Cremation among the Lucanians

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Cremation among the Lucanians*

MAURIZIO GUALTIERI

(Pls. 59–60)

Abstract

The excavation of a Classical cemetery at Roccagloriosa in Lucania has provided evidence for some unusual burials with funerary pyres. The practice of cremation is discussed in connection with representations on vases, and heroic overtones are suggested.

The available archaeological evidence indicates that cremation was not a major burial practice among the Italic populations of Southern Italy, and it certainly was of secondary importance in the Greek colonies along the coast of Magna Graecia in the Archaic and Classical periods. The presence, however, of *ustrina* (the charred remains of pyres, sometimes with burial in situ or, more often, with secondary cremation burials) in such areas as Samnitic Capua, Lucanian Paestum and the hinterland of Metaponto points to the growing popularity of cremation during the fourth century B.C. It is, therefore, of special interest to examine the evidence for a peculiar kind of cremation adopted in the course of the second half of the fourth century B.C. at Roccagloriosa in western Lucania (ca. 30 miles SE of Paestum).

The La Scala cemetery at Roccagloriosa, at least the part which has so far been explored, was situated in a natural saddle of the Capitellum crest and limited to the east by a precipitous drop (pl. 59, fig. 1). The scattered trench graves covered with tile roofs occupied a wide, flat area. At the north and south ends of the central area, near the rock defining the “saddle,” two walls of limestone blocks separated the two extremities of the “saddle” from the rest of the necropolis (ill. 1). The enclosure at the northern end, formed by a line of squared blocks set in two courses, contained the remains of two large pyres, T. 23 and T. 25 (pl. 59, fig. 2); the central part of each was covered by a cist of limestone blocks (ill. 2). The cremation in T. 25 (set just in front of chamber tomb 24, with some blocks of the latter still bearing traces of burning) may have included a funeral bed or wooden coffin decorated with gilded terracottas of Tarentine type (pl. 59, figs. 3–4). The offerings, set on the pyre or in the area around it, included a variety of vases and a group of metal objects among which are six iron spits and an iron fire-dog (pl. 59, fig. 5). A lekane and black glaze salt cellars date the burial to the third quarter of the fourth century B.C.

About a meter west of T. 25, remains of a similar, slightly larger burial (T. 23; ca. 3.5 × 4.0 m.) may be
used to infer further details of the cremation ritual. Two large coarse ware amphorae found at the northeaster-
most corner of the cist (pl. 59, fig. 6; pl. 60, fig. 7) probably held water to put out the fire at the end of
the cremation ritual. In addition, the cist that lay on
the central part of the charred remains of the pyre
appears to have been built to protect the bones found
within it, since the offerings were found scattered
throughout the area around the cist. They included a
bronze belt with zoomorphic clasp and a bovine head
rython (pl. 60, fig. 8), together with other standard
types of vases which date the burial to the second half
of the fourth century.

In the enclosure at the southern end of the cemetery
area, the remains of a large pyre (T. 13) between the
dromos of chamber tomb 12 and tomb 14 (of the type
a cassa) covered an area of ca. 4.0 × 4.0 m. with a
thick layer of charcoal (ill. 1; pl. 60, fig. 9). No cist
protected the remains of the cremated body found on
the surface of the charcoal layer, although the area
used for the pyre had been clearly set off from the rest
of the enclosure by two smaller stone walls. Heavy
traces of burning on the bedrock floor and on the rock
at the south side of the enclosure testify to the intensity
of the blaze and the size of the pyre. A skyphos of
early Gnathian ware helps date the burial to the third
quarter of the fourth century.

The most unusual features of these pyres are the
size of several and the stone cists built on the charred
remains of two. Some elements of similarity can be
found with primary cremation burials covered by a
mound or built tomb in Archaic Greece, and there is

Ill. 1. Roccagloriosa, plan of La Scala cemetery

8 Hydriai, however, are more common in the fifth and fourth
century painted representations of the quenching of Herakles'
pyre: infra n. 15. It is to be noted that coarse ware is conspicu-
ously missing in the Roccagloriosa burials except for the two
large ollae in T. 6.

