A ROMAN BURIAL AT NORTH MARSTON

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ON 9 March agricultural contractors, laying field drains for Bucks County Council Land Agent's Department, cut through a limestone structure at SP 75852301 in an area otherwise consistently of clay at Keenes Lower Ground, Brook Farm (also known as Potters Farm), North Marston. Some bone was discovered and a few fragments of pottery. The County Museum was informed shortly after the discovery, and after a visit to the site it was decided, with the permission of the Land Agent, to examine the structure further. This was completed the following week, the work force being supplied by the County Museum Archaeological Group.

SUMMARY. Excavation revealed a rectangular limestone structure, partly destroyed. The contents had been disturbed even before the field drain was laid, and included pieces of three pots of early third century date and a pseudomorph brooch spring. Only animal bone was certainly identified from the fill, but the structure seems best interpreted as an isolated cremation burial with accompanying grave goods, disturbed at some date after deposition.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS. The writer is grateful to the Land Agent and his Department for notifying the finds and for subsequent active assistance both in initially leaving open the stretch of trench concerned and in subsequently refilling the area with sand to protect the structure, which has been left intact. Thanks are due to volunteers from the County Museum Archaeological Group, who turned out at short notice for several days, also to Mrs. Betty Westley for reporting on the bones and to Mr. M. R. Hull for reporting on the brooch. Photographs and conversation by D. A. Parish; pottery drawings by Mrs. B. Hurman. Thanks are also due to Mrs. M. Green. Finds are at the County Museum (163.73). CAS. 0443.

DESCRIPTION OF CIST. Excavation showed that the contractors had cut through the north end of a rectangular stone cist, composed of a number of limestone slabs laid horizontally with upright slabs around. The average size of these slabs was 0.30 x 0.20 x 0.06m. The surviving structure measured approximately 1.20 x 1.40m., and as at least ten slabs had been disturbed by the mechanical excavator, it seems likely that the cist may originally have been 1.40 x 1.50m., with the longer axis north-south.

The height of the walls of the cist did not exceed 0.40m. above the pavement, and the absence of any quantity of flat stones in the fill suggest it was not originally higher than this, nor ever roofed with stone. The effects of soil pressure on the structure had been considerable and many of the upright slabs

had been pushed over at an angle or otherwise displaced. The stone used in its construction appears to be from the local Portlandian.

After the cist had been excavated a drainage trench was cut slightly to the south, but revealed no trace of any other Roman material or any ditch associated with the burial. If the cist was originally marked in any way, no trace remained today and it was totally concealed beneath ridge and furrow.

