Cambridge Archaeological Journal (2025), 1–15
doi:10.1017/S0959774325100048

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Research Article

Superstitious Beliefs in the Necropolises of the Huelva Coast: Peculiarities of the Premature Death of Children, Outcasts and Women

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Abstract

All societies throughout time have shown a greater or lesser degree of superstition when facing the traumatic event of death. Roman society was no exception, especially when numerous religious currents participated in the funerary rituals, sharing their own conception and beliefs. The following lines present a brief overview of children's death, especially premature ones, from the early Imperial to the late Imperial period, when they became more highly regarded. It is followed by the traumatic or marginal deaths of some individuals whose behaviour, illnesses or ways of dying were suspicious for their closest people: the article closes with the treatment given to certain women. All the deaths in this research aroused suspicions among their relatives or the authorities, who did not hesitate to practise rituals to calm them in the afterlife and ensure that they did not return to life as evil spirits. In this article we will focus on the practices that developed in the city of *Onoba* and its hinterland or influential area; a Roman colony located in the westernmost part of the province of *Baetica*, a port city of enormous importance for the Empire given its importance as a gateway for minerals coming from the *Urium* mines.

(Received 9 April 2024; revised 16 January 2025; accepted 12 April 2025)

Introduction

When talking about the Romans' funerary ritual (*funus*), we must bear in mind that most of them thought that their dead continued to live on in the grave after death, where the soul, converted into a non-corporeal entity, would live on eternally; their eschatological praxis was very heterogeneous, taking, mixing, simplifying and confusing practices and customs from the different cultures incorporated into the Empire (Vaquerizo Gil 2023, 15). However, it would never cross anyone's mind to leave their dead unburied, not only because it was against the law, but also because it was a danger to the community of the living, by allowing the dead to become threatening and vengeful beings. To this end, a whole series of rites had to be carried out, culminating in burial, either by cremation (obtaining purification by means of fire), or by burial (returning to the earth, the origin of everything), passing through the articulation or construction of an honourable burial, the purification of the objects that had been in contact with the dead, and the subsequent offerings, libations and funeral banquets (Vaquerizo Gil 2001, 58).

This is the starting point for future research, since throughout the Empire there have been many cases that speak of the fear or pity that certain communities showed for some sectors of the population, with the city of *Onoba* and its hinterland (see map, Fig. 1) being another example of the cultural conflicts that took place at the time, where the controversial ended up coexisting with the normative. Among the individuals who were used in specific funerary rituals and practices at the moment of their death were children, women, and some adults. There were no isolated cases; in fact, this type of practice was part of the casuistry of the Roman *funus* in many different forms. According to Vaquerizo Gil (2010, 311), both the location of their graves in differentiated areas, as well as their degrading treatment in some cases, lay in their condition as outcasts, criminals, subjects condemned to death, suicides, disabled people, contagiously sick persons, individuals who carried out dreadful jobs (gladiators, prostitutes and actors) or just died prematurely, all of them seen by their contemporaries as dangerous entities if they returned to life as *larvae* or *lemurae*.[1] Precisely for this reason, the main purpose of the rituals was to bury the individual face down, on their chest

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Cite this article: Fernández Sutilo, L. (2025). Superstitious Beliefs in the Necropolises of the Huelva Coast: Peculiarities of the Premature Death of Children, Outcasts and Women. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0959774325100048

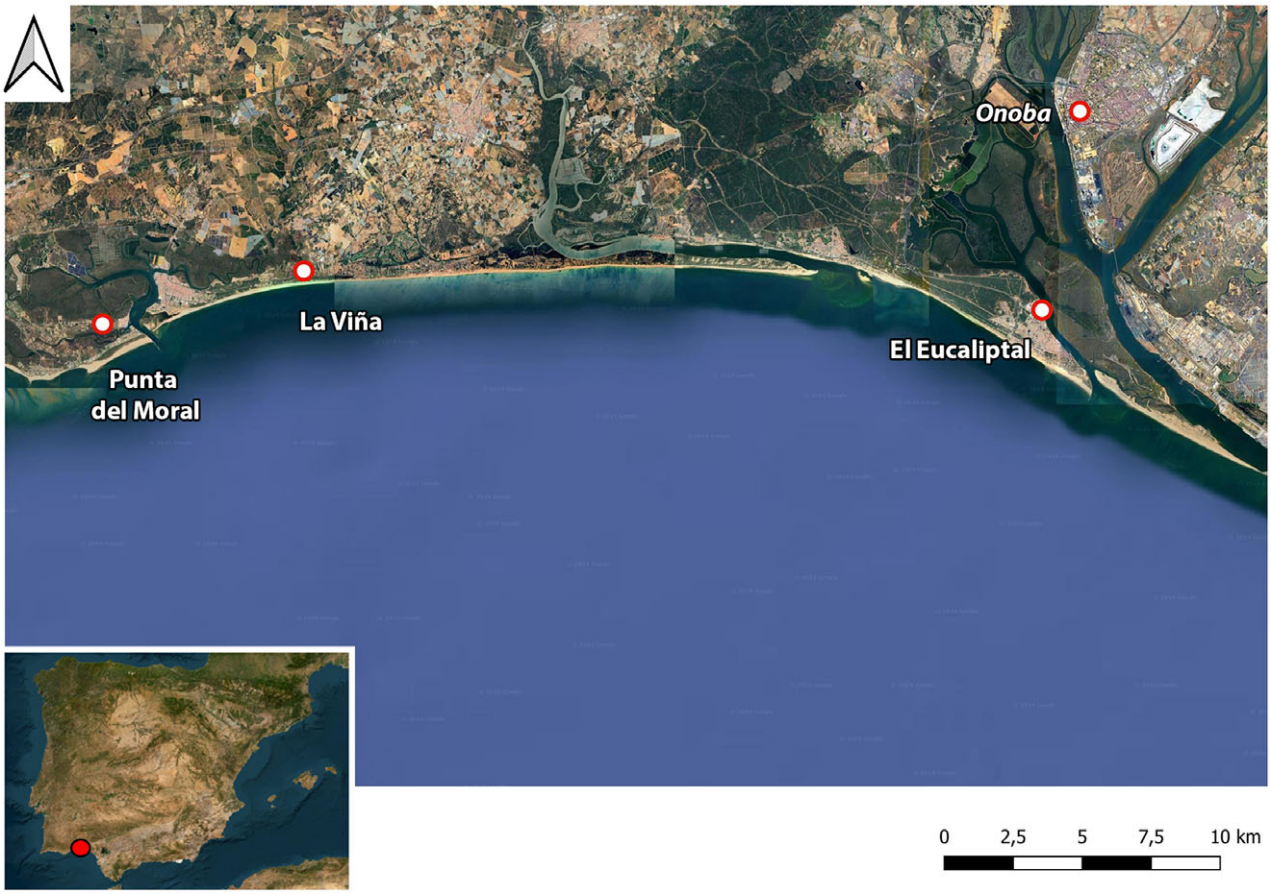

Figure 1. Map of southern Spanish coast showing location of necropolises.

(*ventral decubitus*), decapitating the deceased, or surrounding them with certain ritual magical objects.

In this respect, it is paradigmatic to observe how at the same time that the Romans showed an enormous distrust of death; especially in the case of children, women and outcasts, they did not hesitate to supply these graves with meaning and ritual in search of eternal rest for their relatives, rituals that, in our opinion, need to be analysed in terms of the specific moment in which they were created, as well as the political, economic and cultural outlook in which they were conceived.

