

IV.—NOTES ON THE DISCOVERY OF BRITISH BURIALS
ON THE SIMONSDALE HILLS, PARISH OF ROTHBURY,
IN UPPER COQUETDALE, NORTHUMBERLAND.

By D. D. DIXON.

[Read on the 27th November, 1889.]

THE valley of Upper Coquetdale, Northumberland, is remarkably rich in pre-historic remains. Traces of its early occupants are seen in the camps and earthworks, the hut circles and burial mounds, which are found thickly scattered over the wide stretches of moorland, and capping the ridges of the hills on both sides of the river Coquet, between Rothbury and Alwinton. These remains have not been passed by unnoticed. Some years ago they attracted the attention of one of our members, canon Greenwell, an eminent authority on the subject, who then made a series of successful excavations in the parishes of Alwinton and Rothbury, all of which are duly recorded.¹ During the early part of June, 1889, a workman employed on lord Armstrong's estate at Great Tosson brought to me a package carefully wrapped up in his red pocket handkerchief; on opening out the package I was agreeably surprised to find that it contained fragments of a British cinerary urn, which had been discovered on the hill that afternoon whilst he and his companion were trenching the ground for the purpose of planting trees. He informed me that on attempting to dig into a mound they came upon a large slab of the local freestone, and having—like most countrymen—an idea there was something valuable or wonderful to be found underneath they proceeded to dig a trench right through the centre of the mound, when unfortunately the spade of one of them struck the urn and broke it. However, they had the good sense to know that their discovery was of some interest, so carefully gathering up the broken urn and its scattered contents they brought it to me. I immediately sent the fragments to lord Armstrong with an account of how and where they had been found, at the same time asking his lordship's permission to instruct the workmen to be somewhat careful when excavating any more of the numerous mounds with which that part of the hill where

¹ *British Barrows*, Greenwell and Rolleston, pp. 91, 422, 428, 476, 477.

they were then working is thickly studded. Lord Armstrong at once took a kindly interest in the matter, and on Whit Tuesday—accompanied by his agent, Mr. W. Bertram, and myself—proceeded to Simonside, and marked several mounds which were thought likely to contain burials. At the same time his lordship placed at our disposal a gang of intelligent workmen, whose interest in the proceedings well fitted them for the work, and in whose watchfulness and care in dealing with the contents of the various mounds we had the greatest confidence.

Most of the burials were found on the 'Spital hill,' whose relative position to the British camp on the adjacent hill, 'Tosson burgh,' is fully explained by Mr. Hedley.² Therefore I shall only endeavour to describe the sites of the burials, their character and contents, and the circumstances attending their excavation. The 'Spital hill' is one of the northern outliers of the Simonside range, about two miles south-west from Rothbury, and rises to the south of Great Tosson in three distinct shoulders or ridges, the summit of each ridge being a level plateau of some acres in extent, heather-clad, like the whole of the Kyloe range of hills, and bestrewn with slabs and boulders of rough sandstone, a formation known amongst geologists as 'Simonside grits.' The lower ridge is between the 700 and 800 feet contour lines on the Ordnance map, the second ridge between the 800 and 900, while the third or highest is between the 900 and 1,000 feet lines. On the summit stands a large and conspicuous pile of stones commonly known as 'Willie's cairn.' About a mile southwards from this cairn are the rugged peaks of Simonside proper, rising some 1,400 feet above the level of the sea, a well known landmark throughout the whole county of Northumberland.

NO. 1.—BURIAL AFTER CREMATION.

This—the accidental discovery of the burial already referred to—occurred on the second ridge or plateau between the 800 and 900 contour lines. The cairn containing the burial was 20 feet in diameter, 3 feet high, formed of earth and stones overgrown with heather, and devoid of any particular method in the arrangement of the stones, several of which were very large. At or near the centre,

² 'Notes on Burgh Hill Camp,' by Mr. R. C. Hedley, a paper read at the meeting of the Society on the 27th November, 1889, for which see *post*.

in a cavity, not a properly stone-lined cist, a little below the natural surface of the ground, a small cinerary urn was discovered standing upright, protected by a circle of stones set on edge around it, with a larger slab placed on the top. A considerable quantity of calcined stones and charcoal were also found in the cairn on the same level as the interment. The urn contained burnt bones, but it was unfortunately so much broken by the spade of one of the workmen that it was scarcely possible to piece the fragments together. There was only one burial in this cairn.

