

THE TOMB OF HORSA¹

By JOHN H. EVANS, F.S.A.

“The bones of Agamemnon are a show,
And ruined is his royal monument,
The dust and awful treasures of the dead
Hath Learning scattered wide.”

ANDREW LANG.

THE interest which mankind has always shown in the tombs and memorials of the great Dead doubtless springs from an ancient religious impulse, for the first Tomb possibly became the first Temple, and its guardian the first Priest. Archæology itself was born among the tombs and its earliest votaries played with bones and collected the dust of mummies which “Cambyses or time had spared”, not to speak of Arab tomb-riflers. The Gothic Revival, with its interest in picturesque decay, dealt lovingly with the memorials of the dead, and the tumbled tomb and shattered sepulchre were fit subjects for the pencil of Mr. Simpkinson and like-minded antiquaries. Our Churches and Abbeys are crammed with the tombs of mitred bishops, cross-legged knights and Tudor families, once shining in brilliant colours which have faded in our harsher day; outside, our Downs and vales are scattered with tumuli and megaliths, a range of sepulchral monuments which cover an immense period of time. But of that period during which Roman Britain was changing to Angleland there remains no memorial of the heroic dead. Arthur, *inclutus rex*, has no tomb, for even the simple peasantry of the West saw through the Glastonbury fake and rejected it; Ambrosius Aurelianus, “sprung from the purple”, Vortigern, *superbus tyrannus*, Hengest, the first Bretwalda, Cerdic himself, founder of our Royal line, all lie in unremembered graves, and of all that company of Roman, British and English leaders whose forms are dimly discerned through the mist of legend and the dust of battle, we have but one story of an entombment; and it is that of the colourless Horsa.

This fact is remarkable enough in itself, for Horsa was overshadowed by his great brother Hengest, and is but a name in a dubious record. Both were associated with the *Adventus Saxonum*, the “Coming of the Saxons”, an event which, according to orators in a recent celebration, brought to this island all that now makes life worth living; possibly the Romano-Britons thought otherwise, but they are only the defeated

¹ This paper does not commit the writer to a belief in the historicity of Horsa, for we are here dealing with tradition and not history.

dead, and quite properly had no virtues, a point upon which modern commentators agree with St. Gildas Sapiens.

The story of the invasions and campaigns of the Teutonic English in the fifth century is too well known to bear repetition, and we are only concerned here with the statement that Horsa was killed and buried (or cremated) somewhere.

The earliest literary source for the events of this period is the "Book" of Gildas.¹ From internal evidence it would appear that it was written sometime between 516 and 547 and its homogeneous character shows that it is the work of one writer. These two facts give it a high authority, but unfortunately the historical section is a vague and incoherent narrative which gives one puzzling computus, one battle-name and two personal names, while the historical perspective is much distorted. Gildas appears to have known very little of what occurred in the eastern part of the country, and nothing at all about events in Kent, while he refers to the invaders in terms of sulphurous hatred, calling them "a brood of whelps breaking forth from the lair of the barbaric lioness" and a "jail gang of accomplices and curs", whose devastations he describes in many purple passages. The *Historia*² which goes under the name of Nennius is a composite work built up through many editions, the earliest of which may have been compiled soon after 738, while the latest recension carries a continuation down to 910. The sources of Nennius are various and disparate, but those which bear upon this enquiry are the oral and written legends and the Annals of the Irish and Saxons to which he himself refers.³ If Gildas gives us too little information about the Saxons, Nennius gives us too much, for his account of them and of their doings is padded out with material of an obvious romantic and mythical character. Of the death of Horsa he writes :

*"Et Guorthimer contra illos quator bella avida gessit. Primum bellum ut super dictum est ; secundum super flumen Derguentid ; tertium bellum super vadum, quod dicitur in lingua eorum Episford, in nostra autem lingua Rit Hergabail, et ibi cecidit Hors cum filio Guorthigirni, cujus nomen erat Categern."*⁴

"And eagerly did Guorthimer fight four battles against them. The first as above-mentioned ; the second on the river Derguentid ; the third battle on the ford which is called in their language Episford, but in our language Rithergabail, and there Horsa fell together with the son of Guorthigern, whose name was Categern."

¹ Gildas, *De Excidio et Conquestu Britannicæ* generally referred to as *The Loss of Britain*, but sometimes well named the *Liber Querulus*.

