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ON SOME BRITISH KISTVAENS (STONE COFFINS) UNDER THE PRESENT CHURCHYARD OF PYTCHLEY, NORTHAMPTONSHIRE.

By the Rev. Abner W. Brown, Vicar of Pytchley.

The village of Pytchley occupies a slight ridge about six miles northwards of the river Nen, (or Antona,) the frontier line adopted by Ostorius Scapula (c. A.D. 50) between the Romans and the Britons. It is near Wellingborough, a market town on the same side of the river, opposite to Irchester, or "Chesters," one of Ostorius Scapula's forts. The whole country of the Coritani on this their south frontier was then and long after a dense forest. Numerous Roman coins of all dates of the Christian era have been found in the parish of Pytchley, and many traces more or less distinct of human operations at early periods occur. The name also, still pronounced *Pite's-ley*, is significant: it is spelt in Domesday book *Pihtes-lea*, *Picts-lei*, and *Pites-lea*, and in old records *Pightsly;* and one cannot avoid remembering that the Welch or British name of the *Picti* was *Peithi* and *Fichti;* and their present and ancient Scottish name *Peghts*, *Peights*, and *Pihtes*.

Two ancient cemeteries occur in the parish, neither of which, so far as I can learn, has ever been publicly noticed; the one (apparently pagan) is in a field near a barrow, and about 350 yards northwards of the church and village; the other is under the present church and churchyard. The present paper is confined to the cemetery under the churchyard, and was in part read at the last October meeting of the Architectural Society of the Archdeaconry of Northampton.

The venerable church of Pytchley having become much dilapidated, has within the last few years been undergoing extensive repairs; in the course of which numerous *kistvaens*, or rough stone coffins, situated in general 6 or 8 feet below the present surface of the churchyard, have been brought to light. Unconnected as they are with the modern interments, which are seldom above 4 or 5 feet deep, I have ventured to consider the place that they occupy as an ancient cemetery, which but for the recent excavation of new and deeper foundations for some of the church walls, might have remained a second thousand years unknown.

I have called them *kistvaens:* this word has been much restricted in archæology to something nearly synonymous with cromlech, but has been also used to signify those coffins or rather tombs which consist of four stones, three being placed upright on their edges, and the fourth as a covering slab on the top. The poetry called Ossian's, says, in addressing a deceased warrior, "Four stones with their heads of moss are the only memorials of thee." When these stones are large and above ground, as in Kits Cotty House in Kent, they are not graves but tombs: sometimes however they are small, under cairns or heaps of stones, and barrows or mounds of earth, and these probably are the only true kistvaens among them; nor does any reason appear why the name should be confined, as it has sometimes been, to that class which are constructed of only four stones. Like cairns and barrows, the larger kind were designed for memorials or sepulchres,—to be seen; and it is of this kind only that the Gaelic poem speaks, for such only as were above ground would be moss grown: but the kistvaen is properly the receptacle for the body, and is not intended to be seen. Some northern writers have stated that the kistvaen of a man had three principal or upright stones, and that of a woman only two. May not this be part of an ancient northern custom, which in the church of Icolmkill was kept up nearly to the end of last century, of burying males and females in different parts of the churchyard?

The word *kist* (spelt *cist* and *cista*) is found in Welch, Irish, and Gaelic, in Suiogothic and Saxon, as well as in Latin, Greek, and other languages of the same great western family of mankind. Its meaning is nearly identical in all except the Greek; and whilst in general it is pronounced *kist*,

in Latin it is *cista*, and in our own language has been softened into *chest*, by a process similar to that of modern Italian, and observable in many other of our words; as in *kirch*, or *kirk*, which has become *church*. In the lowlands of Scotland it is still pronounced *kist*, and retains in common use its original meaning of a *burial chest*. Among old-fashioned families in the lowlands of Scotland, that part of a funeral which precedes the removal of the body from the house is a religious service, and is still called in remote districts the *kistening*, or *kisting*, and in other places the *chesting*, or the *coffining*.

