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Anchored in History

A bulldozer in Pisa unearths an array of boats and maritime objects dating from the 5th century B.C.

By GREG BURKE Rome

Italian Culture Minister Giovanna Melandri calls it a "maritime Pompeii." While that may be an exaggeration, the discovery in Pisa of a collection of Roman boats dating from the 3rd century B.C. to the 5th century A.D. has proved to be one of the most important archaeological finds of the 20th century. Just over a year after the discovery of the boats as bulldozers were carving out a basement near the railway tracks in Pisa, more than 600 of the site's treasures have been put on display at an exhibit in Florence's Archaeological Museum.

"The Ancient Ships of Pisa," which runs until May 14, is no ordinary boat show. It covers nearly 10 centuries of maritime history and includes cargo, sailing equipment and objects from terracotta oil lamps and fine glass bowls to leather aprons, wooden clogs and needles for repairing sails. More than 1,000 amphoras, ancient Rome's most popular containers, were pulled from the mud. Their shapes, inscriptions and stamps tell much about Pisa's trading partners and imports. While many were broken, some were wedged in holds and were still sealed. They hold traces of wine, oil, fermented fish sauce, fruit and nuts. One found among the boats served as a coffin: it held the remains of a newborn infant.

Several human bones have been discovered around the site, and last August archaeologists unearthed a complete skeleton, along with that of a dog. The man may have been a stevedore. He was tall for the 1st century B.C.--170 cm--and probably not of Mediterranean origin. Scientists believe he may have been a slave from Scandinavia, and say he had a strong chest and muscular arms. His upper teeth are worn as though they had been used to grip twine

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or rope for closing sacks and crates. Francesco Mallegni, an anthropologist at the University of Pisa, worked from the skull to recreate a face and came up with a tough character, a bruiser one might see in a riverfront brawl. The skeleton was buried under a mass of cargo and debris, with a beam pinned against the neck. The right foot appears to have been wrenched off by a rope that had wrapped around his ankle, perhaps as he went overboard. Archaeologists think he had a pet: the skeleton of a long-bodied dog with short, twisted legs was found lying across his left hand. It is similar to a Basset hound, a breed welcomed on ships as rat catchers.

Animal remains are among the most interesting discoveries from the "Port of Marvels," among them 16 dogs. One large canine tooth comes not from a dog but a young lioness. It was recovered, still attached to a section of jaw, from what has been dubbed the Punic ship, which carried various amphoras and pottery from Africa. The lioness would have been brought to Pisa for an arena spectacle. Some of the bones, such as those of horses, pigs, sheep and goats, indicate livestock trade and food supplies for voyages. Others, including 502 pig scapulas, or shoulder blades, are more enigmatic. More than 400 are from the right shoulder. Why the right side? One expert ventures that pigs' tendency to rest on their right shoulders made that meat tastier.

One of the most beautiful items from the port is a blue glass jug decorated with an appliqué representing a female theater mask. It dates from the 1st century A.D. and may have been high-class cargo or a personal possession of a ship's captain. The director of the excavation, Stefano Bruni, is just as impressed by the humbler objects from the site, such as small bundles of twigs tied together to be used as fire starters on board. There are also wooden combs, bronze snail picks and a small wooden part from a block and tackle.

Bruni, an archaeologist who had specialized in small, isolated Etruscan sites, now heads a staff of 70 and is responsible for documenting Pisa's port from Etruscan times to the rise and fall of the Roman Empire. "Remains of Roman boats have been found before in the Mediterranean," he says, "but never so many at one time and in such a good state." So far 16 boats have been found in the Port of Marvels, and more are expected. Excavations will continue this summer under a merchant ship known as Boat D, which capsized above two other wrecks. Early testing dates the older boats from the 5th century B.C.

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The boats eventually will go on display in a new museum upriver from the site. For those interested in ancient ships and sea trade, Pisa will again become an important port of call.

Reported by Ann Natanson/Florence

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