

## A ROMAN BURIAL AT YORK.

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I HAVE been directed by the Rev. Canon Raine of York to present to the Society a photograph of the back-hair of a young Roman lady, who, judging from a coin that was lying under her coffin, and the style of the coffin itself, probably lived about the time of Constantine. The hair is of an auburn colour. After being slightly twisted, it had been laid in a circular form on the back of her head, and secured in position by two jet pins of two or three inches long. The heads of the pins are neatly ornamented. I have here a small lock of the hair, which, however, was not connected with the main mass. When first discovered the hair was darker than it now is, in consequence probably of its being in a damp condition. The hair is that of a young lady of about fifteen years of age.

It is curious how the sight of a simple and inanimate object like this brings near far distant ages, and sets vividly before us scenes long past. Though fifteen or sixteen centuries have rolled away since this young lady breathed our air, we fancy we see her in the flush of her early youth, adorning her locks, and admiring the charms with which she was endowed. It seems so strange that she and the youths who sought her society should express their merry thoughts in the words which Tacitus and Terence used; we can fancy, too, that she was not a stranger to the Celtic tongue. The slaves of her father's household were probably the inhabitants of the land. Her nurse would most likely be a native of Britain, and with her she would converse in the tongue of our Celtic forefathers. Sickness seizes her—how would her bright eyes be clouded—how would her parents' breast swell with deep anxiety. The healing truths of the gospel had been brought to our Island long before her time. Had she heard them? And before she closed her eyes in death were they brightened by the blissful apprehension of coming glory? I looked upon her empty eye-sockets, but could get no answer to my question.

Being much interested in this strange specimen of Roman humanity, I went to York the other day to see it. Canon Raine kindly accompanied me to the museum, and supplied me with much information respecting the recent discoveries in that city, which was during several centuries the stronghold of Roman power in the North of England. The results of my inquiries I shall endeavour to convey to you.

In digging the foundations for the walls of the new station at York, it was found that the site had in Roman days formed a large burial ground outside the walls of the city. Very many ancient graves were disturbed, in which were found numerous articles of great interest and beauty which had been interred with the deceased. Little children had their pretty necklaces round their bony throats, their toys were by their sides; women still wore their rings and their splendidly-carved jet armlets; numerous vessels of glass and earthenware of peculiar patterns and exquisite workmanship were enclosed in the coffins. In some of these vessels were the remains of unguents, which, on being treated with hot water, gave forth powerful and fragrant odours. As the ground was disturbed only in places where the walls of the building are being reared, it may be conceived what a mass of treasure remains behind, unseen, unmoved. The coffin of the young lady whose hair I have shown you was found under one of the walls of the new booking office. The number of interments which have from time to time been discovered at York is quite extraordinary. They amount on a rough calculation to about three thousand. Other large graveyards have been found beside the one I have been speaking of, and on the sides of some of the roads leading out of York tombs have been planted for a considerable distance on each side of them. The place must have been very populous. One extraordinary fact has come under Mr. Raine's notice during the recent excavations. It is well known that at Rome the dead bodies of slaves and of obscure persons who had no one to care for them were cast without covering into old quarries and sand pits. There they were left to decay to the great annoyance and injury of the living who occupied the neighbourhood. Horace tells us of one of these *puteoli* on the Esquiline Hill, which was acquired by Mæcenas, who turned it into a garden. Mr. Raine noticed one or two pits at York which had been filled with human bodies promiscuously thrown in. Some of the skeletons had their feet uppermost. It is humbling to think that such things should have taken place in

this land of ours, even sixteen hundred years ago. Amongst so many graves numerous skulls have been found, many of them in a perfect state. There is a noble collection of them in one of the underground chambers of the Museum. Most of them have a fine intellectual development. One of them has been pronounced by Professor Rolleston to be the finest he had ever seen. Several specimens of the fir-cone ornament have been found in the burial ground. These, as I have elsewhere endeavoured to show, are supposed to be emblematic of a resuscitated existence.

We now return to the young lady. Her remains were enclosed externally in a large stone coffin, formed of a rough sandstone, resembling millstone grit, very roughly carved, and destitute of inscription or ornament. This, as well as most of the coffins, if I remember rightly, was lying south and north. Within the stone coffin was another of lead, which contained the body. The lead of this coffin has been cast in sheets and not rolled. The lid was tightly fastened to the coffin; it had to be forced off by violence. We shall presently return to this subject. The lid of the lead coffin bore a simple ornament. It was divided into three compartments by an upright line representing a slender twig, round which was loosely twisted a fillet of ribbon. These compartments were occupied by two similar lines, crossing each other in the centre and terminating in the angles of the compartments. There was no inscription. The body seems to have been deposited in its resting place in the following manner. After being enveloped in some coarse cloth, a quantity of fluid plaster of Paris was poured into the coffin, in the midst of which, whilst still soft, the body was laid; after which the rest of the coffin was filled in with more plaster of Paris. In this particular case it seems as if the head had been made to repose upon a pillow, so that it rose above the gypsum which entirely covered the rest of the young lady's person. On opening the coffin, the jaws, the bones of the face, and the frontal bones of the skull were found to have fallen forward, and were seen resting upon the covering of gypsum; the back hair being deprived of its bony support, had also fallen down, and was resting in the place where these bones should have been. One other singular circumstance is yet to be named. The lid of the stone coffin was found to be cracked not far from its middle. Immediately under this crack, and in the lid of the leaden shell, was a round jagged hole of about

