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**Remains of a Roman Villa Discovered at Brislington, Bristol,  
December 1899**

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REMAINS OF A ROMAN VILLA,  
DISCOVERED AT BRISLINGTON, BRISTOL,  
DECEMBER, 1899.

By W. R. BARKER.

THE paper on the subject of the Brislington investigations which has already appeared in the *Transactions* of the Society<sup>1</sup> brought the account down to the time when the paper was read to the Clifton Antiquarian Club. The further researches, near the point marked (m) on the plan,<sup>2</sup> did not for a long time yield any marked results, and it became a question how far it was worth while to continue clearing away the ground to so little purpose. Just at that time the first indications of the circular head of the well appeared, ten feet from the north-eastern angle of the hypocaust, No. 9 on the plan. This was quite enough to awaken afresh that conflict of hope and uncertainty which seems peculiarly to belong to archæological researches. There was what appeared to be the well, but was it intact? how deep was it? what did it contain? were all questions that only hard work could solve. The clearing out was gallantly commenced by Mr. W. G. Smith and his son, but after a time the difficulty of continuing, except by those experienced in such work, and with proper appliances, was realised. Suitable men were accordingly detailed for the purpose, and they did their work admirably.

During the time the work was about, I was able to take careful note of the depth at which the different deposits were found, this being done for the purpose of setting at rest any questions as to the position of particular objects, and also to show the relation of objects to each

<sup>1</sup> Vol. xxiii., pp. 289-308.    <sup>2</sup> Vol. xxiii., p. 290.

other. The graduated scale which is the result, exhibits the well and its miscellaneous contents as it were in section; from which it will be evident that while this was originally the well of the Villa, it was made to serve as a rubbish pit, when its use as a well was discontinued.

The well started with a diameter of five feet, and with masonry eighteen inches thick. This diameter was practically maintained throughout, there being a contraction of only a few inches towards the bottom. The masonry, which consisted of courses of lias stone, was in a wonderful state of preservation, and was regularly continued until near the bottom, where the stonework was of a rougher description. The bottom, about which there could be no mistake, was not reached until thirty-eight feet had been measured, and there the solid rock was found.

**12 feet.** For a depth of about twelve feet the material removed was of a rubbly nature, and with fragments of black pottery and other unimportant objects intermixed therewith. Very curiously, although Samian ware had been so scarce throughout the investigation, some small pieces were found in this upper section of the well. From the first everything brought to the surface was carefully examined and the relics preserved.

**18 feet.** The section between twelve and eighteen feet was filled with material which showed increasingly the presence of water, and the results as regards "finds" were meagre. A coin of Constantinus II. was, however, found on one of the ledges of the masonry at a depth of fourteen feet.

**24 feet.** When a depth of twenty-four feet was reached, some tons of coarse building material, evidently the remains of the Villa, and much of it in a sodden condition, had been brought up.

**28 feet.** Between twenty-four and twenty-eight feet a very remarkable deposit was found, consisting of a large collection of the bones and teeth of various animals, the greater part being the remains of oxen or cows,

including the skulls with the horn cores. The leg bones represented no less than about a dozen of these animals, and the presence of such a mass of these remains formed no little mystery. Intermixed with these and the other animal remains was found a quantity of broken pottery and other miscellaneous objects of the Roman period.

**32 feet.** In clearing out the section between twenty-eight and thirty-two feet down, still greater surprise was experienced, for, with quantities of wet muck and more bones and teeth of animals, three nearly complete human crania, with the separate parts of another, and the skeleton remains to which they belonged, were brought to the surface. In a circumstance so unlooked-for there was at the time, and there has been since, abundant room for speculation as to how these remains of several specimens of the human race came to occupy this strange sepulchre. After this came a graduated series of seven remarkable metal vessels, with curved and ornamented handles. Most of these were fairly perfect, except that they were more or less bruised and bent, but two had been broken to pieces by the fall of heavy material upon them. While the general characteristics of form were the same, in the case of five of them there were different ornaments on the handles. The remaining two had been repaired with new handles of inferior character and of plain triangular section. With these objects was found the only perfect specimen of pottery that came to hand. This was a small black pitcher or jug. Another good specimen, and larger, was slightly damaged, but it was hoped the missing part would be recovered. Other specimens of pottery consisted of fragments larger than usual, and it is worthy of note that a number of large and small tesseræ of the destroyed pavements, showing signs of much use, were among the miscellaneous objects. One of the large tesseræ

is somewhat of a curiosity, as it has a well-defined ammonite on the face.

