

PAAST - A Posthuman Archaeology of Ancient Sardinia: Mobility, Diversity, and De-Racialization of Bodies at Work

PAAST reinterprets the Roman world by recovering the lives of the workers, peasants, and enslaved people whose bodies sustained the Roman Empire, while interrogating the long history of narratives that dehumanised them.

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Project Typology: Young Researchers Fellowship for Marie-Sklodowska Curie Fellowship Holders

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ABOUT PAAST

PAAST is a research project funded by the European Union through NextGeneration EU and supported by the Directorate-General for Internationalisation and Communication of the Italian Ministry for University and Research.

At its core, *PAAST* investigates how processes of dehumanisation were constructed in antiquity and how archaeological narratives can either reproduce or challenge those perspectives today.

Consequently, the project seeks to transform our understanding of the ancient Roman world by focusing on the lives of people whose labour sustained imperial power: peasants, miners, and enslaved individuals. These communities produced the wealth that enabled imperial expansion, yet their experiences remain largely absent from historical narratives. *PAAST* investigates these lives through the case study of ancient Sardinia, a region contended by Carthage and Rome for centuries.

To reconstruct these histories, the project combines:

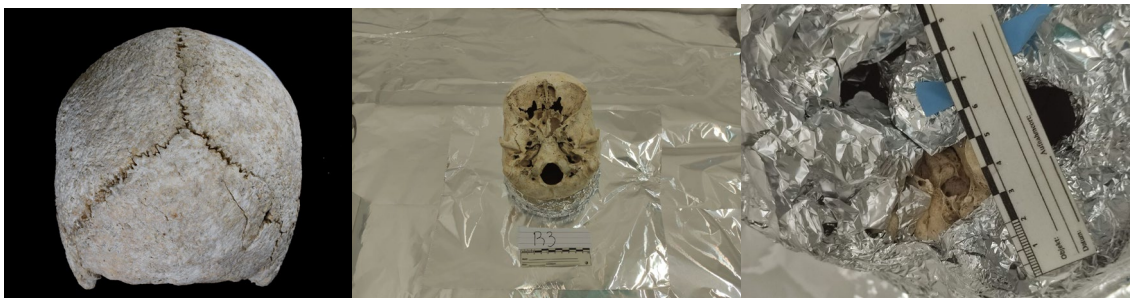
- the critical study of ancient **written sources**, which reveals how imperial power *othered* provincial populations to shape the hierarchical structure of *humanitas*;
- the archaeological investigation of **rural landscapes**, which traces patterns of labour, mobility, and exploitation;
- the bioarchaeological analysis of **human remains**, which allows to reconstruct lived experiences through the paleopathological and genetic study of bodies at work;

- a theoretical framework informed by **feminist posthumanism**, which challenges hierarchical and dehumanising narratives by emphasising relations and embodiment.

This interdisciplinary approach allows the project to explore how labour, mobility, and social inequality shaped the lived experiences of people in Roman provinces like Sardinia.



1. Rural landscape of west-central Sardinia investigated by PAAST.



2. Three different stages of preparation for the sampling of crania from 4th century CE grave 43B, from *Sa Mitza Salida*, Masullas, leading to genetic analyses held in collaboration with the Archaeo and Paleogenetic Group at the University of Tübingen.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

Ancient Sardinia played a strategic role in the ambitions of both Carthage and Rome. In Latin historical sources, however, the island often appears merely as a provider of resources, while its inhabitants are portrayed as backward, unruly, or in need of pacification. Several influential Roman authors described Sardinians as racially and culturally inferior, often associating them in a derogatory way with their “African” origins because of the island’s earlier Punic domination.

These narratives persisted well beyond the Roman Empire: even in the 6th century CE, Pope Gregory the Great described the island’s rural population as people who still lived like

“senseless animals”. Such depictions were not neutral: they formed part of ideological frameworks that justified domination, exploitation, and colonial control.

These issues resonate strongly today. We still inhabit what Albert Camus, speaking at Columbia University in 1946, described as a persistent “**human crisis**” — a world in which systems of domination continue to produce hierarchies between lives considered fully human and those treated as expendable. Studies of the Roman past, long centred on narratives of imperial expansion, acculturation, and the rhetoric of “peace” and “pacification,” have often contributed to reproducing ancient perspectives that justified domination and othering. These interpretations have historically aligned with broader European colonial frameworks.

PAAST contributes to current efforts to rethink these paradigms. By focusing on the embodied experiences of marginalised communities—women, enslaved individuals, rural workers, and colonised populations—the project asks how archaeology can recover histories that were systematically silenced. More broadly, *PAAST* explores how interpretations of the Roman past have shaped modern understandings of human **difference** and **belonging**. Re-examining these narratives is essential for recognising how knowledge about the past continues to influence contemporary debates about identity, inequality, and humanity.



3. An Italian copy of Albert Camus' *L'Étranger*.

OUTPUTS

PAAST produces a range of academic and public outputs, including publications, conferences, and outreach initiatives.

Publications

The project contributes to international scholarly debates through journal articles and edited collections. Current delivered outputs include:

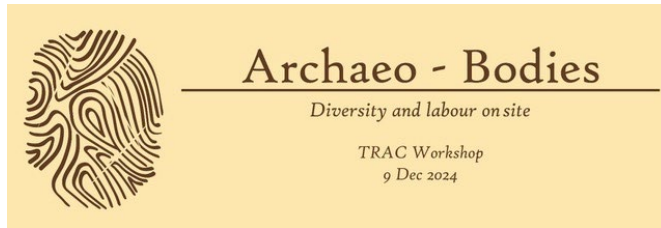
- An article on Antonio Gramsci and the embodied experiences of his contemporaries, published in *Cultural Studies* (open access [here](#)).
- The special issue “Archaeological Identitiscapes: A Semiotic Stance”, published in the *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* (open access [here](#)), featuring papers that discuss [the politics of archaeological interpretations](#), from the perspectives of ancient Sardinia, modern Madagascar, post-Brexit Britain, and Pueblo Revolt New Mexico.



