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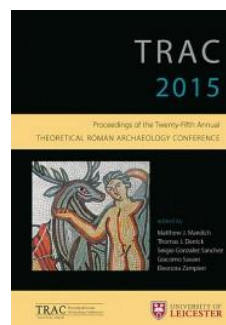
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# Fear of the Dead? 'Deviant' Burials in Roman Northern Italy

*Alessandro Quercia\* and Melania Cazzulo<sup>1</sup>*

## *Introduction: A Theoretical Background*

In the last 20 years, especially in British and northern European academia, research approaches to funerary archaeology have focused on 'deviant' burials, characterized by different treatments in burial rites when compared with other members of their society. According to the archaeological literature, unusual or anomalous burials are considered to be 'cases where the individual has been buried in a different way relative to the norm of period and/or the population under examination' (Tsaliki 2008: 1).

Analysis of the tomb, including its grave goods, together with the human skeletal remains provide significant information about the nature of the social, political and, more broadly, cultural status of the deceased during their lifetime, and/or his/her mode of death. Also, different mortuary treatment for 'special' individuals can be observed when the funerary data is compared with other members of their society.

There is extensive literature about the methodological and theoretical premises of how to identify a 'deviant' burial (in particular, Tsaliki 2008, Murphy 2008, and Ortalli 2010). Also, there is still a wide and lively debate about the correct use of terminology for indicating these unusual funerary practices. Some scholars view these 'deviant' burials as belonging to individuals who had special status, either during their lifetime (shamans, witches, medicine men, or criminals and murderers), or in circumstances of death (suicide victims, dead women during childbirth) and then marginalized. An irrational fear towards these marginalized individuals pushed 'normal' people to use unusual and often horrific funerary practices and acts, with supposed magic value, in order to contain the possible physical and spiritual return of the dead or negative influences from them.

It is difficult, however, to associate every atypical burial exclusively to negative causes – as evidence of crime, deviance, and marginality. In fact, other scholars, in particular the German ones (Aspöck 2008: 19–23), emphasize the exclusivity and exceptionality of these burials and consider this negative connotation inappropriate and, therefore, use more neutral terms, such as 'differential', 'atypical', or 'non-normative', since the motivations behind these different burial rites can be various and associated with complex ranges of different social and religious beliefs.

In the field of archaeology, unusual burials are often difficult to identify, as this depends on the experience and knowledge of the excavators and recorders. Such burials can be distinguished in the archaeological record by examining both the location and external characteristics of the grave alongside the analysis of any associated grave goods, the position of the body itself, and any

items meant to restrict movement of the body after burial. A collaborative and multidisciplinary approach, including data from archaeology and anthropology, palaeopathology, literature, and sociology, can therefore be effective for a more accurate interpretation of such ambiguous burials, and for understanding the complexities involved when dealing with non-normative burials in the archaeological record.

Anastasia Tsaliki (2008: 2, Tables 1.1 and 1.2) provides the basic criteria for distinguishing the different forms of unusual burials documented within different cultures. As Tsaliki emphasized, these criteria are not to be considered exhaustive but rather a guide for recording unusual cases. Fundamentally, she distinguishes: 1) primary and secondary burials in unusual places and/or unusual positions when compared with the ordinary burial customs of a specific society, or of the time period, for instance skeletal remains in wells, pits, or kilns, skeletons laid in prone position; 2) mass burials without historical evidence for crisis; 3) burials associated with indicators of unusual ritual activity, such as cut marks and unusual artifacts of possible symbolic and ritual use; 4) cremations found in a inhumation site or vice-versa and; 5) skeletons with evidence of crime, execution, torture, or special mortuary ritual such as infanticide, senicide, human sacrifice, or cannibalism. In some of these anomalous burials, intentional practices suggesting necrophobia (fear of the dead), such as methods of restriction of the dead within the grave, have been recognized in archaeological and osteological evidence. The possible indicators of necrophobia in funerary contexts are taken up by Tsaliki (2008: 2, table 1.2) in the following list: a) skeleton with evidence of physical and symbolical restrictions of the dead (tied body parts, presence of nails and stakes, rocks and other weights over the deceased) for securing the burials; b) skeleton with evidence of mutilation and post-mortem body manipulation, such as cutting off and dislocation of body parts; c) skeleton in prone or unconventional position and; d) bodies buried unusually deep in the ground.

These practices are suggestive of apotropaic and preventive measures in order to deal with the fear of rising dead and harmful ghosts. For instance, the practice of turning the corpse face-down was likely viewed as necessary for additional control of the deceased (Taylor 2008: 100–102, 107–108). In addition, this position prevented the soul from leaving the body, tied to a belief that souls leave the body through the mouth, and/or may protect the living from the ‘evil eye’ of the dead (Aspöck 2008: 19–20).

