

British Barrows and Their Builders

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Barrow Burial

The almost universal custom of raising a mound, the so-called barrow, over the buried dead, to mark the place where they were laid in the grave, has been variously discussed by many different writers. Notices of the practice have been so often collected from the works of Greek and Latin authors and other sources, that it is not necessary for me to enter upon any general consideration of the subject, except in very brief terms.

This form of memorial, *monumentum aere perennius*, as ancient as it has been lasting, is found in almost all parts of the globe, from the extreme west of Europe to the eastern limit of the continent of the New World. Barrows, under diverse names, line the coasts of the Mediterranean, the seats of ancient empires and civilisations, before whose rise they were in existence, and whose decay they have witnessed and outlived. So numerous are they that they spread like a covering over the wide plains, the Steppes of Northern Asia, from the Euxine almost to the Icy Sea, where a few wandering nomads now feebly represent a population which was once large, wealthy, and powerful. The continent of India possesses them in abundance, and their buried contents present an identity in many particulars, so close to those with Britain, that some have considered it as affording a proof of a near connection between the two peoples who erected them. Egypt knows them as the sepulchres of her early kings, and the great pyramids have remained an unchanging legacy from the dead, when the wisdom of her learned exists only in the oft transmuted knowledge of many an alien race, and when her religion, her literature, her art, almost her language, the living expressions of a nation's being, have all but passed away and been forgotten. The red man of America still places his dead beneath them, and the huge mounds, so common in some parts of that continent, are the evidences of an early civilisation, to which the marvellous ruined cities of Central America bear a stonger witness; cities which, in their elaborate and profuse though strange sculpture, give indications of an art development so distinctive in its character, that it could scarcely have had its origin in the mind of any of the races of the Old World.

They abound in Great Britain and Ireland, differing in shape and size, and made of various materials; and are known as barrows (mounds of earth), and cairns (mounds of stone), and popularly in some parts of England as lows, houes, and tumps. They vary in size from a few feet in diameter to a miniature mountain, like Silbury Hill in Wiltshire, which covers about five acres of ground and measures 130 ft. in perpendicular height.

Life of the Barrow Builders

Their dress, the use of metal, their weapons, implements, ornaments and pottery have already been treated of at some length, so that it is only necessary here to give a slight account of them. That woollen, and probably linen, fabrics were manufactured is evident from the remains of such which have been discovered. The evidence is indeed but scanty, as might be expected, on account of the perishable nature of the material; portions, however, of woven stuffs have been found with deposits of burnt bones, either the remainder of the dress of the person or of some wrapping in which the bones had been collected from the funeral pile. In one of the barrows at Weaverthorpe, the half of a clay spindle-whorl was met with, which may be supposed to indicate a knowledge of spinning. They further appear to have been clothed in garments which had made some considerable advance beyond such as were merely wrapped around the body; for, in a grave at Butterwick, six buttons of jet and stone were found placed in a line in front of the chest of the buried man, showing that the vestment was to some extent fitted to the form of the wearer, and had been fashioned into shape with somewhat of sartorial skill. Their dress appears to have been fastened in a variety of ways. Buttons and pins have occurred in many instances; and a ring with perforations on the side has sometimes been met with, usually in connection with buttons. An oblong narrow article, made of

jet or other lignite, having a slit, which widens toward the middle, and occupies about two-thirds of the whole length, has been found on the wolds accompanying a body; and also in other places in Britain. They have probably been used in some way for fastening the dress, a belt, perhaps, having been passed through the slit. A ring of jet from a barrow at Rudstone, which is too small for an armlet, had possibly been made for the same purpose, though its form is not quite so suitable as the oblong one would be.

