

III-Treatment of Women in Ancient Rome: Contribution of Paleopathology to the Reconstruction of Violence. A Case Report

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Introduction

Many cultures have seen the male as a dominant figure, thus making the female figure the most common victim of abuse. The results of violent episodes may be observed in ancient skeletal remains because the bones can sometimes tell us more about past history than words. This is the case of the described skeletal remains affected by multiple inflicted traumas.

Material and Methods

The skeletal remains described were found in 2002 during excavations directed by the Special Superintendence to Archaeological Heritage of Rome in the Collatina necropolis, placed in the eastern part of modern Rome. This important funerary area is the largest of the Imperial Age (I century BC - III century AC) so close to the Urbe, with 2500 burials of different typologies, many of which placed along the ancient Via Collatina, an important commercial route during the Roman Imperial Age. Archaeological data suggest the presence of different social classes belonging to the Urbe (Buccellato *et al.*, 2008). The skeleton, fairly well preserved and in supine posture, was buried in a *loculo* excavated in tuff rock; the upper part of the body (skull and thorax) was covered only by a tile, with no funerary equipment. Diagnosis of the sex was performed on the basis of the morphological characteristics of the skull and pelvis (Ferembach *et al.*, 1977-79; Canci and Minozzi, 2005) and age determination was based on dental wear and stage of fusion of the cranial sutures (Meindl and Lovejoy, 1985; Lovejoy, 1985). Palaeopathological diagnoses were performed by means of macroscopic and X-ray examination.

Results

The remains belong to a mature female aged over 50 years, of medium stature (153 cm, calculated by long bone length;

Sjøvold, 1990). The spine shows degenerative changes due to physical stress and advanced age, such as osteoarthritis with lipping and osteophytosis, and Schmorl's nodes, suggesting heavy activities and repeated carrying of loads on the back (Kelley, 1982; Sward, 1992). Despite the gracile skeleton, the muscular attachments are strong, indicating considerable work activity. The skeletal marker of repeated childbirths, in particular the very deep and enlarged pre-auricular *sulci* of the hip bones, are evident (Kelley, 1979; Roberts and Manchester, 2007).

Several traumatic events left their signs on the bones. The skull shows the most severe injuries as a result of different and past traumatic episodes: one depressed area is visible on the frontal bone, near the bregma, and at least six large and deep depressions are present on the parietal and occipital bones (Fig. 1). These lesions were caused by different traumatic events, because the depressions are limited by circular, in some cases overlapping edges; furthermore, considering their large extension, the lesions would probably not have healed, if they had been the result of only one or two events. This suggests repeated and long-term injuries. The right parietal bone shows alterations of the endocranial surface: the meningeal groove appears large and deep and numerous vascular channels and pitting affect this region which is characterised by a complex maze of interconnected convoluted channels. These are likely to be the result of hemorrhagic-inflammatory meningeal reactions caused by the traumas. X-ray examination confirmed the evidence of well-recovered traumatic lesions and enlargement of the meningeal artery sulcus of the right parietal bone. The jaw presents the outcome of a bilateral fracture of the mandibular *ramus*: on the right, the *ramus* presents bone remodeling, secondary to a well-repaired fracture, and osteoarthritis of the condilus. On the left, the *ramus* shows an ill-recovered fracture: the primary fibrous callus was not mineralized and a pseudo-articular surface, consisting of fibrous bone, covered the extremities, with the development of pseudoarthrosis. Pseudoarthrosis may have been caused by high distance between the fractured extremities, lack of immobilization and insufficient vascularization.

