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The Contents of Funerary Vessels as Clues to Mortuary Customs: Identifying the Os Exceptum

Marshall Joseph Becker

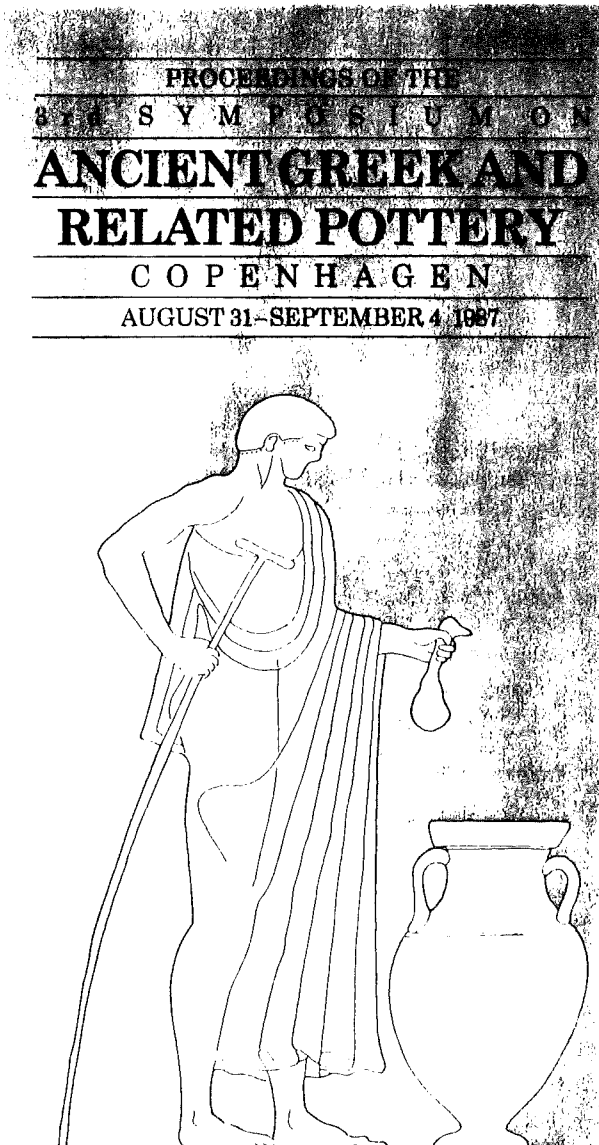
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The Contents of Funerary Vessels as Clues to Mortuary Customs: Identifying the *Os Exceptum**

Marshall Joseph Becker

INTRODUCTION

Pottery provides one of the more common categories of grave furniture which is non-perishable. Human skeletal remains are likewise relatively stable but have received much less attention in the past. Skeletal studies offer a useful means by which we can augment, if not decode, the functions of certain categories of pottery as they were used in tombs. These studies, however, are dependent on knowing where to look for bones other than in the usual locations. The evidence from bits of bone found within vessels or other items of grave furniture other than traditional cremation urns is the focus of this paper.

Cremation urns traditionally have been identified as repositories for the *ossilegium*: the burned bones remaining after a cremation. These vessels and possibly others found within tombs may hold the answer to questions about less well known mortuary behaviours such as relate to the *os exceptum* (as noted by Varro in *de Lingua Latina* V, 23) and the *os resectum* (as noted by Cicero in *de Legibus* Vol. II, XXII, 55). Thus the focus of this study is not on the pottery itself, but on skeletal remains found in and around vessels in tomb contexts. These bits of bone provide important clues, not only to the possible functions which these vessels served in a tomb, but also to ancient mortuary behaviors which previously have been known only from the literary evidence. Specifically, we are interested in those bits of bone which may reflect the customs known from ancient Latium, and perhaps throughout the Roman world, which are termed the *os exceptum* and the *os resectum*.

