Paleobiology of Etruscan populations

A research project on the population biology of ancient Etruscans has recently started. The aim of this multidisciplinary research is the anthropological definition of Etruscan populations, about which little is known. The study of the skeletal remains is expected to lead to the identification of characteristics typical of this group, which will be used to establish affinities and differences with other contemporary Italic populations, as well as with previous and subsequent groups. An outline of the project is presented here, together with an indication of the problems concerning the availability of material. A summary of previous research on Etruscans is also given. In the final section, preliminary results are presented on one aspect of the research presently under way, namely the odontometric study of different groups of Etruscan populations. These results suggest a homogeneity within the groups described under the common label “Etruscans”.

Outline of the project

The purpose of this introductory section is to outline a multidisciplinary research project which has been in progress for a few years and which is aimed at the construction of a comprehensive biological picture of the Etruscan populations by means of the examination of numerous physical anthropological characters, which can be measured or estimated on the skeletal remains.

One of the objectives is to determine possible common somatic traits which might characterize and define the Etruscans with respect to neighboring peoples and also to previous and subsequent inhabitants of the same area. Another objective is instead to verify a possible internal heterogeneity of traits among the peoples of the various Etruscan settlements, with respect to geographical distribution, environmental differences and sociocultural relationships.

There have been many hypotheses formulated in the past and at present about Etruscan origins; for example, that the Etruscan nation originated in the East or in central Europe, or instead that it may have formed within Italy and the external contributions are nothing more than added elements. In spite of the long discussions and secular interests concerning this ethnic group, a scientific study on a large sample, which might lead to a broader knowledge of the biological aspects of the Etruscans and thus give some support to the various attempts to reconstruct the dynamics of that population’s development, has not as yet been carried out. It is true that there have been various valuable studies of the skeletal material recovered from this or the other archeological excavation, but the next step, that of comparison, synthesis and interpretation, has been achieved only for a limited number of aspects.
Among the main obstacles to such an analysis, which are of different severity, may be mentioned:

- the scarcity of skeletal material, which may be surprising given the number of Etruscan tombs which have been excavated; this is partly due to the funerary rite of cremation, which predominated in certain periods and certain areas of Etruria, and in part also to the meager interest shown by many archeologists, up until a short time ago, for skeletal remains, which have been recovered in an incomplete and hurried manner or have been stored without adequate documentation, when they have not even been reburied or consigned to the ossuary of the local cemetery. For this reason many of the human skeletons recovered from the large Etruscan necropoles were lost before their scientific potential could be appreciated.

- Another obstacle is represented by the occasional and episodic nature of a large part of the anthropological studies on the Etruscans, and above-all by the lack of homogeneity of analytical methods, which is one of the reasons for the numerous differences in results obtained by various researchers.

- Finally there are logistical difficulties to the actual carrying out of the research on the available stored material, which are due to its dispersal in numerous locations; consequently there is the necessity for the moving about of the researcher and the necessary equipment, for an actual physical search for the specimens within the store-houses, and for permission to study the specimens which is not always easy to obtain.

At present there is the need for an exhaustive systematic analysis of all the material now available, a uniform statistical analysis of the individual data, carried out on all the information present in the literature and supplementing this with the data that is still missing, and finally a comparative synthesis.

The preliminary operation necessary for this project has been a survey of all the available material, both that which has already been studied and published, through consultation of the bibliographical sources, and that still unpublished, by means of visits to the different institutions (museums, university departments, superintendencies, etc.) and cities where this material is stored. This first phase has now been virtually completed.

The survey has resulted in the compilation and publication of a complete inventory of the skeletal remains originating from Etruscan sites, which thus facilitates access to them. The inventory contains information about the sample numbers, the state of preservation, provenance, chronology, the excavation (the people involved and the date), the present housing of the specimens and possible existing bibliographical references. The specimens have been classified and grouped according to their provenance. The locations of material for which the exact provenance is unknown have also been indicated (generally these involve museums which house collections acquired long ago, in which the specimens are sometimes identified only as "Etruscan"). A part of the inventory, concerning material housed with the Archeological Superintendence for Tuscany (Soprintendenza Archeologica per la Toscana) has already been published (Pacciani, 1989).

The phase of analysis, which is already in progress, concerns the aspects of anthropology and population biology which are the most traditional and less innovative but which have a chronological priority since they are preliminary to more specific studies. These aspects, being examined on each still unpublished subsample deriving from a given excavation site, concern:

1) The sample number and composition by age at death and by sex. As well as being fundamental to a reconstruction of the demographic structure and dynamics of the population, this knowledge is also the basis of the investigative methodology of nearly all the anthropological topics.