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On some Bronze and other Articles found near Birdlip

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ON SOME BRONZE AND OTHER ARTICLES FOUND
NEAR BIRDLIP.

By JOHN BELLOWS.

IN the summer of 1879, Joseph Barnfield, a quarryman living at Birdlip, on the edge of the Cotteswold Hills, near Gloucester, was engaged in getting stone from the side of the road between that village and Crickley, when he came down upon three skeletons, lying in a line, with their feet to the south. They had been buried in a manner frequently seen in Celtic districts, by placing thin slabs of stone on edge round the bodies, and covering these in with broad thin flags, so as to form a rough tomb. It would be a mistake, however, to assign a pre-Roman date to the burial because of this formation of the grave; for so slight has been the tendency to change, in this particular, that a close approach is made, in the more Celtic parts of the country, to the same use of thin stones, even to the present day. Only lately on visiting the burial ground of the Society of Friends, at Marazion, I was struck by noticing the graves of members of a family well known to me, thus walled round with rough thin slabs of stone. These slabs, in accordance with another inveterate custom of the Britons, were neatly white-washed: a custom that may have been brought from the east, where it has prevailed from remote times to the present: for the "whited sepulchres" form as marked a feature of an Arab or Turkish cemetery, as they anciently did of the burial-places of Judea.

Of the skeletons thus found, the two outermost appear to have been those of adult males; but no metallic or other objects occurred in juxta-position with them to afford even the faintest clue as to their status. The remains that had been placed between them, that is between the head of the southernmost and the feet

of the northernmost skeleton, were those of a woman, who, judging from the perfection and beauty of the teeth, must have died in the prime of life.

With this central skeleton there were found several objects, which are shown in the accompanying drawings; and from the character of these objects, some of them of great beauty of design and workmanship, and costly to procure, it is evident that their owner must have been a lady of refinement, and of good position in society.

On her face had been placed the large bronze bowl shown in Plate XIII, *fig. 1*. It is of exquisite workmanship, such as could not be surpassed by the highest art of the present day. The material is a fine brass or bronze, which, when polished, is as nearly as possible of the colour of gold; the rim is turned in a lathe of great accuracy to a fine moulding, and the body of the bowl is hammered to the thinness of a visiting card. A square hole at one side would indicate either the place for a ring or handle by which it could be suspended; or for a hinge by which a lid was fastened to it. A small, light, loop handle, of squared wire, was found near (*Plate XIII., fig. 2*).

The dimensions of this bowl are, inside, as follow:—Greatest diameter, 9 inches; diameter of opening or mouth, $7\frac{5}{8}$ inches; depth from level of rim, $3\frac{3}{4}$ inches. There is also a smaller bowl, similar in form and workmanship, but the metal of which is so much thinner that it has suffered more from corrosion (*fig. 3*). Its corresponding dimensions are 4 ins., $3\frac{1}{2}$ ins., and 2 ins., respectively.

With the bones lay a remarkably fine fibula, of silver, plated with gold (*fig 4*). It is in such perfect condition that even now, after Barnfield had carried it in his pocket from the time of its discovery until he disposed of it, with the other articles, to the Gloucester Museum (where they are placed), and although he kept some small rings, strung upon the pin, and frequently clasped and unclasped it—even after all this, the spring is still so sound that I have no doubt a lady might yet wear it for a lifetime, without damage. The mode in which the point of the fibula is protected so as not to injure the wearer, or to get loose, is, as everyone knows, the same

Fig 1.



as that employed in the "safety pin," which is such a requisite in our nurseries. It is not so generally known, however, that the original patentee of the safety pin took the idea of the latter from a Roman fibula which was found in the Peak cavern, in Derbyshire, many years ago, and which was shown to him as a visitor to that spot. He simply made the *whole* of the pin and its spring of one piece of wire to lessen its cost; but he was directly indebted, for the invention itself, as the babies of all Europe are for their unscratched skins at the present hour, to the Roman invasion of Britain.

