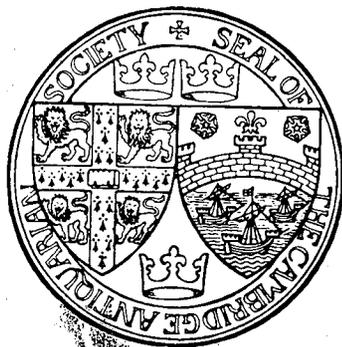


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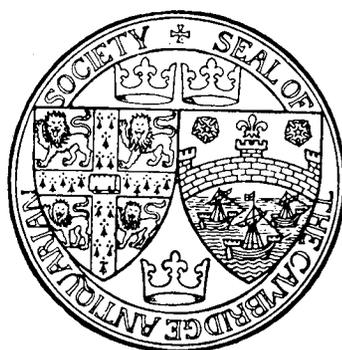
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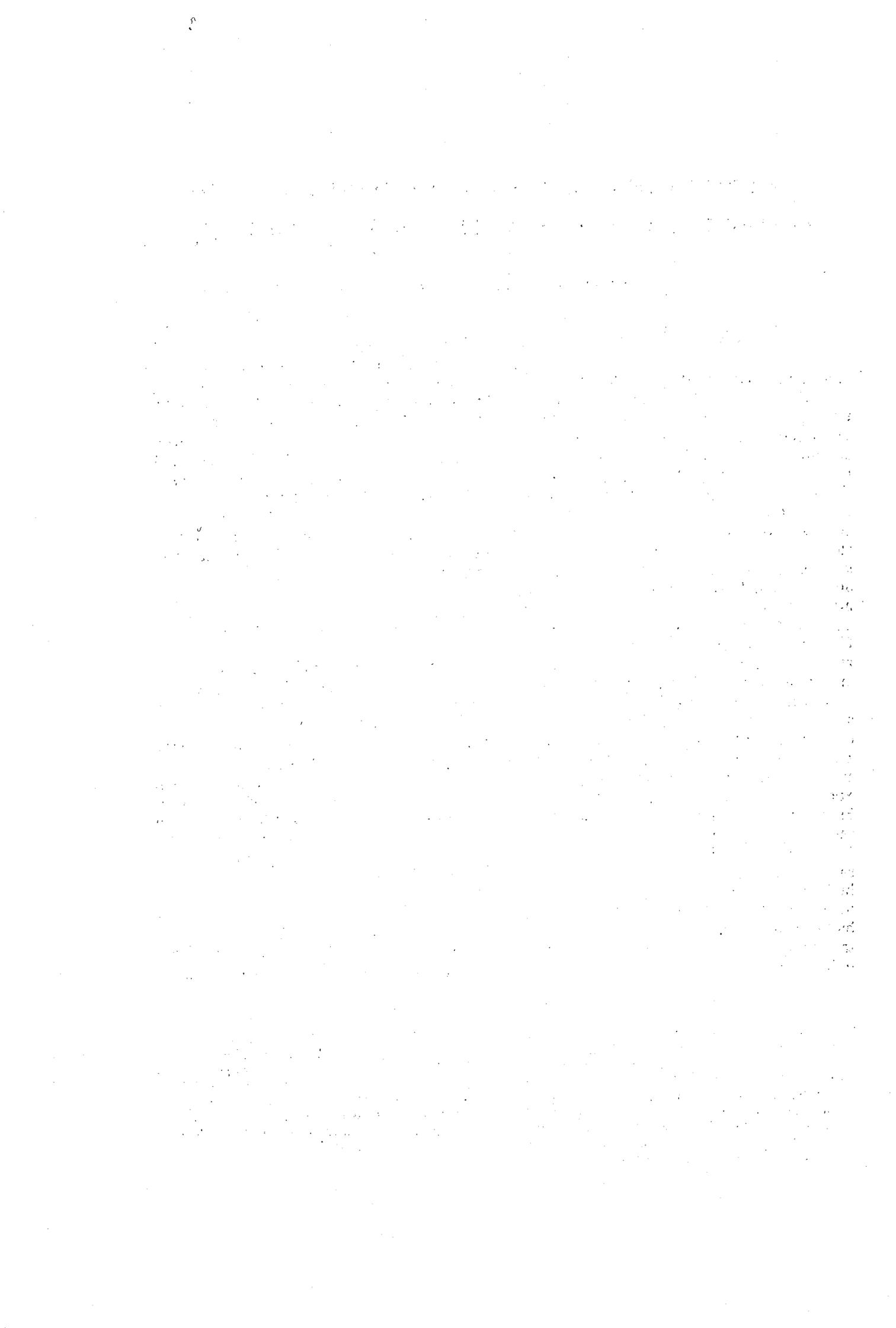
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SKELETAL REMAINS FROM A ROMAN SARCOPHAGUS IN THE COLLECTIONS OF THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM, CAMBRIDGE

