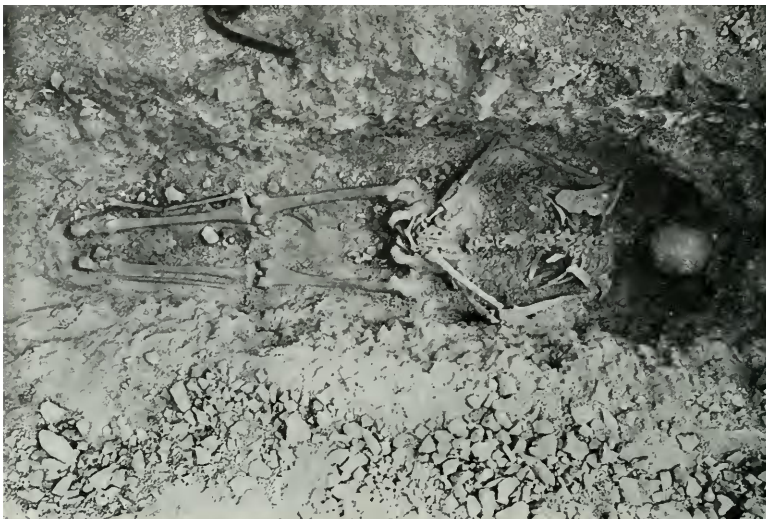


Prone Burial

A very common apotropaic measure

This prone burial example is based on an Anglo-Saxon burial 159, from Guildown excavation, England. This individual was buried prone with his hands tied behind his back. Hands tied behind the back is often considered a sign of death by hanging.



(the image on the left is from *Saxon Cemetery at Guildown* by Lowther, also reproduced in Reynolds' *Anglo-Saxon Devian Burial Customs*)

Prone burials are not limited to execution cemeteries, and can be encountered in consecrated ground. Also, prone burials were given to social outcasts, and to people of high social standing. King Pepin the Short who died in 768 C.E. “was buried prone with his face turned to the east on account of sins committed by his father”.

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This is a prone burial of a 13th century patient of St. John's hospital graveyard, in Cambridge, England. Victims of epidemics, and those whose cause of death unexplained or unknown were considered at risk for revenancy, so apotropaic treatment of a patient would not be unusual.

(this image is from *Face of 13th Century Patient Recreated*, a March 21, 2017 BBC online news release)

Commonly, these are female burials, and are thought to be burials of witches or wise women, though male burials in this position are also known.

This type of burial is associated with a non-normative position of the woman in the society, or a sign of defying social convention – there is a later, 18th c. record of two female bards buried in this position. In addition to prone positioning there may be east-west (head to the east) orientation of the body, as opposed to west-east orientation common to Christian burials.

Occasionally this type of burial may indicate extreme penance of a sinner, and is sometimes seen in monastic burials.

Prone burials are chronologically and geographically scattered. Some, from the Frattesina graveyards (near Verona, Italy), date from 12-10th c. BCE, and prone bog bodies from Denmark date as late as the 14th c. CE.

The prone position was employed to make it difficult for the spirit to return into the body. There is a 16th century account from a shepherd in Bavaria, who had out of body experiences, and commented it was harder to get back into his body, if it was face down. Additionally, the gaze of a corpse was considered dangerous, causing illness, death or possession, and turning it face down, limited its effect.

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