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**Cowry Shell and Flint Cores from Ashen Plains, Dursley**

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## COWRY SHELL AND FLINT CORES FROM ASHEN PLAINS, DURSLEY, GLOUCESTERSHIRE

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SHORTLY before her death in 1937, Miss Mary Hutton showed me a cowry shell which she had picked up on the ploughed surface of a field close to Ashen Plains Wood (O.S. 6-in. LV1 N.E.), one mile southeast of Dursley and 600-650 ft. above O.D. As I expressed interest in the find she suggested that I should put it on record.

The shell (FIG. 1) is 2.1 cms. long, 1.6 cms. broad and 1.1 cms. high. There is a sharply defined dorsal boss,

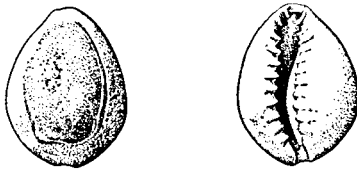


Fig. 1. *Cypraea annulus* Linn. From Ashen Plains, Glos.  
Dorsal and ventral aspects. Natural size  
(del. Arthur Smith)

1.6 cms. by 1.2 cms., which has a mauve tinge, the remainder of the shell being nearly white. It is an example of the Ring Cowry (*Cypraea annulus* Linn.), an Indo-Pacific species not found living nearer to Britain than Suez (1).

Cowry shells are highly valued by primitive people of the present day, commonly as fertility and parturition charms on account of their vulva-like aspect, but also among some as Evil Eye fenders by virtue of their

<sup>1</sup> Schilder and Schilder, *Proc. Malac. Soc.* 1938, XXIII, 141, who refer this and the Money Cowry, not to *Cypraea*, but to a separate genus, *Monetaria*.

resemblance to a closed eye (2). Through extension of the idea of their symbolic value cowries have come to serve as a form of currency in several parts of the world, notably in Africa.

It is evident that in early times cowries were much prized and they were often traded considerable distances (3). From their occurrence in early graves it would seem that they may have been attributed with 'life-giving' properties. Specimens of the cowry of our own coasts—the group of *Trivia europaea* (Mont.)—have been recorded in an Early Bronze Age barrow at Langton in Yorkshire (4), on the Early Bronze Age 'henge' site at Gorsey Bigbury in Somerset (5), as a bead in a Late Bronze Age urn-burial near Dorchester, Dorset (6), and as part of a necklace from the Saxon cemetery at Driffild, Yorkshire (7). Of still greater interest are the Red Sea and Indian Ocean cowries found in prehistoric and early historic associations in Europe. The British records include: *Cypraea moneta* Linn. from a possibly late Neolithic, but more probably Early Bronze Age barrow near Land's End, Cornwall (8); *C. tigris* Linn. in an Early Iron Age 'pit-dwelling' in Hampshire (9); *C. vinosa* Gmelin (= *C. pantherina* Solander ms.) in 6th-7th century Saxon graves (mostly of women it may be noted, and both Pagan and Christian) in Bedfordshire (10),

<sup>2</sup> See Jackson, *Shells as Evidence of the Migrations of Early Culture* (Manchester Univ. Press, 1917); also discussion in *Man*, 1942, 71, 72, 94.

<sup>3</sup> Jackson, op. cit.

<sup>4</sup> Greenwell, *British Barrows* (1877), p. 139.

<sup>5</sup> Found by the writer loose on floor of ditch during excavations in 1933, but not reported in *Proc. Spel. Soc.*, 1938, v, 3-56, possibly owing to doubt as to its antiquity.

<sup>6</sup> Sydenham, *Archaeologia*, 1844, xxx, 330, pl. 27, fig. e.

<sup>7</sup> Mortimer, *Forty years' Researches* (1905), p. 292

<sup>8</sup> Borlase, *The Antiquary* (Walford's), 1880, I, 30.

<sup>9</sup> Tomlin, *Journ. of Conch.*, 1911, XIII, 251.

<sup>10</sup> Bagshawe, *Antiq. Journ.*, 1931, XI, 282

Buckinghamshire (11), Cambridgeshire (12), Kent (13) (also *C. arabica* Linn. in one grave), Somerset (14), and Yorkshire (15). Examples of the two Red Sea and Indian Ocean cowries used widely as currency in Africa at the present day (*C. moneta* Linn. and *C. annulus* Linn.) have been recorded from Early Iron Age graves in Prussia, notably in the neighbourhood of the amber-producing region of Danzig (16).

