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The food of the dead: alimentary offerings in the Etruscan-Celtic necropolis of Monterenzio Vecchio (Bologna, Italy)

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ABSTRACT

The presence of animal bones in human graves may often represent the ritual deposition of alimentary offerings for the dead. In fact, several ancient cultures believed in the perpetuation of earthly life activities and necessities in the afterlife. This essay presents the methodological aspects and the results of the archaeozoological analyses carried out on the 39 graves examined so far in the Etruscan-Celtic necropolis of Monterenzio Vecchio (Bologna, Northern Italy). The study of the animal bone remains points to a very high standardization of meat offering preparatory practices and their presentation inside the graves. The meat portions were always composed of a few adjoining ribs from a single young porker (*Sus domesticus*). The distribution of the bone remains and the lack of manifest stripping traces on the surface, in spite of evidence for meat cooking, exclude any possible interpretation of these findings as refuse from a hypothetical funerary banquet. The spatial and functional correlation between data from faunal and taphonomic analyses, the burial features and grave goods denote obvious symbolic connotations related to funerary rituals. The generalized presence in the Monterenzio Vecchio graves of highly standardized alimentary offerings, generally placed in funerary pottery, seems to demonstrate the existence of a well-defined “food of the dead”.

KEY WORDS

Northern Italy,
Etruscans,
Celts,
funerary customs,
food preparation.

RÉSUMÉ

La nourriture des morts : offrandes alimentaires de la nécropole étrusco-celtique de Monterenzio Vecchio (Bologne – Italie).

La découverte d'ossements animaux à l'intérieur des sépultures peut s'expliquer, dans de nombreux cas, par le dépôt volontaire et rituel d'offrandes alimentaires destinées au défunt. De nombreux peuples et cultures du passé exprimaient en effet par le dépôt d'aliments dans les tombes le besoin de perpétuer dans l'au-delà les activités quotidiennes, basées sur celles effectuées en vie, et dont celui de se nourrir représentait une nécessité primaire. Dans cette contribution les aspects méthodologiques et les résultats de l'étude archéozoologique conduite sur 39 sépultures de la nécropole étrusco-celtique de Monterenzio Vecchio (Bologne) seront présentés. A partir de l'étude des restes osseux une standardisation élevée des pratiques de préparation des viandes et de leur dépôt dans les tombes a pu être mise en évidence. Il s'agit dans tous les cas de parties de côtes d'un seul porc (*Sus domesticus*) abattu jeune. La distribution des restes osseux, l'absence de traces évidentes de détachement de la viande sur les os et la présence de traces de cuisson exclut qu'il puisse s'agir de rejets ou de restes d'un éventuel banquet funéraire. La corrélation spatiale et fonctionnelle des données issues de l'analyse faunique et taphonomique, ainsi que les caractères typologiques des sépultures et des mobiliers, ont permis de mettre en évidence des connotations symboliques liées au rituel funéraire ainsi que l'existence d'une véritable « nourriture des morts ».

MOTS CLÉS

Italie du Nord,
Etrusques,
Celts,
pratiques funéraires,
préparation de
nourriture.

INTRODUCTION

Research on animal bone remains in funerary contexts aims not only to identify the species in an archaeological context, but rather to establish how men used animal resources in different circumstances from those of utilitarian everyday life. From a methodological point of view, the study of animal bone remains discovered in a necropolis is no different to that of remains found in an everyday context. The interpretation and determination of funerary burial behaviour, though, are more connected with cultural issues relating to the religious sphere. An example of this is the discovery of material goods buried in the graves, which provides unquestionable evidence of faith in an afterlife. Thus, the discovery, in certain funerary contexts, of the remains of meat-based food offerings helps to clarify the same population's image of the great beyond (Aspes *et al.* 1987; Chaix & Meniel 1996; Green 1998).