Sir R. Colt-Hoare discovered, in a barrow at Upton Lovell, what he considered to be gold boxes; and somewhat similar objects, though smaller, were found in a barrow at Cressingham in Norfolk; but they may very possibly have been buttons, the more solid part having been made of wood upon which the thin gold plating was laid; what are undoubtedly buttons of a conical form, and made in the way I have suggested, of wood and gold, have occurred in the Wiltshire barrows. What may be called a fibula of bone has also been found, and always, so far as I know, with burnt bodies. No bronze fibulae or any fastenings of that nature have been discovered in barrows of the Bronze Age, though they occur in those of the early time of iron; but a few buckles, small and of a simple form, show that, as might be expected, so very natural a mode of connection was known. The dress was no doubt fastened more commonly by tags or laces, but of such things it is not to be expected that any trace would be left.

The implements and weapons of bronze show that they have attained a high perfection in the process of casting, and give evidence of no little progress in metallurgy; whilst the pottery is quite equal to what has been discovered in other parts of Britain, though perhaps the designs upon some of the vessels do not show so much artistic skill as is seen upon those from the south-west of Scotland. It manifests, however, a long-continued experience in the manufacture of fictile ware. The ornamentation upon the vases and urns is not wanting in a certain tasteful arrangement, but in the ignorance in the use of the wheel, in the imperfect firing, in the absence of glazing, and of any other form of design in the patterns than simple combinations of lines and circular markings, it cannot be said that they had attained to any great perfection in the art of the potter.

The personal ornaments, which have however occurred in a very few instances, give indications of some artistic power, though developed after a simple fashion. They have consisted of necklaces, generally made of jet, or other and inferior lignite; of buttons and rings of jet, in some cases tastefully decorated, and therefore having a claim to be classed under the head of ornaments; of earrings of bronze; of beads and pendants of bone, jet, and other substances, not found in sufficient numbers to constitute a necklace; and of some humbler articles, such as perforated teeth.

The whole evidence of the barrows appears to show that the people living on the wolds were, to some extent, isolated from the rest of the country, with which they seem to have held little intercourse; this state of things originating partly in the natural features of the district in which they dwelt, surrounded, as it was on all sides, by low-lying ground, swampy, and largely covered with wood. They were apparently not possessed of much in the shape of gold, amber, bronze, or glass. Their condition may perhaps be described as that of people who were living in the pastoral state, but at the same time cultivating grain, though probably not extensively. Their clothing no doubt consisted largely of skins, though they certainly used textile fabrics; and such ornaments as they possessed were of a simple, but by no means unartistic, description. The presence of a lump of ochre, which has been found in more than one instance associated with the body, may perhaps be considered as affording some evidence of the use of colour as a means of personal adornment; nor is it easy to account for its occurrence on any other supposition. When these people are compared with the inhabitants of some other districts in Britain, as for instance of Wiltshire, or even of Derbyshire, who, to judge by the pottery, implements and ornaments, must have been occupying the country at the same time, they cannot be regarded as having been in possession of the same amount of wealth of various kinds, as of bronze and other materials, or to have arrived at quite the same height of cultivation.

It cannot be expected that the contents of the burial mounds should give much information upon the social relations of those people, the position the wife occupied in the family, and questions akin to this. Some few inferences may, however, be drawn from the facts which the barrows have disclosed. For instance, the

central and indeed the sole burial in a barrow upon Heslerton Wold, was that of a very young child, placed in a grave sunk in the chalk; and in the largest barrow I have opened on the wolds, at Rudstone, the primary burial, over which the whole mound had been raised, was that of an infant. Numerous other instances have occurred where quite young children have been buried with associated vases, and in a manner which betokens that much care was bestowed upon the burial, as in a barrow at Rudstone, where the grave had been lined out with wood. I have met with other cases elsewhere; for instance, the central cist in a barrow at Ford, Northumberland, was occupied by the skeleton of an infant, having a " food vessel " with it, whilst round the cist were seven burnt bodies, deposited in as many cinerary urns, in one of which was a flint implement.

