



The Discovery of an Ancient Cemetery at Reading.

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Under the above heading a notice appears in the July number of this Journal, of 1890, of the discovery of relics, with human remains, in a small meadow alongside of the King's Road, and immediately opposite the "Jack-of-both-Sides" Inn. And reference is made to this as it is therein stated that some particulars concerning the remains would appear in a future issue of this publication. A paper on the discovery was read at the annual Congress of the British Archæological Association, at Oxford, in 1890; and as since then opportunities have been furnished to make fuller acquaintance with the character of the remains, the following is a condensed summary of the chief objects of interest brought to light during the excavations. As the discoveries were made during the digging out of foundations for buildings, which necessarily could not be retarded, observations could not be correctly made in the narrow trenches, and in consequence a few articles were probably overlooked or lost; but in the cellars the bodies could be seen extended, and particulars recorded. On the whole, some important relics were recovered, which are now arranged, together with a series of the crania, in the Reading Museum.

From May the first to June the twenty-first, 51 skeletons were uncovered, and they were found to occupy practically three levels—an upper at 2ft. 6in. in depth, a middle at from 3 to 4ft., and a lower at the depth of 6ft., on a floor of gravel. The material of the graveyard consisted of dark loam mixed with flint gravel. The

bodies occupying the lowest tier were oriented after the Christian fashion, or from west to east, while many of those occupying the upper levels were lying in various directions ; and it was with these chiefly that the relics were found. Stout nails were present in some of the deepest graves, but never more than three in a grave, implying that coffins had been used, or perhaps boards simply nailed together. On the whole, 30 were found, of a large coarse form, very like those used by the Romano-Britons. And in the upper graves, in two instances, what appeared to be grave-pins were present, suggesting that the bodies had been buried in wrappers.

The site of the cemetery has an elevation of about 35ft. above the Kennet, which lies northward of it at the distance of about 450yds. It is, in short, on the rise of the south wall of the Kennet valley in the general Thames valley ; and within memory was covered with hedges and cornfields. An old map of 1813, in "*Man's History of Reading*," renders the site as cultivated, on "Ort Farm," which was "Crown Land" ; while Speed's early map of 1610 represents the spot as waste with trees. On this map the Kennet is rendered with several side branches, so that the land alongside of it must have been swampy.

With regard to the graves containing relics, the first was on the south side of the enclosure ; and the body lay somewhat west and east, at the depth of 2ft. 6in. Underneath the left shoulder some fragments of metal, which proved to be pewter, were found, which when re-adjusted formed a rude coffin-plate. The plate was pierced with two minute holes for fixing probably to a piece of board, for there were no signs of a coffin. But the most interesting and significant items in association with this presumably Christian interment were three crosses of the Greek form cut on the upper edge of the plate, of which the central one only was perfect, the other two, although still distinct, being somewhat obliterated by the fracture of the metal. The crosses were merely linear, each line cut apparently with a single stroke of the graving tool, and retain much of their original sharpness.

On the north of interment one, at the distance of 12ft., was found a female at the depth of 2ft. 6in., in close contiguity to whom, on the left side, was the upper stone of a small quern or mealing stone, with a hole at the top for a handle. Its dimensions were : diameter 4in., depth 2½in. A peculiarity of the interment was the great age of the owner of this homely relic, as evidenced by the character of the bones and skull. There was not a tooth in either of the jaws,

and that they had been lost during life was shown by the *alveoli* or sockets, which were all closed.

On the left of this aged female, at the depth of 3ft., the workmen came on the skeleton of a male of about middle age, at whose side was a small pewter chalice, or rather perhaps, from the shallowness of its bowl, a tazza without handles. It was crushed, but it has since been restored ; and in the grave it had evidently been placed on the hand as several finger digits were found underneath it. The moulding of the vessel is extremely rude, in common with all the other relics, and being of pewter evidences both the poverty of the art and the monetary poverty of the period to which it belonged.

