

DISCOVERY OF A ROMANO-BRITISH CEMETERY
AT WESTBOROUGH, MAIDSTONE.

BY BEALE POSTE.

THIS cemetery appears to have been rich in its contents, and would, no doubt, have proved very illustrative, had not by far the greater portion of the objects found been, through absolute neglect, broken in pieces, dispersed, and lost. The following are nearly all the particulars which can be collected in reference to it.

The cemetery appears to have occupied a long and rather narrow slip of ground, about one hundred and fifty feet by thirty, lying across the river, in the part of Maidstone parish called Westborough, and according to the map of Maidstone, four hundred and ninety-five yards west by north of All Saints church. It lay on the top of the bank of the former Tunbridge and Maidstone road, which is now removed to another direction, more to the north, and the site is part of the new nursery-ground of Mr. Epps, lying nearly parallel to his forcing-house for exotics, which indeed stands on a part of it. The eastern half of the cemetery only has been taken up. The remainder is crossed by a road, and being laid out and partially planted for nursery purposes, has not been disturbed. Strictly speaking, only one interment was found out of the limits assigned to the cemetery, which appeared to be by the side of a pathway lined with stones, extending in nearly a north-east and south-west direction, and approaching

the cemetery from the river. This pathway was discovered on the ground being deeply trenched. These diggings and moving of the ground continued from about November, 1859, to February or March, 1860.

The quantity of ground to be trenched or otherwise moved being considerable, namely some five or six acres, the chief object of the workmen was evidently to get on as fast as possible with their task; nor did their foremen or directors, though otherwise men of intelligence, appear to have been in anywise sensible that the objects found were of the least consequence, or worthy of any particular notice. Thus no pains whatever were taken in extracting the various objects from the earth, or preserving them from being dashed to pieces by the workmen's tools; and so little was thought of the discovery, that it was almost entirely unmentioned in the adjoining town for some considerable time. The ruthless destruction which took place, leaves me but a short task.

As a general summary, and on a somewhat rough calculation, about twenty-five or thirty skeletons were dug up; as a cart-load of bones was mentioned as removed; and about one hundred and fifty urns, or sepulchral vessels, including some of glass, were met with, as also coins, as it was said, in gold, silver, and copper, were obtained: though I could not verify this last particular myself, not having succeeded in purchasing or meeting with a single one of them. The purpose of the workmen, as the reader will easily imagine from the previous observations, was by no means to dig down beyond their required depth, in search of urns or antiquities; we have therefore no means of knowing how much of this nature they may have passed over, undiscovered in the progress of their work. I will presently enter into a short detail of what the objects which were found principally consisted.

A very noticeable circumstance connected with this Maidstone, or rather Westborough cemetery, is, that it is exclusively Romano-British. These, from some cause not easily assignable, are far more rarely met with than those of the Anglo-Saxons. We find that Faussett, in East Kent, examined seven extensive cemeteries, of which six were Anglo-Saxon, and only the seventh Romano-British, though partially Anglo-Saxon likewise. A reason may be, that the Saxons did not always respect the sites of the burial-places of the former inhabitants when they wanted them for other purposes, but used up their sarcophagi, and other stonework of these repositories, if they required them (see Bede's 'Ecclesiastical History,' book iv. 19, and Mr. C. R. Smith's 'Collectanea Antiqua,' vol. i. p. 188). At other times, again, they used these places of sepulture for themselves, which had the effect of obliterating former interments.

Another thing to be observed in this cemetery is, that the interments are partly pagan and partly Christian. The burning the dead, and urn-burial, denote the former, and the skeletons the latter, as is now universally agreed since the late Mr. Kemble's admissions on the subject, published in the Journal of the Archæological Institute for 1855, No. 48. However, as to the distinction of pagan and Christian, I have met with nothing among the things found at the cemetery which could be construed as being a symbol of Christianity. The population which supplied the interments was apparently a limited number of families, who resided near the bridge or in the environs, of whom a relic, a small statuette or figure of Sylvanus, is engraved in our Vol. I. p. 166, which was found some three hundred yards to the north-east of the cemetery, in the garden of the former hospital of Newark.

Such details as could be procured have been collected respecting Roman Maidstone in our first Volume, pp.

