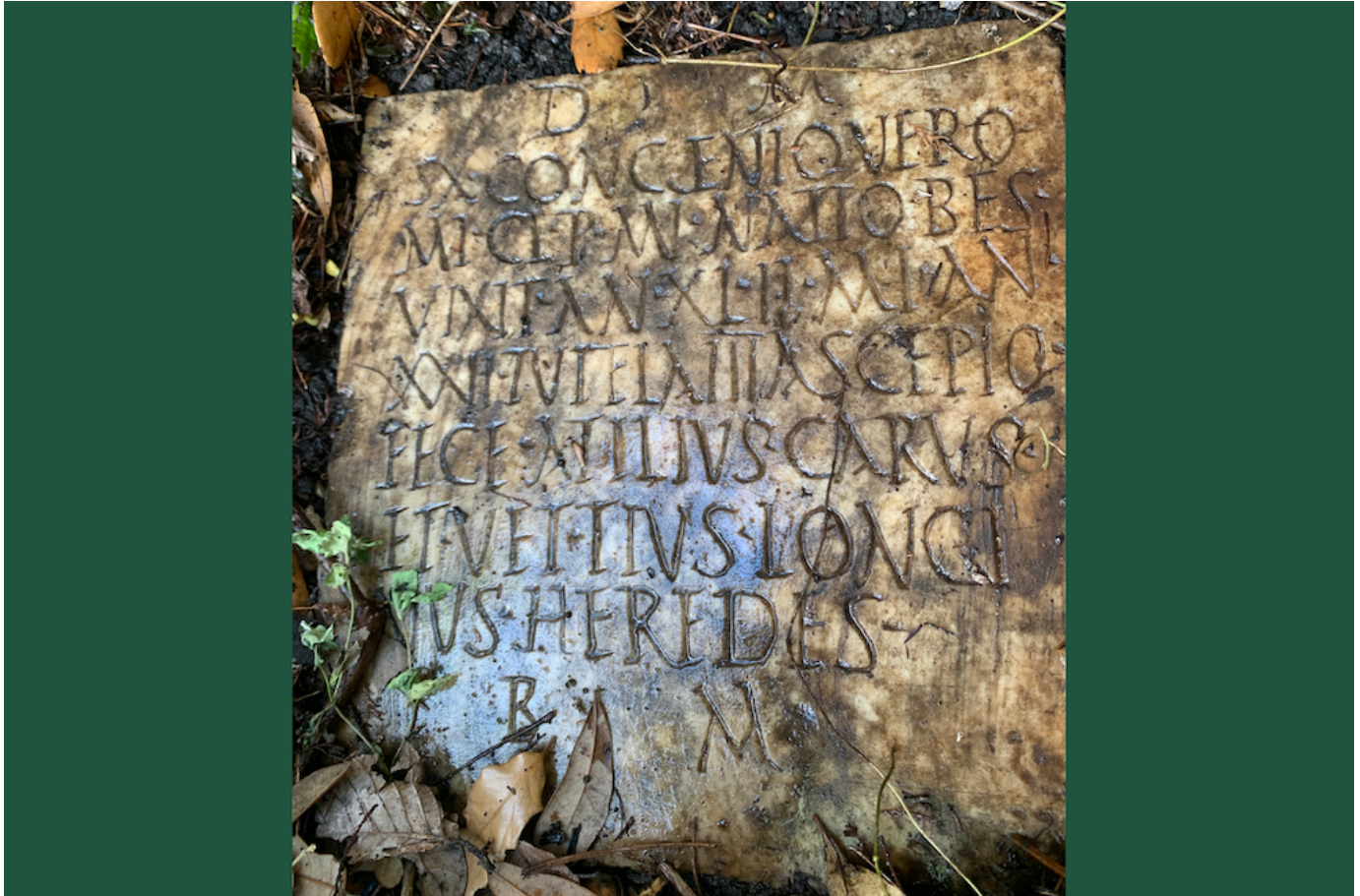


## Tulane professor gains worldwide attention after Roman artifact discovery

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A 1,900-year-old artifact found in a West Carrollton backyard generated a whirlwind of media attention. (Photo by Daniella Santoro)

As far as Tulane University Professor Susann Lusnia was concerned, Oct. 7 was like any other day. That is, until it wasn't.

Lusnia, who has taught Classical Studies for 26 years in the Tulane School of Liberal Arts, was having breakfast with her husband when she received an email from a colleague in the U.K. The colleague had spotted Lusnia's name in an article in The Guardian, a British daily newspaper.

The story noted Lusnia's role in authenticating a 1,900-year-old Roman grave

marker found in a New Orleans' backyard. She soon became a trusted voice as news of the artifact spread.

Before long, she was fielding one media request after the other, beginning with a WWL-TV interview at her office at Jones Hall. Two days later, the Associated Press interviewed Lusnia in the yard where the artifact was found.

"A bit later, there was a request from the New York Times for a telephone interview, and then an interview with USA Today and a third interview that same day in the afternoon with a reporter at The Times-Picayune," Lusnia said.

The following week, The Washington Post, the BBC and the Tulane Hullabaloo took their turns interviewing Lusnia. Other outlets covering the story included Smithsonian Magazine, NBC News, Fox News and even Popular Mechanics.

"The last two weeks have been a whirlwind," Lusnia said.

It all began in April when Daniella Santoro, a Tulane anthropologist, and her husband Aaron Lorenzo unearthed what appeared to be a slab of old stone as they were landscaping their backyard. They were especially curious when they noticed that Latin inscriptions had been carved into the surface.

A colleague in the Department of Anthropology referred Santoro to Lusnia, who was both shocked and thrilled by the discovery. With help from Ryan Gray, a University of New Orleans archaeology professor, Lusnia immediately recognized that the inscription looked authentic, as the lettering, phrasing and funerary formula were consistent with genuine Roman gravestones.

Using key words from the inscription, she searched epigraphic databases and matched it to a second-century marker honoring Sextus Congenius Verus, a Roman sailor.

The stone had once been housed in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Civitavecchia Italy, but it was recorded as missing after World War II. It turns out the previous owners of Santoro's house had inherited the stone from a relative, used it as a garden decoration and forgot it when they moved. They had no idea of its significance.

The artifact is now in the custody of the FBI Art Crimes unit, which will eventually transport it back to the Civitavecchia museum as part of the repatriation process. Lusnia said the museum plans to hold a special event to welcome the artifact back home, and she plans to attend. She will also deliver a paper on the discovery at the annual meeting of the Archaeological Institute of America in January.

From a media standpoint, Lusnia said she is not surprised by all the attention that the artifact has garnered. "I think it's the mystery and intrigue of the discovery as well as the randomness of it, that something Roman would be found in New Orleans," she said. "It's also 'good' news, and that is appealing."



Susann S. Lusnia, professor in the School of Liberal Arts, was called upon to authenticate an ancient Roman grave marker.