

The Roman Way of Death - The Mystery

One of the burials from the cemetery is a mystery and as such a challenge. We have found a skeleton laid out in a grave, east to west as most burials are wherever you find them on the Mount, and at right angles to the Roman road. The body was laid on its back with the hands resting on the pelvis. It is a male, perhaps in his forties. Robust in stature and about 1.75 metres in height, he appears to have suffered a broken left forearm at some time.

There is no sign of a coffin or any personal items with the body. An animal bone on the left side of the body may be the remains of some food put in as an offering.

The odd thing about him is that he had lost his head, in the sense that it wasn't attached to his body when he was buried. His head has been placed face down alongside his lower left leg.



Decapitated bodies are not in fact uncommon finds in Roman cemeteries. Over thirty have recently been found elsewhere on the Mount at Driffeld Terrace. The Celts and Romans believed that the human spirit resided in the head so possibly this apparently barbaric act was to release the spirit so that it could move on to its afterlife.

Most examples have had the head cut from the body carefully and certainly after death. A sharp knife is often used to remove it almost surgically. In other cases the head appears to have been removed with a single blow of an axe or sword; less clearly a post mortem event.

The evidence from our headless body is that it was hacked off in an extremely crude manner. Damage to one of the vertebrae shows clearly that at least one blow was struck down and sideways into the neck, not across the neck as is the usual way even if using something as crude as an axe or sword to remove the head. Not only has it been hacked into but this has apparently destroyed at least four of the vertebrae from the region of the neck.

Is it a case of someone simply not being good at their job, an apprentice axeman? Unlikely since the blows would have almost certainly been laid across the neck. Nor does it seem to have been a frenzied attack. Who ever did it seems to have taken considerable care not to strike the face of our mystery man.

The mystery is compounded by two other wounds. These were made by a very sharp implement being driven down through the neck or upper chest into the spine. The weapon used must have been very similar to a stiletto or a poignard, the killing daggers of the Middle Ages. One blow had cut into the spinal chord and would have paralysed the man.



It looks as if he was grabbed from behind, his head pulled back and then stabbed twice with considerable force. Could the crude hacking at the neck be an attempt to disguise the blows that killed him?

The Roman Way of Death



Archaeological Open Days
89 The Mount

Schools Friday 15th April 10 am to 4 pm

Public Saturday 16th April 10 am to 4 pm

The Roman Way of Death - Ceremony

The Romans generally believed in an afterlife. This spirit world was neither heaven nor hell, merely the place where the spirits of the dead resided.

Failure to accord the dead their due and proper burial rites, *iusta facere*, would result in the spirit being denied entry to the underworld, compelling it to wander for eternity in limbo. It would become a malevolent force bringing unhappiness and misfortune to those who had denied it a proper burial.

If a Roman citizen was found unburied there was an obligation on the finder to perform the necessary rites or risk the consequences.

The earliest burial practice in Roman Britain was cremation. Some of the burnt bone was always buried after the cremation; it wasn't scattered as is sometimes the custom today.

By the middle of the 2nd century, about 150 AD, inhumation had largely replaced cremation as the preferred burial rite. Now the whole body was placed in the ground.



However the body was buried the process was accompanied by rituals and ceremony. Though we only have literary descriptions of the burial of high status individuals there is enough archaeological evidence to show that most people were accorded some ceremony.

Until about 200 AD Roman burials took place during the day; after this burial was usually at night. Where a family member died it was the duty of the oldest son to to bend over the body and call them by name, as if trying to summon the spirit back.

The body would be arranged on a funeral couch where it would lie in state until the burial. Branches of pine or cypress would be set in front of the door to show that the house was polluted by death.

Family, friends and neighbours would be advised when the burial was to take place. The body would be carried on the shoulders of sons or friends in a procession. Musicians might accompany them along with professional mourners. Torches were carried even during daylight burials.

Ceremonies at the burial place varied according to time and custom but usually included three elements. The place was consecrated, earth would be cast onto the burial, and those polluted by the death would be purified.

After the burial ceremony was completed the mourners would return home. Here the house would be purified by an offering to the household gods, *Lares*, and the funeral rites would be complete.

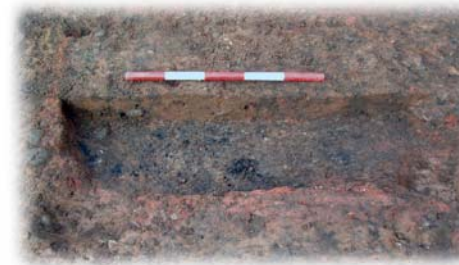
Mourning went on for Nine Days of Sorrow after the funeral and for close family this continued for up to ten months in the case of an adult, less in the case of a child.

The dead were remembered by specific ceremonies known as 'days of obligation.' Some were public such as the *dies parentales* which lasted from the 13th to the 21st of February; private ceremonies might include the birthday or date of death of an individual. These were happy occasions and could include what was in effect a picnic by the graveside.

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 post 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?

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.



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.



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.

The Roman Way of Death - The Road to Calcaria

It was forbidden to bury people inside urban areas during the Roman period. Instead cemeteries grew up along the roads approaching towns and cities and created necropolises, cities of the dead.

