Proceedings of Societies

BERKSHIRE ARCHÆOLOGICAL SOCIETY.

The South Eastern Branch, founded towards the close of last year, now numbers over eighty members. Three meetings have been held at Finchampstead Place by invitation of Mr. and Mrs. Cope. On May 15th, Mr. Treacher, F.G.S., spoke on pre-historic Berkshire and illustrated his remarks by showing some palaeolithic flints found by him in the Thames Valley. It was a great disappointment to all that Mr. Shrubsole, F.G.S., who had promised to come, was unable to be present.

At the second meeting, on June 15th, the subject of Roman remains in Berkshire was chosen for consideration and briefly described by Mrs. Cope. Some very interesting Roman 'finds' from Wickham Bushes were shown by Mrs. Stapleton and also by Mr. Hewett from Long Wittenham.

The most interesting lecture was on July 15th, for the speaker was Arthur Smith-Woodward, F.R.S., F.L.S., F.G.S., F.Z.S., LL.D., who, besides being Keeper of the Geological Department, British Museum (Natural History), South Kensington, is President of the Linnean Society.

Dr. Smith-Woodward is well-known for his writings on the famous Piltdown skull named by him Eanthropus Dawsoni after the late Mr. Charles Dawson, F.G.S., who first called his attention in 1912 to the fossil. For his scientific contributions to biological research the French Academy of Science conferred on Dr. Smith-Woodward the Cuvier Gold Medal, he being one of the four Englishmen to whom this medal has ever been awarded, while from the Royal Society he has been similarly honoured by being the recipient of one of their medals.

In his lecture at Finchampstead he described his recent visit to the South of France to see the work carried out by the French Government amongst the caves in the Dordogne. The members were exceedingly lucky to hear an account of the prehistoric drawings of the Dordogne Caves, especially as this

was the first occasion Dr. Smith-Woodward had spoken in public on the subject. Under these circumstances, I think, we are quite justified in recording this important speech :

'The Dordogne plateau, consisting of horizontal layers of limestone of different degrees of hardness, had been intersected in all directions by rivers, which had cut into deep valleys, with steep walls. The harder layer of limestone being at the top and the softer layers below, the weathering of the cliffs at the side of the valley had led to the rock overhanging. There were thus miles of natural shelters, which would afford especially convenient places for the life of the people, who had not yet learnt to build their own habitations. In prehistoric times the Dordogne was therefore one of the most thickly populated parts of France—the veritable Paris of the time. The remains of the food and the stone implements of this large community thus formed great accumulations along the edge of the valleys in the whole district. In the oldest layers were found the remains of Neanderthal man, with his characteristic flint implements. In the upper layers, which were still thicker, occurred the remains of a higher type of man, who not only had more skill in the working of flints, but also used bone and even began to ornament his implements with conventional designs and sculptures, or drawings of animals and man. Nearly all the remains of habitation were found in the exposed shelters themselves, although several of these shelters were extended into the rock as caves. Man had left very few traces of the habitation of these more secluded spots. But when the caves were penetrated to a considerable distance from the entrance, evidence of mans' handiwork became again conspicuous. In the contracted passages and the narrow fissures of the caves, the walls and roof were often covered with sketches and drawings of the same nature as those found on the bones buried in the refuse heaps of the shelters. These drawings were made on the surface of the rock, just as it was found, without any smoothing or preparation. They were adapted in many cases to the shape of the surface, and were remarkable for the extreme firmness of the lines and the accuracy and beauty of the curves. Some of the drawings were mere outline scratches, made with pieces of flint, others were paintings in

red and brown, made by using different kinds of ochre; these paintings were also often outlined with black, the pigment being either oxide of manganese or carbon. The colour was mixed with grease, which was still sometimes so well preserved that when the wall was damp the moisture oozed to the surface round the picture, which was left dry. The actual hollow pieces of stone, used both for lamps and for palettes, had occasionally been found in the places where the paintings occurred. None of the pictures represented scenes, but each drawing was a separate effort. Most of them represented the animals of the chase. Among these the commonest was the bison, which was especially interesting, because it was more closely similar to the species now living in North America than to that surviving in Europe. Drawings of the reindeer were also very numerous. Other deer and the horse and the wild boar also occurred. The rhinoceros is more rarely seen, but the mammoth, the characteristic elephant of the time, was frequently drawn. Like the original sketch of the mammoth made on its own ivory, found in one of the shelters half a century ago, the sketches on the walls of the caves showed not only the characteristic shape of the head and tusks, but also the long hair with which the animal was known to have been clothed to adapt it to the climate under which it lived. A few drawings of the bear, wolf and lioness had also been recognised; in addition, there seemed to be occasional attempts to represent the human figure, but although both sculptures and outline drawings on stone and bone in the rock shelters were more or less successful representations of the human figure, the sketches of man in the caves themselves were very poor. Much interest had been aroused in recent years by certain marks both on the rocks and on pebbles, which might perhaps be symbols connected with the dawn of writing. Other marks on certain pictures suggested artists' signatures. The interpretation of these various markings however was still very uncertain, and it was difficult to be sure in some cases whether the marks were intentional or whether they were the mere fragments of pictures that had been for the most part destroyed.

'The fact that all the artistic work in the caves was more or less remote from the entrance and in parts which could not be the actual dwelling-places of man, suggested that these

early attempts at art might have had a mystic meaning. As most of the drawings represented animals of the chase, the suggestion had been made that they were connected with a primitive kind of magic. Primeval man might have thought that by making representations of the animals he sought for food he would have greater success in their capture.

'At the present time the study both of the caves and the rock shelters in the Dordogne was in active progress. The Ministry of Fine Arts in Paris had appointed an eminent student of pre-history, Monsieur Peyrony, to take charge of the work. He not only arranged for the guardianship of the caves already explored, which were freely accessible to anyone who wished to see them; he also took part in exploration himself, and took care that others who came to investigate were competent for the work and made proper use of the facilities afforded them.

'Monsieur Peyrony had arranged a small museum in the ruins of the old chateau, actually in a rock shelter at Les Eyzies itself, where a typical series of the bones of animals and the works of man found in the district were arranged. There was also a small museum in the shelter of Laugerie Haute. In addition M. Peyrony had prepared guide-books, which made it easy for the stranger to find all the points of interest and reach them within a short time. It ought also to be mentioned that there is a fine collection of the antiquities of the whole district in the Périgord Museum at Périgueux, under the direction of M. L. Didon. Here there is a skeleton of one of the men belonging to the race who made these drawings, which is almost identical with the skeleton of a modern Esquimeau. This specimen is interesting, because many years ago Professor Boyd Dawkins pointed out the resemblance between the Palæolithic drawings of the Dordogne and the sketches made by the modern Esquimaux. He suggested that the early artist might have been related to the Esquimaux, and that when the reindeer retreated northwards in later times, the man of that period accompanied him.'