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Northfield Tumulus, Cheltenham

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NORTHFIELD TUMULUS, CHELTENHAM

by HERBERT C. HILL

THE Northfield Barrow is situated on the brow of the hill overlooking Cheltenham, from which town it is four miles distant. (Gloucs. 6-inch Ordnance Survey map, 27 NW, about 550 feet to the west of the parliamentary boundary line). In 1912 permission to excavate was obtained by the late Mr S. W. Billings, the one condition imposed being the observance of privacy. The earliest record known of this prehistoric monument is contained in the jurors' report of 1625 on the Manor of Cheltenham, in which 'the stones on Northfield Hill' are stated as one of the boundary marks of the manor. At the time of excavation the cairn was 12 feet only in height. Originally it must have been an imposing monument, for the base of the barrow today exceeds 100 yards in circumference.

The work of excavation was carefully carried out, the stones being removed singly and the earth sifted through the fingers so that nothing should escape detection. Three months were occupied in the work of excavation. The barrow had not been thrown up in any haphazard fashion, but had been systematically built in alternate layers of stone and earth. The presence of this last was at first regarded as accidental, but as excavation proceeded it became obvious that the layers of soil had been so placed deliberately and with the purpose of preventing air or water from percolating down to the interments.

The finding of potsherds mixed with the rubble of a barrow is so general an experience of excavators of prehistoric tumuli that it has been suggested that some significance was attached to their presence, the meaning of which has been lost. This characteristic was present

in the Northfield barrow, but it is impossible to say if it is to be attributed to an act of ritual, or if the sherds were merely thrown in with the soil in building the barrow.

The work of excavation had not proceeded far before Mr (now Dr) W. H. Steavenson, the astronomer, unearthed a secondary interment consisting of a handful of white cremated bone in a stone cist, the covering stone of which slanted towards the east. No weapon or implement had been deposited with the interment, nor had the grave been previously explored ; that was certain.

After a fortnight's further work, the primary interments were reached. These were on the east side of the mound, and six feet from the surface of the barrow, and were contained in three cists built of unhewn slabs of stone measuring four feet by four feet. From the natural surface of the ground, extending to nearly half-way up the barrow, was an irregular flue, along the floor of which lay a quantity of charcoal ; this seemed to confirm Greenwell's theory that all bodies in ancient Britain, whether buried by cremation or inhumation, were subjected to the action of fire to a greater or less degree.*

On uncovering the natural surface of the ground on which the barrow had been built, the site of the funeral pyre was brought to light. Here to a depth of over six inches the soil was black and stodgy, and thickly impregnated with bone and charcoal, while on the surface lay a large quantity of bones. A few of these were removed to serve the purpose of specimens, after which the site was covered over again with rubble for the purpose of preservation, in which state it remains today.

The primary interments comprised three skeletons : two adults and a child. The bones of one of the former, in Dr Hill's opinion, were those of a female. The manner of interment was unusual. Arranged within each cist were four layers of stone, between which the bones of the

* W. Greenwell, *British Barrows*, 29 ff.

skeletons had been sandwiched. Each of the skeletons had been dismembered before burial, and their separate bones wrapped in clay, placed upon a layer of clay, and given a coverlet of the same soil. The skull of the female and the child had been broken into large pieces, and the fragments treated in the same way as the bones, with the result that each skeleton was in an excellent condition of preservation, but after a few weeks' exposure the bones commenced to show signs of decay. The skull of the male adult was intact. The brain and other matter had been removed, and the interior of the skull packed, and the exterior covered with clay.

There was no trace of either cloth or hide, which was scarcely to be expected, but that some such material had been used as a wrapping at the time of burial was shown by the finding of two bone pins lying by the skull of the male. The condition in which the skulls were found seems to suggest that the woman and child had been immolated at the funeral of the chief with the intent that they should accompany him to the land of his future existence. The skull of the male was definitely brachycephalic and his height Dr Hill thought had been 5 ft. 10 in. His leg bones showed that he had been a great runner.

The jaw of the child showed the eight-year molar through, while the ten-year molar was still in the jaw. The root of a molar tooth of the man told that its possessor had suffered from an abscess. The teeth of each skeleton were ground flat from eating gritty and hard food, but otherwise were in an excellent state of preservation.

Lying upon the bones were (1) a flint knife, (2) flint saw, (3) flint fabricator, (4) well worn whetstone, (5) a crystal, (6) a polished white pebble. These articles had not been thrown upon the remains as if mechanically observing some tribal custom, but had been carefully laid upon the bones that suggested in a way belief in a future existence.

The remains with the articles found upon them were given into the care of the Cheltenham College Museum, but the skull of the male is now in the collection at the Royal College of Surgeons.

ADDENDA

Within and about the centre of the barrow the builders had placed four huge slabs of unhewn stone, as if with the intention of giving stability to the mound.

Mixed with the rubble, and about 2 ft. from the top of the grave-mound, were found:—a large jaw with teeth, of a deer; two teeth of an ox; a piece of iron, edged and very corroded; an iron strap buckle; a potsherd, red in colour, badly baked, and globular in shape; a few similar potsherds, but surfaced, and with grooved markings. From their position it was considered that these articles had filtered down from the top of the barrow, and their presence was regarded as accidental.

Near the centre was a hole some 6 inches in diameter, and in it had been laid a small white pebble with three faces and a base, and tapered at the top. It was highly polished by use, and had a depression on each face which enabled one to hold it with a firm easy grip. It was much battered and bruised, especially so at the base.

Lying bottom upward among the rubble, near the base of the mound, was a stone with a cup-shaped cavity 1 inch deep and $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches in diameter. One end was truncated, and so formed a handle.

The funeral fire had been smothered out with the first layer of stone forming the mound, the rubble here giving evidence of having been subject to intense heat.