² Nennius, *Historia Britonum*.

³ "*Vetus traditio seniorum, veteres libri veterum nostrorum,*" and "*Annales Scottorum Saxonumque.*"

⁴ Stovenson, 1838. *Nenni ; Historia Britonum, Cap 44, 34.*

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The *fons et origo* of the story of Horsa's Tomb lies in one sentence in the Venerable Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*, and nowhere else. Here we read :

“ *Duces fuisse perhibentur eorum primi duo fratres Hengest et Horsa ; e quibus Horsa postea occisus in bello a Brettonibus hactenus in orientabilibus Cantiae partibus monumentum habet suo nomini insigne.*”¹

This is rendered in Stapleton's delightful Elizabethan translation as :
 “ The chief captains of the Saxons are said to have been two brothers, Hengest and Horsa, of the which Horsa being after slain in battle of the Britons, was buried in the east parts of Kent, where his tomb bearing his name is yet to show.”

The chief MSS. of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*² all make the same statement to the effect that “ Hengest and Horsa fought against Wyrtegeorne, the king at the place which is called Aegelesthrep, and there Horsa was slain.” Herein the British King Wyrtegeorne (Vortigern, Guorthigern) is named, but not Guorthimer (Vortimer) or Categern ; nor does this “ English ” chronicle say anything of the burial of Horsa. The battle-place Aegelesthrep is rendered in Wheloc's 1644 translation of the now destroyed Cott. MS. Otho B. xi, as Aegelesford.

There is no need to quote other later chronicles since they all repeat Bede, Nennius or the Chronicle.

The summary of information is thus :

Gildas	None.
Nennius	Hors killed at the battle of Episford (Saxon) or Rithergabail (British).
Bede	Horsa killed in battle with the British, buried in East Kent, in a tomb which was said to exist when Bede was writing, and was in some manner distinguished by the name of Horsa.

The Chronicle Horsa slain in the battle of Aegelesthrep or Aegelesford.

All these authorities agree that Horsa was killed in battle, but beyond this there are omissions. That Bede does not give the battle-place at which Horsa was killed is not surprising for he was writing an ecclesiastical history which was not concerned with battles and campaigns. It is certain that some of the sources of the *Historia* were known to Bede, but it is not clear that he was in any way influenced by the former. It is true that the various compilers of Nennius were British and, therefore, not likely to be interested in the details of the

¹ Plummer. *Venerabilis Bædæ ; Historiam Ecclesiasticam Gentis Anglorum*, Bk 1, Cap XV.

² *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Rolls Edn. Vol I, 21. Vol. II, 12.

disposal of the body of a chieftain who was an enemy of their ancestors, but on the other hand there is a good deal of English material in Nennius, including English genealogies, and in the passage quoted above the Saxon name of Rithergabail is given. It has frequently been noted that Bede knew and recorded a great deal more about the southern Saxon kingdoms than the northern ones, and he entirely neglected the early traditions of his own Northumbria. As regards the Kentish information it is known that he received from correspondents, chiefly Nothelm of London, afterwards Archbishop of Canterbury, and Albinus, Abbot of Canterbury, either copies of actual Kentish chronicles or collections of current oral traditions regarding the early history of the Kentish Kingdom and the Diocese of Canterbury. We shall never know in what precise form he received this information, which is unfortunate for this enquiry, since if written chronicles were sent, then it by no means follows that Horsa's Tomb was actually known in Bede's own time; whereas if oral traditions were written down for his benefit then there is a strong probability that a tomb or grave-mound was known which was attributed to Horsa. What is surprising is that no extant MS. of the Chronicle gives the story of the Tomb, for the Chronicle was entirely English in spirit and its various compilers used the work of Bede, even if they did not possess independently his peculiar Kentish data.

The sentence quoted above from the Latin text of Bede has often been translated, and not always in the same sense. Stapleton, as we have seen, renders it "buried in the east parts of Kent, where his tomb, bearing his name is yet to show,"¹ while Giles has "was buried in the eastern parts of Kent, where a monument, bearing his name, is still in existence."² Gidley goes further, "has unto this time a monument in the eastern parts of Kent with his name inscribed upon it."³

The difficulty here is to understand exactly what Bede or his Kentish friends meant by the last five words of the sentence. Was there a tomb with a memorial stone inscribed with the name of Horsa or merely a mound known by his name? It seems to me that Gidley goes too far in his translation, and that all the sentence implies is that Horsa had a tomb in East Kent "distinguished by his name", or, "made famous by his name."⁴ This is the strongest probability, for we have the parallel example of the grave-mound of Taplow, which is undoubtedly the "hlaw" or burial-mound of Tæppa, a Saxon warrior of (possibly) the

¹ Stapleton. *Eccl. Hist. of the English People*, Bede, 1935, p. 24.

