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# On the Ancient British Barrows of Wiltshire,

AND THE ADJOINING COUNTIES;

And on the Inferences to be deduced from them.

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By JOHN THURNAM, M.D., F.S.A.

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*(Read at Salisbury, at the opening of the Blackmore Museum, 4th, 5th and 6th Sept. 1867.)*



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# On the Ancient British Barrows of Wiltshire,

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I HAVE been honoured, on this auspicious occasion, with a request to make some observations on the results to be deduced from the explorations of the ancient grave-mounds, nowhere so numerous, at least in England, as on Salisbury Plain, and the other downs of our county of Wilts. Many of these monuments of a primeval and archaic past, were explored sixty years ago, by the munificent Sir Richard Colt Hoare, and his coadjutor Mr. Cunnington; and following in their steps—*quanto intervallo*—I have myself within the last ten or twelve years, occasionally sought relaxation in similar examinations.

With scarcely an exception, the *tumuli* of our downs are all to be regarded as pre-Roman, and may therefore be spoken of in a general way as ancient British. When tested however, by their outward form and by their contents, they are divisible into two great classes; viz: *long barrows* and *round barrows*, of which the first-named are the earliest in time.

The *long barrows*, in accordance with the geological character of the districts in which they occur, are either simple tumuli of earth, chalk rubble and flints, as in South Wilts and Dorsetshire; or they contain more or less elaborately built-up chambers, galleries or cists of large stones, as in North Wilts and Gloucestershire. Whether, however, they enclose megalithic chambers or not, the sepulchral deposits are almost invariably found at or near the broad and high end of the tumulus, which is generally directed towards the east. But, what is most important, in no case whatever have the primary interments yielded objects of metal, whether bronze or iron; though in several instances implements or weapons of bone and stone have been found with them. Among the latter are specially to be noticed

certain delicate, well chipped arrow-heads of flint, of a leaf-shape; and probably, as at Uley, axe-heads of flint and green-stone, both polished. I therefore think we do not err in attributing this form of tumulus, as it occurs in the south-west of England, to the *neolithic age*, and to a period when the burning of the dead, though not unknown, was not a generally received or favourite method of disposing of their remains.

The *round barrows*, whether simply conoid or bowl-shaped, or of the more elaborate bell or disc forms, are very much more numerous than the long barrows of the same district. They much more frequently cover interments after cremation than by simple inhumation; in the proportion of at least three of the former to one of the latter. As, however, the objects found with the burnt bones, and with the entire skeletons in this class of barrows, do not differ in character, but in addition to implements and weapons of stone, including beautifully barbed arrow-heads of flint, not unfrequently comprise other implements of *bronze*, and also the finer and more decorated sorts of ancient British *fictilia*,—the so-called “drinking cups” and “incense cups”—we may safely conclude that all are of the same *bronze age*, during which, in this part of Britain, cremation, though not the exclusive, was the prevailing mode of interment.

So much for the tumuli; as to which I will only remark that, during the last four or five years, I have been able to explore satisfactorily several of the first class, or long barrows; and that I have observed certain peculiarities in the condition of the skeletons and the form of the skulls, which seem to me of great importance in their right appreciation.

Not to trespass however on the time of this assembly with tedious details, to be found elsewhere; I will content myself by giving a concise summary of the *inferences* which seem fairly deducible from the observed facts, as interpreted by the light of those scanty historical notices which have come down to us.

#### SUMMARY OF INFERENCES.

I. The skulls from the primary interments in the *long barrows* of Wiltshire and Gloucestershire, and it is believed of south Britain



in general, are of a strongly marked dolichocephalic type, having a mean breadth-index of  $\cdot71$ ; which is much lower than that of any modern European people. No brachycephalic skull, with a breadth-index of  $\cdot80$  or upwards, has been obtained from the primeval interments in these barrows. No objects of metal or decorated pottery are known to have been found with these interments, but only those of stone, bone or horn. We therefore refer these long barrows to the *stone period*.

II. The skulls from the primary interments in the *round barrows* of the same districts, and it is believed of south Britain in general, are of more or less brachycephalous proportions, having a mean breadth-index of  $\cdot81$ ; much higher than that now found in the population of any part of England and Wales.<sup>1</sup> Objects of bronze, and very rarely of iron, and richly decorated pottery, are often found in them, with or without objects of stone. These round barrows therefore we refer to the *bronze period*, and to that of *bronze and iron transition*.

III. The skulls from secondary interments in the upper strata of the long barrows are in most cases of similar brachycephalous proportions with those from the primary interments in the round barrows. They have, in a few instances, been found in connexion with decorated British pottery, altogether identical with that of the round barrows. They are doubtless the remains of the same people as those by whom the circular barrows were erected; and for all intents and purposes may be regarded as round barrow skulls.

