

Alas, Poor Yorick....

Thus Hamlet reacts with shock and disbelief when the gravedigger hands him the skull of the king's jester, freshly dug from the earth, for he has vivid memories of Yorick as a sentient living being who had brought enchantment to his childhood: ... "a man of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath borne me on his back a thousand times...." That he should have come to this pierces his soul.

For the archaeologist, what we might call the Yorick experience, the unearthing of skeletons from ancient burial grounds, has become a matter of professional routine. Indeed, the excavation of the dead and the detailed examination of their remains, particularly from Roman or medieval cemeteries, is one of the principle ways of shedding light on the past. One of the hopes of the Society in the 2010 excavations at Slack was that we might find the cemetery attached to the fort. For there must be one. The fort was occupied by the military for at least 60 years, and, as we now know, by a civilian population for several centuries more. In the natural order of things we might predict at least five deaths per year in this population and thus a burial ground containing several hundred cremations and possibly inhumations. It has still to be discovered.

But the Yorick experience also raises a much wider ethical question for the archaeologist in his pursuit of the dead. How should we treat these bones whose final resting place we have so arrogantly disturbed? In her regular appearances on our TV screens, Professor Alice Roberts, positively glowing with life and vitality herself, brandishes femurs and thigh bones and skulls for our delectation, pointing out the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune afflicted on them during their brief period on earth. It would be grossly unfair to say that familiarity has bred contempt in Professor Robert's approach, but it certainly suggests a cool detachment, shared by many other archaeologists. Human remains are treated with the same distancing objectivity as, say a pot of coins, a crumbling sword or a piece of jewellery found in the same grave. I cannot be alone in finding this at times a little insensitive.

Clearly the excavators of the "Mary Rose" were aware of this issue when they recovered the remains of some 179 individuals, including 92 almost complete skeletons from the ship. (Over 400 sailors were drowned trapped below decks when the "Mary Rose" turned on its side and rapidly sank.) The fact that thousands of personal items belonging to these men, including many combs, 400 shoes, plates, drinking pots and several musical instruments, were also found perfectly preserved in the Solent mud virtually forced the archaeologists to acknowledge the once living reality of these skeletal remains. The new technology of facial reconstruction, adding flesh to the bones as it were, only increased the pressure to respond in a more sensitive way. Thus in July 1984 one of the skeletons was symbolically laid to rest in Portsmouth Cathedral, the closest thing Portsmouth has to a memorial for the crew of the "Mary Rose".

The remaining skeletons are of course an almost unique source of information. They represent a cross section of a community at one specific moment in time and are yielding valuable data on the age and state of health of the crew. All were male with 80% under the age of 30 and several were no more than 13 years old. DNA and isotope analysis indicate that most of the crew were English, mainly from the West Country, although some were from continental Europe.

But the Yorick experience also begs another question for the archaeologist. Is there a date or a time-line in the past before which human remains can be subjected to analysis and research without regard for the once living being? Human remains are regularly being found on the battlefields of World War 1 and these are granted an official burial service, often with living relatives present, in one of the military cemeteries in Northern France. It is almost a century since the end of that war, yet the newly discovered dead are treated as though they had only recently sacrificed their lives. This must be because the present generation still has strong emotional and family ties with the victims. My grandfather was one such victim. I have photographs of him and the Christmas card he sent to my mother, then a baby, in December 1916, just a few weeks before he was killed. For the present he lives on through me and my few precious mementoes of his brief life. But when my generation has gone, the last with tangible links to the young men of 1914-1918, will the line then be drawn? Will the still to be discovered dead in Flanders fields then join the ranks of those uncovered in the London plague pits and the Roman cemetery in Winchester and in all those other sites where the archaeologists' trowels beaver away amongst the anonymous dead?

Hamlet's encounter with the skull of Yorick has more to do with existentialism than archaeology, a reinforcement of his own morbid preoccupation with mortality ... "*how long will a man lie i' the earth ere he rot?*"... Inevitably it is also the inescapable lot of the archaeologist to be constantly reminded of man's mortality and his brief sojourn on this earth. Shakespeare, through the words of Hamlet, voices fears which we often prefer to push to the back of our minds. But in another context he can also offer these words of relative comfort, from "Cymbeline".

Fear no more the heat o' the sun,
Nor the furious winter's rages;
Thou thy worldly task hast done,
Home art gone, and ta'en thy wages:
Golden lads and girls all must,
As chimney-sweepers, come to dust.

Fear no more the frown o' the great;
Thou art past the tyrant's stroke;
Care no more to clothe and eat;
To thee the reed is as the oak:
The scepter, learning, physic, must
All follow this, and come to dust.

Fear no more the lightning flash,
Nor the all-dreaded thunder stone;
Fear not slander, censure rash;
Thou hast finished joy and moan:
All lovers young, all lovers must
Consign to thee, and come to dust.

No exorciser harm thee!
Nor no witchcraft charm thee!
Ghost unlaid forbear thee!
Nothing ill come near thee!
Quiet consummation have;
And renownèd be thy grave!