² Giles. *Bede's Eccl. Hist.*, p. 24.

³ Gidley's Translation, 1870, 39.

⁴ Mr. L. R. A. Grove points out that Juvenal (VIII, p. 32) uses *insignis* in this sense, "*indignis genere et praeclaro nomine tantum insignis*", i.e. "unworthy in origin and distinguished only in possessing a noble name."

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sixth century. Wade Evans has suggested¹ that the story may have arisen through a misconception, and that what the ecclesiastics of Kent saw was a Roman memorial stone with a mutilated inscription which included the word "Hors" for cohorts, i.e. cohort. Unfortunately for this enticing theory, although I have consulted the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, and have particularly searched Vol. VII *Inscriptiones Britannicæ Latineæ*, I have been unable to trace a single Roman inscription which contains the word "hors", for cohort is almost invariably contracted to "COH", or rendered as "Cohorti, Cohortibus". And we must doubt if the Saxons would have appropriated an existing Roman inscribed stone for their purposes. We do not know enough about their attitude to the works of the Romans in Britain. In the West, where there was a gap of from 150 to 200 years between the "Departure of the Romans" and the "Coming of the English", the memory of the Roman builders had died out, and their visible efforts were regarded as the work of wizards, giants or fairies; but in Kent, where the gap fell within the life-span of a man, it is incredible that the invaders did not know that the forts, cities, buildings and roads were built by a great people who had recently evacuated the country, whose Empire still existed, and whose fame was immense, particularly among the barbarians of North-West Euröpe. Furthermore, there were considerable numbers of Teutonic English in the Roman Army and the Legion II Augusta, which was stationed at Richborough to the very end of the occupation, was recruited from the Lower Rhine country. The gap in continuity was less in Kent than anywhere else in the country. But in any case, any such stone would surely have borne a runic inscription. The overwhelming probability is that Horsa had a mound which was known as "Horsa's Mound", "Horsa's Grave" or "Horsa's Low".

Wade Evans further suggests that Horsa's Memorial Stone was the Lapis Tituli of the fourth battle of the Kentish campaign according to Nennius, but which is recorded in the Chronicle as having been fought at Wippedes fleet. Now the Chronicle also tells us that the invaders landed at Ypwines fleet, which was almost certainly in Thanet, and both this place and Wippedes fleet have been identified as Ebbsfleet in Thanet. These identifications are not certain, for the forms may be corrupt, and Wallenberg² makes the suggestion that Hyppelles fleet, an early form of Ebbsfleet, comes from an O.E. word meaning a heap or mound. If these various hints and guesses add up to anything worth relying upon they suggest that Horsa was buried near the original landing place of his band, that a later battle was fought around his mound, that the battle of the Lapis Tituli equates with the battle of

¹ Wade Evans, *Nennius's Hist. of the Britons*, 53n, p. 67.

² Wallenberg, *The Place Names of Kent*, p. 596.

Wippedes fleet, and thus the Saxon record confirms the British tradition, preserved by both Gildas and Nennius, of a campaign of temporary expulsion of the invaders from Kent.

Guided by all our authorities the course of events concerning Horsa may have been in this wise. He was killed at the battle of Rithergabail, Episford, Aegelestrep or Aegelesford, and this has been located by general consent at Aylesford.¹ The dead chief was then carried out of debatable territory to East Kent, and to any unprejudiced person this must surely indicate the country to the east of Canterbury, near the original landing place of the invaders. The form of the grave would have been a barrow or mound, but the body may have been burned before interment, or directly buried. Cremation was the earlier rite, but it gave place at an early date to inhumation. There is something to be said for a ceremonial burning of the body on traditional lines and the burial of the ashes. No case is known of the early English erecting a memorial stone over a barrow, and the probability is remote.

