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Prone (Face-down) Burials: An Example of an Unusual Mortuary Pattern Discovered at Mozia, Sicily, Italy

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PRONE (FACE-DOWN) BURIALS : AN EXAMPLE OF AN UNUSUAL MORTUARY PATTERN DISCOVERED AT MOZIA, SICILY, ITALY

ABSTRACT

The skeleton of a mature adult male, lying face down, was located near the fortification wall during the 1992 excavations at Mozia by Prof. A. Ciasca. These remains appear to have been interred in antiquity, and conform to a type of inhumation that is surprisingly common throughout Italy.

INTRODUCTION

During the 1992 excavation season at Mozia, a co-operative effort of the Soprintendenza per i Beni Culturali e Ambientali, Sezione Archeologica, di Trapani and the Università di Roma "La Sapienza," Prof. A. Ciasca encountered a completely articulated human skeleton in a location northeast of the Fortification Wall (identified as MM, or "Mozia mura"). This skeleton (MM 92/61) was identified in the same general locus, but at a lower level, in which the much earlier Whitaker excavations (Whitaker 1921: 158, fig. 13) were conducted (Ciasca Ms. A, see also Ciasca 1989, 1992).

The skeleton was carefully cleaned *in situ* as part of the detailed excavation in this area, and an extremely clear photograph was made. Normal processes of decomposition had rendered the extremities extremely fragile, and most of the bone shafts were no longer intact. In order to maximize the interpretation of these data, Prof. Ciasca and Dott. Famà preserved the entire skeleton in place for later study, covering it with protective plastic and a light covering of earth.

The grave itself is an elongated oval, with the long axis oriented east-west. The skeleton, lying prone with the head toward the west and the face turned toward the right shoulder (north), is completely articulated but appears to have been thrown into this

hole rather than buried in a formal manner. Several pieces of evidence support this view, in addition to the fact that the body lay face down. First, although "extended" in this grave, there is flexion at the knees and the head is unusually cramped against and somewhat below the shoulder. Second, the elbow of the right arm is behind the body, and lodged against the wall of the pit at a higher level than the back. The right hand, consequently, is lying with the palm up, splayed out near or partly over the right section of the rib cage. This indicates that the body was not wrapped in a shroud or otherwise bound for burial (the left arm is tightly flexed and the left hand is below the left shoulder area). Third, no large artifacts were discovered with the body, and no small items appeared during either the excavation when the skeleton was identified or during my subsequent field study (May 1993). Removal of all of the bones, and cleaning of the pit in which the body had been placed, is expected to confirm that there were no grave goods buried with this person.

