Since few skeletons had been found at Herculanum scholars had believed for many years that almost all the people left town before the eruption of Vesuvius on August 24, A.D. 79. However, in the spring of 1982 a large number of skeletons were discovered on the ancient beach front and in chambers adjacent. The accidental discovery changed our interpretation of history. These skeletons were in good to excellent condition owing to their being in an unchanging environment in respect to temperature and humidity. They were buried under 20 meters of volcanic material and were continuously bathed in fresh water of neutral pH. Parts of many of the skeletons were carbonized from the extreme heat, as high as 400°C, in some parts of the pyroclastic material. When exposed to continuously changing environment decay proceeded rapidly. The skeletons must come into equilibrium with each change. Therefore, it is vital to remove skeletons from the ground as soon as they are exposed.

These skeletons are of utmost importance to anthropologists, historians and others interested in Roman history since they are a unique population to study. Romans of that time cremated their dead. Ashes do not tell us very much information. From this population, we can obtain information about health, nutrition, disease, occupation, as well as get a glimpse of the social structures.

But the uniqueness creates a problem, there are no other contemporary populations from the Italic peninsula to use for comparison. We will use Hellenistic Greeks and modern Americans. At Herculanum we have excavated, restored, and studied 139 skeletons: 51 males, 49 females, and 39 children. There are more skeletons waiting to be excavated; there are also more methods of analysis to be employed; therefore, this report is merely preliminary.

Some of the observations and measurements in particular give anthropologists insight into the health and nutrition of a population. Longevity of adults is a parameter of primary importance. But, at Herculanum everybody died accidentally before his time, so that age at death statistics are meaningless. Stature is also a very important indicator of general health and nutrition. Of course, heredity dictates the maximum stature possible for each individual, but poor nutrition or disease can interfere with a persons' achieving this potential. Therefore, mean stature statistics, particularly in comparison with other populations, can be useful. Stature at Herculanum is comparable to Hellenistic Greeks, but shorter than modern Americans. With this parameter, we also have modern Neopolitan statistics to consider. The male mean stature is 164.0 cm and the female is 152.6 cm, both considerably shorter than the Roman period people. See Table 1 for this and the following discussion.

Other important indicators of health and nutrition are the relative flattening of long bones and the pelvis. With much heavy exercise, muscles get larger, but with poor nutrition, long bones are slender and small. They must flatten to accomodate increased muscle mass. Thus, flat long bones suggest heavy exercise in the presence of poor nutrition.