Regarding the Huelva territory, these practices have been verified both in the urban centre of *Onoba* itself, as well in the nearest villas and shellfish farms, dated between the late first century BC and the late Imperial period (late third century AD).

Considerations on infant death from the Republican period to the late Imperial period

The premature death of children, as well as the whole process of their burial, is known as *funus acerbus.* According to the linguistic studies of Fernández Martínez (2003, 318–19), the first meaning of this adjective in the *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* mentions the *sapore*: *acrius acetum*, often referring to unripe fruits. A second meaning is *inmaturus*, used literally for fruits and metaphorically for things that have not yet reached their final state of perfection. A third meaning is *iniucundus tristis*, understood as 'full of pain' or 'bitter', and it is used for wounds and illnesses, feelings, voices, face, actions and, above all, fortune, destiny, death, etc. The *Oxford Latin Dictionary* lists a few meanings associated with this term: firstly, referring to a sound, 'strident' or 'discordant'; secondly, used for fruit, 'unripe' or 'green'; and thirdly, applied to people's death as 'bitterly hostile', 'merciless', 'cruel', 'untimely' and 'premature'.

According to Fernández Martínez (2003, 322), it was common among classical authors to use this adjective metaphorically, making a comparison between human life and that of fruit, in such a way that if a fruit fallen or plucked prematurely is *acerbus* (bitter), the death in these terms was too. On this matter, important classical authors such as Virgil (*Aeneid* 11.823 or 6.429) used this adjective to talk about the death of young people and children; while Ovid (*Fasti* 4.647) used the term to speak of *partus acerbos*, referring to the death of premature or stillborn infants and young children.

Nevertheless, what the classical authors wrote is one thing, and entirely another are the practices carried out during the celebrations of the *funus acerbus*. Originally, during the last centuries of the Republic, and maybe also the first decades of the Empire, the burial took place at night, in the light of torches and candles that provided a certain character of haste and privacy, without tears or expressions of mourning that they had not been able to develop themselves as social individuals and had not been able to

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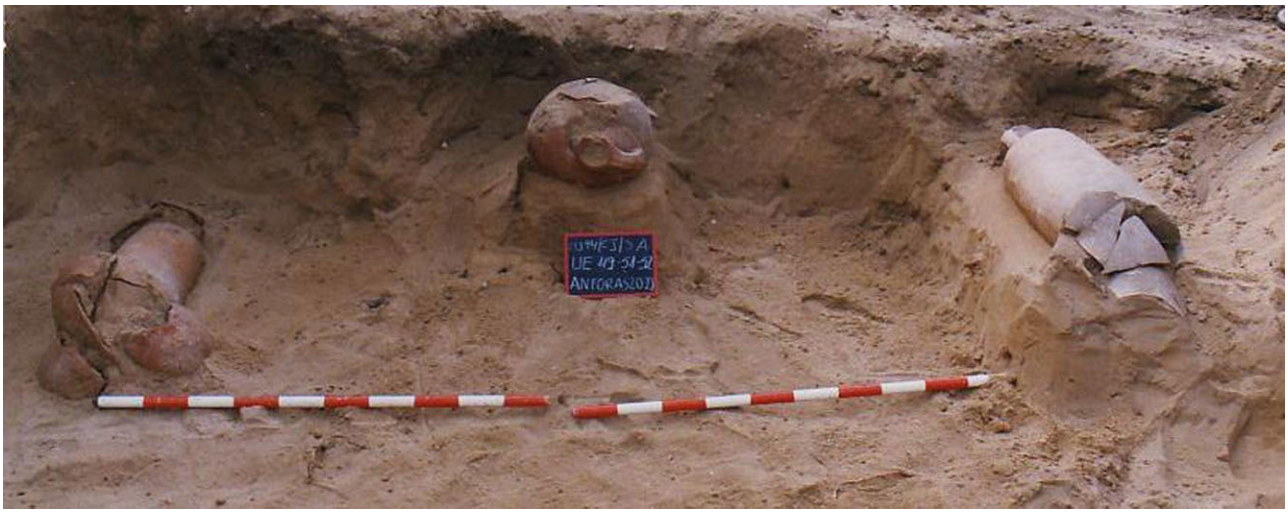

Figure 2. Amphorae documented in the infant burial sector of the necropolis of El Eucaliptal of the fourth century A.D.

achieve any of their father's hopes or ambitions (Vaquerizo Gil 2010, 19). The corpse was not used in libations or rituals, and the majority of child burials even took place inside the house (specifically those of newborns or those who died in the first year of life), in clear connection with the domestic cults practised since prehistoric times with a prophylactic character (Seneca, *De brevitae vitae* 10.20, 5; *De tranquillitate animi* 11.11, 7; Virgil, *Aeneid* 11, 142). In fact, Cicero (*Tusculanae Disputationes* 1, 39, 93) affirmed that the death of children under one year old was not a cause for concern but was something that could be solved, and mourning was not necessary.

This situation changed significantly after the reign of Marcus Aurelius thanks to a radical change in Roman society. It was noticeable among the upper classes at first and later extended to the rest of society who, deprived of political and social power, took refuge in the family when facing these losses. This new reality was complemented by the metaphysical hopes that came with the mystical cults and Stoic philosophies, where children became the centre of families, and a process of awareness towards children began to become generalized, leading them to become the most bitterly mourned dead. In fact, there were a lot of funerary epitaphs that reflected the inconsolable sorrow of parents at the premature death of their children, and the number of spaces reserved for the exclusive burial of children multiplied, as well as the number of children next to their parents or relatives (Bailles-Talbi & Dasen 2008; González Villaescusa 2001, 80; Sevilla Conde 2010–2011; Vaquerizo Gil 2010; 2011; 2014).

Despite this change in the mentality of Roman society, the infant world was always viewed with fear due to the high mortality rate (Del Hoyo & Vázquez 1996, 444ff). This outlook meant that the deaths of children were treated with specific rites and behaviours and sometimes, due to this condition, the corpse of an infant was treated with mistrust and fear (Bailles-Talbi & Dasen 2008; Sevilla Conde 2010–2011; 2012; Vaquerizo Gil 2010; 2011, 218; 2014, 211ff). Among the most common practices was to place the corpse in a prone position or to attach it to the ground with nails. The aim was to bind them to the grave, their final resting place, preventing them from returning to the world of the living, to which they no longer belonged, having become ghosts who were wandering (Sevilla Conde 2010–2011, 212).

Infant death on the Huelva coast and the city of *Onoba*[2]

In the shellfish farms of the Huelva coast, we have been able to see how these premature deaths did not begin to be considered until the late Imperial period. In the specific cases of the necropolis of Eucaliptal (Punta Umbria), these individuals were buried in a funerary area delimited by an enclosure. A stepped brick structure was erected inside the enclosure, which was used as a landmark around which neonates, unborn children and infants were deposited inside amphorae vessels during the fourth and fifth centuries A.D. (Fig. 2). An almost identical situation has been confirmed in the necropolis of La Viña (Isla Cristina) during the fourth century A.D., where it is possible to differentiate between the infants buried generally near graves belonging to adults, and the unborn and neonates located in a separate space within the burial area itself (Fig. 3). Nevertheless, in the case of Punta del Moral (Ayamonte) (Fig. 4), both neonates and infants were buried inside a funerary enclosure next to adult graves, which would later be demolished by the construction of a family pantheon.

