

Old Acquaintances Reappear: The Human Remains in the “Chiesa Vecchia” of Filetto, L’Aquila, Central Italy

Luca Ventura¹, Mirko Traversari²

¹Division of Pathology, San Salvatore Hospital, L’Aquila, Italy

²Department of Cultural Heritage, University of Bologna, Ravenna, Italy

ABSTRACT

Shortly after the discovery of mummies in the village of Calascio, inner Abruzzo region an additional site in the same area has been brought to light in Filetto, a small hermit belonging to the municipality of L’Aquila. Since 2001, a collection of human remains dating back to 19th century was known to be present inside a crypt beneath the ruins of the Chiesa Vecchia (old church). The recent recovery of the ruined church allowed us to come across the remains once again. The human remains from Filetto represent the seventh known collection of mummified bodies in the inner Abruzzo region, enhancing the assets of bioanthropological interests in this area. By analogy with Calascio and other local sites, we proposed a thorough investigation of bodies and burial goods in order to trace a bioanthropological and paleopathological profile of these individuals.

Key words: human remains, bioanthropology, paleopathology, Filetto, Abruzzo region, central Italy

Last year, a newly discovered collection of mummies in the village of Calascio, inner Abruzzo region was reported in this journal by our research group¹. We would like to present an additional site in the same area that has been completely brought to light shortly after, in order to update the list of the human mummified remains in this region² (Table 1).

Filetto is a small village located at 1,100 meters above sea level, very close to the Gran Sasso Mountain in the municipality of L’Aquila, central Italy. Since the 13th century the area had to be involved in transhumance pastoralism, due to its strategic position on the route to the summer pasture plateaus of Piano di Fugno and Campo Imperatore. The nearby Benedictine abbey of S. Crisante and Daria (1202 m above the sea level) used to be a point of reference along the transhumance routes since the end of the 12th century³ (Figure 1).

The ruins of the ancient St. John Baptist’s church, also known as “Chiesa Vecchia” (Old Church), are located on the northern side of the village. Dating back at least to 14th century and restored in 1539, the church used to be the old parish of Filetto and the nearby village

of Camarda. In 1727, the historian Anton Ludovico Antinori (1704-1778)⁴ described it in a poor state of conservation. In 1706, three years after a major earthquake in that area, the parish had been moved to a new church inside the walls of Filetto. During the pastoral visit of the Bishop Ludovico Sabatini d’Anfora (1708-1776) on September 16th 1759, the church was mentioned as “Madonna delle Grazie”, while in the 1809 land register it was named “Madonna del Buonconsiglio” or “Chiesa Vecchia”. Since 1821 the church was used as a mortuary chapel until a new civil cemetery was built in 1884. Most probably, dead bodies were laid down through a trapdoor in the floor of the sacristy. Subsequently, the Old Church was left to its fate and ruined progressively⁵. Heavily damaged by a further earthquake in 1915, the building was definitely abandoned.

In 2001, a survey and inspection of the building from outside allowed to readily observe an external opening in the church walls, almost completely bricked over. Multiple bone remains packed inside the church rooms could be seen through the upper part of the opening (Figure 2A). This opening represented most probably a ground level exit periodically used to empty the space (Figure

TABLE 1
MUMMIFIED REMAINS IN THE INNER ABRUZZO REGION

City	Location	Preservation	Num.	Centuries
L'Aquila	Castello Cinquecentesco	natural	4	16 th -17 th
Navelli	church of S. Sebastiano	natural (skeletonized)	206	18 th -19 th
Goriano Valli	convent of S. Giorgio degli Osservanti	natural	5	19 th -20 th
Popoli	church of the Ss. Trinità	natural	8	18 th -19 th
Casentino	church of S. Giovanni Evangelista	natural	40	19 th
Calascio	convent of S. Maria delle Grazie	natural	7	19 th ?
Filetto	Chiesa Vecchia	natural	?	19 th ?
L'Aquila	Saints and Blessed	natural/artificial	4	15 th -16 th
Monte reale	Blessed	artificial	1	15 th

