Researchers Reveal the Contents of a Roman Sarcophagus Sealed for 2,000 Years, in the Tomb of Cerberus in Naples

by Guillermo Carvajal
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The entrance to the tomb of the Cerbero. Credit: Soprintendenza archeologia belle arti e paesaggio per l'area metropolitana di Napoli

Investigations continue inside the Tomb of Cerberus discovered in October 2023 in Giugliano, alongside the resumption of excavations in the surrounding necropolis and restoration activities of the frescoes, funded by the Ministry of Culture.

Thanks to a specific intervention, following an inspection with a microcamera, it was possible to open a small opening inside the sarcophagus, which had been sealed for more than 2,000 years, and access its interior.

The excavation activities, coordinated by the archaeologist Dr. Simona Formola, have led to the exceptional discovery of a burial in excellent condition, with a supine body covered by a shroud, probably mineralized due to the unique climatic conditions of the burial chamber, surrounded by grave goods, among which several unguentaria and strigils stand out.

Detail of the interior of the sarcophagus being excavated, with the shroud and some funerary treeds. Credit: Soprintendenza archeologia belle arti e paesaggio per l'area metropolitana di Napoli

The special care dedicated to the burial and the chronology of the objects found suggest that it might be an ancestor of the family for whom the mausoleum was built.

"The Tomb of Cerberus continues to provide valuable information about the Phlegraean area near Liternum, expanding knowledge of the past and offering opportunities for multidisciplinary research," declared Superintendent Mariano Nuzzo.

"In recent months, laboratory analyses conducted on samples taken from the burials and depositional beds have yielded a significant amount of data on the treatment of

the bodies and the funerary rituals performed, significantly enriching our understanding," stated a team guided by the Superintendency, which involved archaeologists, technicians, anthropologists, paleobotanists, and chemists, united in the common goal of interpreting the collected data and revealing the site over time.

Paintings inside Cerberus' tomb. Credit: Soprintendenza archeologia belle arti e paesaggio per l'area metropolitana di Napoli

Complex procedures have been implemented, for example, for textile analyses by Prof. Margarita Gleba from the University of Padua's laboratory, to determine the structure of the weaving, type, and quality of the textiles, aiming to gain cultural and sociological information. Microscopic observations have been made by Prof. Maria Rosaria Barone Lumaga, a researcher from the Department of Plant Biology at the University of Naples Federico II – Real Orto Botanico of Naples, on organic substances present in some containers.

Pollen analyses conducted by archaeobotanist Monica Stanzione in collaboration with Dr. Marco Marchesini and Dr. Silvia Marvelli from CAA (Centro Agricoltura Ambiente "Giorgio Nicoli") suggest that the bodies might have been treated with creams made from Chenopodium and wormwood for better preservation; DNA analyses of the individuals are still ongoing thanks to bioanthropologist Barbara Albanese in collaboration with Dr. Pontus Skoglund, Dr. Thomas Booth, and Dr. Sarah Johnston from the Skoglund Ancient Genomics Laboratory at the Francis Crick Institute.

The continuation of archaeological investigations and laboratory sampling and analysis activities in the coming months will undoubtedly yield more interesting data not only from the hypogeum but also from the surrounding necropolis,

useful for reconstructing the historical and social panorama of an ancient community that still has much to tell.