The disparity of opinions about the place of burial, whether a space reserved exclusively for these children or next to the adults, may have been because the Romans do not seem to have had a clear ideology of the afterlife for infants, being forced to adapt their beliefs and traditions to the indistinct eschatological concepts brought by the peoples with whom they came into contact (De Filippis 1997, 25); in the specific case of Onoba, these were the Turdetans, who had been depositaries of the previous

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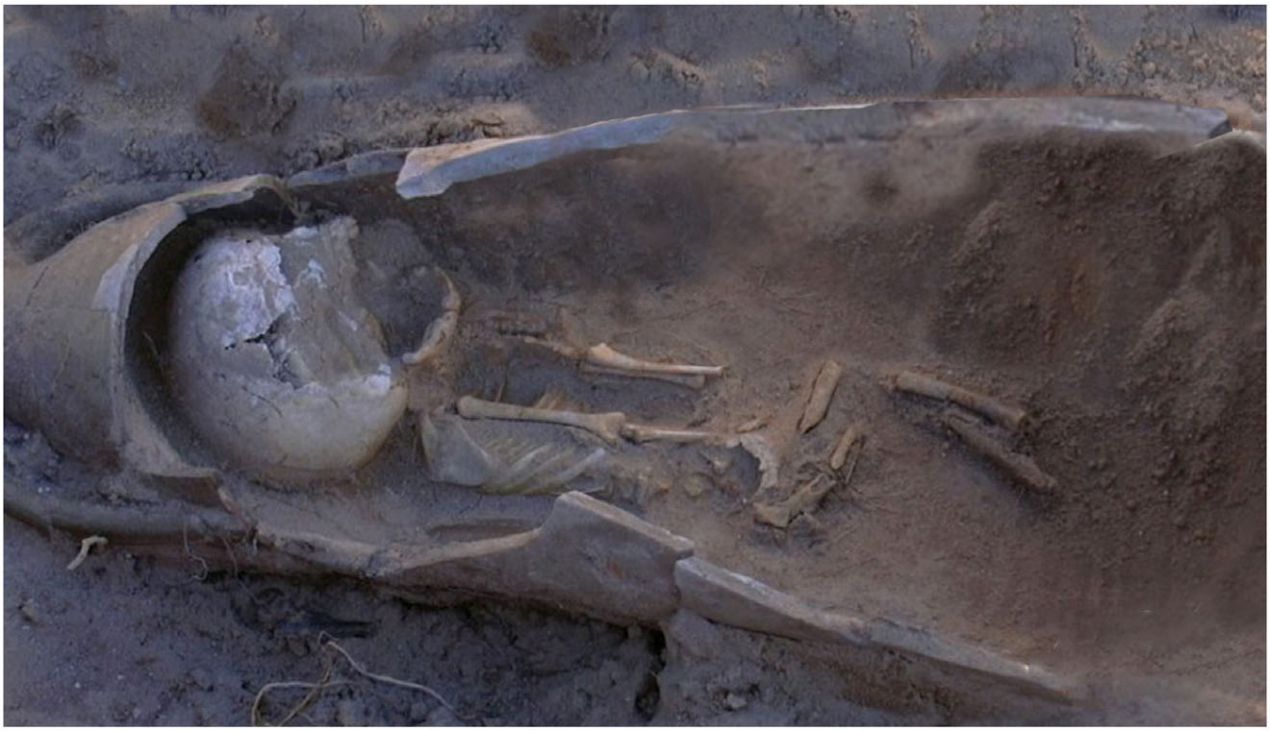

Figure 3. Infant burial in amphora of the necropolis of Punta del Moral. (G.I.R.H.A.)

Figure 4. Infant burial in amphora of the necropolis of Punta del Moral. (G.I.R.H.A.)

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0959774325100048 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Phoenician-Punic tradition, and who would be joined by North African, Italic and Celtic contigents during these first centuries of contact.

In addition to its peculiar location within the necropolis, its rituality is also quite significant. Although most of the children's burials lack grave goods, it is worth mentioning the presence of coins, amulets (animal bones and heads with African features), necklaces and beads of glassy material or amber inside some graves. According to the classical authors mentioned above, children deposited the *bulla*—the amulet that had accompanied them throughout their childhood—in the family *lararium* on the day they took the *virilis* toga, while girls gave, among other objects, a doll or a coin (Jiménez Díez 2007, 96). On this point, we believe that some of these pieces were introduced to serve as an offering to the 'equivalent' gods of the underworld, not having been consecrated to the Lares gods on the familiar altar because of fate.[3]

Likewise, the strange arrangement of some of these individuals in the interior of the graves is of great interest in the analysis of these atypical burials. Generally, the most documented position of the body is the foetal position, which inevitably seems logical, since it is the posture adopted by the newborn during gestation, and symbolizes the return to the maternal womb or Mother Earth. Nevertheless, this is not the only existing arrangement, as prone position burials have been documented at the El Eucaliptal and Punta del Moral sites. This treatment of children has been associated with magical rituals aimed at neutralizing the evil and dangerous potential of this type of premature death (Alfayé 2009, 186), the purpose of which was to immobilize or fix the deceased to the grave so his soul could not escape through his mouth, thus turning him into a harmless spirit (Baills-Talbi & Dansen 2008, 606), and facilitating his return to earth (Baills-Talbi & Dasen 2008, 602).

Regarding the city of *Onoba*, child burials are limited to two individuals dated to the end of the first century A.D. Both were located next to one of the stepped monuments that marked the northern necropolis, where many superstitious rites took place based on the introduction of bronze nails in the earth filling the graves, even, in one case, under the skull itself (Fernández Sutilo 2016, 409–10). As for its arrangement around the stepped monument, we suggest—given the lack of anthropological studies—that this area may have been reserved mainly for children and women, the latter being deduced from the presence inside the graves of *acus crinales* used by women to do their hair. If this theory is corroborated, we could talk about a space reserved for the deposition of these people from the early Imperial to the late Imperial period, since the tombs from the third and fourth centuries A.D.—found a little further south due to natural reasons of space-filling—belonged almost exclusively to children and women, in this case verified by anthropological analysis.

Other non-normative burial

It is not only children who would be the target of deviated burials, but these forced or anomalous positions were sometimes used in the adult funerary world. Their documentation throughout the Roman orbit has led to the appearance of different explanatory proposals. The most rational one suggests that these burials were carried out during the phase of maximum cadaveric rigidity (around 24 hours after death), being impossible, or maybe illicit, to overcome such stiffness to bury these persons in the supine position (Sánchez Ramos 2006, 230). Opposing this theory, we can find the proposals of Vaquerizo Gil (2010, 311): in the first he suggests that 'the particular features of this death are due to the identification of these individuals with outcasts, criminals, subjects condemned to death, suicides, disable people, contagiously sick persons, individuals who carried out dreadful jobs or just died prematurely, those forgotten by the gods, and therefore a potential danger before their possible return as larvae or lemures' (Vaquerizo Gil 2010, 311). A second interpretation, based on the high proliferation of this type of burial in certain provinces of central and northern Europe (Gaul, Helvetia, Britannia), argues that there may have existed some persons who chose to be buried face down as a way of continuing or reproducing the tradition and ritual of their areas of origin (Vaquerizo Gil 2010, 311 and 2011, 220), not being individuals strictly excluded of the social group, given their position in the same funerary areas.

Regarding the coastal necropolis, we have a single specimen in a prone position in El Eucaliptal, which in addition to being buried in the same space as the rest of the adults, carried a large oyster shell in the mouth—a ritual element that will be analysed below.

However, to this anomalous posture, we must add other practices of a noticeably ritual nature. The first of these consisted of the conscious dismemberment of some individuals, perhaps trying to mutilate and invalidate them to prevent them from rising from their tombs. Several cases have been confirmed in the necropolis of Punta Umbría: one of them had several fragments of his femur and shinbone in his left hand, while a second woman had her feet cut off, which were found on one side of the grave. In the necropolis of El Lomo, one of the adults was found with both shinbones in anatomical disconnection, deposited ritually on the left side of the tomb. Finally, in the cemetery of La Viña, one of the individuals was cut in half, and only the lower part of the body was found inside the grave (Fig. 5).

