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Bones and burials in Roman Augst

Maureen Carroll

University of York <maureen.carroll@york.ac.uk>

BAUMANN, M. 2021. *Die Bestattung einer wohlhabenden Frau aus Augusta Raurica. Interdisziplinäre Auswertung eines Bleisargs aus dem Nordwestgräberfeld*. Forschungen in Augst 54. Basel: Augusta Raurica. ISBN 978-3-7151-0054-8.

KRAMIS, S. 2020. *Tote in der Stadt. Anthropologische Untersuchungen von menschlichen Überresten aus dem Siedlungsareal der römischen Koloniestadt Augusta Raurica*. Forschungen in Augst 53. Basel: Augusta Raurica. ISBN 978-3-7151-0053-1.

The two books under discussion, both published in the series *Forschungen in Augst*, present the careful analysis of excavated burials at the Roman *colonia* of Augusta Raurica in Switzerland. Although each volume is thematically devoted to the study of Roman burials, the contexts of these burials are very different, ranging from intramural burials and fragmentary human remains in the town (Kramis) to the interment of a single wealthy individual in one of the Roman cemeteries outside the *colonia* (Baumann). The way in which the burials are investigated and the contextual and social information they convey also distinguishes between the two volumes, although the studies are complementary and, together, they considerably advance our knowledge of death and burial in Roman Augst.

Kramis examined the human remains, frequently of fetuses and newborns, found within the settlement boundaries of Augusta Raurica. They were mixed in with animal bones from excavations and only recognized for what they were during the systematic screening of animal remains. The practice of archaeozoological screening to detect human remains from archaeological contexts began at Augusta Raurica in 1955, and a first volume of the material appeared in 1988. This volume compiles the human bone retrieved from then up to 2011. The first part of the book is dedicated to the taphonomy, preservation, and characterization of the bone material, while the second section deals with demographic considerations based on an anthropological analysis of the bones. The third and final part utilizes archaeological contexts to offer reconstructions of the treatment and disposal of the dead in Augst.

The reasons for disposing of human remains in settlements in the Roman empire are not well understood, and they probably varied according to time and place. To fill in the gaps in our understanding of this situation in Augst, Kramis inventoried all human bones with

the aims of mapping their distribution within the town, understanding the taphonomic and demographic features of the material, and reconstructing the background and motivation for intramural burials. Another specific objective was to investigate the deposition of newborns, and much of the book deals with the remains of this age group.

The published anthropological results are based on an assemblage of 6,017 human bones, equating to a minimum of 115 individuals: 72 adults, of which 11 were complete or almost complete, and 43 newborns. The disposal of adult remains appears to be associated with the end of occupation or periods of crisis in Augst from the mid-3rd c. CE, at the fall of the *limes*, and these bones were distributed more widely and superficially, and irregularly, in structures such as porticoes, ditches, and wells. Not only were various illnesses and skeletal malformations detected, but also injuries relating to physical violence, including combat, not all of which proved fatal. Kramis flags various other potential causes of death for the general population of Augusta Raurica, but some of his discussions in this context, such as those on human sacrifice or homelessness, are rather speculative as no physical evidence has been provided by the human remains.

The main causes of neonatal death appear to have been infection, malnutrition, or anemia, and the lack of new bone formation on the bones indicates that both fetuses and newborns died shortly after the onset of illness. Congenital illnesses also were noted for fetal and neonatal individuals. Neonates, or the partial remains of neonates, were found primarily within domestic buildings, where they perhaps were born and had died during the lifespan of the *colonia*. The intramural burial of premature or full-term newborns in settlements is not an isolated phenomenon in the Roman imperial period. It certainly is not uncommon in Roman Switzerland in urban and rural settlements, and remains of infants also are found regularly in communal cemeteries outside towns and villages with other individuals of all age groups and with their families and siblings.¹ The disposal of these infants inside the town limits at Augst, rather than in the communal cemeteries outside the town, need not imply a surreptitious or hasty disposal, especially because some of the newborns were buried with care in or under imbrices, a common container solution for the burial of very young individuals throughout Roman Italy and western Europe. The remains of toddlers, young children, and adolescents are almost entirely absent in the human bone assemblage, presumably because these age groups were buried in the cemeteries around the *colonia*, where they normally are to be expected, these individuals having outlived infancy.

