Introduction

A burial is described by Leclerc and Tarrête (1988: 963) as the “Lieu où été déposés les restes d’un ou plusieurs défunts, et où il subsiste suffisamment d’indices pour que l’archéologue puisse déceler dans ce dépôt la volonté d’accomplir un geste funéraire”. Essentially, what makes a burial is the intentionality of a deposition and the will of the fulfillment of certain symbolisms14. Other depositions of death individuals are distinct from what is currently interpreted as a burial, such are the cases of dismembered bodies after murders, corpses (or parts) used as trophies or offerings or individuals thrown, dumped or discarded1. An individual may die and be deprived of its status of being human and his body reduced to an object or a thing4.

This work aims to present and interpret the funerary anthropology associated with the human remains recovered from the former Évora Inquisition court3,1.

Sample and Methods

An area of 20.75 m² from the ‘Jail cleaning yard’ - named by Matheus do Couto, architect of the Portuguese Inquisition, in 16341-2 - of the religious court of the Évora Inquisition was excavated in 2007/20086.7. The archaeological context consisted of layers of sediment containing discharges of domestic waste5,7. The sample under analysis consists of 12 adults individuals in articulation (3 males, 9 females) and 980 commingled bones/fragments (all with the epiphyses fused) in a minimum number of 16 individuals.

The study of the funerary practices was made through the archaeological and anthropological reports produced by the excavation team6,7 and by the observation of the pictures taken during the survey.

Results and Discussion

The skeletons recovered in the “Jail cleaning yard” presented several particularities:

- As the name of the place indicates and the archaeological data confirmed, individuals were deposited in the dump of the jail;
- Funerary structures were almost absent. Only in skeleton 4 was identified a structured grave; all the others bodies seems to have been placed directly on the ground;
- No grave goods were found; instead, the layers involving the skeletons were heterogeneous, with concentrations of coals and ashes, fragments of fauna and ceramics, in an area currently termed as dump;
- The orientation, decubitus and position of the members of the skeletons is quite variable and unusual3,1, table 1. In a Christian burial, usually the bodies are in a West-East orientation, in dorsal decubitus and with the hands upon the chest or abdomen6. In this sample, both males (1 ventral, 1 lateral, 1 dorsal) and females (2 ventral, 3 lateral, 3 dorsal) were placed in different orientations and positions, so there seems no to be a burial pattern.

The apparent absence of burial rituals are consistent with discarded or unburied individual and, according to the inquisition historical processes6,7,4, not reconciled with the Catholic faith. These documentary sources allowed the identification of 87 prisoners8 who died during the period in which the dump has been in use (between 1568 and 1634), 11 (12.6%) of which confirmed discarded and charged of Judaism, heresy and/or apostasy. On the other hand, Francisco Machado, charged of bigamy/polygamy in 1608, was buried in sacred ground, which leads us to think that maybe only those accused of Judaism, heresy and/or apostasy were discarded in the yard. Furthermore, several Inquisition processes mentioned a priest visiting prisoners near that place, this is the opposite to the absence of any kind of funerary ritual.

All the archaeological, anthropological and historical data showed that there was a complete disregard with the soul of these individuals, consequence of what were considered at that time religious crimes by the Portuguese Inquisition.

The reasons why these prisoners were discarded into the dump of the jail are unknown but, from the 87 individuals, 93.1% (81/87) were charged of Judaism, heresy and/or apostasy2,1 and, so, it is likely that at least some were considered not Catholic. Nevertheless, there is no guarantee that they were Jewish because the historical processes were built after accusations of religious practices allegedly developed in secret and very difficult to prove.

An identical context of a dumpster in Portugal, was found in the “Valle da Gafaria” (Lagos), in which 155 skeletons from African slaves were recovered6. The very specific contexts of these sites can provide possible explanations for the Medieval and Modern era burials outside Christian standards, known as “atypical” or “deviant” burials10.

Conclusions and future perspectives

There are many studies about Inquisition but, to our knowledge, human remains from dead prisoners were not found. Before this survey, there was no evidence of discarded prisoners in the Évora court. The context and the historical information got from the 20.75 m² excavated shows the importance of the complete excavation of the “Jail cleaning yard” for a better understanding of the questions addressed in this work.

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