**36 feet.** After these interesting "finds" came another deposit of rough building material, and then, mixed with the muddy deposit, were more bones and fragments of pottery, the bottom and side pieces of wooden buckets, with the handles and side plates which no doubt belonged to the articles when complete, a pointed stake, and various iron objects.

The remaining two feet consisted of rubble and soft material, with which small bones and fragments of pottery were intermixed; and when the rocky **38 feet.** bottom was reached at thirty-eight feet, the last bucket that was sent up contained a few bronze and other objects, including an ornamented bronze spoon partly decayed, a coin of Constantine the Great (3rd brass) with the legend destroyed but the bust preserved, part of a triple bronze chain each link consisting of three rings, also two separate rings, part of a fibula, a bronze pin, and part of a wooden comb with fine and coarse teeth.

The depth of water with which the men had to contend during the clearing out of the well increased as the work proceeded, and shortly after this was completed, when the well was inspected by members of the Somerset Archæological and Natural History Society, on the occasion of their visit to Bristol, the water had risen to fourteen feet, which appeared to be its normal height. It has now been filled up with dry rubble and made secure on the surface.

In addition to the numerous objects just referred to as having been found in the well, the following, also found there, may be particularly mentioned:

A rough mortar and pounding stone; several stones with mason's marks; fragment of black ware with metal rivet; iron implements with sockets for handles; masses of iron stone, and small specimens of hematite; portions of burnt bones, and of burnt wood; horn-cores of various

animals besides oxen. A lower human jaw, found not in the well, but in the ground near it, should also be mentioned.

The most important of the contents of the well consist undoubtedly of the series of pewter vessels and the human remains. As regards the pewter vessels, I endeavoured to obtain some information respecting them at the meeting of the British Association at Glasgow, but in the absence of the specimens themselves, not much light could be thrown upon them. There is, however, a reference in *Archæologia* to the find of pewter vessels of the Romano-British period at Appleshaw in Hampshire, which is to the point.<sup>1</sup> Only two of these specimens appear to be at all similar to those found at Brislington, and for the purpose of comparison the following description of them by Mr. Charles H. Read, F.S.A., may be interesting:—

1. "Octagonal jug with a narrow neck and foot. Round the neck a projecting band with punched design between wavy lines. Present height,  $10\frac{1}{4}$  inches. Handle now lost, the plate which attached it to the body is heart-shaped."
2. "Portion of a jug of similar general form, but circular; stout handle of triangular section. On the side is scratched VICTRICI. Height, 7 inches."

In several respects there is a similarity between these Appleshaw examples and those found at Brislington. For instance, the heart-shaped plate, and triangular section of the handle; the ornament round the neck, which in one of the Brislington specimens takes the form of a series of beads or studs, and is introduced also at the junction of the handle with the body. The narrowness of the neck and foot is noticeable. The sizes mentioned are also found among the Brislington specimens, which are more numerous and vary considerably in height and capacity; while the ornamental character of most of the handles, resembling as it does the style of ornament on bronze work of the period,

<sup>1</sup> *Archæologia*, Vol. lvi., Part 1, p. 7, *et seq.*

appears to be a special feature of this discovery. It would certainly appear that such metal vessels, although comparatively numerous in this case, are really very rare. In connection with the account of the Appleshaw specimens in *Archæologia*, it is strongly urged, that in all similar cases a careful analysis of the metal should be made. With the kind help of Mr. A. Capper Pass, this has been furnished with regard to the Brislington specimens, and the component parts were found to be as follows :—

Lead ... ..	62.5 per cent.
Tin ... ..	36.0 „
Antimony ... ..	0.8 „
Copper ... ..	<i>nil.</i>
Earthy matter (and possible loss)	0.7 „
	—
	100.0 „

With regard to the human remains, the three nearly complete crania was submitted to Dr. Beddoe, and he obligingly furnished the following “preliminary report” upon them :

“There are difficulties in the way of stating anything like a positive opinion that these human remains date from the period of the destruction of the villa; but that is what I think. The assemblage of cattle-bones, and the fact of a quantity of the materials of the villa being superposed (which must have been deposited while the ruins were still above the ground level), speak strongly in that direction. No doubt the difference in aspect of the one skeleton (No. 1) from the others is most easily accounted for by supposing it later in date; but perhaps that body lay a little higher and drier than the others. The female pelvis, which must have belonged either to No. 3, or to the body whose skull is in fragments, does not bear the same marks of antiquity, I think, as No. 3 skull.

