

Leg Mutilation or Restraint

A practical approach to revenant prevention – it's hard to walk without legs.

This is a reconstruction of tomb 223 from Narde II cemetery, 12th to 10th centuries BCE, Veneto region, Italy. Here in addition to bent backward and disarticulated legs, we have an example of a prone burial, another common apotropaic measure.



(the above image is from *Final Bronze Age and social change in Veneto: Group membership, ethnicity and marginality*, by Elisa Perego, after the 2010 excavation by Salzani and Colonna)

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(the image to the left is of burial 65, at South Acre, Anglo-Saxon England, archives of Norfolk Historic Environment, reproduced in Reynolds' *Anglo-Saxon Deviant Burial Customs*)

Here the legs are bent backwards in a supine burial, which some researchers also consider a sign of an individual killed in the grave.

Occasionally, the skeletons are missing their feet altogether. Extremity removal, at least in Anglo-Saxon England was a punishment for theft. However, amputation of the hands was more common, less common was amputation of one foot. Therefore, if both feet are missing, this is more likely to be an apotropaic burial.

Mutilation of the legs to prevent the dead from walking appears to be widespread. The degree of damage differs. Broken tibias are seen in the bog bodies of Denmark, which span a 2000 year period, and go as late as the 14th c. CE. These can also be associated with prone burials. Occasionally legs or feet are amputated completely, also in Anglo-Saxon England.

Alternatively, mutilation of the legs may be minimal. In *Oedipus Rex*, by Sophocles, written about 430 B.C., Oedipus (whose name means “swollen foot” was left out in the wilderness to die, with feet tied together and pierced by a thorn, to prevent the exposed infant from walking back as a revenant.

Children were considered to be particularly dangerous dead across Europe, and children’s graves often reflect that.



(the image to the left is from Lowther's *Saxon Cemetery at Guildown*, showing a burial of a child with crossed legs, one of several such burials in this cemetery.)

In burials, the crossing of legs at the ankles is interpreted as tied extremities, as the ropes were usually made of organic material and decayed. Tying of the legs serves as a physical restraint designed to prevent the corpse from walking.

References:

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