The practice of treasuring strange and exotic shells, particularly cowries with their special appeal, is by no means confined to early times even in this country. Travelling gypsies sometimes carry foreign cowries about their person (17), and one of these shells picked up on an English field today might have been dropped there through some odd chance the day before, if there were no evidence to the contrary. Commander H. S. Gracie recently sent me a specimen of the Money Cowry (*C. moneta*) picked up on ploughland near Leonard Stanley, Glos. No valid reason can be advanced for claiming it to be of ancient importation, but the difference in preservation between it and the Ashen Plains specimen is marked and significant. Whereas the Leonard Stanley cowry has retained all its natural hardness and porcellaneous (18) lustre, the other shows a dull surface with a tendency to

<sup>11</sup> A. H. Cox, *Rec. of Bucks*, 1909, LX, 427.

<sup>12</sup> Fox, *Arch. of Cambridge Region* (1923), pp. 257, 260 ('Tiger Cowry,' and 'large *Cypraea*'—probably both *C. vinosa*, but this requires confirmation); Lethbridge, *Cambs. Antiq. Soc. Quarto Pubn. N.S.*, 1931, III, 53, 55 (fig.); 1933, V, 2, 17, 18 (fig.), 24, 31.

<sup>13</sup> Jackson, *Journ. of Conch.*, 1911, XIII, 307; 1934, XX, 46 and refs.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.* 1934; Horne, *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, 1933, LXXIX, 61, and *Antiq. Journ.*, 1933, XIII, 167.

<sup>15</sup> Sheppard, *The Naturalist*, 1938, 12, 170.

<sup>16</sup> Jackson, *Shells as Evidence of the Migrations of Early Culture*, (1917), pp. 131-2.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.* p. 140.

<sup>18</sup> This adjective is peculiarly appropriate, for the word porcelain is probably derived from the Roman nickname for cowry-shells: *porculi*=little pigs.

desquamate. In fact the condition of the Ashen Plains specimen might be described as 'sub-fossil', for the enamel has evidently been attacked by soil acids. In the alkaline type of soil in which it was found (a soil based on the Inferior Oolite) one would expect decalcification to be extremely slow; the fact that it has begun would seem to indicate that the shell has been in the soil for a considerable period of time.

Altogether it is very probable that the Ashen Plains cowry represents a prehistoric importation. As far as I am aware it is the first example of *C. annulus* to be found in this country. The only specimens hitherto recorded in northwestern Europe are those from the Early Iron Age graves around the Lower Vistula, ranging in date over the last few centuries B.C. and the first century A.D.

It is impossible to ascribe a date to an isolated unstratified find of this sort. However, the recording of surface finds, whether individually datable or not, is potentially valuable, for the application of statistical methods to their study can lead to sound deductions, if based on sufficient material. Thus Commander Gracie, by careful combing of restricted areas in Gloucestershire for flints, and then considering the results of his collecting statistically, has been able to produce evidence suggesting that whereas one area (Leonard Stanley) (19) was almost exclusively occupied during the Neolithic period and possibly the Bronze Age by a population of Mesolithic descent, another (Long Newton) (20) appears to have been successively occupied by Middle Tardenoisian and Neolithic folk, vacated during the Bronze Age and resettled by Early Iron Age people.

In the hope that if this kind of evidence were forthcoming from Ashen Plains it might provide a clue as to a *possible* date of the cowry's introduction there, I asked Miss Hutton to let me see every scrap of archaeological material from the locality. Her only finds here besides

<sup>19</sup> *Trans.* B.G.A.S. 1939, LX, 180.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.* 1942, LXIII, 172.

the cowry turned out to be six small flint cores. I take this opportunity of putting them on record, figuring three of them (FIG. 2), although obviously their bearing on possible cultural connections of the cowry remain extremely remote so long as the area has not been subjected to exhaustive search.

1. Conical core of compressed, keeled type; flakes directed from base and from keel. Height 4.0 cms., length 3.8 cms., width 2.9 cms. Patina white; damage chips reveal dark grey flint with small grey blotches. Base and lower parts of sides retain patches of original cortex, which is moderately rough and pale brownish in colour. (*Not figured*).

2. Narrow keeled core; flakes struck off in three main directions from base and keel on one face, and lengthwise from truncated end on opposite face. Two edges show possible signs of use. Height 3.5 cms., length 3.5 cms., width 1.6 cms. Patina white. (*Two lateral aspects figured, fig. 2*).

3. Top of sharply keeled core (or broken half of disc?); one face flatter than the other; flaked from keel. Present height 2.3 cms.; length 3.6 cms., width 1.6 cms. Patina bluish-white to white. Trace of pale brownish cortex retained. (*Not figured*).

