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A case of semi-combusted pregnant female in the Phoenician-Punic necropolis of Monte Sirai (Carbonia, Sardinia, Italy)



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ABSTRACT

We present a case of a pregnant woman with the fetus skeletal remains *in situ*, belonging to the Phoenician-Punic necropolis of Monte Sirai (Sardinia, Italy). The burial dates back to the late 6th to early 5th century BCE. Of the unborn fetal cases documented in the literature this is amongst the oldest four and it represents the first documented case of a pregnant woman in the Phoenician and Punic necropolis literature. A physico-chemical investigation of bones combining X-ray diffraction and Fourier transform-infrared spectroscopy suggests that the female skeleton and fetus were subjected to an incomplete heat treatment according to a funerary practice, perhaps limited to the period of early 5th century BCE, that appears to be peculiar to this site.

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Introduction

Generally ancient populations are characterized by a high level of female mortality, mainly related to the reproductive period, and mostly associated with childbirth complications (Campillo, 1995; Molleson, 1986; Wells, 1975). However, very few cases of pregnant females have been documented in the archaeological record during the prehistory and early history, although complications of pregnancy and childbirth should be regarded as causes of numerous deaths in the past (Malgosa et al., 2004). This could be due to several reasons. People who normally exhume skeletons from archaeological sites may confuse fetal remains with microfaunal evidence (Rascón et al., 2007). It may not be until anthropologists carry out meticulous observations at a laboratory that the fetal elements are recognized. On the other hand, biases on fetal preservation could occur by a combination of physical and chemical processes affecting drastically their fragile parts (Lewis, 2007; Stojanowski, 2002). It is also possible that the remains are placed in large collective burials, where commingled bones sometimes show the presence of fetuses together with skeletons of adult persons (De Miguel, 2010). In the case of double burials, which contain a woman and a child, the cause of death could be unrelated to childbirth but rather to violence, sacrifice, illness or accidents, among others. Also, if birth took place, and both mother and baby died, they may have been buried independently (Malgosa et al., 2004).

In this paper we present a case of a pregnant woman with skeletal remains of a fetus *in situ*, belonging to the Phoenician–Punic necropolis of Monte Sirai (Carbonia, Sardinia, Italy). This case is significant because: (a) it represents the first documented case of a buried pregnant woman in the Phoenician and Punic contexts; (b) of all the cases documented in the literature of women entombed with a fetus inside the abdominal cavity this is amongst the oldest four; (c) the bones of the woman and fetus seem to have undergone an heat treatment unconventional with respect to classical incineration practice.

Materials and methods

Brief archaeological information about the Monte Sirai necropolis

The site of Monte Sirai is located in the south-western part of Sardinia near the city of Carbonia (Fig. 1). It is thought to have been established by the Phoenicians of Sulky (today known as *S. Antioco*) or by the early settlers living in the village of Portoscuso around 740 BCE. Soon after its foundation, the site assumed an importance for its strategic position near the coastline and as a gateway to the Campidano plain of the island (Bartoloni, 2000).

Excavations of the site were conducted between 1963 and 1966 and then again in 1980 and between 2005 and 2010 (Bartoloni, 2000; Guirguis, 2005, 2010, 2012). These research excavations identified three distinct burial areas. The first is a broad valley that opens just east of the chambers tombs and is of Punic Age (Hypogeum sector), with two other distinct areas along the north–east direction. The southern sector has returned the oldest evidence to date (late 6th century BCE), while the Y8 square directed eastward and northern to the so-called “parking area” gradually achieved the horizons of late archaic and early Punic Age. Tomb T316, which contained the skeletal remains of a pregnant woman belongs to this decentralized sector of the necropolis. The pottery elements in use from the end of 6th to the beginning of the 5th century BCE have been used to date the grave (Guirguis, 2011). In the period between 2005 and 2010, 96 burials were identified and subsequently attributed to an extended chronological period between the end of the 7th and the second half of the 4th century BCE.

In the documentation gathered during the latest excavations it was noted that the oldest contexts do not go further back than the 7th century BCE. During the early development of the necropolis (i.e., from the end of the 7th to the second half of the 4th century BCE) there is some variety in funeral rites adopted among which primary incineration is the predominant (Guirguis, 2010, 2011).

Osteoprofiling

Two individuals were recovered from grave T316: the adult body was in supine position, head turned to the east, arms outstretched alongside with slightly bent elbows (Fig. 2). Moreover, a fetal

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