

A Dramatic Event in Late Roman Florence



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The Anomalous Burial Site Discovered
beneath the Uffizi Gallery

Edited by

Elsa Pacciani

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The Uffizi before the Uffizi

Andrea Pessina

It seems hard to find another place in Italy of greater iconic significance than the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. It is one of the world's leading museums, where the masterpieces of art from the Medici collections can be admired, and represents a global symbol of the very idea of a museum.

It is indeed difficult to imagine Florence without the Uffizi: yet this *fabbrica*, originally commissioned by Cosimo I de' Medici to house the offices of the Florentine magistracies and built by Giorgio Vasari in the 16th century between the southern boundary of Piazza della Signoria and the banks of the Arno, had quite a different history before becoming what we are familiar with and admire today.

The archaeological research conducted by the *Soprintendenza* began at the same time as the start of the vast construction site of the New Uffizi. Not only did this unveil the birth and development of the building that today in its final guise is made up of a central body overlooking the Arno and two wings perpendicular to the course of the river, but it also brought to light shreds of a much older and in many ways surprising history.

Between the end of the 4th and the beginning of the 5th century AD, this area - then a mere strip of land, wedged between the walls of the Roman city and the riverbed - was chosen as the burial place for several dozen individuals who had died in a short space of time. What survived the expansion of the medieval city as well as the building works supervised by Vasari and the erosion of the Arno is indeed just a small part of a necropolis that was originally much larger. Yet despite these drawbacks (which often afflict archaeological research), the large number of burials carefully recovered by anthropologists together with the attentive observations recorded during the excavation, subsequent laboratory studies and multidisciplinary analyses allow us to write a whole new chapter about *Florentia's* history.

Unlike many other archaeological contexts, such as the excavations in nearby Piazza della Signoria, for example, here it is not the items of material culture mainly represented by few but significant numismatic finds that speak out to us, but rather the anthropological remains which, following the studies conducted, provide us with a very rich source of knowledge on the living conditions of this community.

Archaeology of life, therefore, but at the same time archaeology of death. The burials show evidence of a dramatic event - an epidemic - that must have struck the population of the city, perhaps when the Goths of Radagaisus besieged *Florentia* around 405-406 AD.

Hence, on closer inspection, we can say that the main purpose of this investigation - which was coordinated by Elsa Pacciani and appears to be quite unique in Italy today due to the breadth and depth of the specialised anthropological analyses conducted - involved not only humans, but also parasites and pathogens, on whose traces scientists from a number research institutes set to work.

The results shed light on the precarious living conditions of a part of the population that must have belonged to a low social class, suffering from food shortage and poor hygiene and health conditions, and so give a voice to individuals rarely dealt with in ancient historical sources.

Yet as Carlo Ginzburg recalled in his introduction to “*Storia notturna*” (Einaudi 1989), the attempt to learn about the past is also a journey into the world of the dead.

Andrea Pessina

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Introduction

*Intéressez vous aux générations mortes,
c'est le moyen d'être indulgent pour les vivantes
et de moins souffrir
(Gustave Flaubert)*

This volume was composed by many hands, at the conclusion of an interdisciplinary scientific investigation involving specialists belonging to several research institutions.

The topic concerns a real enigma that emerged in the history of Florence following the surprising discovery of a concentration of anomalous burials during the archaeological excavations that were part of the renovations at the Uffizi Gallery for the “New Uffizi” Project. The burial site was adjacent to the basement of the eastern wing of the building.

The work was promoted and financed by the *Soprintendenza per i Beni Architettonici, Paesaggistici, Artistici, Storici ed Etnoantropologici di Firenze, Pistoia e Prato* and the *Gallerie degli Uffizi*.

The site was excavated in several campaigns between 2008 and 2014 by the *Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici della Toscana*, now partly incorporated in the *Soprintendenza Archeologia, Belle Arti e Paesaggio di Firenze, Pistoia e Prato*, and were directed by archaeologist Giuseppina Carlotta Cianferoni.

At the time, it seemed difficult to determine the chronology and meaning of the find. What was immediately clear, though, was that the burials were evidence of a catastrophe that had struck Florence at some time in its history and about which nothing was known from written sources.

This small scrap of land, which had miraculously been spared by the urban development of the following centuries, was most probably the portion of a much larger intensive burial area: it indeed belonged to what was then a strip of land along the bank of the Arno River outside the city walls, so we can assume that the available area must have been quite long. Yet the evidence indicated the need to save space, which can only be explained by the fact that the population must have been aware that it was facing a period of high mortality of unpredictable duration, most likely an epidemic.