9 The only evidence so far recorded in South Italy for a "mon-
umental" cremation burial with built tomb, datable to the fourth
century, is presented by E. Galli in NSc 1932, 323–24 (Laos).
But Galli's report may contain misinterpretations of both
the original structure of the burial and its date (as stated by P.
Guzzo in a seminar on "Définitions des rapports entre la Lucan-
ie interne et la côte Tyrhénienne" held at the Jean Bérard
Institute, Naples, June 1980). There is also some scanty and
equally controversial evidence that the "princely" burial at Ar-
mento (in inner Lucania) dated to the end of the fourth century,
which included a gold crown with the dedication of Krethonios
(now in Munich), entailed a cremation: Antiche Civiltà Lucane
64–65 (A. Lipinski), 92–94 (M. Lejeune).

10 D.C. Kurtz and J. Boardman, Greek Burial Customs (Lon-
don 1971) 73–74, 81–82; although the authors mention that
"primary cremation graves familiar from the Archaic period con-
tinue into the Classical virtually unchanged, except for a notice-
able tendency toward simplification" (98), no specific examples
are cited for the latter period. For a good reconstruction of the
a general resemblance to the princely graves in Macedonia\textsuperscript{11} and Salamis on Cyprus.\textsuperscript{12} The latter are on a more monumental scale, but such parallels do indicate a revived interest in cremation with an apparent ceremonial character in some areas of the late Classical Greek world. In addition, a group of mythological representations on fourth century Italiote vases, depicting log-built pyres, are probably relevant. An Apulian calyx-krater from Taranto, attributed to the Painter of the Birth of Dionysos (early fourth century), shows an original depiction of a myth which is found in slightly different versions on later Italiote vases.\textsuperscript{13} Alkmene is seated in grief on a log-built pyre which Amphitryon, her husband, has lit to punish her for her infidelity (pl. 60, fig. 10). As noted by Trendall in discussing a later and more detailed representation of the scene,\textsuperscript{14} although the given version of the story may owe something to the Alkmene by Euripides, there is no ancient authority for the introduction of the pyre. The log-built pyre, appearing in South Italian vase painting with features that are familiar, although not common, in Attic vase painting,\textsuperscript{15} would

![Diagram of Roccagloriosa]  

Ill. 2. Roccagloriosa, plan of enclosure at N end of cemetery area

\textsuperscript{11} C. Picard, "Usages funéraires greques récemment révélés en Macédoine...," \textit{RA} 1963, 188–93; fig. 9 with plan of tomb and pyre. Connections between Macedonia and Apulian monumental burials have been pointed out by R. Bianchi Bandinelli, \textit{DialAr} 1 (1967) 338–39.

\textsuperscript{12} V. Karageorghis, \textit{AA} 1966, 247–55, fig. 62; \textit{RA} 1969, 57–61.

\textsuperscript{13} The calyx-krater from Taranto (IG 4600) is described in \textit{RVAp} 1, 36; a good reproduction is K. Papaioannou, \textit{L'Art grec} (Paris 1972) pl. 119.

\textsuperscript{14} A.D. Trendall, \textit{Paestan Pottery} (London 1936) 56. For the literary references, see L. Séchan, \textit{Etudes sur la tragédie grecque dans ses rapports avec la céramique} (Paris 1924) 242–45.

\textsuperscript{15} In particular see the rendering on Myson's vase in the Louvre (no. 197), depicting Kroisos on the pyre: \textit{ARV}\textsuperscript{2} 238; E. Pottier, \textit{Les vases antiques du Louvre} (Paris 1922) pl. 128. Slightly different seem to be the pyres depicted in some scenes of the apotheosis of Herakles: P. Mingazzini, "Le rappresentazioni vascolari del mito dell'apoteosi di Herakles," \textit{MemLincei} 342 (1925) 417–85; according to Mingazzini (p. 482), the introduction of the pyre in the representation of the myth occurs at the end of the sixth century B.C. (list of such representations on pp. 441–42). See also G.M.A. Richter, \textit{AJA} 45 (1941) 370 figs. 9–10. Only one such representation shows a log-built pyre of the type under discussion: C. Clairmont, \textit{AJA} 57 (1953) 87–88, pl. 45.
seem to be an original Italiote motif. On a later Paestan bell-krater signed by Python, with a more detailed version of the same scene (pl. 60, fig. 11), the artist has attempted to distinguish between the altar on which Alkmene is seated and the burning pyre just in front of it. Here some iconographic sources are clearly discernible, particularly for the representation of the two female figures in the act of extinguishing the pyre. The latter detail seems to have been borrowed from some representations of the apotheosis of Herakles, which show the burning pyre. Last, and perhaps most pertinent to the sepulchral pyres discovered in Lucania, is an Apulian maskaroon krater in Naples by the Darius Painter with a detailed representation of the crucial moment of Patroklos’ funeral as described in Iliad 23 (pl. 60, fig. 12). The central scene, with Achilles slaying one of the Trojan captives in front of the pyre built for the cremation of Patroklos, seems to reproduce the Italiote rendering of the motif of the log-built pyre which, in the other known representations (all Etruscan or Faliscan), was replaced by a tumulus or other sepulchral monument. It is the only extant “Greek” depiction of the story, which must be connected with the popularity the episode acquired in the second half of the fourth century in Etruscan art. Also, what seems to be the latest of the Etruscan representations, on a Prae-nestine cista dated ca. 300 B.C. (the so-called Révil cista), is exceptional in the use of the log-built pyre in the background; this may reflect the lasting influence of the Italiote tradition.

