

Cinerary Urns and Incense Cups, Stanton Moor, Derbyshire.

BY JOHN WARD.

IN March or April, last year, a large cinerary urn, containing the usual *quantum* of burnt bones, and, in addition, a most interesting so-called incense cup, was found on Stanton Moor in the Peak, by some labourers in the process of quarrying. These vessels received rough usage from their hands, and might have been altogether lost or broken up were it not for the antiquarian zeal of a neighbouring farmer, Mr. Joseph Heathcote, who speedily rescued them, and in whose possession they now remain.

The urn was slightly below the surface, and without any protection, beyond that its mouth was covered with a thin piece of flagstone, such as abounds on the moor. No mound marked the spot, nor were there any traces of one. The urn (Fig. 1.) is a typical Bronze Age one, but is somewhat more straight-sided, or flower-pot shaped, than is usual in this part of the country, although the late Mr. Bateman ("Ten Years' Diggings") had precisely the same to say of several he found on this moor in 1852. It is fourteen inches high and ten inches across the mouth. It is made of clay of an even texture, smooth, well-shaped, devoid of ornamentation, of a dull yellow-red colour, and, as usual, is hand-moulded. It was more than half-full of burnt bones, but contained no other object of interest beyond the "incense cup," which rested upon the deposit.

This pretty little vase is of similar, but finer clay, and is

more carefully made and shaped; indeed, it is difficult to realize that it was not fashioned on the wheel. It is two inches high

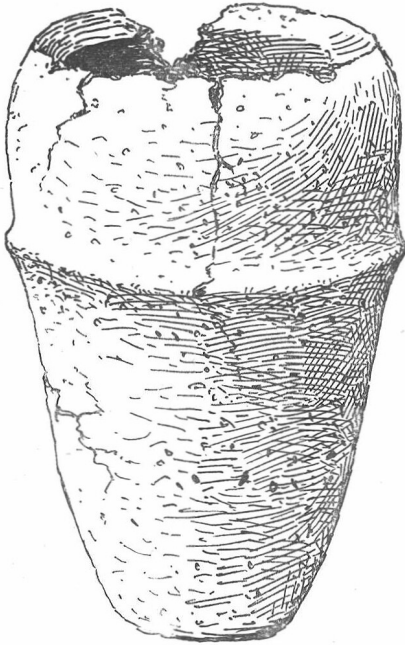


FIG. 1.

and two and three-quarters in diameter at the mouth. As may be observed in the accompanying sketch (Fig. 2), the sides



FIG. 2.

are vertical from the middle upwards, while below the vessel is bevelled off to a small flat bottom. The vertical portion is ornamented with incised lines disposed as a band of zig-zags, five lines abreast, and confined between two double horizontal lines. The intervening triangular spaces are perforated. It is very usual for these little vessels to be pierced with two or more small holes, evidently for suspension during some part of the funeral ceremony, but this is the only Derbyshire example, so far as I am aware, in which the perforations form part of the decorative scheme. But such open-sided vessels have occasionally been found in other parts of the country. One not unlike this Stanton example is figured on page 78 of Greenwell's "British Barrows." I may add that I have never before seen a piece of pre-historic pottery so truly and beautifully modelled.

Some weeks after the above, another urn and cup—"the old man's snuff-box," as the quarryman described it—were found close by the same spot. Unfortunately, these were completely broken up before Mr. Heathcote heard of the discovery. The cup was within the urn as before.

The open-sidedness of the "incense cup" is not without some bearing upon the vexed question of their use. The old view was that they were censers; but, as the Rev. Canon Greenwell urges, this "appears to imply a state of refinement to which we can scarcely consider the people who used them to have attained." Another view is that they were lamps. This is absurd; how could oil be kept in perforated and open-sided vessels? That they *may* have contained the ashes of some particular part of the body, as the heart, is more tenable. But still more so is the theory that they were used for the remains of infants. These cups are occasionally found with burnt bones in them; indeed, this *is said* to have been the case with our present example. It is by no means uncommon to find the skeleton of an infant or young child associated with that of a woman in the unburnt burials of the Bronze Age, indicating, probably, that rather than allow the tender offspring to lack a mother's care or be a burden to the tribe, it was slaughtered and buried with its

parent. The same custom was in vogue amongst the cremationists, for occasionally the burnt bones of adults and children are found intermixed. This would account for the comparative scarcity of "incense cups" compared with urns. But it does not explain why the former should be perforated, or open-sided, or generally of superior workmanship and different shape; and it is the exception that they should contain bones at all. The most feasible hypothesis is that they were chafing dishes. "The burning of the dead was certainly not practised merely to dispose of the body, but was a custom which had more or less of a religious character about it. The rite, doubtless, was gone through with some degree of form and solemn observance. The application of fire to the body, to a greater or less extent, appears to have been universal, and shows what a deep significance there was in it with reference to the dead. It is, therefore, not an unnatural supposition that the fire which was to consume the body should be brought to the pile with a certain amount of ceremony, and that it might have been taken there from the place where it had been kindled in accordance with some especial usage. Their size (*i.e.*, the "incense cups") is what we might expect to find in vessels made for the purpose of carrying a piece of ignited touchwood or other suitable material, and the holes and piercing are not ill-adapted for keeping it, by means of a draught, in a state of ignition."*

