Human Sacrifice in Iron Age Italy: Evidence from the "Tombe Principesche" Numbers 926 and 928 at Pontecagnano (Salerno)

Marshall Joseph Becker

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/anthrosoc_facpub

Part of the Archaeological Anthropology Commons
HUMAN SACRIFICE IN IRON AGE ITALY:
EVIDENCE FROM THE "TOMBE PRINCIPESCHE" NUMBERS 926 and 928
AT PONTECAGNANO (SALERNO)*

Introduction
The vast necropoleis at Pontecagnano have produced thousands of tombs of the ancient inhabitants of this site, some dating from as early as the IX century B.C. Tombs as late as the II century B.C. also are found in great numbers, providing evidence for several centuries of biological and social change. Among these many burials are a number of extremely rich tombs of the Orientalizing period, generally designated as "tombe principesche" (see d'Agostino 1990: 411-420 for a discussion of the definition). Concerning these tombs Boitani (1983: 536 n. 2) notes the following: "Nell'orientalizzante antico e medio dell'Etruria tirrenica il rito incineratorio sembra attestato quasi esclusivamente in tombe "principesche", ove risulta impiegato nella sepoltura maschili", and provides a listing of locations.1 This category of tombs provide unusual and complex examples of mortuary customs of the elite, and outstanding evidence for social class variation during this period (see d'Agostino 1969, 1977a; also Ampolo 1984; Cerchiai 1987; cf. O'Shea 1984, also 1990).

A program to study skeletal remains from this region in order to study local biological variations among the inhabitants of Pontecagnano (cf. Becker 1992) also examined the cremated remains of these high status individuals. Of particular interest in these situations is the skeletal evidence which may indicate that young women were sacrificed to accompany these Iron Age (ca. 675-650 B.C.: see d'Agostino 1990: 409) chiefs on their funerary pyres.

The Cremations
Although skeletal remains from a few individual tombs at Pontecagnano have been studied (e.g. T. 4461: Mallegni 1984), and some more general reviews of some groups of inhumations are available (Bartoli et al. 1988), the cremations from this site had been ignored until recently. Approximately 500 of the burials from the four major cemetery areas at Pontecagnano are cremations. Most of these cremations were interred within large ceramic urns or in perishable containers. Some others may have been placed within tomb chambers containing inhumations.
Although the skeletal remains (ossilegium) may have experienced further disintegration from the conditions of the tombs or soil into which they were deposited, the study of these remains offers valuable clues about the mortuary practices of an important segment of this ancient population.

Some of these cremations have been recovered from mortuary contexts which the archaeologists have defined as "tombe principesche." In these cases the "ashes" (ossilegium) appear to have been gathered into a cloth and then deposited in a vessel of silver or in a large bronze cauldron, which in turn was accompanied by other elaborate grave goods. D'Agostino (1977a, b; 1990: 414; see also Johannowsky 1975) suggests that this burial form reflects aristocratic Greek cremation practices.

While bronze vessels provided an elaborate container for the remains of these presumably high status individuals, the ultimate deterioration of the bronze created an environment which was not conducive to the preservation of these remains. The excavators, however, made great efforts to recover all of the skeletal material, and these human skeletal remains provide the subject of this study.

Several of the cremations from the excavations at Pontecagnano have been studied (Becker 1992, Ms. A). The information derived from those studies offers considerable aid in evaluating the cremated human remains from these two important tombs. As with many of the contemporary mortuary programs in Italy, such as at Veio or Osteria dell'Osa, the gender of the vast majority of the people in cremations and inhumations which contain artifacts can be identified by the types of offerings placed in the graves. Tombs at Pontecagnano generally include a single fibula of a type which can be correlated with either a male or a female (d'Agostino and Gastaldi 1986). A few of the cremations studied by Prof. d'Agostino include two fibulae: one being "male" and the other being "female." These may represent cremations which include the bones of 2 individuals, although this has yet to be verified by anthropological studies (see d'Agostino 1982, 1990).