Osteoarchaeological analysis can identify pathological conditions which caused malformations and disabilities of the body, or affected the deceased’s mental state and behavior, suggestive of social marginalization of the individual during their lifetime, as well as in the features of their burial. It must be said, however, that in the majority of the cases no pathologies, signs of illness, or diseases were present which indicate physical characteristics of the dead, making them anomalous during their lifetime. As Shay (1985) demonstrated within the field of sociology and ethnography, criteria of deviancy vary in different societies. Additionally, deviant burials may not reflect the status of the deceased during his/her life but rather certain actions or the circumstances of death. Furthermore, Shay observed that volitional forms of deviance (e.g. criminal acts), and non-volitional deviancies (e.g. illness, death during childbirth) are not distinguished in simple societies and therefore are treated equally at death.

Actually, some so-called ‘deviant’ burials could display ‘minority’ rites which are simply part of the normal range of funerary practices used by a particular society (Murphy 2008: xvii). The need to study atypical burials within the context of the normal burial rites of a particular society, rather than in isolation is clearly evident. As Aspöck rightly emphasizes (2008: 30), ‘deviant’ burials need to be studied together with ‘normal’ burials. Furthermore, the motivation(s) behind

these differential burial practices can therefore be diverse and overlap. They can be difficult to interpret and can be associated with a highly complex array of different social and religious beliefs.

We should also take into account that our Western system of beliefs of what constitutes a normal burial rite can influence our perceptions of ‘anomalous’ burials in past societies. Finally it cannot be ruled out that other non-ritual factors such as post-depositional processes, and even careless undertakers, could result in the odd positioning of the body.

### *Unquiet Dead in the Greco-Roman World: The Textual Sources*

If we focus specifically on the Greco-Roman world, we can observe that the textual sources provide some information about unusual forms of funerary practices within the normal range of burial rites, which are linked to the marginalized status of the deceased or to particular circumstances of death, such as premature passing, suicide, death in childbirth, murder victims, and so on (for a brief list of the relevant classical texts, Tsaliki 2008: 8; Braccini 2011: 31–54). They were considered *Biaiothanatoi*, ‘unquiet dead’, and they were who the living feared would return to the world of the living in the form of evil spirits, ghosts, and harmful entities (Tsaliki 2008: 4).

Roman literature mentions infrequently cases of revenants, whose physical bodies leave the grave to haunt and attack the living or for non-negative purposes. Phlegon of Tralles, a Greek writer living during the Hadrianic period (second century A.D.) mentions the case of Phillinion in his book *Peri thaumasion (Book of Marvels)*, a young girl who died prematurely immediately after she married and returned in order to successfully seduce a young man (on the tale see also Braccini 2011: 32–35). Mostly, the revenants appear as *umbrae* and specters which lack solid bodies.

Forms of restriction for preventing the dead from coming back to life are also almost non-existent in the texts. The only case is one that appears in the *Sepulcrum Incantatum*, a tale included in a second century A.D. *declamatio* attributed incorrectly to Quintilian (*Declamationes Maiores*, 10), where a grave was secured with iron chains and stakes to prevent the soul of the dead young boy from leaving his grave and visiting his mother (see Braccini 2011: 211–213). Furthermore, we know from Pliny the Elder (*Naturalis Historia* 28, 2, 7) that parts of skeletons, in particular the skulls, were used in Roman times for necromantic practices and were probably frequently stolen from graves.

### *Anomalous Burials in Roman Northern Italy*

Unlike research on Roman and Anglo-Saxon Britain, only the last few years have seen particular attention paid to atypical burials associated with the Roman period in northern Italy, with a particular interest on the area facing the North Adriatic sea (for instance the papers collected in the volume edited by Belcastro and Ortalli 2010; also Costantini 2013; for a distribution of anomalous burials in Roman northern Italy, Fig. 1).

Particularly in the region of *Aemilia* anomalous burials are documented from the pre-Roman period (fourth century B.C.) until late Antiquity, with the concentration of evidence dating mostly to the Roman imperial period. A pre-Roman cemetery investigated at Casalecchio di Reno, near Bologna, yielded a conspicuous number of anomalous graves. Most of the corpses buried in these tombs show traces of being tied up with bands and ropes *post mortem*, likely to prevent the dead from leaving the grave (Pancaldi and Raggi 2010: Fig. 2.1).



Figure 1: Distribution of anomalous burials in Roman northern Italy.

