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978-1-108-07864-1 - British Barrows: A Record of the Examination of Sepulchral
Mounds in Various Parts of England

William Greenwell

Excerpt

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I N T R O D U C T I O N .

THE almost universal custom of raising a mound, the so-called barrow¹, over the buried dead, to mark the place where they were laid in the grave, has been variously discussed, and by many different writers. Notices of the practice have been so often collected from the works of Greek and Latin authors and other sources, that it is not necessary for me to enter upon any general consideration of the subject, except in very brief terms.

This form of memorial, *monumentum ære perennius*, as ancient as it has been lasting, is found in almost all parts of the globe, from the extreme West of Europe to the Eastern limit of the continent of the New World. Barrows, under diverse names, line the coasts of the Mediterranean, the seats of ancient empires and civilisations, before whose rise they were in existence, and whose decay they have witnessed and outlived. So numerous are they, that they spread like a covering over the wide plains, the Steppes of Northern Asia, from the Euxine almost to the Icy Sea, where a few wandering nomads now feebly represent a population which was once large, wealthy, and powerful. The continent of India possesses them in abundance, and their buried contents present an identity in many particulars so close with those of Britain, that some have considered it as affording a proof of a near connection between the two peoples who erected them. Egypt knows them as the sepulchres of her early kings, and the Pyramids have remained, an unchanging legacy from the dead, when the wisdom of her learned exists only in the oft transmuted knowledge of many an alien race, and when her religion, her literature, her art, almost her language, the living expressions of a nation's being, have all but passed away and been forgotten. The red man of America still places his dead beneath

¹ I have preferred to use the English *barrow* rather than the Latin *tumulus*, on account of the word being in the vernacular, and because *tumulus* does not necessarily imply a sepulchral mound.

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them, and the huge mounds, so common in some parts of that continent, are the evidences of an early civilisation, to which the marvellous ruined cities of Central America bear a stronger witness; cities which, in their elaborate and profuse though strange sculpture, give indications of an art development so distinctive in its character, that it could scarcely have had its origin in the mind of any of the races of the Old World.

They abound in Great Britain and Ireland, differing in shape and size, and made of various materials; and are known as barrows (mounds of earth), and cairns (mounds of stone)¹, and popularly in some parts of England as lows, houes, and tumps. They vary in size from a few feet in diameter to a miniature mountain, like Silbury Hill in Wiltshire, which covers above five acres of ground, and measures 130 ft. in perpendicular height ²

The manner in which the dead have been disposed within them differs very considerably. Sometimes the body, whether burnt or unburnt, has been placed in the mound without anything to protect it from the surrounding earth or stones. Sometimes it has been placed in a small box of stone, a cist; at other times in the hollowed trunk of a tree, or in a grave sunk below the surface of the ground; and, when a burnt body, often in an urn; whilst in some instances the mound encloses a large structure, suggestive rather of an abode for the living than of a resting-place for the dead³. Of this last

¹ Barrows and cairns often occur in close proximity, there being nothing in the mode of interment or in the remains found in them to imply that there was any difference in point of time between the two kinds of mound.

² Silbury Hill has been twice examined with the view of ascertaining whether it was sepulchral or not. First in 1777, when a shaft was sunk from the top to the bottom; and again in 1849, when a tunnel was carried up to the present centre, as nearly as it could be ascertained, at the level of the surface of the ground. Though it was satisfactorily proved to be artificial, no remains, which indicated that a burial had taken place beneath it, were discovered. These examinations cannot, however, be considered satisfactory as affording any conclusive evidence that it is not a sepulchral mound. The area which it covers is very large, and the primary burial, even if it was at the centre, might very easily have been missed, and by many yards, during the course of both the investigations. In the process of throwing up so large a mass of earth, the original centre could scarcely have been retained, and it is probably a considerable distance from the present one.