The Etruscan-Celtic necropolis of Monterenzio Vecchio (578 metres ASML) is located in the

Tuscan-Emilian Appennines, 30 kilometres south-east of Bologna (Italy), on the right hillside of the Idice valley. The exploration of the Monterenzio Vecchio necropolis was carried out by the Department of Archaeology - University of Bologna, in collaboration with the *Ecole Française de Rome* and the CNRS UMR 8564 (ENS), Paris. The project included several excavation campaigns that took place between 2000 and 2005. The exact location of the settlement the necropolis belonged to is still unknown. The study of grave goods allowed us to date the necropolis to the Second Iron Age (4th to 3rd century BC) (Bondini *et al.* 2004). The necropolis contains about 50 graves, mainly burials, with rich sets of grave goods, such as banquet pottery, weapons, various types of tools, ornamental accessories and food offerings (Fig. 1). In the Monterenzio Vecchio necropolis, food offerings were a major part of the funerary ritual, as the discovery of animal bones in most of the examined graves clearly shows. This paper presents the analysis of meat-based food offerings found in the 39 graves we examined.



Fig. 1. — View of the Idice Valley from the top of the archaeological site of Monterenzio Vecchio. (E. Maini).

GEOGRAPHICAL, CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the last thirty years, the academic world has shown renewed interest for the study of the Celtic populations who occupied wide areas of northern Italy from the 4th century BC until the Roman conquest (Defente 2003). Most of this information pertains to the time frame between the middle of the 4th century BC and the beginning of the 2nd century BC, when consecutive waves of different Latenian Celtic tribes crossed the Alps southwards in search of wealthy territories to occupy¹ (Santoro 1979; Zuffa 1979; Kruta & Poppi 1983; Kruta 1988; Kruta & Manfredi 1999). After an

1. There is already evidence for Celtic settlements in northwestern Italy as early as the 9th century BC, before the historical migration started early in the 4th century BC; the s.c. Golasecca culture was in

initial period of conflicting interactions with local populations, political and military alliances subsequently led to increased integration between locals and newcomers. In particular, the Boii settled on the southern Po Plain, in the area between the present province of Parma and the Romagna, previously occupied by the indigenous populations of the Liguri and the Umbri and also the Etruscans. The Boii migration radically changed the pre-existing social and cultural structure, but did not totally annihilate the local ethnic background (Sassatelli 1979, 2004). Archaeological research shows a gradual process of integration between the local populations and the Celtic groups. The Celts were extremely receptive to the external influence of local cultures, and in particular, the Etruscan culture. This open attitude favoured cultural

fact identified as a Celtic culture on the basis of inscriptions dated to the 6th century BC (De Marins 1988; Grassi 1991; Dore *et al.* 2000).

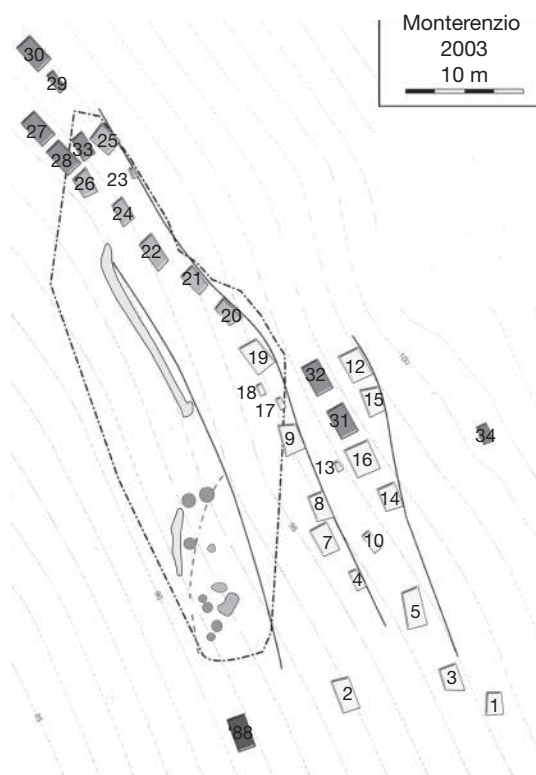


Fig. 2. — Plan of Monterenzio Vecchio necropolis.

exchanges and the integration process, leading to the formation of the so-called Italo-Celtic culture (Dore & Vellani 1994). On one hand, Celtic tribes adopted the Etruscan lifestyle, but on the other, the warrior element became increasingly central to this new intercultural society, as shown by the frequent deposition of weapons among grave goods. This new trend may have been endorsed through frequent mixed marriages between Celtic warriors and Etruscan women².

