

CATACOMBS AND DOLCE VITA

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Passionate about archaeology from a very young age, I began, like most of my colleagues, as a volunteer at sites when I was 16. My professional career began in 1991 with my first contracts as an excavator for Afan, now I'm currently working for [Inrap](#).

The funerary domain always fascinated me and I oriented my career toward the direction of archaeological operations in this field (university education and choice of field sites when possible). My research topics concerned funerary practices, and in particular:

- the excavation of Jewish medieval cemeteries in Europe,
- mortality crises (epidemics and violent inter-human phenomena),
- monastic spaces (funerary or not),
- the chronology and typology of burials.

For the past twenty years, I have worked to communicate the results of my research through articles, conferences and exhibits because I consider that the profession of archaeology does not stop with excavation report writing and that it is our job to transmit our knowledge to both the scientific community and the general public.

On the occasion this "Day of Archeology", I would like to share a typical day on an exceptional project in the Saint Peter and Saint Marcellinus catacomb in Rome.

In 2005, my colleague Dominique Castex (CNRS, Bordeaux), with whom I regularly collaborate, asked me to co-direct a mission with her in the funerary space then managed by the Vatican.

This kind of opportunity knocks only once and I had to cease it even if:

- 1/it was a two month mission,
- 2/my wife was six months pregnant,
- 3/we had to move the day before my departure for Rome!

Thanks to her devotion and sacrifice, we quickly found a solution: I left her with our boxes and I flew home often until she could join me for a bit of the Dolce Vita herself.



Making observations in the Saint Pierre and Saint Marcellinus catacomb. © SSPM

Life on an archaeological site in the Vatican

A typical day began at around 6:00 am for breakfast with the team. The team was composed of anthropology students from Bordeaux and sometimes a few colleagues and friends who found time to participate in this amazing experience.

We were housed in the center of Rome which was great for enjoying the charms of this marvelous city. The disadvantage was the commuting time to get to the site: taking the metro to the Termini station and then bus #105 for 40 minutes.

The doors of the catacomb opened at 8:00 for the fossores, the Vatican employees specialized in the very specific work of managing the catacomb. Their help was essential for the technical organization of the excavation and for finding our way around in the underground tunnels. This space consists of nearly 4.5 kilometers of galleries distributed across two or three levels in places, where it is very easy to get lost.

We then reached sector "X" of the catacomb where we excavated cavities filled skeletons covered with plaster. Each of us got into a horizontal position on our board and uncovered the bones peeking out a few centimeters below. Once they were uncovered, it was time to record, photograph, and draw them. We then "unearthed" the skeletons and put them into bags to take them up to the surface to be studied by

other members of the team. After a short lunch break at Anna's, the local pizzeria, we returned to our cool little hideaway (always 16-17°) while the "surface" was assaulted by the sun with temperatures over 30° during this month of September.



On the field. © Denis Gliksman



After the effort, a bit of comfort?

At around 4:00, the doors were closed again and we began the long journey back to our much awaited showers and beds.

It is then that the second day of the archaeologist's began: that of administrative and scientific tasks. From 6:00 to 8:00 pm, I checked my email and answered the most urgent messages, while remembering to call home for news from the future mom. It was then time to write various articles that were urgently due "yesterday, of course"!

After the effort, a bit of comfort! This came with the meal regularly enjoyed as a group, like monks in the priory, except when we gave in to the temptation of the numerous trattoria in the neighborhood, or the diversity of pasta and pizzas rivalling the marvelous Italian wines. We solved the world's problems during the time of a meal before ending the evening with an ice cream near the Trevi Fountain, always teeming with tourists. Such is the hard life of an archaeologist in exile...



The real Bruschetta ! © Philippe Blanchard