

# The Roman Way of Death - 89 The Mount

89 The Mount lies at the heart of a once extensive Roman cemetery stretching out along the line of a road which joined Roman York, Eboracum, to Roman Tadcaster, Calcaria. The cemetery was laid out on both sides of the road and probably extended over a square mile in all.

The earliest evidence from the site takes the form of traces of a cremation cemetery. As yet we don't know when it was established but probably not until the early 2nd century, about 100 AD. The most significant feature from that cemetery is a *bustum*, a cremation pit. It is only the second example recognised in York. It has survived as a fire reddened rectangular pit cut into the natural clay. The heat generated by the fire was so intense that the clay has been turned almost into brick.



The pit still contains traces of the charcoal, ash and burnt human bone. It would once have had a mound over it or possibly a more substantial structure; there are a number of timber posts set around the pit which may be from a superstructure.

The pit is quite small so the individual being cremated was probably a young child. If we are lucky, enough bone will have survived to enable us to age the individual; it is unlikely that we will be able to say anymore.

Though we have not as yet been fortunate enough to recognise any other cremations, we have found a fragment of a face jug. These were frequently used to contain the cremated bone.



There are also a number of substantial ditches on the site, containing large quantities of broken pottery and other material. These may have been filled in when the cemetery was changed from a place of cremation to one of inhumation, if so some of the cremations could have been disturbed and thrown into the backfill.

The inhumations represent use of the cemetery probably sometime after 150 AD. So far we have found five individuals in various states of preservation. Four are laid out at right angles to the Roman road; their heads are at the east and their feet point west. They are laid out in a quite regular fashion and survived because their graves were cut into the gravel and clay.



Enough of these individuals survive to suggest that we will be able to tell a great deal about them. It should be able to age them, identify their sex, and some of their ailments. Their teeth will give us an idea of their diet and the way their muscles developed will show us if they had a hard or a soft life. If we were to test their DNA we might be able to say if they were of native Yorkshire stock or had originated somewhere else in the far flung Roman Empire. Unfortunately we will never know their names.

There is one individual about whom we will want to know everything possible. He was laid out at right angles to the road, feet to the west but his head wasn't at the east end where it should have been. It had been cut off and placed, face down, next to his lower left leg. So who is this mystery man? How did he die and what can we tell about him from his rather bizarre remains?