

FORGET ME NOT... EXPOSURE OF CASE STUDIES DETECTED IN FUNERARY CONTEXTS, WHICH DEPOSITION IS UNUSUAL (PORTUGAL)

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ABSTRACT

Generally, in funerary contexts, the body deposition in the grave follows specific canons of every religion/chronology/social group, etc. Still, sometimes appear atypical funerary practices comparing with the applied to the majority of the population/group they belong.

Involvement in archeological diggings, usually done on the south region of Portugal, allowed collecting several cases which presents differentiated funerary practices.

In this work are presented several cases which were seen, separately or together, unusual funerary positions, presence of associated unexpected gifts or other atypical ritual parameters. The data from funerary anthropology were crossed with the biological profile of each individual, in order to search for eventual sexual group, age and/or population affinities relations as well as with types of pathologies.

Keywords: funerary practices; deposition; unusual; Portugal.

1. Introduction

Unusual burials are considered to be cases where the individual has been buried in a different way relative to the norm, for the period and /or population under examination.

Typically, unusual burial could be any inhumations or cremations, in cemeteries or isolated, associated with indicators of unusual ritual activity (e.g. cut marks, unusual artifacts).

Deformity and disease received scholarly attention in other centuries, but at the same time, they have also been the focus of social prejudice and superstition.

In all cultures, social and political practices changed over time, for various social, moral and/or political reasons. Thus some people who had previously been socially

excluded may begin to be incorporated into the wider social group. However the members of the majority (or dominant) population do not necessarily adapt to such changes. Stigma is an insidious concept, and although there may be social and even individual claims of acceptance of those who have been brought into fold, stigma and prejudice against them often remains.

In some cases, unusual disposal is accompanied by evidence for practices which indicated fear of the dead. The aim of this study was to indentify unusual burials in the Portuguese funerary context, and thorough a meticulous examination of the skeletons and their burial ritual try to understand or hypothesize why they were buried in such conditions.

2. Case Studies

CASE #1

This was the burial nr. 31 (Figure 1) from medieval/modern (XIV – XVI century) Santa Maria da Graça Necropolis (Lagos, 2005).



Figure 1 – Burial nr. 31 (Lagos, 2005) - the arrows show the location of the spikes.

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Was the only individual from a sample of 142 which funerary ritual was different. Although its position was in conformity with all the other burials (west-east fashion and supine position) there were some details that made all the difference. This young adult male had four iron spikes stuck in his manubrium and cervical, thoracic and lumbar vertebrae. Three spikes perforated the vertebrae and the one on manubrium bended due to its resistance.

The mandible shows an apparent cut mark that severed one incisor root. This cut was probably done *peri mortem* once there are no signs of remodeling on the bone.

A circular bronze object was placed near the pubic area.

CASE #2

It was the burial nr. 1 (Figure 2) excavated in the modern (XVI – XVIII century) São Salvador Necropolis (Sines, 2013).



Figure 2 – Burial nr. 1 (Sines, 2013) - the arrows show the location of the nail and the metal fragments.

From a sample of 37 primary burials he was the only individual who had an iron nail stuck. This adolescent male had the nail between the distal epiphysis and through the diaphysis.

This burial presented another strange feature. Over the distal right tibia was a concentration of metal fragments.

CASE #3

This was the case of the burial nr. 11 (FIGURE 3) from the modern (XVI – XIX century) Nossa Senhora da Luz Necropolis (Lagos, 2012).



Figure 3 – Burial nr. 11 (Lagos, 2012).

In a 13 individuals sample, this was the only who had a stone placed on the mouth.

This old female had some pathological lesions: infection on the palate and mandible, and pleural calcification.

CASE #4

This was the burial nr. 21 (Figure 4) from medieval/modern (XV – XVIII century) São Francisco Necropolis (Évora, 2004).