2. Etruscan funerary ideology rarely provided for deposition of weapons in graves; the social status of warriors was instead testified through funerary steles. On the other hand, Transalpine Celts customarily placed weapons in their graves; this tradition was also maintained after their migration south of the Alps, as testified by the discoveries in the necropolises of Bologna and Monte Tamburino, dated to the 4th century BC, where it continued to distinguish Celtic warriors from the Etruscans, even after the adoption by the Celts of the Etruscan practice of including banquet sets and other ritual objects in grave goods (Vitali 1988: 123).

The Idice Valley, where the Monterenzio Vecchio necropolis is located, was a strategic centre for this process of cultural and social-economic integration. The Idice River crosses a landscape defined by hills with rather smooth ridges, always below 1000 metres ASLM. The area is rich in mineral resources (Rivalta 1990) and was continuously inhabited from the Lower Palaeolithic until Late Antiquity. The most relevant sites date between the Eneolithic and the Iron Age and were located along the main routes that connected Tuscany and the Romagna. One of the main hubs on this itinerary was the Etruscan-Celtic settlement of Monte Bibeale (Vitali 1988; Vitali 1991a). The village was founded by the Etruscans in the early 4th century BC, when the Celtic invasion forced them to leave the plain for a more secure, naturally protected hilltop site. A group of Celtic warriors soon joined the Etruscan community at Monte Bibeale. Archaeological evidence from Mount Bibeale and the related nearby necropolis of Monte Tamburino, which is partially contemporaneous with Monterenzio Vecchio, demonstrated the complete integration between the indigenous Etruscans and the recently arrived individuals. Besides the presence of locally-produced Etruscan pottery, as well as imported elements from central Italy, the grave goods started to include weapons, as prescribed by Celtic funerary practices, alongside ornaments and other personal items of Etruscan tradition (Vitali 1987: 372; Vitali & Dall'Aglio 1990: 198-200; Vitali 1991b: 228). The archaeological contexts discovered at Monterenzio Vecchio, Monte Bibeale and Monte Tamburino confirm the importance of the Apennines area, and the Idice Valley in particular, for the study of the Celtic occupation of central and northern Italy during the two centuries preceding Roman expansion.

THE ETRUSCAN-CELTIC NECROPOLIS OF MONTERENZIO VECCHIO

The necropolis of Monterenzio Vecchio was fortuitously identified in 1882, but professional archaeologists only explored the area in depth a century later, between 1988 and 2005. The remains of wooden huts discovered on the flat hilltop dated the first occupation of the area back to the Late Bronze Age (8th century BC), while the Monterenzio Vecchio

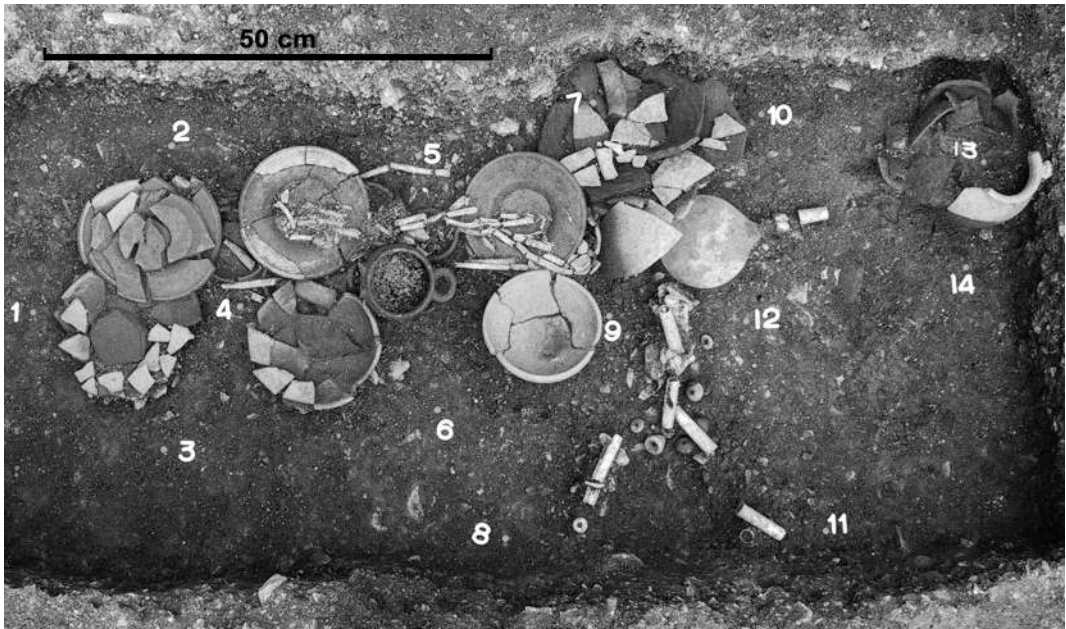


Fig. 3. — Grave 20. Adult woman burial with rich food offerings placed in bowls and small plates. (T. Lejars).