FINDINGS

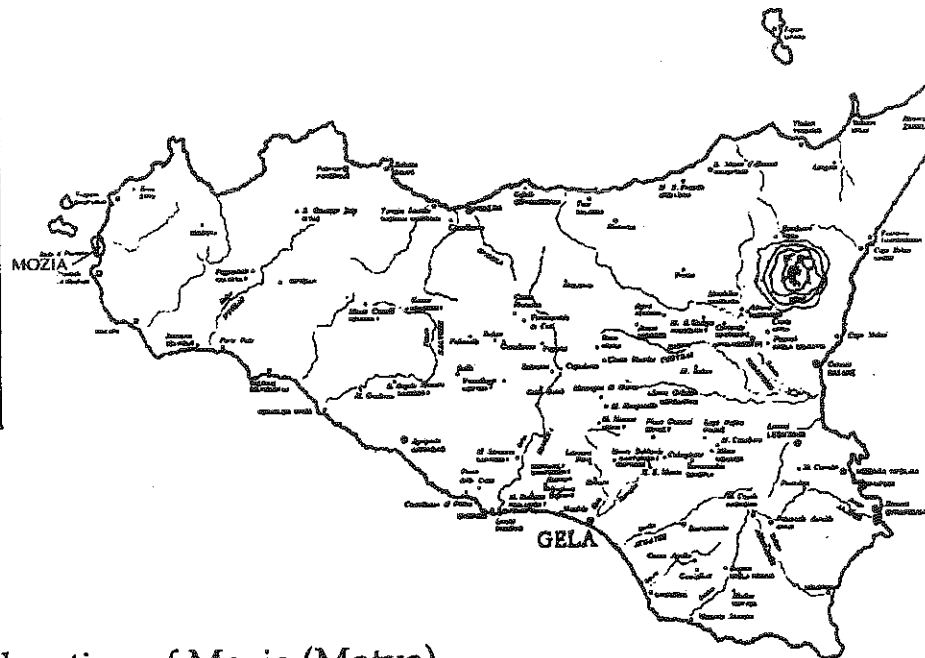
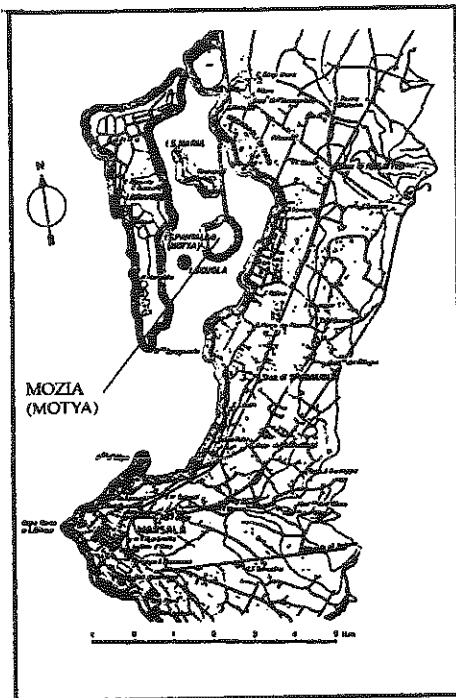
The details seen in the excellent field photograph (N. 456), later verified through partial excavation in 1993, enables us to record an *in situ* stature of 168 cm. This compares extremely well with the stature calculated using the Trotter and Gleser (1958) formula based on the length of the right femur, estimated during my excavation at 448 mm. maximum length (stature = $2.32 \times \text{Fem.} [65.53]$). The stature was thus calculated at 169.47 cm. (± 3.94), an average stature for a male of this period in this area (see also Becker 1985). Note should be made that the left humerus appeared unusually short, but an exact measurement was hampered by possible breakage and

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Map of Sicily showing location of Mozia (Motya).

From *Guida archeologica Laterza: Sicilia* (Rome-Bari 1984).

compression. The robust midshaft diameters of the femur clearly indicate that this is a male.

At least some molars had been lost before death, with complete resorption of the sockets of the mandible. The dental loss pattern and degree of tooth wear noted in the surviving dentition suggest an age at death of at least 60 years.

Photographs of the cleaned skeleton clearly reveal the details of the positions of the bones, reflecting an excellent application of field techniques. The only unclear area evident in the photograph is that above the upper right thorax and shoulder, in which a confusion of bone or other material appears. This problem was specifically addressed in my own field study, but was not clearly resolved. Probably the recent excavators discovered this burial unexpectedly, while digging in this area, and first encountered the right scapula and upper right ribs. These bones were disturbed in this process before these remains were recognized as belonging to an articulated burial placed in an unusual location. This disturbance of these few bones had made it difficult to determine which specific shoulder bones are present. Stray animal bones from the fill also appear to have been placed with the articulated human bone in order to avoid the loss of any data. Other animal bones, probably strays, were found when I uncovered the human bones. Two small animal bones were found located above the area of the left innominate, or near the lower back. One of these bones clearly is that of a young goat/sheep. While these may simply be stray bones which were in the fill, the possible connection with the unidentifiable "material" in the area over the right thorax should be noted. The final analysis should be particularly concerned with the identification of further animal bones.

A series of 6 sherds were recovered from the fill surrounding this person in May of 1993, 4 being from beneath the skull and 2 near the skull. While these may be random inclusions from the area of the intrusion, and not useful in dating the actual burial, the burial may date from a period *after* the latest date offered by these ceramics.