But of old, the *kisting* took place in the grave-yard, and not in the house, for coffins, in our sense of them, were not used. The body, wrapped in the shroud or grave-clothes, but not enclosed in any coffin, was carried forth upon a *feretrum* or *bier*, as is described in the history of the son of the widow of Nain (Luke vii. 11—15); and when it had arrived at the cave or place of sepulture, it was there *kisted*, or *kistined*, that is, placed in a recess or receptacle hewn from the rock, or in a constructed *kistvaen*: and after the interment was completed, and "the dead was buried out of sight," then some monument which *was meant to be seen*, might be raised at will. Urn-burial, which presupposes burning the dead, probably only prevailed in Britain while the Romans ruled: it does not seem to have been customary here before their arrival, nor after the population had become Christian: instances have, it is said, been discovered where Saxon Christians in England must have been interred by burning; yet as a general rule, when a nation has become Christian, burning the dead has ceased. The kistvaens in Pytchley were therefore probably either prior to Roman dates, or subsequent to the prevailing of Christianity.

Kistvaen simply means *stone coffin*: *vaen* being, as it appears, merely the softened pronunciation of *maen* (stone), a Welch word which does not exist, in that form at least, in Irish or Gaelic: although the word *kistvaen* is in common use through Scotland to signify the rude receptacles made of several rough stones, which are there commonly found under cairns or heaps of loose stones. Those which (like Kits Cotty House in Kent) are above ground and in the nature of monuments, are in Scotland called *clach* or *clachan*, and not *kistvaens*. The Gaelic word used for ordinary coffins is *cobhain* (pronounced *coffain*), and it is usually restricted to a *wooden chest* or *ark*;

being probably identical with its kindred Greek term κοφινος, a hamper or basket, which is also the meaning of κιστη, the Greek form of *kist*. It is not improbable that when first a *loculus* (small place) or box began to be used for the dead, those first employed might be literally what the Greek words describe, wicker or wattled work: for such as were laboriously excavated from a single *trunk* of a tree, like that lately found at Gristhorpe, near Scarborough, must have been far too expensive for common use.

Fosbroke (Encyc. 776, 777.) states that Pausanias considers *kistvaens* as of Cyclopean origin, and that they occur in Greece, and even in Palestine, of *four* uprights and *one* top slab. Our own medieval stone coffins are of a kind essentially distinct from what has obtained the name of *kistvaen*. They are *coffins* made of stone and afterwards removed to the grave; and from the Archæological Journal, vol. i. page 190, it appears that interments in such stone coffins took place in Le Maine so late as the 17th century.

But to recur to the subject which these observations are designed to illustrate. It was well remarked, some years since, by an anonymous writer, in a periodical, that we know little of the usual modes of burial among our countrymen in days of old, for barrows, cairns, and cromlechs, must have been far too expensive to have been within the reach of any but the wealthy or noble. I have never seen this difficulty fairly met; but possibly, what I have now undertaken to communicate may have some bearing on the subject.

The church of Pytchley, like many more in this county, consists of architecture of almost every date and style, engrafted upon an early Norman building. One cylindrical pillar, having its height and circumference nearly equal, remains in the north side of the nave, with a very rudely, though elaborately carved capital, of the first part of the 12th century, and standing between two semicircular arches, to which the pointed Early English arches that complete the row are awkwardly jointed. As this pillar, which had evidently been often repaired, was in so mouldering a condition that it might probably have caused serious injury to the whole fabric, we strongly propped up the arches and capitals springing from it, and took it down even to its foundation, (two feet below the pavement,) and excavating until we reached the solid rock, we succeeded in rebuilding a new shaft,

and replacing, without aceident, the superincumbent capitals and arches, &c., upon this rebuilt shaft. But the operation had brought to light the startling fact that the original Norman builders of the pillar had laid their foundation in ignorance of a hollow kistvaen or coffin of numerous rough slabs, directly below, and at an interval of perhaps a foot of soil, which having only partially sunk in at the thorax from the weight placed upon it was by no means solid.

