

New Evidence of How Romans Would Have Crucified Jesus

The Romans normally tied victims to the cross—but a grave in Italy provides new archaeological evidence that the Biblical account of the Crucifixion may have been right all along.

Candida Moss – June 6, 2018



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When it comes to [Jesus of Nazareth](#), one of the few things that scholars agree on is that the man Christians call the Messiah was crucified in first-century Jerusalem. But when it comes to the specifics of his death and burial, there's considerable controversy about what actually happened. The Romans executed most criminals by tying them to the wooden crosses, so it is highly unusual that Jesus was nailed. Some have even questioned whether it actually happened. But a new archaeological discovery in Italy adds weight to the Biblical claims about [the death of Jesus](#).

In a recently published article in the *Journal of Archaeological and Anthropologica Sciences*, a team of scientists led by Emanuela Gualdi and Ursula Thun Hohenstein of the University of Ferrara revealed that they had excavated a 2,000-year-old corpse from an isolated tomb in Gavello, near Venice, in Northern Italy, that showed signs of having been crucified. The heel of the skeleton has a hole through it consistent with the kind of injury that would have been sustained during crucifixion. Gualdi told Italian paper *Estense* that “in [this case] despite the poorly preserved conditions, we could demonstrate the presence of signs on the skeleton that indicate a violence similar to crucifixion.” The fact that the man was buried directly into the ground (instead of a tomb) and without any kinds of

grave goods (items that the deceased might need in the hereafter) suggests that the burial was performed without ceremony. It was, in other words, the kind of burial reserved for slaves and criminals.

This makes the discovery only the second piece of material evidence that Romans used nails in their crucifixion practices. The first was discovered in 1968 in a Roman-era tomb in Jerusalem. Greek archaeologist Vassilios Tzaferis found a heel bone through which a 7-inch nail had been hammered. The nail was still lodged in the heel and was attached to a small piece of olive wood, presumably the wood from which the cross had been made. While the Romans might have preferred to retrieve and reuse the nail, it was deeply embedded in the man's ankle and, as a result it stayed in the unhappy victim's foot.

(There is no comparable physical evidence for those who were bound during crucifixion: being tied to a cross does not leave marks on the skeleton).

Crucifixion is arguably the best known form of ancient execution. The Romans, who utilized it regularly when punishing slaves and those guilty of sedition, adopted the practice from the ancient Carthaginians (modern-day Tunisia). Crucifixion was fairly broadly practiced in the ancient world, but the Romans used this particularly brutal form of execution as a means of producing social conformity. It was, the Roman politician Cicero says, the "most cruel and hideous of tortures." The bodies of the condemned would remain on crosses for days. One legend describes a case in 213 C.E. in which a husband and wife lasted 10 days on the cross. By comparison, Jesus died remarkably quickly.

Once dead, some were allowed to rot in public, others were taken down and thrown to wild animals, while others—like the Italian skeleton—were buried. By maximizing the public display of torture the message to onlookers was quite clear: undermine the empire and the same thing could happen to you. Nor were the Romans particularly reserved in their application of crucifixion: after the uprising of slaves led by Spartacus, 6,000 crosses lined the highway to Rome.

While crucifixion was outlawed by the Emperor Constantine in the fourth century, it has continued to intrigue those who wonder about the mechanics of this notorious method of execution. For Christians of every stripe, [crucifixion holds a particular fascination](#). Christian medics wondered, how does a person die when they are crucified? Christian artists ruminated on what a crucified body—the central focus of Western art—really looked like while it hung on the cross. And so they decided to experiment.

In 1801 sculptor Thomas Banks and artists Benjamin West and Richard Cosway embarked on a truly morbid experiment. They negotiated access to the corpse of a recently-hung pensioner, 73-year-old James Legg; hung the cadaver on a cross; flayed the skin from the rigid body; and made a cast. To this day, the cast remains the property of the Royal Academy of Arts. Banks' intent was to produce an accurate image of the crucified body of Jesus, one that would represent the embodied nature of this moment with anatomical accuracy. Banks, West, and Cosway performed their experiment in a period of medical history notorious for its interest in corpses and dissection, but this was not the first period in history in which this sort of thing was attempted.

According to Carpus, the surgeon who helped them gain access to Legg's remains, they were inspired by the work of the great artist Michelangelo. In an apocryphal story that circulated in the 19th century, Michelangelo tied a model to a wooden cross and stabbed him in the side in order to produce the physical effects of the crucifixion.

In the 1930s, when trying to demonstrate the authenticity of the Shroud of Turin, a French doctor named Pierre Barbet, the surgeon general of the Saint Joseph Hospital in Paris, volunteered to help. Barbet nailed an unclaimed cadaver to a makeshift cross in an effort to understand the wound marks on the “hands” of the Turin Shroud. Barbet struggled to understand how the hands could sustain the weight of the body and ended up performing further experiments on 13 more amputated arms. In the end he punctured what is known as “Destot’s space,” a small pea-sized opening bordered by bones. Barbet hypothesized that when crucified in this manner a person could not lift themselves up on the cross and gradually suffocated. His inspiration was a torture technique devised in World War I in which a person is hung with hands bound directly over their head. Barbet had figured out a way in which Jesus could be crucified but, unfortunately for him, the wounds he created did not match the shroud.

In 2001 Rockland County, New York examiner Frederick Zugibe used living volunteers from the local religious group the Third Order of St. Francis to replicate the methods of execution. Over the course of his experiment he strapped (no nailing, thankfully) nearly a hundred people to a cross in his garage. The participants were remarkably eager to experience the death of Jesus. Zugibe told Mary Roach, the author of *Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers*, “Everyone wanted to go up and see what it felt like.”

“They would have paid me,” he added.

His experiment revealed that those strapped to the crosses did not seem to experience much difficulty breathing, but a corpse on his coroner’s table gave him inspiration. A murder victim who had been repeatedly stabbed had a defensive wound in the palm of her hand that travelled at an angle exiting at the back of her wrist. Zugibe concluded that victims of crucifixion died from “hypovolemic shock.”

To this day some penitents in the Philippines volunteer to be crucified on Good Friday. Though the Catholic Church strongly disapproves of the practice, it includes being nailed to a cross on a makeshift Calvary. The process, as you might expect, is brutal, but it is popular enough that the Department of Health issues formal guidelines, suggesting that practitioners receive tetanus shots and use sterilized nails.

Source: <https://www.thedailybeast.com/new-evidence-of-how-romans-would-have-crucified-jesus?>