The original and sometimes unusual depictions of these myths in South Italian vase painting appear to be contemporary with the use of large cremation pyres for individual burials in a dynamic area of non-Greek South Italy, Lucania of the fourth century B.C. The South Italian vase painters betray an interest in heroic pyres which some groups of the native inhabitants of Magna Graecia were actually adopting in their elaborate funerary rituals. The “heroic” overtones of such rituals among the Lucanians are even more evident in the Roccagloriosa cremation burials. First, their particular sitting within the cemetery area is noteworthy: they were limited to the space inside the two enclosures with chamber tombs and were found at the extremities (north and south) of the cemetery area (ill. 1). Second, the pyres are significantly larger than most *ustrina* of the fourth century, and the Rome 1975) (*non vidi*). Possible Hellenistic illustrations and Roman derivations are discussed in EAA 5, s.v. Patroclus, 990–92 (L. Guerrini).

The term “replaced” seems justified by Beazley’s hypothesis that all known representations of the scene derive from one (Greek) archetype, depicting the pyre in the background: *EVP* 91. Beazley defines the prototype as Greek, without further discussion, although the episode is unknown in Attic vase painting. M. Torelli, in R. Bandinelli, *L’Arte nell’Antichità Classica* 2 (Turin 1976) 154, seems to envisage the prototype as deriving more specifically from Magna Graecia. For recent analysis and dating of the paintings in the François tomb at Vulci, see M. Cristofani, *DialAr* 1 (1967) 186–219.

Beazley (*EVP* 91) regards the presence of a stone tomb or tumulus with a monument, in the Etruscan depiction of the myth, as “Etruscan substitutes for the Greek pyre.” Rocco (supra n. 19) 178, on the other hand, considers interchangeable the tumulus with the pyre on Patroklos’ vase and describes the depiction of the pyre as “rogo simbolico e convenzionale, e quasi equivalente al tumulo” (the meaning of “quasi” here is hard to understand).


A general picture of the material culture of the Lucanians in the fourth century may be found in *Antiche Civiltà Lucane* 26–28 (D. Adamensteau), 53–56 (E. Lepore).
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The special characteristics of the cremation burials indicate their connection with a select group of the population. If the connection can be maintained, the adoption of the cremation ritual can be linked with other developments in Lucania of the fourth century B.C.: a marked process of social differentiation and the concomitant emergence of local elites. It is these groups which would have found the "heroic" overtones of the cremation ritual expressive of their position in society, and which would have wished to provide themselves with backgrounds and traditions suitable to their new status.

Finally, and very meaningful indeed, the geographical area where the cremation ritual has so far been revealed can be considered, by the mid-fourth century, as part of the hellenized Paralia (to use Strabo's definition), a fact confirmed by the nature of many of the grave goods found at La Scala. Within the context of the Paralia, however, the Lucanians settled in the Rocca Gloriosa area still maintained close ties with the material culture of the Mesogea, as witnessed by the conservative aspects of their burial practices.

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Anthropological Appendix*

The analysis of skeletal material from three funeral pyres at Rocca Gloriosa, illustrated by Gualtieri, provides useful information concerning ritual behavior in antiquity, as well as insights into important problems in the analysis of human skeletal material recovered from archaeological contexts. The fragmentary skeletal material from Tombs 13, 23 and 25 was examined in May 1982 to determine if it was human or animal, and if this material had been burned. Detailed documentation on the skeletal analysis will be published elsewhere, but a summary of results is appended here.

