Introduction

Why Examine the Bones

Abraham spoke up again, ‘Here I am presuming to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes.’

*Genesis XVIII 27* (Speiser 1964, 132–133)
Then, while the earth shall be cast upon the Body by some standing by, the Minister shall say, ‘...earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.’

_Book of Common Prayer_ (1945, 333)

Archaeology in Etruria has long suffered from an embarrassment of riches. With fields filled with large chamber tombs filled with objects of gold, the best examples of Attic pottery known and wall paintings of stupendous quality, who could possibly care about searching for the burned bones buried in a used clay cooking pot. Like the bones of the upscale people for whom these tombs were built, these pots and their contents were trashed by tomb looters as well as by the proto-archaeologists of the 19th and most of the 20th century. Even as the bones within Etruscan tombs began to be somewhat systematically recovered in the 1980s, the burned bones representing cremations were largely ignored even within big tombs that were still being identified. At sites such as Tarquinia, among the many inhumations in a chamber tomb, a number of cremations often are found. In these chamber tombs the cremations that had been placed within elaborate imported Greek vessels are commonly noted, and even saved, but those placed within simple or perishable containers generally go unnoticed or are simply disregarded.

The growing awareness in Italy of the importance of studying individuals buried in the simplest manners (such as in a _tomba a buca_; cf. Cavagnaro Vanoni 2002; Cataldi 2005) has led to increased interest in what the skeletal remains can tell us. Fortunately “the often underestimated presence of cremation” (Rife 2006) has become a subject of particular interest to physical anthropologists. The analysis of cremations is vital to the interpretation of mortuary programs of all classes as well as to the understanding of gender roles among the Etruscans (Becker 2005a). The study of cremated remains is particularly important in cases where these fragments of bone constitute the entire recovered mortuary ‘assemblage’ (e.g. Cazzella and Moscoloni 1988) and represent all that we can know about the burial other than its placement. The numbers of studies of burned bones has grown particularly rapidly over the past fifteen years as awareness of the value of this procedure has grown. Unfortunately there is more awareness of value (Borgognini Tarli, Minozzi and Masali 1998) than actual implementation of these studies. Relatively little effort has been made to decode what the contexts and condition of the recovered burned bones can tell us about Etruscan and Italic mortuary procedures.

In general cremation had become the norm throughout the Italian peninsula and much of central Europe during the Iron Age. Recent