“There is nothing ethnognomonic (to coin a term) in

the aspect of the skulls. No. 1 is a very fine one, mesocephalic near the limit of dolichocephaly, and rather elliptic than oval: it may have belonged to an Italian gentleman, or a Germanic chieftain: the Roman soldiery under the later emperors were largely Germanic. Nos. 2 and 3: of these, 2 is pretty surely male, but of a lower type than 1, than which it rather more resembles a common Romano-British type. It is mesocephalic; but the absence of the base of the skull may have caused an apparent widening: it is also a little askew. No. 3 belonged to a female and, I think, an old woman; it is of the same oval, rather than elliptic, type as No. 2, and like it, rather lower and flatter than No. 1: still it is a 'well-filled' skull of, probably, a person belonging to a civilised community. It is mesocephalic, almost subbrachycephalic (index 79). No. 4 is in fragments, and, I should fear, not susceptible of restoration.

"In all the three the teeth are much worn down: I do not think this is common in really Roman skulls, while it is so in British ones: it is of course a matter of food, and rarely occurs in the same jaws with caries.

"By my reckoning the owner of No. 1 may have been as much as 5 feet 7.7 inches in height, but by Pearson's plan perhaps not over 5 feet 6.3 inches. The other man was very little shorter. The woman perhaps 5 feet 2 inches: but I will work out these figures more carefully hereafter.

"The brain in all three must have been of fair size, *i.e.* the skull of fair capacity, or perhaps, in No. 1, above the average."

This report indicates a mixture of types which would be characteristic of the period, and may also suggest something as to the social conditions that then prevailed. We looked in vain for any distinct marks of violence; there were none. These people may have been suffocated in the fire which destroyed the Villa, or they may have been thrown into the well in the midst of a fierce

encounter, when any ready means of dealing death and destruction would be resorted to. If this latter be the explanation, the enormous quantity of animal remains would further suggest a great feast to celebrate the victory, and this would agree with the broken condition of many of the animal bones.

It has been suggested that probably the Villa remained standing after the Roman occupation came to an end. But the contents of the well seem altogether to set aside that idea. It is noteworthy that at all the different levels Roman objects were found, and that even near the top, as already mentioned, there were some of the few fragments of Samian ware that the whole exploration yielded. The evidence of the pavements shows that the Villa was destroyed by fire, and the contents of the well show that it was filled up at the time of, or not long after, that destruction. Writing to me of this well, Dr. Beddoe said, very pertinently: "To the uncivil mind a hole seems always to suggest filling it up," and that appears to be what happened in this case.

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1

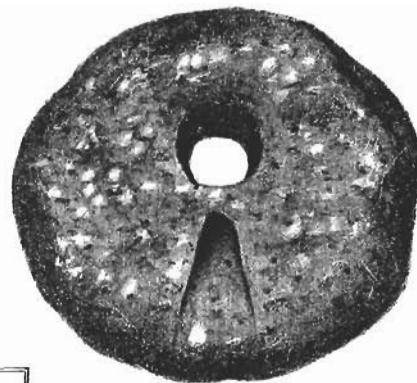


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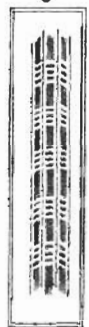
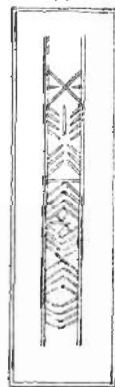
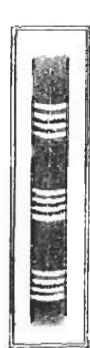
A

C

2



4



3



Section.

OBJECTS ON PLATE I.

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1. Carved Capstone.
2. Group of Metal Vessels.
3. Various Ornaments on the handles of Metal Vessels,  
and the two plain handles.
4. Upper Stone of Quern.

## OBJECTS ON PLATE 2.

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1. Small black Pitcher or Jug.
  2. Handle of Knife.
  - 3 and 4. Knives.
  5. Implement of bill-hook type with socket for handle.
  6. Group of Bronze objects:—
    - Armillæ.
    - Bronze Rings.
    - Spoon.
    - Ring Key.
    - Bow and Pin of Fibula.
  7. Ivory and Bone Pins.
  8. Part of Strainer.
  9. Wooden Comb, with coarse and fine teeth.
  10. Fragment of Pottery, with metal rivet.



1



2



4



3



5



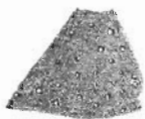
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7



9



8



10