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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 297 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.*

**KEY WORDS:** *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 200 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.

Possible reasons for the anomalies in the Cirencester cases will be offered in the Discussion. *Table 1* presents the osteological evidence for decapitation noted in the Cirencester and Ashton burials.

TABLE 1. *Osteologic evidence for decapitation*

Burial No.	Sex	Age	Direction of cut	Cervical vertebrae present	Macroscopic damage	Other trauma	General comments
R	F	40-50	Posterior-anterior	1-2; 5-7	C1: L and R articular facets amputated, with superior border of anterior neural arch (Fig. 1).  C2: Dens removed by a clean cut (Fig. 1). Small cut, 3.6 mm long and 1.6 mm below line of stroke on posterior surface of dens.	None seen	Possibly postmortem event in view of high level of decapitation.
81	M	35-55	Posterior-anterior	74; 6-7	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 hyaline cyst in the neurocentral synostosis was bisected by the stroke.	Superficial, well-healed lesion, c.3.4 x 1.2 on frontal bone. Possibly caused by weapon passing front-back, or by scooping sideways. No sign of inner table involvement (Wells '82)	
123	M	26-30	Anterior-posterior	3-7	C3: removal of margins of laminae, and superior facets, with loss of body.	R mastoid process amputated by stroke	Compression of trabecular bone visible microscopically. This indicates use of a sharp, heavy weapon.
			Anterior-posterior?		C4: Trimming of anterior border of R inferior facet and corresponding margin of R superior facet. Inferior surface of bone cleanly cut to margin of neural canal. Cut terminates with a small lip of bone in line with surface cut across L inferior facet and an incision into R pedicle. Fig. 2 shows C3-4 in articulation.		
144	M	25-35	Anterior-posterior?; Posterior-anterior	4	Diagonal cut, resulting in the loss of the R superior and posterior inferior facets. Vertebra not cut through by a single stroke; midway down R lamina an incision indicates a further stroke in opposite direction.	Skull now missing. Wells (1982) diagnosed infective osteitis of anterior parietals, as result of trauma	
150	M	25-35	Posterior-anterior, diagonally between C3-4	1-7	C3: Inferior margins of laminae and approximately quarter of inferior facet removed by stroke.  C4: L and R superior facets cut through, with loss of half of L and three quarters of R. Both postero-lateral lips of body removed by stroke.	None seen	Macroscopic appearance of R superior facet in particular suggests C4 cut by either deliberate sawing action or blade with nicks along cutting edge.
152	M	35-55	Posterior-anterior?	4-7	C5: 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.  C6: Lateral half of L superior facet appears to have been removed cleanly, but post-mortem damage makes assessment difficult. Sliver of lateral border of R superior facet removed.	None seen	Buried in same group as 215, 216. Only skull and C4-T2 present.

TABLE 1. (Cont.)

Burial No.	Sex	Age	Direction of cut	Cervical vertebrae present	Macroscopic damage	Other trauma	General comments
215	M	20-35	Anterior-posterior diagonally	1-7	C5: 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 arch lost, but post-mortem damage means no conclusions can be drawn. No obvious injury to C6.	Well-healed frac. to body of L3 or 4 rib; well-healed "parry" frac. of L. ulna; well-healed frac. of 2nd metacarpal; compression frac. of R talus and calcaneus, with considerable deformity.	Trauma to talus and calcaneus compatible with fall onto heels from a great height (Wells, 1982), but there is no sign of trauma to femoral heads or acetabulae which might be expected in such a fall.
216	M	38-46	Posterior-anterior	1-7	C3: 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.  C4: Decapitation achieved through this vertebra by clean diagonal cut which removed the superior facets and a portion of upper border of neural arch. L postero-lateral lip completely lost, but only tip of R lip removed.	None seen	Buried with 215.
304	M	35-50	Cannot be determined	1-7	C3: Very little damage; only spinous process has been removed.  C4: 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.	Small exostoses of interosseous borders of L radius and ulna, possibly result of ossified blood clot following tear of interosseous membrane or slight green-stick fracture.	
305	M	19-35	Posterior-anterior	1-7	C2: Tip of R inferior facet cut through.  C3: Both postero-lateral lips have been removed, the L to a greater degree than the R. The superior facet has been completely removed, while only the tip of R is now missing. The angle of the cuts suggests that more than one stroke was used.	Linear wound 78 mm long extends from R. coronal suture c. 30 mm above pterion across R parietal. Also a triangular wound, 56x46x37 mm depressed below surface level of skull, which is probably a depressed fracture. Now well-healed.	Wound would have caused a variety of neurological symptoms, and an elliptical lesion c. 34x21 mm on the frontal bone may have been a therapeutic trephination intended to relieve the symptoms (Wells 1982).

TABLE 1. (Cont.)