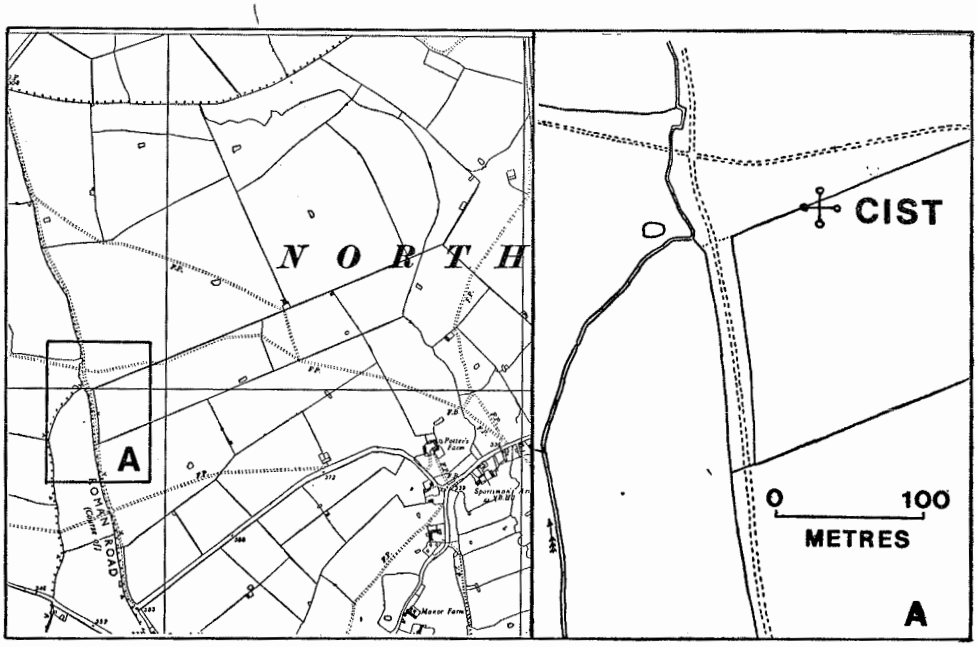

Fig. 1. North Marston cist. *Based on O.S. by permission*

CONTENTS OF CIST. Only about one-third of the contents of the cist remained to be excavated, as the mechanical excavator had removed a certain amount, and some had also been removed immediately after the discovery and before the significance of the find had been realised.

On excavation the surviving upper fill was found to be distinguishable from the natural clay only by its being marginally more humic. Soil pressures had compressed the upper fill so that its extent proved to be less horizontal than that of the pavement of the cist when eventually reached. The lower fill of the cist was wetter and slightly more crumbly than the upper. It soon became evident that the cist had previously been opened, for the most complete find—a bowl of orange fabric (Fig. 0,1) was in some thirty pieces, its base inverted and a large part of the wall lay 0.45m. distant. The whole did not rest on the floor of the cist, but was distributed between 0.10-0.15m. above the floor. A fifth of the pot was missing.

Parts of three other bowls were discovered and sherds from four other vessels. The former may well have been from the same workshop and part of the original deposit, whilst some of the latter are likely to be residual from elsewhere. An anomalous 'spring', (Fig. 0. 5) possibly from a brooch and part of the original deposit, came from subsoil above the cist.

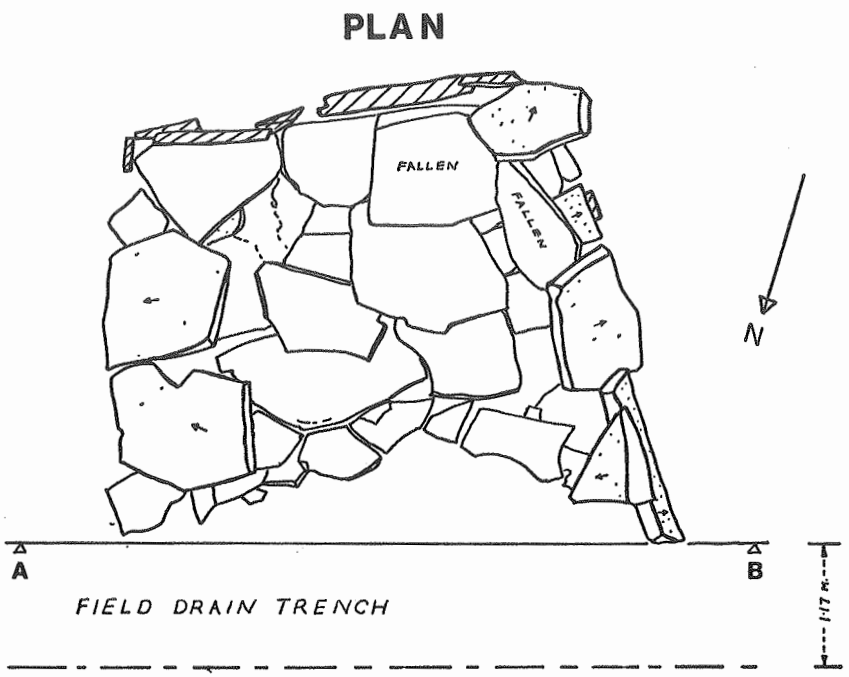

Fig. 2. North Marston cist. Plan and Section.

Also from the fill and subsoil came extremely fragmentary bone. It is apparent that some soil factor was responsible for their condition as a few pieces retained their form but were broken up into cubic pieces about 4mm. square. This cannot have been caused by acidity, as the soil pH was 7.5—slightly alkaline. All visible fragments of bone were collected, but subsequent sieving through a 2mm. and 1mm. mesh sieve showed that bone fragments were still present in quantity at this level. Total weight of bone, including wrappings, was 2lbs.