Much of the pottery which forms the subject matter of this volume passed some time as what would be called "*grave goods*". Studies of human skeletal remains, which not co-incidentally also may have passed some time in graves, has provided information relating to a general category of small ceramic vessels, now often called "*unguentaria*". The best point of departure for this enquiry into the possible functions of the small vessels may be in the consideration of vessels known to have been cremation urns. In many cases where cremation was practised, containers were made specifically to act as repositories for the burned bones. The Latial Iron Age hut urns or the biconical and lidded vessels of Etruria are recognised as the containers for cremations, since these vessels specifically were used for that purpose and presumably only to hold the *ossilegium*. Since these and many other cremation urns were not painted they now have less artistic (read "*modern commercial*") value than, for example, Attic figure decorated vessels which also may have been used as urns for cremated individuals. Unfortunately, with few notable exceptions,

archaeologists pay little attention to the contents of these urns, except in a general way – that is, to use the bones which are contained as diagnostic of the vessels' last function.

The importance of considering Late Iron Age cremation urns as a category of vessels is that the skeletal contents identify the function and enable us to infer that these containers probably were intended only for mortuary use. At this time we have no evidence for their use in other contexts. One can only wonder how often painted vessels found in later Roman or Etruscan contexts were used to hold human remains. Presumably, in most cases where such painted containers are found the contents, and thus the evidence, are simply discarded¹. Therefore, our actual knowledge of how such vessels may have been used within a tomb may be restricted not only by looting, which destroys all context, but also by archaeological techniques which fail to preserve all vessel contents. The process of recovery, therefore, may be a factor in the interpretation of the uses which some ceramic "*unguentaria*" had served in ancient tombs.

THE *OS EXCEPTUM*: ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND OTHER EVIDENCE

In this same volume Prof. William Biers and also Dr. N. Kourou discuss the identification of possible functions of small ceramic vessels as indicated by the analysis of residues which were found within each vessel, and by inferences about possible contents, such as perfumes, narcotics such as opium, and so forth. Virginia Anderson-Stojanović, in a recent article, masterfully discusses the chronology and possible functions of ceramic "*unguentaria*", but without employing the analytical techniques noted here. She concludes that these so-called "*unguentaria*" (which are small in size and have narrow necks) so often found in Roman burials, were closely connected with funerary rituals, but "*not necessarily related to the commercial trade in perfumed oils and unguents.*"²

Her review of the subject, and insightful conclusion, include no suggestion as to what functions these vessels may have served. Moreover, the same conclusion regarding the functions of such vessels – that they were connected to funeral rituals – plus a specific inference regarding their functions, were suggested over 250 years ago!

In July of 1732 Gianfrancesco Baldini located a chamber near S. Cesario, near the place where the Via Appia exits from Rome, in the area of the Collegio Clementino. This chamber contained, at least, a mount of small ollas of varying shapes. Of the 300 or so vessels in this group, approximately 180 bear some small inscription (figs. 1 and 2). These brief texts each include a person's name and generally a date, presumably that of the death of the person noted³. The epigraphic evidence as Baldini then understood it suggested a date before the period of "*Gaius Caesar*" [Caligula A.C. 37–41], but a more specific date now should be attainable.

For reasons as yet unknown to me the material was first extensively published 2 years later by Antonio Maria Lupi⁴, but Baldini's important discussion of these data was soon to follow. Baldini reviewed the evidence to demonstrate why, in this context, these small vessels were meant neither to hold tears shed at funerals nor for unguent offerings to the dead⁵. His evidence may be

