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ROMANO-BRITISH DECAPITATION BURIALS: A COMPARISON OF OSTEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE AND BURIAL RITUAL FROM TWO CEMETERIES

ABSTRACT: Fifty-six 1st to 4th century British cemeteries show evidence for decapitation; twenty-six of these cemeteries are apparently late Roman. Evidence from two such will be presented: of the 421 individuals from Cirencester, at least nine have been decapitated, while six of the 207 individuals from Ashton were similarly treated. Osteological examination has given evidence for the employment of different methods of decapitation, which will be described, and possible explanations for the ritual will be offered.

KEYWORDS: Romano-British — Cirencester — Ashton — Decapitation.

Decapitation burials have been noted in Romano-British cemeteries dating from the first to the fourth centuries A.D., with an apparent increase in the later period. There was a change in burial ritual in the second century, with cremation declining in favour of inhumation, which may partly explain this increase. A recent survey (Jolley 1987) has shown that decapitation burials occur at both rural and urban sites, and are confined to central southern England, the Midlands and East Anglia. Both sexes, and a wide age range, are represented. This paper will present the findings of a preliminary macroscopic study of decapitated individuals in two late Romano-British cemeteries, and will offer a possible explanation for the variation they reveal.

THE ASSEMBLAGES

The first assemblage is from the Bath Gate cemetery in Cirencester, which lies in the Cotswold Hills of South West England.

The city was primarily an administrative centre, reaching its zenith in the fourth century, at which time it was the provincial capital of Britannia Prima and the second largest city in Britain. Four hundred and twenty one individuals have been examined (Wells 1982). Six decapitations were reported (ibid: 108), but subsequent re-examination of the material has revealed that a further five individuals were treated in a similar fashion (Bush, 1991). The second assemblage was excavated from Ashton, a lesser fourth century Roman town located some 150 miles to the north east of Cirencester, and apparently an industrial complex. Two hundred and ninety seven burials from Ashton have been examined, of which approximately 203 were in a cemetery, the remainder being buried either in gardens or under house floors. None of the six decapitated individuals recovered was buried in the cemetery.

