

רקה או מפרקת?

אבנר רמו

In the Book of Samuel we read about Eli, the ninety-eight year old priest of the temple of God in Shiloh. Eli usually sat upon his seat by the door-post of the temple, in particular when his heart trembled for the ark of God that was taken to the battlefield.

When the messenger came to Eli to give him the bad news:

ויהי כהזכירו את-ארון האלהים, ויפל מעל-הכסא אחרנית בעד יד השער ותשבר מפרקתו וימת

“And when he made mention of the ark of God, he fell from off his seat backward by the side of the gate, and his neck broke, and he died” (1 Sam 4:18).



Indeed falling backward and striking a hard surface with the skull, can cause, in particular in frail persons, the tearing of the spinal cord at the junction between the head and the neck, which will result in an instantaneous death.

Large cats kill by severing their prey's spine at the same location. This fact was already known to the Psalmist: **פן-יטרף כאריה נפשי; פרק, ואין מציל** - “Lest he tear my soul like a lion, rending it in pieces, while there is none to deliver” (Ps 7:3).

Although the Greek (and English) translators had no clue what the word **פרק** (*poreq*) means, it seems that the Psalmist himself was aware of the effect of the lion's bite on the game's **מפרקת** (*maphreqeth*) - the junction between the head and the neck.”

The vulnerability of this anatomical site was even known to the priests:

והביא את-אשמו אשר חטא שתי תרים או-שני בני-יונה ליהוה: אחד לחטאת ואחד לעלה.

והביא אתם אל-הכהן, והקריב את-אשר לחטאת ראשונה; ומלק את-ראשו ממול ערפו, ולא יבדיל.

“And he shall bring his forfeit for that wherein he had sinned, two turtle-doves, or two young pigeons, to *YHWH*: one for a sin-offering, and the other for a burnt-offering. And he shall bring them to the priest, who shall offer that which is for the sin-offering first, and pinch off its head close by its neck but shall not divide it asunder” (Lev 5:7-8).

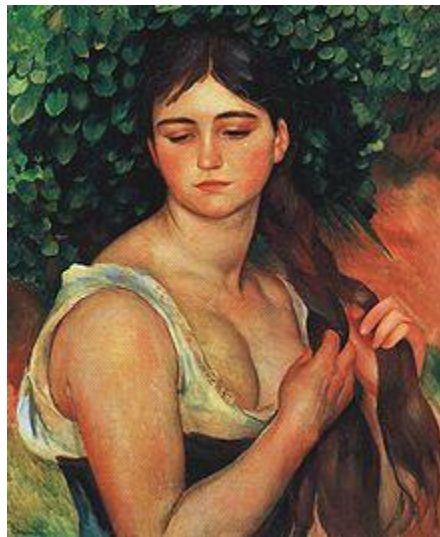
A similar outcome is achieved in execution by weight-bearing hanging.

In the Book of Canticles we read: **כפלה הרמון רקתך, מבעד לצמתך**, - “Your temples are like a pomegranate split open behind your veil” Can 6:7; see also: Can 4:3).

Because the English translator assumed that **צמתך** (*tsamathech*) is “your veil” he had to translate **רקתך** (*raqathech*) as “Your temples.” Yet if this was the case, we would expect to read here the word **רקתנך** (*raqothaich*), the assumed plural form of **רקתך** (*raqathech*).

The understanding of **רקתך** (*raqathech*) as “your temples” must have assumed that the Hebrew word for a “temple” is **רקה** (*raqah*), but such a word (or a plural form of such a word) is not found in the Hebrew Bible.

The Greek translator did not share the English understanding of: **רקתך** (*raqathech*) as “Your temples.” nor of: **צמתך** (*tsamathech*) as “your veil” and his translation of **צמתך** (*tsamathech*) in verse Is 47:2, refers to “hair.” Most scholars believe that this word in fact means “your braid.”



“The Braid” by Auguste Renoir (1887)

If indeed **צמתך** (*tsamathech*) means “your braid” then the word **רקתך** (*raqathech*) is not likely to mean “your temples” but would suggest that **רקתך** (*raqathech*) is a letter-deletion error of: **מפרקתך** (*maphraqathech*) - “the connection between your head and neck.”



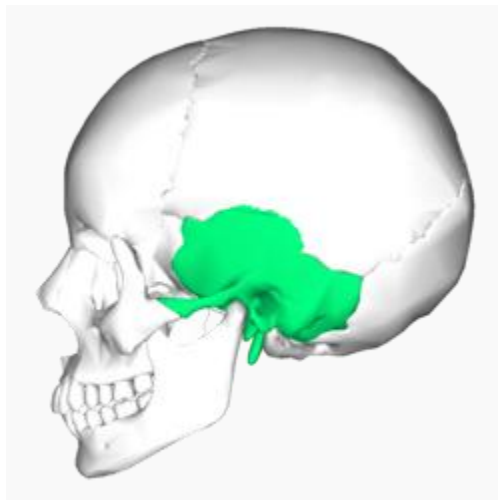
Limoges enamel plaque 1550-1575

In the Book of Judges we read about Jael's killing of Sisera:

ותקח יעל אשת-חבר את-יתד האהל ותשם את-המקבת בידה, ותבוא אליו בלאט, ותתקע את-היתד ברקתו, ותצנח בארץ; והוא-נרדם ויעף וימת.

“Then Jael Heber's wife took a tent-pin, and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him, and smote the pin into his temples, and it pierced through into the ground; for he was in a deep sleep; so he swooned and died” (Jud 4:21; see also: Jud 4:22; 5:26).

The Alexandrinus Greek translator wrote here “his jaw.”



The temporal bone is a very thick and hard structure located in the base and the side of the skull. For obtaining a quick homicide, it seems unlikely that one would choose to pierce the skull through this bone.

However, as indicated above, an easier slaying can be achieved by severing the spinal cord at the junction between the head and the neck. It is therefore suggested that in these verses of the Book of Judges the word **רקתו** (*raqatho*) is also a letter-deletion error of **מפרקתו** (*maphraqatho*) - “the connection between his head and neck.”

The vulnerability of this anatomical locus was well known to executioner who used the axe, the sword, and the Guillotine for severing the spinal cord to cause an immediate death even if the beheading was incomplete. However, it appears that the only executioner ever to use a tent-peg and a hammer was Jael.