Besides these mutilations, another type of immobilization that occurred quite frequently in the ancient world consisted of placing the skulls or feet of other individuals on the body of the deceased, and sometimes even a heavy element on the chest: a slab, stone, brick, or mortar (Baills-Talbi & Dasen 2008, 607). Specifically, in one of the burials recovered at the necropolis of the Relics, four skulls were placed at the feet of the dead, forming a square, while a fifth skull was situated parallel to the main occupant. In the necropolis of El Eucaliptal, an infant with cranial deformities was pierced in the chest by a lead arrow, possibly because of the fear and rejection it must have caused among those close to him. However, if the purpose was to prevent the buried person from rising from the grave, a common practice was to chain the deceased to the tomb, and in the case of the necropolis of La Viña, by placing an iron ring in the knee (Fig. 6).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0959774325100048 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 5. Burial with the presence of mutilations in La Viña.

In short, according to most theories, it seems that the main purpose of this type of burial or practice was to fix the corpse to the grave, either by dismembering it, mutilating it, throwing stones over it or securing it with nails and curses, because of the fear that it might return to the world to take revenge[4] (Alfayé 2009, 208ff; Baills-Talbi & Dasen 2008, 606ff; Vaquerizo Gil 2010, 311).

But, undoubtedly, beyond the positions of the bodies or the mutilations, it is the placing of nails inside the tombs that has caused the greatest debate on the implementation of magical practices intended to prevent the dead from wandering around the living world. The nails play an important role in the idea of holding the deceased, sometimes reinforced by other factors already mentioned, such as the abnormal

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Figure 6. Burial with iron ring arranged around the leg in the necropolis of La Viña.

position of the body, or other ritual elements of the grave goods such as oyster shells, melted lead or amulets such as animal fangs or coins, relatively frequent in the Baetica necropolises of *Italica*, *Munigua* and *Baelo Claudia* (Vaquerizo Gil 2011, 219). It is true that on most occasions these elements had a utilitarian function,[5] so when assessing their appearance we must dismiss those that either formed part of the structure of the coffin, the stretcher or any other element deposited as an offering, or those that appeared alone or arranged in a particular way around the deceased or even on some part of the body, such as hands, mouth, or eyes, in which case some kind of symbolism or subliminal message seems to underlie them.

Already in ancient excavations, this kind of piece was interpreted as an apotropaic amulet, whose purpose was to protect the dead from post-mortem threats and desecration —mainly from practitioners of magic and thieves (Alfayé 2009, 201; Sevilla Conde 2014, 243; Vaquerizo Gil 2010, 311), or to fix the prematurely dead or outcast to the grave to protect the living from its possible return from the afterlife (Baills-Talbi & Dasen 2008, 608). On this, ancient times offer us several texts in which the magical character of these pieces in combination with other ritual practices can be appreciated. Quintilian's *X Declamatio Maior* tells the story of a young man who died in an accident—which gives him the status of a violently premature death—who returns every night as a ghost to his mother's side. Although the development of the ritual is not very clear in the text, it involved the use of a nail, stones and chains to hold and fix the dead person forever in his grave (Sevilla Conde 2014, 213). We can see another example in a *tabella defixionis* found in a Gallo-Roman tomb in Villepouge and Chagnon.[6] This piece was found pierced with another tablet by a nail, containing a magical procedure, and it said: 'in the same way that this puppy is turned upside down and cannot get up, may they not be able to get up either; may they be pierced as this one is' (Marco Simón 2002, 199; Vaquerizo Gil 2010, 95).

In the *Onoba territorium*, we have observed different variants of this ritual practice; the most visible is the one in which the whole body or some parts of it were surrounded by nails. In the necropolis of Punta del Moral, an infant had an iron nail in each of his hands, while another child (9–10 years old) was surrounded by 10 nails arranged as follows: three around the head, another three around the feet and two on the palms of the hands. The same operation was found in one of the adult graves at La Viña, where 10 nails were placed around the corpse, gathered at the head, hips, knees and feet. The last example is found in the necropolis of Las Reliquias, where an adult was pierced by two iron nails in the pelvis area.

There are many more examples in which a bronze or iron nail was on the cover of the grave, or near it. In El Eucaliptal, this custom was mostly continued in the funerary world of children in the fifth and sixth centuries A.D., and there were several children's graves with covers made of tegulae and amphorae. On the outside there was a bronze nail, although there is no shortage of examples for adults in the fifth century A.D. A more complex variant of this practice can be seen in a cremation urn burial, which was surrounded by iron nails. In the necropolis of La Viña, only one tomb had a bronze nail on the roof; otherwise, there are several burials under a tegula roof in which these pieces were pierced by several bronze nails—the mutilated body already mentioned was found inside one of them (Fig. 5). There are also examples in both necropolises where these nails were included in the ritual offerings given by the relatives to facilitate and protect the afterlife. Normally, they appear mixed with African *sigillata* plates and bowls for La Viña, and common pottery in El Eucaliptal, although there are many examples in which the

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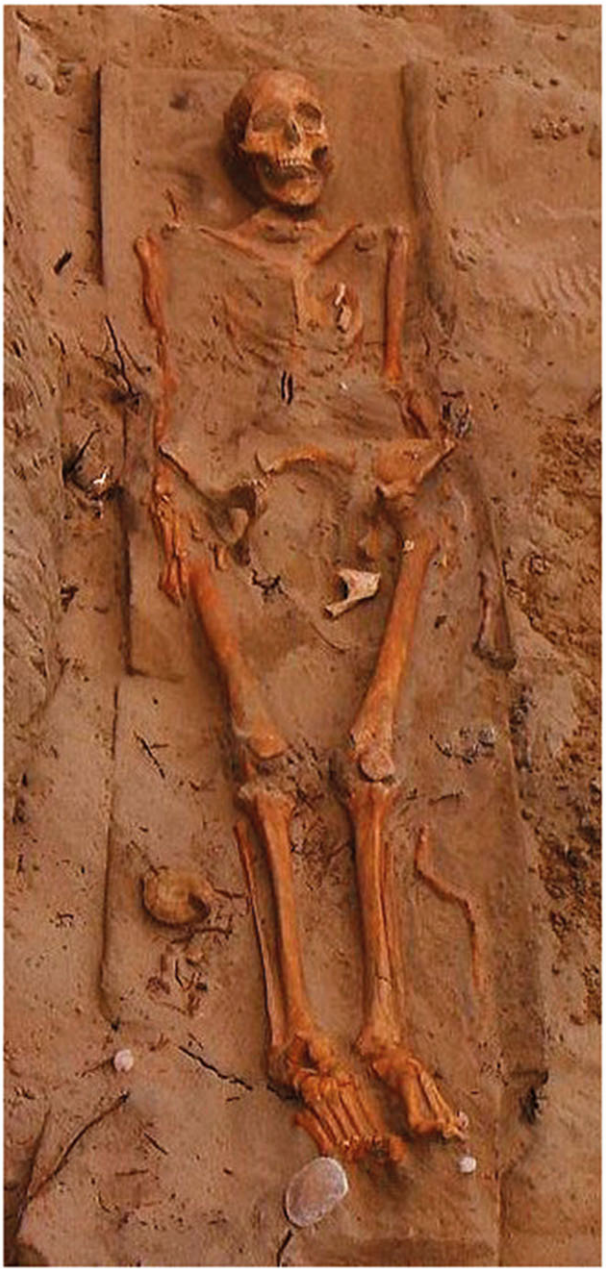

Figure 7. Scallop shell introduced as trousseau in the necropolis of El Eucaliptal.

grave goods were composed exclusively of these apotropaic elements (Fig. 5). In short, whatever the variations documented in the ritual may be, we believe that each nail was placed deliberately with the intention of fixing the soul of the deceased to the earth and preventing it from being disturbed, a sign of the non-return transit that death entailed.