Also distinctly different from "tombe principesche" are the "paired" tombs at Pontecagnano, such as Tombs 4696 and 4697 (Cerchiai 1990b: 39). These may be the burials of a husband and wife, but are not in themselves "princely tombs," such as Tombs 4306 and 4307 (see Cerchiai 1990a).

One question which we should like to address in all cases of cremation from the Italian Iron Age is whether or not there may be more than one person's cremated bones represented in any given case. This is particularly interesting in those tombs which include two bronze fibulae. This question had been asked by Prof. G. P. Bartoloni in an exhaustive study of Italian hut urns and their contents (Bartoloni et al. 1987, see also Becker 1987), but in none of those cases has more than one individual been identified in any hut urn.

**Materials and Methods**

The excavator recovered all skeletal material from both "tombe principesche" and carefully stored these remains in the Museo regionale del Agro Picentino, in Pontecagnano. These materials were transported to the "field house" of the Istituto for study during May of 1990. Some of the osseous material was unburned and was discovered to consist of non-human remains, and the initial phase of this project involved unpacking and separating out for study the human remains in the cremations.

The methods of analysis used for these cremations have been employed with great success in other central Italian situations (Becker 1987; Becker and Salvadei in press). Fine soil and tiny flakes of bone were removed from the mass by passing it through a 2mm. mesh screen. In the few cases where bone fragments could be joined (or consolidated) a PVA solution was applied. The recovered data, however, are difficult to evaluate in the absence of an intact comparative skeletal population from the same time and location.

This skeletal research was conducted "blind", or without knowledge of date, location, or specific archaeological items found with either burial. This was done to avoid bias in the interpretation of the skeletal evidence. Only at the conclusion of the skeletal study were the two data sets brought together, for purposes of analysis and interpretation.
TOMB 926: No human remains. No human remains were found in association with the material recovered from this tomb (see d'Agostino 1990: 418-419, fig. 12), but a small quantity of unburned animal bones suggest the remains of a funeral feast. All of these bones appear to belong to the same mature animal, quite possibly representing much of the right forequarter of a caprine (sheep/goat). These remains had been studied by Barker (1977), whose conclusions were duplicated in my 1990 study. However, while Barker found no evidence of cut marks on any of the bones, I believe that the right forearm (some 134 mm. long) does have cut marks at the proximal end, possibly indicating where it was severed from the missing distal end of the humerus. A small amount of iron oxide and rust stained earth was also found stored with these bones.

TOMB 928: Male, 65 years old; Female??, age 16 ± 3 years. Approximately 1.5 kg. of burned human bone, mixed with some earth, were recovered from the massive container which held the remains of these two people. Also included with this material is a series of extremely thin bronze sheets which derive either from the container for the ossilegium or from artifacts placed together with the bones in the urn. In addition, many small pieces of bronze appear to adhere to pieces of bone, either from having been burned together or from the decaying processes which both were subjected to while in the grave. Two small bits of rusted iron also appeared among these remains.

The human bones appear to have been cremated on a pyre at a temperature closer to 800 than 900 degrees Centigrade, with relatively little porcelainization taking place. Much of the remaining bone is simply charred, and quite fragile. What remains of the bone appears as if it had been extensively comminuted, as if for placement in a small container, but this must be a factor of the low temperature of the burning, and the charring that results, as well as the problematical environment of this tomb.

The volume of bone preserved would suggest that much of only a single adult is present. Sifting and careful sorting of the material provided the basis for identifying less than half of what remains into major bone categories. The evidence clearly demonstrates the presence of a robust male, but considerable evidence for the second person emerged in this process. While most of the remains cannot be clearly placed with either of these 2 people, sufficient numbers of fragments can be separated to provide age and gender identification for both individuals.

The Male
The majority of the identifiable bone derives from a robust male of mature age. The long bone fragments include a large section of the dorsal area of a femur shaft, which has the largest linea aspera seen in any cremation from Pontecagnano studied to date. This is also the only bone where a join was found, providing a section nearly 9 cm. long. Another complete section of femur, badly charred and lacking in much of the cortical area, is still found to have diameters of 28.8 by 23.8 mm., reflecting a rather robust individual. The marrow cavity is over 14 mm. in diameter.

