INTRODUCTION

The colony Augusta Emerita (Mérida, Spain) was founded in 25 BC and was the capital of Lusitania Province.

During 2004 and 2005 a funerary area located in the south zone of Augusta Emerita was partially excavated under the direction of one of the authors (JMP).

The intervention number 5036, with an area of 1,342 m², revealed 52 graves: 35 cremations, 3 probable cremations, 15 inhumations and 1 ossuary.

AIMS

This work will present the study of the double burial A 33, composed by:

1. inhumation, in an atypical position, and 1 urned cremation.

The burial A 33 was excavated in 2005. Firstly, it was acknowledged the presence of a child inhumed in supine position, with the head facing North.

This individual, designated UE 325, was incomplete, preserving the skull, upper limbs, ribs and vertebrae.

The pelvis and the lower limbs were probably removed due to the violation of the nearby burial A 34.

Near the head of the individual UE 325 were positioned:

- two ceramics vessels, dated between the second half of 1st to 2nd century AD

- and one cinerary urn. Inside were the remains of a second individual, called UE 333.

FIELDWORK

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Burial A 33 revealed 2 1/2 adults with around 3 years old, 1 inhumed and the other cremated.

The inhumed individual show a cranial trauma on frontal and right zygomatic bones with signs of remodeling.

This lesion could be responsible for the child’s death. According to Coulon (2004) accidents such as falls, with chariots and during playground were an important cause of death during Roman times.

From a medical point of view the cause of death may have been multifactorial: the traumatism was the initial mechanism, followed by brain injury with probable coma, and feeding problems that could led to denutrition and/or dehydration of the child. Infection was most certainly another factor contributing to death.

Giving the characteristics of the lesion and its consequences on the child’s health, care assistance allowed his/her survival for a maximum period of 2 months.

THE CHILDREN

The teeth development (Ubelaker, 1989), observed by naked eye and radiological analyses, permits to calculate the approximate age at the time of death for both children: 3 years +/- 12 months.

However, bone lengths (or Scheuer and Black, 2006) give a younger age, around 1.5 years +/- 6 months.

From an anthropology and archaeology perspective this burial points out interesting questions such as:

- did both children died at the same time? Or they died at different moments and were buried at the same burial?
- the two ceramic vessels belongs to which child?
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The cremated bones have:

- total weight = 379.59 gr
- maximum bone size = 59.91 mm

All bone regions were present.

CRANIAL TRAUMA

The inhumed individual UE 325 has a severe cranial traumatic lesion, affecting the frontal, including the orbit, and right zygomatic bone. These areas show irregular surfaces and signs of bone remodeling.

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The images obtained by CT (3D - Computed Tomography) shows different bone densities between the area affected by the lesion and the other parts of the bone.

Assuming that the lesion resulted from a violent trauma – fall or direct trauma by blunt object – it caused a primary brain lesion.

Independently from the type of accident, the trauma originated bone fracture, with about 4 cm of length in the cranial vault, and probably an extended lesion in the skin.

It is also plausible that the small pieces of bone, resulting from the impact, provoked the tear of the dura mater, opening an entrance to microorganisms. Thus, it was highly possible the occurrence of meningitis which in the Roman time was a synonymous of death.

From a functional point of view, the frontal region affected is not a place of any vital structure. However, it may have caused some degree of unconsciousness or coma.

According to medical experience, the state of bone remodeling suggest a survival period between 3 weeks and 2 months, only possible with bottle feeding or the use of a tube.

FINAL COMMENTS

From an anthropology and archaeology perspective this burial points out interesting questions such as:

- did both children died at the same time? Or they died at different moments and were buried at the same burial?
- the two ceramic vessels belongs to which child?
- why did two children with the same age and chronology receive distinct burial practices? According to Rawson (2003), after teeth eruption a child could be cremated. For those, inhumation could be also used. Could a violent cause of death and/or prolonged period of unconsciousness determine the option for inhumation? Another question without answer is why the upper limbs of the inhumed child are in an atypical position?
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