An almost universal feature of Romano-British decapitation burials is the relocation of the severed head, frequently in the vicinity of the legs. With one exception, the examples from Ashton follow this pattern. Decapitation was determined by the position of the head alone in four of these burials, the cervical vertebrae no longer being present. The Cirencester examples are virtually unique, however, for in eight of the eleven cases the head was in the anatomical position. Two others were represented by the head and cervical vertebrae, and one was not recorded. Thus it was the examination of the bones, and not the excavation, which revealed that the cervical vertebrae had been cut. We know of only four other burials from this period, including the Ashton example, in which the body was buried with the severed head in the anatomical position.
### TABLE 1. Osteological evidence for decapitation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Burial No.</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Direction of cut</th>
<th>Cranial abnormality</th>
<th>Macropscopic damage</th>
<th>Other trauma</th>
<th>General comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>40-60</td>
<td>Posterior-anterior</td>
<td>1-2, 5-7</td>
<td>C1: 1 and R articular facets amputated, with superior border of anterior articular arch (Fig. 1).</td>
<td>None seen</td>
<td>Possibly postmortem event due to high level of decapitation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>81</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>35-55</td>
<td>Posterior-anterior</td>
<td>7-6, 7-6</td>
<td>C2: Dens removed by a clean cut (Fig. 1). Small cut, 3.6 mm long and 3.6 mm max line of stroke on posterior surface of dens. C4: Body transected cleanly. R superior facet removed by the blade which also cut through the lamina just posterior to L superior facet. An apparent bony cyst in the uncinated process was bisected by the stroke.</td>
<td>Superficial, well-healed lesion, c3-c4 &amp; L2 on frontal bone. Possibly caused by weapon passing front-back, or by something-always. No sign of inner table involvement (Wells 82).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>123</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>26-30</td>
<td>Anterior-posterior</td>
<td>3-7</td>
<td>C3: Removal of margins of lamina, and articular facets, with loss of body.</td>
<td>R mastoid process amputated by stroke. Compression of trabecular bone visible microscopically. This indicates use of a sharp, heavy weapon.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>146</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25-35</td>
<td>Anterior-posterior</td>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>Diagonal cut, resulting in the loss of the R superior and posterior inferior facets. Vein/nerve not cut through by a single stroke; midway down R lamina an incision indicates a further stroke at opposite direction.</td>
<td>Skull now missing. Wells (1982) diagnosed inferior osteitic of anterior pedicles, as result of trauma.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>150</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25-35</td>
<td>Posterior-anterior</td>
<td>1-7</td>
<td>C3: Inferior margin of lamina and approximately quarter of inferior facet removed by stroke.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>152</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>35-55</td>
<td>Posterior-anterior</td>
<td>1-4-7</td>
<td>C6: Horizontal stroke has cut through body, removing its inferior half. Area of cortical bone at base of L pedicle is polished and smooth in appearance.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>215</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>20-35</td>
<td>Anterior-posterior</td>
<td>1-7</td>
<td>C3: Inferior third of body removed by a very clean cut, which extends halfway through body. Appearance suggests snapping of bone at this point. Articular facets and neural archotic, but post-mortem damage makes conclusions can be drawn. No obvious injury to C6.</td>
<td>None seen</td>
<td>Buried in same group as 213, 216. Only skull and C4-T2 present.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>216</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>38-46</td>
<td>Posterior-anterior</td>
<td>1-7</td>
<td>C2: Very little damage apart from slicing off of inferior edges of inferior facets. L, to a greater degree than R, this may be postmortem damage. C6: Decapitation achieved through this vertebra by clean diagonal cut which removed the superior facets and a portion of upper border of neural arch. L posterior-lateral lip completely lost, but only lip of R lip removed.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>304</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>35-50</td>
<td>Cannot be determined</td>
<td>1-7</td>
<td>C3: Very little damage; only spinous process has been removed.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>305</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>19-35</td>
<td>Posterior-anterior</td>
<td>1-7</td>
<td>C6: decapitation achieved by stroke which has removed approximately three quarters of R superior facet, leaving only R inferior facet and three quarters of neural arch intact.</td>
<td>Linear wound 38 mm long extends from R cricovalar suture c. 30 mm above posterior across R pedicle. Also a triangular wound, 36x157 mm depressed below surface level of skull, which is probably a depressed fracture. Now well-healed.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TABLE 1. (Cont.)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Burial No.</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Direction of cut</th>
<th>Other trauma</th>
<th>General comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>215</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>20-35</td>
<td>Anterior-posterior</td>
<td>1-7</td>
<td>Well-healed fracture of body of L3 or 4 R; well-healed &quot;perry&quot; frac. of L: ulna; well-healed frac. of 2nd metacarpal. Fracture fragment of R tibia and fibula, with considerable deformity. None seen</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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207
TABLE 1. (Cont.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Burial No.</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Direction of cut</th>
<th>Cranial condition</th>
<th>Microscopic damage</th>
<th>Other trauma</th>
<th>General comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ashton</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>45+</td>
<td>Posterior-anterior</td>
<td>1-6</td>
<td>None seen</td>
<td>Head in the anatomical position. Fusion of L2-C4.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>ADULT</td>
<td>Posterior-anterior</td>
<td>1-7</td>
<td>Tip of R mastoid process stippled, homocentroid.</td>
<td>Staining of atlas may indicate that the head was placed on a block. Reclining position (Watt 1979).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**DISCUSSION**

The obviously different treatment of the decapitated individuals from Cirencester compared to those at Ashdon and other contemporary cemeteries requires an explanation. Perhaps the most palatable factor to account for the burial patterns at Cirencester is a possible difference in the underlying motive for decapitation. It is important to note at the outset that during the period of Roman rule in Britain, civilians were not permitted to carry arms, except in certain well-defined circumstances (Salway 1984: 527). The presence of a sword and knives are found in civilian contexts, and would have been used for hunting (Braunian, personal communication), but the appearance of theervical injuries generally suggests the use of a sharp, heavy instrument (Jarvis, personal communication). This absence of a weapon law implies that the act of decapitation was an official rite, and makes less likely Wells' suggestion that one individual from Cirencester with a vertebra (No. 212) was the victim of a murder as an official rite.