Also present is the distal articular surface of a large fibula. The cranial fragments also include a small number which are quite robust, and clearly male. It is from some of these fragments that we find evidence for age, in the form of sutures which are entirely closed on the inner surface but maintain the exterior configuration of the suture. None of these have split along the suture, indicating that the closure is relatively advanced.

The only piece of mandible as well as one of the tooth fragments recovered seem to derive from the male. The mandibular piece extends from the rear of the last molar socket up through the curve on the anterior surface only. This bronze stained fragment appears relatively gracile, but since this is but a small fragment, the overall size is difficult to estimate. One section of tooth root may derive from a premolar, but the exact position cannot be determined.

The Female
The most extensive indication of the second person represented by these remains derives from the numbers of bones which reflect a lack of epiphyseal fusion. These include the head of a radius with a diameter estimated at 15 mm, the head of a humerus, and what appears to be 2 sections of the
innominate. A pair of small fragments even appear to be from the face of the pubic symphysis. A very charred femur shaft section, almost 6 cm. long, has lost most of its exterior surface. However, the marrow cavity measures 9 by 11.3 mm., and the external diameters are estimated at 23 by 22.7 mm. Two extremely thin cranial fragments, one of which is separated along the suture, not only suggest age but also gender. In addition a portion of the left frontal over the lateral aspect of the left orbit also suggests that this is a small person distinct from the robust individual described as the male above.

Most of the recovered dental fragments appear to belong to this female. This would be particularly probable in the case of unerupted molars in a younger individual. Seven fragments were found, of which one is extremely small. The largest appears to be a mandibular molar from which all of the enamel and the bases of the roots are missing. Three other much smaller pieces are also bits of crown, but like the two root fragments cannot be identified by location. One of the roots which is complete may be from a first maxillary molar.

Animal Bones
In addition to the two cremated humans found in this tomb a varied collection of unburned animal bone was recovered (see Barker 1977). The variety and quantity suggests a much more elaborate activity than is reflected in the bone from Tomb 926. At least six different quarters of caprines (Barker indicates that these are sheep), both mature and immature, as well as some smaller pig bones and at least one bird bone are present. The six legs are equally divided into fore and hind quarters, but may derive from only two animals. The intact humeri appear to be a matched pair (see Barker 1977 for metric data). The forearm bones also appear to be matched, while the third is more gracile. Portions of two scapulae appear to belong to this animal, as may the six vertebral fragments and four pieces of rib. Femora which could belong to the same animals are present, with one pair represented only by the proximal halves and the third reconstructed to form the complete bone nearly 165 mm. long. The head of the femur of this third example still shows traces of fusion, suggesting that it was not as old as the animal represented by the paired examples. Three tibiae are present, of which the pair (both missing the distal aspects), may have been part of the same legs that produced the pair of femurium, and measure over 190 mm. in length. The third tibia, however, clearly belongs to a younger animal. The epiphyses have not fused and the shaft measures only 112 mm. long.

Discussion
The study of the actual skeletal remains in the cremation burials associated with the various "tomba principesche" (see Note 1) is quite rare. Gender generally is determined through the evaluation of grave goods. We have, however, skeletal data from the individual from cist Tomb 4461 at Pontecagnano (Cerchiai 1984, 1987; d'Agostino 1990: 408). The remains in this "tomba principesca," found in a bronze lebetes, are those of an adult individual, age 48 years (Mallegni 1984). The data, however, appears to suggest that a second person might be present (Cerchiai 1984).

The remains of the "prince" in a tomb from Monte Michele at Veio, excavated in 1980 and dated to ca. 675-650 B.C. (Boitani 1982, 1983), also appears to have been subjected to specific anthropological analysis (Reverte et al. 1989). Reverte and his colleagues (1989) note that the thin cranial vault of this individual from Veio in the VII century appears female, but the remainder of the skeleton appears male. Since the archaeological data suggests that a male is present they have accepted this conclusion (see also Boitani 1983: 540 n. 11). Becker and Salvadei (in press) found that gender identification at Osteria dell'Osa, and presumably central Italy in general, is most accurately derived from the postcranial skeleton, and that gender discrimination was poor when only the skull was available. This evidence from Osteria dell'Osa suggests that the gracile skull studied by Reverte from this tomb at Veio derives from the same individual as the post-cranial remains, and therefore only one individual is represented.