IV. It has never been pretended that there is any necessary connexion between long skulls and long barrows, or round skulls and round barrows; and the dolichocephalic people who in this part of England buried in long barrows, may have elsewhere erected circular tumuli over their dead. The important question does not regard the form of their tombs, so much as the sequence of the two peoples in the order of time and civilization. As to this, it is contended that the long heads were the true primeval race; and that they were succeeded by a taller, more powerful, and more civilized people, who

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<sup>1</sup> See Table by Dr. Beddoe. *Mem. Anthropol. Soc.* ii. 350.

gradually extended themselves, and became dominant through a great part, perhaps nearly the whole, of the island.

V. These British *dolichocephali*, or long-heads, are the earliest people whose sepulchral monuments can be shown to remain to us. The exploration of their tombs—the long barrows—show that they buried their dead entire, and almost always without cremation; that they possessed herds of small short-horned oxen—the *Bos longifrons*, or *Bos brachyceros*—that they subsisted largely by the chase of the red-deer and wild boar; that some of their customs were barbarous in the extreme; and in particular, that, if not addicted to anthropophagism, they at least sacrificed many human victims, whose cleft skulls and half-charred bones are found in their tombs.

VI. The brachycephalous people, or round-heads, who buried in the round barrows, were more civilized than the *dolichocephali*; and may be inferred to have brought with them the more common use, if not the first knowledge, of bronze. The exploration of their tombs shows that burning the dead was with them the prevailing and fashionable, though not the exclusive mode of burial; and the appearances are consistent with what we are told of the funerals of the Gauls (their supposed congeners), by Cæsar and Pomponius Mela. From the same source, or the appearances in their tombs, we should infer that they had advanced from the nomadic, hunting and pastoral condition, to a more settled agricultural stage of culture; and that if they had not altogether abandoned the more barbarous customs of their ancestors, and in particular that of human sacrifice, (which all history tells us was, at one time, everywhere prevalent) they had at least restricted them within narrow limits.

VII. There is no proof, nor is it the least probable, that the brachycephalic extirpated the earlier dolichocephalic people. It is far more likely that they reduced them to slavery, or drove them in part into the interior and western parts of the island. When once reduced to obedience, they may have lived with them on friendly terms, and even mingled with them in domestic relations. In some districts, the *brachycephali* would probably entirely replace the earlier race; whilst in others, the *dolichocephali* would live on under the supremacy of their more powerful neighbours. A mingling of



the remains of the two peoples in their later tombs must almost certainly have ensued.

VIII. The two races, whose existenee is made known to us by researches in the tumuli, are most naturally identified with the two peoples, strongly contrasted in their manners, whom Cæsar describes in well known passages of the twelfth and fourteenth chapters of the 5th book of his Commentaries.<sup>1</sup> According to this, the round-heads of the bronze period are the same as the agricultural people of the maritime districts, who are said by Cæsar to have migrated from Belgie Gaul; and the long-headed people of the stone period are the aneestors of the pastoral and less civilized tribes of the interior, reputed aboriginal, and who prior to the coming of the others—as to which event there is no certain note of time—must have oocupied, and been dominant in the maritime parts, as well as in the interior of the island.

IX. The origin and ethnîc affinities of these two peoples can only be discussed conjeeturally and tentatively, in the present state of science. An often-quoted passage in the *Agricola* of Tacitus seems however to indieate part of the probable solution.<sup>2</sup> The great Roman historian points out, first, the dark complexion and curly hair of the western tribe of the Silures; and, secondly, the similarity of the appearanee of the southern Britons to their neighbours in Gaul. And he adduees the very obvious argument, from these differenees of physiognomy and appearanee, that the Silures were

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<sup>1</sup> “Britanniæ pars interior ab iis incolitur, quos natos in insula ipsa, memoria proditum dicunt. Maritima pars ab iis, qui prædæ ac belli inferendi causa ex Belgis transierant; qui omnes fere iis nominibus civitatum appellantur, quibus orti ex civitatibus eo pervenerant, et bello illato ibi remanserunt atque agros colere cœperunt. . . . Ex his omnibus longe sunt humanissimi, qui Cantium incolunt, quæ regio est maritima omnis, neque multum a Gallica differunt consuetudine. Interiores plerique frumenta non scrunt, sed lacte et carne vivunt, pellibusque sunt vestiti.” (*B.G.*, v., 12, 14). Whilst it is seen that the Belgie tribes near the coast were comparatively civilised agriculturists, the people of the interior were much less cultivated, and still in the hunting and pastoral condition.