Finally, when nails appear associated with other preventative elements, such as oysters, animal teeth or melted lead, their meaning may have been modified or amplified. In the case of oysters, there is no understanding of their presence inside the graves. Aries and Duby (1993, 491–2) relate this type of piece to female and child burials by establishing a parallelism between the white cavity of the mollusc and the female vulva. Nevertheless, most authors consider that their presence should not be related to any female attribute, but rather responds to natural and environmental issues; thus, for example, in the necropolis of Las Delicias research in Granada, their presence is explained by two causes: a natural one, because oysters could have entered the tomb in search of a sheltered and wet habitat; or, as already noted for the necropolis of Tarragona, because they entered the grave on the days consecrated to the memory of the deceased on which the tomb was opened (Toro & Ramos 1987, 142).

Obviously, in a coastal environment such as that of the Huelva cemeteries, the presence of these pieces inside the graves may be the result of natural processes, although their location on very specific parts of the body, as well as their association with other apotropaic elements, seems to be somewhat intentional. In the necropolis of El Eucaliptal, evidence of this type is occasionally associated with a couple of adult individuals, both male and female, and mostly with newborns. Regarding the infants, these pieces were deposited on the head; in the female grave at the feet (Fig. 7); and for the male, covering the mouth.[7] In the necropolis of La Viña, for its part, in addition to the fact that only scallop shells[8] were used, it was found that in most cases they were associated with nails, pieces of melted lead and animal incisors, and there were several examples in which they appeared perforated as an amulet and on the chest of those buried, or directly on the palms of the hands, although there are also examples in which these pieces were placed next to the feet or on the heads. In the most representative example of this ritual practice, the floor of one of the graves of this cemetery was completely covered with shells of different species.

This intentionality, both when choosing a type of shell and its location, inevitably indicates a ritual need. The first archaeological reference to the conscious introduction of these objects into burials was made by Chapa Brunet (2008, 634), who reported the presence of shells and other remains belonging to marine animals inside children's burials in the Iberian funerary world. The possible explanation of the symbolic use of these pieces by Escacena and Vázquez (2009, 77) goes one step further, suggesting that it is a Semitic funerary practice whereby these pieces provided the deceased with special protection from evil spirits, hence when they were buried it was normal to be accompanied by them as they meant a safe passage to the afterlife. More recently, studies carried out by Prados Martínez (2015b, 120) in the necropolis of *Baelo Claudia* have led this author to connect the appearance of shells placed at the head of some children's tombs with the world of death and the afterlife. This would be a religious element associated with Phoenicio-Punic funerary rituals, which over time would be assimilated by the cults of Mithra and Christianity. There are also many ancient references to this type of practice, such as in the Egyptian Book of the Dead, which said that a certain shell was called the 'Hand of Isis'. In the text, the function of this mollusc is linked to the deceased's need for the goddess to help him escape by a certain magic formula from the net into

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which the souls could fall in the journey to the afterlife (Lara Peinado 2002, 310). There is no lack of stories in the Greek world where the use of shells in burials, incantations, imprecations of good or bad luck, and other magical practices —specifically when the aim was to obtain love wishes, protection against illness or defence against the attack of evil spirits and demons, or even when seeking to achieve 'eternal' rest—was quite common (Calvo & Sánchez 1987, 87ff).

Regarding melted lead elements, their function is uncertain. It is well known in the Roman world that *defixio* tablets made of lead were found inside tombs, consisting of an inscription made by a magician or sorcerer to gain the support of supernatural forces, for both good and ill purposes. These magical tablets were addressed to infernal gods, whose aim could be to take revenge on some people or to provide them with certain advantages on their way to the afterlife (Carmona Berenguer 1998, 186). However, no inscriptions have been found on any of the pieces recovered in the *territorium*, so we do not know whether this type of object was introduced into the tombs to gain the support of these gods, or on the contrary, to fix the dead person to the grave. In this regard, maybe we can find answers in the discovery at the end of the nineteenth century in the necropolis of Italica of several skeletons whose skulls were in some cases filled with melted lead and in others pierced by nails in their frontal and occipital part. There were different interpretations: on the one hand, it was a type of torture, a way of executing a death sentence, since everything seems to indicate that these nails were inserted when the person was still alive—or had just died—or, on the other hand, to prevent their return to the world of the living by fixing them to the tombs (González Parrilla 2009, 988). Undoubtedly, if the latter is the real explanation, the introduction of these elements implies the implementation of a magic ritual developed around those persons who died prematurely or violently to nullify their injurious character.

The last of the conjuring elements is an animal tooth: here, boar tusks and herbivore molars. These objects were used as protective talismans, as they received magical powers that enhanced the preservation of the individual's strength after death (Aries & Duby 1993, 491–2; Carmona Berenguer 1998, 190). Generally, they are found unworked and without carving, although they may sometimes have been drilled as they also served as pendants during life; however, their symbolism and intrinsic meaning continued.

In short, these deposits are considered an important part of the funerary ritual, with a magical/superstitious and apotropaic sense, which had the ultimate purpose of protecting the dead people from evil spirits, but also to ensure that they were immobilized in their burial place according to their new condition (Remesal Rodríguez 1979, 41; Schattner 2003, 13–131; Sevilla Conde 2010–2011, 212; 2014, 243; Sillières 1997, 198; Vaquerizo Gil 2010, 311; 2011, 219).

Superstitious practices in women's unexpected deaths

Roman women lived in a world where their image was projected by men for them, materialized in a virtue centred on taking care of their children, husband and home, as well as guaranteeing the family unit, providing heirs, transmitting property, honour and the good name of the family; i.e. women were nothing more than a means to an end (Sevilla Conde 2015, 98ff). If this project was not completed or was truncated by a premature or accidental death, the natural order was broken, and it was precisely in this scenario, and depending on the virtue of the family, that such deaths began to be viewed with suspicion, which could only be mitigated if a series of specific ritual practices were carried out to save the family's honour (Vaquerizo Gil 2010). In addition, they were also identified with issues such as the conception of deformed beings, adultery, poisoning and abortions, all of which were considered to be the bearers of divine wrath (Cid López 2007, 14).

Maybe the best example is represented by the large public grave (*puticulus*) from the Early Imperial period at *Augusta Emerita*. There were 64 graves, mostly women and children of all age ranges, placed in unusual positions such as lateral decubitus, prone position, sitting or on their knees. Despite their location in a public grave and their arrangements, the presence of reused ceramic objects—maybe even from the dumping site—and disarticulated skeletal remains of animals included as funerary offerings in numerous tombs indicate that their families were worried about the burial process (Márquez & Pérez 2005, 541–2; Vaquerizo Gil 2010, 307). Thus, for example, one of the corpses in the ventral position had as funerary offering two unguent jars placed next to the head, a small glass jar next to the face, a small pot of common pottery on the front part of the body and a jar of common pottery next to the feet. Likewise, the cadaver of a woman was seated and was carrying a cockerel under her left arm, with a small pot of common pottery, three plates and a bone needle next to her feet (Pérez Maestro 2007, 295–300).

