



THE CRUCIFIXION, PART 3

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As mentioned, giving the victim a proper burial following death on the cross during the Roman period was rare and in most cases simply not permitted in order to continue the humiliation - it was common for Romans to deny burial to criminals, as in the cases of Brutus and his supporters (Suetonius, *Augustus* 13.1-2) and Sejanus and company (Tacitus, *Annals* 6.29). The corpse was in many cases either simply thrown away on the garbage dump of the city, 'buried' in a common grave, or left on the cross as food for wild beasts and birds of prey.

Petronius, in the *Satyricon* (111), writes an amusing - to the Romans at least - story about a soldier who was tasked to guard the body of some crucified criminals from theft.

The soldier manages to lose one of the corpses, however, when he diverts his attention from the crosses in order to pursue an amorous interlude with a widow mourning for the loss of her husband (who was buried near the execution site):

"...Thus it came about that the relatives of one of the malefactors, observing this relaxation of vigilance, removed his body from the cross during the night and gave it proper burial. But what of the unfortunate soldier, whose self-indulgence had thus been taken advantage of, when next morning he saw one of the crosses under his charge without its body! Dreading instant punishment, he acquaints his mistress with what had occurred, assuring her he would not await the judge's sentence, but with his own sword exact the penalty of his negligence. He must die therefore; would she give him sepulture, and join the friend to the husband in that fatal spot?

But the lady was no less tender-hearted than virtuous. 'The Gods forbid,' she cried, 'I should at one and the same time look on the corpses of two men, both most dear to me. I had rather hang a dead man on the cross than kill a living.' So said, so done; she orders her husband's body to be taken from its coffin and fixed upon the vacant cross. The soldier availed himself of the ready-witted lady's expedient, and next day all men marveled how in the world a dead man had found his own way to the cross."

Beyond the bauldness and light-heartedness of the anecdote lies the seriousness with which Romans could take the matter of guarding victims: the soldier guards the crosses for three nights, and fears for his life when the theft is discovered.

The prevention of burial also serves to show a graphic display of the power of the Roman Empire: by not allowing the victims even a decent burial, it is declared that the loss of these victims is not a loss to society, but far from it, they actually served to strengthen and empower Rome, ridding the Empire of its enemies and maintaining the status quo and preserving law and order.

Because of these details, some, like [John Dominic Crossan](#), suggest controversially that it was improbable that Jesus was given a proper burial, as the Gospels relate; instead, he might have been thrown in the waste dump in Jerusalem. Indeed, there were times in which Roman officials in Judea behaved like their counterparts in other areas of the Empire.

When [Publius Quinctilius Varus](#), then Legate of Syria, moved into Judea in 4 BC to quell a messianic revolt after the death of Rome's client king Herod the Great, he reportedly crucified 2000 Jewish rebels in and around Jerusalem (Josephus, *Antiquities* 17.295).

Later, the procurator of Judea, [Gessius Florus](#) is said to have ordered indiscriminate crucifixions, including those who were actually Roman citizens (Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.306-7). And, finally, in 70 AD, the general Titus ordered hundreds of Jewish captives to be crucified around the walls of Jerusalem in the hopes that this would drive the Jews to surrender (*Jewish War* 5.450). Josephus does not state explicitly that the bodies were left hanging, but that would be entirely consistent with the general purpose of these crucifixions.

Even so, one needs to consider the situation of the Province of Judea within the time of Jesus: at that time the situation was (in one sense) peaceful enough that events in and around Jerusalem were not always under control of the Prefect of Judea. While there is a small contingent of soldiers stationed in the Antonia Fortress, the day-to-day government of the city is largely left to Jewish hands, specifically the high priest and the council, who were accountable to the Prefect (in this period, Pontius Pilate).

The Prefect in turn was accountable to the Legate of Syria, and it was the interest of all to keep the status quo undisrupted. It would then be a mistake to assume that episodes like those of Varus, Florus, and Titus are typical of the situation surrounding Jesus' burial.

However, taking victims of crucifixion down from their crosses and burying them was not unheard of. Philo ([Flaccus](#), 10.83-84) tells us that:

"I actually know of instances of people who had been crucified and who, on the moment that such a holiday was at hand, were taken down from the cross and given back to their relatives in order to give them a burial and the customary rites of the last honors. For it was (thought to be) proper that even the dead should enjoy something good on the emperor's birthday and at the same time that the sanctity of the festival should be preserved. Flaccus, however, did not order to take down people who had died on the cross but to crucify living ones, people for whom the occasion offered amnesty, to be sure only a short-lived not a permanent one, but at least a short postponement of punishment if not entire forgiveness."

Josephus ([Jewish War](#) 4.5.2) relates that Jews took down the bodies of those who were crucified during the Great Revolt, as is the command in Deuteronomy 21:22-23 ("When someone is convicted of a crime punishable by death and is executed, and you hang him on a tree, **his corpse must not remain all night upon the tree; you shall bury him that same day, for anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse**").

In Jewish thought, giving a proper interment for someone -- even the dead of their enemies -- was considered to be ritual piety (2 Sam. 21:12-14):

"...But the rage of the Idumeans was not satiated by these slaughters; but they now betook themselves to the city, and plundered every house, and slew every one they met; and for the other multitude, they esteemed it needless to go on with killing them, but they sought for the high priests, and the generality went with the greatest zeal against them; and as soon as they caught them they slew them, and then standing upon their dead bodies, in way of jest, upbraided Ananus with his kindness to the people, and [Jesus \(ben Ananias\)](#) with his speech made to them from the wall:

Nay, they proceeded to that degree of impiety, as to cast away their dead bodies without burial, although the Jews used to take so much care of the burial of men, that they took down those that were condemned and crucified, and buried them before the going down of the sun. I should not mistake if I said that the death of Ananus was the beginning of the destruction of the city, and that from this very day may be dated the overthrow of her wall, and the ruin of her affairs, whereon they saw their high priest, and the procurer of their preservation, slain in the midst of their city..."

