The Cult of the Dead in Prehistoric Times

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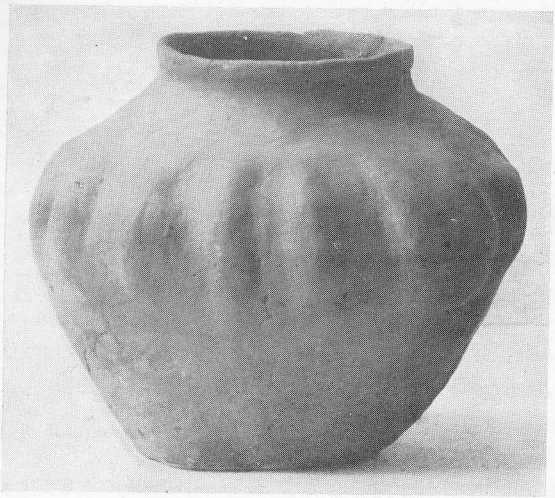
It is now established beyond all reasonable doubt that the brutish-looking fellows who inhabited the caves at Le Moustier, La Chapelle-aux-Saints, and La Ferrassie in France (and probably elsewhere, *e.g.*, Spy, Chancelade, and Laugerie Basse) in the middle of the Glacial period, not only made beautifully-worked flint tools, but also buried their dead with great care and ceremony, providing them with the things they would require in the next life. Thus at Le Moustier the skeleton of a youth about sixteen years of age was found carefully placed in the attitude of sleep, with the right forearm under the head. A bed of flint chips formed a sort of pillow under the skull, and close by the hand was a splendid implement. Other flints of the pattern characteristic of this period were discovered in the grave, together with the bones of the wild ox. Since the latter were charred and split, it is generally thought that they were the relics of a funeral feast. The ceremonial interment at La Chapelle-aux-Saints was similarly arranged. It would therefore seem that Neanderthal Man believed in a life after death, but he does not appear to have formulated any definite theories of the soul or of the land of the dead. To the primitive mind, doubtless, death constituted a mere continuation of the earthly life. Professor Macalister, in his recent *Text-Book of European Archæology* (Camb. 1921, p. 343) suggests that man's attention was first turned to the supernatural world when he gave up the free life of the Lower Palæolithic stages and sought the shelter of awe-inspiring caves; but the Mousterian interments were so circumstantially carried out as to suggest that they were founded on an already-established cult of the dead. It is therefore possible that the origin of the belief of a life after death belongs to a time prior to the Cave period.

Be this as it may, it was not until the Neolithic culture arose that the ceremonial disposal of the dead became a dominating factor in social and religious organization. In the Palæolithic age burial consisted in simple inhumation, *i.e.*, placing the body in a hole in the ground in a position of rest,



SAXON BURIAL URN FOUND IN READING.

The accompanying photograph is of a Saxon Burial Urn, containing cremated remains, found 18 inches from the surface in the grounds of a house that is being built for Mr. C. E. Chivers, in Southcote Lane, Reading. It is of a blackish-brown ware, and is ornamented with fifteen elongated bosses running around the urn at the shoulder. The height is $7\frac{1}{2}$ inches, the greatest width $8\frac{1}{2}$, whilst the opening at the lip is 4 inches.

Urns of this type are rare in this neighbourhood, in fact they are for the South of England, but they are found in numbers in the Yorkshire Cemeteries. They are also found in the Midlands and East Anglia. In these districts they are rarely used as cremation urns, but usually placed with unburnt burials. On the other hand, on the Continent they are often found with cremations. From this we might fairly well conclude that the burial is an early one. The type of urn is shown in 'The Arts of Early England,' Vol. IV, Pl. cxxxi, by Prof. Baldwin Brown. It is probably an isolated burial, for nothing further has been discovered, although the ground has been trenched for a considerable distance around the site.

