

STONE COFFIN AND ROMAN POTTERY FOUND AT BOW.

BY B. H. COWPER, ESQ.

East India Road, March 1, 1856.

DEAR SIR,

I am happy to be able to report upon the first mission which it has been my pleasure to fulfil on behalf of the London and Middlesex Archæological Society. Immediately upon the receipt of your communication I proceeded to the Iron Church and House Works at Bow, belonging to Mr. Hemmings. These works lie to the north of the Bow Road, not far from the Bow Station of the North London Railway, occupying the north-western angle of the intersection of that line with the Eastern Counties Railway. The ground is therefore less than a quarter of a mile to the south of the old Roman Road, which appears to have run along the Bethnal Green Road and Green Street, on to Old Ford, where it crosses the River Lea and enters Essex, not far from Stratford, which, as you know, derives its name from this very road or *street*. From Green Street to Old Ford the ancient way is still used as a driftway.

On reaching the spot above described I was politely furnished by Mr. Hemmings with the particulars of the discovery. The antiquities brought to light consisted of one stone coffin with skeleton entire, of one sepulchral vase or urn, of one small vase, and of a patera. Of each of these objects I am enabled to subjoin the following imperfect account.

1. The *Coffin*, the top of which was less than four feet from the surface of the soil, was formed of one large stone, which was hollowed out to receive the body, and resembled an oblong stone trough or sarcophagus, with a cavity of the same shape as the exterior. It consists of a block of oolite or freestone, somewhat coarser in texture, and darker in colour, than the well known Bath-stone, and resembles what is commonly derived from the Cotswold range of hills. The proportions by admeasurement were found to be as follows :

	ft.	in.	
Extreme length outside . . .	6	7	
„ „ inside . . .	5	11	
„ width outside . . .	2	2	
„ „ inside . . .	1	6	
„ depth outside . . .	2	2	ft. in.
„ „ inside . . .	1	6	to 1 8

The varying depth inside is owing to the irregular surface of the bottom of the cavity.

The lid was originally of one piece of similar stone, and was

in width	2 ft. 2 in.
in length	6 ft. 7 in.

The under surface of the lid was flat, the upper surface very slightly convex.

The stone bore no inscription or ornament of any kind. The workmanship is plain, and even rude. When discovered and *in situ*, it was apparently entire, but was broken into many pieces by the workmen on its removal, a circumstance which we cannot regard without deep regret. This sarcophagus, as I may term it, contained the perfect skeleton of a full-grown human being; the bones were nearly of the colour of the clay about London, and were moist and clammy to the touch. Nothing remained of the body or of its integuments but a whitish substance resembling old lime mortar, which was deposited inside upon the bottom of the coffin.

There is one singular appearance to which I wish to direct especial attention, as it is a fact of which I remember no mention. Under the lid and elsewhere the coffin had closely attached to it long fibres, resembling those of large decayed leaves, and the fine tissue spread out on either side of them. Some of these I myself detached from the stone to which they were cleaving, but in the last stage of decay. I am informed that the skull was well high veiled with a similar substance, which but for the fibres might have been mistaken for cobweb.

When the discovery was made a policeman was sent for, who, when consulted, gave it as his opinion that the bones should be interred in a gravel-pit hard by, and his advice was followed; the skeleton was huddled into a basket or hamper, and deposited as he directed!

The coffin-lid is in but two pieces. The coffin itself could be almost entirely reconstructed out of the fragments, which have been now collected and laid aside, and were partly put together to gratify my curiosity, and to assist me in taking the dimensions.

2. A sepulchral *Vase* of coarse grey pottery, which contained, I am informed, what appeared to be the bones of an infant; of this but one "potsherd" remains, a part of the bottom, the rest was wholly destroyed.

3. An *Urn*, or rather *Ampulla*, of a fine red material and elegant shape. From the remains of it, it appears to have held about one pint, is nearly globular in form, and had an exceedingly narrow neck. On one side there was a handle. This was a very pretty article, and a good part of it remains in fragments.

4. A *Patena*, or saucer, which I found in the possession of one of the workmen, and obtained from him. This, too, is of red earth, but coarser than No. 3. It is in fragments, and of these some are lost, but enough remains to show what it was, and I shall be happy to submit them to inspection when I have attempted to put them together.

This earthenware is undoubtedly Roman, and was found in close prox-

imity to the coffin, with which it must have been buried. The position of the coffin, due east and west, and of the arms of the skeleton which were crossed upon the breast, would suggest that the interment was made during the Christian period of Roman domination in Britain. The material of the coffin, which must have been obtained from a considerable distance, proves that it belonged to one of the wealthier inhabitants of probably old Londinum, it being well known that the Roman interments were extramural, and that the citizens deposited their dead along and near the highways leading from their cities.

One of the workmen informed me, that a few months ago several discoveries were made somewhat further north, in digging for the foundation of some houses, and that he was told the place appeared to have been a burying-ground. This spot is still nearer to the Roman way. In this locality there will probably be a large amount of building within a few years, and there may be other discoveries, to which attention should be given.

The excavation in which the remains above described were found was made for the purpose of laying a deep foundation, and has since been quite filled up.

Faithfully yours,

B. H. COWPER.

G. B. Webb, Esq. Secretary.