Signs of other traumatic events are also visible in the post-cranial bones: the left clavicle shows an enthesopathy on the attachment of the conoid ligament, probably caused by a tear of the coracoclavicular ligament, joining the acromial

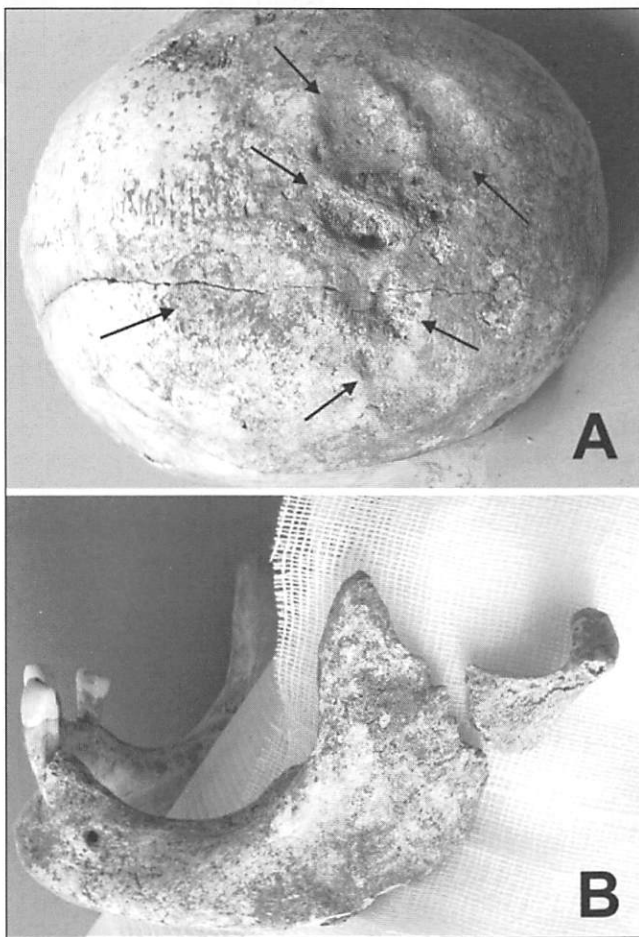


Fig. 1. The results of multiple traumatic injuries. A: different large and deep depressions on the parietal and occipital bones (black arrows). B: Unrepaired fracture of the left mandibular ramus with two separated stumps and pseudo-arthritis.

extremity of the clavicle with the coracoid apophysis of the scapula. The right clavicle presents modification of the acromial extremity with bone remodelling and new bone apposition at the attachment of the trapezoid ligament, secondary to muscle tear and possible clavicle subdislocation.

The right radius shows bone thickness and diaphyseal bowing of the distal tract; the incomplete ulna shows similar bowing and alteration at the same diaphyseal point. X-ray examination confirms the traumatic cause of the lesions, completely repaired in the radius. This kind of trauma is called "parry fracture", a typical bone fracture caused by raising the forearm in self-protective reaction, trying to parry a blow during an aggression.

Discussion

The evidences of repeated and long-term injuries in the skeleton with skeletal markers of repeated childbirth suggest domestic abuse and ill-treatment during the course of life of this aged woman. We know nothing about her social position, but the poor burial with no funerary goods testify humble or slave origins. The role of women was very low in the ancient Roman society. For the Roman law, a woman was

not a real *civis romanus*, for example she could not vote or be a witness in court and was subdued to male authority. As a girl, she depended on her father; as a married woman, to her husband, and as a widow, to a tutor. A woman was not the owner of her personal belongings, she had no personal name, but assumed her *gens* name, so that two sisters had the same name and "the minor" or "the second" as nicknames": negation of the name indicated lack of identity. It was not possible for a woman to divorce, even if her husband had committed adultery but, according to the law, a man could murder both an adulterous wife and her lover, if he discovered infidelity.

Very few examples of violent husbands or of domestic abuse are reported in Roman history, and the sources rarely describe the life of the female population, as most examples regard the upper social classes whose behavior was considered worth recording. For example, the Emperor Nero was suspected of having had his first wife Claudia Ottavia tortured and then murdered (Tacitus, *Annals* XVI.6). He then married Poppaea Sabina the Younger, who was killed by one of his violent aggressions while she was pregnant (Gourevitch and Raepsaet-Charlier, 2003). Other examples of domestic abuse are referred to the Emperor Commodus, who killed both his wife and his sister (McLynn, 2009). Although we know very little about the real life conditions and domestic violence in Imperial Rome, and it is impossible to provide crime statistics relating to two thousand years ago, the traumas observed on skeletal remains can help reconstruct aspects of the social life and female condition.

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