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surrounded by implements ,and covering it with earth. It is possible, however, that the Mousterian interment at La Ferrassie, Dordogne, represents an early attempt at protecting the body by laying it beneath a sort of pavement of flat stones, supposed to have been intentionally laid down. But in any case we know that early in the Neolithic age the custom prevailed of lining the grave with flagstones set on edge, over which a larger stone was placed as a cover, thus forming the *cist.*

According to Reisner and Elliot Smith, the practice of lining graves with brickwork to support a roof of branches, logs, and, later, corbal vaults, arose in Egypt at the end of the Predynastic period as a result of the loose nature of the soil. On this hypothesis, it was the conditions peculiar to Egypt which started the evolution of the funerary structures on these lines.[1] As the grave increased in size and depth to accommodate the quantity of furniture in it, chambers were constructed to contain not only the corpse but also the pottery. It then became oblong, perhaps to facilitate the application of the mud-brick lining, instead of elliptical or circular as in the earliest period. When it was roofed with logs, and brick walls were built to retain the mass of earth placed upon the roof, these walls naturally conformed to the oblong form. Since such a structure presented a marked likeness to an Egyptian dwelling, it became crystallized, instead of assuming the natural circular form, as was the case with many Neolithic graves elsewhere. Therefore, according to this view, the *stone circle* originated in the Egyptian mud-brick *mastaba.*[2]

Of the prehistoric rough stone monuments (megaliths) which come under the category of 'stone circles,' Britain possesses more than any other country in Europe. Of these, Stonehenge and Avebury are amongst the most remarkable, the former being now under careful investigation by Lt.-Col. W. Hawley and other representatives of the Society of Antiquaries. That most of the smaller circles have been used as sepulchres has been proved by the discovery of urns, burnt bones, and skeletons, sometimes deposited in the centre and sometimes at the base of the standing stones, or elsewhere within the enclosure. It is probable, however, that at the larger cromlechs, such as Stone-

[1] Elliot Smith in *Essays and Studies to William Ridgeway* (Camb. 1913), pp. 401 *ff.*

[2] *Op. cit.*, pp. 504–509.

henge, Avebury and Penrith, more elaborate funerary rites were performed, connected with a solar cult comparable to the worship of Rä in Egypt (*cf.* p.), since there is strong reason to think that these monuments were dedicated to the sun.[3]

A simpler form of megalithic memorial of the dead is represented by the *dolmen.* This monument, consisting of a single slab of stone supported by several others arranged so as to enclose a chamber beneath it, is regarded by Professor Elliot Smith as a degraded form of the typical Egyptian tomb (*mastaba*) of the Pyramid age. Hidden in the *mastaba* somewhere between the chapel of offerings and the shaft leading to the burial chamber was a chamber called the *serdab,* surrounded and roofed with great slabs of stone, in which a statue of the deceased was placed. Here the spirit dwelt, and, in consequence, the chamber had to be made secure and durable to prevent the soul wandering at large to the discomfort of the survivors. When this type of grave was made where circumstances did not permit of burial shafts being cut in the rock or carved statues erected, the *serdab* was retained and increased in size and importance, becoming a chamber made of huge stones to house the soul. The reliefs and 'cup-markings' frequently found on dolmens represent the survival of the Egyptian statues and portraits of the deceased receiving offerings. Thus, on this hypothesis, the simplest type of dolmen represents a glorified *serdab* without a false door or *stela* (symbolic of the means of communication with the dead) before which offerings of food were made to the deceased in the eastern wall of the *mastaba.* The eastern side of the dolmen, however, is usually open to represent the door through which food offerings can be made.[4] If this view is correct, the dolmen must be regarded as the core of the Egyptian *mastaba*-tomb, greatly overgrown and stripped of all the essential parts. That the *serdab* should survive the rest of the tomb is not altogether surprising when it is remembered that it represented the dwelling of the spirit to which offerings could be made before the holed-stone.

For some time Elliot Smith has suggested that the distribution of megalithic monuments can be reduced to a single origin, Egypt being the cradle-land of the culture. From the Nile

[3] T. E. Peet, *Rough Stone Monuments* (Lond. 1912), p. 29.

[4] *83rd Report of Brit. Assoc.,* Sept. 1913 (Lond. 1914), pp. 646 *ff.*

valley it gradually spread, he thinks, along the coasts of the Mediterranean and Western Europe at the end of the Neolithic and beginning of the Bronze age, and also along the whole of the Asiatic littoral, from that of the Red Sea to South Arabia and Persia, and thence to India, Ceylon and Burma, penetrating later to Indo-Malaysia, Korea, Japan, and the Pacific Isles, if not beyond to America. Thus at the dawn of the age of metals the whole world was encircled by this peculiar culture.[5] Professor Elliot Smith has made out a strong case for a relation between the dolmens of Western Europe and the megalithic culture of Egypt, and he has shown that the practice of mummification accompanied the setting up of megaliths as the culture proceeded eastwards.[6] The uniformity in structure, and the date of erection of these monuments, together with the fact that they are confined to the coastlands, favour the view that they are not of independent origin.