Other evidence emerged in support of this assumption: the characteristics of the depositions did not suggest the almost simultaneous death of many people, but rather a high mortality event lasting over a certain period of time. What was before our eyes was not a mass grave but many multiple pits, dug one next to each other and large enough to accommodate a variable number of deceased, probably those who had died on that day. The bodies were laid in each pit at the same time. They were crammed together and were often placed sideways, leaning against each other, head to foot, and with children placed between the empty spaces of the adult bodies. Finally, the position of the arms and legs indicated a hasty burial, often neglecting the ritual accommodation of bodies.

The burial ground revealed that Florence had undergone a dramatic event of considerable proportions, which was of historical interest not only for the event itself but also for its twofold implication: it was a mirror of the living conditions in the city at that time and was a factor in the demographic and social changes of the future. For these reasons, it added a new element to Florence’s ancient history.

The excavation was therefore planned and conducted with the utmost care, according to the long time-schedules required. It involved the work of anthropologists and other specialists, and the adoption of specific criteria for the recovery of human remains.

In addition, a structured project involving researchers in a wide variety of disciplines was immediately set up. Using a concentric and synergistic approach, the objective was to understand what the causes of death and the favouring conditions were. More generally, the aim was to reconstruct a picture of the life of the Florentine population at that time. Alongside specific, anthropological and paleopathological studies, a series of research activities became necessary to provide chronological, historical and environmental framing and in-depth interpretation.

In May 2017, a programmatic meeting was held by the research groups. The discussion turned out to be very fruitful because it brought together disciplinary fields with very different approaches and vocabularies, often unknown to each other. A dialogue was established that was rich in reciprocal questions, which highlighted the various issues and above all stimulated curiosity and interest.

After the meeting, each of the teams set to work in their respective laboratories, but without losing contact with the others and in a spirit of cooperation and sharing the goal.

Today we are able to present the results, although with a certain delay compared to the expected schedule due to various vicissitudes, not least an epidemic that in the meantime hit our lives and yet allowed us to feel more empathetic towards those individuals struck by a remote and unknown epidemic disease.

Below is a list and quick definition of the chapters, each of which represents the contribution of a working group.

Chapter 1 offers a brief archaeological overview and describes the anthropological excavation and **archo-thanatological and taphonomic** analysis, i.e. the set of detailed observations made in the field on the typology of the burials and on the position of the deceased and its interpretation. It was precisely these observations on the anomalous burial aspects compared to canonical cemetery areas, that triggered the entire project.

The chronological framework includes the **radiocarbon dating of the bones** (Chapter 2) and the **numismatic study** of the coins found closely associated with some of the skeletons (Chapter 3). The results provided by two such different disciplinary fields are complementary, allowing the chronology of the site to be delimited in as precise a time frame as possible.

The first aim of the **anthropological study** of the skeletons (Chapter 4) is to gain knowledge of the composition of the sample by age and sex: these are essential data to understand the meaning of the catastrophe. Secondly, the study collects data on some biological characteristics, work-related activities and lifestyle, which influence the occurrence and spread of diseases.

Palaeobacteriology (Chapter 5) allows us to identify the DNA of many types of pathogenic agents on ancient human remains. In order to discover a pathogen that might have been responsible for the possible epidemic, we provided dental samples to two highly qualified and world-leading laboratories: the Department of Biosciences at the University of Oslo and the Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History in Jena.

Palaeopathology (Chapter 6) searched the skeletons using visual inspection and instrumental examinations to find traces of any diseases, anomalies or metabolic disorders that afflicted the

population, with special focus on those most widespread, which could be potentially ascribable to a specific fatal disease or at least to a favouring condition.

Palaeogenetic analysis (Chapter 7) studies human DNA and seeks here to answer the questions that immediately arose: which *people* did these dead belong to? Were they Florentines or foreigners? And if they were foreigners, where did they come from?

The volume also includes studies aimed at reconstructing the cultural and environmental context in which the catastrophic event took place.

Palaeoparasitology (Chapter 8) investigates the lifestyle of the population in terms of health and hygiene conditions, eating habits, waste disposal methods, etc., by searching for microscopic or molecular residues of human parasites in the burial soil.

The **study of dental pathologies** (Chapter 9) focuses on the direct impact of food on the organ of mastication, allowing us to reconstruct other dietary and oral health aspects and to draw assumptions about the sources of food supply and the relationship between the city and the countryside.

The **analysis of the stable isotopes** of carbon, nitrogen and oxygen (Chapter 10) has the twofold objective of exploring diets and investigating a possible allochthonous origin of the group, via a biochemical approach.

Finally, the chapter on the **laboratory conservation treatment of human remains** (Chapter 11) illustrates the state of preservation and the long and patient preliminary work required to prepare the skeletons for the studies that were then carried out and for future ones.

Elsa Pacciani

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