For detailed description of the bone see Mrs. Westley's report. All the identifiable bone was animal, of cattle, sheep and pig; there were six calcined fragments only. Many of the calcined fragments are not determinable, but some are undoubtedly from domestic animals. Some of the bone may have been deposited in the cist at the time when it was 'opened' and not all need be contemporary with the original deposit.

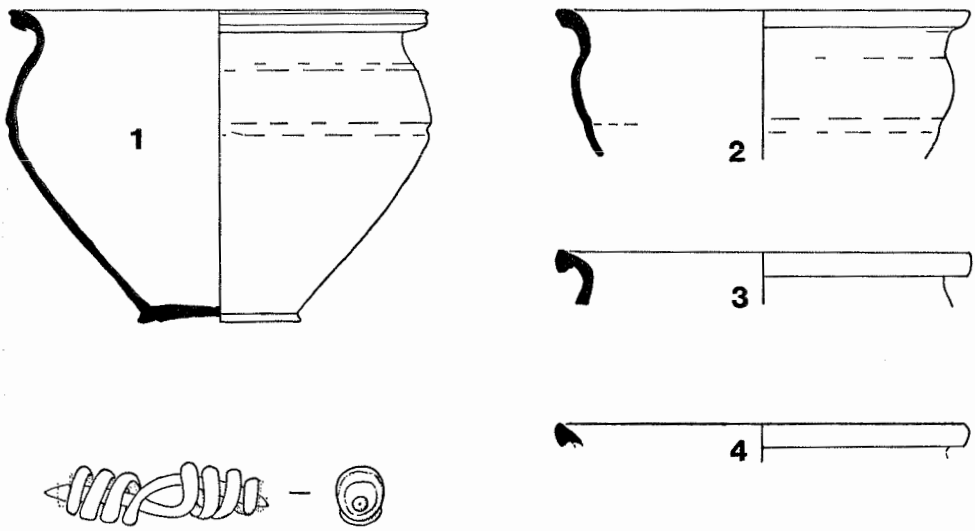

Fig. 3. North Marston. Pottery ¼. Bronze 2/1 (Drawn from a Radiograph.)

DESCRIPTION OF FINDS

(a) *Pottery* (Fig. 3)

As a result of the earlier disturbance the pottery was distributed throughout both the subsoil and the cist fill itself, sherds joining from both levels. It is not possible to be certain if all the pottery recovered was originally deposited in the cist. The more complete vessels 1 and 2 almost certainly were; 3 and 4 probably were as on grounds of fabric and style they are likely to have come from the same potter's workshop. It is not possible to determine whether the body sherds representing four other pots including one of samian, formed part of the original deposit or were residual.

No good parallels for 1-4 have been noted and dating is slightly speculative. However, on grounds of fabric, bowl form, the presence of a footring on 1 and grooves on both 1 and 2, a date early in the third century A.D. seems likely.