In a few cases, concessions can be made if relatives or friends of the victim asked for the corpse to give it a decent burial. The discovery of the bones of a victim who died of crucifixion discovered in 1968, within an ossuary inside a tomb may suggest that giving proper burial to crucifixion victims (as in the case of Jesus), while being rather rare, was not unknown.

Despite being mentioned in many literary sources for the Roman period, few exact details as to how the condemned were affixed to the cross have come down to us. But we do have one unique archeological witness to this gruesome practice.

In 1968, building contractors working in Giv'at haMivtar (Ras el-Masaref), just north of Jerusalem near [Mount Scopus](#) and immediately west of the road to Nablus accidentally uncovered a Jewish tomb dated to the 1st century AD. The date of the tombs, revealed by the pottery in situ, ranged from the late 2nd century B.C. until 70 A.D.

These family tombs with branching chambers, which had been hewn out of soft limestone, belong to the Jewish cemetery of Jesus' time that extends from Mount Scopus in the east to the tombs in the neighborhood of Sanhedriya (named after the Jewish [Sanhedrin](#); it is not certain, however, whether the tombs, which are occupied by seventy people of high status, were the burial places of Sanhedrin officials), in the north west.

A team of archeologists, led by [Vassilios Tzaferis](#), found within the caves the bones of thirty-five individuals, with nine of them apparently having a violent death. Three children, ranging in ages from eight months to eight years, died from starvation. A child of almost four expired after much suffering from an arrow wound that penetrated the left of his skull (the occipital bone). A young man of about seventeen years burned to death cruelly bound upon a rack, as inferred by the grey and white alternate lines on his left fibula.

A slightly older female also died from conflagration. An old women of nearly sixty probably collapsed from the crushing blow of a weapon like a mace; her atlas, axis vertebrae and occipital bone were shattered. A woman in her early thirties died in childbirth, she still retained a fetus in her pelvis.

The late Professor [Nicu Haas](#), an anthropologist at the Anatomy School at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem-Hadassah Medical School, examined one of the bones, which were placed inside a stone ossuary (right) placed inside one of the tombs which bears the Hebrew inscription "Yehohanan the son of Hagaqol'.

The [bones were those](#) of a man in his twenties, crucified probably between 7 A.D., the time of the census revolt, and 66 A.D., the beginning of the war against Rome. The evidence for this was based on

the right heel bone, pierced by an iron nail 11.5 centimetres in length.

The nail penetrated the lateral surface of the bone emerging on the middle of the surface in which the tip of the nail had become bent. The bending of the tip upon itself suggests that after the nail penetrated the tree or the upright it may have struck a knot in the wood thereby making it difficult to remove from the heel when Yehohanan was taken down from the cross.

The point of the nail had olive wood fragments on it indicating that Yehohanan was crucified on a cross made of olive wood or on an olive tree, which would suggest that the condemned was crucified at eye level since olive trees were not very tall. Additionally, a piece of acacia wood was located between the bones and the head of the nail, presumably to keep the condemned from freeing his foot by sliding it over the nail. Yehohanan's legs were found broken, perhaps as a means of hastening his death (Crucifragium; cf. John 19:31-32).

Haas asserted that Yehohanan experienced three traumatic episodes: the cleft palate on the right side and the associated asymmetries of his face likely resulted from the deterioration of his mother's diet during the first few weeks of pregnancy; the disproportion of his cerebral cranium (pladiocephaly) were caused by difficulties during birth. All the marks of violence on the skeleton resulted directly or indirectly from crucifixion.

He also postulated that the legs had been pressed together, bent, and twisted to that the calves were parallel to the patibulum, with the feet being secured to the cross by one iron nail driven simultaneously through both heels (tuber calcanei), and also deduced from a scratch on the inner surface of the right radius bone of the forearm, close to the wrist, that a nail had been driven into the forearm at that position.

However, a subsequent reexamination by [Joseph "Joe" Zias](#), former Curator of Archaeology and Anthropology for the Israel Antiquities Authority, and [Eliezer Sekeles](#) in 1985 found that many of the conclusions upon which his attempted reconstruction were made were flawed. The nail which Haas reported to be 17-18 centimeters in length was but 11.5 centimeters, making it anatomically impossible to affix two feet with one nail.

Furthermore, despite the original belief that evidence for nailing was found on the radius, a subsequent

reexamination of the evidence showed that there was no evidence for traumatic injury to the forearms; various opinions have since then been proposed as to whether the feet were both nailed together to the front of the cross or one on the left side, one on the right side, and whether Yehohanan's hands was actually nailed to the cross or merely tied (Zias' reconstruction of Yehohanan's posture, at right).

While the archeological and physiological record are mostly silent on crucifixion, there are possibilities which may account for this: one is that most victims may have been tied to the cross, which would explain the lack of any direct traumatic evidence on the human skeleton when tied to the cross. The other is that the nails were usually either reused or taken as medical amulets, as stated in [Part 1](#).

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The [photo](#) shows, "Compassion," by William-Adolphe Bouguereau, painted in 1897.