<sup>2</sup> Tac. Agric. xi. “Silurum colorati vultus torti plerumque crines (Jordanes adds, ‘et nigri,’) et posita contra Hispania, Iberos veteres trajecisse easque sedes occupasse, fidem faciunt. Proximi Gallis et similes sunt . . . . In universum tamen æstimanti Gallos vicinum solum occupasse credibile est.”

descended from the Iberians of Spain, whilst the southern and south-eastern Britons were derived from the people of the opposite coast of Gaul. As evidence of this last position, Tacitus refers to the similarity of the religion, language, moral and mental temperament of the Britons and Gauls. It is not improbable that in this passage the Silures are named *κατ' ἑξοχὴν*, as a principal tribe, and as representative of others not like themselves, confined to the extreme west of the island. By Cæsar, however, who knew nothing of the west of Britain, the Silures would be regarded as *interiores*, just as the regions producing tin were, and termed by him *mediterranei*. The *proximi Gallis* of Tacitus are clearly the same people as those of the *maritima pars* of Cæsar.

X. The geographer Strabo is another important witness for a great difference in the features and personal characteristics of the Iberians and Gauls. In the course of his fourth book, he twice tells us that the Iberians differed entirely in their bodily conformation from the Gauls of both "Celtica" and "Belgia;" who he expressly says participated in the common Gaulish physiognomy.<sup>1</sup> It is evident, that if we interpret this observation of Strabo's by the light of that first quoted from Tacitus, we must picture the Iberians as a swarthy or *melanous* people, with dark complexion and curly dark hair. They would thus be strongly contrasted with the Gauls; who by the classical writers are uniformly represented as fair or *xanthous*, and moreover as of tall stature. Compared with the Gauls, the Iberians like other southern Europeans, were probably a people of short stature. We derive no light from the remains in the barrows, as to the colour of the hair and the complexion of the people buried in them: but they do enable us to ascertain a difference of stature. The measurement of the skeletons, and especially of the thigh-bones, from the long barrows and the round barrows respectively, clearly demonstrates that the *dolichocephali* of the former, as compared with the *brachycephali* of the latter, were a people of short stature. The mean height, as calculated from the measurement of 52 male skeletons or femora, was about 5 feet 6

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<sup>1</sup> Strabo, iv., 1, § i.; iv., 2, § i. Τοὺς δὲ λοιποὺς Γαλατικὴν μὲν τὴν ὄψιν.

inches in the one, and 5 feet 9 inches in the other, the average difference being no less than three inches.

XI. The cranial type of the ancient Iberians has not yet been so conclusively ascertained as is to be desired. But the examination of the large series of skulls of modern Spanish Basques, at Paris, as well as of such Spanish and Portuguese skulls as exist in English and Dutch collections, altogether justifies the presumption that the Iberians of antiquity were a decidedly dolichocephalous people.

XII. The British *brachycephali* of the bronze period are to be regarded as an offshoot, through the Belgic Gauls, from the great brachycephalous stock of central and north-eastern Europe and Asia; in all the countries of which—France, Switzerland, South Germany, Bohemia, Poland, Russia, and Finland—the broad and short cranial type is still the prevailing one.

The earlier British *dolichocephali* of the stone period were, we think, either derived from the ancient Iberians, or from a common source with that people. Not only was Spain peopled by the Iberian race, but even in historical times, a considerable part of Gaul; and there is no improbability in the conclusion of its having occupied the British Islands likewise, as is, indeed, asserted by some ancient historians.<sup>1</sup>

XIII. As to the origin of the Iberians themselves, it is better to confess our ignorance, than to indulge in premature speculations. Some,—as Professor Vogt, would bring them from America, by way of a lost Atlantis, or “connecting land between Florida and our own

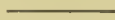
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<sup>1</sup> Dionysius and his paraphraser Priscian, say expressly that the Cassiterides were peopled by the Iberians:—“*populos tenuit quas fortis Iberi.*” [Dion., *Perieg.* v., 563; Priscian, *Perieg.* v., 578.] The Cassiterides are termed by these writers *the Western isles whence tin proceeds*—a mere paraphrase of the word Cassiterides. Under this last designation, as used by the ancients, not only the Seilly Isles, but the Damnonian promontory and coasts were generally included. The very ancient notice of the Cassiterides preserved by Strabo, represents the inhabitants as nomadic and pastoral, clothed in long tunics, covered by *black* mantles; a garb identical with that of the ancient Iberians of Spain, who are likewise described by the geographers, Diodorus and Strabo, as *melanchlæni*, or black robed. [Diod. Sic., lib. v., c. 33; Strabo, lib. iii., c. 3, § 7; c. 5. § 2.]



Continent, which in the middle tertiary (miocene) period, was still above the water." Others, as M. Broca, search for them in Northern Africa; others, in the more or less far East; whilst Professor Huxley finds in their crania, as in those of the other dolichocephali of Western Europe, Australian affinities, though without deciding on "the ethnological value of the osteological resemblance."

