

Archaeologists Crack Open a 2,000-Year-Old Coffin in Italy's 'Tomb of Cerberus'

The stone coffin likely contains the leader of the family that built the frescoed chamber in Naples

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As well as frescoes of Cerberus, the guard dog of the underworld, the tomb was decorated with paintings of marine centaurs. [Superintendency of Archaeology, Fine Arts and Landscape of Naples](#)

Archaeologists opened a sarcophagus in an ancient tomb in Italy—dubbed the “Tomb of Cerberus” for its murals depicting the mythical three-headed dog—and found a shrouded skeleton surrounded by goods. They believe the 2,000-year-old remains belong to an influential Roman patriarch who lived in the ancient city of Liternum.

Researchers discovered the sealed tomb last year, in Giugliano, a city in Naples some 130 miles south of Rome. According to a [2023 translated statement](#) by Naples’ [Superintendency of Archaeology, Fine Arts and Landscape](#), the tomb was found in a “perfect state of conservation” in an ancient Roman necropolis.

Archaeologists gleaned from its “lavish design” that the tomb was probably built by an influential family, writes the *Independent*’s Vishwam Sankaran.



The tomb was discovered in a necropolis in Giugliano in 2023. Superintendency of Archaeology, Fine Arts and Landscape of Naples

Frescoes on the tomb’s walls and ceiling depicted not only Cerberus—the “Hound of Hades,” who guards the gates of hell—but ichthyocentaurs, or marine centaurs possessing human heads and torsos, horse front legs and fish tails, as *Live Science*’s Laura Geggel writes. The tomb contained three painted altars, complete with vases that once held libations, alongside multiple well-furnished funeral beds.



Researchers found libation vases, glass containers for ointments and a strigil in the tomb. Superintendency of Archaeology, Fine Arts and Landscape of Naples

During their investigation of the tomb, archaeologists used a miniature camera to probe into one of its coffins before excavating it, per a recent translated statement by the superintendency. The skeleton inside lay in a supine position—flat on its back—in “an excellent state of preservation,” per the statement. The deceased was covered with a damaged shroud, which

probably mineralized thanks to thousands of years in the funerary chamber's "particular climatic conditions." Alongside the bones, researchers found glass ointment or perfume jars, as well as a strigil—a small metal tool ancient Greeks and Romans used to scrape their skin clean.

As Mariano Nuzzo, Naples' superintendent of archaeology, fine arts and landscape, says in the statement, scientists of multiple disciplines have spent recent months analyzing samples from the stone coffin. A textile archaeologist is studying the shroud's fabric to determine the origin of its yarn, and a plant biologist is studying the contents of the glass containers. So far, researchers have determined via pollen samples that the tomb's occupants were rubbed with creams containing wormwood and goosefoot. These ointments may have been intended to conserve the bodies, per the statement.



The ancient necropolis is in Naples, about 130 miles south of Rome. Superintendency of Archaeology, Fine Arts and Landscape of Naples

The researchers await the results of genetic testing, which could reveal more about the deceased family's origins and identities. As the superintendency reports, continued archaeological investigations will hopefully reveal more about the tomb and the surrounding necropolis, which may illuminate the social history of the ancient Neapolitan community that used it.