

# Exploration of an Anglo-Saxon Cemetery

IN THE PARISH OF CASTLEACRE, NORFOLK.

COMMUNICATED BY

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THE parish of Castleacre, near Swaffham, in Norfolk, has long been noted for its antiquarian remains. These comprise the distinct traces of a Roman camp; very considerable remains of pre-Norman earthworks, and of the castle built by William of Warren, to which the village owes its present name; above all, the remains of a priory, founded by the said William of Warren, second Earl of Surrey; and, as if such an inheritance of historical antiquities were not enough for this favoured parish, a fourth object of interest has lately been found to belong to it by the discovery of an Anglo-Saxon cemetery.

The existence of this cemetery was suspected some years ago, when, on making the hedge and ditch which now form the western boundary of the Priory Field, some cinerary urns, believed to be of Saxon make, were discovered. From time to time since then, urns and fragments of urns have been unearthed by the plough, each discovery adding strength to the supposition that the spot in question was the site of an ancient place of burial. A full and thorough examination of the locality was thus eagerly desired on the part of all who were interested in our national antiquities. At the suggestion of Dr. Jessopp, by the kind help so liberally given by

Mr. Henry Willett of Brighton, and with the kind permission of Mr. W. H. Hudson, of Manor House Farm, Castleacre, the tenant of the field, such an examination was commenced early in October, 1891.

Priory Field, the site of the proposed exploration, lies about a mile and a half to the north-west of the village of Castleacre, bordering on the high road to King's Lynn. It covers the southern side of a gently sloping chalk hill, the surface soil rarely exceeding a foot in depth. The examination was commenced by cutting a shallow trench 3 ft. in breadth, and about 6 ins. deep, and some 30 ft. in length in a straight line, running due north and south. Having taken off the surface of the soil, the workmen were instructed to dig carefully with trowels and other small tools to the further depth of about four inches in search of urns. It was not long before one was found, and the spot was carefully marked as a centre for all further measurements; it was 45 ft. due east of the hedge bounding the Field to the west, and 220 ft. due north of the hedge to the south. This urn was much broken, and it was soon observed with regret that the urns had been deposited so near the surface that in almost every instance the repeated ploughings to which the soil had been subjected had destroyed more or less their mouths and necks, and in many cases shattered them so completely that they fell to pieces at the first attempt to remove them. Eleven feet south of this first urn another was found; a little further on another, and then others, all more or less fractured. At first it was proposed to mark on the plan the exact position of each urn as it was discovered, but owing to the frequency of their occurrence this became impracticable, and, in fact, would serve no useful end. They had been deposited without any regard to order or regularity; sometimes singly, frequently in pairs, sometimes in groups of four or five

close together. Having continued this first trench for about 50 ft., when no more urns were discovered, short trenches running towards the western hedge were dug, which proved even more prolific of urns than the original trench. Scarcely ten minutes ever elapsed without a notice from the workmen that they had come upon a fresh one. Other trenches, parallel to the short one running east and west, were dug at the distance of about 4 ft. from each other, and a few were also dug running east from the first long one, but these scarcely yielded an urn; the heart of the cemetery was evidently to the west of the original trench.

The work of the first four days, October 7th to 10th, having abundantly proved the existence of a Saxon Cemetery in the Priory Field, the next object was to endeavour to ascertain its limits. Trenches were cut, one after another, to the south of the central point, until at a distance of 87 ft. the urns ceased; nothing was found beyond, and thus the southern limit of the cemetery was satisfactorily ascertained.

*The Urns.*—Considerably more than fifty, including those which had been so shattered by the plough as to have left mere traces of what they had been, were discovered. They were all of coarse pottery, evidently made of the sandy clay of the district, and burnt in smother kilns, giving them the black appearance of the ordinary Upchurch ware. In size they varied from a diameter of 12 inches to that of 7 or 8 inches. With the exception of those which were perfectly plain, and showed no ornament whatever, no two were alike, either as to shape or decoration. About twelve were got out in fairly perfect preservation, and these have since been deposited in the little museum for local antiquities in the Priory. The favourite ornament was a circle, about half an inch in diameter, filled with crossed lines; or a larger one,

containing a cross of four lines, the inner circumference opposite to the angles bearing a small triangular figure. This ornamentation is eminently characteristic of Saxon pottery (Wright, p. 493), and at once distinguishes it from Roman, and it appears to have been stamped, as Dr. Wright observes, with the carved end of a stick. Sometimes large rough flints had been laid upon the mouth of the urn by way of protection. The urns had not been deposited upon the bare chalk, but in every instance upon a bed of mortar some six inches deep, and so deeply were they imbedded in it that it was often a difficult matter to raise them without leaving the bottom of the vessel behind.

*Contents of the Urns.*—In every case the urns were more or less filled with the surrounding soil, beneath which lay a hardened breccia of comminuted human bones, partly calcined and discoloured by fire. With these human remains some of the urns contained the thin hollow bones of a bird, apparently about the size of a rook. If each urn contained the remains of a human body after cremation, it was remarkable how very small a portion of the skeleton was left after the process. The fragments of the skull seemed remarkably thin and delicate for those of an adult. No trace of a jaw was observed, and only two teeth were found, and these very small ones. It was remarkable how often the tiny land-shell, *Achatina acicula*, had insinuated itself into the urns, and found a habitation among the bones.

In carefully examining the contents of the urns, several small articles, all connected with personal or domestic use, were found. Nothing which would come under the designation of "valuables," such as coin or jewellery, had been deposited with the ashes.

The following is a list of the articles found in the cinerary urns:

1. Bronze knife, 6 inches in length, sharp and pointed

as when made, with the fang for the handle, which, being probably of wood, had perished.

2. Another, 4 inches in length.

3. Four pairs of iron scissors, or, rather, little shears, of Roman pattern. See illustration on p. 409 in Dr. Wright's *The Celt, the Roman, and the Saxon*.

4. Two needles.

5. Four pairs of bronze tweezers, one attached to a wire ring for suspension.

6. Two fragments of glass vessels, one stamped with the letter R.

7. Many circular discs of bone, flat on one side and convex on the other; the flat side showing sometimes one and sometimes two shallow holes, not penetrating to the circumference. These curious objects are sometimes called "buttons," which I feel sure is an erroneous designation. They could not possibly have been sewn on, and the one or two shallow holes preclude the idea of their being fastened on in any other way. Neither is there anything about them to suggest that they could have been used as ornaments. My own impression is that they were counters, or "men," for draughts, the Saxons, we are told, being much addicted to that game, and that the holes were merely made in order to give the workmen a firm hold when manufacturing them.

8. On the mouth of one urn was found a large perforated bead of coarse clay, probably the weight for a fishing net.

9. A small yellow bead.

10. Several glass beads. These had been burnt with the body, and were all more or less fused with the soil.

11. The most frequent objects found were fragments of bone combs. On one specimen the body of the comb is most artistically ornamented.