The investigation of a Roman necropolis at Bologna including over 200 burials dating between the first and the third centuries A.D. unearthed at least four graves with unusual features (Cornelio-Cassai and Cavallari 2010; Milella *et al.* 2010). In fact, these four tombs include variously manipulated individuals. Two corpses were partially mutilated and nailed, or nails and spikes were positioned close to them (tombs nos. 76 and 109; Cornelio-Cassai and Cavallari 2010: 85–90; Milella *et al.* 2010: 94–96; Fig. 2.2). Tomb no. 161 (Fig. 3: 1) contains a prone individual, pierced by one nail with another one located on the body and small nails belonging to two *caligae* (shoes) were found under the skull (Cornelio-Cassai and Cavallari 2010: 87–88; Milella *et al.* 2010: 96). The practice of depositing *caligae* is difficult to explain fully. It has been claimed that depositing them alongside the corpse, instead of on the feet, underlined the motivation of preventing the dead from walking back to the living world (Cornelio-Cassai and Cavallari 2010: 93).

In contrast, the young woman buried in tomb no. 244 (Fig. 3: 2) preserved only the lower part of her body (Cornelio-Cassai and Cavallari 2010: 91–92; Milella *et al.* 2010: 97). The insertion of a glass unguentarium into her pelvis likely occurred in a second phase after the burial, perhaps when parts of the body were taken away, potentially for necromantic rites.

Other atypical treatments of the dead were identified in the tombs of the *Aemilia* area. The practice of covering the corpse with stones for ‘retaining’ the dead is attested in two Roman tombs from Sarsina (Ortalli *et al.* 2008: 49). Furthermore, decapitated frogs were positioned

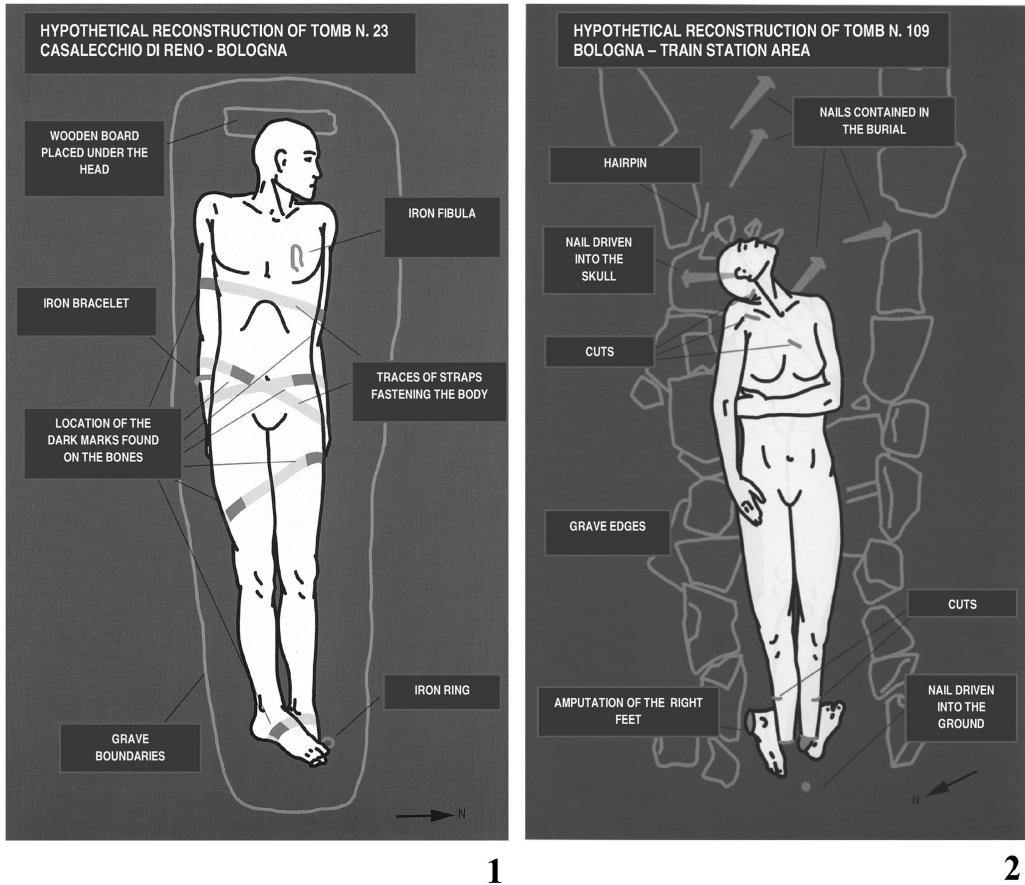


Figure 2: Reconstructions of anomalous graves from the Emilia region. 1) Casalecchio di Reno, tomb no. 2, fastened individual (after Pancaldi and Raggi 2010: 83); 2) Bologna, tomb no. 109, nailed individual (after Cornelio-Cassai and Cavallari 2010: 100).

alongside the deceased in the grave of a newborn at Baggiovara, near Modena, dating to the fifth or sixth century A.D. (Labate and Palazzini 2010: 123; Mariotti *et al.* 2010: 126–127).