At about 6ft. farther north, at the depth of 3ft. 6in., a quadrangular mass composed of rude tiles attracted attention, and was found to be a tomb. Its length was 6ft., depth 3ft., and width 18in. The tiles were impacted in mortar with their short axes towards the interior. The chest was filled with earth ; but some clayey material had been moulded at the west end, apparently for the reception of a human head. The contents of the tomb were found to be some finger bones and a circular bronze brooch-buckle of Saxon type, which were taken from the centre. The buckle was coarsely wrought, and the loop of the pin was penannular or beaked. A piece of wrought circular tile was found in the chest. As the tomb had no cover, and from the absence of human remains, it might have been previously rifled.

The next discovery, at a somewhat greater depth, was associated with a male interment. It also was of lead or pewter, but so greatly damaged from long contact with the earth that it was with difficulty restored. It proved to be a heavy cruciform pendant, at all events it was looped at the end for suspension. At the feet of this last body extended a female ; and at the distance of only 2ft, but in quite a different direction, had been placed another male ; and with it was found a broken pewter ornament which proved to be a neat cruciform fibula of quite Saxon character, and bearing a general resemblance to fibulæ found in the midland and south-eastern counties, in graves of the Angles.

At this part of the excavations the bodies were so impacted that it was difficult to determine to what remains two very remarkable discovered articles belonged. They were, however, lying so closely in contact with bones that there was no doubt of their having been deposited with bodies at the time of burial. These relics consisted of beautifully coloured glass, each of the dimensions of 2in. square,

made up of a central square of rich purple-blue, with a square of most delicately tinted gold glass on each side of the purple. The three layers were accurately adjusted and secured to each other. So rich was the character of the gold glass that some particles which had crumbled away bore the appearance of grains of metallic gold. What could be the intention in placing these singular objects with the dead it is difficult to conjecture, but it is probable they were intended for charms.

Grave seven yielded a remarkable pathological specimen with the body of a female lying north of the tile tomb, at the depth of 5ft. The right arm-bone (*Humerus*) was found encased at its centre in two half-circle plates of copper, which surrounded the arm and overlapped each other at their edges. The bone had been extensively diseased during life (*Necrosis*), and the adjacent tissues must have been in a state of ulceration; and these plates had evidently been applied as a protection to the arm, and to contain dressings. The remedial agent was found to be a small mass of leaves, which had most likely been used as a poultice. By the aid of a strong microscope the leaves were found to be those of ivy. Another object of interest which was present in this interment was a small silver earring of the penannular form, which was taken from beneath the head. A word with regard to the use of ivy, which I find was extolled by early writers. In Sloane MS. (No. 3,489) its name is spelt "Ivyne"; by the Anglo-Saxons it was called "Ifig." In *Saxon Leechdoms*, a very early medical book, it was used for dropsy. Both Pliny and Dioscorides praise it as a drink for jaundice, &c., in red wine. Indeed, it was employed in various ways down to, and at the time of Queen Elizabeth, inasmuch as we find Gerard, in his *Herball* of 1633, writing of the leaves as good when "layd upon little ulcers made in the thighs, &c., which are called issues." And Parkinson, in his *Theater of Plantæ*, 1640, speaks of the fresh leaves as useful when "laid upon issues wheresoever in the armes, legges, &c., to keep them open and to draw forth the humours." Here we have the true reading of the application found in the grave.

Several other graves yielded relics of no great import. In one lay part of some iron implement, which had been used during life. In a second an iron knife was present, and in removing the earth above an antique bone or ivory draughtsman was found, and a piece of fine sandstone, on which lines were scored as if for a talley. While a third, and these were all deeper graves, contained charcoal ashes, and fragments of Romano-British pottery, suggesting that a

burnt interment had been present, although perhaps not intentionally, with an extended one.

Digging on the north of the interments, a workman called attention to a piece of foundation wall of coarse flints and very coarse mortar, composed of sand, flint-grit and fragments of chalk—very like Romano-British mortar; and specimens are preserved in the Museum. The wall was traced in the ground, and through the cuttings for 50ft., from east to west, and it had a return of 10ft. at the east end, extending north. The width of the wall was 3ft.; but the return had been broken through on the north, as evidenced by the sink of the ground from gravel digging at this point.

