



The First Archeological Evidence for Crucifixion

By SIEGFRIED H. HORN

WORKING on a housing project in the Giv'at ha-Mivtar area, north of Jerusalem in June, 1968, bulldozers accidentally laid bare rock-cut tombs that by pottery and inscriptional evidence can be dated as having been used during the first century B.C. and the first century A.D. When the Israeli Department of Antiquities was informed of this discovery, it instructed the Greek-born Israeli archeologist Vasilius Tzaferis to direct careful excavation of four of these tombs. In the course of his excavation, he made one of the most exciting finds of recent times—he discovered the skeletal remains of a man who had died by crucifixion, the first such skeletal remains ever to be discovered. What makes the find particularly significant is the fact that this crucifixion occurred about the time Jesus was crucified.

In June, 1970, I had the privilege of traveling with Mr. Tzaferis from northern Galilee to Jerusalem, during which time he gave me certain details of that startling discovery that the brief news reports had omitted when the discovery was reported two years earlier. Since then a detailed report has been published in the *Israel Exploration Journal* (vol. 20, nos. 1-2). This contains all the necessary information, so that I no longer need hold in confidence the information given to me privately. In the journal report Mr. Tzaferis describes the four excavated tombs and their contents; the well-known epigrapher J. Naveh studies the inscriptions; and Dr. Nicu Haas, professor of anatomy at Hebrew University's Hadassah Medical School, an authority in the field of human skeletal material, discusses the bone material.

In three of the four tombs, all dating before A.D. 70, a total of 15 ossuaries were found, which contained the skeletons of 35 humans. Ossuaries are stone receptacles used principally by Jews in the time of Christ to preserve the bones of deceased human bodies. After the deceased had been buried, usually in underground rock-hewn tombs, and the fleshy parts had disintegrated, the bones were collected

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and placed in ossuaries. The 15 ossuaries discovered in the Giv'at ha-Mivtar tombs each contained the bones of from one to five bodies.

Of the 35 skeletons, nine belonged to adult males ranging from 26 to 65 years of age; ten to women, ages 23-55; four teenagers, two of which were male and two female. Eleven children from less than a year to six years of age and an unborn fetus were represented, testifying to the high infant mortality rate prevalent some 2,000 years ago. The skeletons also revealed that many people in Christ's time—a period of great political stress—died of unusual causes, including violent deaths. Professor Haas found that three persons had died probably from lack of proper medical attention, three children of starvation, one woman from blows with a blunt instrument, perhaps a mace, one child from a wound inflicted by an arrow, one woman and a youth from burns, perhaps from accidental fires, and one woman in childbirth. Certainly of a period in which one third of the population died violent deaths it could be said as did the contemporary apostle Paul, that "the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together" (Rom. 8:22).

A Unique Skeleton

By far the most interesting skeleton of those unfortunate victims from a painful period in Jewish history was that of Johanan, son of Chaggol, who was crucified at an age somewhere between 24 and 28 years. Professor Haas and his colleagues made a most careful study of the bones of this man. Unfortunately, they had to do their work quickly because for religious reasons they were forced to reinter the bones soon after their discovery. Fortunately, however, they were granted extra time for this particular skeleton, and were therefore able to do a more thorough study on the crucified man than on the other skeletons.

Dr. Haas found that the man had a slightly malformed head, a condition he claims was caused by a change in his mother's diet during pregnancy. However, such a malformation would hardly have been noticeable in adulthood, since in common with all Jews of that time, the man most probably wore a beard. He was five feet seven inches tall, an average-sized man for the

people of that time and area. His bones showed that he had never engaged in heavy physical work, had never been seriously injured, and had no pathological deformations. He must have had a healthy constitution. In fact, Dr. Haas says that his body was of a "gracious, almost feminine allure," and reminded him "of the Hellenistic ideal ephebe [Greek *ephēbos*, "youth"]."

The evidence of his crucifixion became obvious the minute his bones were removed from Ossuary 4, of Tomb I, a bone receptacle he shared with the remains of a child two to six years of age. Among his bones were his two heel bones pierced by a seven-inch-long iron nail. Between the nail's head and the bones was a plaque of acacia wood, and around the bent tip of the nail was a knotted piece of olive wood. This piece of knotted olive wood had been part of the upright shaft of the cross. The nail had hit the knot and thus had been bent. The radius of the crucified man's right arm, that is the shorter of the two bones of his forearm, showed a scratch at its lower end where the nail had been driven through his forearm between the two bones just above the wrist. His leg bones had been broken as was usually done some hours after crucifixion so the victims would be unable to leave the cross after nightfall. This custom is mentioned in the Bible, which tells us that the two criminals crucified with Christ suffered this additional torture, while Christ was spared because He had already expired (John 19:31-33). Furthermore, it was found that the feet of the crucified man had been cut off from the body, perhaps because those who took the victim from the cross were initially unable to extract the nail bent in the knot. Finally they must have succeeded in extracting the nail by breaking from the cross the knotty piece of wood attached to the iron nail. Everything—nail, feet, acacia plaque, and knotted piece of olive wood—detached from the cross was then buried with the corpse and finally recovered, still in this form, almost 2,000 years later by the modern archeologist.

The study of the pierced heel bones and their relationship to each other provided a surprise, for it showed that the crucifixion was not carried out as it has been pic-

tured since A.D. 440—from which time the earliest picture of the crucified Christ dates—in an erect cruciform. The evidence shows clearly that the man's two heels had been pierced sideways in such a way that he could have been crucified only in a bent position while sitting on a crosspiece of wood, called a *sedecula*, which would prevent him from sagging and perhaps getting loose from the cross.

Nails Through Arms, Not Palms

As far as the upper limbs are concerned, it had been known for a long time that the nails were not driven through the palms of the hands, but rather through the arms. The weight of the body would have been so heavy that the ligaments in the hands would have torn open. The evidence of this crucified man proves that the nails went through the arms and not through the hands of the victim.

The question is naturally raised, Would this have been true also in the case of Jesus? The words of doubting Thomas recorded in John 20:25 give the impression that the nails left their marks on the risen Saviour's hands. However, scholars point out that the Greek word *cheir*, "hand," is also used for arm (see W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* [Cambridge, 1957], p. 888b). The Biblical evidence, therefore, is inconclusive.

When was our man crucified? Tzaferis examines the historical evidence and comes to the conclusion that it probably happened about A.D. 7, when crucifixions were carried out by the Romans during a revolt against the census. Mass crucifixions took place in Jerusalem in 88 B.C. under Alexander Jannaeus, the Maccabean ruler, and during the siege of the city in A.D. 70 under Titus. However, the first is too early and the second too late to fit the date of our tomb. Occasionally common, as well as political, criminals were crucified, and our man may have belonged to one of the two categories, so that an exact date for his death cannot be ascertained. According to the pottery found in the tomb, his death occurred either in the last part of the first century B.C. or during the early years of the first century A.D., hence approximately during the lifetime of Jesus Christ. ♦♦