That chambered tombs were frequently enclosed in an earth mound has been shown by the numerous examples which have been found in various stages of denudation. In the Neolithic period elongated mounds—'long barrows,' as they were termed —were prolific in Wiltshire, Dorsetshire, Somersetshire, and Gloucestershire. In the Yorkshire Wolds and elsewhere where large slabs are unprocurable, structures of megalithic type do not occur. When chambers are found within mounds they are of three types. A central gallery may enter the mound and lead to a chamber or chambers formed of large slabs set on edge. The roof is made by laying large slabs across the tops of the sides. When there is no central corridor, the chambers are so arranged as to open outwards on the edge of the mound. Where the chamber is not connected with the outside, the barrow is composed of a series of cists or small domens within the mound.

The burials in these barrows were inhumations, the body having been laid on the side in a contracted position, that is, with the knees drawn up towards the head, which is generally more or less bent forward. Out of 301 burials examined by Greenwell in the barrows of the Yorkshire Wolds, in only four cases was the corpse laid at full length.[7]

[5] *82nd British Assoc. Report* (Lond. 1913), pp. 607 *ff.*

[6] *The Migrations of Early Culture* (Manchester, 1915).

[7] *British Barrows* (Oxford, 1877), p. 22.

At the beginning of the Bronze age the custom of *cremation,* which appears to have originated in the East and to have spread westward, introduced various innovations on the sepulchral rites previously in vogue in Europe. The incinerated remains were carefully collected and usually placed in an urn before burial. When no urn was used, they were laid in a heap either in the grave, over which a mound was raised, or put in a hole in the earth or barrow already consecrated to the dead. Thus may be explained the occurrence of burnt and unburnt burials in the same mound, as at Acklam Wold, Yorkshire. In the Bronze age, therefore, the tendency was for chambered cairns, megaliths, and long barrows, in which the dolichocephalic (long headed) Neolithic folk were buried, to give place to the small stone-lined cists and round barrows of the brachycephals (round headed people) who practised cremation.

It must not be supposed, however, that inhumation and its associated customs disappeared entirely with the Neolithic period. On the contrary, the two methods of disposing of the dead continued to exist side by side in the Bronze age. This is illustrated by a sequence of prehistoric interments found at Largs, Ayrshire. A megalith known as the Haylee cairn contained multiple burials by inhumation comparable to the great chambered cairns of Wiltshire, etc., constructed by the dolichocephalic Neolithic people. The existence of other chambered cairns containing burials after cremation in the same geographical area shows that the custom of burial in megaliths survived when cremation was first introduced. The other Largs burial —the Haylee stone cist—is an example of the method of interment introduced into Britain by the tall brachycephalic race who brought in short cists and urns of the beaker and food-vessel types. A still later phase is indicated by the cremation cemetery at Largs. The structural details of the grave are now greatly simplified, the body being regarded merely as a mass of corrupt matter purified by fire, the calcined remains being buried in the ground, often without enclosure in an urn.[8] Huge monuments were no longer necessary, and although the older methods often survived, cremation seems to have predominated in the later Bronze and Early Iron age, continuing till the Christian era.

[8] *Archaeologia* lxii, pp. 249 *ff.*

At the famous 'urn-cemetery' of Hallstatt in the Noric Alps, belonging to the transition from the Bronze to the Early Iron age, burials by inhumation and incineration were indiscriminately disposed over the whole area. Out of the 993 tombs described in Baron Von Sacken's work, *Das Gräberfeld von Hallstatt,* 525 contained simple interments, 455 had incinerated remains, and in 13 the bodies had been partially burnt before interment. The ashes and charred bones were carefully collected and deposited in the natural soil, sometimes laid over with a flat stone, sometimes placed in a roughly burnt trough of clay. Only twice were they found in a bronze vase, and once in a clay urn. They were richer in furniture and articles of luxury—armour, toilet utensils, vases in bronze and iron, and gold, glass and clay objects—except as regards those of amber, than the burials after inhumation. A widespread group of Early Iron age 'urn-fields' containing cremated interments occur in Central and Northern Europe, the characteristic feature of the culture being the deposition of cinerary urns, in company with smaller associated vessels, in shallow pits in the flat surface of the ground. This is represented in the Aylesford cemetery, though in this case there is a greater tendency to place several cinerary urns in the same grave, and the 'accessory' vessels are not quite so plentiful.[9]