From the time of Bede in the eighth century to that of Elizabeth in the sixteenth chroniclers were sometimes content to repeat the Bedan story, but with Lambarde a new discussion arose as to the identification of the tomb. Perambulating through Kent in 1570 he saw with astonishment the strange structure of Kits Coty House and by a natural association of ideas and words gave it as his opinion that it was the tomb of the British Prince Categern, who fell with Horsa on the fatal field of Aylesford. He then goes on to write :²

“ Alfred of Beverley and Richard of Cicester³ have mentioned a place in E. Kent where Horsa was buried, and which even to their days did continue the memory of his name. We have in this Shyre a towne called Horsmundene, which resolved into Saxon Orthographie is . . . the valley of the monument or memorial of Horsa. But for as much as that lyeth in the Southe part of this country towards Sussex, and for that I read that Horsa was slaine at Ailesford it is more reasonable to affirm that he was buried at Horsted, which signifieth the place or stede of Horsa. Hengest and Horsa whose names be synomenous and signifieth a Horse.”

¹ Accepting the tradition, the identification is fair enough, if we remember that the Saxon *g* was pronounced like our *y*, and that “threp” (i.e. thorp, a small town by a stream) fits Aylesford as well as the alternative “ford”.

² Lambarde, 1576, *The Perambulation of Kent*, p. 288.

³ The references are: Alfred of Beverley (fl. 1140) *Alfredi Beverlacensis; Annales sive Historia de Gestis Regum Britannice* (Hearne, 1716, Lib. VI, 78) who repeats the sentence of Bede. Richard of Cirencester (c. 1335-c. 1401) *Ricardus de Cirencestria; Speculum Historiale de Gestis Regum Angliae*, 447-1066. J. E. B. Mayer, Rolls Series No. 30, Vol. i, 15. The words are: “*Sepulcrum quoque Horsi in orientaliibus Kantie partibus adhuc famosum ostenditur*,” merely quoting Bede.

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It will be noted that Lambarde did not assert that an actual tomb existed at Horsted, and it is left to the next historian Weever to state definitely that a structure similar to Kits Coty House once stood there :

“ The like Monument was of Horsa at Horsted, which storms and time have now devoured.”¹

Philipot follows this with :

“ And in our grandfathers memory, there were the scattered remains of diverse huge massy stones, which storms and other impressions of time, have now altogether demolished ; and these certainly were, in elder times, composed into the figure of a monument, to shroud the ashes of this Horsa ; as those of Cits Cothouse, above Alresford, were framed into the same proportionate mould, to secure the dust, or at least to point out to posterity the memory of Categern.”²

Camden repeats Lambarde, and adds nothing to the story, while there is no echo of Horsted in Stukeley, who visited the Aylesford district in 1722. Forty-one years later Colebrooke took the trouble to visit Horsted, and after some difficulty in locating the farmstead, was shown what :

“ Was reputed to be Horsa’s monument by the people of the country. On the side of a hill, in the middle of a wood, is a great quantity of flint stones, which, by the length of time and the dripping of the trees, are overgrown with moss. From the situation they seem to have been shot out of carts, to fill up a hollow or valley, and to have been collected from the neighbouring fields.”³

Disappointed in his search Colebrooke declared that Camden was wrong about Kits Coty House, which was really the tomb of Horsa. Hasted, writing in 1782, supposes that Horsted takes its name from Horsa, who was buried there, and that :

“ In the fields near it, there are numbers of large stones dispersed over the lands, some standing and others thrown down by time, which is probable were placed as memorials of those who were slain on the side of the Saxons in this memorable encounter, and were buried here.”⁴

Those who have accepted this dubious story of a “ tomb ” at Horsted point triumphantly to the fact that in his *Custumale Roffense* of 1788, Thorpe actually published a map showing the “ reputed situation of

¹ Weever, 1631, *Ancient Funerall Monuments*, p. 317.

² Philipot, 1659, *Villare Cantianum*, p. 293.

³ Colebrooke, 1763, *Archæologia*, II, p. 110.