No. 2.—BURIAL BY INHUMATION.

About 200 yards west of burial No. 1, on the north-western verge of the same ridge, there is a large cairn or mound of an irregular form, composed of an admixture of earth and stones. On its south-western margin, at a depth of 3 feet from the surface of the mound, the excavators struck upon a large slab of freestone, measuring 4 feet 8 inches by 1 foot 10 inches. Beneath this slab was found a perfect and well-shaped cist or stone-lined grave, which lay nearly due E. and W., and was formed of four clean level side stones. In length, the south side measured 3 feet 4 inches, and the north side 3 feet 2 inches; in width, 1 foot 10 inches at the west end, and 2 feet 1 inch at the east end, and was 20 inches deep. The cist was clear of any intrusive sand or soil, and on a level bed of the native peat earth lay the remains of a body on its left side, the head in the north-west corner of the cist. After removing the skeleton, the soil forming the floor of the grave was taken carefully out and put through a sieve, but neither flint, sherd, nor any other relic was found associated with this burial. We did not disturb this mound further, but it has every appearance of containing more burials.

The following description of the remains found in this cist has been kindly furnished me by Dr. Barrow of Rothbury :—

The remains consist of the right half of skull with portion of the left side; entire articulation of both sides at base; a hole at the side of skull, perhaps due to a blow on the head, which may have been the cause of death. Piece of right upper jaw containing five teeth, viz.:—three molars and two bi-cuspid, also a portion of left lower jaw containing one molar tooth; teeth all in good

state of preservation. Right collar bone, portion of right scapula or shoulder blade, upper half of right humerus, lower portion of left humerus. Nine vertebrae, more or less entire. Four pieces of ribs, top and bottom ribs almost entire. Pelvis nearly entire, in three pieces, viz., main part of sacrum, entire left pelvic bone, and large part of right pelvic bone. Entire right femur, 16 inches long. Right tibia or shin bone, $13\frac{1}{2}$ inches long. Portion of left femur and left tibia, also portions of shafts of small bones of legs and arms. The remains are those of a male adult, probably between 25 and 40 years of age, about 5 feet 2 inches or 5 feet 4 inches in height.²

The skull is distinctly brachy-cephalic or round-headed, belonging to a race who are generally supposed to have supplanted the older dolicho-cephalic or long-headed race of people in Britain.³

NO. 3.—PROBABLE BURIAL BY INHUMATION.

On the first or lower ridge, between the 700 and 800 feet contour lines, 300 yards south-west from burial No. 2, beneath a mound of small dimensions, a cist was found of an irregular shape formed of five slabs of very unequal sizes. The cist lay N.N.E. and S.W. by W., measured 3 feet 6 inches extreme length, 20 inches in width, and 18 inches deep. Nothing whatever was found in this cist, probably it had contained a burial by inhumation, but owing to its defective architecture, if I may so term it, allowing the free admission of air, the body deposited therein would quickly moulder away. There was only one burial in this mound.

NO. 4.—BURIAL BY INHUMATION.

This cist, the smallest of the series, being only 15 inches square and 18 inches deep, was found beneath a scarcely perceptible mound of earth and stones, situated about 100 yards N.E. from the circular enclosures known as the 'Aad Stells,' called in the 'order of the marches made by Lord Wharton, in 1549' 'the Stell-ende.' The cist contained only a small fragment of bone, but quite sufficient to prove that a burial had taken place. This mound contained only one burial.

² As regards the age of these mounds, see Canon Greenwell's remarks, *Proceedings* iv. p. 173.

No. 5.—BURIALS AFTER CREMATION.

In a mound situated on the north-eastern border of the upper ridge, between the 900 and 1,000 feet contour lines, were found the fragments of two small urns, probably of the food vessel type, accompanying a deposit of charcoal and bones. The urns were unfortunately so much decayed that they went to pieces immediately on being handled. Neither cists nor cinerary urn were found in this cairn.

