

THE CREMATED HUMAN SKELETON IN A SMALL
CARVED STONE ASH CHEST FROM
loc. CRETAIIOLE (PIENZA), ITALY:
NOTES ON THE ORIGINS OF CHIUSINE
CREMATION PRACTISES

INTRODUCTION

A. Rastrelli (1982: 367; see also 1985: 438-9) offers a commentary on «una tomba a camera ellenistica» recently discovered at loc. Cretaiole (Pienza) during an emergency excavation. Among the tomb goods salvaged is a cinerary chest «in pietra fetida con cassa a *theca*» (Rastrelli 1985: 438) which Rastrelli (1933: 130) suggests is prototypic of Chiusine urns in general. Therefore, the cremated human skeletal remains *inside* this chest may tell us something regarding the origins or development of mortuary customs of the people in this area.

In recent years numerous scholars have become interested in understanding the various aspects of Etruscan social class (e.g. Bonfante 1981, Becker 1990) so that all aspects of this ancient society may be better known. Social variables may be inferred both from funeral ritual itself (see Angle and Gianni 1985) as well as by examining the treatment of the *body* of the deceased person. Information such as age and gender has been commonly sought by archaeologists (Bartoloni *et al.* 1987), but now we also recognize that the way in which the corpse was processed, as well as the related tomb goods, offers a means by which funerary practises and social class may be better understood (see also Becker 1986).

Recent studies of cremations (Bowmer and Molleson 1986; Becker 1987, Mss. A and C; Becker and Donadio 1992; Becker and Salvadei 1992) and other bones from funerary vessels (Becker 1988) have greatly added to our understanding of ancient funerary ritual. In almost every case the bones had been removed from their containers prior to anthropological study. Not only does this disturb the micro-contexts from which these bones derive, but any movement exaggerates the fracturing and breakage which had been initiated by the cremation process.

These studies of cremated remains now are being expanded by direct observation of cremated skeletons within the containers in which they had been placed in antiquity (e.g. Becker Ms. B). This allows us to reconstruct the cremation process, which further adds to our information about ancient mortuary activities.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

One of two small stone cinerary chests, each decorated with a winged figure of Scylla on the front, has an extremely deteriorated reclining figure on the lid (see Rastrelli 1985: 439, 1993: 190, Tav. XV b). This chest was found to contain a moderately large sample of burned human bones. The chest, which is 40 cm. in length, 18 cm. in width and 29 cm. high, has a large interior chamber cut 19 cm. into the stone. The opening of the chamber measures 10.5 by 29.3 cm., yet the bone within does not fill more than a third of the space.

The gender of the figure on the lid is not identifiable by someone unfamiliar with the conventions of these sculpted figures, nor is the iconography entirely clear. The figure on the lid of the other chest is that of a male. A bronze mirror appears to have been among the tomb goods (Rastrelli 1993: 130), but is not directly associated with either chest.

The author had an opportunity to extract («excavate») and study the human remains within this chest in June of 1989. Although the ample chamber of this chest easily could have held the complete remains of a cremated adult, the boney contents appear to represent only a portion of the *ossilegium* of one adult. Of greater interest in the evaluation of mortuary ritual is the fact that these bones are in an unusually crushed condition, far greater comminution having taken place than would be needed to place the remains from an adult cremation into a chamber of this size (cf. Becker Ms. B).

The extensive comminution of the bones has left us with almost no diagnostic material. However, over 35 pieces of skull can be recognized, the largest of which is a portion extending across the right fronto-parietal suture (40 by 48 mm.). This suture is completely obliterated on the interior surface, as are the few other sutures which can be seen. These suggest an age at death of about 70 years (± 10).

Despite the age of this person, the 11 fragmentary tooth roots which have survived the cremation, plus other information noted below, suggest that dentition may have been nearly complete at the time of death. Three of these roots are too fragmentary to evaluate, but the other 8 which are present indicate that the mesial dentition is well represented. The presence of these teeth and not molar roots, which in most cremation tend to survive relatively well, suggests that molar loss in this person may have been high. Since we already know that this person was quite old, based on cranial suture closure, this information concerning tooth loss appears to be consistent with data from other central Italian sites. In this area caries development in antiquity began at an unusually late age, ca. 50 years. Only one molar is represented among these tooth roots, and that only by a series of short roots which have fused to a point. This would be expected in a third molar. Although the overall length of the roots is short this is not clear evidence that this came from a small, possibly female, mandible.

Other teeth represented by this sample include 2 premolars, but the lack of the tips of the roots does not allow the evaluation of bifurcation although this is not indicated in either case. One canine is represented as well as 3 incisors, one of which clearly is mandibular. The last of these 11 teeth also appears to be an incisor, but one which confirms the evaluation of age. This tooth clearly has been worn down to the level of the gum, and at a sharp angle suggesting the loss of at least one of the teeth in the opposing jaw. Although cremation normally causes the enamel of teeth to fracture, and otherwise alters the bits of tooth which survive, this tooth clearly appears to have been worn into its present shape.

The evidence is insufficient to permit secure clear identification of the gender of this individual. The skull fragments appear relatively gracile, and when combined with the limited data from the dentition one might conclude that the remains could be those of a female. The evidence, however, is not adequate to permit speculation at this time. The container itself, or perhaps tomb context, might be used to confirm the evaluation of gender.

DISCUSSION

Of particular interest here is the extensive comminution of the *ossilegium*, far beyond what would be needed to place these sparse fragments into this relatively adequate container. This cremation clearly indicates that the comminution practise was in use during this early period of Etruscan burials of this type. One of two possibilities may be inferred. This evidence suggests that comminution had long been used to reduce the mass of cremated bone to a very small size; smaller than needed for this particular container. Thus the process was simply applied in this case without regard to the dimensions of this cinerary chest, or possibly only a small portion of the *ossilegium* had been recovered in this case.

CONCLUSION

These bones may be those of an elderly female (???), whose age at death is estimated to have been approximately 70 ± 10 years.

As the sample of cremations examined *in situ* by physical anthropologists grows, these questions regarding «normal» practises of the Etruscans at sites in the general area of Chiusi may be answered. Each example, at this time, is important to our understanding of these mortuary behaviors, and to the reconstruction of ancient Etruscan culture.

MARSHALL JOSEPH BECKER

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