XIV. In conclusion, I am content with having established, from archæological and osteological data, at least to my own satisfaction, the existence in this island of the west, of two distinct races in pre-Roman times. One of these, I may repeat, which had lost its supremacy, at least in the south of the island, being the earlier and dolichocephalic, was probably Iberic; the other being the later brachycephalic, was probably Gaulish, or in other words, Belgic.



THE CHAIRMAN:—I am sure that we must all feel deeply indebted to Dr. Thurnam for the interesting paper which he has just read to us. Coming as it has done from such an authority on skulls, we shall feel that what he has said is deserving of the greatest attention. The very fact of the two skulls before us having been found, one in a long barrow, and the other in a round barrow—presuming them to be of a typical character—does appear to me to point out most decisively the existence of different races in this county. One remark, which, I once made before the Archæological Society, I may perhaps be allowed to repeat here, because it has reference to a point on which I do differ a little from Dr. Thurnam. I really cannot think there is sufficient evidence before us to show that the early Britons were addicted to human sacrifice. I am aware that it has been so stated by Cæsar and others, but with the object, as I conceive, of depreciating in the minds of their own people the habits and customs of the nations whom they had conquered. In bringing their armies against the Britons, they were naturally ready to accuse the latter of being addicted to the practices to which Dr. Thurnam has alluded. It is not, however, satisfactorily proved to my mind that the early Britons were either cannibals or addicted to human sacrifice. The feat of skulls having been found in the barrows which had been

cloven and knocked about, would seem only to indicate their having been buried after the feuds which prevailed among savage nations. This is an opinion, I may be allowed to say, that is held by others as well as myself, and I have ventured to say so much on this point, because I am desirous that without ample proof, the early Britons should not be set down as cannibals, or as addicted to human sacrifice. I hope that Dr. Thurnam will allow his paper to appear in the *Archæological Magazine*, because discussion in its pages may serve to throw further light upon the subject.

MR. E. T. STEVENS:—In the immediate neighbourhood of this city, within the last twelve months, we have opened a number of what we regard as pit dwellings, and I will mention one or two circumstances which may tend to support the observations of Dr. Thurnam with regard to the practice of cannibalism among the Britons. The surface soil of the fields in which these pits exist is largely charged with the ordinary Roman pottery in a fragmentary state, none of which however is found mixed with the material employed for filling in these troglodytic habitations. We infer from this as well as other circumstances, that they were inhabited by a pre-Roman race, or at all events by a people not exposed to Roman influence. It matters little, however, whether the pits were formed before the Romans came to Britain. If the Romans had not influence upon the people, as would appear to be the case from the entire absence of Roman ware in their habitations, it is sufficient for the present purpose. Very few human remains were found in the pit dwellings, although animal bones in large quantities were obtained from them; but what few human remains there were, appear to have been treated in the same way as the animal remains. All the long bones had been broken, as if for the extraction of marrow, precisely as was the case with the mammalian remains. Looking at the scoring of knives upon some of the bones, there is, as far as we can judge, direct evidence of the practice of cannibalism amongst the people who in pre-Roman times lived in these pits close to Salisbury.

MR. BLYTH:—I remember reading, some months ago, that in the caverns of the south of France human bones were found split in a similar way, apparently for the extraction of marrow.



Rev. E. KELL:—But there is no proof that they had anything to do with human sacrifice.

Dr. THURNAM:—The Belgian caverns have been explored by M. Dupont, whose collection of objects found in them I had an opportunity of inspecting about two months ago. There you will find a considerable number of bones split in the way alluded to. I believe the evidence in favour of that practice is becoming stronger and stronger every day, through the researches which are being made in the caves. All who are in the habit of reading the classical authors, must know that in the history of almost all barbarian and savage people, there has been a period in which man has been killed by his fellow man, and offered as a sacrifice to the gods. There is a curious passage in the work of the Roman geographer Mela, in reference to Gaul. Writing in the reign of Claudius, he says that although human sacrifices had ceased, one thing was still observed in the completion of the religious rites; the human victim was brought to the altar of the god, and blood was abstracted, and with it the altar was sprinkled. Although human sacrifice had been abolished, this reminiscence of it was kept up. Such is the express testimony of the historian Mela, as regards Gaul. The various substitutes for human sacrifice which obtained in Rome and Greece, are well known. In Greece, when man ceased to be offered, locks of his hair were cut off. The head was not separated, but yet a part of the head was cut off and offered on the altar. In Rome, when the human victim ceased to be thrown into the Tiber, images made of rushes were thrown over, so as to keep up the practice, in a way not offensive to the instincts of civilized man.