No. 6.—BURIAL BY INHUMATION.

About 100 yards west of burial No. 5, on the same ridge, and about 200 yards east from 'Willie's Cairn,' underneath a mound of earth and stones, a cist of unusual shape was discovered, empty. The peculiarity of its form, as well as an uncommon arrangement of seven thin slabs of stone, each $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches thick, placed along the edges, and across the corners of the cist below the cover, as if to give the cover a perfectly level bed, is worthy of attention. The direction of the cist is N.W. and S.E. The space available lengthwise to contain the body of a person would be about 3 feet 6 inches, although the full length from the extreme point to the base is 4 feet 4 inches. The width at the base is $20\frac{1}{2}$ inches, and the depth 17 inches. The slab cover measured 3 feet 9 inches by 2 feet 8 inches, and 3 inches thick.

No. 7.—BURIALS AFTER CREMATION AND BY INHUMATION.

About 120 yards south from 'Willie's Cairn,' between the 900 and 1,000 feet contour lines, a larger cairn than any of the preceding was opened. It was composed of stone and a small admixture of earth, measured 26 feet in diameter, about 6 feet in height, and contained three burials, viz., two cists and a cinerary urn, besides two smaller urns. The central cist, which doubtless contained the primary burial, lay E. and W., was 3 feet long and 2 feet deep beneath the natural surface of the ground, rudely lined with stones, and had three covering slabs, but contained no burial remains; but in the second cist, which was 5 feet S.S.W. from the central one, having a direction S.W. and N.E., and measuring 3 feet 3 inches long, 20 inches wide, 19 inches deep, with two covering slabs, there was found a large

deposit of calcined bones and ashes, evidently the remains of several burnt bodies in a fragmentary condition, placed in the cist after cremation. Judging from the reddened appearance of the closely surrounding stones and soil, it is probable that the bodies were burnt on the site of the burial. There were no flints nor implements of any kind found amongst the contents of this cist. In the same cairn, at a distance of 4 feet east of the central cist, the cinerary urn (plate III.) was found standing on the natural surface of the ground, placed in an inverted position on a flat stone yet *in situ*. This stone showed no traces of having been through fire; therefore in this case the body or bodies had not been burnt on the place of interment, but the contents of the urn showed that the funeral pyre had been on a spot not far off, the bones and ashes within the urn being mixed with the native peat soil and pieces of local sandstone. Eighteen inches south of this cinerary urn a smaller urn was found, and about 3 feet S.E. of the central cist a second was found. Both were standing upright, and on the same level as the larger one, and both were evidently of the ordinary food vessel type. One only has been preserved (plate IV., fig. 1), which measures $5\frac{1}{2}$ inches high, 5 inches diameter at top, and $5\frac{1}{2}$ inches diameter at widest part. It exhibits no attempt at ornamentation, but has had two handles on the rim; portion of one handle, or ear, yet remains. A few weeks after its exhumation, the cinerary urn (plate III.) was emptied of its contents in the presence of lord Armstrong and party at Craggside, when a flint implement, which may be a knife, was found near the top. The flint is 3 inches long and $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches wide. One side is very neatly flaked; the other side is flat, just as the piece has been split off the block or core. Further down, near the centre of the urn, which was quite full of burnt bones, pieces of sandstone and peat soil, were found several sherds of pottery, probably of another urn, all of which had apparently been gathered up in a promiscuous manner and thrust into the urn. The urn bears the usual characteristic scorings of the British sepulchral urn. The overhanging rim, $2\frac{1}{4}$ inches deep, is ornamented with alternate series of vertical and horizontal lines; below the rim, for a space of 3 inches, the urn is covered with a zigzag pattern. It is generally thought that these ornamentations have been done with a twisted thong, and the spiral marks in each line have every appearance of such a process. A



ANCIENT BRITISH URN FROM SIMONSHILL, ROTHBURY.

In the Museum of the Society, the gift of Lord Armstrong.

