

## THE LIVING AND THE DEAD AT WHARRAM PERCY: RECENT REANALYSIS OF SOME HUMAN REMAINS FROM THE MEDIEVAL SETTLEMENT

By SIMON MAYS<sup>1</sup>

One of the most important facets of the long-running research excavation at Wharram Percy, North Yorkshire, was the recovery of skeletal remains of some of the villagers who lived there. Most come from excavations, initiated by the late Don Brothwell, in the churchyard. However, a small collection of bones come not from the churchyard but from a pit on the settlement part of the site. The remains in question were excavated in the early 1960s, and they have recently become the focus of renewed scientific interest. They comprise 137 commingled, disarticulated human bones representing a minimum of ten individuals, ranging in age at death from about two years to well over 50 years old. Both sexes are represented. As well as the human remains, the pit also contained a mixture of Roman and medieval pottery.

Re-examination of these bones in 2014 by a research team from Historic England and the University of Southampton revealed that they bore evidence of burning, cut-marks and deliberate breakage. A programme of work was instituted to systematically record these alterations and to attempt to shed light upon the human activities that might have produced the assemblage.

Seventeen of the bones showed evidence for burning. Skulls were the elements most commonly involved. Affected bones show brown or black discolouration, suggesting that they were exposed to temperatures of less than about 400°C. This, together with the pattern of burning, suggested exposure to a short-lived blaze whilst their bones were still flesh-covered. There were a total of 76 cut marks on seventeen bones (three of which also showed evidence for burning). There were three chop-marks to the base of one of the skulls, but the rest were fine knife-marks. The cuts were concentrated in the upper body, especially the head / neck region, and none were present in elements from below the chest area. The knife-marks seemed to be indicative of dismemberment, and at least two individuals seemed to have been decapitated. In addition, six long-bones showed evidence for deliberate breakage.

Radiocarbon determinations showed that the bones dated to the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, contemporary with the burials from the churchyard. The remains represented people who died over a period of perhaps two or three centuries. Given that the modifications to the bones appeared to have occurred immediately after death, this suggests that the remains are the product not of a single event but rather of several similar episodes of activity spread over many years.

There are considerable difficulties in the interpretation of these remains. The presence of pottery of different dates within the pit fill suggest that the contents were redeposited from elsewhere, but it is unclear why the human remains ended up together in this particular pit, especially given their different dates. The bones are substantially fewer than would be expected from a minimum of ten individuals; the fate of the rest of the remains of these people is unknown. We were also unable to locate any close parallels from other late medieval sites that might help us to understand what we are seeing here.

An initial hypothesis was that the people whose bones these are might have been singled out for this rather bizarre mortuary treatment because they were outsiders rather than members of the local community. However, analysis of strontium isotopes in the teeth gave results that matched those of control samples from burials from the churchyard; they were consistent with these individuals having spent their childhoods on the chalk of the Yorkshire Wolds and hence being of local origin.

The remains pre-date the execution by burning of those suspected of witchcraft or heresy in sixteenth-century England, and in any event such scenarios would not account for the full gamut of alterations seen on the bones. The idea that these might be the remains of people who were victims of murderous assault was also considered. However, in such cases, sharp force trauma is normally in the form of chop-marks from swords or axes; the paucity of chop-marks, and the evidence for post-mortem processing in the form of knife-marks and breakage of long-bones are inconsistent with this explanation. Two possibilities that seemed more likely were starvation cannibalism, or attempts to lay the revenant dead.

Famine was frequent in medieval England, and the northerly, upland location and poor soils at Wharram Percy would have made the community more vulnerable than most. Could starving villagers have resorted to cannibalism? The bony signature of cannibalism is highly variable, but fracturing of long-bones (to extract marrow), knife marks from removal of flesh or dismemberment, and burning from cooking by roasting may occur. However, in cannibalism cut-marks on bone tend to be located at major joints or at the attachment sites of large muscle groups. At Wharram Percy, the concentration of cuts is not in these areas, but in the head / neck region. This is difficult to reconcile with cannibalism.

A revenant is a corpse that arises from its grave. Belief in revenants was widespread in medieval times.

---

<sup>1</sup> Historic England



Figure 1  
Wharram Percy  
(© Historic England).

Medieval texts describe instances of walking corpses. These are related as factual events, usually occurring recently in the writer's immediate locale. These stories were most often recorded by clerical writers, sometimes as part of general chronicles of events, but more often as part of collections of *exempla* – short narratives intended to be used in preaching to make moral points. Although they do not refer to Wharram Percy, two of the best known written sources describing revenants, William of Newburgh's *Historia Rerum Anglicarum* (a late twelfth-century chronicle) and the anonymous Monk of Byland's manuscript (stories probably recorded for use as *exempla* in c. AD 1400) come from North Yorkshire. Revenants were generally malevolent toward the living, violently assaulting those unlucky enough to encounter

them, and spreading disease with the putrifying odour of their bodies. The underlying logic of medieval belief in revenants was that the buried corpse might be reanimated by residual life force in individuals who had expressed strong ill-will in life, or who had died unshriven or suffered sudden death with energy still unexpended. One way of dealing with a revenant was to place a scroll of absolution in the grave but, according to William of Newburgh, the more usual way was to dig up the corpse, dismember it and burn the pieces in a fire. The evidence for dismemberment and exposure to fire in the current remains might be consistent with such a scenario. In medieval texts, the revenant is a fleshed corpse rather than a skeleton, and it is only in the liminal period between death and the decay of the flesh that the



*Figure 2 Part of a cranium, viewed from above, showing discolouration as a result of exposure to heat (© Historic England).*



*Figure 3 a) A clavicle showing knife-marks on its underside (arrowed). b) Inset showing detail of marks (© Historic England).*

body poses a threat. Mutilation and burning represent efforts to destroy the integrity of the corpse. In the Wharram Percy remains, the burning was insufficient to affect very greatly the integrity of the bones but it would doubtless have removed, or rendered unrecognisable, the fleshy parts. The breakage of long-bones might also be part of this process – one medieval text describes breaking the legs of a body to stop it roaming.

Although it is currently our preferred interpretation, there are difficulties with the revenant explanation. Written sources usually fail to specify the final fate of the remains after the troublesome corpse has been mutilated / burnt, but disposal of remains in a domestic context within a settlement could be argued as inconsistent with the idea that the corpses were feared. Revenants reported by medieval chroniclers are invariably adults and mainly men. This may in part reflect that men were more likely to have led the kinds of lives, or died the kinds of deaths, associated with restless corpses. The fact that women and children are represented in the Wharram Percy remains may argue against the revenant explanation. However, surviving textual accounts of revenants are selections, made because they suited the

authors' purposes, from tales that were circulating at the time; the extent to which they reflect the full gamut of folk beliefs is unclear.

Further scientific work is planned to try and learn more about these remains. For example, biomolecular study of deposits of calculus (mineralised dental plaque) on the teeth may shed light on whether the people whose remains ended up in the pit differed in lifestyle, diet or other ways from their counterparts who were buried in the churchyard. One of the concluding remarks in the final volume on the Wharram Percy excavations was that there was still 'a good deal of research potential' in the Wharram Percy site archive. The continuing work on the human remains testifies to the truth of this.

## **Bibliography**

This work is described in full in:

Mays, S., Fryer, R., Pike, A. W. G., Cooper, M.J. and Marshall, P. in press. A multidisciplinary study of a burnt and mutilated assemblage of human remains from a deserted Mediaeval village in England, *Journal of Archaeological Science Reports*. Available on Open Access at <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2352409X1630791X>.