Burial No.	Sex	Age	Direction of cut	Cervical vertebrae present	Macroscopic damage	Other trauma	General comments
Ashton 14	?M	45+	Latero-medial from R.		C4: Neural arch now missing. There is a trace of a cut along the faces of the R and L superior facets, which is confirmed microscopically. The R inferior facet has been removed, apparently by a different stroke to the one which modified C3. Fracture of the pedicle has produced a lip of bone, and a notch cut into the bone superior to this fracture is clear microscopically. This may represent rebound of the implement as it struck the vertebra in a latero-medial direction. There is some damage to the adjacent portion of the body, which may be post-mortem.		
			Posterior-anterior	1-6	C2: blade skimmed posterior arch of axis and R lamina. Approximately one third of the L and R superior facets were removed by the stroke, which cut through the base of the dens. Decapitation seems to have been incomplete at this stage: appearance of portion <i>in situ</i> suggests that the head was removed completely by snapping the rest of the bone.	None seen	Head in the anatomical position. Fusion of C2-C4.
77	?F	ADULT	Posterior-anterior	1-7	C1: Superior border of facet for odontoid on atlas sliced off. C2: Smashed.	Tip of R mastoid process sliced off, horizontally.	Smashing of atlas may indicate that the head was placed on a block to achieve decapitation (Watt 1979).

## DISCUSSION

The obviously different treatment of the decapitated individuals from Cirencester compared to those at Ashton and other contemporary cemeteries requires an explanation. Perhaps the most palpable factor to account for the burial pattern 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). Spearheads and knives are found in civilian contexts, and would have been used for hunting (Branigan, personal communication), but the appearance of the cervical injuries generally suggests the use of a sharp, heavy instrument (Jarvis, personal communication). This point of law implies that the act of decapitation was an official rite, and makes less likely Wells' (1982: 110) suggestion that one individual from Cirencester with a cut vertebra (No. 215) was the victim of a murderous attack.

From a modern standpoint, an obvious explanation is that it was punitive. The Romans did 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 wrong-doing, 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 Ashton victims suffered antemortem trauma.

It is difficult to say if decapitation was the sequel to a criminal offence; Liversedge (1968: 477-8) believed that the beheaded skeleton excavated at Guilden Morden may well 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 can be universally applied to all Romano-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 heads 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 heads 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 unless, of course, they were decapitated on the "home-ground" of their captors.

We have alluded to the burial location of the examples from Ashton, 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 (Dix, 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 motive 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 severing 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 Celtic beliefs continued after the Roman conquest of Britain (Wacher 1980: 223); MacDonald supported his argument for the persistence of the Celtic cult of vicarious substitution by noting that "in the fourth century St. Darius 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 of 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 the head". The point of this examination of MacDonald's hypothesis as far as Ashton is concerned is this: while the decapitated individuals are buried outside the cemetery, this 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 his argument applicable to the Bath Gate cases because the physical characteristics of their burial, noted above, argue for different circumstances of death. Moreover, where they are buried in double or multiple graves, 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 death 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 proximity of the cemetery to the amphitheatre, "it is tempting to think that they had participated in combat in the arena" (Viner and Leech 1982: 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

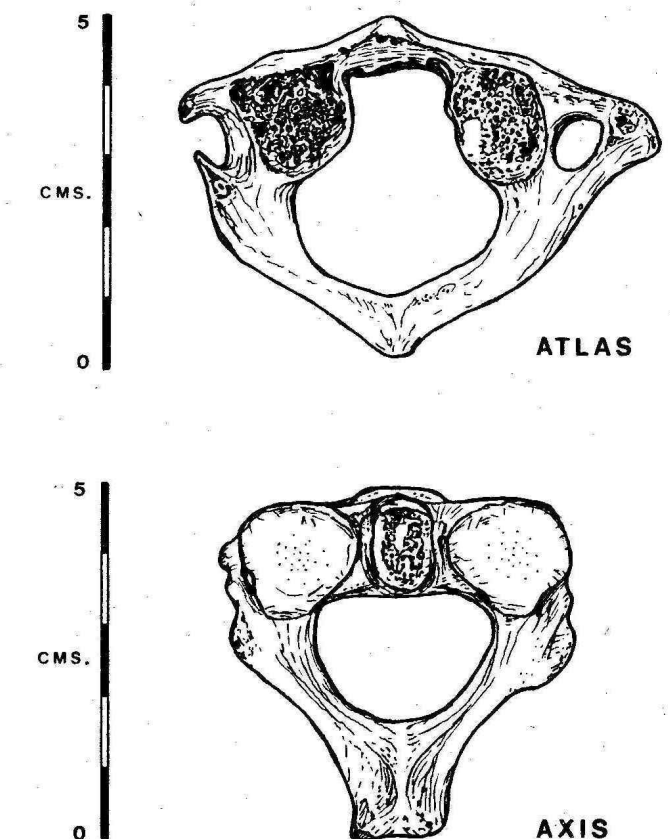


FIGURE 1. Cirencester Burial R

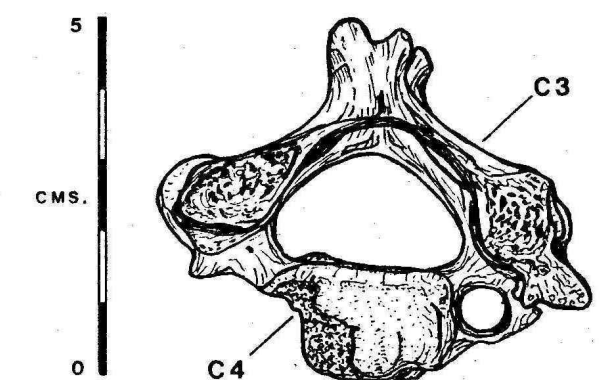


FIGURE 2. Cirencester Burial 123

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 Ashton, 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 Liversedge (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 Ashton. 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).

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