Pytchley church belonged, even before the Conquest, to the abbey of Peterborough; and it appears probable that the Norman edifice, of which this pillar was part, was erected during the great church building era of that monastery, while Martin, Waterville, and Benedict were successively abbots, viz., from A.D. 1133 to A.D. 1194. The existence of these kistvaens, therefore, was not then even traditionally known, and consequently they are not later than Saxon times.

We had also to rebuild the east wall of this north aisle, and in doing so we discovered that the modern window was once a magnificently Decorated one, which had been defaced by some Goths of the last century, and that this Decorated window had itself superseded two beautiful splayed lanceolate windows of Early English style: and again that the stones of these last had previously formed part of a circular window with Norman work nearly in the same part; and out of the wall we saved a curious and beautiful Norman piscina, the carving of which corresponds with the Norman capital already mentioned. The wall had formed part of the original Norman church, but had required continual repair or rebuilding; the cause of which, on sinking the new foundation down to the rock, we found to consist in three or four kistvaens, across which the Norman builders had laid their original foundation at an interval of two feet of soil, evidently unconscious that they were building on an unsound basis. But besides this corroboration of such history as the Norman pillar had already told us, we met with another significant fact: below the foundation, though above the level of the kistvaens, there were common graves; in one of which was the skeleton of a beheaded person lying at full length, the head placed upon the breast, one of the neck bones having apparently been divided. This would indicate a long period to have elapsed between the use of the *kistvaens* and the erection of the Norman building, during which the locality had been used by the villagers as a burial ground, in

ignorance of the tier of kistvaen interments below: and used so long that the Norman masons found the soil sufficiently solid to build upon, even above the second era of graves. These graves of the upper tier, which had already become solid within a century or less from the Conquest, must in a Saxon, or perhaps a British village, have been Saxon. And as when they were dug, the still deeper kistvaens were unknown or forgotten, and belonged to a mode of sepulture then passed away, we are thrown back upon the times before the foundation of the kingdom of Mercia—thrown back upon the Romanized British period for their date.

In rebuilding the Decorated chancel-arch, which had evidently been rebuilt in a bad style more than once before, and of which the north capital had sunk seven inches below the level of its south companion, we found the cause of its sinking was a kistvaen of a person about twelve years old, nearly two feet below the foundation. In underpinning various parts of the church walls which were leaning, numerous instances appeared in which the walls had been built across or along the kistvaens according to their position; or where from any cause the foundation had been unusually deep, a kistvaen had been sometimes cut through and part left untouched. In all instances, the kistvaens had evidently been unknown or unnoticed by the Norman masons; and yet the churchyard had been well filled at the time: for holes were found filled with large accumulations of crumbling bones, apparently made by the sides of the Norman foundations and coeval with them.

Like many other country churches it had a coating of green mould or moss for five or six feet up the walls inside, and in winter and rainy weather the water soaked in from the outside and stood in pools in the remote corners of the church floor. Possibly this constant wet may have assisted to preserve the ancient bones from entire decay. The enormous accumulations of soil outside of the walls have now been removed down to the level of the floor: and a drain (in some places nine feet deep) has been carried across the churchyard, and has effectually dried the church. But these removals and drains, narrow as they were made for the sake of avoiding graves, have sufficed to disclose numerous kistvaens; in general so deep that the deepest modern graves were some inches, and ordinary graves two or three feet above them. Ancient

foundations also were found, of which all trace had disappeared from the surface, and which modern graves had cut through, but which had been originally laid in ignorance of the kistvaens. The whole churchyard had evidently been a populous burial-ground in the days of kistvaen interment[a]: for small as the aggregate space was which we had altogether opened, twenty kistvaens at least were disclosed. We found also in the south-east corner that a narrow pathway, paved with round pebbles about the size of large apples, had crossed the churchyard about six feet below the present surface, leading from what was the ancient highway, towards the place where the chancel-arch now stands. In other places, less distinct lines, which the labourers called gravelled walks, presented themselves at the like depth, passing under the present nave. Every thing combined to prove that a cemetery, arranged with care and kept with neatness, had occupied the present churchyard so long before the Norman Conquest, that the existence of its kistvaens and its paved paths was unknown to the Norman builders.