### *The Evidence in Piedmont (North-Western Italy)*

Anomalous and non-normative burials have been recently recognized in Piedmont (north-western Italy) as well. In particular, a few Roman imperial-period burials from this region yielded either individuals lying face-down, bearing systems of physical restriction or buried with a series of iron nails, which were used for ‘retaining’ the dead in the tomb because of their magical connotations.

As early as the 19th century, scholars mentioned evidence of nailed skulls discovered in the area of Eastern Piedmont; in particular the Roman city of Dertona (modern Tortona) – very close to Carbonara Scrivia (the site of the case-study below) – yielded 14 cases of this practice (Bottazzi 1815: 184), and another similar case is recorded for a specimen from Libarna. Since

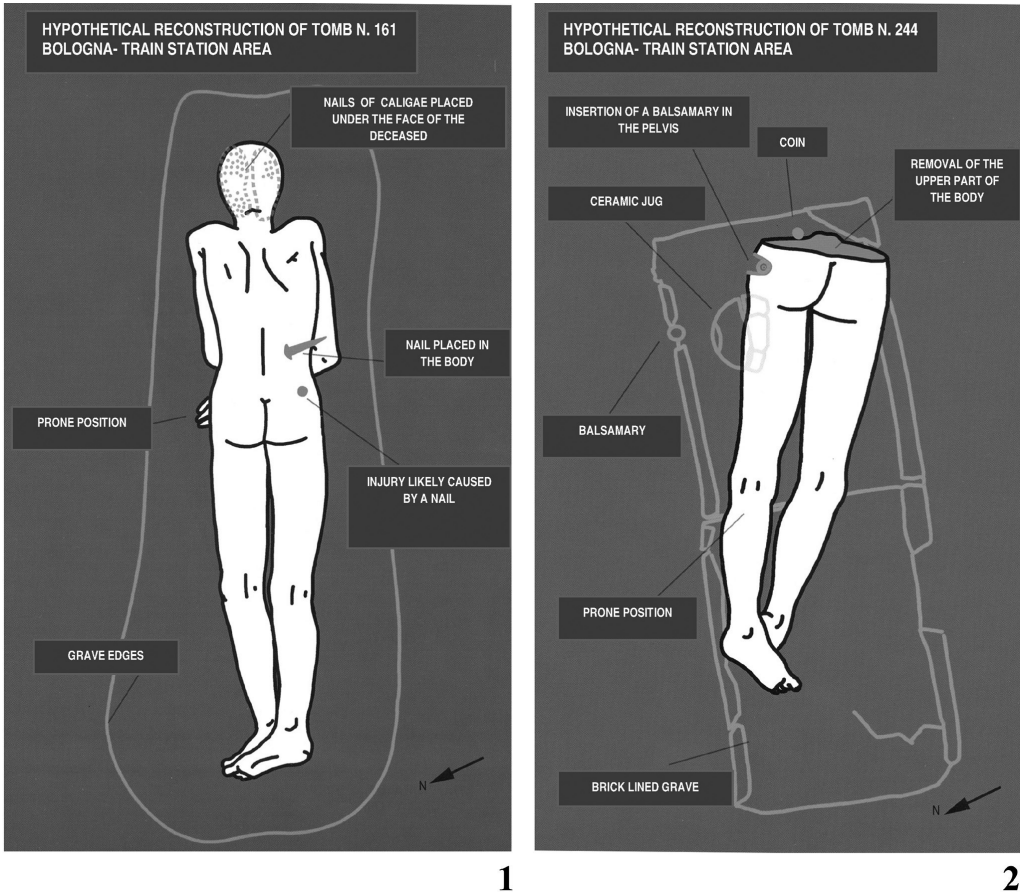


Figure 3: Reconstructions of anomalous graves from Aemilia region 1) Bologna, tomb no. 161, prone individual (after Cornelio-Cassai and Cavallari 2010: 101); 2) Bologna, tomb no. 244, mutilated individual with an insertion of an unguentarium in the pelvis (after Cornelio-Cassai and Cavallari 2010: 102).

the bones are not consistently preserved, however, a control of the relevant archaeological data is impossible; it cannot be ruled out that the nails could have belonged instead to the coffin.

The use of nails for magical goals, which is attested in other contexts of Roman Italy (see Ceci 2001), is recorded also for a cremation burial in the necropolis of Tronzano Vercellese. Here, the cinerary urn was found ‘tutta ricinta di chiodi disposti in modo che intrecciati insieme a guisa di fitta rete lo circondavano’ – all surrounded by nails arranged in a way that they resembled a dense net (Bruzza 1874: li–lii). A similar case is attested at Aquileia, in north-eastern Italy: the funerary enclosure dedicated to *Q. Etvivius Capreolus*, a soldier from Gallia Narbonensis, contains a funerary urn surrounded by a dozen *tribuli*, four pointed metal objects used during military actions for slowing infantry and cavalry of the opposite army down (Giovannini 2000: 121). It has to be said that in some cases the magic use of nails in graves could also have been a form of securing the dead, and the tomb itself, from violations by spiteful living people and from hostile visits of evil spirits and ghosts.



