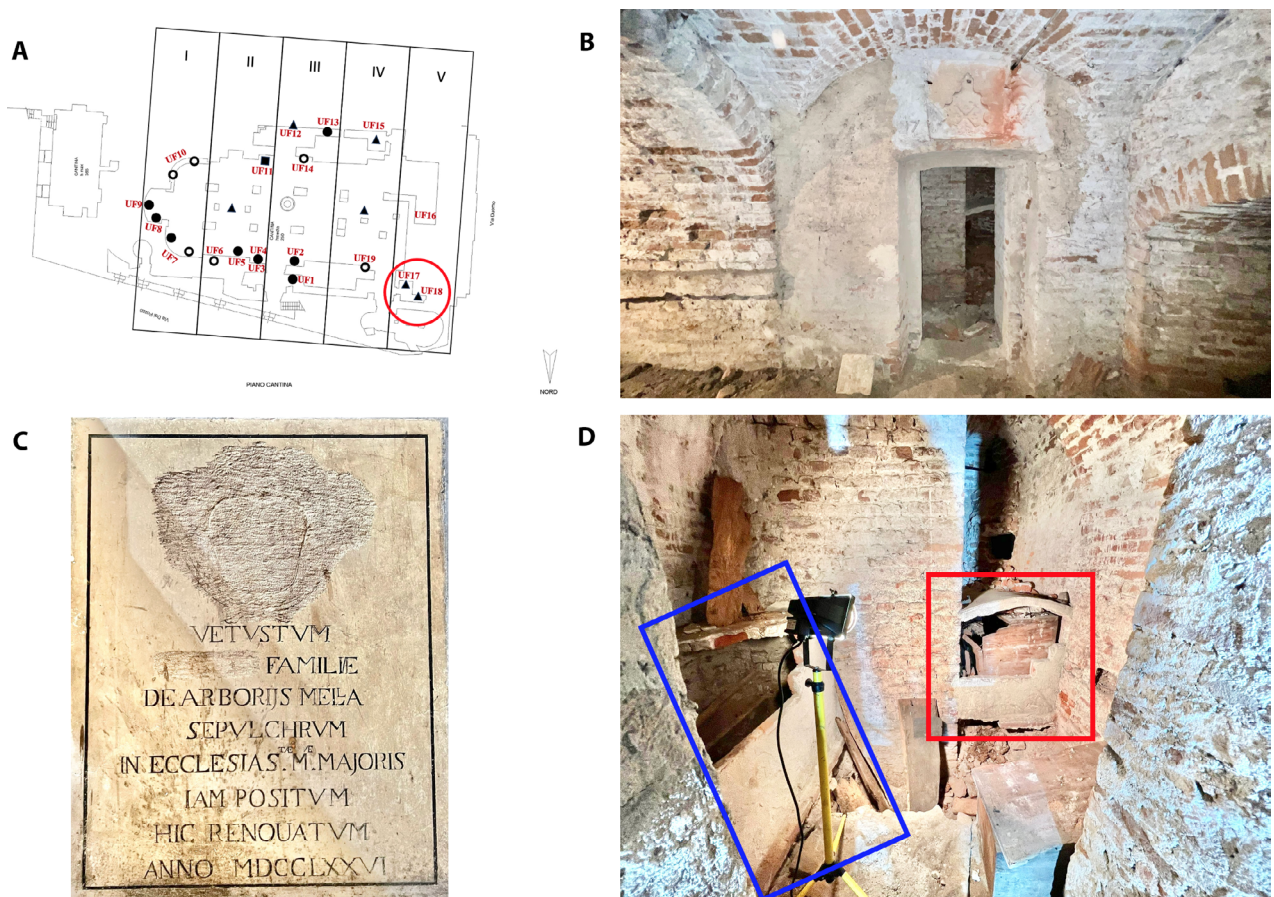
The chapel once had to be closed by a door, of which today only the hinges and jambs remain, and inside it has two masonry structures, one positioned on the left (FU 17) and one opposite the entrance

(FU 18), both in brick, covered with mortar and with a rounded lid (Figure 1D).

Inside FU 17 there were two wooden coffins, visible thanks to the presence of a breach that affects both part of the roof and the long side; its dimensions were 172cm long, a height that varies from 96cm to 67cm in the part closest to the entrance, width between 61cm and 54cm.

FU 18 consisted of a wooden caisson in a reasonably preserved state, lacking only a few lid boards. Its dimensions were approximately 186cm in length, 111cm in height, and 91cm in width.