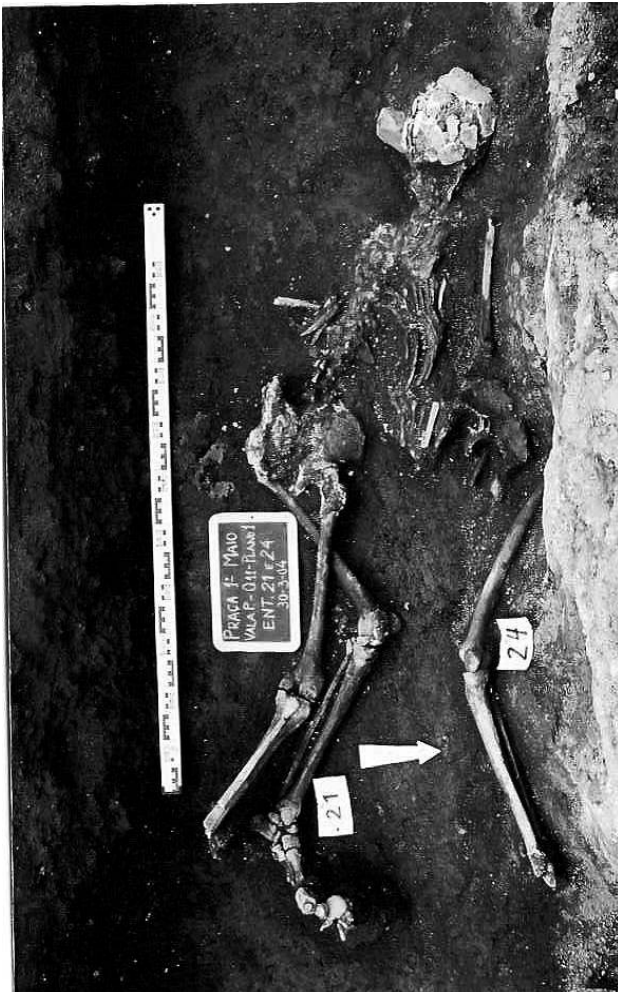


Figure 4 – Burial nr. 21 (Évora, 2004).

Was the only individual in a sample of 50 that was in a prone position.

The place where this adult male was buried didn't show any grave limits.

CASE #5

From the same necropolis of case #4, this was the only inhumation that was leaning against the grave wall. This was the burial nr. 16 (Figure 5).

It was an adult female with no other singularity except that she was wearing 2 big circular copper earrings with 3 bone beads each.

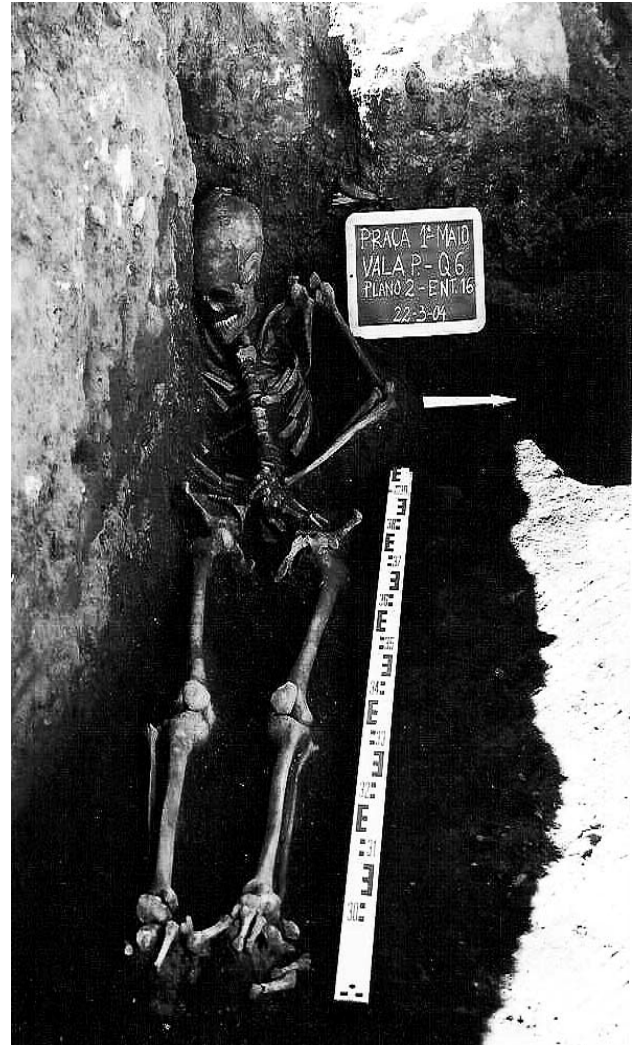


Figure 5 – Burial nr. 16 (Évora, 2004).

CASE #6

This was the burial nr. 106 (FIGURE 6) from the modern (XVI – XIX century) São Francisco Necropolis (Castelo de Vide, 2009).

From a sample of 106 primary burials this was the only case of an individual in a prone position.

This mature adult male, had his left arm behind the neck and the legs, right arm and skull were missing.

It was the first inhumation in one of the only two stone graves in front of the altar.



Figure 6 – Burial nr. 106 (Castelo de Vide, 2009).

CASE #7

From the same necropolis of case #6, the burial nr. 55 (Figure 7) was the only inhumation that was in left lateral position.

Was a young adult female (with several bones missing, probably due to human disturbance) that was wearing a thick iron “bracelet” in her right wrist.

