

# 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?