

ON CELTIC TUMULI IN EAST KENT.

BY C. H. WOODRUFF, F.S.A.

THE abundance and variety of sepulchral relics discovered in the county of Kent, and especially in the Eastern division, are well known, and have been well illustrated in former volumes of 'Archæologia Cantiana.' Saxon cemeteries have yielded, and continue to yield, objects of peculiar beauty and interest. Traces of the Roman occupation, and of Roman obsequies, meet us at every step, and prove that our county was surpassed by no other part of England in populousness or refinement at that period. But in one respect Kent may be said to be "*magnas inter opes inops.*" The archæology of an earlier epoch presents a different aspect. Our knowledge of a more primitive people as evidenced by their funereal customs is scanty. So few and far between are the traces of a race adopting similar sepulchral rites to those once practised in other parts of the island, and to which a Celtic origin has been generally assigned, that so great an authority as the late Mr. Kemble was of opinion that the Celts made no settlements in East Kent. An interment to which I shall allude, and which has been considered Celtic, he referred to a Teutonic race. I think it will be clear that his theory has not been corroborated by the later discoveries, which will be

described. Their importance lies in the fact that they connect the sepulchral usages of Kent in early ages with those of many other parts of Great Britain, and supply a link in a chain of evidence which has hitherto been imperfect.

When Stukeley wrote his Itinerary there were many large grave-mounds in East Kent, and his description of some of them indicates that they were the work of a Celtic race. That these have been obliterated, that their contents have perished unrecorded, is not surprising. The existence of large moors and unenclosed tracts of land in such counties as Yorkshire, Wiltshire, and Dorsetshire, has been favourable to the preservation of the barrows, which stud their surface, for the researches of the modern investigator. In Kent a more advanced state of cultivation has caused their removal, in most cases, before any one was at hand to take an interest in their contents. The rich, unctuous soil of which these barrows are often composed, forming a good manure, has given an additional motive for levelling what is always an obstruction to tillage. From the fragile nature of its material, and the rudeness of its workmanship, it is seldom that Celtic pottery is found in a perfect state or excites much interest in the finder.

Douglas in his 'Nænia Britannica,' in the Chapter on Great Barrows,* gives an account of a large British tumulus opened in Kent (probably in the Eastern division, but the locality is not specified), in which was found "a large brown-coloured urn of unbaked clay, ten inches high and seven-and-a-half in diameter, with a few burnt bones; the fragments so few in number that they did not correspond but to a small proportion

* P. 158.

of the human body; a circumstance very common in urn-burial, and which, corroborating with ancient authors, prove, by the pains taken to consume the bones, and to reduce them into a small compass, the greater the honour to have been shewn the remains of the dead." A representation of this urn is given in the vignette to the chapter, and the author calls it a good specimen to discriminate between the Roman and those usually called British. It should be added that the engraving appears to represent a Romano-British rather than a Celtic urn: the narrowed mouth distinctive of late pottery is seldom seen in the archaic.

In volume xxx. of the 'Archæologia'* the opening of a barrow in Iffin's Wood, near Canterbury, is described in a letter from Mr. Akerman to Sir Henry Ellis. The substance of his account is as follows:—

"About two miles S.E. of Canterbury is a place called Iffin's Wood, a little to the right of the Roman Road called Stone Street, which ran from Durovernum to the Portus Lemanis (Lymne) near Hythe. Within this wood are the vestigia of an ancient camp, and besides this camp there are a number of different intrenchments throughout this large wood. About 250 yards to the westward of the camp is a tumulus 150 feet in circumference and nearly six feet high. Mr. Bell, who conducted the excavation, caused a trench four feet broad to be dug in the centre of the barrow, and from this trench, and to the eastward of it, five urns were brought to light. Four of the five were precisely alike in size and form; but the fifth was much larger, and slightly different in shape and ornament, the former being 18 inches in height, and 13 inches in diameter at the broadest part, and the latter not less than 25 inches in height, and 22 inches in diameter. The material of which these urns were made was of the rudest description, consisting of half-baked

* P. 57.

clay, mixed with numerous fragments of silex, which crumbled at the touch, so that their removal entire was impossible. The urns were all found *with their mouths downwards*, filled with ashes, charcoal, and minute fragments of bones. The mouths of the urns were closely stopped with unburnt clay, which appeared to have been firmly rammed in. Not a vestige of any weapon, bead, or other ornament could be discovered. The soil of which the barrow was formed was most excellent brick earth, which appeared perfectly well tempered and fit for immediate use, without further preparation, and contained not a single pebble larger than a bean, and very few of these. Some of the urns, when uncovered, were found leaning to one side, and by the impressions made in the surrounding clay were evidently cracked on the day of their deposit. It is remarkable that nothing was discovered in the western half of the barrow. The urns (the only ornament on which was a row of indentations, apparently made with the end of the finger) were standing on nearly the same level as the surrounding ground, which on digging into it appeared not to have been disturbed."