⁴ Hasted, 1782, *History of Kent*, II, p. 69.

the tomb", but they seldom seem to read how the map came to be made, and what Thorpe himself wrote on the matter. Here are his own words :

"In the year 1777 my friend Mr. Tracey, who lives in the neighbourhood, favoured me with a plan of the wood, etc., adjoining to Horsted, and the reputed situation of Horsa's tomb, together with the following account. 'Sir, I have made minute enquiries concerning Horsa's grave, of the oldest country people I could find, some of whom have been resident about the place near 70 years ; but of them I cannot learn anything satisfactory ; only that by their predecessors they have been told, that the large stones being decayed and gone, some farmer in the neighbourhood, to preserve in memory the spot, had brought a large quantity of flints from the adjoining lands, and placed them in a heap there. How true this may be, I cannot presume to say ; but the stones so laid were, when the wood was last fallen, taken away to repair the Maidstone Road, and at present there is nothing to point out the spot but the remains of an old pollard.'"

Thorpe goes on to remark that "little, if any, certainty is to be collected from these vague accounts of the tomb", to make the just remark that "massy stones" do not decay, and that the name of Horsted may be derived, not from Horsa at all but from "Herst, a wood, and Stede, a place or Homestall", and finally he rejects the whole story.¹

We now enter the nineteenth century with the researches of Beale Poste who went to Horsted in November, 1841. He found "the place of sepulture much forgotten among the neighbouring Inhabitants, some of whom had never heard of it while others were inclined to place it at Well Wood close to Horsted Farm house by the road side where there are several foundations." He "at length met with an intelligent Woodman who had been accustomed above 30 years ago to bring up persons from the Dockyard and Rochester to view the Spot and who appeared to be almost the only individual who knew where it was." This "Spot" shown to Poste agreed with the site indicated on the Tracey-Thorpe Map, but a flint-heap was still in existence there, so that Poste thought that Tracey was in error when he stated that it had been removed for road mending. Poste goes on to write (*Beale Poste MSS.*, III, 138) : "There laid the same heap of stones mentioned by him (Tracey) as also by Colebrooke and which they both thought must be the Karnedd which covered Horsa's Remains if he were buried here. They were however apparently wrong in this : for on one side of the heap is a small round Tumulus 9 feet over and only about 18 inches or at

¹ Thorpe, 1788, *Custumale Roffense*, p. 69.

most 20 high which was pointed out as the Grave and not the heap of flints."¹

In 1854 Wright carried out extensive investigations in the middle Medway valley, which included the opening of the Holborough barrow and digging on Blue Bell Hill; he was a very critical antiquary and represents a reaction from the Romantic Movement in its archæological aspect. He rejects the whole Hengest and Horsa story as being mythical, questions the battle of Aylesford, the legend of which he thinks arose because of the megalithic remains scattered about that district, and does not even deign to mention the tomb of Horsa. But we may be quite certain that if there had been any good reason to believe that a barrow existed there he would have been on the spot. Wright should be honoured for his critical and modern attitude to the problems of antiquity and his sensible chapters can still be read with profit.²

The next investigator, James Fergusson, represents a return to earlier notions regarding the Saxon connection with the Aylesford megaliths, for he believed that the whole group were memorials of the battle. To him Kits Coty House was the tomb of Categern, and "the tumulus at Horstead would in accordance with ancient tradition be the grave of Horsa." He then goes on to write:

"So much depends on this last determination that last year . . . the assistance of a party of sappers was procured . . . and the mound was thoroughly explored. It was found that a cremation (it is presumed of a human body) had taken place on the natural surface of the ground, and a tumulus raised over it. The chalk was dug down to some depth and found quite undisturbed, but no ornament or implement was found anywhere."³

He accepted this poor result as a vindication of the tomb of Horsa, and excused the poverty of it by accepting the British tradition that the Saxons were defeated at Aylesford and that poor Horsa, in consequence, was buried hurriedly under a flag of truce. This excavation took place before 1871, probably in the late sixties.

Thus far we have faithfully followed the tangled tale of the Horsted Tomb as told by those who have speculated upon it, but omitting much repetitive matter by many other writers. Since Fergusson, no new light has been thrown on the subject, although the story has been bolstered up by all kinds of exaggeration and incorrect information.

For instance, in a semi-popular work (and therefore widely read) we find the following sentence, "Bede is the first to mention that

¹ A.C., LXII, p. 136.

² Wright, 1854, *The Wanderings of an Antiquary*, Chap. ix.

³ Fergusson, 1872, *Rude Stone Monuments*, p. 120.

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Horsa . . . *was interred at Horsted, where a monument bearing his name was erected.*"¹ The italics are ours.