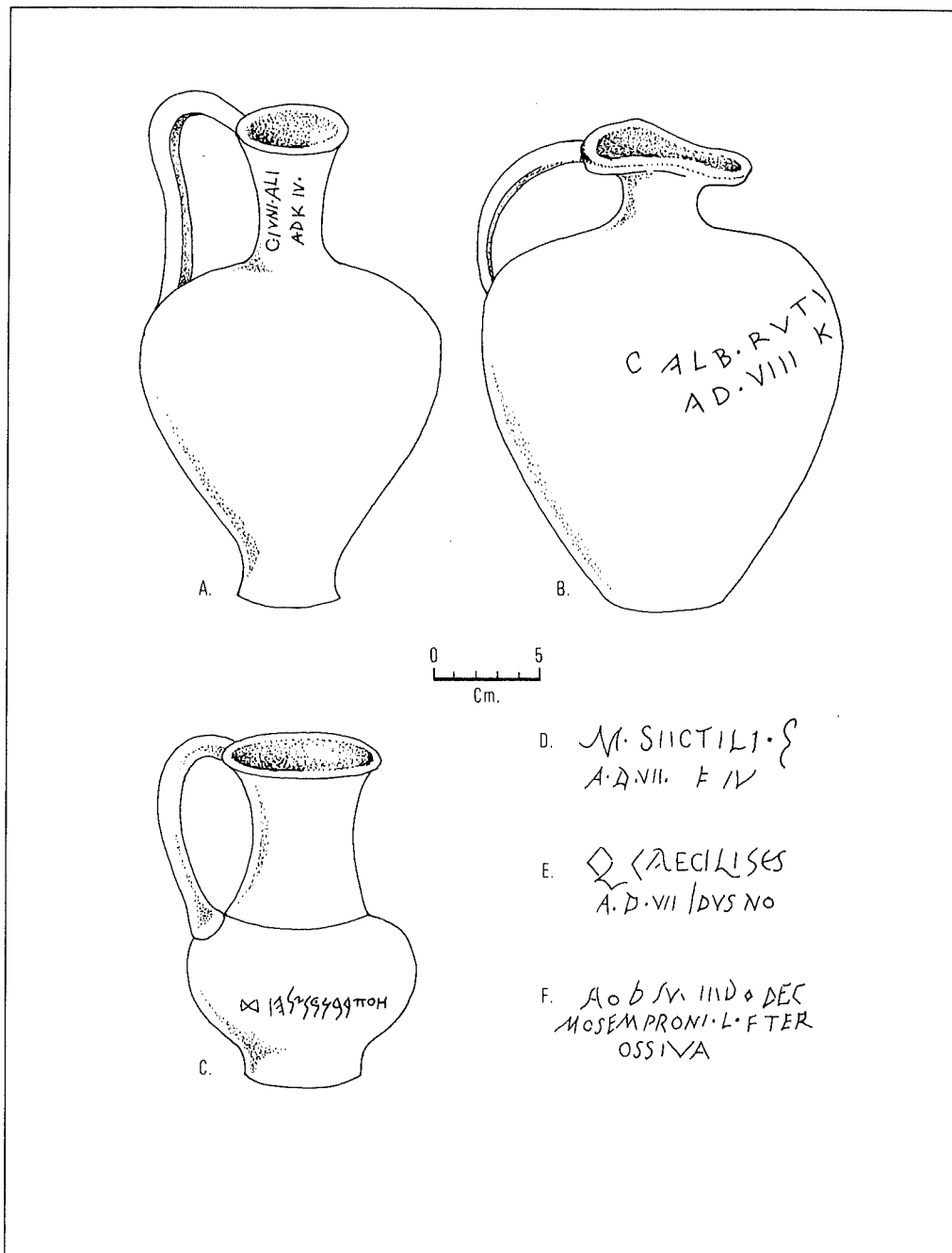


Fig. 1 Illustrations from A. M. Lupi 1734; A. Plate XIII, B. Plate XII, C. Plate XI, D-F. Plate XV, nos. 5, 22, 27.

summarised briefly. Baldini surveyed the known classical literature relating to ancient mortuary customs and found that portions of the deceased often were removed at some point in the funerary process for purposes which are never explicitly stated⁶. To the literary data Baldini added his archaeological findings from S. Cesario, where each of the vessels held a piece of burned bone. He then suggested that each piece of burned bone was taken from an individual and placed within a small vessel for use outside the tomb, but these vessels ultimately were interred where he found them. This was confirmed for Baldini by the epigraphic evidence found on more than half of the vessels from his excavation.

Baldini's observation conclusively demonstrated to him the ultimate purpose for which these particular vessels served: that of containing a fragment of the bones of the dead whose name appeared on the vessel. Baldini's logic has not been surpassed in any of the subsequent commentaries on this discovery nor by recent studies of tomb vessels.