From the apparent haste and irregularity of this interment Mr. Bell supposed that the remains were those of men killed in battle; and that the trenches in Iffin's Wood mark an encampment where Cæsar defeated the Britons under Cassivellanus. A plan shewing the position of the interments, and a drawing of the eastern half of the barrow, shewing the form of the urns and the extent of the excavations, accompany Mr. Akerman's paper.

This description, the representations of the urns, their position, the half-baked clay of which they were made, and their ornamentation, all raise a strong presumption that this was a very similar interment to those found in other counties, and to which a Celtic origin has always been assigned. The rite of cremation was very commonly practised by Celts in this

island. In Cornwall no sepulchral urns have been found with unburnt bones. In many localities it seems to have co-existed with, and finally to have taken the place of, inhumation, till the latter practice was revived in Christian times. It is not clear, however, in my opinion, that cremation was practised in Britain before the expansion of the Roman power, although there can be little doubt that it was practised before the Roman invasion. The size of the largest urn is remarkable. Vessels of this class rarely exceed twenty inches in height. There is, however, in the British Museum an urn from Felixstowe, in Suffolk, of perhaps equal dimensions, which bears a resemblance to the Iffin's Wood example, and the ornament is partly produced in the same way by a row of punctures made apparently with the finger. Dorsetshire pottery also presents similar marks.

In the autumn of 1870, John Brent, Esq., F.S.A., explored a tumulus on Mountain Hill, Cage Hill, in the parish of Stowting, which bears indications of Celtic origin. In his account read before the Society of Antiquaries, Mr. Brent states that he found, near the surface, portions of a British urn of reddish clay, slackly baked, and lying evidently out of the place of their original deposit; small knobs projected under the rim of the vessel, perforated by minute clear cut holes. An urn, with similar perforated knobs, is figured in Borlase's '*Nænia Cornubiæ*,'* and one found at Darley Dale has the same peculiarity. About two feet lower, what appeared to be a flint flake and the charred blade-bone of a sheep or pig were found upon a floor of wood ashes. Mr. Brent considered that this floor of burnt ashes indicated some

* P. 231.

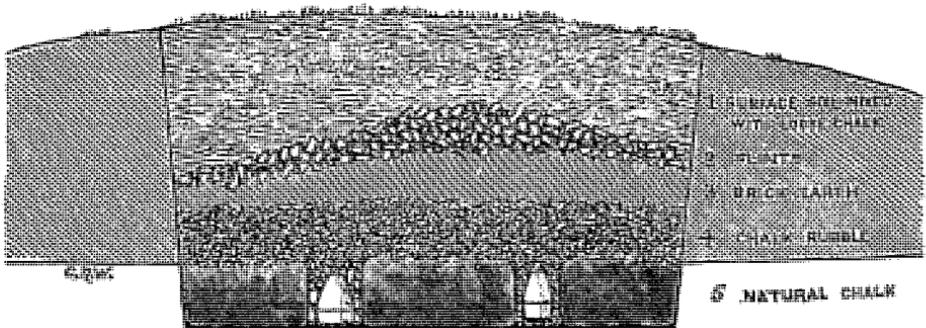
sacrifice or funeral feast. . After the excavations were commenced, it was ascertained that the mound had been accidentally explored some years previously, when part of the top had been taken off, and that some earthen vessels had been found. From the large size of the barrow, and from the alterations which it had undergone, Mr. Brent thought that he might even then have missed the primary interment.