Also clear is the distinction between the dark brown to black organic rich clay soil in the pit and the lighter and more clay-like soil into which the pit intrudes. This should have been visible in the plan of the earlier excavation, unless clearing excavations in this area were removing thick units as would be appropriate in an area where burials or smaller features are not expected. Quite possibly this pit intruded only a short distance into the soil, and was noted only when bones began to be revealed. More significant regarding the date of this burial is the fact that the compaction of the soil within the pit is not distinct from the soil into which it intrudes, clearly

suggesting great antiquity for these bones. The fragmentary condition of the bone, and their demineralization, also suggest a date contemporary with the active habitation of Mozia. This should rule out the possibility of a clandestine burial being made after 1900, using the bottom of one of Whitaker's excavations as a repository for a modern body.

COMPARATIVE DATA ON PRONE BURIALS: "POSIZIONE BOCCONI"

One of the more common "anomalies" noted among burials throughout the world involves positioning the dead in a face down position. Extended burials most often are interred in a supine position (lying on the back), with the hands placed in a variety of arrangements. Much less common are extended prone burials, where the individual is buried face down (see Viner and Leech 1982: 78-81; Becker 1986). McWhirr (1973: Pl. XXIIb) notes that Inhumation 190 at Romano-British Cirencester is a prone burial. Wilson's (1988: 76-86) review of prone and "live" burials provides an excellent summary of Anglo-Saxon examples.

In Italy examples of prone inhumations (*a boccone*) are particularly well documented from the northern regions. It is presumed to be an artifact of the very large numbers of anthropological studies conducted in this area rather than a reflection of local cultural behaviors. The earliest example of a "possible" face down burial reported from the Veneto appears to be the Late Bronze Age ("Enea") example noted from the necropolis at Franzine Nuove di Villabartolomea, Verona (Corrain *et al.* 1977; including useful references). Of the 200 graves identified here more than half are inhumations, of which only one appears to have been buried face down. Corrain and his colleagues are cautious in this evaluation, noting that this possibly male young adult does not seem to have been carefully placed in this grave. However, they also cite Battaglia (1957: 9, in Corrain *et al.* 1977:146) as noting that among the many cremation and inhumation graves from Este (southern Veneto) is one inhumation which had been buried face down. The dates for the Este burials are not provided.

Corrain and Capitanio (1968: 37) also provide a study of a single prone inhumation of a mature adult male found by excavations of the Soprintendente G. Fogolari in the Via Tiepolo in Padova. The body was *below* a cremation tomb of the Paleovenete III period, dating from some time in the Iron Age. Stature for this person is variously calculated at 165.2 to 165.9 cm. The illustration shows a skeleton which appears to have been tightly wound in a shroud. In such wrappings the corpse, unless there was a shroud pin or other indicator as to "which way is up," might

not be deliberately buried in a face down position. In this case the body may have been inadvertently buried in a prone position, an observation not clearly noted by Corrain and Capitanio until a later publication (1990).

The possibility that this Iron Age burial from the Via Tiepolo in Padova was not deliberately placed face down must be entertained until further examples are found from this early period. The Via Tiepolo example, however, may be in the tradition of later and more numerous examples of this burial pattern. At this point the earliest clear evidence for *boccone* burials from the Veneto derive from a VI-V century B.C. (Paleoveneta) cemetery in Padova (area "Piovego:" Corrain and Capitanio 1990). The majority of the burials from this excavation are cremations, which have not been studied. Among the 22 graves, with 23 individuals (20 adults), recovered from the "Piovego" area are three adults buried face down. Two are female and the third is a male, eliminating any possible gender correlation. The importance of the "Piovego" necropolis information from Padova is the recognition of *boccone* burials in the Veneto prior to the Christian period. Probably the strong evidence for such anomalous burials during the Christian period is simply the better preservation of skeletons, and thus the greater ease of recognizing details in the placement of burials.

Corrain (*et al.* 1977) does provide considerable numbers of comments (unreferenced) regarding the relative frequency of prone burials in Merovingian Gaul in the 6th-8th centuries (but, see Salin 1952). They also state that Pepe the Short (Pipino il Breve) was buried face down. Corrain and his colleagues, however, provide a series of references to prone burials which are of interest.