In 1747, Giambatista Passeri continued the discussion of the ollas excavated by Baldini with equal perspicacity and diligence. Passeri's review of the classical literature led him to conclude (1747b: 50) that these vessels must have been related to the rituals involving the *ossilegium* and cites a number of authors in this regard⁷. Important in the understanding of the function of taking a piece of the *ossilegium* is the comment of Varro (116–27 B.C.) on the *os exceptum*. Varro (*de Lingua Latina* 22–23) notes that “if a bone of the [cremated] deceased has been kept out to purify the household, then in the purification (the bone) is covered with humus...” [emphasis added]. A quote from Seneca's *de Consolatione* [VI] also is of importance in understanding the relationship between the *ossilegium* and the *os exceptum*:

“...; tunc enim permiserunt ei ossa legi, quo post funus fiat, hoc est membrum aliquod odimi, ad quod servatum iusta Romae fierent, reliquo corpore apud peregrinos combusto”.

From these various data Passeri reconstructed some of the rituals believed to be concerned with mortuary activities, thereby reconstructing the possible activities in which Baldini's vessels might have been used. The archaeological, epigraphic, and literary evidence had all been brought together by these scholars more than two centuries ago to provide an interpretation for the actual functions – at least in these tomb contexts – of the small, generally narrow-necked vessels which Baldini called “ollas”, as repositories for the *os exceptum*. This information also may help us to distinguish between the Roman custom of preserving an *os exceptum* and the possibly related custom of taking an *os resectum*. These fine distinctions can only be made by adding the approach of physical anthropology to the methods already employed by these many scholars.

Several recent studies of cremated remains encountered examples in which unburned terminal phalanges (the bones of the ends or last joints of the fingers) appeared among the contents of cremation urns⁸. Involved theories as to how this could occur can be discarded in favour of the simple explanation that these bones are the skeletal remains of the *os resectum*, placed in the urn along with the *ossilegium*⁹. We now have before us an interesting problem from antiquity. Did Baldini's vessels contain relatively shapeless bits of unbur-

