

ANCIENT BURIAL-PLACES : A SUGGESTION.

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I.

The earliest graves known to us are interments made in caves belonging to the Palaeolithic age. There is little doubt from the evidence that these primitive people must have been buried with funeral rites, so that even at this early period there is reason to believe that people had religious beliefs of some kind. The earliest remains of actual tombs belong to a much later time and are ascribed to the Neolithic period. These are familiar under the names of dolmen, barrow and tumulus. It is generally believed that these were constructed during the latter half of the Neolithic age, and similar structures were still being made after the introduction of bronze. These tombs vary to a certain amount in structure: attempts have been made to arrange them in chronological order, according to these variations, but there is doubt as to which is the older form. It is possible that different kinds of tombs may have been constructed and used during the same period. Results obtained from investigations on the continent are contradictory, and more research is necessary before a definite idea can be arrived at. In the meantime the tombs can be roughly classified into four groups.

In the first group is the dolmen. This consists of a large slab of stone poised on three or more upright stones to form the roof of a chamber in which a burial could be made. The chamber varied in size and was usually just high enough for a man to stand upright in. The spaces between the upright stones were filled in with smaller stones which completed the walls of the chamber. The dolmen was then covered by a large mound of earth (or stones) which was piled up over it so as completely to conceal the dolmen. In many cases the mound has been preserved to this day, whilst in others, time and weather

have caused it to be washed away, leaving the dolmen fully exposed.

To the second group belong the passage-graves. These are similar to the dolmen, but, in addition, the chamber communicates with a long passage constructed of slabs of stone in the same way. The whole of this structure was also concealed under a great mound of earth, the entrance to the passage alone being exposed.

To the third group belong a small variety of passage-graves which show no signs of having been roofed with stones. The upright stones are small, sometimes only two or three feet in height, but they are arranged in the same plan as the passage-graves, although the passage is shorter. It is possible that boughs and timber may have been used as roofing material to support the covering of earth.

To the fourth group belong the cists. In these the chamber is smaller and resembles a large shallow box, nevertheless it would have been large enough for the reception of several bodies, although it is almost invariably the rule that only one burial is found in a cist. There is no trace of any passage or outlet. Some of these cists are covered by a mound, others have only a shallow covering of earth.

Within these four groups are several subdivisions, differing in detail of construction.

Characteristic of these tombs are the mounds of earth, called barrows or tumuli, under which they are hidden. Even the smallest of these mounds are several yards in diameter : others are quite large. The mound at New Grange is 70 feet high with a diameter of 315 feet at its base. All mounds have a definite ground-plan and shape, so that they arrest the eye and make all these tombs look, outwardly, very much alike. During the succeeding Bronze age, mounds were still being raised over graves, but at that time dolmens and passage-graves had begun to drop out of fashion, and characteristic Bronze-age barrows contain no traces of a stone burial-chamber. Funeral rites also appear to have changed with the introduction of bronze, and cremations became more numerous. This may have been due to a change in religious belief. The outward appearance of the mounds, however, was

not so very different and shows how an old idea, its origin perhaps already obscure, can go hand-in-hand with a new belief or a new culture.

The most interesting of these tombs is the passage-grave. It has been a matter for conjecture why these tombs came to be built in this way with a long passage. The labour of building such a structure must have been great and the artificial mound was often so large as to be a landmark for miles. The purpose of this passage has been difficult to explain. It has been suggested that passage-graves were built in imitation of Stone-age dwellings and represent houses of the dead. But no remains of Stone-age dwellings built in this form have been found, and although huts with passages are not unknown both in early and modern times, it still appears strange that tombs should have been built like that, in many cases the passage attaining a length hardly convenient for a house. At New Grange the passage is 63 feet long and leads into an unusually large chamber, 24 feet by 21 feet. Huts with passages, of whatever material built, give the impression, when viewed from the outside, of being a hut with a passage. The passage-graves, on the other hand, present to the eye just one great mound with no outward sign to indicate the position of the chambers or the length of the passage. In fact, the ground-plan of the actual mound has been designed with great care and accuracy, generally either oval or circular, and gives no hint of the structure within except the entrance to the passage. In many cases the entrance has been found blocked.