The book has several sections dedicated to the broader topic of newborn children, in places drawing more widely on archaeological finds from various parts of the empire and exploring such themes as infanticide and exposure. Nothing particularly new is offered here, however, and for the neonate remains at the Roman villa at Hambelden in Britain and at other Roman sites, recent research dispelling or refuting the notion of infanticide should have been cited.²

The lengthy catalogue of all human bones with a description of context and location within the settlement will be a very useful reference tool for researchers. The book is well illustrated with maps, tables, and graphs. The introduction of the volume is written

¹ Carroll 2018, 152–63.

² Gowland et al. 2014; Carroll 2018, 165–77.

in German and English side-by-side on the same pages; the main body of the book is only in German, but a lengthy summary in both German and English appears at the end of the text. Further page-long summaries in German, English, French, and Italian conclude the study.

The volume by Baumann is a comprehensive treatment of a single, rich burial of a woman in a lead sarcophagus in the northwest cemetery of Roman Augst that was revealed in 2016 during maintenance work on a water pipe. This cemetery was in use in the late 3rd and the first half of the 4th c. CE, even after most of the population of the greatly reduced *colonia* had moved to the new fortified settlement of Castrum Rauracense on the banks of the Rhine. Burials from Augst normally are not found with organic remains intact or even superficially preserved, and many discoveries of Roman burials took place here long ago when attention was not focused on recognizing or retrieving ephemeral materials. This burial, therefore, was special because the sealed lead container, originally encased in a wooden box held together by iron nails, had contributed to the good preservation of the human remains, clothing, and grave goods. This is one of only four known lead sarcophagus burials in Augusta Raurica, and one of only 14 in Switzerland. The unique opportunity for an interdisciplinary study of all remains was embraced immediately, with a total of 24 specialists participating in the analysis of the burial and enabling a comprehensive publication of the results only five years later.

The first part of the volume is structured around the layout and chronological development of the cemetery, and the discovery, excavation, and exemplary retrieval and conservation of the woman's burial. The results of scientific analysis of the skeleton and the lead sarcophagus are laid out in part two, along with a presentation of the associated grave goods. The last section is dedicated to discussions and concluding remarks.

The deceased woman was about 44–50 years old, had suffered painful dental problems, and had a parasitic infection at the time of her death. Isotopic analysis suggests that she probably was of local or regional origin. The nature of her burial, and the care taken to prepare and dress her body for interment, indicate clearly that this woman was of relatively high status in the community, although she cannot be put in the same elite group as the individuals buried in fine clothes with evidence of silk damask, gold threads, and Tyrian purple dye that we know from other sites such as Trier.³

The cleaning and conservation of the sarcophagus revealed interesting technical details pertaining to its manufacture. It is apparent that molten lead had been poured into a clay mold and then the edges of the lead sheet folded up when it had cooled and hardened; the overlapping corners were soldered and nailed together. Lines in the clay mold and incised into the hardened lead indicated to the maker where exactly to bend up the lead sheet. The author suggests that this work and various seemingly hasty adjustments to the dimensions of the sarcophagus might have taken place at or near the grave, avoiding the transport over any distance of the heavy container. The lead isotope analysis revealed that the ore used for the sarcophagus came from mines in the Eifel Mountains west of Cologne in Germany.

Of greatest interest, because of the rarity of textile remains in Roman burials,⁴ are 470 fragments of mineralized textiles and various fragments of animal skin that enable the

³ Reifarth 2013.

⁴ Carroll and Wild 2012.

reconstruction of the woman's clothing and the appointment of the sarcophagus interior and exterior with soft furnishings. The woman wore a fine under-tunic of hemp, over which she was dressed in a striped linen tunic. Over the tunic she wore a fur cape or wrap that extended from her shoulders to her knees, with a fine wool scarf over this covering her head and shoulders. The colored reconstruction in Figure 185, of the woman in her clothing when alive, is striking and very useful. The lid was covered in textile and leather, whereas the interior of the sarcophagus was lined with a sheepskin rug, on which the body lay. The rug may have been a possession the woman enjoyed in life. Wood shavings under her head point to the possibility of a cushion filled with this material. Making the deceased physically comfortable in this way reflects the community's perception of the transition between life and death, from real comfort enjoyed during life to symbolic comfort imparted in death. Such ideas are apparent in other contemporary communities, such as Évreux in France, where the presence of textiles and fur has been noted in an inhumation in a lead sarcophagus.⁵