Most of the kistvaens which we discovered were of course necessarily removed or mutilated in our endeavours to save the sacred edifice, though wherever it was possible we replaced the bones of the removed part in the part which was allowed to remain. Two however were nearly saved, one by throwing a slight arch over it, and the other by turning the course of the drain. This last, though by no means the best, or that which I should have selected for preservation, has been marked and guarded by a low sunk wall, and covered with heavy slabs, so as to be hereafter accessible without great labour, and I hope that no future churchwarden will sweep it away for the sake of the slabs.

It is a hollow, 5 feet 11 inches long, and about 10 inches deep, rudely excavated in the coarse and friable yellow limestone gault, or kale, (as it is here called,) which lies immediately over the limestone rock. The excavation is somewhat in the shape of a human body, rounded at the head, swelling at the shoulders to 13 inches, and at the elbows to 17, and contracting again to a few inches at the toes. Its sides are not upright, but incline to one another as they descend, the

[a] It had probably been the cemetery of a large district; at Mont Majour near Arles were graves excavated in the rock, which at present have no covering slabs remaining.

upper part being 13 inches wide where the lower part is only 6, and these sides are formed of the kale, except where it was not firm enough, and there they are made of rough thin stones, varying from 8 to 15 inches long, set edgewise at the general slope, and standing a little above the sides, small rough stones being laid flat along the top of those parts where the kale only is the side, in order to bring the whole to a level. Across the opening were laid five or six rough slabs of common stone to form a covering, some of which had broken in by the superincumbent weight.

Such is the general outline of the one preserved, but others were more correctly and beautifully accommodated to the shape of the body, and where the kale was firm, excavated clean and exact, without any upright stones, and having merely the large covering slabs. Some had no excavation in the kale, but were made of rough thin stones set edgewise, so much inclined as to touch at the bottom those which formed the other side, and correspondingly wide at top, each end being formed of a single transverse stone set edgewise. Some, and those such as were nearest the surface, had no covering slabs, but merely edging stones. The varying dip of the kale stratum would in some instances account for these differences, both as to depth and construction, but they evidently depended also on some other causes; and it was difficult not to believe that there existed something like a chronological series among the kistvaens, from the rudest form of rough stones, to the neatest and most finished excavation, and thence onwards to the time when the covering slabs were dispensed with, and the use of kistvaens was passing away. The cemetery had I think been very long in use.

In all the kistvaens the following points uniformly presented themselves to our notice. 1. The skeletons were lying east and west, or nearly so; the feet being to the east, as is usual in our own times. 2. They were lying on their right sides, the left shoulder and leg being considerably higher than the others; which explains why the coffins are so narrow, and especially at the bottom: the faces were thus looking at once towards the east and towards the south. 3. The arms were crossed in a peculiar way; the right arm across the breast, with its hand touching the left shoulder; and the left arm straight across, so that its hand touched the right elbow. 4. The legs were not crossed, but the feet merely touched each other.

In our various excavations many Norman coins were found, though always near the surface: one of Henry III. was the earliest. A few small, much defaced, Roman copper coins, apparently only of late and debased coinages, were turned up in the churchyard, though many, and some extremely beautiful, of all periods, (even prior to Claudius,) have been found in the fields of the parish. Fragments of coarse unglazed British and also of Roman pottery, have occurred in the deeper churchyard excavations. Close to, or within one kistvaen, was found a rude amethyst, or pink crystal oblong eardrop, about an inch long; it is perforated lengthwise, but is without metal. The kistvaen under the Norman pillar contained apparently the skeleton of a lady with an infant in her arms: about that kistvaen I myself picked up small pieces of charcoal, which no doubt had some connection with the interment, and a small fragment of peculiar pottery studded with raised dots, like some found I think on Barham downs. From another was taken a large tusk of a wild boar, much worn by whetting; it is above the average size of those now common in Germany, being a full inch broad, and of a curve which would be six inches in diameter. Probably this was the kistvaen of some celebrated hunter, and contained the treasured spoils of some huge Erymanthian boar which he had slain in the dense Coritanian forest that crossed the county of Northampton, from Whittlebury to Marham and Peterborough. But we looked in vain for traces of armour, either offensive or defensive; it was the cemetery of a peaceful nation. We saw no traces of clothing, no haircloth, such as occurs in the stone coffins properly so called, nor was there the discoloured dust of any wooden coffin or interior receptacle for the bodies. Neither did we find any thing from which to gather the existence or not of a place of worship within the cemetery; a point which would have much narrowed the difficulties of the subject.