1787.—Major Rooke examined a small mound within a so-called "Druids' Circle," and found three cinerary urns, one containing an "incense cup," in a row. He also mentioned that such urns were frequently found on this moor.

1799.—Mr. White Watson of Bakewell, procured several urns from barrows here, one containing an "incense cup." He was informed that three were frequently found together.

Date (?).—Rev. Bach Thornhill opened several barrows; all the interments had undergone cremation, and in most cases were inurned.

* Greenwell.

1847.—Labourers cutting a drain found three urns, apparently together, the largest inverted over the burnt bones. Their ashly contents contained a bone and bronze pin, flint fragments, and a vitrified pebble.

Stanton Moor and the neighbouring one of Hartle are very rich in remains of antiquity and weird-looking natural assemblages of rocks that the older antiquaries imagined, or tried to imagine, to be “curious groups of Druidical monuments.” But it is more to our interest for the present to note that all the pre-historic interments hitherto found in this region, with one doubtful exception, have been of the cremation variety. A similar state of things obtains for Eyam Moor, and the district immediately north of it—Abney and Offerton Moors, and right away to the borders of Yorkshire. Elsewhere in the Peak and the adjacent parts of Staffordshire, burnt and unburnt interments are more or less intermixed, but everywhere the latter are in the majority. This certainly looks as though a cremation-practising people long held the upper valley of the Derwent and its neighbouring country. These burnt burials are by no means all inurned; on the contrary, they constitute only about thirty per cent., or some seventy, at least, instances. But in the Stanton and Eyam districts they have a much larger proportion.

The following burials of this class that have been found on Stanton Moor are taken from Bateman’s “Vestiges” and “Ten Years’ Diggings” :—

1852.—Mr. Bateman found within a small circle the remains of three urns and as many cups.

“Incense cups” are rarely associated in the Peak region with other than inurned interments, and with these they are only occasionally found. Amongst the seventy inurned interments just alluded to, only thirteen “incense cups” (including the two recently found on Stanton Moor) have been recorded; and of these, no less than *seven* have occurred on this moor, and *two* in the immediate neighbourhood. Is it not clear, then, that the ancient dwellers of Stanton were not only pronounced cremationists, but attached some mystic significance to the number

three,* and were more than their neighbours devoted to the ceremonial, whatever it may have been, in which the "incense cup" was used?

Another peculiarity is worth noticing: I do not know whether it has been observed elsewhere. In both the Stanton and the Eyam districts the cremation burials are associated with *small* barrows, and it is very doubtful whether a mound was always thrown up over the grave. Our present case is one to the point; and in the above examples of former "finds," there is no mention of mounds in two instances. On the other hand, small circles of earth and standing stones are, or rather were, extremely common. Many still remain, as the well-known "Nine Ladies" on Stanton Moor, the "Nine Stones" on Hartle Moor, and several large ones on Eyam and Offerton Moors; but more have been destroyed in recent times. Half a century ago, no less than thirteen could be counted on Eyam Moor and six on that of Stanton. The ring or circle, then, seems to have had an important place in the mysticism of these ancient cremationists.

Since the above went to the press, Mr. Heathcote has forwarded the second "incense cup." It is quite different, both in material and shape, from the first-mentioned, being cut out of a very fine sandstone, and somewhat gobular in shape; that is, so far as I can judge, for all the upper part and the lower portion of the bottom are broken away. It is about three inches in diameter. The outer surface is smoothed or polished, and it shows near the base two shallow, discontinued grooves, one on each side. The inner surface is scratched, indicating that the cavity was scraped out with some pointed instrument, perhaps a flint-flake. The grooves are clearly not decorative; they are suggestive of a cord. Stone vessels are very rarely found in this part of the country, although they are common in Ireland and the

* It is probable that the two urns recently found so near together formed part of a trio.

north of Scotland. The late Mr. Carrington found one in a barrow at Wetton, Staffordshire, in 1850. It was of similar shape to our present example, but a little larger, and had several grooves—apparently continuous—at different heights. It is quite possible that our example when perfect had other grooves.