

# The Roman Way of Death - Inhumation

From the middle of the 2nd century inhumation, interring the body whole, became the dominant burial rite. Possibly influenced by contact with Eastern religions it now became important to preserve the body intact. Indeed in some parts of the Roman Empire mummification became popular. Cremation did not die out completely but it certainly became a rare event.

The poor were probably buried in little more than a shroud and the poorest of the poor may have been tumbled into common graves.

Most individuals were buried in some form of coffin. These were normally of wood and have therefore rarely survived being buried in the ground for many hundreds of years. If they were constructed using wooden dowels or pegs they would be untraceable. Sometimes they can be identified as a stain but most usually their former existence is betrayed by iron nails or less frequently metal straps.

Sometimes the coffins were more substantial and made of stone, a sarcophagus. These were used in quite large numbers in York, usually made from gritstone from the Pennines. The numbers which have been found suggest quite a thriving industry.

Most are roughly chiselled with no form of external decoration. They normally have a stone lid and the two items together can weigh as much as 2 tons. These couldn't have been carried on the shoulders of the mourners.



Stone sarcophagus from Mill Mount

It is assumed that they were placed in the grave before the arrival of the body. It must have been a major task lowering over a ton and a half of stone into the ground. Putting the lid on afterwards can't have been too easy either.

Sometimes a stone coffin was decorated. This was often little more than having the lid carved to imitate roof tiles so that the stone coffin resembled a house, a house of the dead, but it could include more extravagant decoration.

The most common form of decoration found in York is an inscription on the side of the coffin recording the name, age and details of the individual who was inside it. That is to say who should have been inside it. Many coffins have proved to contain human remains which clearly are not those of the original owner. Recycling of these massive stone coffins certainly took place.

It wasn't restricted to just the more cash conscious Yorkshireman; the Emperor Constantine's mother Helena was buried in a sarcophagus which, from its warlike scenes, was probably originally meant for the emperor himself. Perhaps being elected emperor in York had given him a liking for Yorkshire thrift.

Coffins were also made of lead. These are a much rarer find, no doubt they were also recycled but not for use as coffins.



Coffin stain, Hungate

The surface of these coffins may have been covered in rich carvings and inscriptions, and lined with cloth or other material. Unfortunately the evidence doesn't survive so we assume that they were relatively plain.

Wooden coffins were probably only slightly heavier than the wooden funerary beds, biers, which had borne the dead to the funeral pyre. So the ceremony of carrying the dead to the place of burial in their coffin may have continued.