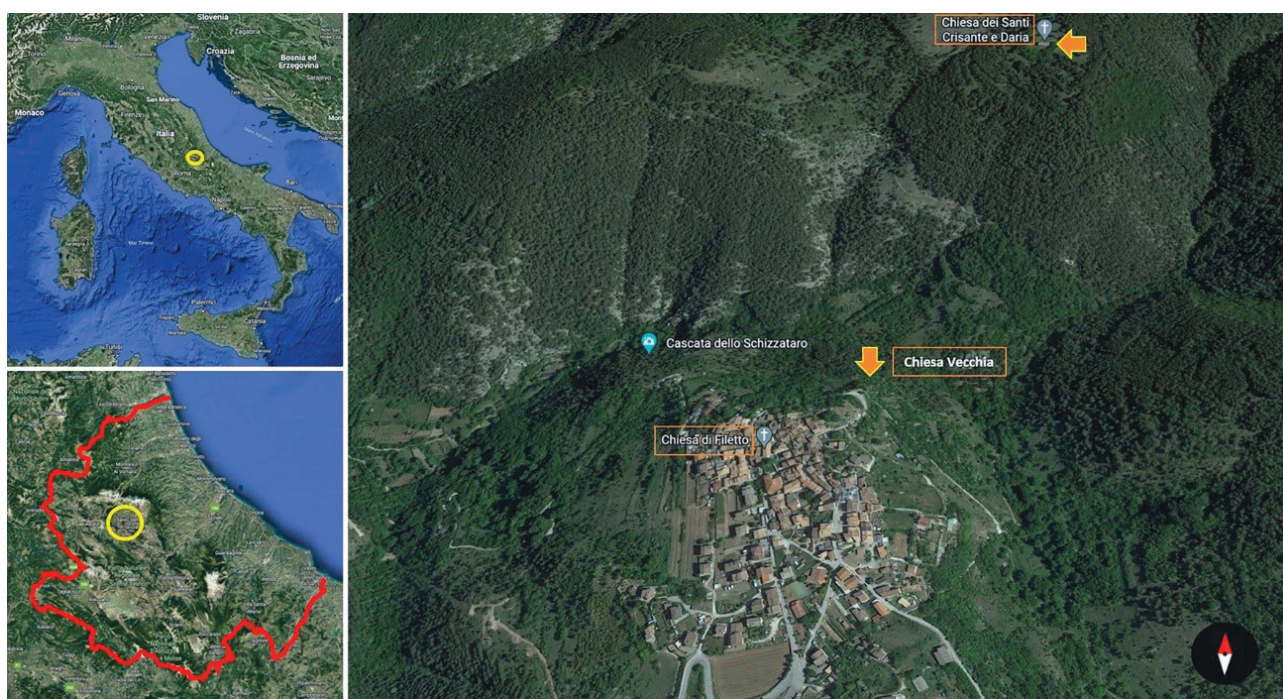


Fig. 1 – Left: Position of Filetto and its area (yellow circle) in the Italian peninsula and in Abruzzo region (red line). Right: The village of Filetto with the abbey of St. Crisante and Daria, the Chiesa Vecchia, and the parish church inside the walls. Maps data: ©2023 Google, TerraMetrics.

2B). Recently, the local municipality has obtained funds for the redevelopment of the church area, and the works began on 23 June 2022. A new survey and inspection took place shortly after. Visual investigation of the external opening in the church walls still allowed to observe compact layers of skeletonized human remains with focal textile remnants (Figure 2C). Several bony remains are probably scattered throughout the whole burial place, with possible examples of partially mummified bodies placed far from the actual opening (Figure 2D). Due to the collapsed ceiling, the crypt could not be inspected from above.

Due to its historical and topographical features the Chiesa Vecchia may share the same aspects with other sites in central Italy, where the entire population buried in the same place for a long time. Most probably, the bodies in the Old Church of Filetto date back to the 19th century, and belong to laypersons. Preservation of soft tissues might have been due to the cold dry environment of the crypt. The human remains from Filetto represent the seventh known collection of mummified bodies in the inner Abruzzo region, enhancing the assets of bioanthropological interests in this area⁶⁻¹². As already proposed in Calascio and the other local sites¹, a thorough investiga-