From a modern standpoint, an obvious explanation is that it was punitive. The Romans did not decapitate criminals (MacDonald 1979: 415) but more typical methods of execution were stoning, flogging and crucifixion. In fact, death was not considered sufficient punishment for wrongdoing, and so it was common to inflict a thorough beating before execution (Kiefer 1934). Although the decapitated individuals from Cirencester suffered a variety of fractures, these cannot be directly related to the time of beheading for they are all well-healed. None of the Ashdon victims suffered antemortem trauma.

It is difficult to say if decapitation was the sequel to a criminal offense. It points to a Limes, Limes (1968: 477-480) believed that the beheaded skeleton excavated at Guilden Morden may have been that of a criminal. The skeleton, which was probably male, was prone, with arms crossed as if they had been bound. Given Wells' (1982: 194) interpretation of the Cirencester decapitations (see below), it is interesting to note that the skull of the Guilden Morden example was buried in the anatomical position. Although capital punishment may be a realistic interpretation in this instance, it is doubtful that it is universally applied to all Roman-British examples (Salway 1984: 706). Nevertheless, Wells (1982: 194) was of the opinion that the atypical nature of the Cirencester examples is indicative of 'penal decapitation'. He attributed the position of the head to incomplete severance of the soft tissues of the neck, so that the head would still be attached to the trunk at the time of burial. From this it follows that the head had not been removed as trophies or spoils of war (1982: 194). We would argue further that decapitation under those circumstances would be futile if the perpetrators failed to take with them the evidence of their success in the form of the severed head; hence, of course, they were decapitated on the 'home-ground' of their captives.

We have alluded to the burial location of the examples from Ashdon, outside the main cemetery. While burial within the boundaries of individual properties or plots was common, particularly in the lesser settlements, there are some interesting features in this group. Firstly, there is evidence that these burials were pagan; they clearly varied in orientation from the cemetery burials and they were also the only burials containing grave goods (Dick, personal communication). The cemetery population appears to have been Christian. Secondly, many of the 'plot' burials occurred in pairs, with one of the pair being decapitated. In these cases, it is clear that the decapitated individual had the higher status of the two (ibid). Finally, four of the six decapitations are female and all are middle-aged or older. We would argue along with the excavator that, in the case of Ashton, decapitation is a burial ritual used as a mark of respect for individuals of a higher social status. This is in direct contrast to the hypothesis suggested by MacDonald for individuals from Lankhills (1979). All seven decapitated bodies here appear to have been secondary inhumations in graves with military associations. To support his hypothesis of vicarious substitution, two burials in particular are singled out, one described as a cenotaph, the other 'a mysterious pile of bones' (1979: 416). The dead they represent would have been condemned to a restless after-life for, according to Virgil (cited by MacDonald 1979: 421), those who did not receive a proper burial would suffer 100 years of wandering. To give rest to such a soul, anyone not valued in society - criminals, slaves, children or old women - could be sacrificed. MacDonald (1979: 417) was unhappy with the idea that this would ensure that the *substitute* wandered, rather than the man for whom he was sacrificed, since those who carried out the act would not wish to have a malignant spirit at large. Rather, the serving of the head would deprive the victim of his soul, the head being regarded by the Celts as its seat. A human sacrifice deprived in this way of an after-life would be acceptable to the gods (MacDonald 1979: 418).

