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Tuscan Hills Are Alive With Amateur Archaeologists

By ELISABETTA POVOLEDO
Published: August 21, 2007

CASENOVOLE, Italy, Aug. 16 — The Etruscan tomb was hidden in such a remote corner of Tuscany that Andrea Marcocci, the archaeology student who found and identified it about a decade ago, was not very worried that anyone else would stumble upon it.



Archaeology students and enthusiasts in Casenovole, Tuscany.

Then, this year, woodsmen began to clear brush in the area, and Mr. Marcocci — who had believed the tomb would be safe as long as it was concealed in a forest — realized he had to act.

“I became worried that what’s supposed to be the patrimony of mankind would become the patrimony of an individual,” he said.

Armed with a permit from the archaeological authorities (in Italy, anything found underground belongs to the state), he and a handful of volunteers began to dig.

What they found last week was a complete surprise: a tomb dating back more than 2,000 years with a cache of almost perfectly preserved ceramic and bronze funerary objects, including cremation urns for more than two dozen people.

“It was an incredible moment,” said another archaeology student, Giacomo Ghini, who was the first to spot the tops of the urns buried in dirt in the burial chamber. “We weren’t sure there would be anything there.”

The find, experts say, is not particularly exceptional in terms of the rarity of the unearthed objects. The burial chamber, about six feet long and almost as wide, is not painted, and the objects, probably Hellenistic and dating from between the first and third centuries B.C., are quite modest in nature. They are now in safekeeping at a nearby city hall but they will be turned over to state archaeologists to be cleaned, restored if necessary and studied.

But as far as this local group of archaeologists is concerned, finding the tomb was like stumbling on King Tutankhamen’s gold.

“It really brought locals together; it made them proud to live here,” said Carla Bonsanti, Mr. Marcocci’s wife and a member of Odysseus, the amateur archaeological association that carried out the dig in this part of the Tuscan Maremma, a remote, hilly region southwest of Siena known for its horseback-riding cattle breeders.

If it weren’t for amateur groups like Odysseus, much of Italy’s ancient heritage would be even more at risk to random plundering by tomb robbers, said Gabriella Barbieri, who is

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the state official in charge of protecting the area’s archaeological heritage and granted permission for the excavation. “The more citizens are concerned, the more they can help us,” she said. “The state can’t be everywhere at once.”

Inadequate protection of Italy’s archaeologically rich soil is one reason many plundered antiquities have ended up in private collections and public museums around the world. But in recent years Italy has increased security at archaeological sites and has created a special police force to investigate looting.

From 2001 to 2006, the art theft squad recovered 345,320 purloined archaeological artifacts (including individual fragments). Because of the very nature of the finds, “it’s impossible to estimate the amount that has been actually excavated,” a spokesman for the squad said.

Italy has also tried to curb the illegal antiquities market through an aggressive and high-profile campaign, including moral persuasion, to reclaim artifacts. After successfully lobbying for the return of works from the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) in New York and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Italy announced an accord with the [J. Paul Getty Museum](#) in Los Angeles on Aug. 1 providing for the return of 40 pieces.

Yet archaeological experts say vigilance is critical, because what has emerged from the ground is only a fraction of what still lies underneath.

Speaking of the tomb robbers, Maria Grazia Celuzza, the director of the archaeological museum in Grosseto, about 12 miles south of here, said, “As long as there are Etruscan tombs to be found, there’s going to be the risk of tombaroli.”

The monetary value of the objects aside, scholars argue that every time a tomb is violated, potential knowledge of ancient civilizations is lost.

There is much still to be learned, for instance, about the Etruscans, an ancient population with a distinct language and traditions that dominated what is now central Italy for about a millennium, until they were conquered by the Romans.

Groups like Odysseus as well as university archaeology programs (both national and foreign) also provide crucial manual labor to the state’s cultural heritage authorities, who simply cannot afford to finance hundreds of archaeological excavations each year.

Because the tomb at Casenovole is not a major site, only local amateur archaeologists like Mr. Marcocci and Mr. Ghini would be likely to have an interest in excavating it. Since both are about to graduate with degrees in archaeology, it was not difficult for them to obtain a permit.

Ms. Barbieri, the government official, said that the Italian government granted such permits only to people with experience, and that all aspects of the dig were supervised.

Mr. Marcocci said, “There are always archaeological emergencies in Italy and this system helps the state keep up.” Fortunately, he added, “there are a lot of passionate people” to serve as volunteers.

His permit expires on Aug. 20, but the Odysseus association will continue to seek out new hidden treasures. “Here,” he added, “any hillock can be good.”

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