

## Bioarcheology in northwest Italy. Our experience

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**Abstract.** In this letter we report our experience in the bioarchaeological field during the last 10 years. We would like to focus the attention on the importance of interdisciplinary approach, in order to better comprehend archaeological record and the history of our territory.

**Key words:** bioarchaeology, northwest Italy, Varese, anthropology, archaeology

Our research centre deals mainly with the study of ancient populations through anthropological and paleopathological analysis of human remains and it promotes archaeological and anthropological investigations in collaboration with the Ministry of Culture, archaeological superintendence, museums and other public and private entities following the same objectives. This is done by adopting interdisciplinary, purposeful and dynamic approaches.

Interdisciplinary because the anthropological study of human remains takes place during the archaeological excavation. In fact, laboratories of physical anthropology are set up directly on the archaeological site. The team of our centre analyses the bone remains *in situ*, in this way preventing the loss of important information. On one side, the anthropological investigation allows us to reconstruct the ancient demographics, highlighting the average life expectancy for reference periods, the stature of men and women, the morphological features that allow us to define the physical appearance of people, the presence of certain pathologies, the diet consumed and the physical stresses possibly associated with the working conditions of the time (1-3). On the other side, we have funerary archaeological investigations that bring to light sepulchral contexts, documenting the period, classifying funerary finds, where the main objective is a reconstruction of the burial ritual. The reconstruction of the archaeological context combined with the description of the biological profile of the individual, therefore the entire sample-community,

allows us to better investigate and reconstruct the history of the populations and the way of life but also the way of dying, also thanks to the radiological analysis. This strong interdisciplinary feature allows us to develop new interpretations of the history of the territories, especially those who in the past represented peripheral centers and now, thanks to these research operations, may fall within the context of minor archaeology and promote tourism in these places (4).

Purposeful because our centre of research proposes research projects in the Cultural Heritage field, in particular initiatives aimed at the recovery, development and enhancement of the archaeological heritage of the province. Today, it is necessary to consider that the field of necropolis excavation is almost totally of an "emergency archaeology" which intervenes on building sites when there is an occasion of ancient sepulchres becoming known. Normally, the investigation stops at the limit of available funding, to the point that there are interrupted excavations and consequently there are incomplete anthropological researches. Consequently, this represents a persistent problem that derives from the fact that the archaeological investigations today, for the most part, take the form of safeguard interventions, where construction work unexpectedly reveal finds or sites that require protection. Therefore, the excavations almost never assume systematic characteristics of taking steps towards the diachronic reconstruction of a site, there just simple survey operations dictated by contingencies. Therefore, we claim

the importance of recovering and intervening in those unexplored areas with the aim of obtaining a satisfied anthropological analysis and giving a complete view of the site. Our goal is therefore to resume archaeological and anthropological investigations in the past that have been interrupted, or those cemeteries that have not been fully excavated. Our latest studies conducted on the sites of Azzio (5), Cittiglio (6) and Caravate (7) are full demonstrations.

Dynamic because when the archaeological site is operating (archaeological investigations and anthropological in situ), it is transformed. It sees the presence of professionals, university trainees, but also high school students in the context of schoolwork alternation projects. The site becomes a place of learning where practice and teaching activities are interspersed.

At this moment, archaeological sites have re-acquired more "site-museum" value. Perception, of historical things, reaches the maximum level of communication, fruition and valorisation. In this way, dynamic archaeological sites are created with the active involvement of students and the local population and where possible have a display of visiting areas with the reconstructed osteoarcheological findings. This is the empathic account of the archaeological and biological history of the site population, of individuals and of the cemetery population as a whole. The work experience we are building will allow us to make a comparative analysis of the sites both from the archaeological and anthropological point of view.

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