MARSHALL JOSEPH BECKER

INTRODUCTION

A Roman sarcophagus with its lid, now in the collections of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, England (Inv. number: GR.1.1863), when found contained a small amount of human skeletal material presumed to be the remains of the original occupant. The sarcophagus had long been situated in the portico of the Museum, but in June of 1969 the contents were removed to a more secure storage location. Information concerning the sarcophagus and its contents, both skeletal and artefactual, has been published in several articles since its discovery in 1863 (Babington 1864, 1883: 35–6) at 'Gravel Hill' near the Huntingdon Road.¹ However, the skeletal remains were examined in detail only in 1986 and the findings are the subject of this report.

A study of the sarcophagus, which has a semi-circular head end and is dated to the 3rd or early 4th century AC (RCHM 1959: lxiv, Pl. 1), has been provided by Alison Taylor (1984: 16, no. 6). The Cambridge Antiquarian Society deposited this sarcophagus with the Fitzwilliam Museum. This was one of two sarcophagi found buried at right angles to the Godmanchester Roman road.¹ The other sarcophagus, mended with iron clamps and believed to have held a male, has been 'recycled' (Taylor 1984: 20). Water damage had destroyed the skeleton in this now lost sarcophagus, and no grave goods were known to have survived.

Joan Liversidge (1977: 15–16, note 12, Pl. 2), in her useful survey of Roman burials from this area (cf. Fox 1923: 188), has reviewed the now-surviving tomb goods found with the person in the Fitzwilliam sarcophagus. These goods include four small glass vessels from near the feet (Pl. 2), a shallow bronze vessel, one pottery dish, a beaker (Pl. 2), an amulet, and two pins of jet. The remains in this sarcophagus were identified as those of a woman, but no information was provided concerning how this conclusion had been reached.

THE SKELETAL MATERIAL

Babington's original publication (1864) noted that 'the female skeleton lay as it had been originally deposited'. His subsequent publication (1883) reiterated this observation with the note that the excavators found in this sarcophagus the 'perfect skeleton of a female . . . quite undisturbed.' The hundred years subsequent to the discovery of this woman have not been as kind as the 1500 years during which she lay buried, as is indicated by the paucity of material which remained to be examined in 1986.

A very brief note on the surviving bones and teeth was provided by F.V.H. Powell (1984). Even more recently this skeletal material was briefly examined by Prof. Sebastian Payne,

¹ Liversidge (1977: 15–16) notes that these two stone coffins were found two years after 1861, when a series of cremation burials were found in the same area (cf. near-by urns noted by Lysons, 1808: 44). The Roman cemetery appears to lie along the west side of the Godmanchester Roman road running out of Cambridge, at some 3/4 of a mile (1.25 km.) distance. The graves were located between Howe House and Gravel Hill Farm (more recently the University

Farm; TL 431599). H.A. Chapman (1904: 72) offers an account of this sarcophagus indicating that it was found at Shire Hall in 1842 and was given to the Fitzwilliam Museum by W. Parker Hammond. Dr C. Simon (personal communication) has suggested that Chapman may have confused the data on the sarcophagus in question with another object which then may have been in the Fitzwilliam collections.

who affirmed that the bones remaining in the sarcophagus were almost all human² and possibly those of the person for whom the sarcophagus had been made. The following report is a complete study of the surviving remains with a note on what this tells us about the occupant of this sarcophagus.

The skull, mandible, and most of the long bones of this single individual appear to have been removed at some time in the past. Those bones which do survive, representing only a single person, are typical of the types of bones which are left behind when tombs are cleared, or when skeletal remains are shifted from one portion of a chamber tomb to another (Becker 1985). The more recognizable bones tend to be transported, while those with a low recognition factor, such as most of these, are simply ignored. These remains belong to this latter category with one exception. An intact left humerus with a length of 279 mm. has remained. From the Babington publications we may assume that the skeleton had been completely intact and that the loss of skull and other long bones has resulted from selected removal. This has left us with only the traces of material which are herein described.

Along with the other traits, the morphology and size of the single humerus which has survived allows us to identify this individual as a female (as Babington originally had suggested) and to calculate her stature at 151.7 cm (with possible variation of plus or minus 4.45 cm: Trotter and Gleser 1952, 1977; Becker Ms. A). Trotter and Gleser found that the humerus is the best single bone for calculating stature in white females, which suggests that this figure may be considered relatively accurate.

