The colony Augusta Emerita (Mérida, Spain) was founded in 25 BC and was the capital of Lusitania Province. Its strategic location in the Roman road system and its role as an administration and economic centre allowed the development of city buildings such as forums, theater, circus, amphitheatre and tempe. An intense archaeological research has been developed in the city (Nogales and Márquez, 2002). In the southern area of the city, near a main road, is located an important funerary area now called “Los Bodegones” which includes several funerary buildings, such as the Columbarium (Márquez, 2006). Between 2004 and 2005, an emergency excavation was made in the area designated intervention 5017, under the direction of one author [IMP]. On this area with ca. 881.34 m² of extension, were identified 20 graves, dated from the 1st to 3rd centuries AD. The main aim of this research is to co-interpret the archaeological and anthropological data to give insight of the burial practices in the Roman Empire.

RESULTS

In the intervention 5017 were excavated 20 graves with different states of preservation. Eighteen were cremation burials and 2 inhumations. Graveware like glass vessels, pottery vessels, lamps, personal ornaments (eg. metal, bone, stone, amber), coins are among the finds.

From the 20 graves, 11 had human remains:
- 9 cremation burials (A 1 to A 4, A 6, A 9, A 12 to A 15) – unmarked primary deposits
- 2 inhumations – pits with line in its walls;
  - A 10 (unmarked) body put on the East part of the pit pointed East-West.
  - A 11 the individual was in supine position, oriented West-East.

The graphic represent the distribution of gravegoods in the 11 graves with human remains.

For the 9 cremation burials the bone analysis revealed a mean of:
- total weight = 631.74 g
- bone fragment size > 10 mm = 89.86%
- maximum bone size = 67.05 mm
- weight of non-human bone (n = 6 burials) = 19.95 g
- weight of cremated human bone = 612.12g (overall range 122.66 g to 1699.49 g)

Human bone identification was possible in 66% of the pieces.

The graphic represent the distribution of human bones by anatomical region considered.

Taphonomy:
- main color of the bones: pale yellow (n = 5), gray-blue (n = 2) and white (n = 2)
- green color (n = 1) on a thoracic vertebra (A 3)
- metal/iron adhering to bone (n = 3): limb bone shafts (A 4, A 6 and A 12)
- bone deformation, mainly in limb long bones and in the skull (respectively in 6 and 2 cremation burials)
- curved transversed fractures and/or concentric fractures (n = 6)

Demographic data from the 11 burials:
- minimum number of 13 individuals:
  - 11 cremated: 7 adults + 2 infants + 1 juvenile + 1 undetermined
  - 2 inhumed: 1 young adult (A 10) + 1 adult (A 11)

Double cremation burials: 2 non-adults (A 14) and 1 non-adult and 1 adult (A 3)

Sex diagnosis of the adults was possible:
- 4 cremation burials – 3 males (A 3, A 4, A 15) and 1 female (A 9)
- 2 inhumed individuals – 1 male (A 10) and 1 female (A 11)

DISCUSSION AND FINAL COMMENTS

The mean weight of the human cremated bone per burial is lower than the values found by McKinnley (1993) in commercial cremations and Bel (1996) in primary Gallo-roman deposits. But higher that the mean found in secondary deposits by Van den Bos and Maat (2002) or Drusin et al. (1998) in Roman sites with similar chronology. During the excavation the cremation burials were recognized as primary deposits. This assumption was corroborated in the laboratory which confirmed that most of the deposits contained all the bones regions. The mean size of the bigger bone fragment per cremation burial is smaller than the mean value recorded by McKinnley (1993). The 89.8% of bone fragment bigger than 10 mm is superior to the 43.1 to 55.7% determined by McKinnley (1993) and the 76% calculated in McKinnley (2004b) undisturbed unmarked burials from a Roman cemetery. This can be explained by differences on grade combustion. The pale-yellow color reveal incomplete combustions (Shelok, 1997/2000) and blower temperature (≈ 285°C) according to Shipman et al. (1984). The high incidence of deformations and transverse curved fractures indicate a fresh bone cremation according to Herrmann and Bennett (1999) study.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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FIRST ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESULTS FROM A FUNERARY AREA IN AUGUSTA EMERITA (MÉRIDA, SPAIN)

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INTRODUCTION

MÁRQUEZ PÉREZ, J. s.d. Las exequias romanas en Mérida (Spain).


The graphic represent the distribution of gravegoods in the 11 graves with human remains.

[Photo from JMP]