At this time, Tomb 928 at Pontecagnano may be the only cremation from a "tomba principesca" for which we have good evidence of the presence of two individuals. The skeletal material from Tomb 4461 at Pontecagnano could be a second example but should be reviewed.

The absence of any human remains from Pontecagnano Tomb 926 may be unusual, suggesting a problem which can only be solved through re-examination of the archaeological data. However, the
possibility that bones were deposited in the tomb but could not be identified or recovered may be explained if the cremation temperature was low and the chamber conditions were hostile to their preservation. The much smaller quantity of animal bone with Tomb 926, relative to the more elaborate contents of Tomb 928, also is noteworthy. The specific animal bones identified from both contexts suggests that these were intended to be eaten, or possibly prepared for a funeral feast. The possibility that human remains from Tomb 926 became mixed with those from 928 also must be considered.

The human bones from Tomb 928 clearly represent two individuals. If two fibulae were present in the container for the bones of Tomb 928, this would agree with and confirm the evaluation made on the basis of the study of the bones. The many possible interpretations of the relationship between an elder man and the young woman include the following: the woman as a young wife, as a child, or as a sacrificial offering (see Bartoloni 1989, regarding "gifts"). She also may have been a deceased female servant or other non-kin to the principal in the tomb, but such individuals almost certainly would have been given a separate and less exclusive burial, and almost certainly would have been inhumed. The fact that both bodies were burned together, and that no female offerings were found with the remains (see d'Agostino 1977), strongly points to this burial as the individual remains of a male with whom a young woman had been cremated as an offering rather than as a person in her own right.

One also needs to know if cremation may have been limited, or largely restricted, to males in this society during this period (cf. Bietti Sestieri 1985; 1992). If this were the case, the presence of a female with this male might indicate that a second person was burned in the same fashion that items of personal adornment were burned as an offering, and not as a distinct person. Ethnographic analogues could be produced in numbers from cultures which sent young women to their death as offerings with deceased high status males. Perhaps the best known examples derive from the Viking period.

Perhaps the most significant variable influencing the presence of 2 people in Pontecagnano Tomb 928 is the status of the principal individual. The custom of cremating more than one person may reflect a cultural pattern limited to the mortuary programs of the elite, just as cremations also appear to be an aspect of elite mortuary programs during specific periods in various areas of central Italy. Cerchiai (1990:25 n. 6), in referring to these tombs, suggests that location also may be an indicator of social class.

Prof. G. P. Bartoloni has suggested that multiple cremation burials might be found within hut urns of the Iron Age (cf. Bartoloni et al. 1987). In some cases, such as Osteria dell'Osa, the use of cremations at a late date appears reserved for high status male (see Bietti Sestieri 1985, 1992). A study of the skeletal contents of these urns did not find evidence for this idea (see Becker 1987). However, the ability to confirm the presence of two cremated individuals depends on the preservation of similar aspects of the skeletal anatomy of both. While this might not seem problematical in cases where the ossilegium was carefully gathered for burial, and no comminution occurred for placement in a container, and where preservation is good, these three factors rarely occur together. More usually the cultural process of gathering the burned remains generally does not achieve osteological success, the bones generally are crushed to force them into a small container, and the conditions within the burial chamber are often extremely poor. Thus the potential for identifying multiple people in any single grave declines at a considerable rate.

In the case of Pontecagnano Tomb 928, where no clear duplicates of any specific bone was noted, the gender differences suggested by the various surviving elements plus the great discrepancy in age indicated by other portions of these skeletons provided an opportunity to recognize the presence of two people. That only one other example of multiple burial in a cremation container (or context) is known from Pontecagnano may reflect the small sample studied to date (see Note 1; cf. Becker 1992, Ms. A).