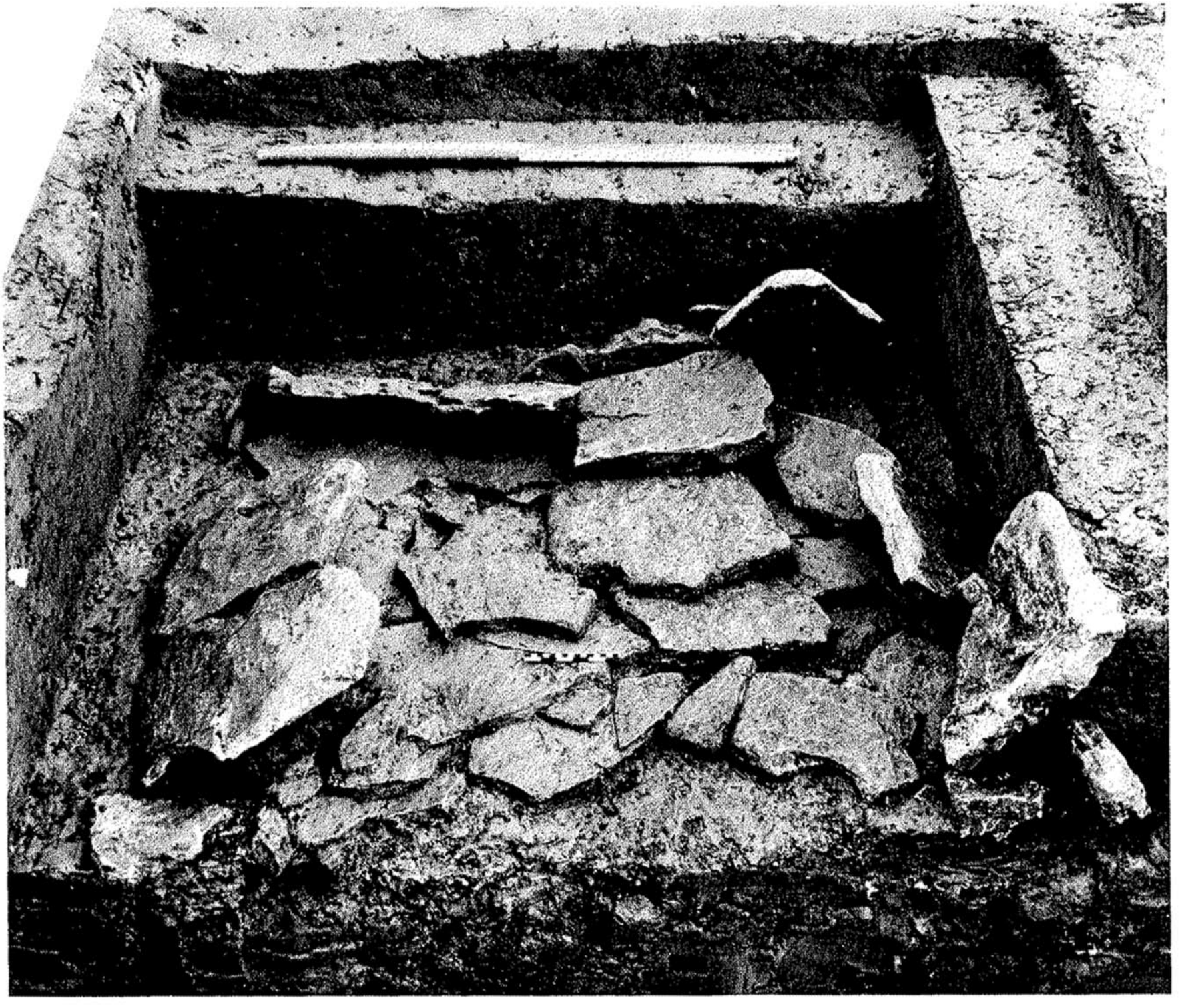

PLATE III. NORTH MARSTON. The cist completely excavated.

1. Bowl, orange with grey core, fine sandy fabric with red flecks, thin walled. Four fifths restorable but edges badly eroded.
2. Bowl, grey, fabric similar to 1.
3. Bowl or wide-mouthed jar, buff, fabric similar to 1.
4. Bowl or wide-mouthed jar, orange, fabric similar to 1. Very abraded, and diameter and rim angle not certain.

The following are not illustrated:

Four sherds, handmade, grey fabric, similar to 1-4 but 'soapy' feel.
Seven sherds, orange-buff with grey core, fairly soft.
One chip of samian
Three sherds, handmade, heavily gritted with calcareous material, pre-Roman.

(b) *Bronze* (Fig. 3, 5) Pseudomorph Brooch Spring, length 15mm.

Note contributed by M. R. Hull, MA, FSA

The illusion of a brooch spring is very strong, but the two small pieces of wire of which it is made have nothing to hold them together and were the bronze not adhering either by the tightness of the coils or corrosion the two pieces should come apart quite easily. It could have been an apprentice piece, or alternatively fastened to a brooch to imitate a spring. The only way it could be so attached would be by passing the two wires where they come together in the middle through a hole in the head of the brooch. This could have been done by manufacturing the head round the wires or by making the 'spring' in two parts so that each part has a straight limb which passes through the hole and engages in the other part on the other side. The latter alternative would fit this piece. Note also that this cannot be a spring to actuate a pin since there is no point at which a pin could be attached to it.

I have not seen this on any brooch (and I have dealt with nearly 10,000), so I do not feel I can suggest any type of brooch to which it might have belonged.