Figure 4: Acqui Terme, tomb no. 3. Skeleton with the indication of the nails (photo Melania Cazzulo © Soprintendenza Archeologia del Piemonte).



Evidence of anomalous burials was also identified in a necropolis of the Roman town of *Alba Pompeia*, during the excavations between 1973 and 1975. In particular, two first century A.D. graves with female individuals laid face-down were recovered, while in a male tomb dated to the third century A.D. the corpse was buried supine and ‘blocked’ by a spike which was bent over around each ankle (Spagnolo-Garzoli 1997: 299; 361–362, 401–402). In this last tomb some small nails were found, which were probably related to the presence of *caligae* (Spagnolo-Garzoli 1997: 299; 401–402). It should be noted that inhumations are documented much less frequently in Roman Piedmont, especially for the early Roman imperial period, so therefore the presence of prone and ‘secured’ inhumations is culturally quite distinctive. Unfortunately, the bones from these three graves from *Alba Pompeia* were reburied without any osteological analysis.

A rather controversial case is represented by a burial recently investigated by the *Soprintendenza Archeologia del Piemonte* in the Roman city of *Aquae Statiellae*, under the modern town of Acqui Terme. The tomb (no. 3) was a part of a small funerary area located in the periphery of the northern urban sector of the Roman city, alongside a road and next to an earlier ceramic workshop (Venturino *et al.* 2012: 158–163; Cazzulo 2014). This necropolis consisting of 33 burials, both inhumations and secondary cremations, was used from the mid-first to the third century A.D. The corpse from this grave, dated tentatively to the third century A.D., was buried supine with a different orientation compared with the other tombs. Additionally, the grave is contained and covered by tiles. No grave goods were found in the tomb, apart from an unreadable coin, which was positioned under the right forearm. This tomb contained 26 iron nails (Fig. 4).

Two bent-over nails were located on the sides of the skull, while others were grouped on the collarbones, right humerus, on the chest, alongside the knees, and on the feet. Like in the tombs from *Alba* and *Bologna* (tomb. no 161), mentioned above, evidence of *caligae* is supposed by the discovery of a concentration of small nails adjacent to the tibias (Fig. 5).



Figure 5: *Acqui Terme*, tomb no. 3. Nails and caligae (photo Melania Cazzulo © Soprintendenza Archeologia del Piemonte).

The osteoarchaeological analysis conducted tells us that the deceased was male, approximately 15 to 20 years old. The individual does not have any particular pathologies, aside from dental caries and wear, traces of illness like fever, or lack of vitamin D.

The function of the nails in this tomb is uncertain. At first appearance the nails could be related to the coffin. The osteoarchaeological analysis has shown how the dispersion of the left foot bones, as well the position of head, cervical vertebrae, and the pelvis suggest the decomposition of the body in an empty space, contained by a coffin. Most of the skeleton is still in an anatomically assembled position, however, which it should not be after the dissolving of a coffin. Additionally, the use of tiles for covering and containing the grave would have essentially prevented soil from fully filling the tomb's space. Furthermore, the nails were placed around the individual in a non-aligned way, in contrast to what one would expect if they collapsed from a coffin. It can be hypothetically inferred, therefore, that the nails were positioned along the body for ritual and magical reasons, as a sort of symbolic fixing of the deceased into his dead condition or for protecting him from evil spirits and from possible tomb violators. It cannot be ruled out that the nails might have been tied with cords for effectively fastening the corpse.

The picture of the 'deviant' burials documented in Roman Piedmont is remarkably enriched by a very recent (2014) discovery of an atypical grave, found during excavations directed by the *Soprintendenza Archeologia del Piemonte* in the modern village of Carbonara Scrivia, three kilometers south of the Roman town of Dertona. The complete analysis of the context is ongoing, but a preliminary and combined analysis of the archaeological and osteoarchaeological evidence demonstrates the importance of this tomb in the domain of non-normative graves.

The tomb is a part of a small rural necropolis, which is still under archaeological investigation. This funerary complex is placed along the hypothetical passage of the *via Postumia*, a Roman consular road which crossed northern Italy (from Aquileia to Genoa), and within an area that probably was exploited for rural purposes in the Roman period, as the probable presence of *limites* of the Roman *centuriatio*, still surviving in the modern landscape, seems to suggest (Finocchi 2002: 135–137, 140–143). The necropolis contains nine single tombs, including many adults and a few children, who were mostly cremated. The chronological range of this necropolis is still unclear, but the grave goods suggest the use of the area for funerary purposes within the first two centuries A.D.