This idea changed substantially from the third century A.D. onwards, thanks to the political and economic transformations that took place in the Empire, where the birth of a new upper class, together with the appearance of new mystical beliefs, led to the resurgence of these figures of women, which were ideologically projected as generators of life and as elements of family cohesion. Since that time, family funerary monuments began to appear, in which both women and children were included, overcoming the monumentality of the typical character of the Early Imperial period (Rueda *et al.* 2008, 478).

Nevertheless, like infants, they would occupy reserved spaces within the necropolis. This is the case of the El Eucaliptal cemetery, where from the third to the fifth century A.D., thanks to anthropological studies, we can confirm that there was an area reserved for the burial of women and young children, even visually differentiated by the appearance of a stepped structure and a masonry enclosure. In the city of *Onoba*, as mentioned above, a space reserved almost entirely for the placement of women and children in the late Imperial period was found: specifically, it was a group of graves excavated in the 1970s by Mariano del Amo y de la Hera (1976) in Onésimo Redondo Street, now called Plácido Bañuelos Street, dating from the third and fourth centuries A.D. These tombs are remarkable not only for the fact that most of them belonged to mature or elderly women (between 65 and 70 years old) with children

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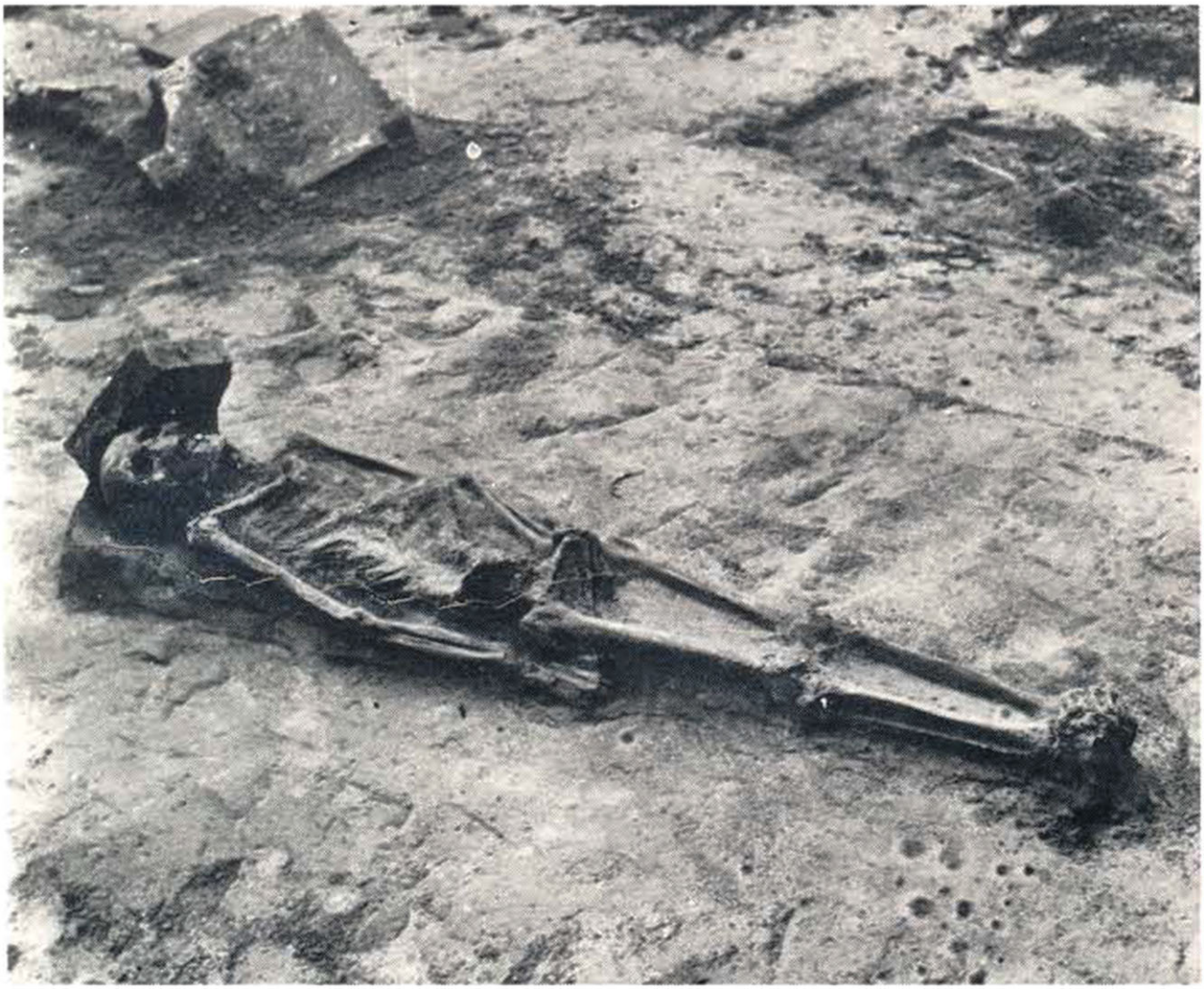

Figure 8. Female individual of the street Onésimo Redondo with skull compressed by a brick. (Amo y de la Hera 1976, pl. 16.)

(they were not the subject of anthropological studies, so their age cannot be accurately determined), but also for the incorporation of a whole system of magical and superstitious ritual practices. Among these rituals, we can see the following cases: in grave number three, belonging to a woman, the corpse was found surrounded by bronze nails, one of which was inserted inside the mouth. Two bronze nails were recovered from grave number 5: one through the ribs of the dead and the other between the fill soil. The last case where we have observed the ritual use of these objects is in tomb number 7, where the corpse was completely surrounded by 24 nails. A different practice was documented in grave number 6, based on the placement of a brick over the deceased head to squash and immobilize it, thus preventing it from leaving the grave (Fig. 8).

A last example of a particular death is represented by grave 23 from the southern necropolis of *Onoba* (Castilla *et al.* 2004). Inside this tomb there was a double burial consisting of the skeleton of an adult woman and a neonate in a prone position introduced between the mother's pelvis and knees[9] (Fig. 9). Evidence such as coal, bone remains, bronze and iron nails and oysters were recovered from the grave fill, almost certainly derived from a ritual process with the aim of preventing the disturbance of the dead, but especially of the living. As we have already seen in the previous section, the placement of nails and oysters responds to a superstitious magical meaning by which the grave was sealed and protected against possible aggression from evil agents. Nevertheless, the position of the infant indicates that just as the tomb was sealed to avoid the entry of pernicious spirits, its inverted position neutralized the evil and dangerous potential of this premature death (Alfayé 2009, 186).

Other non-normative practices

Finally, we cannot end this article without mentioning the significance of cenotaph burials in a coastal area such as ours. The importance of funerals in the Roman world reached such levels that even those who died in the sea or in war, whose bodies could not be buried with the posthumous honours

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they deserved, were given an imaginary sepulchre, called a *cenotaphium*. These were built believing that the soul, separated from the body, needed an abode in order not to wander like an evil genius[10] (Guillén 2000, 392). In the coastal cemeteries, we are certain of the existence of two examples, one in El Eucaliptal and the other in La Viña, both dated to the late Imperial period. The first of these was composed of a plate of common African pottery (Ostia, I, 261), a pitcher and a disc-shaped roman oil lamp with an erotic theme (Dressel 30) (Fig. 10), while the second was composed of a plate of African *terra sigillata* (Hayes 50), a fragmented roman oil lamp decorated with four concentric circles made with dots in relief (Dressel 30), an iron utensil, possibly a knife, a small fragment of melted lead and two iron nails. In short, this is a standardized work, made up of ceramic pieces necessary for making food offerings, an oil lamp with a clear symbolic function based on the light that radiated from these pieces to guide wandering souls to their graves, as well as various apotropaic or magical elements such as nails and melted lead.