If the woman was laid out after her death in her sartorial finery for a period of viewing in her home, her social status would have been visually and publicly expressed through dress for a varied audience. Her clothing might also have been on display during the procession to the cemetery, unless the shroud, for which there is physical evidence, had been wrapped around her before the transition to the grave site. The researchers suggest that the wrapping of the body in the shroud took place in the cemetery immediately before interment, but this is speculation. Once shrouded and in the coffin, final gifts were given to the woman. Traces of meadowsweet, heather, devils-bit, thistle, and ivy in the chest area are taken as proof either that flowers were laid on her breast or that extracts of these plants were deposited with her. If the former is the case, the time of year in which the burial occurred can be determined, as all these plants flower in late summer or early autumn. Three glass balsamaria then were placed in the coffin. One of these, filled with a liquid containing knotweed, had a hole in its wall, perhaps to enable the contents to be poured onto the body as a libation. The reconstruction of the woman in her coffin in Figure 186 is misleading and at odds with the sequence of bodily preparations described in the text because it depicts her with flowers and balsamaria deposited on and around her clothed body, instead of on the body after it had been wrapped in a shroud.

A bedding of lime (calcium carbonate) had been spread over the bottom of the sarcophagus before the body was laid down. Lime, plaster, and gypsum in Late Roman burials are attested on the continent and in Britain, although in Britain the plaster or gypsum usually was poured over the body rather than deposited underneath it. Sometimes clothed bodies in contemporary burials also were drenched or wrapped in textiles containing aromatic resins, in addition to the use of lime, plaster, or gypsum, although the woman from August was not treated in this particular manner.⁶ The lime bedding in the lead sarcophagus from August may well have had something to do with retarding the decomposition of the body and reducing the associated smells, as the author proposes. But such burial rites with added substances and materials which affected the decomposition of the body are poorly understood, and questions remain. Why, for example, would it be important to slow the decay of the body, since it was not on view or seen by anyone after the coffin was closed

⁵ Pluton-Kliesch et al. 2013.

⁶ Brettell et al. 2014; Schotsmans et al. 2019.

and lowered in the ground? And who would be affected by the potential smell of decomposition when the coffin was deeply buried in a necropolis outside the city?

Bauman's book offers the full range of scientific and interdisciplinary analyses of the material remains, but the reader would have benefited from greater discussion of the place of this burial in the wider picture of late Roman inhumation burials and the cultural and religious implications of burial rites of this type. More consideration of the role of dress in expressing ethnic, social, and gendered identity, as part of current theoretical debate, also would have been welcome.⁷ For anyone wishing to follow up on such questions or to relate the woman from Augst to other elaborate Late Roman burials, however, the volume provides extensive material evidence and analytical results on which to build.

The book is richly illustrated with maps, artefact drawings, photos of the burial recovery, laboratory images, and tables. A particularly valuable aid in recognizing the placement of the body, textiles, and artefacts in the sarcophagus are the plans with color-coded contents. The book concludes with useful two-page summaries in German, English, French, and Italian.

Both books under review deal with human remains, albeit from different contexts. The full range of scientific analysis is applied both to the variously dated burials and partial remains of newborns and adults scattered throughout the town and to the intact extramural inhumation of a woman in the early 4th c. CE. Such publications reflect the increasing attention in archaeology towards anthropological and palaeopathological investigations of skeletal material, and they shed new light on the health, disease, trauma, and living conditions of the population of Roman Augst. In the case of the undisturbed lead coffin burial in the northwest cemetery, however, not only bioarchaeology, but also the scientific analysis of textiles, botanical remains, and the lead sarcophagus itself allows us to evaluate the social status of a former resident of Augst, as represented in the material culture, and to retrace the sequence of events that took place between her death and her interment in ways that are rarely possible.

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⁷ Rothe 2009; Rothe 2012; Carroll 2012.

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