

## A CRITICAL NOTE BY ABELE DE BLASIO (1902) ON THE ARCHAEO-ANTHROPOLOGICAL CONJECTURES OF LUIGI PALMIERI (1872)

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper offers a description and explanation of a criticism written by Abel De Blasio in 1902 on the archaeological and anthropological conjectures that Luigi Palmieri had made in the past. In a note presented in 1872 at the Academy of Sciences of Naples, regarding some ancient tombs discovered by chance near the Observatory on Mount Vesuvius, Palmieri presented interpretative observations that were unacceptable for specialists in anthropological studies and funerary archaeology.*

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Having studied different aspects of the always interesting character of Abele De Blasio (1858-1945)<sup>(1)</sup> as well as his thorough studies that were open to a rather vast anthropological viewpoint, we would like to take this opportunity to remember how in 1902 he lit the fuse to a scientific controversy with Luigi Palmieri (1807-1896)<sup>(2)</sup>, whose authority in the field of physics and geology remained undisputed even after death. It is not surprising that many of Palmieri's studies, as director - among his numerous positions - of the Vesuvius Observatory, concerned volcanology and seismology, highlighting his solid expertise in this area.

However, this scientist was certainly not an expert in archaeology and ancient history<sup>(3)</sup>. And so it happened that one of his notes, presented in 1872 at the Academy of Sciences of Naples, Italy, on some ancient tombs randomly discovered near the Observatory on Mt. Vesuvius, presented unacceptable ingenuities for specialists in our area of study. In this report, Palmieri had described how, during

works carried out on the Observatory road, three skeletons had been found in compact pozzolana (siliceous material created by ash) at a depth of three meters below the ground. The first skeleton had been found in a Capuchin-style tomb - there were no funerary items, the bones were poorly conserved and the skull was disarranged along the suture lines.

A second skeleton was covered with fragments of amphorae and lay in bare earth, much like the third body that had no covering. Seeing that only one corpse had been given a dignified burial, while the other two had been simply placed in bare ground, Palmieri hypothesised a hurried burial, pushing his imagination as far as the time of Spartacus, somehow recognizing these bodies as the companions of the gladiator who had headed the revolt of the slave rebellion in the first century BCE. Two renowned archaeologists, Giulio Minervini (1819-1891) and Giuseppe Fiorelli (1823-1896), who at that time were directing the

excavations of Pompeii, had not shared the Palmieri's opinion, due to the fact that shingles and the ceramics found with the skeletons were certainly from a time period after Spartacus. In order to support the hypothesis of extraordinary events, we could think back the battles fought by the Goths on the slopes of Mt. Vesuvius, however these archaeologists remained quite doubtful about certain interpretations, suggesting that these corpses could be more simply be members from families of farmers who lived in that mountainous area. While accepting the different dating of the amphorae, Palmieri refused to abandon his conjecture of a hasty burial of people who were travelling through the area, perhaps fugitives of Spartacus or plunderers during the Goth period.

Thirty years later, when the discussion appeared to have been locked away in the annals of history, De Blasio decided to once again deal with these human remains by studying them with more advanced anthropological expertise. In 1902, he published a brief clarifying note (Regarding the human remains discovered on Vesuvius at the Observatory)<sup>(4)</sup>. By examining the skulls, he began to think about the opposing hypotheses of Palmieri and the beliefs of Fiorelli and Minervini. He immediately excluded the possibility that these bodies could have been people passing by and who had been hurriedly buried, specifically due to the fact that one of the skeletons in a tomb clearly conformed to that of the Capuchin order. Palmieri had seen these people as those from the slave revolt, passing through trials and tribulations that could have seen them wounded in combat. We know quite well that in the ancient tombs there is no lack of biological traces of violent actions<sup>(5)</sup>.

However, the bones from Mt. Vesuvius showed no signs of injury, clues that appear quite frequently in our studies<sup>(6)</sup>. Moreover, the two skeletons found in the bare earth were two women who died quite young, calculated at the age of about twenty. De Blasio performed craniometric measurements and provided precise data for one of the two women: horizontal circumference 483 mm, nasal-occipital curve 346 mm, bi-auricular curve 275 mm, anterior posterior diameter 183 mm, bi-parietal diameter 122 mm, cephalic index 66.66, and approximate cubic capacity 1394.

Since then, anthropological research has clarified the meaning of certain measurements and perhaps we could return today with modern and updated tools<sup>(7)</sup> in order to explore elements that science

from a century ago was unable to properly study<sup>(8)</sup>. Along general lines, however, we can now see that Palmieri's imagination had run too wild, and that, as initially suggested by archaeologists Fiorelli and Minervini, with the scientific assertions offered by the anthropologist De Blasio, the remains in question were more than likely the burials of individuals from families of local farmers or shepherds who were living in that part of Mount Somma-Vesuvius.

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