Discussion

In short, all the events mentioned are only confirming that these practices were not isolated cases but formed part of the Roman *funus* in a great heterogeneity of forms; in fact, most researchers are in favour of outcasts who were buried with several practices due to the fear aroused by the causes of their deaths. On this point, we believe that we cannot end this article without focusing our area of study in the larger world of the Roman Empire, where the development of these rituals was not an exception, it was something usual.

As we have already seen, one of the best-documented practices in the city of *Onoba* and its *territorium* was to create spaces reserved for the placement of children and women, and it was set aside from the rest of the dead people. On this matter, there are many necropolises in which these spatial separations are identified; for example, we have the case of Granollers (Barcelona), where the funerary remains are distributed in two different areas: a sector of 350 sq. m dedicated to the burial of people aged between five and six years, and a large grave (1.65 sq. m surface area and a depth of 1.5 m) destined for perinatal burials associated with a series of offerings, such as containers of common pottery and faunal remains of canines, equids and bovines (Tenas i Busquets 1991, 67–79).

The organization documented in the necropolis of Tarragona is similar to the one proposed in Punta del Moral. In the former, we find many child burials in amphorae scattered around adult graves, sometimes even on top of them, as if a father or mother had several of their children grouped together (Serra Vilaró 1994, 202–3).

If we look more closely, on the Cadiz coasts it was common to bury neonates and infants in amphorae or under them, especially from the period of the imposition of Christianity (Bernal & Lagóstena 2010, 410–11), when the funerary care and consideration of children increased.

Outside *Hispania*, in the north of Africa, we have the case of *Thyrsdrus* (Tunisia), in the province of Proconsularis. A funerary complex dated between the second and early third centuries A.D. was found in one of its burial areas, consisting of 15 inscriptions belonging to people who died between the ages of 5 and 15; below this, there was a second level of graves, in this case without inscriptions, in which babies who had died in perinatal age (up to 2 years of age) were entombed (Lassère 1987).

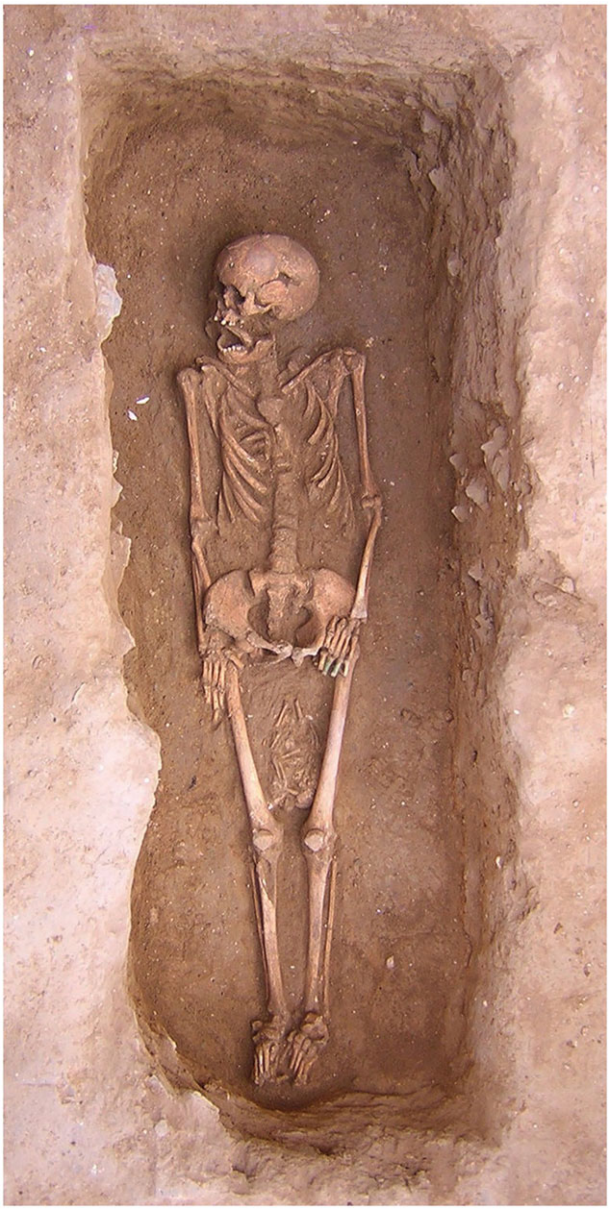

Figure 9. Singular burial of a female individual and a neonate from the southern necropolis of *Onoba*. (G.I.R.H.A.)

Other non-normative practices already mentioned are related to the documentation of forced or anomalous positions of some adults inside the tombs, who were sometimes fixed to them through the deposition of certain materials, magical/superstitious pieces or directly with shackles. These, as we have already said, are not unique in our area; in fact, on investigation of specialized bibliography it is easy to document several cases; for example, under geographical criteria in the nearby city of *Gades* we have many examples. Specifically, the grave of an

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Figure 10. *Cenotaphium* of El Eucaliptal.

adult in a prone position was recovered during archaeological work carried out in the Amilcar Barca Avenue (General Social Security Treasury), and had the head placed where the feet should have been. As for the excavations carried out in the Varela infantry barracks, we can see a simple pit without cover, where the deceased, placed face down, appeared accompanied by some offerings with clear ritual connotations. Specifically, a bronze nail was found in the ocular cavity along with other ritual pieces (Arévalo González 2010, 517). More significant are the specimens found in the Teatro de Andalusia, as it has been possible to determine their isolation. The first of these was deposited on a deathbed of black pebbles, and he was dead because of a costal osteosarcoma, which must have been evidenced in life by a bulky mass on the right side of the thorax. Right at this end of the tomb, there was a barrier of *galbos*, which seems to indicate that these pieces, as well as the pebbles, were intended to safeguard the living from the deceased person through a magical-religious conception (Macías López 2007, 33ff). Nearby, another person was buried in an unusual position. In this case, he was in a supine position with his head forced back due to the placement of a large stone on his neck. This individual suffered a large granuloma, located in the inner part of the right ear, which probably caused a brain injury with symptoms such as partial paralysis of the body, altered perception and significant personality changes (Macías López, 2007, 35).

In the city of Córdoba, in the Miraflores sector, eight burials were recovered in forced positions,[11] some of them in a supine position with the legs turned to the right, in the foetal position and even in a prone position. Although it is associated with a late chronology, Vaquerizo Gil (2010, 110) does not rule out the possibility that it may be a funerary area for outcasts, dating back to earlier times. Besides this, there are individuals who appeared with displaced kneecaps,[12] decapitated, or even dismembered in grave number seven of Ollerías Avenue, in Lucano Street, and in Corregidor Avenue; or, closer, two burials in the necropolis of Italica (Sevilla Conde 2014, 216).

A little further away we have examples from *Valentia*, where burials in prone positions have been related to socially isolated people, buried like this due to the significance of their death or as a way of banishing the illness (García & Guerín 2002, 206). We must highlight the case documented in Quart Street, where an iron ring was recovered from around the left tibia of an adult person dated to the first century A.D., and he was considered an outcast by his researchers (García *et al.* 2007, 165, fig. 11). Similar to this, we have the example found in the western necropolis of Cartagena, where it was possible to see how one of the iron bracelets documented inside the grave of a child was around his foot (Madrid & Vizcaíno 2006, 199).

