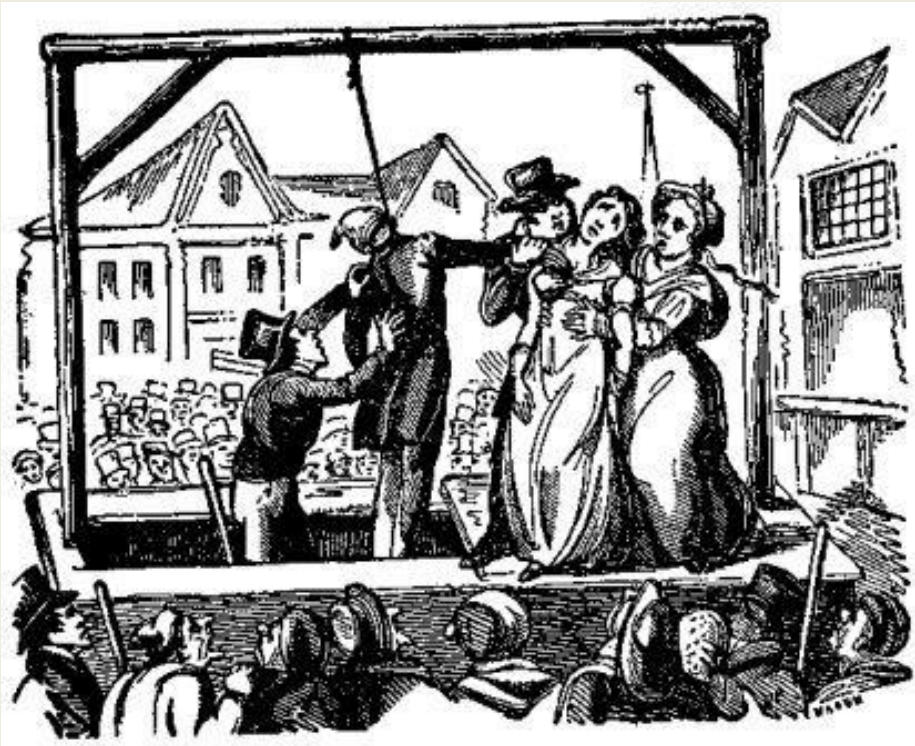


## THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE CRIMINAL CORPSE

A new major research programme funded by the Wellcome Trust is bringing Leicester academics in the School of Archaeology and Ancient History, and the School of Historical Studies together with colleagues from the University of Hertfordshire and Oxford Brookes University to examine the fate of the the corpses of executed criminals.



*Image: a woodcut from the Newgate Calendar, which shows the hand of a newly hanged man being applied to a young woman in an effort to cure a disease of the neck.*



Between 1752 and 1832 the bodies of executed murderers were legally denied burial in consecrated ground. Instead they were donated for anatomical dissection or ‘hung in chains’ (displayed in a gibbet). This new research programme brings together scholars from archaeology, medical and criminal history, folklore, literature and philosophy to explore the ways that the dead body of the criminal could still be powerful. Their emotional power was exploited by the State to enforce conformity with the law, they were exploited as sources of scientific or medical knowledge; they gave meaning to places in the landscape (‘Gibbet Hills’ and so on). At a popular level, their touch was believed to cure disease; their ghosts to stalk the living and their bodies to be places of lurking malevolence which might threaten our comfortable lives (as Frankenstein’s monster did).

This new 5-year project, in which the **Wellcome Trust** has invested nearly a million pounds, uses the criminal corpse as a focal point from which the team can spin out to explore the many ways that human bodies were understood in the period between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries, and how attitudes that took shape at that time continue to affect our ambivalent feelings about how the dead should be treated.

“This is a great opportunity to study the history of the body at a fascinating time,” said Dr Sarah Tarlow, an archaeologist and the leader of this team. “This is a key period in the development of modern medical knowledge, where the inside of the body was carefully explored and described by anatomists. At the same time it was generally believed that the touch of a hanged man’s hand could cure cancers of the neck, and that suicides should be buried with a stake through their bodies.”

Her colleague, Professor Peter King of the Centre for English Local History added, “We aim to look at the whole journey of the criminal body from sentencing to eventual disposal. Sentences passed were not always carried out; we want to find out what determined the eventual fate of the body. We need to locate the places where bodies were dissected and displayed – both when they were hung in chains and when bodies or body parts were preserved as curios or as part of scientific collections.”

Philosopher Dr Floris Tomasini will work closely with the other team members to trace the history of some of our modern attitudes towards the dead body. “Why is there a public outcry when organs are retained by doctors after a death? Why do we attach so much importance to bringing the bodies of our war dead ‘home’?” asks Dr Tomasini. “These are important questions in moral philosophy, but they have deep historical roots. I am excited to be working a new way with colleagues from other disciplines.”

The team will be producing a number of academic publications but will also be setting up a website to host an online exhibition and keeping a blog of their findings and ideas as the project gets underway. Watch out for their new website.