

A Roman woman from Çatalhöyük

Sophie Moore & Michelle Gamble |

Brown University/University of Hull & Heritage and
Archaeological Research Practice, Edinburgh

doi:10.18866/biaa2016.034

Osteobiographies grant us an insight into the lives experienced by people of the past. This year at Çatalhöyük, the historic cemeteries team was involved in excavating and studying the remains of a Roman woman from Çatalhöyük who had been interred with a remarkable assemblage of objects; the remains offered singular evidence of congenital disabilities. The process of piecing together the story of historic Çatalhöyük is one which works at various scales; in previous editions of *Heritage Turkey* we have discussed data at the largest scale, focusing on the typology of graves and the possible interactions between mortuary populations, here we focus at the scale of a single human life.

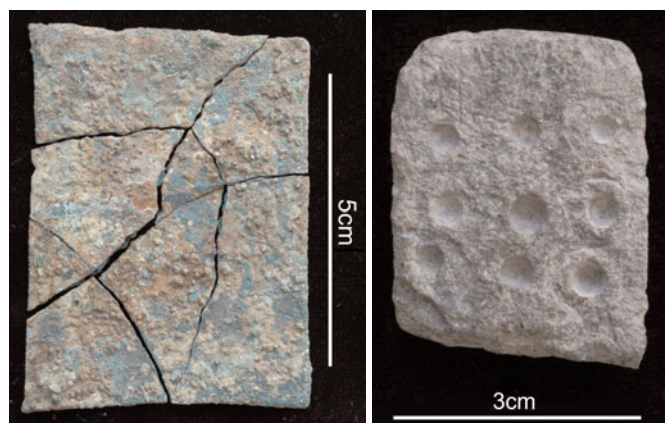
Our Roman woman was buried in the cemetery that overlies the Neolithic remains at Çatalhöyük; this cemetery is present in almost every area excavated on site. She is part of a mortuary group of approximately 62 graves dating from the Roman period, which have been determined as such by their grave goods, burial position and grave type. The 190 well-contextualised grave contexts from the first and second millennia AD comprise four morphological groups of graves. These groups correspond roughly to phases of cemetery use: Roman, Christian and two separate groups of Islamic-period burials, all cut into the prehistoric East and West Mound tell sites. While the majority of historic-period burials contain few grave goods or inclusions, a number of the excavated Roman burials were richly furnished. The grave focused on here, Feature 5077, was cut into a Neolithic midden deposit close to a group of richly furnished burials excavated by the BACH team (Cottica et al. 2012).

The woman is likely to have died in her mid-30s, and was interred in a Roman furnished burial, typical for the site: a deep, straight-sided grave aligned west to east with the cranium to the western end facing approximately east. The

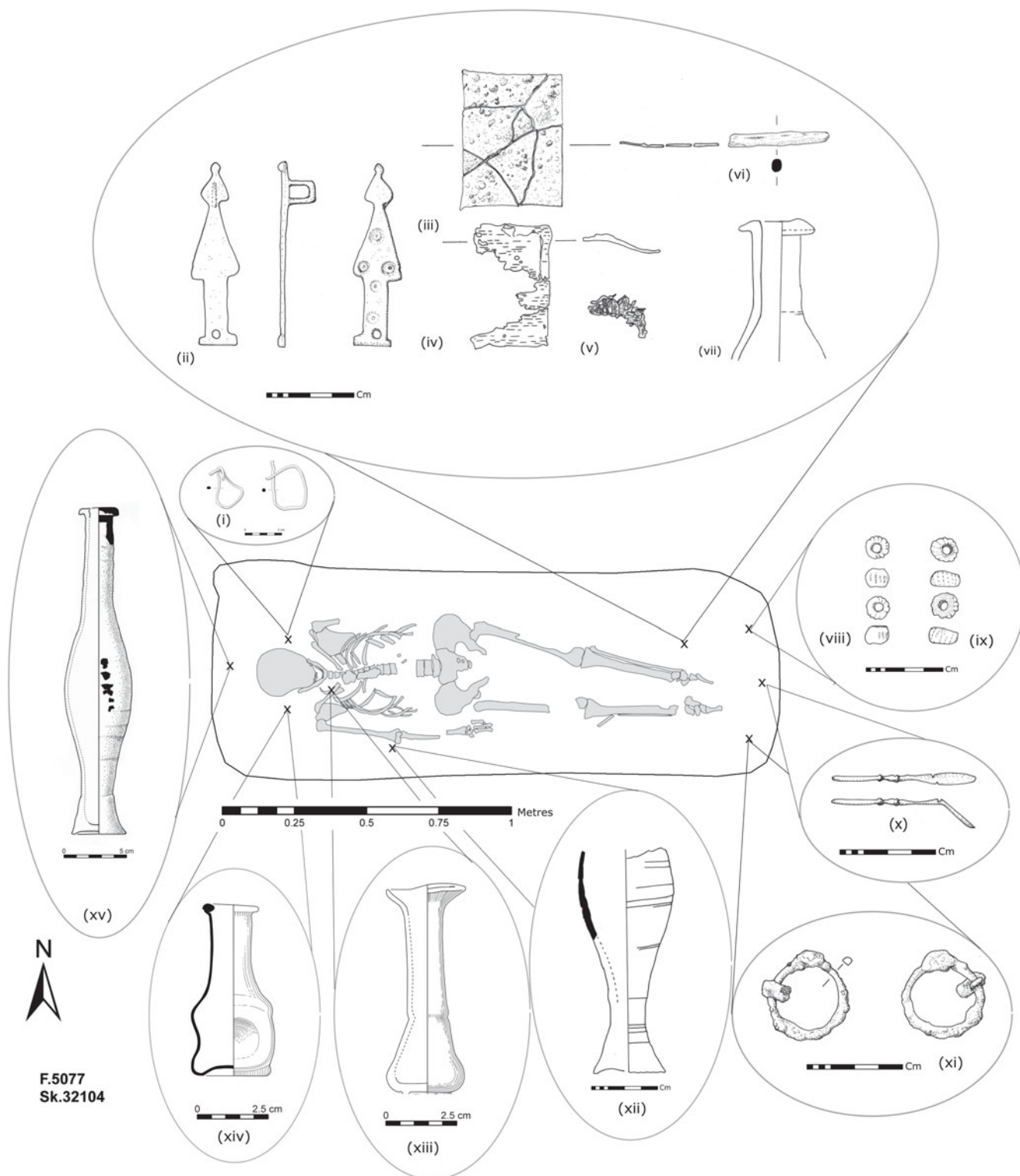
pattern of decomposition of the body, particularly the opening of the pelvic girdle, indicates that the body decayed in a void (C. Knüsel, personal communication), while the presence of wood and iron nails suggests the use of a coffin. Significant numbers of grave goods and inclusions were recovered from the grave. Most came from within the line of the coffin or were placed on the body itself. There are indications that the body was loosely shrouded; the clavicles were held in a vertical position and the right arm was held against the torso. In addition, red pigment staining the top of the spine (body of T2) and left side of the mandible perhaps indicates that a red-coloured cloth, which stained the bone during decay, was draped over the cranium, in addition to a shroud wrapping the rest of the body. The woman's head is likely to have rested on a now decayed object at the time of deposition, elevating the top of the cranium enough to allow it to face east.