154–175, from which the relative situation of the present cemetery, with respect to the supposed former site of the Roman military station, Vagniacæ, at the north-west extremity of the present town, and distant nearly a mile, can be sufficiently understood. There were, of course, numerous outlying hamlets, villas, and agricultural dwellings in communication with every Roman town or station; and the former existence of these is generally ascertained by the discovery of foundations, or of coins, or of objects of pottery, or of an ornamental nature. Accordingly, traces of Roman occupation have been found in various localities within a mile or two of the town, as in Hayle Place grounds, Postley Fields, Allington Fields, Grove Green, and Vinter's Park. Our present cemetery takes its place among these as one of the number connected with the former station.

No traces of Roman foundations have ever been recorded as having come to light at Westborough; but we see from the experience of the present discoveries how easily they may have been overlooked. Two hills, or declivities of the ground, on either side of the Medway, approached each other where the original Romano-British hamlet, near the present bridge, may be considered to have been situated, which made a favourable place for the passage of the river; since below, on the site of the Fair Meadow, was a small lake or sheet of water, as was shown by a deep longitudinal cutting made through it in the year 1852, for the purposes of the Public Baths and Washhouses; whilst immediately above, opposite the Palace, Church and College, there was another lake of some fifteen acres in extent, formed by the spreading of the channel of the river. These lagoons, or sheets of water, now mostly verdant meadows, were shown to be rather numerous along the ancient course of the Medway, by the borings for the projected atmospheric railway in 1848. The hamlet, then, or dwellings, to which the

Roman Cemetery at Westborough belonged, would appear to have been connected with the ferry or other passage across the river in those times, in this its narrowest part; it being sufficiently known that the present bridge was not built till long after the Conquest.

I need not say much on the subject of the date of this cemetery, concluding that it extended through the greater part of the period of Roman occupation: that is, beginning with the Emperor Antoninus, or about the year 150, down to the Saxon invasion, when, by the year 473, the Britons in Kent were either driven away, or thoroughly subdued, and the Anglo-Saxons occupied their places.

The objects found, as far as they have come to notice, may be now described.—

I. A large earthenware urn, of the species called "Olla," (by estimation) about one foot eleven inches in diameter, and rather more in height. It contained a globe of green glass, about ten and a half inches in diameter, which was filled with fragments of human bones. These glass globes are not uncommon without handles; the present specimen however had two very broad ones, set opposite to each other, and fluted. I conclude the pattern of this is rare, as I cannot find that any have been before found of the same form. The Olla was destroyed by a stroke of a mattock, and the same fate awaited the glass globe; some fragments of this last however were preserved by Mr. Barling, of Maidstone, to whom the Society is indebted for the first intimation of the existence of these interments.

II. Other glass vessels were found, but, as it should seem, not preserved. Among which was a cantharus, or libation vessel or jug, with a long narrow neck, about nine inches high, and in good preservation, except the handle. This specimen of ancient art, becoming the property of one of the labourers, was a few days afterwards, on the family moving, consigned, with two urns, to the parish dustman.

III. Samian ware. There is a patera of this species of pottery, of the unornamented kind, in Mr. Barling's possession. The maker's name is stamped upon it, very plain to be read,—

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IV. Urns, sepulchral vessels, bottles of a rounded shape, pateras, drinking-cups of the ancient form, ampullæ, cruets, etc. etc., all in a very common sort of earthenware. Of these, Mr. Barling has seven or eight specimens, more or less perfect; two, also, are in my possession. I may refer to plates ix. and x., vol. i., of Mr. C. Roach Smith's 'Collectanea Antiqua,' for some good representations of these kinds of objects, as also for a great variety of them.

V. A ring, three inches and a quarter in diameter, of a species of bituminous shale, otherwise brown jet. This ring, which is in my possession, is of a thick form, the hoop or round of it measuring half an inch, notwithstanding its interior surface has been worked away, and made quite flat. The other dimension of the round or hoop, which likewise has been flattened on one of its sides to the extent of an eighth of an inch, measures three-quarters of an inch. One of these rings, but larger and more ornamented, is engraved in Douglas's 'Nænia Britannica,' plate xiv. fig. 1. Antiquaries are not decided as to their use. They have been suggested as being *armillæ*, that is, ornaments worn on the arms; and, again, as rings through which the hair was passed in female head-dress. Jet (in Latin *gagates*) was used as a charm, as we find by ancient authorities, which would not have interfered with either of the above uses. These rings are rather rare. In the present case a skeleton was found, towards the middle of which lay the bones of a dog, with this ring between; at least, so the account was given, which also added that nothing else was found.