4. Bun-shaped core with flat base; flakes struck off in several directions. Height 1.7 cms., diam. 2.7-3.0 cms. Patina white. Trace of pale brownish cortex retained. (*Lateral and basal aspects figured, fig. 2*).

5. Discoidal core (or rough globose disc?). Max. diam. 3.7 cms., min. diam. 2.5 cms. Patina bluish-white to white. Retains patches of rather rough, pale brownish cortex. (*Not figured*).

6. Smaller version of last. Max. diam. 3.3 cms., min. diam. 2.1 cms. Patina white; small traces of brownish cortex. (*Two aspects figured, fig. 2*).

These cores are of the relatively small type characteristic of lithic industries in the Cotswolds, where flint

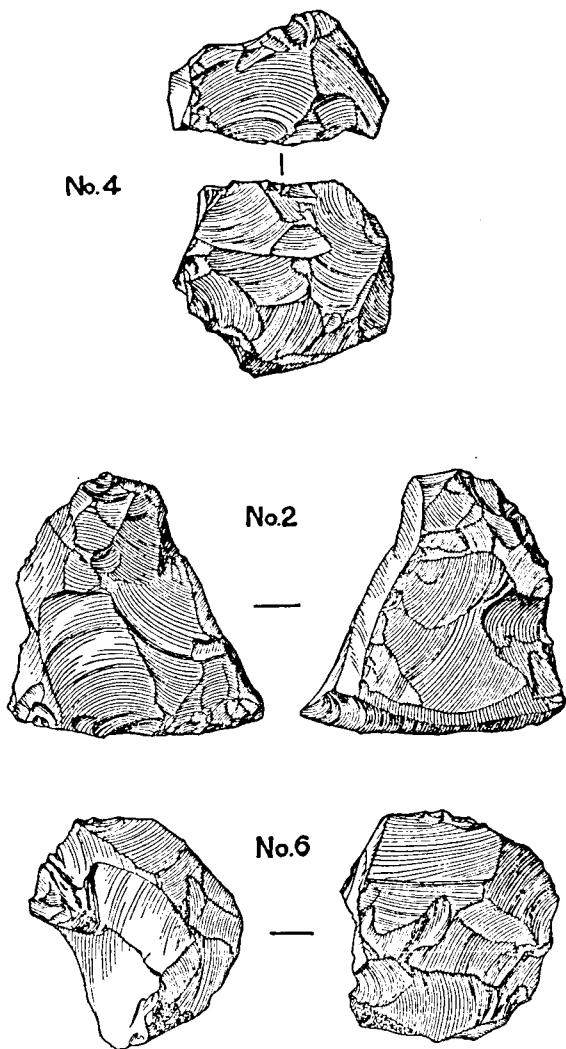


Fig. 2. Three of the flint cores from Ashen Plains, Glos.  
Natural size  
(*del.* C. O. Waterhouse). See p. 93.

being a scarce imported commodity was used with great economy and there was a tendency to whittle away cores to the minimum dimensions which would yield serviceable flakes.

The cores are all of the same type of flint. Where preserved the cortex shows no signs of rolling, but is of the roughish, weathered type characteristic of flint nodules in the soil of a Chalk area. Thus the raw material of the industry, consisting of small nodules, was evidently obtained, not from flint-bearing river gravels, but most probably from the nearest Chalk outcrop, which lies east of Calne in Wiltshire, just over 20 miles to the southeast of Dursley.

It is not possible to assign a definite age to the cores. They are certainly not Mesolithic, but might be either Neolithic or Bronze Age in date. In calcareous soil such as that on Ashen Plains patina is practically no criterion of age.

As regards the general archaeological environment of these finds, Mrs E. M. Clifford, F.S.A., points out to me that within four miles of Ashen Plains, stretched along the Cotswold escarpment to the northeast at some 750 ft. above O.D., there are no less than five long cairns, including those of Uley (21) and Nympsfield (22) (both cruciform in plan). Quite near the latter there is a large round cairn known as the Soldier's Grave (23), containing a rock-cut tomb, which although used for collective burial (usual in the Neolithic period) is perhaps of Bronze Age date. Others have doubtless been destroyed, but there is still ample evidence that the uplands near Dursley were occupied by Neolithic people, and further that occupation continued into Bronze Age times.

The specimens described in this note have been deposited in the Stroud Museum.

<sup>21</sup> Crawford, *Long Barrows of the Cotswolds* (1925), p. 106.

<sup>22</sup> Clifford, *Proc. Prehist. Soc.*, 1938, IV, 188.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.* p. 214.