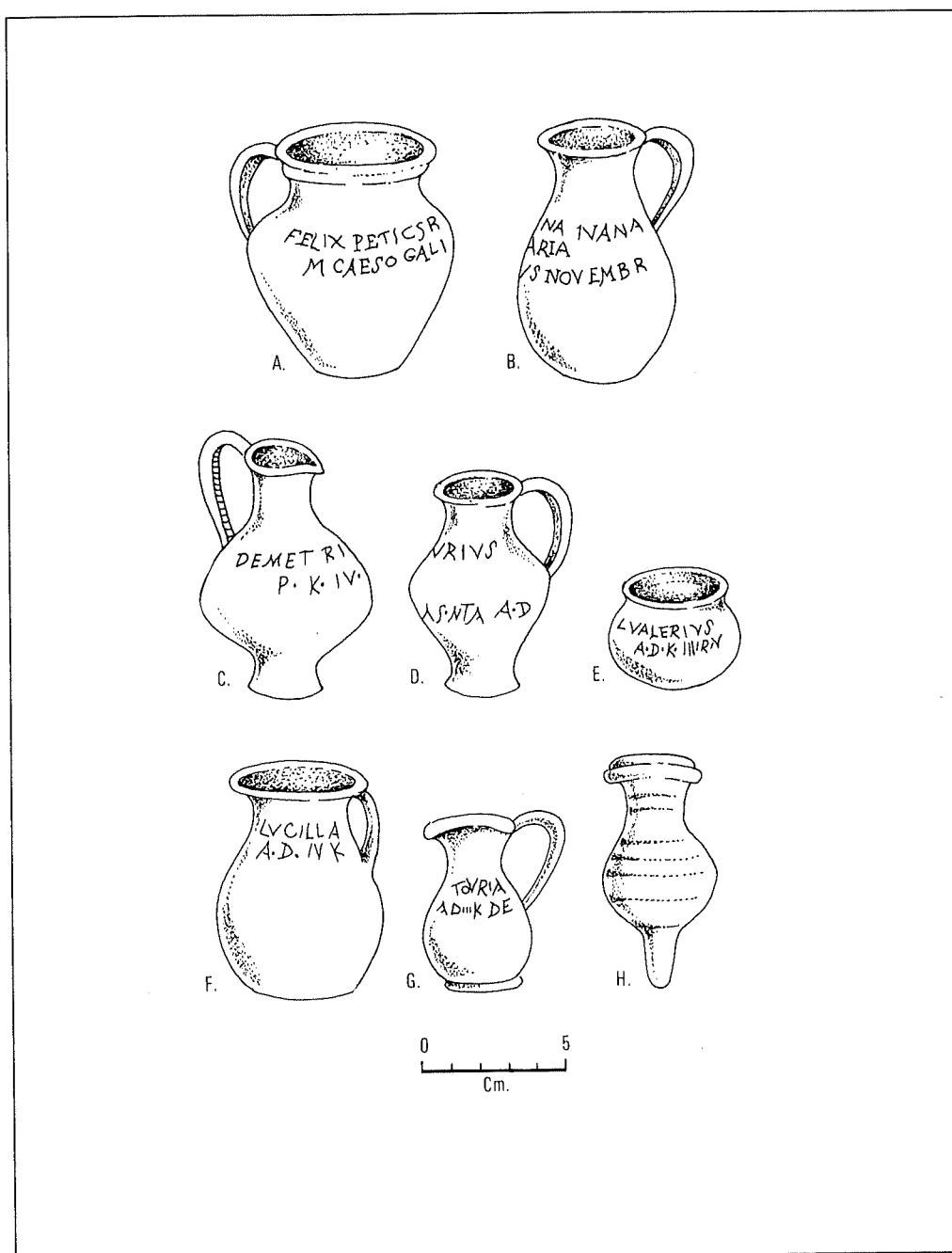


Fig. 2 A-E. Five of the smaller vessels illustrated by Lupi, Plate XIV, F. from Baldini 1732, G. & H. from Passeri 1747a.

ned bone as he describes them, each removed from the *ossilegium* for use perhaps as an icon of the dead in a sanctuary in the home? Or is it possible that the bones in Baldini's vessels were unburned *os resecta*, but not recognized as such by someone presumably unfamiliar with human skeletal anatomy. Unfortunately, not only do we lack the contents of Baldini's vessels but as of this date not one of these 180 or more inscribed ollas has actually been located, and we have less hope of ever locating any of those which were not written on. Through gifts and other vectors these vessels soon after 1732 were distributed to at least 10 different collections or individuals¹⁰.

Although the contents of the Baldini vessels, augmented by the inscriptions, offer a clue regarding the functions to which they had been put, the apparent size variation and range of shapes in Baldini's vessels certainly makes it unlikely that they were all produced for use as containers of some remnant or icon of the dead. Nevertheless, that they all may have each been used in a mortuary ritual, and ultimately were "*interred*" together, provides us with a clue as to the possible functions of such small vessels in other funerary contexts. Obviously, knowing where to look in a tomb and what to look for, can provide evidence far beyond that traditionally seen by scholars interested only in pottery. The contents – visible and invisible – of all vessels as they stand in situ in a tomb affords us the possibility of greatly expanding our knowledge of the purposes to which these containers were put. The associated skeletal material also may tell us a great deal about gender, age, and status of the people whose afterlives these vessels were meant to serve.

The Baldini vessels probably would have been ignored as an unimportant collection of trivia had it not been for the texts scratched into the surface of some 180 of them. Although iconographic interest may have been the prime motivating force for these early archaeologists, their scholarly rigor and breadth of interests allowed them to achieve more with limited means than we seem to have accomplished in over 250 years.

Of great interest is the fact that Baldini's discovery of small vessels with mortuary texts inscribed on them does not appear to have duplicated in the subsequent 250 years of Roman archaeology. His unique find, however, sheds light on a number of problems related to physical anthropology and its applications in archaeology. Obviously what may be contained within a vessel, as what may be found depicted on it¹¹ or found in the same context, can provide considerable information which may help us to understand meaning or function if we have the right techniques of analysis and appropriate interpretative models of social behaviour. Obviously this pertains to all archaeological contexts, from which all the pottery which is the focus of this volume once derived.

PROSPECTS AND CONCLUSIONS

By the time of the Roman Republic the literary evidence demonstrates that variations in mortuary behaviour had increased significantly from the uniformity found during the Iron Age. This reflects the increasing complexity of Roman socio-political systems. The trait on which this paper focuses appears to be but one aspect of funerary ritual known from an extremely dynamic period of Roman history.