Stukeley mentions that an iron bridle-bit and some armour were found on the summit, the remains probably of a Saxon interment, placed there certainly long after the mound was thrown up. The occurrence of Saxon burials in the upper parts of British barrows is by no means infrequent. I have myself met with three, and very notable instances.

³ Some writers, and with much probability, have regarded the sepulchral chamber as a copy of the habitation of the living, and the way in which the dead are sometimes found, arranged upon a stone bench round the chamber, as representing the manner in which they sat in their huts when alive. There certainly is a great

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mode the great chambered cairns at New Grange and Dowth, in the County of Meath, on the banks of the Boyne, and Maeshowe in the Orkneys, are the most remarkable examples in the United Kingdom.

As a rule they are circular, though at times approaching an oval form, but a long-shaped mound is common in some parts of England, and has been regarded with much probability as the earliest form of barrow, and belonging to a period before the introduction of the use of metal into the country.

It has been stated in the Preface, that the Introduction will be mainly confined to a consideration of the facts which an extended examination of the barrows of the Yorkshire Wolds has supplied, and to certain deductions which may be drawn from those facts. It becomes necessary however, in the first place, to give a description of the barrows themselves, preparatory to giving an account of their contents.

In form they are either long or circular; but as the long barrows, and the various interesting questions connected with them, are fully considered in the account of the opening of several of them, given in the sequel, the present remarks will be limited to the round barrows.

They differ considerably in outline, and the slope of the sides is sometimes very gradual, at other times quite sharp. In most cases they have become so greatly altered, during the course of years of cultivation of the surface, that it is difficult to ascertain what has been the original form; but judging from some which still remain untouched by the plough, and from the present appearance of the whole of them, they may be described as being bowl-shaped and conical; those of the former shape being perhaps the most numerous.

resemblance between some of these receptacles for the dead, especially in Scandinavia, and the places of abode of the Eskimo and other Arctic residents. Nilsson, *Stone Age*, ed. Lubbock, p. 124 *seq.* The supposition is not one which bears in itself anything of improbability, but rather is the expression of a natural feeling. Some of the early twelfth-century grave-stones are miniature high-pitched roofs, the covering in fact of man's last home.

The same idea, connecting the dead with the living, and retaining in the grave some reminiscence of the former life, may possibly have been sought to be embodied by the use of a peculiarly shaped urn, holding the ashes of the dead,—specimens of which have been found at Albano and on Mons Crescentius in Italy, and at several places in Germany. They are imitations of huts, and have a moveable door, which was secured after the bones had been deposited within them. They belong to the Bronze Age. Birch, *Ancient Pottery*, vol. ii. 196, 391 1st ed., 446, 595 2nd ed.; Pigorini and Lubbock, *Notes on the Hut Urns . . . of Marino*, *Archæol.* vol. xlii. p. 99; *Matériaux pour l'Histoire primitive de l'Homme*, 2^de Sér. vol. iv. p. 420; Lindenschmit, *Alterthümer*, vol. i. Heft. x. Taf. 3.

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The evidence afforded by those on the moorland to the north of the river Derwent, and which are situated at a distance of but a few miles from the chalk range of the wolds, tends likewise to show the correctness of this description.

In Wiltshire, as also, though not so commonly, in other districts of England, different forms are met with. One large series has had the name of bell-barrow given to it; but it is difficult to separate it from the conical-shaped mound, except that it has a ditch round the base. What Sir Richard Colt Hoare calls Druid barrows, consisting of one or more very small mounds having a circular bank surrounding them at some distance, do not occur upon the wolds, though it is possible that such may at one time have existed, and have been entirely destroyed by cultivation; at the same time, as they have not been met with on the moors to the north of the Derwent, it is more probable that they were always absent on the wolds. Nor do the twin barrows of Sir R. Colt Hoare, or a group of three mounds, surrounded by a ditch, which are found, though rarely, in Wiltshire, find any representatives on the wolds.