(This plate presented by Lord Armstrong).



notched stick has also been a theory advanced by others, which, too, seems feasible. The more scanty ornamentation of the lower portion of the urn has probably been done with a pointed piece of wood or bone. It is quite evident that our British ancestors had regard to the due proportions and graceful outline of their cinerary urns. Canon Greenwell, at pages 66 and 67 of his *British Barrows*, respecting the size of sepulchral urns, says:—‘The cinerary urns, those vessels which contain a deposit of burnt bones, are of different sizes, and vary to some extent in shape. They range in height from 5 or 6 inches to about 3 feet, the breadth at the widest part being usually about the same as the height.’ This urn, as well as the smaller one, is quite in accordance with that rule. It measures exactly 12 inches in diameter at the widest part, and its height when first removed from its original position in the cairn was 12 inches; diameter at the top, $9\frac{1}{2}$ inches.

NO. 8.—BURIAL AFTER CREMATION.

At the bottom of a slope, 15 yards on the right hand side of an old hill road leading out of Coquetdale by way of Chesterhope, and the ‘neck of Simonside,’ thence over the fells into Redewater, between the 900 feet and 1,000 feet contour lines, two-thirds of a mile S.W. of a large rock called ‘Little Church,’ there is a stone cairn of goodly dimensions. On the north side of the cairn stands a large block of freestone, as if to mark the spot more surely. Beneath the centre of the cairn a cist was discovered, 3 feet long, 19 inches wide, and 18 inches deep, having a direction S.E. and N.W., nothing was found in this cist, but at a distance of 12 feet S.W. from this central cist, almost on the margin of the cairn, a small rudely formed chamber 18 inches square was discovered which contained portion of a skull, and a few fragments of bone which bear clear traces of cremation.

NO. 9.—CAIRN ON RAVENSHEUGH.

On the summit of a ridge on Ravensheugh, one of the loftiest of the Simonside range, at an elevation of about 1,300 feet stands a huge cairn of stones, 53 feet by 40 feet in diameter, situated near the edge of the hill 269 yards N.E. from a large stone called ‘The Main Stone,’ and about one mile N.E. from a spot known as ‘The Jabel Trews.’ This cairn which forms quite a little hump in the outline of the hill,

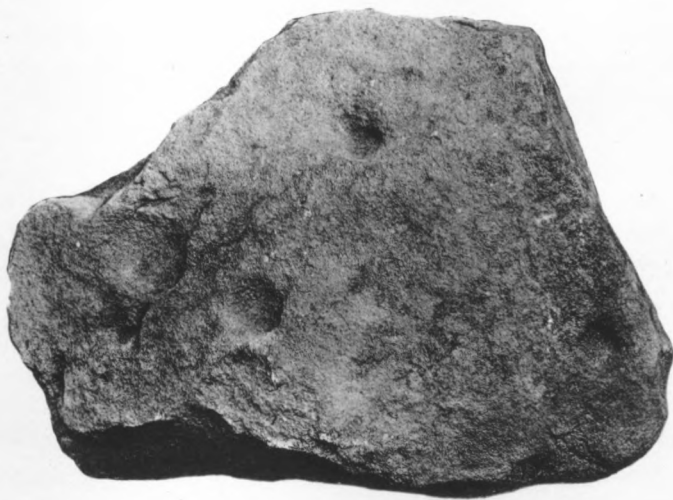
easily seen from any part of the highway between Rothbury and Hepple, was thought to contain a burial, therefore Mr. W. Bertram, the Rev. Brice Smith of Rothbury, and myself, with a gang of four workmen, climbed the hill one hot afternoon in August last, when after three hours' hard digging we found the cairn fruitless.

NO. 10.—PROBABLE BURIAL BY INHUMATION.