necropolis belongs to the Second Iron Age (4th-3rd century BC). The necropolis comprises several alignments of graves excavated in the hill slope on man-made artificial terraces. A first cluster of partially destroyed graves was found in 1988, whereas during recent excavations four artificial terraces with a total of 39 graves were discovered: 16 adult male burials, including 13 warriors and 3 civilians (with no weapons among the grave goods); 8 adult female burials; 2 adolescent burials of indeterminable gender and 7 burials of children, two of whom were certainly females. Post-depositional disturbances prevent the attribution of gender, role and social status for the remaining burials (Charlier 2006) (Fig. 2).

On the basis of comparisons with the nearby necropolis of Monte Tamburino, the burials excavated to date at Monterenzio Vecchio might range chronologically from the last decades of the 4th to the first decades of the 3rd century BC, corresponding to La Tène B2. This period represents the peak of Celtic presence in northern Italy and Celtic receptiveness to Mediterranean influences (Vitali *et al.* 2002).

In the Monterenzio Vecchio necropolis, the most frequently attested funerary practice is the burial

of dead adults in wide rectangular pits. Children's graves were less accurately excavated. The dead bodies were laid on the back with the head facing north, in wooden coffins generally placed along the eastern side of the pit; sometimes the body was set on bedding, as proven by the discovery of grave goods under the body. Cremation is only documented in four of the examined graves, where the burnt remains of the dead may have been stored in organic containers, as shown by the traces found in Grave 16.

An estimation of the age of death indicates that females lived to a relatively ripe old age, usually over 45 years; warriors' death age ranged between 19 and 40 years; the age of three non-warrior males was estimated between 45 and 60 years old. Unlike the nearby necropolis of Mount Tamburino, no remains of elderly individuals over 60 years old were discovered at Monterenzio Vecchio (Basili & Belcastro 2003; Usai 2003). The dead were always provided with a banquet set of pottery vases for food and beverage consumption, composed of between 9 and 20 containers, usually in ceramic or rarely in bronze. Meat offerings, consisting specifically of pork rib portions, were associated with the pottery banquet set.



Fig. 4. — Grave 32. Reconstruction of the meat offering composed of 4 portions created from 15 adjoining ribs, including 7 from the right hand side and 6 from the left (2 undefined) and 8 thoracic vertebrae. (E. Maini).

Specific tools directly related to the gender of the dead completed the grave goods (Della Casa *et al.* 2001). The main indicator of social and hierarchical differentiation in male burials was undoubtedly the presence (or absence) of weapons, such as swords, spears, javelins and occasional shields. Iron skewers and knives, probably related to the cutting and cooking of meat, characterized males buried without weapons. Moreover, dressing tools such as strigils, shears, razors and balm cruets were also discovered in male burials. Women's graves were usually marked by the presence of sewing related tools such as terracotta spindle whorls, associated in some cases with bone distaffs. In addition, women were usually buried with jewellery sets, which included composite necklaces made of amber and glass beads, iron and bronze ornaments and at times, silver brooches, finger rings and pendants. Bronze mirrors with bone handles enriched the set of dressing goods in three of the women's graves.

In three cases, the grave goods included a bronze mirror with a bone handle (Fig. 3). Juveniles (about 2-13 years old) were usually buried with one or two small pots, which were empty at the time of excavation. However, three juveniles were buried with sets of grave goods comparable to those of adults, including pottery vases, gender-related tools and a remarkable number of meat offerings. Clear inequalities in juvenile funerary offerings are further evidence for the presence of well-established hereditary social distinction.