Another suggestion is that the passage-grave was made in imitation of the cave in which primitive man dwelt. This gives perhaps a better reason for the passage. At the same time it is difficult to imagine that a man who inhabited a cave should have thought of this laborious way of imitating one, especially as cave-dwellers would have little experience of building.

Neither explanation is altogether satisfactory. At first sight it might appear that the dolmens and passage-graves had been roughly put together because the stones are unworked and often look bulky. In reality, great skill must have been used in their construction. Each rough upright stone was so well placed that the heavy roofing-

stones, often unequally weighted, could be balanced upon them. That this was skilfully done is manifest when it is remembered that many of these stones have remained in position since the Neolithic age.

Examination of these tombs has revealed that many of them contain traces of burials. Skeletons have been found, together with implements and pottery. Sometimes the remains of several skeletons have been found in one tomb. There seems to have been no fixed rule as to the attitude or position of these skeletons. Some have been found in a sitting position, others kneeling, others recumbent with the knees slightly flexed, or in a crouching position, and so on. Small earthenware vessels and offerings have been found placed near the dead, as well as ornaments and stone implements, but there is no fixed rule either as regards these. The pottery belongs to different stages of culture. These differences indicate changes due either to fashion, outside influences or development of ideas during a succession of generations, but they are only changes in detail and, although important in themselves, do not appear to have interfered with the fundamental idea which inspired the construction of the tombs.

It is admitted that the people of the Neolithic age had definite religious beliefs, and buried their dead with funeral rites. It can therefore be assumed that the builders of dolmens and passage-graves believed in a life to come, and that these tombs were constructed because people believed that this form of burial would ensure the attainment of a life beyond the grave.

Some very simple idea must have been at the bottom of this belief. Dolmen and passage-graves are found in most parts of the world. They are widely distributed in Europe and parts of Asia. They all bear such close resemblance to each other that one is forced to the conclusion that they express a common idea in regard to the burial of the dead, some root-idea which must have been common almost to the whole of mankind, and which persisted for a long period of time. It must have been an idea which appealed to people of different places and climates, living at a great distance from each other. It must therefore have been something readily understood and recognized

by the ordinary people of Neolithic culture. An idea that could only have been grasped by the more intelligent could never have taken such a hold on mankind.

It must not be overlooked that these tombs were being constructed during a long period of time. How long is not very certain. Some authorities suggest eight thousand years as the duration of the Neolithic period in England, terminating about 2000 B.C. The earliest dolmen has been dated at 4000 B.C. During so long a time, ideas and outlook must have changed considerably. Even if progress were slow at that period of the earth's history, there is evidence that it did take place. If, therefore, it be admitted that the construction of these tombs was the expression of a root-idea, it can hardly be expected that the expression of this idea would be entirely uniform. It would be more logical to assume that it underwent a series of changes, during which it had its rise, grew to its highest development and then degenerated.

The confusion of the evidence and our ignorance of the times makes the difficulties of trying to understand the meaning of the tombs at first appear overwhelming. At the same time it must be remembered that an idea which took such a hold on mankind must have had an origin so simple that people could not fail to grasp it, because it was within their experience. Let us therefore turn from the evidence of the tombs and try instead to put ourselves in the position of the tomb-builders, and search the hearts of the people who expressed themselves in this way.

II.

So little is actually known of the mental outlook of the Neolithic age that it is difficult to write about it without wandering into the realms of conjecture, but a good deal can be inferred from our knowledge of the culture of succeeding periods, for the beginnings of culture of historic times must be sought for in prehistoric ages.

In a period, perhaps uneventful, except for battles and raids, the most important events in the lives of people would have been the fundamental facts of existence. These would have been food, birth, marriage and death. The

first of these, food, was a necessity for bodily needs. The next two, birth and marriage, can be grouped under the word 'sex.' Sex must have played a very important part in the lives of Neolithic people. Traces of this have been handed down in the form of myths as well as in religions in which sex played a prominent part. It gave colour to the Neolithic imagination and greatly influenced the explanation of natural phenomena. Many things could have been accounted for satisfactorily in this way to a primitive mind, but one of the most important events in a man's experience could not have been explained by sex. This important event was the mystery of death and the escape of the spirit into the next world.