Tomb 13: Mature Adult Male. The largest amount of skeletal material recovered from any of the three “cremations” derived from this tomb. Five boxes of materials from this cremation were in storage and each was culled for bone. Bone appears throughout the area, with cross-fits indicating some slight disturbance in the tomb, but no more than would be expected from decay, rodent entry and collapse. The vast majority of the bones represent a single adult human. Gender was determined to be male on the basis of large femora (e.g., right head diameter ca. 51 mm, mid-shaft diameters: ant.-post. 33, lateral 31 mm), a masculine right ilium and distal end of a right humerus, the generally heavy long bone midshaft sections (e.g., right ulna) and half of a right patella. Although a precise age cannot be determined for this person, the configuration of the sacral and lumbar surfaces, the anterior surface of the patella and other features suggest that this individual died at an age greater than 40 or 50 years.

Of particular note is the absence of any indication of a head. Since the mandible and teeth as well as the thicker bones of the skull generally are represented among the remains of cremations, their absence here is of special concern. Possibly these remains were missed in excavating. In fact, no evidence of the clavicles and scapulae was found, although these bones are far less likely to be preserved. Given the large volume of bone which did survive, however, the absence of any trace of the cranium must be given careful attention, and the possibility that no head was present must use, e.g., in T. 6 (dated 400-390 B.C.) and in T. 9 (dated mid-fourth century B.C.) and some of the grave types.

* I would like to thank Professor M. Gualtieri for his aid in initiating this research and for making appropriate arrangements for this study to be conducted. A special debt is owed Professor W. Johannowsky, Archaeological Superintendent for the provinces of Salerno, Avellino and Benevento, for granting permission to inspect the skeletal remains in June 1982. Thanks are due the editors of this Journal and F. Minervini for their many useful suggestions regarding the presentation of these data. The interpretations and information included are the responsibility of the author alone. Partial funding for this research was provided by a travel grant from West Chester State College and a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.
be considered. The skeletal material from about the middle of the chest to the region of the lower legs is extremely well represented. Of significance is the fact that a great deal of the surviving bone appears to be unburned and that which is burned is charred rather than incinerated, as is usual in cremations where remaining bone and ash are placed in an urn for final deposition. The extent of survival of this person’s remains permits some inferences about the mortuary program.

The first problem is why some of the bone is charred, while other portions of the skeleton were minimally affected by the fire. The difference is so striking that at first this evidence appeared to reflect two separate burials, i.e., a cremation and an inhumation. Tabulation of each piece of identifiable bone demonstrates that only one person (male) is represented and that those bones in the region of the pelvis were left almost untouched by the fire. The bones at the upper and lower margins of this uncharred pelvic zone show a singed or toasted transition into those parts of the skeleton on either side which clearly are charred. The unburned area extends from about the waist (the region of the second or third lumbar vertebra) down to the middle of the thighs (femora).

This unusual state of bone preservation, for which no precedent is known, could result from several factors. The funerary pyre may have been of such small size as to be incapable of consuming the entire corpse and vitrifying the skeleton, or the fire was not allowed to burn to completion. The vast amounts of intact charcoal suggest the latter. This abbreviated cremation can be explained by Gualtieri’s thesis that the fire had been quenched at some point before exhaustion.

The second possible explanation for the uncharred bone may be seen in the archaeological context. The unburned part of the skeleton corresponds to a portion of the body which may have been covered by a large girdle or protective skirt. The remains of bronze plates probably reflect a highly decorated and possibly protective garment worn by the principal. If backed by leather and padded by fabric, this piece of the costume could have served to retard the action of the fire sufficiently long to have resulted in the pattern of burning described above.

A further peculiarity in the pattern of charring evident from these bones also may be explained by an item of costume. Five fragments of ribs manifest no evidence of burning, but all are stained green from contact with copper or bronze. In addition, three rib fragments and two vertebral spine pieces, all charred, as well as two unburned vertebral spine pieces show the hues characteristic of post-mortem impregnation with copper salts. The girdle or skirt may have had a bronze-lined flange or extension to cover the lower part of the back. Alternatively, another item of dress or some other accoutrement placed with this person on the pyre may have protected some portion of his back from the fire.