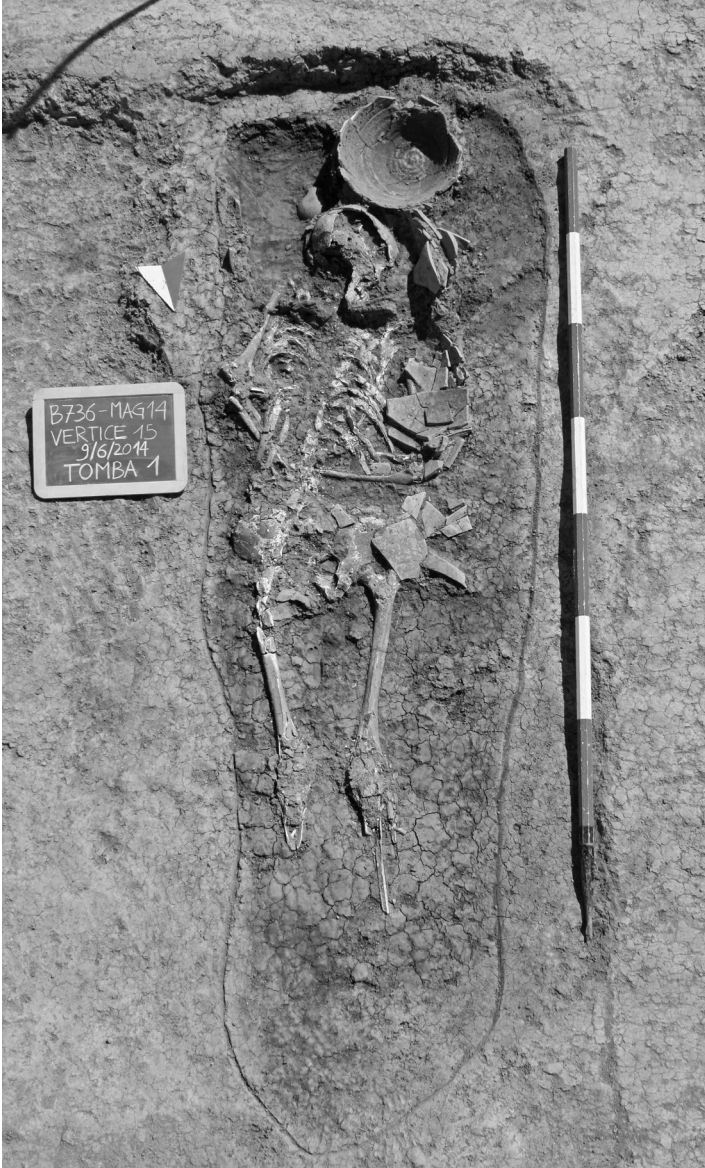
The grave (Fig. 6), 2.10 m long and 0.60 m wide, was dug into the soil far more deeply than the other tombs of the funerary area; it cannot be excluded that this element could be somewhat related to the particular nature and features of such a burial.

It contains the primary inhumation of an individual, whose skeleton was minimally damaged, probably during gas pipeline works; the skull is partially broken, while part of the tibiae and the feet are missing. Unfortunately, because of the conditions of the discovery we do not have definitive elements for clarifying whether the feet were removed in antiquity or whether they were damaged during the mentioned works.

The main peculiarity of this grave is that the individual was buried prone with his head turned on one side; the arms are crossed under the pelvis, while the left side of the corpse is contained by a row of fragmentary amphora walls. In addition, three iron nails were found in line along the neck and left shoulder (Fig. 7).

Two of these nails were bent in a 90 degrees angle with their heads downward (Fig. 8), hypothetically they were hammered on a thin wooden support (a maximum 7cm thick board), which was placed on the area of the neck; part of the wood seems still visible along the nails.

Although we do not have conclusive evidence for reconstructing this device (a yoke?), we



*Figure 6: Carbonara Scrivia, tomb no. 1 (photo Andrea Martelli © Soprintendenza Archeologia del Piemonte).*

have elements for saying that the dead had a sort of physical (Fig. 9: 1) or symbolic (Fig. 9: 2) restriction system between his neck and the upper part of the shoulder for retaining him on the ground. Another nail is located between the thigh bones, close to the groin, and unlike the two specimens located in the restriction system, this one is not bent over and the point faces down.