ZOOARCHEAOLOGICAL AND TAPHONOMIC STUDIES

Faunal bone remains resulting from funerary food offerings were found in practically all the untouched graves in Monterenzio Vecchio, whether male or female, and without substantial qualitative or quan-



FIG. 5. — Grave 4. Adjoining ribs from the meat offering showing the longitudinal cutting of the spinal column for pig dismembering. (E. Maini).

titative differences between inhumations and cremations. Meat offerings were also discovered in the graves of three children, containing grave goods comparable in richness to those of most adults. Given the elements listed above, it was fundamental to reconstruct in detail the nature of the food offerings and the ritual procedures behind this practice, in order to understand the significance of these offerings as part of the funerary practices of the Etruscan-Celtic communities in the Idice Valley, and to some extent, in the whole of northern Italy.

The detailed evaluation of the post-depositional effects on the distribution of all the material discovered in the graves, combined with the data from the zooarchaeological analyses, allowed us to identify the exact animal portions offered to the dead and to establish their original collocation in the grave and their connection with the different pottery banquet elements. This study enabled us

to formulate plausible hypotheses concerning the customary ritual gestures adopted in the preparation of the graves. The results of the zooarchaeological study of every single grave were then extended to an overall evaluation of the necropolis, in order to verify the possible presence of repetitive patterns in funerary practices. This research indicates the substantial standardization of animal offerings, as proven by the exclusive use of pig (*Sus domesticus*) meat and also by the consistent choice of the same portions. The number of bone remains found in every single burial and their dimensional regularity suggest that a single animal was sacrificed for each funerary ritual. The offerings only consisted of pork chest portions, mainly ribs or a combination of ribs and vertebrae, always from juvenile or sub-adult animals. The faunal bone remains were anatomically related to skeletal parts from both the right and the left side of the pig's chest between the



FIG. 6. — Grave 14. Caudal view of the 14th thoracic vertebra with evidence of three cutting traces: (a) longitudinal section; (b) transverse cut of the column; (c) cut for disjoining the rib. (E. Maini).



FIG. 7. — Grave 20. Rib from the meat offering with three different cutting traces: (a) on the proximal epiphysis; (b) on the medial-proximal portion; (c) on the medial-distal portion. (E. Maini).

middle portion of the thoracic vertebrae (usually from the sixth thoracic vertebra) and the first lumbar vertebra. They generally included ribs between the seventh and the fourteenth, although some burials rich in meat offerings also included the fifth and the sixth ribs (Fig. 4).

Most of the bone remains show similar fractures and comparable cut marks in terms of type and position, which might be possible evidence for standard butchering and cooking practices. Judging from the streaked morphology, these butchering cut marks were all left by metallic tools. On the basis



FIG. 8. — Grave 16. Detail of continuous sub-parallel cutting traces on the ventral faces of four adjoining ribs; the fractures are visible in the upper part. (E. Maini).

of previous studies of pig butchering techniques in Celtic villages and necropolises (Ménier 2001), it was possible to understand the procedure used at Monterenzio Vecchio for butchering and portioning the pig's chest. The portioning, namely the reduction of the animal body and skeleton into single portions, began with the dissection of the pig into two halves through the lengthwise cutting of the vertebral column. The butchering procedure then continued with the separation of each half of the chest by cutting the costovertebral articulation, or alternatively with the division of the vertebral column into smaller portions without cutting the ribs off. In both cases the ribs were then broken into two parts, or more rarely into three parts, to obtain smaller portions that might be more easily placed in the pottery containers (Figs 5-7). On most ribs, in fact, clear cut marks have been detected on the

median side of the internal face, corresponding to fractures on the external side (Fig. 8). Such traces are due to the partial cutting of the ribs in order to weaken them and allow the manual bending of the portions just by pressing the ribs' extremities. Experimental tests confirmed that it is possible to gain better control of the fracture point, avoiding random bone breaking and the consequent production of splinters that might be dangerous for meat consumption, by just cutting shallow notches into the medial section of the ribs before bending them for breaking (Fig. 9).

The analysis of the distribution of animal remains in the burials, with particular reference to their spatial relations with the other grave goods, led to the reconstruction of the original position of the meat offerings for most graves. The different meat portions placed within the graves were



FIG. 9. — Experimental reconstruction of the cuts and fractures of a modern pig rib, compared with two ribs from the Monterenzio Vecchio necropolis. The ribs are fractured but not divided into two separate parts. (E. Maini).