Small finds from within the grave include a glass unguentarium recovered significantly above the level of the skeleton; this object might have been placed on the closed coffin lid. A glass unguentarium with an oblong body was recovered from the left-hand side of the cranium and two gold earrings were closely associated with the left and right temporal bones; these are likely to have been worn at the moment of burial. Two ceramic unguentaria were present. One was recovered unbroken from immediately behind the cranium, and was probably pushed against the western edge of the coffin. The other was broken in half at the midline with the base preserved, and came from the southern edge of the coffin, closely associated with the right arm. A copper alloy box clasp, with associated fragmentary wood, was recovered from the left of the body by the pelvis, and was found with a fragmentary glass vessel, a worn fragment of bone pin and a milled rectangular copper alloy plate in the same area. Mineralised beneath the copper plate was a fragmentary sheet of wood and a small piece of coarse fabric. The latter could be part of the shroud or, together, these items might be three parts of a composite object. At the base of the grave two blue faience melon beads were recovered, as well as a copper alloy ear-scoop and a corroded iron fibula brooch.

In addition to the intentionally deposited items listed above, the fill of the grave contained a significant quantity of Neolithic objects. The inclusion of Neolithic objects in historic-period graves is not unusual at the site, particularly for graves cut into midden contexts. It is likely that in most cases the inclusion of Neolithic objects in historic-period graves is incidental, a by-product of the back-filling process. In some cases, however, such as feature 2403 on the West Mound where a very fine obsidian point was recovered in close association with a burial, Neolithic objects may have been intentionally buried with the Roman dead. One such object is present in this grave: a worked stone with rows of indentations similar to the markings on the copper alloy box hasp. The date and nature of this decorated stone is unclear, making the nature of its inclusion in the grave assemblage ambiguous.



Milled copper alloy plate and Neolithic stone object
(photos by S. Moore)



(i) gold earrings, (ii) copper alloy box hasp, (iii) milled copper alloy rectangular plate, (iv) wood preserved beneath iii, (v) fabric preserved beneath iii, (vi) bone pin fragment, (vii) glass bottle neck, (viii) blue faience melon bead, (ix) blue faience melon bead, (x) copper alloy ear-scoop, (xi) iron fibula brooch, (xii) ceramic unguentarium base, (xiii) glass unguentarium, (xiv) glass unguentarium, (xv) ceramic unguentarium (i, xiii, xiv and xv illustrated by K. Killackey)

Although the small-finds assemblage from this grave is relatively rich in comparison to most other Roman-period graves at the site, it contains a fairly standard suite of objects for an Anatolian furnished grave of the second or third

century AD, where cosmetic kits including vessels containing oil or perfume, ear-scoops and other small copper alloy grooming objects commonly accompany the burial of women. The three glass vessels, two of which are largely

complete, provide a secure Roman date. Free-blown glass vessels, like these, date back to the Etruscan period and examples are known from tombs as early as the second and first centuries BC, but they do not become common grave goods until the first century AD, and the unguentaria forms present here and in other previously published graves from the site are common for Anatolian graves of the first to third century. The vessel which may have been placed above the coffin has most in common with a first-century type Isings 28b, which continued in use into the second century with the addition of a partially broken ring foot. The broken neck of a thick-walled white vessel found at the base of the grave is perhaps more closely related to Isings 82b2, a form common in the second and third centuries AD (Isings 1957).