The head diameter of this humerus is 39.2 mm while the distal end is 50.7 mm across. The midshaft diameters are 19.8 and 16.0 mm (anterior-posterior; lateral). No olecranon perforation is evident. A slight suggestion of a fusion line on the head of this humerus leads me to suggest an age of 20 to 22 years at death. None of the other bone fragments have

exostoses or geriatric characteristics which would contradict this tentative age evaluation.

A small corpus sternum (80.4 mm maximum length) does show some lipping along the inferior margin. However, this seems to be developmental rather than a function of geriatric processes. The entire inferior aspect of this corpus is askew, being pinched toward the right side as a result of unequal unilateral development. This suggests that the lower rib cage would have shown some distortion, but this might not be visible on individual ribs. More likely this probable pathology would be noticed in the spine.

Fortunately, among the few bones which are present there are two vertebrae. One of these is an adult lower cervical vertebra (possibly number 5 or 6), in which a slight asymmetry can be detected. The second is an upper thoracic vertebra (probably number 2 or 3) in which the asymmetry is quite evident. The entire spine must have veered to the left since the right wing of this bone is lower than the left, twisted, and with a large articular surface at its tip where it articulated with the body of its rib. The left wing shows only the slightest articulation with its rib.

Also in this collection are two intact left ribs and six rib fragments, of which five have relatively fresh fractures, not made in antiquity. The size of these ribs confirm the small size of this woman, and the anterior articular margins of the ribs confirm the estimate of age. The only other bones present are a single carpal, a digital second phalange, a pedal second phalange, one metatarsal, and a small fragment of ilium. The ilium, as would be expected in such a fragile bone, shows considerable post-mortem damage.

DISCUSSION

The calculated stature of this woman, at 151.7 cm is quite short, and below that which would

2 As Payne noted, the only non-human skeletal material in the sarcophagus in 1969 were portions of a young pig's leg. This is represented by an immature tibia shaft (right) with its unfused proximal epiphysis and the articular portion of the unfused distal epiphysis, which had been sawed through in the butchering process which also nicked the distal end

of the shaft. The presence of these remains of a pig (genus *Sus*), and the mechanical sawing of them indicates that these remains reflect a single, recent intrusion into the sarcophagus, while the bones were still joined by connective tissue, perhaps as remains from a picnic.

be expected for her status and this rural situation. Her physical difficulties, however, may reflect poor health throughout her life, and these factors may correlate with her small stature. No comparative sample exists for these populations, and no evaluation of relative social status can be made. The only skeleton from such a stone coffin for which a calculation of stature is available is that of a young adult male who Powell (1984: 19) believes to have been 173.90 cm tall. This considerable stature is what might be expected from higher status individuals of this period.³

Denston (1976: 15–16) provides useful data from two small skeletal samples from Bronze Age Cambridgeshire. Using the same method of calculation (Trotter and Gleser 1952), Denston provides data on four females from Chippenham and a similar number from Snailwell. Both populations average about five feet, four and five-eighths inches tall (c. 164.13 cm.). These figures are closer to what might be expected for this Romano-British woman. Given the numbers of people involved in these calculations we cannot reach any conclusions about the general populations which these few people represent.

CONCLUSIONS

These skeletal remains appear to be those of a single individual; a young adult female age 20 to 22 years at death. Her height has been calculated at 151.7 cm. (just under five feet tall). Although this stature is near the average for urban females in antiquity, it appears somewhat short for a higher-status female (judging from the sarcophagus) from a rural area. Her short stature, therefore probably reflects the poor state of health suffered by this woman during her brief life.

Characteristics of the surviving bone suggest that a spinal deformity afflicted this young woman. Given her age at death, mortality may have been related to childbirth or post-partum complications, a major cause of death in antiquity and throughout history.

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Sincere thanks are due Dr Christopher Simon for his kind invitation, when he was posted at the Fitzwilliam Museum, to study these remains and for his useful comments on an earlier draft of this manuscript. Thanks also are due Dr Birgitte Ginge (Clare Hall, The University of Cambridge) for her considerable assistance with this research and for numerous useful suggestions on an earlier draft of this report. Thanks also are due Dr Colin A. Shell for his aid in using computer resources while the author was a Visiting Fellow in the Department of Archaeology at the University of Cambridge.

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The ideas and opinions expressed are those of the author alone.

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3 Powell (1984) does not indicate which formula was used in this process, nor does he provide individual bone lengths.

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