It has been stated above that there is little doubt that Neolithic man did believe in a life to come. The fact that people were buried with funeral rites leads to that conclusion. Certain people must have existed whose duty it was to take a leading part in funerals. It is impossible to guess at the exact status of such a person. He may have been a priest, the chief of a tribe or simply a teacher. Probably he was a man of local fame whose position was one of authority and in whose hands rested the religious learning of the district. Neither is it easy to decide whether he combined his knowledge of spiritual things with that of the material body. But since priests have been connected with the curing of diseases and the casting out of devils throughout historical times, as well as the fact that many taboos are founded on hygienic principles, it is likely that religious men of the Neolithic age preserved not only the spiritual knowledge, but also what medical and surgical knowledge was known empirically. The common people must have looked up to such a religious man for guidance in matters of religion and its problems. If anything had to be explained, the religious man would have to explain it, and he would have to do it in such a way that it would have been comprehensible to the common people. It must have been very difficult satisfactorily to explain anything that was outside people's experience. Death and the escape of the spirit into another, unseen world, would not have been easy to explain without resorting to an analogy of which people had knowledge. This entering upon a new life in a new world, might have

been likened to a process similar to that experienced when people came into this world. No one came into this world unless he is born. To enter the next world, therefore the spirit would have to be *re-born*.

In this way the idea of death would have become associated with one of the important events of sex, and this might have appealed strongly to the people of that period. There would have been little difficulty in understanding such an explanation. In imagination the spirit could be seen entering the unseen world very much as a child enters this one, strange and a little helpless at first until it had learnt to take its part in the new environment.

The problem of the actual re-birth itself must, in the course of time, have given rise to several questions. It had been noticed that certain conditions were necessary when any one was born into this world, conditions which were not apparent when any one died. To begin with, a child did not come into this world all at once. A period of time was known to elapse prior to birth whilst it grew and developed. How could this happen to a spirit? What was actually meant when it was said that the spirit was *re-born*? Added to this, every child had a mother. Who then, was the mother of the dead? Looked at from this point of view the problem may not at first have appeared simple, but a solution was not difficult to find. The religious man when pressed for an answer may have replied: 'The earth, under which men are buried, is the mother of the dead.'

The acceptance of such an explanation would have had an important influence on the construction of burial-places. The object of the tomb-builder would have been to make the tomb as much like the body of a mother as he was able. His object in raising so great a mound of earth over the grave must have been to suggest that the earth itself were pregnant.

The same idea seems to have been carried out in the internal arrangement of the passage-grave. Hidden beneath the mound were the burial-chamber and the passage, these perhaps representing the uterus and the vagina. In many instances the bodies of the dead were found placed in the graves in a crouching position, with the knees drawn up to the chin. This position is identical

with that of the foetus before birth, and is what one would expect to find in a tomb made to represent a mother. We often speak of 'mother earth' and say 'in the womb of the earth': expressions like this may have been in use since the Stone age. Mother Earth, perhaps originally looked upon as the mother of the dead, may have become, as time went on, to be regarded as a most important female deity.

In all the tombs, and it is here assumed that some means were taken to do so in the small passage-graves which lack roofing-stones, steps were taken to protect the dead from being injured or crushed by the weight of the earth above. Doubtless it was known that ante-natal injury might have fatal consequences or result in a difficult birth. This may have suggested the use of a cist or a chamber for the protection of the dead, because it was thought essential to the successful re-birth of the spirit.

This idea of re-birth may have been worked out still further. It is, therefore, possible that the belief was held that the body and the spirit—for at the time of death the two must have been supposed to be still inseparable—must remain for a certain fixed time in the tomb. This would represent a 'period of gestation,' and not until its expiration would the spirit have been supposed to be ready to make its escape from the body and pass down the passage and out of the tomb. In this connexion it is interesting to consider the offerings of food and weapons placed in the tombs beside the dead. These may have been meant for the use of the dead whilst the spirit still remained with the body in the tomb. Perhaps it is more probable that they were intended for use at the moment of re-birth, when the spirit, awakening from its long sleep, would need sustenance and weapons for the journey which still had to be made. Picking up these things, the spirit might be supposed to pass down the passage and so out to join the shades of his fathers.