Studies of mortuary behaviours involving the bones can provide evidence for culture change as important as that derived from ceramics. When does the *os resectum* first appear among cremated remains in Latium and how long does the custom last? Where does this custom first appear and how widely does the behaviour spread? Do these aspects of tradition and change parallel or relate to changes in ceramic forms or decoration, which in turn may tell us about social or cultural processes which do not appear in any text?

At this point the following conclusions may be suggested:

1. Various vessels in tombs have been re-used (recycled) to serve mortuary purposes.
 - A. The same use may have been served by vessels of different sizes and shapes.
 - B. This "use" – such as container for an *os exceptum* – may have been served outside the context of the grave, such as in a household shrine.
2. The identification of function of vessels in tombs may be determined by macroscopic as well as microscopic and other analyses of contents.
3. The apparently unique find made by Baldini, of small vessels with funerary inscriptions each containing a bit of bone, may reflect a custom of inscription used by a single extended family over a limited period of time, and not a widespread trait. The norm may simply have been to remove a bit of bone and place it in an unmarked container.

Marshall Joseph Becker
West Chester University
West Chester,
Pennsylvania 19383
USA

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Any errors of interpretation or presentation are the responsibility of the author alone.

1. An interesting exception is found in a Corinthian pyxis, from an unknown provenience, now in the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford (M. Vickers, *Greek Vases* (1982) 78, plate 12, Oxford). This vessel is far too small to have held a complete cremation, and may be a secondary container for these remains (see M. J. Becker, "A Cremation Burial in a Corinthian Pyxis in the Ashmolean Museum," manuscript on file with the Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities, The Ashmolean Museum).
2. V. R. Anderson-Stojanović, The Chronology and Function of Ceramic Unguentaria, *AJA* 91 (1987) 105.
3. G. Baldini, *Sopra certi Vasetti di Creta in gran numero trovati... Saggi di Disserta-*

zioni Accademiche. Accademia etrusca Dell'antichissima Città di Cortona. Vol. II, no. VIII, pages 151-162 (1738).

4. Antonio Maria Lupi, *Dissertatio et Animadversiones ad nuper inventum Severae Martyris Epitaphium*, Panormi (1734).
5. Baldini 153-6 (note 3 supra, and cf. also Anderson, note 2).
6. The Baldini survey was augmented by G. Passeri in two papers ("Sopra alcuni Monumenti Etruschi ... scoperti ultimamente presso a Cortona, collocati nel Museo Cozzazzi"; and, "Sopra l'ossilegio degli antichi") published as the first two items in *Memorie de Varia Erudizione della Società Columbaria Fiorentina*, Vol. 1 (1747). Further work on the subject is included in the author's manuscript "The *Os resectum*: Literary, archaeological, and anthropological evidence for an ancient Italian mortuary custom" (in preparation).
7. Passeri 1747, No. 2, p. 50 (note 6 supra).
8. M. J. Becker, "The analysis of cremation burials from the area of Rome as an adjunct to archaeology and ancient History." In G. P. Bartoloni, *The Iron Age in Lazio*, Rome (in press); "An analysis of the human skeletal material from Roman cremation burials of the I and II centuries A. C. at Otranto (Puglia): Appendix to the excavation report." *Otranto*, edited by F. D'Andria (in press); M. Bowmer and T. Molleson, "Appendix: Identification of human remains from the hut urns." Pp. 238-9 of, "Le urne a capanna: ancora sulle prime scoperte nei Colli Albani," by G. Bartoloni. In, *Italian Iron Age Artifacts in the British Museum*, edited by J. Swaddling (London 1986).
9. Becker manuscript, (note 6 supra).
10. Listed in Appendix I, Becker manuscript, (note 6 supra).
11. L. Bonfante, "Human Sacrifice on an Etruscan Urn," *AJA* 88 (1984) 531-9; and, H. R. W. Smith, *Funerary Symbolism in Apulian Vase-Painting*, edited by J. K. Anderson, *University of California Publications: Classical Studies*, Vol. 12 (1976).

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et al. 1987)

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