(c) *Bone*

Report by Mrs. B. Westley, BSc, FZS

(The numbering relates to bone groups. These are of little stratigraphic significance.)

(100) i Test tube with 5 burned fragments, indeterminable.
ii Also Cattle Numerous small fragments, mostly vertebral
A young animal (epiphyses missing)
iii Also Fragments mostly gravel, with burnt bone fragments, indeterminate. (Passed through 2mm. mesh sieve).

(101) Cattle 1 fragment Tibia (?)
Pig/sheep 2 fragments Femur (?)

(102) Small fragments of a large animal probably cattle. Curvature and thickness of bone shows it to be non-human.

(103) 3 fragments of animal bone (too thick for human)
Parts of razor shell.

(104) Axis vertebra of pig, chopped laterally, i.e. by butcher.

(104)A Cattle. 7 fragments (radius and other limb parts) and other small fragments, apparently of the same animal. They are not determinable but not, in my opinion, human.

(104)B Cattle. Vertebral centrum and other indeterminate pieces, not human.

(104)C Animal fragments, possibly pig.

(104)D Cattle. 13 fragments (tibia?)
Other indeterminate fragments, probably same animal. Thickness of the bone precludes their being human.

(104)F Cattle. 1 vertebral centrum
Long-bone fragments, perhaps pig.

(104)G Cattle. 1 patella (knee-cap) fragment
1 tibia fragment, proximal
Other animal fragments small.

(104)H Sheep. 2 complete incisor teeth, 1 and 3.

(104)J Sheep. 2 foot bones (phalanges, 1st and 2nd joints of hoof)
1 caudal vertebra (tail)
Femur (?) fragments
Other small, indeterminate fragments, probably lamb.

DISCUSSION. The isolated position of this solitary burial is hard to account for, Roman burials being commonly associated with settlement or religious foci such as the important complex at Thornborough. Its proximity to the Fleet Marston-Towcester road[1], which lies only 70m. to the west, may be important. Excavations carried out in 1973 at Thornborough[2] located a north-south road, which may represent its course here, whilst at the Fleet Marston end at its junction with Akeman Street fieldwork has re-affirmed the existence of a settlement. The careful construction of the cist—if that structure is accepted as being contemporary with the burial— shows that whilst this may have been a wayside burial it was by no means a casual one.

Though no further Roman material was recovered from the other drainage trenches in the field, it is possible more may come to light and I am indebted to Mr. E. Lambourne for pointing out that a field further to the north is called "Deadman's Ground", a name which may indicate earlier discoveries in the locality. The date at which the cist burial itself was disturbed cannot now be determined. The only non-Roman element from the site was a piece of medieval or later tile from the sub-soil and three weathered sherds of heavily gritted pre-Roman fabric.

Finally there is the question of the bone to be considered. None of this bone was certainly human. Sieving recovered a few fragments of calcined bone such as one might expect from a first-third century Roman burial, but some of

[1] *Roman Roads in Britain I*, I. D. Margary (1955) 152, and *Roman Roads in the South-East Midlands*, The Viatores (1964) 306-9.
[2] Note in this issue of *Records of Bucks.*

this was certainly animal. The structure, however, was clearly funerary in intent and the presence of an almost complete bowl of early third century date inside leaves no alternative explanation open but that this was originally a burial of that date—perhaps a cremation. Roman cist burials have not been recorded before in the county and are at any rate not common. A few of similar date are known from Sussex[3].

POSTSCRIPT. The dating of the deposit in the cist must now be revised. Those pots which it was suggested were made at one workshop (Fig. 0, 1-4) can now be firmly identified as products of a group of kilns near Headington, Oxon. (C. J. Young, Excavations at the Churchill Hospital, 1971', *Oxoniensia* 37 (1973), 23 and fig. 5, nos. 6 and 11). Examples of the North Marston type occur in late third-century A. D. deposits at Shakenoak in Oxfordshire. (A. C. C. Brodribb, A. R. Hands, D. R. Walker, *Excavations at Shakenoak*, II (1971), Fig. 36).

[3] *The Archaeology of Sussex*, E. C. Curwen (1937), 298 for references.