S. Pier Damiani is cited as discussing the burial of the Marquis Ugo of Tuscany, said to have been buried in a prone position by his soldiers. The Abbot of the Florence Abbey dreamed of this anomalous interment, apparently leading him to open the tomb and rearrange the body in a normal (supine) position (Damiani Ms. A, in Corrain *et al.* 1977). The text is cited as follows:

Hugonis ducis mors ... aiunt ... quia praefatus Marchio Marino abbati, qui monasterium id tunc regebat, per speciem nocturnae visionis apparuit, atque ut corpus suum in supinum iuxta consuetudinem volveret, quod in os declinatum jacebat admonuit. Quibus profecto visionibus abbas fidem praebens, probare non voluit, et honesti viri corpus primum, et in faciem jacens, sicut sibi revelatum erat, inveniens, reverenter, ut decebat, in latum alterum supinavit

A "barbaric period" necropolis (7th century AD) at Saint-Felix (Haute-Garonne), amidst other presumably normal tombs, contained the bones of a tall person buried face down (Salin 1952:220 ff, in Corrain and Capitanio 1968:36). The relative stature in this case is not indicated.

Corrain and Capitanio (1968: 36, citing Ginzburg 1966:25, 50) discuss testimony given at an inquisition at Udine (Oct. 1580) regarding the spirit of a wizard, and another (in 1571?) commentary which suggests that prone burial prevents the spirit from leaving the tomb (cf. Merrifield 1987). However, Corrain and Capitanio (1968: 37) contradict their earlier observations when they state that prone burials were common in the Veneto in the 16th century, to the extent that a diocesan synod in Treviso in 1581 denounced prone burial for those who were born prone. Corrain and Capitanio (1968: 37) give the reference to this synod of 1581 as "Tit. I, Cap. V" with the quote:

... qui volunt ut, quando quis facie deorsus versa fuerit natus, eodem plane modo moriens sepulturae tradatur. Nam si supinus sepelitur asseverant omnes ex eadem domo mortem obituros: atque ob eam maxime causam nonnulli ... ex nostra Dioecesi ... cum intellexissent quemdam e eorum familia terram aspicientem natum esse, supinum tamen, cum mortuus esset humi traditum fuisse, non post multos dies tentarunt a sepultura cadaver extrahere, ut illud vererent, quo nihil absurdius excogitari potest.

Molleson (pers. comm. 17 March 1995) suggests that British examples of prone burials may relate to people who are culturally atypical. Her unpublished study of the Poundbury skeletons, dated to the 3rd-5th centuries, found associated bone features indicating disfigurements during life. Molleson further notes that David Miles (Oxford Archaeological Unit) had suggested that prone burials indicated people who had been disowned by their society, for reasons of deviant behaviors or psychological difficulties. A comparative note regarding burial practices in India may be of interest. People of the street cleaner caste are said to be buried face down (Murray 1957:107, in Corrain and Capitanio 1968: 37).

The presence of a physical anthropologist during excavation increases the probability that face down burials will be recognized. In Great Britain, where team excavations are common, interesting variations of the supine interment pattern are routinely noted. Harman (*et al.* 1981) provides an outstanding review of interesting variations in Romano-British and Anglo-Saxon burials in Britain, collecting

data available before 1981 (see also Roberts 1993). Harmon and his colleagues include evidence for prone burials, an unusual but not rare mortuary custom for which meaning or meanings remain uncertain. While we think that we can understand, from the skeletal evidence, the presence of beheaded individuals, from executions or other situations such as massacres (see Wells 1982: 194), the exact nature of prone burials continues to perplex us.

DISCUSSION OF THE DATA FROM MOZIA

The compaction of the soil and condition of the skeletal remains strongly indicates that this is a burial, unusual as it may be, which was made in antiquity. Conversely, a modern intrusion might be expected to include traces of clothing such as buckles or buttons. These also might be expected to be under the prone individual. Thus only complete recovery of these remains will offer conclusive evidence of the absence of such articles.

