# Some Notes on Crucifixion

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In 1968, ossuary I:4, retrieved from a burial cave at Giv'at ha-Mivtar in north-east Jerusalem, was found to contain the remains of an adult male (24-28 years old, 167 cms tall) and a child (3-4 years old). The adult skeleton was the first, and so far only, archaeological find bearing conclusive evidence of death by crucifixion (Haas 1970; Tzaferis 1970 & 1985). This came from the right calcaneus which was transfixed by a nail, 11.5 cms long and up to about 1 cm wide, which passed from an entry point 2 cms below the posterior articular surface, laterally, to an exit 0.5 cm lower, on the medial side (Zias 1991; Zias & Sekeles 1985). The tip of this nail had bent back on itself apparently as it had been driven into the victim's cross and so had proved impossible to remove.

With the exception of the crucifragium (the breaking of the victim's legs used sometimes to hasten death), crucifixion produced predominantly soft tissue injuries and so victims may not be readily identifiable from skeletal remains. Furthermore, crucifixion nails were held to have superstitious medical properties and were believed to be effective against such conditions as fever, bee-sting and epilepsy. Consequently, a black market appears to have surrounded their disposal (Wilson 1984). Josephus' accounts (Whiston 1895) suggest that nailing was not out of the ordinary - a point which Hengel (1977) emphasises, in asserting that binding a victim to his cross was the exception.

Initial reconstructions of the Giv'at ha-Mivtar victim's death were adversely affected by inaccuracies in the description of the find (Haas 1970; Møller-Christensen 1976; Tzaferis 1985). More accurate analysis has led to a revision (Zias 1991; Zias & Sekeles 1985) but has not relied on osteological evidence alone. The ossuary bore an enigmatic Hebrew inscription (Naveh 1970) which also seems to relate to the victim's mode of death. Both the victim and the child, it states, were called Yehohanan; the child being described further as 'son of the one hanged with knees apart' (Yadin 1973). All reconstructions have been based upon the +-shaped or Latin cross (crux immissa or crux capitata). Reconstructions with the victim more clearly open-legged on an X-shaped cross (crux decussata) have not been reported, however. The use of different positions for crucifixion is evident from various ancient accounts. Seneca the Younger states that he saw at one time crosses 'not just of one kind but made in many different ways: some have their victims with head down to the ground; some impale their private parts; others stretch out their arms on the gibbet' (Hengel 1977).

Although victims were often left to decay on their crosses as examples to potential wrongdoers, those that did receive a burial have tended to go unnoticed due to a lack of obvious skeletal trauma, even when nails were used. However, it is the use of nails, even when through soft tissue, which may leave skeletal clues. At the extremities, nails may be passed between the radius and ulna, the bones of the carpus, the proximal metatarsals, perhaps the distal row of the tarsus and possibly between the lower tibia and fibula. As the palmar tissue cannot support the weight of the body, nailing between the metacarpals would also require tying to the cross. Localised grooving or splintering of bones in these areas may be produced when the nails are driven in or as the victim hangs from them - as has been suggested for the Giv'at ha-Mivtar find (Haas 1970). In the case of the carpal and tarsal bones, individualised fragmentation may have occurred although easy passage between the carpals also seems possible (Zugibe 1989). Because of the width of the nails, separation of bones at the wrist is likely to have led to the evulsion of bony fragments as occurs in other traumatic axial dislocations there (Garcia-Elias et al. 1989).

Crucifragium, practised by the Romans in Israel where Jewish law forbade the leaving of executed criminals hanging overnight (Deuteronomy), may not have been a universal practice. However, when performed, it would be expected to produce comminuted fractures which, for the victim, would probably have also been compound - as also suggested for the Giv'at ha-Mivtar find (Haas 1970).
Although the outcome of crucifixion was death, it was more a form of torture than execution - life was not taken judicially, rather the victim could no longer hold on to it. The remains of many executed by crucifixion may well be in our collections, having gone undiscovered.

**References**

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