

The Roman Way of Death - Cremation

There was no major change in the burial rite when the Romans conquered Britain. The Celtic tribes had practised cremation as a form of burial for hundreds of years previously.

For the first hundred years after the Roman Conquest cremation was to remain the preferred burial method. The major change that occurred was the requirement to bury the dead in properly organised cemeteries, particularly on the outskirts of urban areas. It was forbidden to cremate the deceased within the city walls, so the body was taken in a procession to the burial place, where the cremation took place.

The remains to be burned were taken to the *ustrinum*, the place of cremation, which was not necessarily regarded as a part of the *sepulcrum*, the place of burial, and placed upon the pile of wood, *rogus*.

Spices and perfumes were thrown onto the body and the pyre, together with gifts and tokens from those present. The pyre was then set on fire with a torch by a close relative, who kept his face averted during the act.



Sometimes the body was burned where it was to be buried. A shallow grave was dug and filled with dry wood, and the couch and body were placed on top of it. The pyre was then fired and, when the wood and body had been consumed, earth was heaped over the ashes to form a mound. The name for a grave in which the body was burned was a *bustum*. It was consecrated as a regular *sepulcrum*, burial place, by a series of ceremonies.

Where the body was cremated away from the burial place, after the fire had burned out, the embers were extinguished with water or wine and those present called a last farewell to the dead. The water of purification was then sprinkled, three times, over those present and all except the immediate family left the place. The ashes were then collected in a cloth and dried. The ceremonial bone, called *os resectum*, was then buried.

A sacrifice, sometimes of a pig, was then offered and the place of burial was made sacred ground; food, *silicernium*, was eaten together by the mourners.

The ashes were usually placed in cinerary urns which could be made of a variety of materials. Most frequently they were no more than an everyday pot, the kind in use in the kitchen.

Cinerary urns from Fishergate



Sometimes more elaborate containers were employed. These could range from wooden boxes to metal receptacles. The urns of the poor were buried simply in the soil and covered with a stone, terracotta tiles or perhaps the upper part of an amphora.

Metal fittings of a wooden box used to contain a cremation (Yorkshire Museum)



The urns of the wealthier individuals were sometimes placed in the soil of the *bustum*, or in one of the niches of a funerary chamber, *columbarium*. These could be substantial buildings, set in an open enclosure and with an upper floor. These structures were also built by funeral clubs who sold individual niches to members.