The information collected about the tomb may be thus summarized :

1576	Lambarde	Categern buried in Kits Coty House, Horsa interred at Horsted.
1586	Camden	Repeats Lambarde.
1631	Weever	There was a megalithic tomb at Horsted, but destroyed.
1659	Philipot	The stones of the monument gone.
1722	Stukeley	No reference.
1763	Colebrooke	Shown only a flint-heap which he was told was the actual monument.
1782	Hasted	Declared that sarzens abounded around Horsted, some lying prone, others still standing. These were the monuments of the battle of Aylesford.
1788	Tracey-Thorpe	A flint-heap once marked the site of the tomb, but now gone. Published a map showing the reputed site of the tomb.
1841	Beale Poste	Finds a small round tumulus, near a flint heap.
1854	Wright	No reference.
186-	Fergusson	Opens a mound and finds only ashes.

The evolution and variations of this "literary" legend can be clearly followed. Lambarde, Weever and Philipot thought that a megalithic tomb similar to that of Kits Coty House once existed at Horsted, but when Colebrooke actually visited the district he was shown a "karnedd" of flint stones as being the tomb. Yet 19 years later Hasted tells the story of the sarzen stones about Horsted, which, as Poste notes, never existed outside his pages; for Colebrooke before him, and Tracey, Poste and Fergusson after him would have been delighted to have found such stones. Tracey combined the "megalith theory" with the "karnedd theory" by the ingenious guess that a (very uncharacteristic) farmer had raised the latter to mark the site of the former. Next Poste is shown in 1841 a "karnedd" which Tracey had declared had disappeared before 1788: Poste rejected this and adopted a nearby "tumulus" as being the tomb, yet one of such insignificant proportions that we must doubt if it was an artificial work at all. The mysterious re-appearance of Tracey's flint heap and the equally strange discovery of a "tumulus", missed by all previous investigators, must arouse all our suspicions; it is difficult to fake a megalithic monument, but stone-heaps abound in the flint-ridden

¹ Coles-Finch, 1925, *In Kentish Pilgrim Land*, p. 34.

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countryside of Horsted, while an energetic labourer could produce Poste's miserable mound in an hour.

There can be little doubt but that this was the tumulus opened by Fergusson, for clearly he was disappointed with it, and especially with the entire lack of ornaments and weapons, always associated with the graves of Saxon warriors. The note that the sappers dug for some distance into the virgin chalk also indicates that the mound was of small size. This investigation of Fergusson has not advanced the cause of the Horsted Tomb, for it was not even established that the ashes found were those of a human body, much less those of the body of Horsa.

The two main objections to the Horsted theory are, of course, that the place is not in East Kent, and its name has no connection with a personal name Hors. As regards the first objection no amount of tortured reasoning will convince a fair-minded person that Bede or his friends meant the middle Medway Valley when he wrote that the burial took place "*in orientabilibus Cantiae partibus*". Beale Poste gave the true explanation of the Horsted place-name when he wrote that it was analogous with the Cowsteds and Oxteds, and meant a steading for horses. Modern place-name authorities agree, and the history of the name confirms it. Horsham, Horsmonden, Horsley, Horsenden, Horsey and Horsted all refer to horses, while Horsington is either the "tun of the horsekeepers" or, possibly, the "tun of Hors's people".¹

The story of the Horsted Tomb really belongs to the wider literary legend of the association of the Neolithic megalith group around Aylesford with the traditional fifth century battle. So far as we know Lambarde started the story, and even if he borrowed it from an earlier antiquary, it makes no difference to our assessment of its value. Once started, the belief that the megaliths were memorials of the battle spread far and wide, embracing Horsted at once by the accident of a place-name, taken across the river to include the Addington megaliths by Colebrooke, from whence it spread to Coldrum. Its farthest echo was the "Warrior's Tomb" of Cobham. It was a sixteenth-century antiquary's guess, and should have been abandoned when the true nature of the megaliths was understood. When Categern lost his "House of Coits", Horsa should have been banished from Horsted. But will he be? One doubts, yet, eventually, *ex nihilo nihil fit*.

THE HUT OF CHRISTOPHER

Having spent so many pages on the tomb of the Saxon Chief, perhaps another one or two may be devoted to the sepulchre of the British Prince.