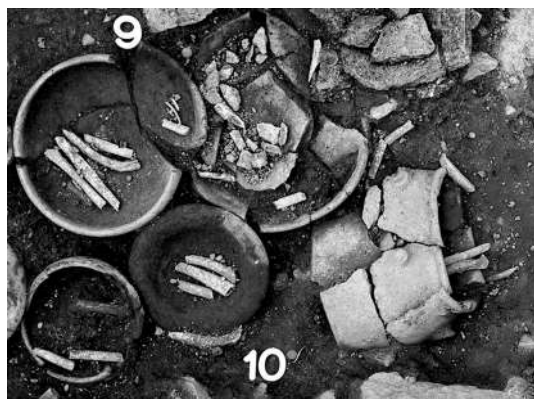


FIG. 10. — Grave 12. Warrior burial with a rich ceramic assemblage containing meat offerings. (T. Lejars).

made up of small groups of anatomically contiguous ribs (from two to four ribs each), which often presented continuous cut marks. These groups of ribs, which represented the actual meat offerings placed in the graves, were usually placed in a variable number of ceramic containers (up to 6), depending on the number of portions offered to the dead. Bowls (55%), mainly comprised of medium-sized bowls made of semi-depurated or *bucchero* ware, or more rarely of fine Etruscan black-gloss ware, were the most common ceramic vessels used for meat offerings. Stemmed dishes (27%), mainly made of *bucchero* ware, were also widely used. Bowls and dishes were commonly

used for the presentation and the consumption of food in everyday life, whereas the five *kylikes* used as containers for funerary meat offerings were usually associated with wine drinking (Fig. 10).

Since only a few remains bear superficial evidence of meat cooking, it is very difficult to establish whether the meat was deposited in the graves raw, or whether it was cooked beforehand in some cases. However, the general lack of heating traces may be due to boiling the meat or smoking the portions, or grilling the animal before portioning it.

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF MEAT OFFERINGS IN THE ETRUSCAN-CELTIC NECROPOLIS OF MONTERENZIO VECCHIO

The analysis of the animal bone remains found in the graves of the Etruscan-Celtic necropolis of Monterenzio Vecchio reveals the co-existence of ritual elements borrowed from both the pre-existing autochthonous Etruscans and the newly arrived Celtic people. The tradition of including meat offerings in the graves was already common among Etruscans in the Po Plain before the arrival of the Celts. The earliest evidence for meat funerary offerings in graves in the Italian territory dates back to the middle of the 8th century BC and is connected to the depositing of banquet and symposium pottery sets in the graves of men and women of high social rank (Bertani 1995). The diffusion of this practice was a direct consequence of the increasing importance of ritual banquets as a symbol of social status in north-central Italy, with particular reference to the Tyrrhenian Etruria, between the 6th and the 5th centuries BC. From the 4th century BC onwards, there is evidence for the standardization of grave goods and related food offerings, which became an integral part of the funerary ritual regardless of the social status of the dead (Bertani 1995).

As far as the Monterenzio Vecchio necropolis is concerned, no substantial differences due to gender or social status emerged from analysing

