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Topic of the Year: Connective (T)issue

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A thermal sanctuary dedicated to Apollo at San Casciano dei Bagni

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Abstract

An exceptional discovery at San Casciano dei Bagni: A Roman thermal sanctuary dedicated to the healing god Apollo. The complex may have originally been built in honor of the Etruscan god Suri.

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Neywords: San Casciano, sanctuary, baths, Apollo, altar



Fig. 1. The archaeological site of San Casciano dei Bagni: a view from above.

It is a typical scenario in archaeological research: the most fascinating discoveries take place on the last day of fieldwork. A similar event unfolded last Friday at San Casciano dei Bagni (Siena), where the ancient thermal complex, known since the sixteenth century,

was discovered next to the so-called *Bagno Grande* ("large bath"), still in use today. At last, Friday, all suspicions were confirmed: the remains were not merely thermal baths, but parts of an actual sanctuary dedicated to the healing god Apollo. This interpretation is

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■ How to cite Dal Maso, C. 2020. A thermal sanctuary dedicated to Apollo at San Casciano dei Bagni. Archeostorie. Journal of Public Archaeology. 4: pp. 111-114. DOI: https://doi.org/10.23821/2019_6b/ corroborated by an inscribed altar which tells the story of the woman Triaria, who dedicated this altar to the god and who is known to have left other inscriptions in the area during the 2nd century AD. One might say she was blessed by divine grace, since she recovered from her sickness.

A Sacred Place at San Casciano dei Bagni

Dozens of ex-voto, especially bronze and lead ears, had already been brought to light. In addition, many lead drops were also revealed, recalling, says Jacopo Tabolli – archaeologist of the *Soprintendenza* and scientific coordinator of the project – an Etruscan ritual in honor of the god Suri, the healing god of the Etruscans. Suri was the Etruscan Apollo and was associated not only to the sky but also to the underworld. In his honor, lead was smelted and poured into the earth at regular intervals. For Tabolli, it is all clear: as seen for other areas of Etruria, the Romans imposed their cult of Apollo in order to take over a place already sacred to the Etruscans.

This large sanctuary is currently being excavated by several teams from Italian, Irish, Cypriot, and Dutch universities. Its architectural layout is already emerging in all its complexity, although only future excavations will clarify its exact dimensions. The tubs were obtained artificially from an enormous travertine basement dating to the Augustan age which also has the purpose of connecting the basins. Most of the baths were filled with water from the 47° C spring which flows just to the North and which is still utilized today. Other tubs, in contrast, collected cold water from other small springs, forming a complex system of alternating temperatures used for therapeutic purposes, the exact functioning of which will be interesting to unveil.

A Planned Process

Tabolli is enthusiastic and announces: "This is only the beginning". "It will take years to unearth the entire sanctuary". Nonetheless, he already envisions the radical transformation that will occur in the valley's landscape once the work is over. "The ancient tubs need to be filled with water to preserve them: in other words, it will be

necessary to recreate the sanctuary in line with its original state". Here, no virtual reconstructions are needed as everything will return to its initial form. "It will then become clear to everyone why this area has always been known as *Monte Santo* ("Sacred Mountain"). Until recently, the reason behind this toponym was unclear; now that the god Apollo has decided to reveal himself once again, possibly together with his corresponding Etruscan god Suri, its meaning is obvious".

Tabolli's vision is no dream, but, rather, it is already part of a precise and finalized landscape plan which resulted from the local municipal administration's determination, perseverance, and complete funding of the project. The process, initiated several years ago, has been ongoing since the redaction of the archaeological map, the field survey, the geophysical prospection, and the landscape plan, so that once the excavation is over the next moves are already outlined and everyone can benefit from the work carried out.

After all, there have been rumors about an ancient and important sanctuary in the area since the sixteenth century: indeed, during the construction work for the Medici's thermal baths in the valley which likely involved the re-use of local ancient pieces of marble, many inscriptions with the names of Apollo and Aesculapius were found. For this reason, the former mayor inaugurated the research project, which is being developed enthusiastically by the current mayor Agnese Carletti. Incredibly, it is now clear that this sanctuary was huge, it was dedicated to Apollo, the healing god par excellence, and probably had Etruscan origins.

A Challenging job

Hard to believe that last year the first excavation season was a huge disappointment. Many ancient artifacts were found but they were randomly scattered and probably dumped into a pit during the construction of a street. Therefore, this year's operations concentrated on the opposite side of the *Bagno Grande*, and the target was hit. It was not an easy excavation because when earth is moved in that area, water emerges, and one is forced to dig in the mud. On the other hand, humidity preserves the artifacts beautifully.

Moreover, the adoption of very strict Covid-19 protocols further complicated the work. Nonetheless, while these measures halted many other excavations, at San Casciano such an important project could not be interrupted. Undoubtedly, this perseverance was rewarded. It is nice to think, as said by Andrea Muzzi – Superintendent of the provinces of Siena,

Arezzo, and Grosseto – that this discovery is an important symbol of re-birth: it is both a saving sanctuary from the pandemic and a recovery in the name of culture. We hope this is true.

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