La Sassa cave (Sonnino, Italy)

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The cave

In February 2014, mr. Gianni Carroccia led a team of speleologists to the entrance of the La Sassa cave. Explorations were then carried out by the Gruppo Grotte Castelli Romani and the Speleo Club Roma, with the collaboration of the Associazione Vivere Sonnino. Just beyond the entrance a very large room (n. 2) contains modern and contemporary terraces and stone walls; information collected on the site confirmed the use of the cave as a shelter during the Second World War. On the surface, a fragment of an impasto decorated bowl (sherd n. 1) was collected, but another very large quantity of impasto potsherds and animal bones was found on the surface in rooms 3 and 4, together with several fragments of a human parietal bone. The potsherds can be dated to the Middle Bronze Age 2 (around 1550-1400 BCE). Other human bones have been collected in room 2.

In room 6 an almost complete skeleton of a bear (Ursus arctos) has been found, completely covered by concretions. A radiocarbon date gives 30210±180 BP (GrA-64830).

The project

After the discovery of the cave, some preliminary studies have already been carried out. All the sherd and bones on the surface, more than 500, have been collected and are now being processed. A 3D scan of the cave was made with the kind collaboration of C. Tambrurri, to enable the high-quality spatial localization of artefacts. A joint excavation by the University of Groningen and Roma Tor Vergata has been planned for the summer of 2016. The Università di Roma Tre (dir. F. Bellastreccia) will investigate the geological aspects. The research is also part of the Avellino Project, led by Groningen and Leiden universities, which aims to trace the possible presence of a Campanian refugee population fleeing from the EBA (Avellino) eruption of Mount Vesuvius. For this purpose, radiocarbon and strontium (Sr) isotope analysis on human bones are planned.

The context

The finds and their dates all point to a necropolis, in the Copper Age and in the MBA2. The planned excavation will try to establish if this funerary use has been continuous rather than episodic. Other caves in the southern part of Latium have been used as necropoleis in the Neolithic, Copper Age (7) and especially Middle Bronze Age, and in these cases the human bones are often associated with traces of cultic activities like burnt seeds and fireplaces.

N: Neolithic; CA: Copper Age; MBA, Middle Bronze Age
- not excavated • already excavated • being excavated

Room 2: twelve fragments of parietal and temporal skull bones (1); two distal femoral epiphyses (right and left), probably belonging to the same individual (4, 5); one proximal phalanx of the foot (3); one thoracic vertebra (2). A radiocarbon date on bone 5 gives 4000±35 (GrA-64828, 2619-2462 calBC, IntCal13, 95.4%, OxCal 4.2), in the Copper Age.

Room 3: one small fragment of parietal bone (6); one right proximal humeral epiphysis (7).

Room 4: three fragments of parietal bone (8). Given the proximity of rooms 3 and 4, the bones from could belong to the same individual. They are associated with MBA2 potsherds.

The potsherds

Sherds 2-6 (from rooms 3 and 4) were dated to MBA2. The bowl n. 1 (from room 1) can be dated slightly later (MBA2/3).

The human bones

Room 3

Room 4