We now pass to the Ringwoud tumuli, explored by the writer in the autumn of 1872. Two barrows stand east and west on the high ridge of the Free Down in the parish of Ringwoud, between Deal and Dover, about a mile from the sea—an elevation which commands a view of the whole coast line between the North and South Foreland. The western, which was first opened, is seventy-two yards in circumference, slightly oval in form, and four feet six inches at its highest part above the natural level. Near the centre of the mound, at a depth of three feet, the workmen came upon a deposit of burnt bones, probably a secondary interment, without any trace of pottery or other remains. To the eastward of this spot, after removing a heap of flint stones, and passing through a layer of brick earth, we came upon loose chalk, and below this rubble the primary interments were discovered, all being rather to the east of the centre of the barrow. Scattered throughout the mound, bones and teeth of a horse occurred, suggestive of the custom of sacrificing horses at the funeral pyre, mentioned by Tacitus,* and practised by the Indians in recent times.

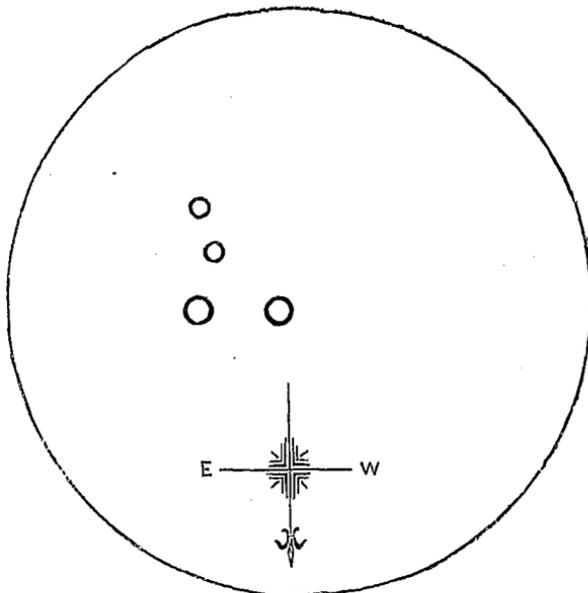
The accompanying section of the barrow will best explain the method of its construction, and the plan

* "Quorundam igni et equus adjicitur." Tacitus, De Morib. Germ. cap. xxvii.

below shews the relative position of the interments. Circular cists had been dug in the natural chalk to a depth of about eighteen inches, and in these cavities had been placed four inverted urns, covering deposits of calcined bones, great care having been



SECTION OF CENTRAL PORTION OF WEST TUMULUS.



PLAN OF THE WEST TUMULUS, SHEWING RELATIVE POSITIONS OF URNS.

Fig. 1.



height 16 inches.

FIG. NICHOLSON'S 1864

THE RINGWOULD URNS.

Fig. 2.



height 13 inches

taken that no interstices should intervene between the floor of the cist and the rim of the urn. In one case, an attempt appeared to have been made to protect the urn from superincumbent pressure, by making an arched niche in the side of the cavity prepared for its reception. The spaces between the sides of the cists and the urns were filled up with chalk rubble and flints. The first that came to light crumbled in pieces on being touched; its size was about the same as that of the smaller of the urns of which representations are annexed. [Pl. I., fig. 2.] The next [Pl. I., fig. 2] was extracted nearly perfect. It is slightly ornamented with vertical lines around the upper portion. The third urn had been crushed by the weight of the soil; the fragments shew that it was almost identical with the large urn on Plate I. Within these fragments, with the mouth stopped with a lump of half-baked clay, was lying a little cup of very rude workmanship. [Pl. II., fig. 5.] The bones in this interment appeared to be those of an infant or young person. The fourth and last urn was uncovered in a perfect state, but fell in pieces when we attempted to remove it. The number of fragments, and the fragile nature of the ware, made its subsequent restoration a work of much difficulty. Around the upper portion are encircling lines, and between them a chevron pattern produced by impressing a twisted cord or thong in the moist clay. Below are four projecting bosses or handles, ornamented in the same way. On the heap of burnt bones covered by this urn were two small vessels [Pl. II., figs. 3 and 4], the first-named standing upon the other. The larger has irregular cord-like lines round the upper part, and below them is a rude chevron pat-

tern. The smaller is ornamented by an alternate arrangement of vertical and horizontal lines. It is perforated by two small holes near the base, and contained a few fragments of some burnt substance resembling linen. The other small vessels were empty. On sifting the bones we found four small beads of a light green vitreous paste. [Pl. I., fig. 6.] The material of which all the pottery is made is a coarse, dark-coloured clay, which seems to have been subjected to no more regular process of firing than what might have been afforded on the funeral pyre. All the vessels, with the exception of the perforated cup, are of very rude workmanship, and all are hand-made.