Some clumsily-made rings of brass, found with the other articles at Birdlip, probably belonged to a portion of the lady's dress (*figs. 5 to 8*). There is also a tubular brass armlet or bracelet, closing with a slight spring (*fig. 9*); a small brass handle of a key, exactly similar to some found at Pompeii (*fig. 10*); and an elegantly-formed bronze handle of a knife; probably the companion of the owner's work-basket (*fig. 11*). The little mass of rust pendant from this handle shows that a steel blade had been fitted to it. There are two holes forming the eyes of the fawn represented by the hilt; and these appear to have been intended to receive gems, though I cannot discover that any were found. Possibly no very careful search was made for such things when the graves were uncovered.

A number of large beads, which are accurately represented in their exact size in Plate XIV., lay among the remains. Most of these beads are of fine red amber: but some of the smaller ones are of pale straw colour of the same material (*fig. 2*); while two of the larger ones are of jet (*figs. 3, 4*); and one of a drab grey marble (*fig. 5*).

The presence of this necklace—for such the beads must have formed—shows the wearer to have been a married lady. It was part of the marriage ceremony with the Romans that the girdle of the bride should be taken away and a necklace put upon her. But more than this: a necklace of *amber*, though intended as an ornament, was also intended as an amulet, or charm against accidents in childbirth. The jet and the marble were also undoubtedly used with a similar idea of warding off mischief of some kind;

but I cannot at present trace what particular mischiefs they were supposed to counteract: whether the evil eye or aught else. It may be remarked, apropos of the jet rings, that the small discs of lignite found in the "Isle of Purbeck," and which are known as "Kimmeridge Coal Money," are neither more nor less than the centre cores, or waste, from the turning in a lathe of exactly such rings as the pair in this Birdlip necklace.

We now come to the last of the objects which had been buried with the lady: her mirror (*Pl. XIV., fig. 1*) It is of massive bronze, of most beautiful workmanship; the front still retaining almost enough of its polish to serve as a reflector. It has been *lacquered*. The back is enchased, or incised, with a volute floral pattern; and the rim is formed of a hollow beading, swelling into the form of the buccina or Roman military bugle. The same instruments, turned mouth to mouth, are gracefully wrought into the upper part of the handle, where it is fastened to the plate; and the interspaces on this portion are ornamented by circular spots of crimson enamel. The handle itself is of solid bronze, formed into a beautiful loop, banded in the middle; while a *nervure*, between a double incised line, passes round it, as shown in the lithograph.

The oval plate itself, with the portion of its beading remaining, measures $9\frac{3}{4}$ ins. by $10\frac{5}{8}$ ins.; and the weight of the mirror is $38\frac{1}{4}$ ozs. This would be uncomfortably heavy if held by the user, but such mirrors were often held by an attendant or slave. The finest bronze mirrors used by the Romans were made at Brundisium,—the modern Brindisi.

It will naturally be asked: "To what period do these articles belong: and, therefore, to what era should we assign the remains of the lady with whom they were buried?"

This is a question the reader must decide for himself. Each of the objects discovered could be very closely matched by articles from Pompeii and other Roman cities; though fibulæ are more frequently found, in such localities, made of bronze, or even of gold, than of silver, which material is rare. The authorities of the British Museum, however, assign this Birdlip find to the "late Celtic" period. Be this as it may, it is impossible to see the spot

chosen by this family for their last home, without in some degree sharing the feeling which determined their choice of it. At Crickley and Birdlip the Cotteswold Hills form the grandest of their escarpments ; and Gilpin, the writer on Forest Scenery, regards the ascent to this point as affording the finest landscape in England. Looking up at the brow of the mountain—for such it really is—from the Roman Villa in the Combe below, the effect is exceedingly grand ; especially when the cliff is lighted up by the sunset.

This was the spot in which lay all that was mortal of the lady and her two kinsmen. Their graves were rudely fashioned ; yet few in any age, or in any land, have found a last resting place with more magnificent surroundings.
