

ON HUMAN REMAINS IN THE CRYPT OF ST. LEONARD'S CHURCH, HYTHE.

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IN the Crypt beneath the high altar in St. Leonard's Church, Hythe, there is deposited a vast collection of human remains. On either side, as you enter, some six hundred skulls are arranged on ledges, while neatly stacked on the floor there is a pile of bones some twenty-five feet in length, eight feet high, six and half feet thick. It has been calculated that there are the remains here of nearly 7000 people.

Mention is made of them in a work written about two centuries ago, by Rev. J. Brome, who was rector of Cheriton 1679-1719. Speaking of this great stack of dead men's bones and skulls, he says, "How or by what means they were brought to this place (the charnel house under the church), the townsmen are altogether ignorant, and can find no account of the matter." He conjectures himself that they were the remains of some 240 Frenchmen who were killed in an engagement at Hythe A.D. 1295, and that continual accessions were made to the collection "till they increased to so vast a number as is still visible." A century later than this, Hasted has the following notice of them in his *History of Kent* :—

"In the cript or vault under the east end of the middle chancel, is piled up that vast quantity of human skulls and bones, so often mentioned in this History, the pile of them being twenty-eight feet in length, and eight feet in height and breadth. They are by the most probable conjectures supposed to have been the remains of the Britons, slain in a bloody battle fought on the shore, between this place and Folkestone, with the retreating Saxons in the year 456, and to have attained their whiteness by lying for some length of time exposed on the sea shore. Several of the skulls have deep cuts in them, as if made by some heavy weapon, most likely of the Saxons."*

So much for the historical notices of these human remains.

* *History of Kent*, vol. viii., p. 251.

A very careful examination of them was made by Robert Knox, M.D., F.E.S., in 1860. In a paper which he subsequently read on them, before the Ethnological Society, he says, "This pile seems composed mostly of bones of the extremities, but I observed many skulls as well as portions of the *Pelvis*. There were two or three bones which evidently belonged to children, and two *crania* of boys; all the rest had belonged to adult men. I did not observe any female *crania*. The teeth were regular and sound. They seem to have belonged, if not wholly, at least in a great degree, to adult men in the prime of life. Several bear the marks of violence, as if inflicted by a sharp weapon; in one a small orifice penetrated through and through the skull, but the mischief might have been caused by disease, and had most assuredly taken place *long prior to the death of the person*, as was evident by the large amount of new osseous matter deposited all around the opening. Of disease, I found only one specimen among the *crania*, and a second less distinct." Dr. Knox goes on to say that "none of the crests in these *crania* were prominent, nor had the bones any appearance of belonging to a hardy, coarse, primitive race." He qualifies this remark, however, afterwards, for he says, "that in all examined there was a distinct *spheno-parietal suture*, a variety well marked in a skull disinterred at Ozengell, and supposed to be that of an Anglo-Saxon." He adds that "he has in his possession many fragments of Romano-Saxon pottery, and of mediæval coarse earthenware, which have been found very recently in re-stacking a portion of the pile." Dr. Knox alludes in his paper to an examination of these remains which was made by Mr. Walker, "a distinguished anatomist." He boldly asserted that the bones at Hythe were those of Britons and Saxons, that "the rounded skulls were those of the ancient Celtic Britons, and that the elongated heads had belonged to the Saxon invaders, and that the square-shaped heads were Roman." With this theory Mr. Prideaux, F.A.S., generally agreed. He devoted ten days to the careful examination of these remains, during which he submitted to accurate measurements some 600 skulls. He told the Vicar at the time that he was of opinion that a large proportion of them were of the Celtic type, the greater part of the remainder being of the Anglo-Saxon type. Two skulls he believed to be Roman in form, and two Laps or Danes.

Dr. Knox subsequently read a second paper on these remains, before the Ethnological Society. In it he says, "Of the various theories offered as to how these *crania* came to be collected I gave

a preference, after mature consideration, to their being the remains of men who had fallen in battle, who had never been interred singly in graves, but had been buried in a heap, perhaps after long exposure in the open air, and this implied that they were the remains of an enemy slain in fight. The reasons for the preference were:—

“1st. The bones do not (with few exceptions) resemble what we call churchyard bones, their condition refuting such an idea.

“2nd. They seem to be chiefly the bones of adult men—men in the prime of life. Had they been merely churchyard bones, collected at various times, or disinterred at any one period, it must be obvious that in the collection there would be numbers in a state of decay, as well as the remains of women and young persons of all ages. Now nothing of the kind occurs.

“I adhere, therefore, to my opinion, that the most probable theory is that the bones collected in the crypt of the church at Hythe are the remains of men who fell in battle, but at what period has not yet been determined.”

And now to sum up briefly the scientific evidence. It seems so far established—

1. That the bones in the crypt of Hythe Church are almost all those of men in the prime of life.

2. That in all probability they were, if buried at all, buried in a heap, after long exposure in the open air.

3. That the skulls evidence them to have belonged for the most part to two distinct races of the human family, the Celtic and the Saxon while there is reason to think that two were of the form of Roman skulls, and other two of the form of Laps or Danish skulls.

4. That there are distinct incisions, as of some sharp instrument, on many of the skulls. One skull was especially pointed out to me by a number of medical men, who, having microscopically examined it, said that the man must have lived for several weeks after having received the wound, for that osseous matter had begun to form beneath. The careful examination of the skulls and bones would then seem rather in favour of the opinion that they are the remains of men slain in battle—such a battle as that fought between the Britons and Saxons on this very coast in the year 456. We might reasonably expect, if this be so, to find among the skulls those of some Romans who still lingered in the neighbourhood of the Castrum at Lymne, and the Laps may well have come over with the Saxons.

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Confirmation of this opinion is added by the discovery, on the re-stacking of the bones, of remains of Romano-Saxon pottery. But nothing is certain ; though the balance of probability seems in favour of their great antiquity. Neither do we know for certain how they came to be placed in the crypt of Hythe Church. Even 200 years ago, the townsmen could give no reliable account of them. Their real history seems to have been lost in the mist of ages.