This individual was placed on the ground, with no visible grave limits, to the left of one of the two stone graves in front of the altar.



Figure 7 – Burial nr. 55 (Castelo de Vide, 2009).

CASE #8

This is the case of the burial #124 (Figure 8) from the medieval/modern (XIII – XVIII century) Santa Maria do Olival Necropolis (Tomar, 2008).

It was the only prone position occurrence in a sample of 3675 primary burials.

Was a mature adult male (with several bones missing, probably due to human disturbance). His right hand was placed over the left hand, close to the thorax.

There was a silver alloy ring in the right hand and there were no grave limits visible on the ground.



Figure 8 – Burial nr. 124 (Tomar, 2008).

CASE #9

From the same necropolis of case #8, this was the burial nr. 151 (Figure 9). The only in a sample of 3675 primary burial, that was found in this way.

Was a mature adult male, with his skull intentionally rotated backwards.

He had several old fractures on the nose and face, and also showed *peri mortem* cut marks on the skull.



Figure 9 – Burial nr. 151 (Tomar, 2008).

CASE #10

Also from the necropolis of São Salvador (Sines, 2013), the burial nr.11 (Figure 10), was the only in 37 primary burials that was found with several coins.

There were other burials (the majority) with a coin associated, but in those cases was a single copper coin. This burial was found with 25 silver coins (from 3 continuous dynasties – D. João III, D. Sebastião, D. Filipe II of Portugal).

It was a mature adult male with a few bone lesions: pleural calcification and alteration of the right femoral condyle.

Last but not least, this individual has a distinctive trait: dental mutilation of anterior upper dentition.



Figure 10 – Burial nr. 11 (Sines, 2013).

3. Discussion

Although the chronology presented in these 10 cases is from the medieval/modern period, the unusual burials can be seen in all periods (pre-historical and historical). These cases are just a sample from a larger universe found in excavations in which the authors participated.

Unfortunately we were limited in the choice of the cases, for various reasons. The time for the presentation was one of the factors. Other reason was that most of the excavations in which the authors participated were from the medieval or/and modern period, and the last factor that affected the choice of the cases, was a legal one (rights over the material from some of the excavations).

In some of these cases was very difficult to establish an obvious reason for the ritual presented in the burial.

However, there are situations like the case #1, in which we could suppose that this individual was nailed to the

ground because in some way the community was afraid that he could come back from the world of the dead.

In the case #2, the metal fragments in the distal right tibia, could be remains from a chain, but we have to wait for the study of the material to be completed before proceed with a reliable explanation.

The stone in the mouth of the woman from the case #3 could be seen as a method to try to stop something, like a disease, from spreading. This seems to be a reasonable explanation due to the infectious lesion seen on palate and mandible (sometimes this kind of lesions could be very unpleasant at sight). One could suppose that the stone simply fall into the mouth, but this was a case in which there was no coffin (closed space burial), and that stone was the only found in the grave.

The individual from case #4 was apparently thrown to the ground, maybe because he had an unpleasant appearance (for example by disease), although there were no bone lesions (once a pathology does not always leave bone lesions).

The position of the female from case #5 may have a very simple explanation, like the fact that the gravedigger made a grave too small for the body, once this individual didn't show any other strange features.

There is no reasonable explanation for the position of the individual from case #6. Just the fact that this situation occurred inside a church in one of only two stone graves in front of the altar is very awkward. Prone position is not typical in the Christian ritual as well as the position of the arm. The best explanation for the missing bones is that someone took them (taphonomic processes can be excluded).

The young female from case #7 was wearing an iron shackle. This fact along with the type of deposition could be indicator of a person considered to be inferior in some way (probably a slave, although the ethnicity couldn't be confirmed in this case).

In case #8, just the fact that was 1 in almost 4000 burials is strange. The hands crossed over the thorax and the prone position could suggest a fatal aggression, and the lack of grave limits could imply an attempt to hide that event.

The male from case #9 was almost certainly a bully as the several old lesions in the face can suggest. Probably it was killed from the back (*peri mortem* cuts on the back of the skull). The rotation of the skull (*post mortem* and after decomposition) show that someone was angry enough with him to wait several years to did that.

In case #10 the unusual situation are the 25 silver coins. The dental mutilation suggests an African individual. This could be a former slave that gained the coins from his master, succeeded during his freedom or had in his conscious the thought that he had to pay for his salvation.

4. Final Considerations

The process of interpretation in this kind of context could be risky, with the formulation of hypothesis that may appear implausible.

Benefits could be gained from collaborative framework between anthropology, paleopathology, archaeology, sociology, historic literature and related disciplines, for a better understanding of the remains of the past societies.

5. Bibliography

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