The skeletal evidence also permits reconstruction of the type of pyre. The dorsal surface of the left humerus clearly is more charred than the ventral surface. This suggests that this individual lay supine on the pyre, and that little or no flammable material was piled above the body. Therefore, the corpse was not enclosed within the pyre. The extent of the conflagration prior to the postulated quenching may be seen in more than the volume of unburned material found within the tomb. Four fragments believed to derive from the left fibula have been burned to a gray-white color similar to that of bones recovered from complete cremations. Other bones of the lower legs show the extensive charring which characterizes the other burned areas of the skeleton, but at least one extremely hot- or long-burning region can be detected. No bones of the hands or feet were identified.

TOMB 23: MATURE ADULT; MALE(?). The charred remains of a single adult are represented by the several lots of bones recovered from this tomb. They clearly represent an adult, but a specific age cannot be assigned. One of the cranial fragments includes a suture suggesting an age of at least 40 years. Had this person been younger, the junction of these cranial bones probably would have split through the action of the fire.

Gender is more difficult to determine than in the burial from Tomb 13, despite the presence of pieces of the cranium and a mandibular fragment. The size and robusticity of the surviving fragments suggest that the individual was male. The pattern of burning in this case suggests that relatively intense combustion occurred in the vicinity of the pelvis, but by and large extensive charring appears relatively uniform throughout the length of the body.

TOMB 25: ADULT MALE. A small collection of cremated bone was recovered from this tomb. The relatively large pieces, all of which are burned and fire cracked, indicate that this cremation was longer in duration.
than either of the two described above. In addition, many of the surviving bone fragments are coated with calcareous layers suggesting that these remains lay exposed in an open limestone chamber for a considerable period of time.

Moderate to heavy charring is evident on the dorsal surfaces of many of the surviving pieces of bone. This observation reinforces the less conclusive evidence from Tomb 13 that the bodies had been placed in a supine position on top of the pyre, rather than enclosed within the combustible materials. As with the remains from Tomb 13, no trace of skull, mandible or teeth is to be found among the skeletal remains recovered, but the vertebrae bear no indications of a decapitation. Therefore, we must infer that the skull was in place at the time of cremation.

The gender of this individual was difficult to determine, but measurements of several bones conform closely to the same measurement on each of the other individuals discussed in this report.

A few animal bones were found in Tombs 13 and 23, none in Tomb 25.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Each of the three tombs included the remains of one mature adult male.

2. Although no traces of a head were found among those remains recovered from Tomb 13 and Tomb 25, the evidence from the latter suggests that no ritual removal took place.

3. The series of “partial cremations” offers an extremely important example of a type of mortuary program previously unreported in anthropological literature. The degree of charring of the bone in general, as well as the relatively minimal effect on unexposed bone and the large quantities of charcoal not burned to ash, reflect a style of cremation which might not be detected by an analyst working without knowledge of the archaeological context.

4. The skeletal evidence from these three burials supports Gualtieri’s contention that water was used to quench the fires before cremation was complete.

5. The limited amount of animal bone suggests that these finds were associated by entirely accidental means and that no deliberate attempt had been made to include all or parts of any animal with these cremations.

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FIG. 1. Roccagloriosa, general view of La Scala cemetery from N

FIG. 2. Roccagloriosa, view of enclosure at N end of cemetery area

FIG. 3. Roccagloriosa, T.25. S. edge, gilded terracottas in situ

FIG. 4. Roccagloriosa, T.25, detail of terracotta appliqué

FIG. 5. Roccagloriosa, T.25, iron spits and firedog from pyre

FIG. 6. Roccagloriosa, view of T.23. Enclosure wall in foreground, one of two amphorae in situ in NE corner of cist. (Scale 1.60 m., small scale 0.20 m.)
Fig. 7. Roccagloriosa, T.23 after removal of most of the cist. The second amphora is visible in the NE corner. (Scale 1.60 m.)

Fig. 8. Roccagloriosa, T.23, fragments of bovine-head rhyton found on remains of pyre.

Fig. 9. Roccagloriosa, T.13, general view of charred remains of pyre. (Scale 1.60 m.)

Fig. 10. Calyx-krater (Taranto IG 4600), central scene. (After Papaioannou, L’Art Grec pl. 119)

Fig. 11. Bell-krater (BMF 149), central scene. (After Charbonneaux, Martin and Villard, Classical Greek Art [London 1972] fig. 372)

Fig. 12. Mascaroon krater (Naples 3254), detail of central scene. (After Charbonneaux et al., Classical Greek Art fig. 364)