The place of burial was usually marked though the form of the marker varied considerably. Poor burials may have had no more than a wooden post or stone whereas the rich would erect temples. These were often highly ornate. Unfortunately in York the evidence for the above ground structures has gone, broken up and reused.



Tombs alongside one of the main roads to Rome

Though we cannot be sure how large the population was in York at any time in the Roman period we can estimate that many more than a hundred thousand would have died during the three and a half centuries that the city flourished. The roads which approached the city were therefore lined with burials, thousands of them.

Every approach road leading into York has revealed some evidence of Roman cemeteries.

Blossom Street and the Mount lie on, or very close, to the line of a main road which left the city on its south west side. This road ran towards Tadcaster, Roman Calcaria, and was one of the vital links with the road system which bound the country and the empire together.

Over the centuries evidence for this cemetery has come to light when roads were being widened, new houses built, and services laid. This shows that the cemetery was very extensive. It ran for over a mile alongside the road and stretched back nearly half a mile from it in some places.

It was also complicated and may have been made up of different zones. The wealthiest tombs are close to the road and on the high ground, emphasising their status. The less wealthy, though not necessarily the poor, are buried away from the road.

There are divisions within the cemetery, usually ditches, which may demarcate burial plots. Some would have been family plots and others run by burial clubs.

The burial rites used in the area range from simple cremations through to complex inhumations such as the gypsum burial recently found at Mill Mount and modern developer funded archaeological excavation provides an unequalled opportunity to look in far more depth and detail than has ever been possible before.

Gypsum burial being excavated at Mill Mount



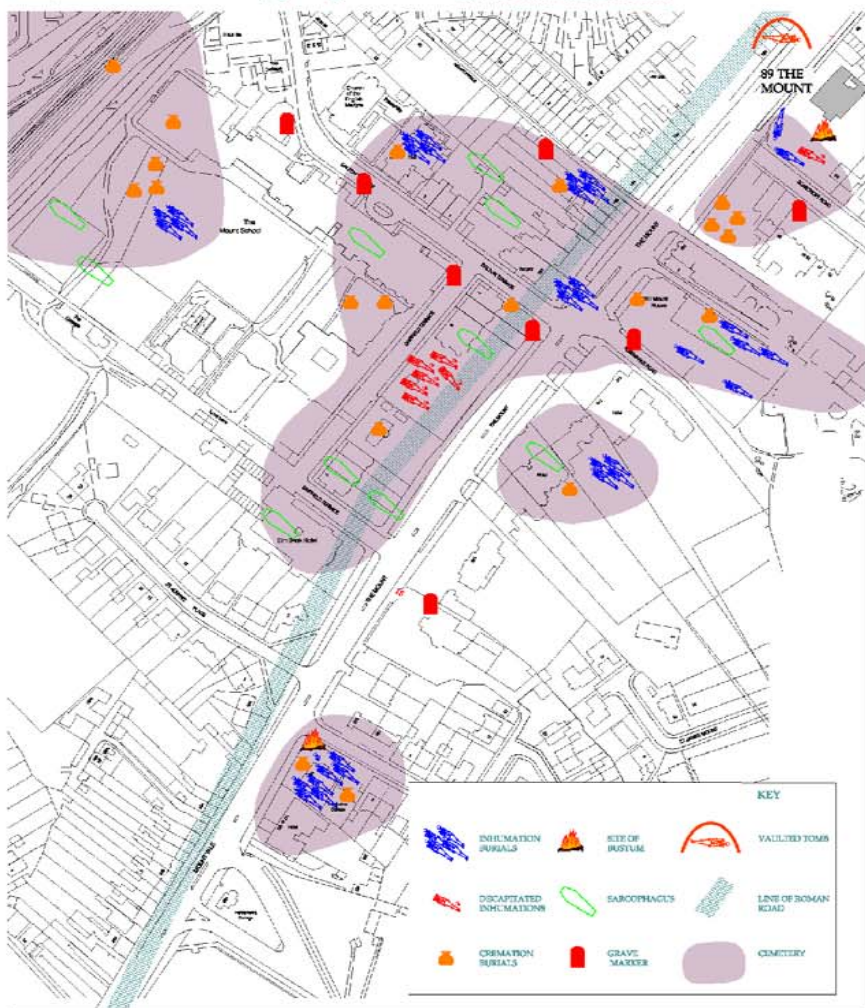
The Roman Way of Death - The Mount Cemetery

The Mount is littered with the remains of the once extensive Roman cemetery.

The burials of the wealthiest of Eboracum's citizens lined the approach road from Calcaria. These would have been marked by many fine monuments and buildings and the highest point on the Mount, nearest to the road, would have been very prestigious.

89 The Mount lies someway behind the line of the main Roman road. The form of the cremation burial, the *bustum*, is normally associated with someone of wealth, though not necessarily rank.

The inhumation cemetery which replaced the cremation cemetery seems to reflect a lower status of burial.



The poor were buried away from the most prestigious areas, over the hill and out of sight. The Trentholme Drive cemetery was packed full of burials, literally layer upon layer.

Just as the burials seem to become poorer as you move along the road and away from the city so they become less extravagant as you move away from the road.

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.