Before proceeding with the recovery of the burials inside the chapel, archaeological surveys were carried out that led to the excavation of part of the floor to investigate whether previous architectural structures had been intercepted, as can be seen in several points of the cemetery. These investigations have brought to light brick structures underneath the masonry structure of FU18. In addition, at the back of the burial chamber, behind FU 18, an ancient brick well is still visible, probably useful for the water supply of an old building prior to the construction of the church.



**Figure 1.** A. Planimetry of the hypogeal cemetery of Santa Maria Maggiore, Vercelli; in the red circle is highlighted the location of the Mella private chapel. B. Entrance of the Mella chapel. C. The epigraph in Santa Maria Maggiore. D. Blue rectangle is FU 17; red rectangle is FU 18.

In December 2022 we proceeded with the recovery of the ossuary chest of FU 18.

At the time of recovery, the chest was obstructed by the remnants of some bricks that once completely sealed the compartment in which it had been placed (Figure 1D). Therefore, the restorers worked to free it and transported it outside the chamber, making it slide on some boards due to uncertainty about the integrity of the planks comprising the crate's floor.

Following the phase of retrieval of the crate from the chapel, there was the phase of recovering its contents. Inside the caisson, upon initial analysis, numerous mixed bones belonging to multiple individuals were present, without any apparent order of deposition. Preliminarily, the only specimens showing anatomical connection were a partially mummified hand and part of a vertebral column articulated with some ribs.

After photographically documenting the initial conditions of the caisson (Figure 2), we proceeded with the extraction of the bone specimens, attempting



**Figure 2.** Crate's contents as appeared after the retrieval.

to maintain the stratigraphic and proximity order of the finds.

During the extraction of bone specimens, beneath four skulls positioned neatly in the lower right corner of the crate, some remains of a small animal were found.

In this brief discussion, we will not address the human osteological specimens found in this crate, which are still under study, instead, we will focus on the discovery of these animal remains recovered from the FU 18 crate and the history of animal interments with their owners.

Let's start by saying that a total of the skull, the complete mandible, and the right humerus of a cat (*Felis catus*) have been found (Figure 3).

The fact that the box originally had to be nailed and was walled up behind a brick and concrete wall and the placement of the remains, beneath all the layers of human remains deposited, especially the skulls as mentioned earlier, would not suggest an intrusion of the animal into the crate through an opening (such as the missing planks of the lid). The hypothesis is that the animal was deliberately and carefully placed, likely alongside the owners' family.

Although this is only a suggestion, we cannot forget that history tells us about millennia of burials of humans with animals, as well as the ones of beloved pets in special cemeteries or within the properties

of their owners, remembered and loved even after separation.

Before continuing with the history of these interments, it appears that the term 'pet' or 'companion animal' came into common use in the sixteenth century and referred to an animal that '*was kept indoors, was not eaten, and was given a name*', as reconstructed by Figg, meanwhile, Tourigny defines pets as '*animals who occupy a domestic space and primarily serve as entertainment and companionship for humans*' (Figg, 2013; Tourigny, 2020).

One of the earliest recorded instances of pet burials can be traced back to ancient Egypt, where it was customary to bury pets with their masters, assigning the animal a role as a guide to accompany its human after death (Ciliberti et al., 2023). It is during this era that, for the first time, the cat is domesticated, and a name is given to it, which paraphrased mean 'He/She who meows' (Tesolin, 2016).

In the Roman period, cats were primarily used as 'pest controllers' before becoming pets, but there is no shortage of evidence of an affectionate relationship between owner and animal, as evidenced by dedicated cemeteries rich in gravestones with funeral epitaphs sometimes with their portraits (Stevanato, 2016; Osypinska & Osypiński, 2017; Ciliberti et al., 2023). From the Roman period (last quarter of the 1st century–first



**Figure 3.** Cat's bones (scale bar is 5cm). A: right humerus; B and C: mandible; D: cranium.



half of the 2nd century AD circa) is the cemetery for animals in Berenice, Egypt. In this site, researchers have calculated that more than 90% of the animal remains belonged to cats, all of which were placed in a 'sleeping position' and sometimes adorned with collars or necklaces (Osypinska & Osypiński, 2017; Osypinska et al., 2020). The Berenice cemetery thus appears to be a 'cemetery of house-kept pets' (Osypinska & Osypiński, 2017).

Moving on to the Middle Ages, however, literature presents conflicting testimonies regarding the perception of cats. For some, cats were seen as a testament to a prosperous status and the luxury of the family that owned them, while for others, they were considered bad omens, fierce creatures, faithful companions of witches, and associated with heretics (Tesolin, 2016; Onar et al., 2021).