From these and similar instances we may gather that the family tie had much influence with these people, and that the child of the chief or other person of distinction held an important position in the estimation of the tribe. The affection of the father might prompt him to honour with the full ceremonial of the burial rites the child whose early death he mourned, but unless the social importance of the infant had been likewise recognised in the eyes of the people, it is scarcely likely that so high a mark of consideration as a separate barrow implies would have been accorded to so young a member of the community. Perhaps it may not be considered to be an unfair inference to regard a circumstance like this as indicating that something like a hereditary headship prevailed amongst them.

The great labour and pains bestowed upon the burial of the dead, the large mound, the deep grave, the various attendant ceremonies of the funeral, may not necessarily show any high advance in civilisation, for in the rude conditions of society the disposal of the body after death has generally attended with somewhat of care, and regarded as requiring the presence of some rites of burial. But, making allowance for this, we cannot look upon the barrows and their various contents without being impressed with the belief that the semi-savage state had been well-nigh passed, and that the dawn of an advanced civilisation was approaching. The pottery, with its simple and yet effective ornamentation, the bronze knife-dagger and awl, the necklace of jet, the buttons tastefully decorated, the ear-ring of metal, all may be regarded as heralds of cultivation and refinement, even as the east is flecked with streaks of gold and crimson before the morning sun breaks forth in all his splendour.

There are, on the other hand, some features pointing to a condition of things which ill accords with much advance beyond savagery, though to the practices these would seem to indicate we might find a parallel amongst people who, in some of the processes of mental development, have been second to few. It can scarcely be questioned that it was the habit to slay at the funeral and to bury with the dead man, wives, children, and others, probably slaves. The frequent occurrence of several bodies, all certainly interred at the same time, the finding of a man and a woman in adjoining graves, which must have been excavated together, or of two persons of different sexes in the same grave, with the remains of children, or with deposits of burnt bones, are incidents difficult to interpret in any other way. Nor has the practice been so uncommon that we need feel much hesitation in attributing it to the ancient dwellers upon the wolds. The custom of suttee which still, in spite of the most stringent enactments, lingers in India, shows that, under an elaborate religious system and highly organised communities, a habit so repugnant to our ideas has nevertheless prevailed. That it was in use among the ancient Scythians, the account of the burial of their kings given by Herodotus (and amply confirmed by the examination of the countries occupied by that people) abundantly proves. That women, however, were not in the condition of slaves, but held a position of trust as the equals in some degree of the husband, may perhaps be considered as not improbable, when the manner in which they seem to have received burial in the barrows is remembered. They have been found interred apart from any male, and occupying an important position in the burial mounds; in some cases a woman being the sole tenant of the barrow, a circumstance which is quite inconsistent with their place in the house being merely a servile one.

Physical Types

One of the most important and interesting subjects of inquiry which a knowledge of the contents of the barrows has enabled us to discuss is that of the people themselves, with reference to their physical characteristics. Some description therefore of their form, stature, and general appearance is necessary to

complete, as far as is possible, the imperfect picture we have hitherto been able to present. There are, two classes of barrows upon the wolds, so different in their appearance and their construction, as to suggest at once, that they belong to different periods of time, and the probability that they are the burial places of different peoples. The one is eminently a long mound, the other is circular in its outline; the former being the grave-hills of a markedly dolichocephalic (long-headed) people, the latter producing skulls both dolichocephalic and brachycephalic (round-headed).

The round barrows then, contain two very distinct forms of skull, a long and a round one, together with other less characteristic forms which may be supposed to have belonged to people who were descended from intermarriage between persons whose heads were of the two different types in question. The dolichocephalic head of the round barrows does not differ from the dolichocephalic head of the long barrows. It would appear from this that if, as there is every reason to believe is the case, that the long barrows are the burial places of the oldest occupants of the wolds (at all events in Neolithic times), the long-headed people of the round barrows are the representatives of those persons who buried in the earlier long-shaped mounds. This people was probably intruded upon and conquered by the more powerfully made round-headed folk, who, is as nearly always found to be the case, would in course of time become intermixed with them , and with whom in the end they would become identified as one people. This appears to be the most reasonable, in fact the only way of accounting for the finding of the bones of the long-headed people in the round barrows.

