



Susana Labrador, the administration's patrimony councillor, joined by her department's staff specialist Jaume Escandell and archaeologist Maria José Escandell, held a press conference today on recent archaeological findings in Sant Francesc. Labrador explained the unearthing—a cemetery with origins in the Byzantine Empire—was a fortuitous corollary to preventive dig work being done in the urban centre of Sant Francesc Xavier. It is the second of its kind to be discovered on the island, she said.

Labrador underscored the importance of the preventive work that preceded the find. The councillor asserted that discoveries such as the necropolis justify the Council's heightened precaution, despite the additional cost such prevention imposes on project leaders. “We've got plenty of hidden treasure here on the island,” Labrador proclaimed, “and as we conduct more of this kind of work we'll see more cases like this”.

The four burial sites uncovered, which held the remains of at least 12 individuals (eight adults and four children), also enclosed funeral rites that allowed the team to identify the site as seventh century Byzantine. Escandell hailed the cemetery as “highly significant in terms of cultural heritage, not least because this is a period on which scant information exists”. The ensuing study, he pledged, would “shed relevant scientific light on the historiographical study of Formentera in the late Antiquity”.

At this point, the fate of the necropolis will depend on the decision reached by a special archaeological commission created in 2013 to provide technical review to archaeological initiatives of the Council.

Preventive archaeological efforts

The burial grounds were unearthed during preventive archaeological work ordered by the Council's advisory body on land, historical patrimony and other activities. Formentera's catalogue of cultural heritage sites, adopted in September 2010 at the same time as a series of municipal regulations, requires a review of any planned disturbance to subsoil on protected archaeological sites.

The review must then be evaluated by the special commission, whose green-light is necessary before building permits are issued.

Dig

The archaeologist and project head said the discovery was the of its kind first since 1916, when Josep Colomines i Roca uncovered three burial sites—two from the Later Roman Empire and a third from the Byzantine—at can Gabino.

Maria José Escandell also highlighted the discovery of 23 holes, used for planting trees, which would have succeeded the cemetery. The tombs themselves, unearthed just as central efforts were concluding, were discovered when four cutouts were taken on the westerly edge of the dig site. Given the attributes of similar findings in the Pityusic Islands, it is likely that the necropolis in question extends further west and southwest.

Through the Antiquity the only village in the Pityuses was Eivissa. Individuals were spread throughout the countryside in single family units, the archaeologist said, which is crucial to understanding life, and death, on the islands at the time. Transporting a deceased person to the nearest village would have required several days' travel and that one temporarily abandon both home and land. Hence, from the start of Punic settlement of the countryside, inhabitants buried their deceased at family plots located quite near to their dwellings. Such “rural” cemeteries lasted continued through the Roman and Byzantine empires.

The archaeological team concluded that graves were initially devised to contain no more than one individual and that the decision to reuse them came after. They also pointed out the absence of iron nails, inferring that, unlike at similar sites, these buried individuals were not placed in wooden coffins.

Necropolises from the Roman and Byzantine epochs are often found to contain deposits of both cremated and non-cremated remains, which span the first to seventh centuries. It is the absence of signs from that five-hundred-year period, says Maria José Escandell, that suggests the newly uncovered necropolis is in fact much more extensive.

As for illnesses or other aspects of the interred individuals' health, work and diet, forthcoming studies will address those issues. For now it can be observed that the remains in question

belonged to peasant farmers of grand stature who, judging by the funeral rites found nearby, were of modest means.

Archaeological work was overseen by the POSIDÒNIA firm, comprising Ricard Marlasca, J. M. López Gari and Maria José Escandell.