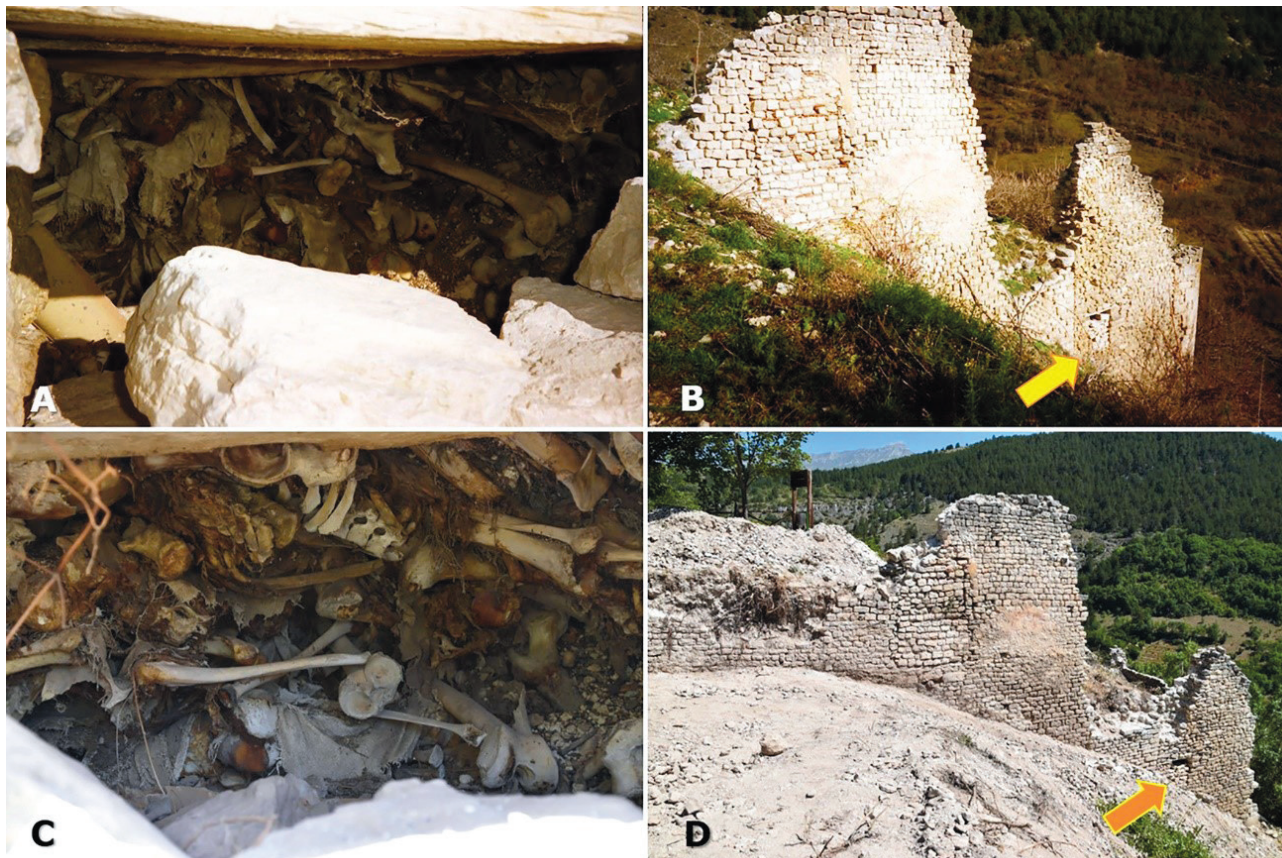


Fig. 2 – A) Detail of the human remains as they appeared through the wall opening in 2001. B) The ruins of the church as they appeared in 2001 (yellow arrow: the wall opening). C) Detail of the human remains in 2022. D) The ruins of the church in 2022 (orange arrow: the wall opening).

tion of bodies and burial goods should be performed, in order to trace a bioanthropological and paleopathological profile of the subjects, assessing the daily life of these individuals. Finally, a permanent exhibition of the human remains along with the scientific results obtained might be held in order to promote this small hermit near L'Aquila.

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L. Ventura

Division of Pathology, San Salvatore Hospital, L'Aquila, Italy

e-mail: lucaventura67@gmail.com

POJAVLJUJU SE STARI ZNANCI: LJUDSKI OSTACI U "CHIESA VECCHIA" U FILETTU, L'AQUILA, SREDIŠNJA ITALIJA

SAŽETAK

Ubrzo nakon otkrića mumija u selu Calascio, u regiji Abruzzo, otkriveno je još jedno nalazište u istom području u Filettu, koji pripada općini L'Aquila. Od 2001. poznato je da se unutar kriptе ispod ruševina Chiesa Vecchia (stare crkve) nalazi zbirka ljudskih ostataka iz 19. stoljeća. Nedavno otkriće porušene crkve omogućilo nam je da ponovno nađemo na ostatke. Ljudski ostaci iz Filetta predstavljaju sedmu poznatu zbirku mumificiranih tijela u unutarnoj regiji Abruzzo, povećavajući značaj bioantropoloških nalaza u ovom području. Po analogiji s Calasciom i drugim lokalnim nalazištima, predložili smo temeljito istraživanje tijela i grobnih dobara kako bismo ušli u trag bioantropološkom i paleopatološkom profilu tih pojedinaca.