Unlike the majority of the prone burials, this grave contained surprisingly numerous goods. A big coarseware vase, only the bottom of which is preserved, was positioned to the west of the head; an upside-down decorated lamp with a dolphin impressed on the disc was located along the other side of the skull (Fig. 6). Furthermore, a needle was placed on the top of the

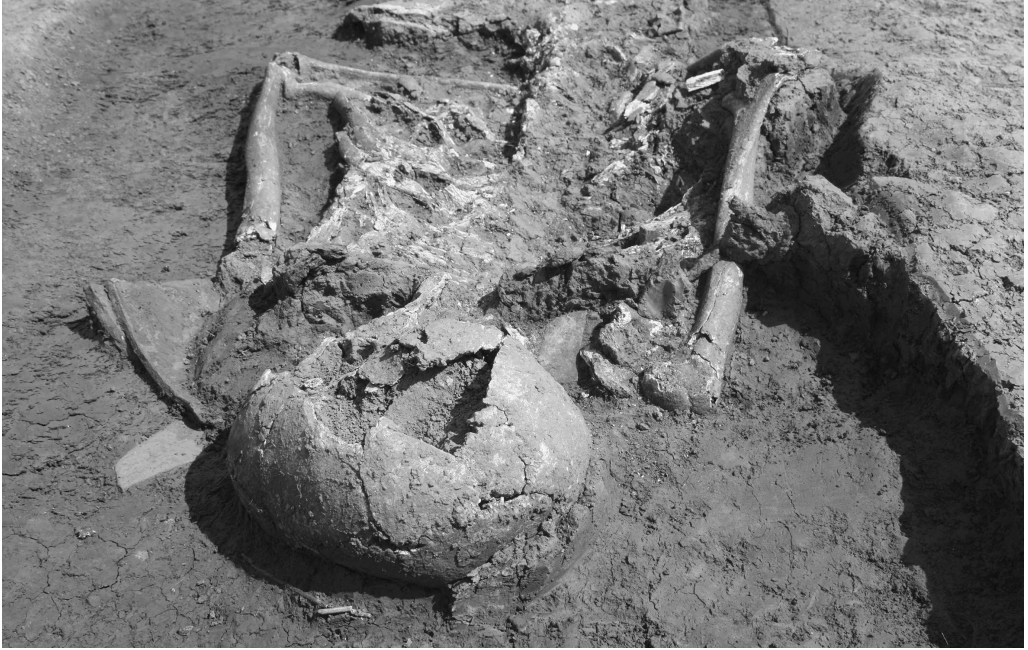


Figure 7: Carbonara Scrivia, tomb no. 1. Detail of the restriction system with the nails (photo Andrea Martelli © Soprintendenza Archeologia del Piemonte).



Figure 8: Carbonara Scrivia, tomb no. 1. A bent-over nail from the restriction system (photo Enrico Bertazzoli © Soprintendenza Archeologia del Piemonte).

head (maybe used as a hairpin, or for fastening headgear, or a shroud) and another one under the pelvis. The tomb also contained an unreadable coin along the left-hand side, a thin-walled cup, two radial glass beads between the thigh bones, and an iron blade was located along the left thigh bone. Fragments of one or more unidentifiable glass vessels were found in different portions of the tomb and, additionally, underneath the corpse. It cannot be excluded that the unidentified glass vessels contained products which were used for ritual reasons, such as substances for preserving or perfuming

the body, a practice widely attested in Roman graves. Finally, fragments of coarseware pots and amphorae were fixed on the western and, in a smaller quantity, eastern sides of the grave cuts, as if the dead were delimited by them. Judging by this material, the tomb can be dated to the second half of the first, and the first half of the second century A.D.

The level of tooth wear, the modifications of the symphyseal face and sternal end of the ribs (Buikstra & Ubelaker 1994) tell us that the deceased was probably a male, 35 to 50 years old. Several muscle and tendon insertions on bone indicate that he was a quite robust and muscular