If this 'period of gestation' actually took place, it is possible that the relatives of the dead person celebrated the occasion of the re-birth of the spirit with certain religious rites. This event may also have terminated the period of mourning for the dead. Later, when this period

was passed, and the spirit finally believed to have escaped from the body and the tomb, and to have been re-born into the next world, there would have been no objection to the removal of the bodily remains. The body, now that the spirit had left it, may have been considered of no further use. It would have been no sacrilege to remove it from the tomb and to put it on one side or to bury it elsewhere together with the offerings which had been placed by it. The spirit, for whose sake these things had been done, was no longer able to benefit by the things of this world. The tomb might now be prepared for a fresh burial.

In connexion with dolmen and passage-graves mention must be made of the menhirs or standing stones which are associated with the tombs. Sometimes a single menhir is found on the summit of a mound, or standing near to the entrance to a passage ; sometimes a ring of standing stones encircles the base of the mound and so on. Whatever their position, it is probable that menhirs, when found associated with a tomb, have the same significance. Ancient menhirs are found in most parts of the world. Various meanings have been attached to them. They have been described as boundary-stones, memorial-stones, stones of worship, tombstones and so on. At the present day stones are often put up, also for various reasons. It is evident, therefore, that not only one but several meanings must be sought if it is wished to understand the meaning of ancient menhirs. Nevertheless, it will probably be found that as we go back in time, the more ancient of the menhirs were put up because they embodied the same fundamental idea. One of the meanings ascribed to menhirs is that they are connected with the idea of fertility, and that they were put up in fields in order to ensure a good harvest. According to tradition, some of the menhirs are supposed to represent the phallus. If it is admitted that the earth was looked upon as the Mother and had come in time to represent an important female deity, it is not difficult to follow the reasoning of the man who put up such a stone in her honour. Viewed also in connexion with a tomb planned to represent Mother Earth, this gives the menhirs an added significance and meaning.

III.

It might be maintained that the anatomical knowledge of Neolithic man was so slight that he would have been incapable of making a tomb to represent a womb. But there is reason to believe that Neolithic man did have a certain amount of such knowledge. Some rude kind of anatomical knowledge may have been gained by savagery and mutilation in warfare. Tribes which made a practice of human sacrifices may have acquired still more. That even a slight knowledge of surgery had been acquired is evident since we find traces in historic times of operations which were performed with a flint knife only. But what may have played a more important part in the acquisition of such knowledge was man's natural curiosity in regard to matters of sex. This may have led to investigations which had sex-knowledge as their goal, and these would have been undertaken quite apart from any idea of acquiring surgical or anatomical knowledge, but simply as an investigation based on curiosity.

The dolmens, passage-graves and cists all vary in details of structure. In no single form are they a perfect design of Mother Earth, but each type has some point compatible with the idea. Different generations probably gave prominence to different details. This may have been due to different sects of the same religion existing side by side, each sect emphasizing a particular detail. As knowledge gradually increased, innovations may have been introduced into the religion which were repudiated by the more conservative; thus by some, prominence was given to the passage which in many cases is exaggerated in length. The total lack of a passage in dolmens and cists may have been due to ignorance and the incorrect supposition that the uterus and vagina were one organ, an error which might easily have been made. Again, in some passage-graves the passage is quite straight. In others there is a slight bend. The reason for this is not far to seek. The normal position of the uterus and vagina when viewed from the front is not in a straight line. The uterus inclines slightly towards the left side. It must have been this bend which the tomb-builder had in mind, or else it may have been an attempt to represent the

position of these organs as seen from the side. As far as the position of the dead is concerned, it seems that the crouching position is more prevalent in cists than in the other graves.

The passage-graves vary in detail more than any of the other three groups. The single-chambered passage-grave must have been the expression of the idea at its best. The more elaborate passage-graves are generally considered to be of later date. These were often constructed with several chambers, all opening out of the main passage. In some cases the single chamber has been divided into several recesses each of which served for a burial. The construction of these more elaborate tombs, may have been prompted by an increase in the population which necessitated more burial space. At the same time it looks as if a step had been taken away from the original idea in its pure form.