4. Front page and first article of the Special Issue Archaeological Identitiscapes, for the Cambridge Archaeological Journal.

Further publications are currently in preparation, addressing topics such as:

- feminist postcolonial Roman Archaeology (forthcoming [Theoretical Roman Archaeology Journal](#) Special Issue)
- the landscape and timescapes of Roman period rural Sardinia;
- the role of archaeology in contemporary society through the study of the bodies of workers on archaeological sites;
- the role of genetic ties in family formations in Roman period Sardinia;
- isotopic markers to disclose mobility patterns within the Roman Empire;
- archaeology and empathy, through the analysis of two collaborative exhibitions with the Museum of Broken Relationships, in the framework of the Marie-Curie project [IDENTIS](#).



5. Logo of the Archaeo-Bodies workshop for the Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference (TRAC).

Conferences

The project also promotes international scholarly dialogue through the organisation of conferences and panels, including:

- an International Conference on Mobility, Humanity, and Posthumanism planned in Siena (May 2028 - tentative date);
- a plenary roundtable on re-humanising the Roman World upcoming at the Roman Archaeology Conference (Aarhus, May 2026);
- a session on Italian material culture upcoming at the Society for Italian Studies Biennial Conference (Dublin, July 2026).
- a session on "Sardinia as Praxis: Decolonising European Archaeology through a Joint Feminist-Postcolonial Approach" held at the [31st EAA Meeting \(2025\)](#) in Belgrade.

Collaborations and International Network

PAAST is developed through collaborations with several international institutions contributing to specific aspects of the project.

- Durham University – collaboration with Prof. Robert Witcher, Prof. Richard Hingley, and Dr. Ilaria Bucci in organising the plenary roundtables at the Roman Archaeology Conference (Aarhus, 2026), fostering international discussion on mobility, empathy, and humanity in the Roman world.
- Radboud University – collaboration with Dr. Saskia Kroonemberg on research exploring the embodied experiences of Antonio Gramsci and his contemporaries, published in Cultural Studies.
- University of Cagliari - collaboration with Dr. Vitale Sparacello on paleopathological studies on human remains from burials in Sardinia.
- University of Pisa - collaboration with Dr. Simona Minozzi on framing domestic violence in the Roman world at the intersection of bioarchaeology and social theory.

- University of North Carolina Charlotte – partnership with Dr. Luca Lai for stable isotope analysis, supporting the investigation of mobility, diet, and environmental interactions of ancient populations.
- University of Tübingen – collaboration with Dr. Cosimo Posth and Orhan Efe Yavuz, Archaeo and Paleogenetics Group, on ancient DNA and genetic analyses, contributing to the reconstruction of diversity and population histories in Roman Sardinia.
- Columbia University and Weltmuseum Wien - Dr. Mazen Iwaisi and R. Tobias Moerike, on the decolonisation of the crossroads theory in Gaza (Theoretical Roman Archaeology Group York 2025, and Special Issue editing).

These collaborations strengthen PAAST’s interdisciplinary approach, integrating archaeology, bioarchaeology, and critical theory within a broad international research network.

CULTURAL STUDIES
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Written on the subaltern body: Gramsci and the material politics of Sardinian and Italian prison lives

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ABSTRACT

This article argues for the need to combine written texts with other material sources when studying past subaltern lives. It suggests that much of a person's life history is inscribed on their body (i.e. their teeth and bones) and objects. Such nonverbal traces are especially vital for reconstructing the historical value of subaltern lives. In his prison notes (Q25), Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) pointed out that it is hard to collect the histories of the subalterns, as they are scattered, fragmented by the ruling groups. We apply this thought to Gramsci himself in relation to his subaltern contemporaries in Sardinia by integrating multiple material legacies (bodily remains, texts, objects). We thereby wish to situate Gramsci's suffering within the broader bodily experience of his contemporaries, revealing how the physical symptoms he described may have materialized as skeletal pathologies. While Gramsci is known for his sharp-sighted mind, we know much less of his body. Yet, he lived a life entrenched in and physically marked by colonialism, imprisonment, inequality, child labour, poverty, discrimination and illness. Presumably, his remains are marked by a life of struggle and labour, similarly to the bones of his contemporaries from Sardinia. By combining osteo-biographies (archaeological research on indicators of physiological stress on bones and teeth) of his contemporaries with written knowledge about Gramsci's symptoms, diet, and material culture in Sardinia and Italian prison, this article reveals an array of different stories about these bodily lives which are as yet untold.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 23 October 2025; Accepted 8 January 2026

KEYWORDS material culture; osteobiography; bones; posthumanism; colonized bodies; internal colonialism

6. Front page of the article on Antonio Gramsci's body for Cultural Studies.

Public Engagement

Embedded in the CADMO centre of the University for Foreigners of Siena, PAAST actively engages with different audiences, from university students through lectures, to local communities in the areas under study and beyond, promoting dialogue about the social relevance of archaeology and the interpretation of the past.



7. An example of Public engagement activities in the territory studied within the PAAST project.