It is in this long period of time that there is a decrease in animal burial practices, returning to a clearer separation between man and animal, likely due to the advent of Christian doctrine throughout Europe (Figg, 2013; Poole, 2015; Tourigny, 2020; Ciliberti et al., 2023).

This decline, according to Tourigny, may not necessarily indicate a reduced emotional connection between humans and animals, but the issue of hygiene and therefore safety also comes into play, as there are multiple findings of common graves designated for animals during this epoch (Tourigny, 2020).

As for Italy, there are numerous instances of animal burials in contexts that also included human burials, particularly in prehistoric periods, with burials predominantly of dogs. In subsequent times, till the Modern Era, burials of cattle, pigs, and occasionally horses are more commonly found, however assuming a ritual significance, either as companionship for the owner in the afterlife or as offerings for foundation rituals (Bernabò Brea et al., 2010; Petiti & Bedini, 2014; Pascolini, 2018; Percivaldi, 2018; Fedele, 2022; Malvaso et al., 2023).

So, how does the FU 18 cat fit within this panorama of animal burials?

Firstly, despite the example of Berenice, it is only at the end of the nineteenth century that we see the emergence of the first pet cemeteries. The oldest ones include the London Hyde Park Dog Cemetery, opened in 1880-81; the Hartsdale Cemetery in the USA,

founded in 1896 and still active; and the Cimetière des Chiens (et Autres Animaux Domestiques) in Paris, established in 1899 (Howell, 2002; Kean, 2013; Osypinska & Osypiński, 2017; Osypinska et al., 2020; Tourigny, 2020; Ciliberti et al., 2023).

In Italy, on the other hand, we have to wait until 1923 for the establishment of the first pet cemetery, Casa Rosa, licensed by the municipality of Rome (la Repubblica, 2022). Considering this, we can first of all exclude the possibility that the cat could have been transferred from a dedicated pet cemetery in the VerCELLI area, as the dating of the crate is prior to the early nineteenth century.

As mentioned above, other evidence in favor of the intentional deposition of the cat, and not of an accident or intrusion from the outside, is primarily the way in which the human skeletal remains are deposited inside the box, which are placed above the remains of the cat and not below, as one would expect following an intrusion after the crate was closed. In addition, the FU was originally behind a wall made of bricks and sealed with cement and the chest itself had the planks nailed in, all of which are therefore obstacles to access from the outside.

Given the discovery of only 4 fragments of the cat's skeleton, perhaps attributable to the delicacy of these remains or to a hasty recovery, we cannot determine the cause of death of the individual or the original context of deposition, whether it was a single burial or contextual to one of the other individuals.

This ossuary-crate, as the other secondary depositions located inside the same private chapel, results from an explicit desire to translate the members of the same family - from the old cemetery to the new - within a single space.

What we can hypothesize is that the secondary deposition of the FU 18 cat is also a translation, suggesting that it was a cherished member of the family.

However, we cannot exclude the possibility that the animal's remains were coincidentally near the interments of the previous cathedral. In fact, in Santa Maria Maggiore, numerous remains of small animals are found throughout the cemetery area, likely associated with individuals that got trapped, possibly entering through the openings that connect the underground environment to the street level.

This particular case, despite being challenging to interpret due to the lack of many elements, leads us to reflect on how archeozoological reconstructions are essential for understanding the history of societies and in particular their relationship with animals, evolving from wild to domesticated, from having a functional/practical role to becoming loyal companion, gaining insights into societal attitudes and religious beliefs of ancient civilizations.

In tracing the historical practice of burying pets, we discover a rich tapestry of cultural, emotional, and spiritual connections. From ancient civilizations to the contemporary era, the inclusion of pets in burials reflects the profound impact these animals have had on human lives.

Given that the study of this ossuary crate is still in a preliminary research phase and the cemetery of Santa Maria Maggiore is in the early stages of its recovery, it will be interesting to see if there are other similar situations or if we will find other animal depositions with different meanings in the future.

From the bibliographic research conducted for this short communication, the difficulty of obtaining relevant documentation for both the type of context (noble crate) and the geographical location (Italy) has emerged. Literature predominantly contains texts on pet burials in the United States and especially in England (e.g. Howell, 2002; Poole, 2015; Tourigny, 2020). Therefore, it will be interesting to continue archival research and explore bulletins from the Superintendency to identify situations similar to ours for future comparisons.

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