**Conclusion**

Tomb 926 at Pontecagnano revealed no surviving human remains, although a small group of unburned animal bones appears to reflect the presence of an offering of food. Tomb 928 held the cremated remains of a male age 65 as well as those of a female only 16 years old at death. The evidence suggests that both were burned on the same pyre. The available evidence suggests that this young woman was part of the elaborate grave offerings included with this very high status male.
### Endnote

1 A listing of those tombs of the early and middle Orientalizing Period tombs which have been defined as "Tombe principesche" is provided to indicate how rarely the associated skeletal material has been studied. Those listed by Boitani (1983: 536 n. 2), which she believes to contain only males, are indicated by an asterisk. Bartoloni, on the other hand, indicates that females are present in several examples. Cases where a skeletal analysis has been used are indicated.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Caere</th>
<th>Regolini Galassi tomb (Pareti 1947; see also d’Agostino 1990: 411).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Castel di Decima</td>
<td>A &quot;sepolture femminili ‘principesche’ delle necropoli&quot; (Bartoloni and Grottanelli 1989)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cerveteri*</td>
<td>Tomba Regolini (Pareti 1947: 124ff)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faleri</td>
<td>(see below)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laurentina</td>
<td>A &quot;sepolture femminili ‘principesche’ delle necropoli&quot; (Bartoloni and Grottanelli 1989)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marsiliana</td>
<td>Circulo della (Minto 1921: 87) d’Albegna* Fibula</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palestrina</td>
<td>(Colonna 1974: 312)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1) Barberini tomb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2) Bernardini tomb (Reisch 1899: 437-438; Canciani and Hase 1979)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pontecagnano</td>
<td>Tombs 926 and 928 (This paper)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tomb 996 (d’Agostino 1990: fig. 11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tomb 2145 (d’Agostino 1990: 412, fig. 10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tombs 4306 and 4307 (Cerchiai 1990a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Populonia</td>
<td>&quot;women&quot; from &quot;tombe principesche&quot; (Bartoloni 1989:37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veio*</td>
<td>Tomb V ca. 650 B.C. (from a ms. in the Museo di Villa Giulia: Boitani 1982, 1983)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tomb from Monte Michele, excavated in 1980 and dated to ca. 675-650 B.C. (Boitani 1982, 1983) Reverte et al. (1989) indicate that this may be a male.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vetulonia*</td>
<td>T. del Duce (Camporeale 1967: 141ff) (gruppo V)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vulci*</td>
<td>T. del Carro (Scichione 1967: 25ff)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Boitani (1983: 536 n. 2) also suggests 2 possible "tombe principesche" from l’agro falisco: one is in a bronze urn from Faleri at the museum of the Villa Giulia (which she cites as Giglioli AE [Anne L’Epigraphique ?] Tav. IV, 4) and the other is the Campanian example described by d’Agostino (1977a).

### Acknowledgements

My sincere thanks are due Prof. B. d’Agostino and Prof. Patrizia Gastaldi for their interest in this project and the invitation to study the skeletal remains from these tombs at Pontecagnano. Their kindness in making the initial arrangements as well as for their aid at various stages of the research is deeply appreciated. This project was undertaken as part of a general research program aimed at evaluating various groups of skeletal remains excavated from Pontecagnano. Thanks also are due Dott. Luca Cerchiai for his kind permission to examine these skeletal remains, and for his hospitality while the study was in progress, and for his permission to publish these results. The permission of the Istituto Universitario Orientale at the University of Naples to use their facilities at Pontecagnano for this project during the spring of 1990 is gratefully acknowledged. A travel supplement from Dean R. Wells (West Chester University of Pennsylvania, 1990) enabled the field portion of this research to be initiated. Departmental assignments arranged by Prof. L. Shaffer (Anthropology, West Chester University of Pennsylvania) facilitated completion of this project.

### References


Marshall Joseph Becker, Ph.D.
Professor of Anthropology
West Chester University of Pennsylvania
West Chester, PA 19383 U.S.A.