the size of your fist; a corresponding hollow penetrated the gypsum, and the bottom of the stone coffin was cracked. What had caused these appearances? Possibly after death had done his worst by this young lady her narrow house had been stricken by the lightning's flash, or, to carry out the figure more correctly, by a thunderbolt. No other probable solution of the difficulty has been suggested. Before leaving our young lady I must mention that there is a record of hair having been found upon the head of another Roman subject found in York, but it has long been lost sight of. These, so far as I can learn, are the only known instances.

Roman antiquaries find that the instances in which the Romans used leaden cases in the burial of their dead are more numerous than was once supposed. At the present moment there are not less than twelve leaden coffins in the Museum at York, all derived from the graveyards of the city. If my memory does not deceive me, the late Mr. Denham, of Piers Bridge, met with a leaden coffin in a Roman burying-ground near that station. In 1844 a leaden coffin was found on the site of a Roman burial place at Stratford-le-Bow. The coffin had been run in with lime. Mr. Roach Smith published an account of it in the "Archæologia," Vol. XXXI., p. 308. In that gentleman's "Collectanea Antiqua," Vol. III., is a record of the finding of many others, from which I make a few extracts. "In 1739 a leaden coffin was ploughed up near Stilton, with Roman coins and a cinerary urn. At Colchester several Roman leaden coffins have been found from time to time, consisting each of two pieces of lead. At Southfleet, in Kent, in 1801, was found a tomb of stone, covered with two very large stones. The tomb contained two leaden coffins of the most simple construction; the bottom pieces being turned up formed the sides of each, and the top pieces being turned down at each end and a little over at the sides, formed the tops and ends of the coffins." In London several instances have occurred besides that at Stratford-le-Bow already mentioned. In 1811, one was dug up in Old Kent Road. On the lid were two figures of Minerva. In 1844, a small leaden coffin containing the remains of a child was found in Mansell Street, Whitechapel. Several foreign examples are on record. Near the village of Savigny-sous-Beaune a leaden coffin was found in 1819. Other interments of the ordinary character had taken place near it, amongst which were four

jet pins worked in facets, and twelve small brass coins of Maximinus, Constans, and Constantius II. In 1828 two leaden coffins were found at Rouen; one contained a coin of Postumus, the other, which was that of a child, contained the playthings of the deceased and four Roman coins, the effigies on which could not be determined. In 1835 one was found at Evreux; it inclosed a coin of Constantine. Others have been found near Nismes and at Amiens. Mr. Roach Smith, in a letter which I had from him the other day, says, "I could cite some fifty or sixty examples, the latest being one at Ilchester."

A question occurs to me in reference to these leaden coffins which I find it difficult to answer. What end had the Romans in view in making use of them?

We employ them in order hermetically to seal up the dead. So far as I have observed, the Roman coffins were not air tight. Some of those at York have been clumsily put together. In every case the lead has been cast, and the sheets are thick and heavy. In some cases the pieces of which the coffin is composed are nailed together. In one instance the lead has been held in position by being nailed to a strong external covering of wood, and this in turn has been strongly braced together by bars of iron. In the case of this young lady, Mr. Raine thinks the lid of the coffin was fastened on with cement. I may be wrong, but I do not think that the Romans used solder. Their leaden pipes were formed of long flat strips of metal, bent into shape and fastened at the edges. The fastening, so far as I have observed, was not effected by the intervention of easily fusible metal such as our solder. A jet of ignited hydrogen gas made to play upon the edges would partially melt them, so as to allow of their being brought into permanent union. In this way, possibly, the Roman pipes were formed. The process, however, is one which could not easily be applied to coffins. If the object had been simply to provide an imperishable ark in which to deposit the precious remains of the departed one, why not rest satisfied with a stone sarcophagus? In the instance before us, both stone and lead were used. Perhaps it was to make security doubly secure. And yet, after all, in this particular case, the effort was vain; first of all, the lightning invaded the carefully guarded precinct, and then the modern navy fairly bore the whole away. We are much obliged to the navy for the information which he has afforded us.