The skeleton which we have endeavoured to preserve is that of a muscular well-proportioned young man, probably 5 feet 9 inches high; the teeth are fine, the wisdom teeth scarcely developed. The facial line in some of the sculls appeared to be very fine. In the present instance there is a deep wound over the left eye, but whether it existed before death, or was caused by the falling in of the slab covering, is not clear. A contused wound on the back of the scull is however evident,

and it almost seems that osseous granulations had been formed since it occurred. This scull exhibits the peculiar lengthy form, the prominent and high cheek bones, and the remarkable narrowness of forehead, which characterize the Celtic races, and distinguish theirs from the rounder, broader sculls, and more upright facial line of the Teutonic tribes. The same kistvaen was casually opened in 1837, in a prior unsuccessful attempt to drain, and the curious position, &c., having been noted, it was closed up: the bones have crumbled greatly since that date, and the sides are mouldering away.

But who were the occupants of these kistvaens? Here is a very ancient cemetery, densely filled, for it must be remembered that we can only have touched upon a very small proportion of the kistvaens which exist, belonging to a small village, which gives no indications of having ever been other than a village, larger or smaller. The mode of interment, though long since passed away, is simple, decent, and unexpensive; and being therefore within the reach of the poorest, yet not unbecoming the greatest, was almost certainly in its day the national mode. If so, the subject is one of great historical interest, and the mode of interment one which will doubtless be found to have been practised in many other places on a similarly large scale. Possibly others have already described it, but I have never happened to meet with any description of it.

The position of bodies and graves has varied with different nations, but I have not met with any satisfactory discussion of the whole question. The Greeks made the bodies, it is said, face the east; the Jews turned the face to Jerusalem; and most of the pagans laid the corpse so as to be towards the midday sun, the primary object of their veneration. The Christians have always buried with the face towards the rising sun, in token of their hope of resurrection at the last day; a primitive and significant Christian habit which one regrets to see occasionally disregarded, by the bodies being laid, like those of suicides, in all directions. In the tenants of the Pytchley kistvaens, the crossing of the arms, together with the east and west position, make it difficult to question their being Christians. Would it be too bold a supposition to imagine that they may have been of a date when the prior pagan habit of placing the corpse to face the midday sun had not yet been forgotten, and was retained as an addition to the usual Chris-

tian customs, by laying the body on its right side, yet with the feet to the east?

Such a date would chronologically correspond with all the other notes which have occurred in the examination. There was no doubling-up of the body; no Druidical remains. Could they be anterior to Roman dates? There are no traces of urns or of cremation—were they of pagan Romanized times? The position is prima-facie Christian; the scull prima-facie Celtic: the historical and local evidences seem to prove that they were earlier than the Saxon population, and it is impossible that they can be subsequent to the Norman conquest. Can these kistvaens belong to aught but to the Christians of Romanized Britain before the Saxon invasion?

If this were an ancient Christian cemetery, it indicates the existence of a Christian church at Pytchley[b], before, and during the Saxon invasion; as I strongly suspect was also the case at Collingtree, Brixworth, Earl's Barton, Cransley, Lamport, and many other Northamptonshire villages. We are thus carried back to an obscure but most important period in the history of the Church of England, and one which we often overlook; the time when the relics of the national Church, humbled and shattered as it had been by pagan foes, still refused to submit to any other than its own ancient hierarchy, and held earnest and fruitless controversies with Augustine and his immediate successors; one of which, an important interview with the Scottish Dagan, must, if some northern historians may be relied upon, have occurred in the immediate vicinity of Northampton.

[b] Many, if not all, ancient cemeteries were merely cemeteries, and not around churches, as in later times; Pytchley church therefore did not then occupy its present site.