In Egypt the cult of the dead developed in another direction. From the third dynasty onwards, elaborate care was taken to preserve the body and its appurtenances intact exactly as they were placed in the grave. It is chiefly to this method of burial that we owe our very full and accurate knowledge of Ancient Egypt, a fact that is being illustrated to-day in the remarkable discovery recently made by Mr. Carter of the royal tomb of Tutankhamen. In the Predynastic period mummification was unknown, though it is possible that the rapid desiccation produced in bodies placed in graves scooped out in the hot, dry sand led to their being preserved in a state of uncorruption for an indefinite period. It is therefore probably more than a coincidence that the practice of mummification arose in the Nile valley at the beginning of the Dynastic, and subsequently became a characteristic of Egyptian funerary customs.[10]

[9] *Archaeologia* lii, p. 323.

[10] *Essays to W. Ridgeway,* p. 502.

The earliest tombstones, however—those of the first dynasty—do not reveal any traces of the rite. They show the *khu* bird between the *ka* arms, both of which are immaterial entities in the material body (*khat*). The ka was the spiritual double of the individual with parts and feelings like the body. It was born at the same time as the man, but persisted after death and lived in or about the tomb. It could live without the body, but the body could not live without the ka. Sometimes it is represented as the miniature duplicate of the person, following after the man, sometimes as half the size, sometimes as full size. Similarly, all inanimate things had their spiritual doubles, so that the ka-world was a duplicate of the corporeal world. Hence the elaborate system of offerings and objects of life which characterise Egyptian tombs.

From the XIIth dynasty onwards there arose a conception of the *ba* or disembodied soul figured as a human-headed bird. It left the body at death and flew around the tomb, a notion probably suggested by the white owls with round heads and very human expressions which frequent the tombs, flying noiselessly to and fro. This conception of the ghost as a separate entity coming into existence at death was incorporated in the system of mummification, and became associated with the mummy (*sahu*), just as the ka was connected with the body (khat), and said to go to Osiris, or to the company of Rä.

The Egyptian beliefs regarding the life beyond the grave were very incoherent and contradictory. Sometimes it was thought that the soul continued its existence in the tomb or about the cemetery, or wandered towards the West, unless it went to the realm of Osiris in the marshlands of the Delta. Later the heavenly region was moved to Byblos in Syria, and, finally, it became situated in the north-east of the sky, where the 'Milky Way' was the heavenly Nile. This realm was figured after the likeness of earth, and closely resembled the original delta even in its name, *Aalû*, meaning the plants that grow in swampy places. Here the main occupation was agriculture, and all the pleasant pursuits of life—hunting in the swamps of the Nile, dancing, games, gymnastics, etc.—were enjoyed. The harvest never failed, the Nile always rose to the right height, servants (buried with the king) were in abundance, and enemies were never victorious. In short, the life of

the dead in the fields of Aalû was an idealised earthly life. A less inspiring and quite distinct theology was connected with the journey of the soul to the west in association with Rà, the sun-god. With the help of magic the dead might succeed in sailing with Rà in his boat through the twelve gloomy divisions of the under-world, and in the morning rise with him again in the eastern sky.

In all these views the material body does not have any very significant part. It was the ka (and later the ba) that was fed in the grave, not the body; and it was an immaterial entity that travelled to the realms of Osiris, or made its way in the barque of Rä to the land of everlasting light. But as early as the third dynasty, if not before, the organized system of mummified and protective amulets arose. Henceforth the customs and beliefs associated with the preservation of the body characterised Egyptian funerary ritual, and it was around this that the complex and contradictory doctrines of later times centred.

Sometimes after 3,000 years the various elements which go to make up the complete man ((ka, ba and khu) were supposed to reanimate the mummy, or a spiritual body was thought to germinate in the corruptible body. It was in this (*sahu*) that man rose to life eternal with all his component parts, as the dead Osiris became the new living Osiris. Nevertheless, the mummy was always treated as if it were really the immortal part of man, and the tomb made as pleasant as possible. But the technical difficulties in the process of mummification led to the production of life-like images of the dead to which the ka was transferred. This probably constituted the first step towards the soul becoming a separate entity or ba (*i.e.*, the ghost) living a life distinct from the body. As the solar theology predominated, and the Osirian doctrine of the hereafter became celestialized, attention was directed more and more skywards, and means for conveying the mummy to its final home had to be devised.

In Egypt immortality was always associated with the physical body or its image, and therefore cremation was never adopted, but elsewhere, as for example in Europe, the body itself became the vehicle for getting the soul to the sky. In this way the practice of cremation probably developed out of the ritual of mummification.