Regarding women, there are also many examples beyond our scope of analysis. Resemblant situations can be seen in other necropolises with similar cultural roots, such as *Gades* and *Baelo Claudia*. In Plaza de Asdrúbal in Cádiz in 1983, it was possible to exhume a group of burials dating from the fifth to the first century B.C. Among these, there were Roman graves that were dug in simple pits directly in the ground, most of which belonged to women, and the grave goods included items related basically to ornamentation and personal care, such as earrings, rings, mirrors and unguent bottles (Macías López 2007, 14). Already in the first and second centuries A.D., during the early Imperial period, this area continued to be occupied mainly by children, showing that it was a sector with a differential use perpetuated over time (Vaquerizo Gil 2010, 149–50). In the case of *Baelo Claudia*, during excavation carried out in 2012, several funerary arrangements with obvious Punic roots were found (Prados Martínez 2015a, 93).

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These arrangements consisted of stone urns of quadrangular or cylindrical sections with a cover and two or three jars with one handle of common pottery covered by a plate. Up to now, studies have shown that the stone urns contained female objects such as iron needles, plates, bronze mirrors and *acus crinales* of bones. In the absence of anthropological studies to refute this, these depositions could correspond to women, proving the greater consideration that these ethnic or family groups showed for these social classes.

Lastly, we have the example of the late Imperial necropolis located in the old bus station of Granada, where, as in El Eucaliptal, only the human remains of women and prepubescent children under 6 years of age were found (Navas *et al.* 2010–2011, 224).

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is important to point out that most of the burials presented in this article are from the period between the third and fifth centuries A.D. (late Imperial period and Late Antiquity). At the beginning of the third century A.D., the end of mining meant the decline of the port of *Onoba* in a direct way, producing an important economic recession that practically led to the depopulation of the city. The capital that, until then, had been allocated to these activities was redirected towards the salting factories and the agricultural world, producing an important take-off of these activities. Along with these economic changes, an important social transformation also took place. A new wave of eastern and North African agents would arrive at these establishments, monopolizing the Mediterranean trade and displacing the Italics, and together with them the new mystical religions, key in our opinion in this whole process of progressive acceptance of outcast groups such as women and children. The official Roman religion stopped being effective in the presence of an increasingly open social and political organization, that was no longer satisfied with an afterlife in which people would continue to suffer the same misfortunes in death as in life. In short, these new religions brought with them important ideas and conceptions of hope, but without forgetting, or completely disregarding, the classical and fearful precepts that had been deeply rooted in traditional society.

Nevertheless, this higher appreciation for outcast groups was not something new for the city of *Onoba*, very possibly because they started from a strong attachment to their previous traditions of clear Phoenicio-Punic roots, where the consideration of these individuals was not so restrictive; hence the existence in the capital's northern necropolis of a space occupied by women and children from the early Imperial period. Both their grave goods and the topographical characteristics of their deposition around the stepped monument leave no doubt that they belong to an ethnic group with a strong tradition prior to the Roman one (Fernández Sutilo 2021).

In conclusion, although it is obvious that all these superstitious and magical practices were typical of the Roman Empire, their level of application, understanding, and even their rhythms seem to have depended on the individual beliefs of each one of the cultural elements that made it up. In this sense, we believe that the incorporation of Huelva and its surroundings into this line of research represents a significant enrichment for it. We cannot forget that this was an area of vital importance for the Empire due to the riches first of its mines, and later its factories, with a significant cultural hybridism from even before the arrival of the Romans (the Tartessian and Turdetan world), strengthened and favoured over time by continuous exchanges with the eastern population. This reality means that our area of study has long been a gateway for different religious and cultural currents, not only official ones, but also subversive ones.

Acknowledgements. This article is part of the CEIMAR Young Researchers Project, titled 'Las necrópolis portuarias del suroeste hispano. Escenarios de representación política, social, económica y religiosa', CEIJ-011. This work has been carried out within the framework of the project 'The Atlantic arc of south-western Spain from protohistory to late antiquity: geomorphological evolution, coastal occupation and port systems (PID2022-142778NB-I00)' belonging to the call for Knowledge Generation Projects of the Ministry of Science and Innovation. Funding for open access charge: Universidad de Huelva.

Notes

1. For Romans of any era, the most important thing was always to die with dignity, something that could only be achieved if they had previously lived a decent life. To this end, it was essential that their relatives honoured their memory by setting up a complex funeral ritual (*funus*) that would make the transition from this world to the Afterlife less traumatic; if, on the other hand, life had not been lived according to the Roman canons of righteousness, or if the ritual was not adequate, it was believed that these people would return to life as evil spirits (*larvae* or *lemurae*), ready to torment the family.

2. The cases chosen for this study are the result of various emergency archaeological interventions, where access to data is sometimes difficult due to the lack of scientific publications, in addition to the scarcity of anthropological studies in most instances. As a result, it is sometimes difficult to determine specific ages or sexes.

3. The single beads of glassy material or amber found in these burials have always been connected to the presence of necklaces and bracelets; however, in our opinion, it is possible that some of these pieces represent a variety of amulets known as *crepundia*, whose function was to make noise or tinkling to drive evil spirits away.

4. It is not clear that this practice is exclusively related to outcasts, as one of the richest graves in the Roman necropolis of the Royston Road in Britain contained a decapitated individual (Bailles-Talbi & Dasen 2008, 606). With this we want to make it clear that the atypical burials that will be dealt with in this study have been classified under this nomenclature because of the way in which the person died and was buried, not necessarily, and in a unidirectional way, because of the socio-economic position of the deceased.

5. Generally speaking, most of the nails found inside the graves belong to the coffin or bier that contained the deceased, and may even have formed part of a jewellery-type trousseau; however, those, usually bronze, which appear alone or arranged in a particular way around the deceased, or even on some part of the anatomy of the body such as hands, mouths or eyes, seem to mask some kind of symbolism or subliminal message. Already in ancient excavations, these types of pieces were interpreted as apotropaic amulets whose purpose was to protect the dead from threats from beyond the grave and from desecration; mainly from practitioners of magic and thieves (Alfayé 2009, 201; Sevilla Conde 2014, 243; Vaquerizo Gil 2010, 311), or to fix prematurely dead or marginal individuals to graves to protect the living from their possible return from the Afterlife (Bailles-Talbi & Dasen 2008, 608).

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6. *Tabellae defixionum* are lead desecration tablets, which contain texts written for purposes harmful or injurious to the victims mentioned on them. They are used to achieve objectives that are impossible—or difficult—to accomplish through the legal means provided by the authorities. Anxiety, fear, envy, resentment or the desire for revenge are the key factors that explain this type of text.
7. This person was in a prone position.
8. The vagueness of the El Eucaliptal case, where these pieces are generically classified as malacology fauna, prevents us from knowing whether scallop shells were chosen for this ritual practice, as they were at La Viña. Nevertheless, one of the photographs taken during the excavation work shows that at least this type of mollusc was used in this burial site.
9. The current level of research makes it impossible to determine whether this woman had a miscarriage or an intentional abortion.
10. As *larvae* or *lemures*, i.e. an evil being turned into a ghost or spectre.
11. Some of the corpses recovered in this sector were deposited with their legs turned to the right, together with others in the foetal position, in right or left lateral decubitus, or even in prone decubitus (Casal *et al.* 2004, 265).
12. In the different cases found, the bodies of the inhumed persons maintain their anatomical articulation, except for the kneecaps, which have been found either next to the head or arranged parallel to the legs.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0959774325100048 Published online by Cambridge University Press