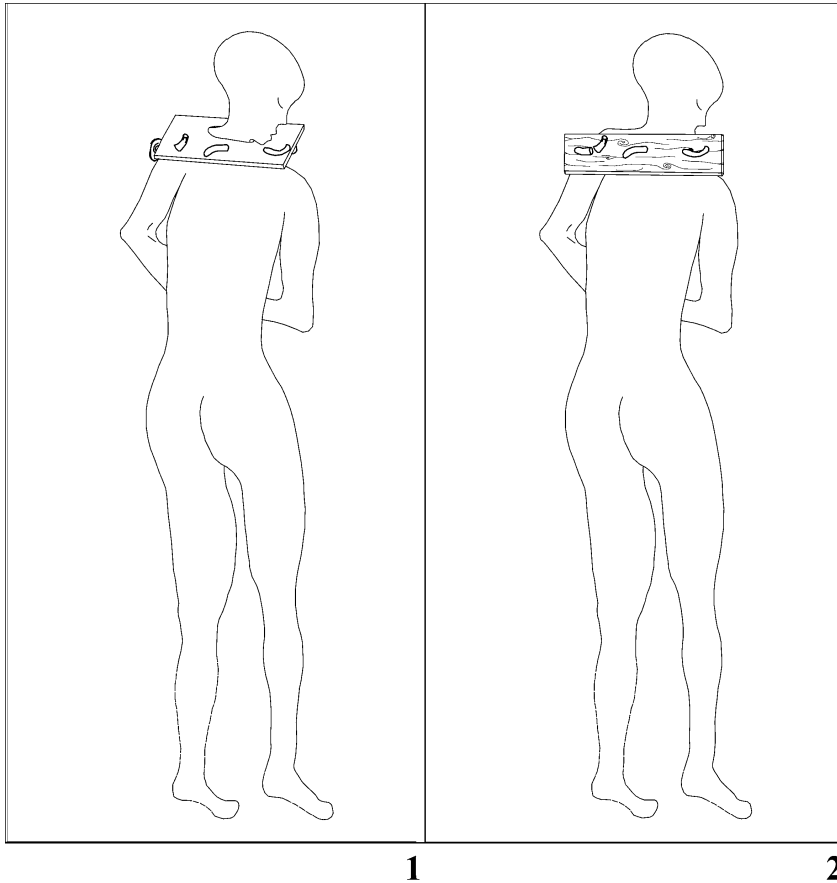


Figure 9: Carbonara Scrivia, tomb no. 1. Hypothetical reconstruction of the restriction system: 1) physical restriction (yoke?) 2) symbolic restriction (the device is only placed on the body, without securing physically the corpse's neck and shoulder (drawing Laura Marchi © Soprintendenza Archeologia del Piemonte).

man. Marginal lipping in correspondence to the knees and eburation on the right patella indicates an advanced degeneration of the cartilage, which was probably due to particularly intense physical activity. The individual does not seem to have any pathologies, aside from dental caries and cartilage wear. The only identified anomaly is the presence of the 'lambda' bone on the skull, which is a peculiar fibrous joint in the skull. The presence of this joint is genetically determined and can provide information on the type of population exhibiting it, however, this is not a mark of deformity or physical abnormality at all.

In summary, the cross-check of the archaeological and osteoarchaeological evidence does not provide conclusive answers as to why this individual was buried in a different way compared with the Roman period norm in Piedmont. The prone deposition of the body with a physical or symbolic restriction system clearly represents an anomaly. We do not, however, have any clear evidence of pathology and physical deviancy. Furthermore, the presence of a rich funerary assemblage within an anomalous context is an unusual practice. The grave goods also include

some objects used or placed in an odd manner, such as the needle on the top of the head used as a sort of headpin or the upside down lamp, which is reminiscent of other overturning practices in the Roman funerary rites (Scheid 1984). The particular care taken in burying this individual might shed some further light on the nature of his death. It can be inferred that this man was not a marginalized or outcast individual, but was rather a fully accepted member of the local community, or an exceptional individual who suffered an ‘anomalous’ or sudden death. Such an unusual death made the deceased’s return to the living world undesirable or dangerous, and therefore his body was ‘retained’ within the grave.

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion, many factors are involved for fully understanding the complexities of atypical practices and magic rites in funerary contexts. As the evidence from Roman Piedmont shows, defining an anomalous burial is not easy or straightforward. The cases of the tombs from Acqui Terme and Carbonaria Scrivia demonstrates that multidisciplinary analyses, combined with the cross-checking of archaeological and osteoarchaeological evidence, is often not enough for a conclusive interpretation of non-normative graves. Additionally, the analysis of the bones frequently results in no supporting information for the ‘deviancy’ of the dead. On the contrary, sometimes the osteoarchaeological analysis provides evidence apparently in contrast with the archaeological record, such as in the case of the tomb from Carbonara, where a prone individual is unconventionally buried with funerary equipment. Cases of pathology are rarely recognized on corpses within burials thought to be atypical. Furthermore, some practices that are conventionally interpreted as forms of body restrictions need to be fully understood, in particular the deposition of nails around the corpse for magical purposes. The nineteenth century discoveries of nailed skulls from Dertona and Libarna are not supported by conclusive evidence, such as the deposition of nails in the cremation burial at Tronzano Vercellese. Likewise, the role of the nails from tomb no. 3 of Acqui Terme is quite dubious and the combination of the archaeological and osteoarchaeological studies does not clarify whether they were part of the coffin or they were used for magical purposes.

Again, only the study of the burials that are thought to be non-normative in association with the full analysis of the funerary context represents a correct methodological approach for interpreting what is ‘deviant’ and what is not. Clearly, the modern Western concepts of death and normative practices can affect the accuracy of the interpretation of anomalous features in Roman funerary rites.

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