The large urns will be at once recognized as belonging to a not uncommon type of Celtic pottery. Fig. 1 may be compared with an urn from Belhevie, in Fifeshire, figured in 'Horæ Ferales,'* while the handles are a common feature in Dorset, Devon, and Cornish types. Fig. 2, although more regularly made, is not unlike an urn found at Cleatham in Lincolnshire.

The largest of the small cups on Plate II. belongs to a class which may be designated as "miniature urns," and seems in this instance to have been used for some such purpose as that to which the so-called "food vessels" were applied. It closely resembles a cup found inside an urn at Matlock in 1848,† and an

* Pl. xxix., fig. 7.

† See Bateman's 'Ten Years' Diggings.' The vase is there called an "incense cup." In the appendix to that work, p. 281, a small urn is engraved, which contained incinerated remains. Mr. Bateman supposed that these miniature urns are of a later period than, and superseded the use of, large urns. Neither of these uses seems applicable to the specimen before us.

Fig. 5.



height 2½ inches.

Fig. 4.



height 2¾ inches.

Fig. 6.



Size of Originals.

Fig. 7.



Fig. 3.



height 3½ inches.

THE RINGWOULD URNS.

urn from Boscawen-ûn, in Cornwall, of rather larger dimensions, is very similar in shape.*

The name of "incense cups" has been given to such vessels as figs. 4 and 5 on Plate II., but without any sufficient reason. One not unlike the ruder of the two was found in Dorsetshire filled with small birds' bones.† The other may be compared with two of these cups figured in Bateman's 'Ten Years Diggings,'‡ one of which is similarly pierced at the side, and with an almost identical specimen from a Sussex barrow.§ It has been conjectured that these holes were for suspension. In the present instance, from the fact that the mouth of the cup was covered, and from the burnt substance inside, it seems more likely that they were made to allow the escape of smoke, and the admission of air to a burning substance within. There is a small cup of Romano-British ware from the Upchurch marshes in the Geological Museum, in Jermyn Street, which is perforated in the same way by two holes at the side. Some beads like those on Plate II. were taken from a barrow on Upton Lovell Down, in Wiltshire, and are described as being "in long pieces, notched between, so as to resemble a string of beads of green and blue glass."|| They seem to have been designed to form part of some ornament, like the jet necklace found at Windle Nook, in Derbyshire, in which parallel lines of long, narrow beads are alternated with broad flat plates of jet. Mr. Roach Smith, in his 'Collectanea Antiqua,'¶ gives a drawing of this

* Borlase's 'Nænia Cornubiæ,' p. 222.

† See 'Barrow Diggers,' a Dialogue. Plate ix.

‡ pp. 281 and 283 app.

§ Horsfield's 'History of Lewes.' Pl. v., fig. 21.

|| 'Archæologia,' vol. xv., p. 126. ¶ Vol. v., pl. xv.

necklace, and compares it with a necklace carved on a sepulchral monument at Lincoln, representing a Roman lady, and he assigns an early Romano-British origin to the Derbyshire specimen.

It is remarkable that, both here and in Iffin's Wood, all the interments were to the east of the centre of the mound, and that nothing was found in the western half of the barrow.

The eastern tumulus was next opened. Externally it differs very little from the other, its dimensions being about the same. It was found to be composed entirely of chalk, and, although we excavated the greater part of the mound, no traces of sepulture were discovered. The number of barrows which have been found to contain no deposit, gives support to the supposition that they were prepared beforehand, and opened for successive interments, like family vaults, and not raised after the burial. Near the surface was found a fragment of pottery. [Pl. II., fig. 7.] It is well burnt, ornamented with irregular incised lines, and probably formed part of a domestic, and not of a sepulchral vessel.

