

The Horror of Crucifixion

Christ knew what He faced as He "strode out ahead" on the road up from Jericho and as He knelt under the gnarled olives in the Garden of the Wine Press. For all the cluttering of that sacred site with the buildings of rival sects, there is the sense of a Presence there. Those incredibly seamed and weathered trunks might be a millennium old, but the roots under the ground, spared Roman destruction in both revolts, are probably the roots which sought the moisture in the sparse soil and limestone crevices when the Lord faced His agony.

With His undimmed intelligence and acuteness of apprehension, He could imagine the rending horror of it all, and on that theme archaeology has had a recent word to say. Fearful light on the crucifixion was shed by a discovery of 1968, in an ancient cemetery at Giv'at Ha-Mivtar. In this Jerusalem cave, exposed by a bulldozer during road construction, containing some limestone chests or "ossuaries", Israeli archaeologists unearthed the first material evidence of a crucifixion. It could indicate that Jesus Christ might have been crucified in a position different from that shown on the traditional Cross. A detailed anatomical study of the skeleton of a man crucified at about the same time as Christ (he was a young man named Yehohanan, that is, "John", Ha-Ga'ol) showed that the victim was nailed to the cross in a sitting position, both his legs slung sideways, with the nail penetrating the sides of both feet just below the heel.

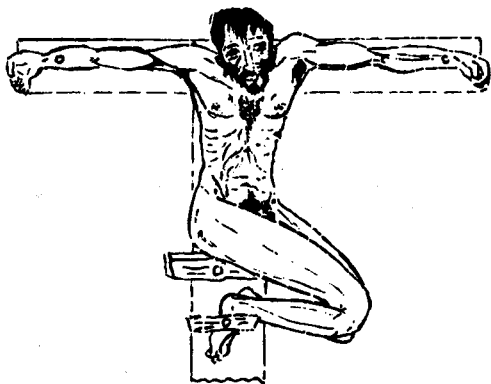
The anatomical study of Yehohanan's tortured skeletal remains, carried out by Dr. Nico Haas of the Hebrew University anatomy department, indicated that the man was crucified "in a compulsive position, a difficult and unnatural posture", evidently to increase the agony. The feet were joined almost parallel, both transfixed by the same nail at the heels, with the legs adjacent. The remains of the nail were embedded in the ankle bones. This single nail, which had fastened his feet to the upright post, in fact, had struck a knot which bent the point, so that it was easier for those who took the body down to break the nail from the wood rather than to remove it from the feet. They hacked off the feet and the eighteen centimetre nail.

The knees were doubled in a semi-flexed position, with the nailed heel bones showing the right one overlapping the left while the trunk was contorted and the arms stretched out each apparently stabbed with a nail in the forearm, and not in the palms. The arm bones were scratched around the nails, by Yehohanan's agonised writhings, some two inches above the wrist bones.

This pattern seems more likely than the traditional art which shows Christ with both palms nailed to the Cross, His legs stretch-

ing straight downward with a nail transfixing the feet frontally near the instep. Scholars in Jerusalem believe that the posture revealed in the anatomical report indicated the usual position for crucifixion used in the city at that time.

Although the Israeli scholars who discovered the remains say the man was crucified 2,000 years ago, team member Dr. Avraham Biran, director of the Government Department of Antiquities, said it would be "mere fantasy" to think the skeleton might be that of Jesus Christ. The tomb at Givat Ha-Mivtar was not empty, and the contention that "the bones of Jesus lie somewhere in Palestine", remains as nebulous as the scepticism of the New Theology which advances it.



Sketch depicting method of crucifying Yehohanan.

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The Cross

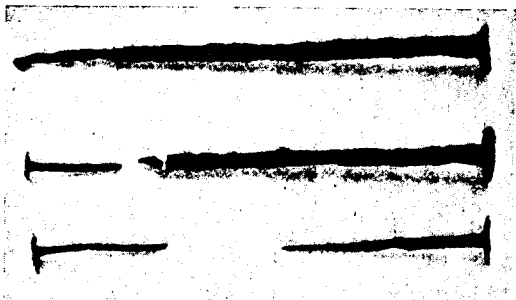
Nor, for all the relic-lore of the Middle Ages which inspired a satirical essay of John Calvin, has any fragment of the cross survived. Roman nails, on the other hand, some of them in brand-new condition, were discovered by Professor I. A. Richmond¹ recently at Inchtuthill, in Scotland — a seven-ton supply abandoned by Agricola when he withdrew from his reconnaissance into Scotland in A.D. 78*. The nine-inch and six-inch spikes, sharp, heavy-headed,

¹ *Journal of Roman Studies*, 1944.

*Alternatively, the nails may have been abandoned when the Romans withdrew from Agricola's northern fortress line late in the next decade.—Ed.

quadilateral, in tough iron, were like the nails of the cross. We can picture what the execution squad used.

Philological and literary evidence seems to point to a cross in the shape of a capital T, and archaeology, as we shall see, gives some small support. The upright stake (stipes) was a fixture at the place of execution. The cross-piece was a beam carried by the condemned victim, bound to his arms and across the nape of the neck. This evidence has been competently assembled by Dr. Barbet,³ whose object was to prove, by examination of the pathology of the death of Christ, the authenticity of the Turin Shroud, a major archaeological treasure, could such authenticity be established. Unfortunately, the history of the relic cannot be traced back beyond the fourteenth century.⁴ But apart from this difficult project, the book is a moving study, and has much of deep interest to say on the death of the Lord and His agony.



Roman nails from Inchtuthil — 9 inch to 2 inch.

From the Institute's collection.