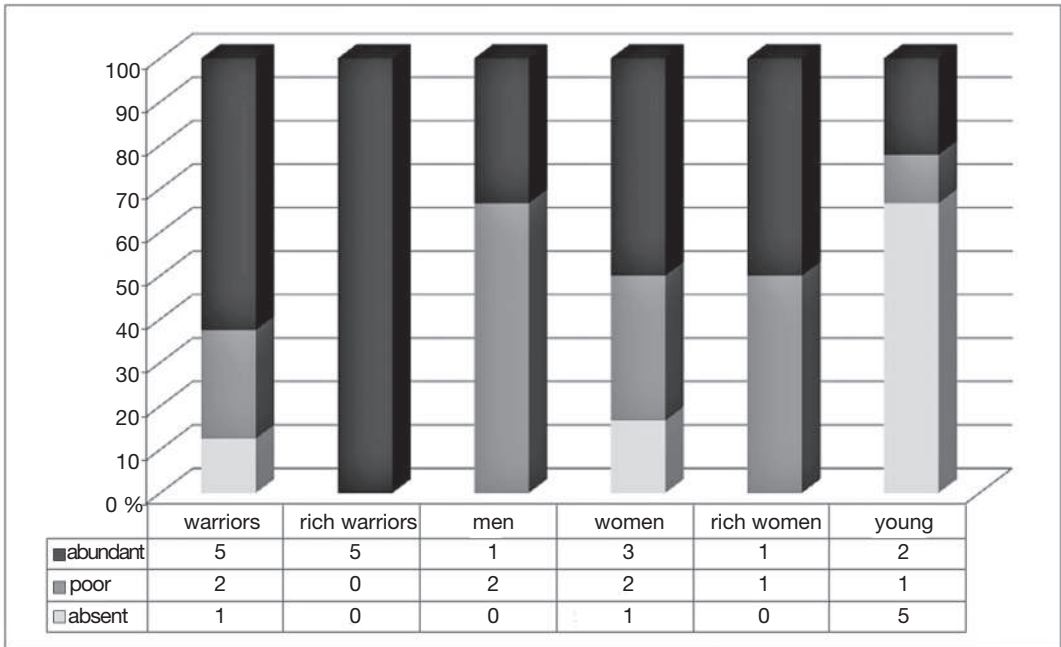


FIG. 11. — Graph showing the relationship between the abundance of the meat food offerings in relation to the status of the deceased and the wealth of funeral paraphernalia.

the quantitative and qualitative data available for grave goods with those obtained from the zooarchaeological analysis of the related meat offerings. Men, in particular those characterized by weapon deposits, were generally provided with more generous portions of meat whereas women were usually buried with less meat, regardless of the richness of the other grave goods. Burials of children and adolescents very rarely contained food offerings, but it is interesting to note that the richest graves of the whole necropolis in terms of meat portions belonged to two female children (Fig. 11).

Remains of animal or vegetal food offerings were found in many other necropolises across north-central Italy³, but the most suitable site for comparisons with

Monterenzio Vecchio is the nearby necropolis of Monte Tamburino, related to the Etruscan-Celtic settlement of Monte Bibeale. Archaeological research at the Monte Tamburino necropolis brought to light a total of 161 burials, which ranged from the end of the 5th to the middle of the 3rd century BC (Vitali 2003; Lejars *et al.* 2004; Della Casa *et al.* 2010). The practice of depositing meat portions from domesticated animals in the burials as ritual offerings also characterized the Monte Tamburino necropolis, but while at Monterenzio Vecchio funerary meat offerings consisted exclusively of pork, at Monte Tamburino three burials also contained sheep or goat bones (Ménier 2001, 2003)⁴. At both

burials of children contained chicken bones (Muggia 2004); Casa di Ricovero at Este, where burials contained bovine, pig, sheep-goat and bird bones (Bertani 1995); Santa Lucia di Tolmino where burials contained sheep back and rib remains (Tagliacozzo & Cassoli 1990).

4. Three burials in the Etruscan-Celtic necropolis of Monte Tamburino contained goat or sheep meat offerings. In particular, Grave 82 (burial of an over 60-year-old male) included the right scapula, humerus, radius and ulna and the left scapula, humerus, radius, ulna and carpus

3. Various zooarchaeological studies have been carried out on the faunal remains found in graves of several necropolises contemporary to Monterenzio Vecchio, in Emilia-Romagna and south-eastern Veneto: Bologna, Marzabotto di Casteldebole, Bazzano and Verucchio (Bertani 1995; Farello 2002); Valle Trebba at Spina, where

sites, meat portions ritually offered to the dead were mainly from the chest of a single juvenile pig. This evidence is coherent with the model reconstructed for the exploitation of pigs, which were only used for meat and hence killed at a young age in order to obtain the best balance between the quantity and quality of meat produced. Taphonomic analyses did not reveal any substantial differences in the butchering and portioning techniques between the two necropolises.

The abundant grave goods, including meat offerings discovered in the Etruscan-Celtic necropolises of Monterenzio Vecchio and Monte Tamburino, provide further evidence for the integration process between the native Etruscans and the Celts who migrated to the Po Plain and Northern Etruria from the middle of the 4th century BC onwards. The Celts who migrated south of the Alps borrowed the funerary custom of including banquet pottery sets among grave goods from the Etruscans, but at the same time they maintained their tradition of placing weapons in the graves. The custom of depositing food offerings beside the dead in the graves was thus a common practice in both cultures, even if it probably had different connotations in Etruscan and Celtic traditions (Vitali 1998).