Having been informed by Mr. Geo. Turnbull, the farmer at Great Tosson, that there was a very large cairn on the northern slopes of Ravensheugh, just below 'Kate and Geordy' (two standing stones known by these names), we, under his guidance, proceeded to the spot, where we found the cairn, an enormous pile of stones, in a recess in the hillside (at an elevation of about 1,000 feet), situated on a knoll or projecting ridge, having a steep declivity in front and at the east side, with the hill rising behind and on the west side. The cairn measured 27 feet from E. to W., and 30 feet from N. to S. The four men, after digging at this cairn for a day and a half, when at a depth of 10 feet from the surface or apex of the mound, came upon a very rudely built cist formed of four rough slabs of freestone, and a cover of irregular shape and colossal proportions. The cist was lying N.W. by S.E., and was found in the S.E. quarter of the cairn, but the superincumbent weight of stones had completely thrust the side stones forming the cist, which were standing on the natural surface of the ground, out of their original position. The cist was entirely filled up with sand and bracken roots, which Mr. Hedley and myself removed most carefully and examined most minutely, but *found nothing*. The base of the cairn consisted of a number of large rock boulders, such as would be readily found on the hillside close at hand. These were placed in a somewhat systematic manner around the base, and formed the first layer or foundation. Near to the centre of the cairn a pit-marked stone was found (plate IV., fig. 2). My own opinion is that the hollow markings on this stone are distinctly artificial (although there was a difference of opinion amongst the excavators on that point). They are very similar to the markings on the rocks at Lordenshaw's camp, two miles distant. On the possible meaning of such stones found in burial cairns and barrows, I shall again quote canon Greenwell, who, in reference to a barrow



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(1) ANCIENT BRITISH URN, AND (2) CUP-MARKED STONE
FROM SIMONSHILL, ROTHBURY.

The urn, the gift of Lord Armstrong, is in the Museum of the Society.

(This plate presented by Lord Armstrong).



excavated in the North Riding of Yorkshire, says:—‘A remarkable feature in this barrow was the very large number of stones (more than twenty) of various sizes, from 5 inches to 18 inches square, and of different and irregular shapes, on which pit or cup-markings had been formed. These hollows were both circular and oval, and differed in size from 1 inch in diameter to 3 inches, and their depth was about 2 inches. . . .’ He then goes on to say:—‘It is not easy to attribute any special purpose to these stones or to their markings. . . . On the whole I prefer to regard them as symbolic representations: though as to what their significancy may be I confess myself unable to offer anything more than conjecture. . . . The tau symbol of Egypt, the pine-cone of Assyria, the triangular-shaped stone of India, the cross of Christianity, outward expressions of that which has been in almost every religion its most sacred belief, may well have been, however different in form, yet the same in essence with these mysterious pits and circles.’—*British Barrows*, pp. 342, 343.

Several eminent authorities on barrows and their contents aver that when a cist is found empty in the centre of a cairn, under circumstances such as I have related, there has been no burial, and ‘these empty barrows have been spoken of as cenotaphs, monuments raised to commemorate but not to contain the dead.’ I myself scarcely think it likely that so much care would be taken in the formation of a cist to be simply covered up without containing a burial.⁴ At all events, whether cenotaph or burial mound, the site of this more than ordinary cairn has for pleasantness of situation been well chosen. Standing as it does in a sheltered rocky defile, under the shadow of the lofty crags of Ravensheugh, the peaceful valley of Chesterhope stretching along the foot of the hill close in front, with Chesterhopeburn winding its way by Wolfershiel and the Twizel around the base of the Burgh hill, while beyond is the rippling Coquet, and in the distant north are seen the round-topped hills of the Cheviots.

⁴ ‘Speaking of burials he would like to mention a word or two upon the question of cenotaphs. Up to the time he published *British Barrows*, he came to the conclusion that there were no such things as cenotaphs, but he had since altered his opinion. He opened a barrow last year in the East Riding of Yorkshire, the largest in that part of the country, and whilst finding bones of animals in good preservation, there were no signs of a body having occupied the grave. The grave had never been disturbed from the time the mound was erected.’—Canon Greenwell’s address in *Proceedings* iv. p. 174.

In conclusion I have a very pleasing duty to perform, and it is this: Lord Armstrong, besides placing at our service a number of his workmen, whenever we required them, in carrying out the recent explorations, has also, with that readiness to assist in the furtherance of all pursuits of an intellectual or scientific nature, which has ever been a characteristic of his lordship, decided to present these British remains, fragmentary though they be, to the Newcastle Society of Antiquaries to be placed in their Black Gate Museum. Therefore on behalf of lord Armstrong I have much pleasure in asking your acceptance of these Northumbrian pre-historic remains.