Monuments at Rudstone

On the ridge of the wolds, where the chalk range slopes sharply away to the flat land of Holderness, and near the division between the parishes of Rudstone and Burton Agnes, is a group of barrows which follows more or less the line of the crest of the hill. There are first three, very near together, and standing the furthest to the west, then a single one, and still more to the east another. Somewhat to the south-east of the last are two long mounds, almost parallel, their northern ends gradually losing themselves in the surface-level, but connected together at their southern ends by another long mound. Then about half a mile to the east-north-east is a very large barrow, while other three are placed at considerable intervals still further to the east. One of this group, that the most towards the west was almost entirely removed many years ago, when bones are said to have been found in large quantities: part also of one of the long mounds was taken away fifty years since in order to fill in a neighboring chalk-pit, but finding some human bones, the workmen were stopped, leaving it little disturbed except at one end. I opened seven of the round barrows which remained untouched, and also the long mounds.

The position which the barrows occupy is a very striking one, and must always have been so. The men who raised these funeral mounds looked on the one side over the swelling upland of the wold, bleak, grey, and treeless, their eye taking in on many a distant ridge the burial-places of chiefs of other, though perhaps kindred, tribes; whilst upon an outcrop of rock, lifting itself out of the valley just beneath them, rose the lofty monolith which now stands in Rudstone churchyard, even then it may be hoar and lichen-covered, and to them equally speechless, as to its origin and meaning, as it is to ourselves at the present day. Or possibly they might look upon it with traditionary knowledge of its purport, or even have helped to raise it from its bed, where, laid ages before, it told of a mighty cataclysm, and how it had wandered far from its original home, borne over the waves on some buoyant ice-ship. There it stood, telling them perchance that at its base was laid to rest a mightier warrior than him they were entombing on the height above; or it may have spoken to them as the symbol of a belief, according to which their lives were regulated, and marked the place it stood upon as holy ground.

If they looked to the south there was nothing but a dreary tract of marsh-land, which seemed almost interminable, wherein however, amidst the coarse vegetation and brushwood, the deer and wild swine had their haunt, and where the beaver made a habitation almost equal in point of construction to those they had themselves the skill to form. Beyond was the sea, as yet enlivened by no sail.

A very different sight met our eye, when on a bright frosty day in November, with a strong north-east wind sweeping over the hills, we commenced opening the barrows. Below us was, as of old, the mighty stone,

ancient of days; whilst round it rose in the clear air from many a chimney the pale blue line of smoke, suggestive of comforts these older people never dreamed of. The cold and cheerless wold, with its flocks of bustards and flights of dotterel, had given place to bright-green cultured fields, and flocks of sheep, and teams of horses turning up the rich brown mould in preparation for the golden sheaves of the next coming harvest. And just as great a change had taken place in the other direction, in what had been the dreary swamps of the old days. There the rough sedges and rank growth of rush and reed, and the thickets of the water-loving alder and the willow were replaced by fields teeming with agricultural wealth, and diversified by hedgerows broken up by the varying forms of oak and ash and elm tree. Far away rose the towers of Beverly. Still further in the distance, and dimly seen in the haze of the far-off horizon, were tall chimneys, and the smoke which marked where Hull, with its commerce and manufactures, was itself more stirring and changing than was all the world with which these ancient wold-dwellers were acquainted. In the distance, but nearer to us, was the Bay of Bridlington, where hundreds of ships were lying at anchor, kept there by the wind, which forbade a course to the north. There they were, laden with the products and goods of many a land, manned by the sons of many a clime, making the whole world akin in purpose and pursuit. As we looked, the thought could not but be stirred - How much have we changed from those who, in the dark past, raised the mound on which we are standing, and which they thought would speak with no faltering tongue to all future time !

How much more from us will those have changed who, thousands of years hence, may stand on the self-same spot, and to whom our boasted knowledge may seem as feeble and as strange as we think theirs who laid beside the ashes of the departed the food they thought he needed for the journey to the unknown land.