The gold earrings and possibly the iron fibula brooch are the only true grave goods, being distinct from grave inclusions in that they were worn by the deceased at the moment of burial. The two faience melon beads, which show close similarity to beads from a late Flavian mortuary context in Winchester (Biddle 1967: 243), may have been worn during life, but are also likely to have apotropaic significance (Allason-Jones 1995: 27). The two beads from this grave are very worn around the bore, suggesting a significant use-life prior to deposition. The wear on the beads does not necessarily indicate their use as objects of personal adornment; beads of this type have also been noted decorating military equipment (Allason-Jones 1995: 27) and interpreted as having been used to decorate horse harnesses (Ritterling cited in Price, Worrell 2010). Beads showing little wear were perhaps produced specifically as funerary objects and included in graves to ward off the spirits of the dead.

The woman herself had a number of congenital skeletal conditions which would have affected her during her lifetime. She was unusually small and gracile for the population at large, with scoliosis to the right side, indicated by the narrowing of her vertebral bones and the addition of a pillar of bone anteriorly. There are associated changes to her pelvis, with the right auricular surface smaller than the left, suggesting asymmetric force transmission (C. Knüsel, personal communication). In life, this woman would have had significant ambulatory problems, and her remains sit within a group of at least three other Roman skeletons, found in features 700, 706 and 1455, which display significant palaeopathological changes which would have limited mobility in life and necessitated care from others in the community. A further seven individuals among the Roman burials show osteoarthritic changes or trauma to the feet and legs.

As we enter our final year of fieldwork, and aim to complete the palaeopathological assessment of the community in 2017, it will be interesting to establish whether the Roman population of this site contained an unusual number of people with conditions affecting their movement.

Another possibility of pathology is presented by a black deposit present at the base of the thoracic cavity, on the anterior surface of the ribs. This deposit is similar in terms of composition and location as those noted on two adult skeletons from the Neolithic levels – sk.1378 in F.28 and sk.1424 in F.30 (Birch 2005) – and two adult burials from the Roman cemetery excavated by the BACH team – sk.2219 and sk.2212 (Cottica et al 2012: 331–34). Wendy Birch suggests that for the Neolithic individuals the deposit is a result of pneumoconiosis, or ‘black lung’, caused by inhaled soot, and it is possible that the woman buried in the Roman grave discussed here had the same condition. Conversely, the black staining could be manganese deposited on the bones during the taphonomic process, and not an indicator of pathology at all.

The aim of a full bio-cultural analysis of the individuals from the multi-phase historic cemetery at Çatalhöyük is to provide a clearer understanding of both the individuals buried at the site and the communities of practice they lived within. Understanding the levels of pathology present in a community gives us insight at the scale of a population but also allows us to look at the likely experiences of individuals and how they may have fitted into the broader picture. For the Roman community, one of the most interesting developing threads of research is the frequent instances in which individuals who required a great deal of care during life were shown a great deal of respect in death. This was the case for our Roman woman of limited mobility who was buried with her gold earrings, iron brooch and scented unguents. She was laid to rest carefully wrapped, dressed and protected by two blue faience beads.

References

- Allason-Jones, L. 1995: ‘“Sexing” small finds’ in P. Rush (ed.), *Theoretical Roman Archaeology: Second Conference Proceedings*. Aldershot, Avebury/Ashgate
- Biddle, M. 1967: ‘Two Flavian burials from Grange Road Winchester’ *Antiquaries Journal* 47: 224–50
- Birch, W. 2005: ‘A possible case of shortness of breath at Çatalhöyük – black lungs’ in I. Hodder (ed.), *Inhabiting Çatalhöyük: Reports from the 1995–99 Seasons*. London/Cambridge, British Institute at Ankara/Çatalhöyük Research Project: 593–96
- Cottica, D., Hager, L.D., Boz, B. 2012: ‘Post-Neolithic use of Building 3 and Spaces 88 and 89 at Catalhoyuk’ in R. Tringham, M. Stevanović (eds), *Last House on the Hill: Bach Area Reports from Catalhoyuk, Turkey*. Los Angeles, Cotsen Institute of Archaeology: 331–43
- Isings, C. 1957: *Roman Glass from Dated Finds*. Groningen, J.B. Wolters
- Price, J., Worrell, S. 2010: ‘Roman glass’ in I. Ferris (ed.), *The Beautiful Rooms are Empty: Excavations at Binchester Roman Fort, County Durham 1976–1981 and 1986–1991*. Durham, Durham County Council