

# The Intriguing History of the Term Sacrum

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## ABSTRACT

The sacrum was considered special and by some regions or religions, sacred and worthy of veneration. This article highlights its special role in history and derivation as a term. The Spine Scholar 1:17-18, 2018

## INTRODUCTION

The sacrum is a large, triangular bone located between the lumbar and coccygeal portions of the spine. It is shaped like an inverted triangle and is inserted like a wedge between the two coxal bones of the pelvis (Bartlett, 1919). It articulates with the last lumbar vertebra superiorly and the coccyx inferiorly. The sacrum projects posteriorly to form the lumbosacral angle (Diel et al., 2001). The greater the angle, the higher the shear forces placed on the joint; and the higher the incidence of lower back pain (DioGiovanna et al., 2004). The sacrum consists of five fused vertebrae. The S1 vertebra is the largest and is composed of a wide body that contains the greatest density of trabeculae (Diel, 2001).

### The Holy Bone

The origin of the term sacrum is not completely clear. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the anatomic "sacrum" entered the English language in 1753 (Medicinet, 2008). The os sacrum was so named by the Romans as a direct translation from the older Greek hieron osteon, which translates to "sacred" or "holy." It was used in sacrificial rites and in protecting the genitalia (which in ancient times were considered sacred). The German word for sacrum is Kreuzbein, which means "crossbone," and infers the holiness associated with the cross of crucifixion. In some English translations of Galen's work, the word "crossbone," is synonymous with hieron osteon. Another translation for hieron is temple (Helps ministeries 1987; Renn 2005)]. Another school of thought was that it was in this bony temple that the sacred organs of the female (i.e., the uterus and ovaries) lay (Medicinet, 2002). Although the primary meaning of hieron is holy, it can also mean large, great, or magnificent. As a result, both recent and ancient etymologists have considered "large" as an alternate translation of sacrum (Stross, 2017). Lastly, due to its size, the sacrum may resist decomposition more than other vertebrae. Therefore, many ancients may have believed that it might serve as the source of resurrection in the afterlife.

### In Judiac Tradition

The Jews also held the belief that this bone held the nucleus for the resurrection of the human body (Besant, 2015). The concept of the bone being important for resurrection (therefore being sacred) stemmed from the ancient belief that the sacrum is exceptionally hard and resistant to decay or destruction (Stross, 2017). This is not far-fetched as the sacrum is essential for effective load transfer between the spine and lower limbs (Vleeming et al., 2012). The term luz, as the Hebrews refer to it, meaning almond or nut (Garrison, 1910) was derived from the dialogue between Emperor Hadrian and Rabbi Joshua. The Emperor asked where God expected man to rise up from in the world and the Rabbi replied: "the vertebrae called, luz." The rabbi went on to say, "Though you grind the luz in a hand mill, it is not pulverized; though you burn it in a fire, it is not consumed; though you put it in water, it is not dissolved; though you place it on an anvil and begin to strike it with a hammer, the anvil is split and the hammer cleft but the luz remains intact" (Shapiro, 1987).

## In Islamic Tradition

Muslims share the belief that there is a bone in the human body that does not decay and it is from this bone that the human body will be resurrected; however, they refer to that bone as the little bone at the end of the coccyx. "It is the first part of a person that is created, and it is what will be left of him so that he will be created anew from it" (Saalih al-Munajjid, 2002). The coccyx, known as the al ajb by the Arabs, was called by Mohammed "the incorruptible" and "serves as a basis for the future edifice at the resurrection" (Wheeler et al., 1910). Later, authors found that al ajb can be translated as coccyx or sacrum, although now it is thought to be a likely equivalent to the luz of Jewish tradition (Oscar, 1987).

It is important to mention that there was also some confusion as to whether this indestructible bone spoken of by the rabbi was located in the neck and not at the end of the vertebrae. According to the Talmudists and other Hebrew commentators, the bone was near the base of the skull, in the skull itself or in the spine. To others this indestructible bone was the one with which we incline the head and bend the neck. Garrison also pointed out that although bone is durable, it was hard to believe there was such a bone that could withstand fire and not be pulverized by hammer as mentioned by Rabbi Joshua. Garrison also stated, "Plato and the ancient agree that only the teeth could stand the test of fire which effaces all other remains" (Garrison, 1910).

## In Ancient Egyptian Tradition

Osiris is the Egyptian god of the Underworld and Judge of the Dead or god of the dead, one of the most important worshipped gods of ancient Egypt. The backbone of Osiris referred to as djed by the ancient Egyptians has been thought by some to be the sacrum and was worn as an amulet to signify permanence and stability. This name for the sacrum was also better known as the "pillar of four capitals," identified with Osiris as his backbone and the tree in which he was entombed (Stross, 2017). There are several interpretations of what the djed means. Budge (1966) has said, "Many peoples and tribes in Africa have been in the habit of preserving carefully a bone belonging to the body of some great or beloved ancestor, and there can be little doubt that the is a conventional representation of a part of the backbone of Osiris, namely the sacrum bone, which on account of its proximity to the sperm bag, was regarded as the most important member of his body."

## CONCLUSION

The term sacrum has an interesting derivation although its true etiology is enigmatic. It has been important to many different cultures for perhaps, many different reasons. Regardless of its original meaning, the term sacrum continues to have a near mystical status in many ancient languages and cultures.

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