

# Did Lavoisier Blink?

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## Question

The story has been circulating on the internet and among various colleagues that Lavoisier made an agreement with Lagrange, shortly before being guillotined, that he would blink his eyes if he retained consciousness after being beheaded, and that he was executed because of his revolutionary scientific views. Is there any truth to these stories?

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## Answer

Both stories are false. Though Lavoisier (figure 1) did incur the wrath of the notorious revolutionary, Jean-Paul Marat, through his criticism of Marat's rather amateurish forays into the theory of fire, his trial (figure 2) and death had nothing to do with his science, but were instead based on his involvement, along with his father-in-law, Jacques Paulze, in the notorious *Ferme Générale* or tax farm - a private corporation of financiers commissioned by the French government to collect tolls and taxes. Among other things, the members of the *Ferme* were accused of embezzling government funds and adulterating tobacco in order to increase



Figure 1. Antoine Laurent Lavoisier (1743-1794). Note the false implication that Lavoisier was beheaded with an axe and chopping block.



Figure 2. A 19th-century rendition of the trial of Lavoisier and the *Ferme Générale*.

their profits from the toll duty.

As for the story of the postmortem experiment with Lagrange, no mention is made of it in any of the reputable biographies of Lavoisier (1-3). On 8 May 1794 Lavoisier, his father-in-law, and most of the other members of the *Ferme* were taken to the *Place de la Revolution* where they were rapidly guillotined, their heads falling into a common sack and their torsos being tossed into a wagon. After the execution, their remains were carted away and buried in an unmarked mass grave. Lagrange and a small group of other scientists were present at the execution but were standing at a distance in one corner of the square, separated from

the guillotine by a line of gendarmes. To have actually performed the experiment, Lagrange would have had to of been at the base of the guillotine examining each head as it fell into the sack. This “urban myth” apparently started with a special on the guillotine that aired on the *Discovery Channel* several years ago - a source not exactly known for either its reliability or skepticism. Indeed, it even became the subject of a popular syndicated newspaper question-answer column (4).

The circumstances surrounding Lavoisier’s death and burial also cast doubt on the authenticity of the so-called death mask of Lavoisier that the Fisher Scientific Company once claimed to have owned (5).

#### Literature Cited

1. D. McKie, *Antoine Lavoisier: Scientist, Economist, Social Reformer*, Schulman: New York, NY, 1952.

2. F. Szabadváry, *Antoine Laurent Lavoisier*, University of Cincinnati: Cincinnati, OH, 1977.

3. A. Donovan, *Antoine Lavoisier: Science, Administration, and Revolution*, Blackwell: Oxford, 1993.

4. C. Adams, *Triumph of the Straight Dope*, Ballantine Books: New York, NY 1999, pp. 262-264.

5. Undated Fisher brochure describing its historical and art collections.

*Do you have a question about the historical origins of a symbol, name, concept or experimental procedure used in your teaching? Address them to Dr. William B. Jensen, Oesper Collections in the History of Chemistry, Department of Chemistry, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH 45221-0172 or e-mail them to [jensenwb@ucmail.uc.edu](mailto:jensenwb@ucmail.uc.edu)*