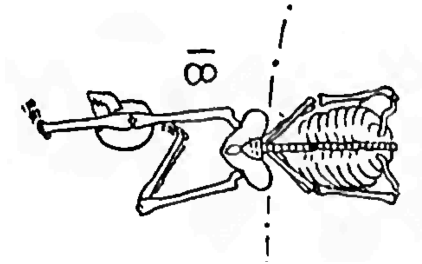


Decapitation

A common judiciary and apotropaic measure



This is reconstruction of skeleton 18, From Roche Court Down, Wiltshire. Unfortunately, as the dig is from the 1930's, no photograph was available and all I could find was this line drawing.

(this image is from *Stone's Saxon Interments from Roche Court Down*)



However, there is a very similar burial from Stockbridge Down excavation, Hampshire, dating to Anglo-Saxon England.

“ This was the body of a man who had been decapitated. The body was buried in the supine position, with the left thigh rotated outwards and the left knee semi flexed. The head had been placed between the legs just below the knees. The neck has been cut through at the level of the second cervical vertebra. “ (after 1937 report by Hill)

The burial also included a decapitated dog, buried without the head.



Both burials were a part of an execution cemetery. There is a significant overlap between apotropaic and judicial decapitation, just as there is significant overlap between executed criminals and potential revenants. However, the ‘safe’ decapitated corpses would be buried in with the head in anatomic position, while the dangerous ones would have it placed elsewhere, or buried without the head.

This mode of burial was considered not only apotropaic, but also may have been derogatory: one of the early Norwegian laws states that “ if the head is severed from the body, and the head is placed between the feet, the wergild shall be doubled”.

(the image on the left is from the original 1937 report by Hill, from the archives of the Hampshire Field Club and Archaeological Society, reproduced on the Hampshire Archaeology blog site)

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(this image is from the excavation on Meon Hill, by Dorothy Liddell, reproduced by Hampshire Archaeology blog)

Multiple apotropaic measures were common in execution cemeteries: in the above image, from another execution cemetery, in Meon Hill, Hampshire dating from 10th c. CE, there are several decapitation with placement of the head between the legs, as well as a prone burial, another very common apotropaic measure. Furthermore, the burials were placed in a ditch, which is consistent with a liminal burial: ditches demarcate borders of structures, and are also intermittently filled with water, making them technically a “between the earth and water” place, which is a common place to bury the dangerous dead. (It may also have been practical, as you don’t have to dig as deep.)



The decapitation burials are not limited to execution cemeteries, the example on the left is from a late 16th-early 17th cemetery in Gwilice, Poland.

(the image on the left is from 'Vampire' Graves in Poland Where Skeletons Were Buried with Skulls between Their Legs, 2013 article from Daily Mail)

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