In removing the top soil of the graveyard generally, miscellaneous articles were found in evidence of the presence of past races, from the Romano-Britons almost to the present day. The list enumerates pieces of flanged tiles, fragments of Romano-British pottery, a large piece of what appears to be a Saxon basin with a spout, crocks of painted mediæval ware, and down to the 16th century. A few sections of paving tiles were present, with inlaid *fleurs-de-lis*, of about the 14th century, also a whetstone, some scraps of iron tools, together with bones and teeth of the small Celtic ox (*Bos longifrons*).

As a short summary from the foregoing facts, it may be stated that we have here a cemetery of early date and of lengthened usage, as shewn by the character of the dead and its crowded condition. The absence of the military element, and the use of lead and pewter for ornaments and other articles imply a settled people with but little wealth. That it was a place of general interment is testified by the young, middle aged, and the very aged being found side by side. The deepest graves being oriented, and practically without relics, and the more superficial variously arranged and in many cases with secular objects, suggest difference of both period and of race; and the features of the dead appear to support this view. Those occupying the lowest tier were people of good stature, but their crania were more globular (*Brachycephalic*), and they had powerful jaws and high cheek-bones, characteristic of the Celtic race; while the crania of the upper levels were longer and broader, and generally more capacious. Space will not permit of detail, but from measurements taken in the Museum the older interments were found to correspond in average with the dimensions of the British skulls given in Davis's *Crania Britannica*; and as a rule the upper forms came closely to the indices of the Saxons as given by Davis.

This somewhat corresponds with the late Prof. Rolleston's researches at Frilford, where Christian Britons were found buried underneath pagan Teutons.* From the discoveries made of late years it is evident a Romano-British population occupied Reading and the surrounding districts. And there is no doubt that after Alfred's Danish wars the Saxons also became settlers wherever facilities in the shape of arable and pasture were favourable. These small communities must have had centres for the burial of their dead ; and we have seen that a small edifice of some kind, probably a small church, stood on the site of the cemetery. The orientation of the bodies is too general to admit of doubt but that the larger portion of the dead were interred with attention to Christian rites. In 742, Cuthbert, Archbishop of Canterbury, introduced the practice of burial in churchyards.† But pagan usages could only have been slowly relinquished ; indeed, they must have lingered indefinitely in places, inasmuch as in the time of Canute (1014) Mr. Thorpe states that laws were framed to forbid heathenism, and the practice of heathen rites.‡ It might, I think, be considered that we have here a Christian British cemetery, which was subsequently utilised by the Saxons at a time when the custom of placing pagan relics in the grave had not been wholly abandoned.

* Rolleston, Further researches in an Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Frilford, pp. 657-8. Scientific Papers and Addresses, Vol. II.

† Weever, Funeral Monuments, p. 8.

‡ Ancient Laws and Institutes, edited by Thorpe, p. 379, c. 3 and 5.

INTERESTING "FIND" AT THE READING MUNICIPAL BUILDINGS.—

While searching the vaults beneath the Municipal Buildings for suitable storage for utensils, in connection with the new Dairy School of the University Extension College at Reading, Mr. G. W. Webb (Chairman of the Survey Committee of the Corporation), discovered some very interesting property. In one of the vaults were two old oak chests, about 5ft. by 3½ft., and in one of them were found several dozens of heavy pewter dishes and platters, the largest dish being about 2½ft. in diameter ; and a number of pewter spoons. Some of the articles have been partially cleaned, and reveal inscriptions, coats of arms, &c., proving them to be the property of the Corporation ; and a careful inspection of the "plate marks" has led Mr. J. E. Sydenham (of Messrs. Bracher and Sydenham) to fix their date *circa* 1680. In another part of the buildings, Mr. Webb discovered no less than 19½ dozen of old "Sheffield plate" (silver rolled on iron) table spoons, all stamped with the borough arms, which Mr. Sydenham considers to be about 60 years old.