The origin and meaning of the strange name of Kits Coty House, which is the portal burial chamber of a Neolithic Long Barrow, has

¹ Wallenberg, *op. cit.* and Ekwall, *Oxford Dict. of English Place-Names*.

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puzzled antiquaries since at least the time of Lambarde. Here are some of the variations on the name :

1570	Lambarde	Citscotehouse.
1586	Camden	Keith Coty House.
1631	Weever	Keith or Kits Coty House.
1659	Philipot	Kits Cothouse.
1754	Colebrooke	Keith or Kits Coty House.
1773	Grose	Kits Cotys House.
1793	Douglas	Kitz Cotys House.
1854	Wright	Kits Coty House.
1867	Fergusson	Kits Cotty or Coity-House.

Lambarde thought that the Chamber bore the name of Categern in a corrupted form which Grose interpreted as "Categern's House of Coits"; for coits or quoits was an old name for the massive sandstone blocks of which megaliths are built in Kent. "Cat" is Old Welsh for "battle", and Categern, properly *Catwigernos*, simply means "War Lord"; thus the first element may refer to the Prince or to a battle. Now one of the explanations of the second, coty, element is that it is the Celtic word for "wood", and the two first names of the House are well illustrated in the name of the seventh battle of Arthur which was *in silva Celidonis, id est, Cat Coit Celidon*, or "the battle of the wood of Caledonia", and in modern Welsh, *Cad Coed Celyddon*.¹

The other explanation of coty suggests that it is really coits or stones, as noted above; thus three megaliths in North Wales are called Coetan Arthur, i.e. Arthur's Coits.

Yet a third explanation pretends that the word is really the Saxon "cota" meaning a hut, small cottage or shelter for animals, and it has been borrowed by the Welsh as *cwt*, a hut or sty. The various meanings thus far elicited are as follows, the "House" element in any case being an obvious Saxon addition, if not a duplication.

Categern's Coits, or Stones.	Cat's Coits.
Battle of the wood.	Cat Coit.
Battle of the stones.	Cat Coits.
Battle Cottage.	Cat Cota.

It was in 1754 that Colebrooke suggested an entirely different origin of a beautiful simplicity. He wrote, "I apprehend the name of Kits or Keith Coty-house to have been given to this place from some old shepherd who . . . used to shelter himself from the weather on one side or the other of the monument."² Colebrooke had his own reasons for this invention; as has been noticed he could not find Horsa's

¹ *Historia Britonum*, Ed. by T. Mommsen in *Chron.min.Saec*, IV-VII (M.G.H.), iii, 111, Chap. LVI.

² Colebrooke, *Archæologia*, II, 114.

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Tomb at Horsted so he adopted the House for the purpose, by evicting the British Prince and seeking to divorce his very name from the Chamber. But the name is as old as Lambarde, and probably much older, so that Colebrooke's conjectural shepherd Christopher, Keith or Kit must have lived some 200 years before his "onlie begetter", although this is not realized by many who stand by this explanation of the name. Those, too, who refuse to give the monument its full title on the assumption that "house" is a duplication of "cota", should reflect that they are tampering with a name which is at least 400 years old, and they should find better reasons than those which have been advanced for persisting in their ill-advised courses.

There is no reason why the House should not bear an ancient name for since the day of its building it has been visible at the end of its Long Barrow, and its commanding position makes it a conspicuous object in the landscape, which is certainly the reason why it alone of all the Kentish megaliths bears an individual name. If a real Categern was slain in a real battle here then it is conceivable that the British peasants might name it "Categern's Coits", and so pass on the name down the long centuries until someone added the obvious "House". It is difficult to believe that the name has a literary origin, for although the battle of Aeglesford was located at Aylesford at a very early date, it is very improbable that a mediæval scholar would have bestowed an Old Welsh name upon it. If Cat's Coits is the right origin then it is a very remarkable survival from an age when a Celtic tongue was still spoken in Kent. If it is not the "Stone House of the War Lord" it may be the Cot of Keith-Christopher and Colebrooke's guess an inspired one; but we shall never know.

One might add to that sentence of old Sir Thomas Browne, "What song the Syrens sang, or what name Achilles assumed when he hid among women, though puzzling questions, are not beyond all conjecture", but the origin and meaning of the name of Kits Coty House will ever evade our question, not for lack of an answer but because there are too many.

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