Shortly after the examination of the Ringwoud tumuli, a small barrow, about half a mile to the S.E. towards St. Margaret's Bay, was opened. It is 24 feet in diameter, and not more than two feet in height. From an account communicated to the Society of Antiquaries by the Rev. F. J. Rawlins, F.S.A., it appears that a cairn of flints covered a circular grave of two feet six inches in diameter and three feet six inches deep. At the depth of twenty inches were found portions of a *femur* and *tibia*; and, a little deeper, portions of an arm. At the bottom, upon the natural chalk, was found a skull resting on the frontal bone. From the thinness of the skull the remains were considered to

be those of a young person, and from the position of the bones it would appear that the body had been buried head downwards, with the limbs compressed on the abdomen. Charcoal and pieces of calcined flint occurred in the mound, and, although the bones which were found did not appear to have been subjected to fire, they only represented a small portion of the body. If we suppose that cremation had been intended, and that the body from some cause or other had been imperfectly consumed, the position of the unburnt bones in the grave was probably accidental. Not much weight, therefore, can be attached to this apparently extraordinary method of interment. Marine shells, together with a pebble of iron-stone, were found in the grave. Mr. Bateman found inside an urn, in one of the Derbyshire barrows, two light coloured pebbles and an article of iron ore polished, which he considered to have been used as an amulet.

The heap of flints found in this and in one of the Ringwould tumuli is a very usual feature of Celtic grave-mounds; and the custom of throwing flints, pebbles, and, in many cases, broken pieces of pottery over the grave, may perhaps throw some light on a difficult passage in Shakspeare.

It has been supposed that, after the introduction of Christianity, these old Pagan practices were retained in order to stigmatize those who, like heathens, had laid violent hands on themselves; and that those persons were interred with remnants of heathen ceremonies who were not deemed worthy of Christian burial. Some such usage, or a tradition of it, may have lingered in parts of England till Shakspeare's time.

When Hamlet, at the burial of Ophelia, observes the "maimed rites," he supposes that the deceased had

perished by her own hand. The priest, in his answer to the enquiries of Laertes as to what ceremonies were to be observed at the obsequies, says,—

“ Her death was doubtful ;
And, but that great command o’ersways the order,
She should in ground unsanctified have lodg’d
Till the last trumpet ; for charitable prayers,
Shards, flints, and pebbles should be thrown on her.”

Hamlet, Act v., Sc. 1.

A large barrow, opened by the writer at West Langdon, near Dover, proved to have been previously disturbed. It is in a ploughed field, formerly downs, and its dimensions are equal to those of the Ringwould tumuli. The central portion was found to be composed of a coarse loam ; the sides are of chalk. At a depth of six feet, and below the natural level, the workmen came upon some large stones laid as a pavement, which we subsequently learnt had been found in the barrow when it was opened about twenty years ago. Whether these stones had originally formed a cist could not be ascertained.*

This completes the short list of barrows which have come under the notice of the writer, and which he believes to be Celtic. A comparison of the Iffin’s Wood with the Ringwould interments, leaves little doubt that they belong to the same race and period ; and when the Ringwould remains are compared with the contents of barrows from other parts of England, their Celtic origin seems equally clear. The question of date next arises, but much must be done before a satisfactory answer can be given. The practice of

* A worked flint was found in this barrow ; unfortunately it was a *gun-flint* !

cremation, and one or two other indications, which have been mentioned above in connection with the objects discovered, lead me to conjecture that the remains must be referred to a period at any rate not much anterior to the Roman occupation. Mr. Borlase, in his recent valuable essay,* which has thrown much light on Cornish sepulchral remains, brings forward some conclusive arguments in favour of a post-Roman origin for most of the interments, and probably for all the sepulchral pottery, of Cornwall. But, of course, it is not necessary to assign so late a date to similar remains in Kent. No one will assume that, because identical customs prevailed in different parts of the land, therefore those customs were contemporaneous. Kent, according to the well-known testimony of Cæsar, was far in advance of the rest of Britain in civilization before the Roman occupation, and practices, which had been adopted from contact through Gaul with the Roman world, may have taken centuries to penetrate into remote parts of the island.

But carefully noted facts, and not conjecture, will help us. The scanty investigations here recorded must be supplemented by future researches, and much more evidence must be brought to light, before we can arrive at sufficient data for generalization. There is little doubt that undisturbed Celtic tumuli still exist here and there in both divisions of the county, and I shall feel very grateful for any information as to their locality, and still more so for any facilities which may be afforded me for explorations. Destructive causes, as has been stated above, are continually at work, and we must endeavour to preserve the little

* 'Nænia Cornubia.' Longmans, 1872.

that remains before that little becomes less. Other fields of enquiry may be more fertile, but this is not the least interesting. The burial mounds are among the few sources open to us, for gaining knowledge of the habits and customs of our early predecessors. The race has perished. Even now, we may almost say that "their memorial has perished with them."