Some scholars argue that the Celtic beliefs continued after the Roman conquest of Britain (Wacher 1982: 223); MacDonald supported his argument for the persistence of the Celtic cult of vicarious substitution by noting that in 1800 St. Didses was forced to kill himself as a scapegoat at the Saturnalia (1979: 419). This one example, however, is not sufficient evidence to support his argument in view of the wide-spread occurrence of the phenomenon, and the evidence from Ashton. Salway (1984) took the view that the later decapitations are apparently too late to be comfortably associated with the Celtic 'cult of heads', and stated that point of this examination of MacDonald's hypothesis as far as Ashton is concerned, he states that the decapitated individuals are buried outside the cemetery, that is, not unusual. They are the richest burials, suggesting a higher social status, and, even when they occur in pairs, the decapitated individual is the higher status one. By no means are they secondary, either in burial position, or in status. Neither is he argument applicable to the Bainbridge example, where the physical characteristics of their burial, noted above, argue for different circumstances of death. Moreover, both are not buried in double graves, although at least one of the accompanying burials has also been beheaded.

We feel that the motives for decapitation of the Ashton individuals are reasonably clear. However, we would like to offer an alternative hypothesis for the beheading of the eleven unfortunate individuals from Cirencester: that some, if not all, were combatants. Their deaths in the arena, rather than in sacrificial circumstances, would remove the need for the visible separation of the head from the rest of the body. The comparatively high frequency of trauma in four males buried together was noted by the excavators, who proposed that in view of the severity of the injury to the amphitheatre, 'it is tempting to think that they had participated in combat in the arena' (Viner and Letch 1922: 110). None of these individuals had modified vertebrae, but in a second group of male burials, comprising at least four complete and two partial skeletons, three individuals (152, 215, and 216) have apparently been beheaded. From the photograph and drawing of this group, No. 194 also appears to have been decapitated, but frustratingly this skeleton has disappeared since the original report was published, so...
verification is not possible. Two further decapitated individuals (304 and 305) were buried together. The collective burials may indicate a shared meeting with violent death.

Gladiators whose performance was deemed by the crowds to be insufficiently enthusiastic were apparently beaten (Grant 1967: 75), while those who survived the arena must nevertheless have sustained in combat a range of injuries with varying degrees of severity. Osteological evidence for trauma in decapitated individuals is listed in Table 1. While this trauma obviously cannot be categorically related to gladiatorial combat, individuals with apparent weapon injuries are of particular interest, for example the fractured ribs and "parry" fracture of 215, and the cranial trauma of 81, 144 and specially 305.

The presence of a decapitated female at Cirencester is not entirely out of keeping with our hypothesis, for women took part in gladiatorial combat; Petronius refers to a female gladiator fighting from a British-style chariot (cited by Grant, 1967: 33). Female participation shocked the Romans, and was eventually forbidden by Septimius Severus in AD 200 (ibid: 34), a point against including Burial R in this category. Her estimated age of 40-50 is an additional obstacle but, in view of the evidence from Ashdon, decapitation may have been afforded to this woman as a sign of her high status. We believe either of our hypotheses is preferable to that of Liveredge (1968: 477), who suggested that the two decapitated females from Guilden Morden earned their fate by being bad-tempered.

We have considered some motives for Romano-British decapitations, and offered alternative explanations for the anomalous burials at Cirencester and Ashdon. They support Salway's (1984: 707) conclusion that "we do not know either the origin of this rite nor what it meant. We can only record it, with the observation that it ought to remind us of just how much that is very alien to our ways of thinking lay beneath the superficially modern and familiar appearance of the Roman world."

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NOTE

The timing of the decapitation of individuals in archaeological samples can only be a matter of speculation. In the cases of decapitation at the C1-C2 level, it may well be that this was a post-mortem event, given the difficulties of beheading a living individual at this level. Rigor mortis normally sets in rapidly in the British climate, and it has been suggested to us that this condition could have been used to position the body before onset to facilitate the high decapitations. The report of the decapitations from the late fourth century Lankhills cemetery in Winchester suggested that the minimal bone damage, testimony to the skill and care of the executioner, could only have been achieved on a dead victim (Watt, 1979: 343).

REFERENCES


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