There is no evidence in the published record that Whitaker was aware of the feature (pit) within which this skeleton was deposited. Four possibilities may be considered for this lack of previous notation of this unusual interment. The first assumes that this burial is recent, while the remaining 3 (based on the evidence from my own work at the site) try to account for Whitaker's apparent failure to observe any signs relating to this burial.

1. The burial is a modern interment, postdating Whitaker's excavations, and was conducted as a covert activity – possibly relating to a murder.

2. Whitaker actually saw evidence of a feature (this pit), but ignored it because his excavations were focused on solving other problems relating to the construction of this defensive wall. Since burials would not have been expected here, and a feature in this location might easily be a trash pit, Whitaker simply decided not to explore this feature, and either did not record its presence, or did not publish the observation.

3. The Whitaker excavations failed to note evidence of this feature (the burial pit) into which this person was placed, and at the same time obscured the evidence through his own trenching immediately above the burial.

4. This burial was intruded through a surface at a lower level than Whitaker had reached, and was then sealed by a floor or other surface just above the grave (by a filling operation?). Whitaker may have reached this surface, but there would not have been any evidence that a burial lay immediately below.

CONCLUSIONS

This adult male, aged 60 ± 10 years, was interred at some time in the distant past, and at a level

lower than that reached by the Whitaker excavations. The *in situ* measurement of the skeleton enables us to calculate a stature of 169.47 cm.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sincere thanks to Dott.ssa Maria Luisa Famà for her kind invitation to visit the excavation and to recover important information regarding the context in which this burial was placed as well as data from the bones themselves. Thanks also are due Dott.ssa R. Camerata Scovazzo (Direttore della Sezione Archeologica, Beni Culturali e Ambientale di Trapani) for her aid in arranging for me to visit Mozia on very short notice, and for her continued support of these important skeletal studies in the area of her jurisdiction.

Considerable thanks are due Prof.ssa A. Ciasca (Università di Roma, "La Sapienza") for her continuing interest in skeletal studies and what these studies, as an aspect of archaeological research, can contribute to our knowledge of the past. Thanks also are due to Professors Gioacchino Falson and Guido Masotto (Università di Palermo) and Prof.ssa Adele Re for technical and logistical support during the period of this research, and to Dr. R. Reese for his contribution to this study. Thanks also are extended to Dott.ssa L. Passi Pitcher (of the Soprintendenza Archeologica della Lombardia) for her kind invitation to study a face down skeleton from Santa Maria alla Senigola near Piacarolo (Cremona), to Dr. Neil Christie for his kindness in reading related manuscripts, and to Dr. Theya Molleson (British Museum Natural History). The support of Prof. Gregory L. Possehl and his kind facilitation of the use of resources at The University of Pennsylvania, where this report was produced, was critical to this research.

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

GRANT RECEIVED:

Gary and Maud Webster, archaeologists in the Sardinia Program-Department of Anthropology at Penn State University-Mont Alto Campus, have been awarded renewed funding from the National Geographic Society to continue their archaeological research at Duos Nuraghes-Borore, Sardinia in 1996. The multi-year project, begun in 1985, is amassing data for evaluating current theories on the origins and early development of socially stratified societies. The potential importance of the site of Duos Nuraghes derives from its exceptionally long history of occupation spanning some 3000 years (from ca. 2000 BC to AD 1000) and also from its relatively modest size which typifies the average Nuragic culture settlement. Once excavations are completed, the accumulated data on settlement patterns, techno-economy, foreign trade and local exchange, and ritual observances at Duos Nuraghes will allow comparisons with similar evidence from the larger and better known elite centers in the island, like Su Nuraxi-Barumini and Palmavera-Alghero. Such comparative analyses are crucial for evaluating the relative merits of competing theories which have attributed the emergence of stratification alternatively to the differential control of land, capital, trade-routes, labor and ideology.

CONFERENCES, LECTURES, AND EXHIBITIONS

The Museum of Cycladic Art, Athens, hosted an exhibition "Neolithic Culture in Greece." It was inaugurated by H.E. the President of the Hellenic Republic Constantinos Stephanopoulos on February 23, 1996. The exhibition is under the sponsorship of the Ionian