COMMENTS ON RITUALISM

Archaeozoological studies enabled us to identify and describe the nature and characteristics of the animal bone remains discovered in the graves of the Etruscan-Celtic necropolis of Monterenzio Vecchio. Meat offerings always consisted of pork chest portions specifically presented to the dead and, although they do not represent prime pork cuts in terms of the quantity and quality of the meat, they were nonetheless good enough to be eaten. The regular presence of meat offerings in the Monterenzio Vecchio necropolis graves,

of a sheep or goat, plus six lumbar vertebrae cut lengthwise, part of the sacrum and the right portion of the coxal of a sheep or goat (Ménier 2003). Moreover, the faunal remains from Monte Tamburino have been also compared with animal remains found in the nearby related village of Monte Bible. No major difference between everyday and funerary contexts emerged in terms of the treatment and exploitation of animal resources (Giusberti 1990: 135-37; Curci *et al.* 2000).

the repetitive selection of pork chest portions similar to those intended for everyday consumption, and the possibility that they were cooked before being placed in the graves, point to the existence of an actual 'food of the dead'.

Nevertheless, at this stage it is very difficult to provide a precise functional and symbolic definition of this specific food for the dead. A first hypothesis might be connected to the practice of celebrating ritual banquets to honour the dead; during such banquets one or more animals were sacrificed and eaten by the guests, usually the relatives and the closest friends of the dead. Banquets were certainly an important feature of both Etruscan and Celtic ideologies, even though they represented different traditions and bore different connotations (Roncalli 1984; Steingraber & Weber-Lehman 1984; Sassatelli 1985; Ménier 1987, 2001; Cunliffe 2001: 212-25). Accordingly, it is highly plausible that this practice was also adopted during the funerary rituals officiated at Monterenzio Vecchio, where traces of interaction and integration between these two ethnic groups are particularly evident.

For the Etruscans, funerary rituals played a central role in social life; on those occasions economic power, hierarchic authority and cultural tradition were displayed to confirm and possibly increase the prestige and the reputation of the family of the dead. Banquet scenes painted on the walls of tombs in Tarquinia, Orvieto, Chiusi and other famous Etruscan sites depict sumptuous banquets organised in the proximity of tombs during funerals, with diners sitting beneath pavilions being entertained by musicians, dancers and sometimes even by vicious and violent performances. Even though these scenes do not represent any of the foods consumed, they give a clear idea of the importance of eating and drinking "along with the dead" during such banquets and consequently of placing food, and presumably also wine, for the dead in the tombs (Colonna 1985). In the Celtic territories of West-Central Europe, specific areas devoted to the celebration of ritual banquets have been discovered in the proximity of villages, necropolises and other sacred areas. Moreover, many historical sources describe banquets, and funerary banquets in particular, as one of the most characteristic features of Celtic communities (Brunaux 1986; Ménier 1989, 2001). For both the Etruscan and Celtic cultural components of the community related to the Monterenzio

Vecchio necropolis, banquets constituted key social and cultural events, during which the social position of the organisers within the community was exhibited and renegotiated (D'Agostino 1985).

Throughout time, many gestures and practices which originally had specific symbolic meaning and deep symbolic values, related to a particular ideology in the sphere of the divine and supernatural, may have taken on new significances derived from concrete and tangible ritual elements. Hence, the custom of placing food offerings in graves might just have become an empty routine for the people using the Monterenzio Vecchio necropolis, with almost no links with its original significance of celebrating the dead during ritual banquets. This interpretation might also be supported by the evident normalization of the funerary ritual, as proven by the standardization of the shape of the graves, grave goods and also meat offerings, which seem to have had a merely symbolic function, as the amount and variety of meat do not change significantly among individuals of different gender, age and social status. In conclusion, at present the discovery of meat offerings in the burials of the Etruscan-Celtic necropolis of Monterenzio Vecchio might have different possible interpretations. In fact, the same human actions and gestures can take on different meanings, often concurrent and overlapping, which might also change over time. Placing an animal, or part of an animal, in a burial might in fact be the result of a ritual sacrifice performed to celebrate the dead or to honour some god or deity, but it could also provide the dead with food for the afterlife, depending on whether it was offered during a ritual banquet with extended social significance, or just intimately placed in the grave.

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