It is probable that many of the wold barrows had originally an encircling mound or ditch, or both, at the base; but if such was the case, the process of agriculture has long since destroyed all trace of them. Some such method of enclosure is very common in connection with sepulchral places throughout the whole of Britain. It is found in the shape of circles of stone, where that material is abundant; and in mounds of earth or ditches, where no suitable stone exists. The circles are placed in some cases immediately round the base of the barrow, and in others at some little distance from it¹. Several barrows upon Wykeham Moor, in the North Riding of Yorkshire, and on Riccal and Skipwith commons, in the East Riding, have each a ditch round the base. The downs of Wiltshire present numerous instances of encircling mounds; and the greater number of the Cornish barrows are enclosed by rings of stone. This frequent characteristic makes it probable that the wold barrows were, many of them, originally surrounded by a similar enclosure.

Barrows differ very considerably in size, though not perhaps so much on the wolds as in other districts: those of the wolds

¹ In Homeric times the custom appears to have been to first mark out the site of the tomb (*σῆμα*) in somewhat of a circular form, or, as Mr. Paley thinks, in an oval, and then to place stones round the outline. See paper by F. A. Paley, M.A., on Homeric Tumuli, in *Trans. of Cambridge Phil. Soc.* vol. xi. pt. 2.

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may be said to range from 20 feet to 150 feet in diameter, and from one foot to 24 feet in height ¹

They have been made with the materials which came the readiest to hand ; and these appear to have been collected for some distance round each mound, for no indication of a hollow marks the place from whence the earth or chalk was taken. As might be expected, they are more commonly made of earth than of chalk, but it is rare to find one without some admixture of that stone, or of flint, the former no doubt frequently obtained from the grave, which is almost always found at the centre. They occur but very rarely made entirely of chalk.

With the imperfect tools and other appliances possessed by the people who erected them, the task of collecting the earth, and much more of quarrying the chalk, must have been by no means an easy one. Chalk however, from its tendency to become broken up, especially in the upper beds by cracks, is easier to work, even by means of so humble an implement as a pick of deer's-horn or a pointed stake, than might at first be supposed. I have frequently noticed indications of turfs or sods of earth having been used ; in a few instances the remains of grass and other plants being distinctly visible. In some of the barrows the appearances were such as to suggest that the material was collected in small quantities, probably in baskets ², and that the mound was constructed piecemeal, here a basketfull of earth, there a few turfs, then a basketfull of chalk, then two or three blocks of flint, and so on ³. In some cases the materials have been placed with greater regularity, and the way in which a barrow had gradually increased from the centre was most clearly shown by the parallel layers of different-coloured matter which were distinguishable in the section of it. I have never seen anything to lead to the conclusion that a material foreign to the spot on which the barrow was erected had been used in its construction, with the exception of slabs of stone, used in making cists, and that has occurred, within

¹ The largest that I am acquainted with is Willy Houe, near Wold Newton, which is very nearly 150 feet in diameter, and about 24 feet high. It was partly opened by the late Lord Londesborough, but no interment was discovered, nor was the centre reached.

² Mr. Peacock noticed the same appearances in a barrow at Cleatham, Lincolnshire ; see a paper by him in the *Reliquary*, vol. viii. p. 224.

³ Is it possible that the custom of friends throwing earth on the coffin, when the words 'earth to earth' are being read, is a reminiscence or survival of the old manner of raising the barrow, when it may be supposed that those present deposited each his portion of earth, &c. with some degree of observance ?

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my experience, in only one case upon the wolds¹. Nor have I ever found that the body had been placed amongst any peculiar soil, or brought in contact with any other substance than what might be obtained in close proximity to the barrow².

It has already been suggested that it is probable the wold barrows had circles round the base, in the shape of mounds or ditches, as is not uncommon elsewhere. In some rare instances they certainly had enclosing circles within the barrow. I have met with this feature, in the form of a circle of flint stones, and of a circular trench. In both cases the circle was an incomplete one. In the ring of flint stones there was a space left vacant; in the trench, which was hollowed out of the chalk rock, there was one portion, or more, which was necessary to complete the circle, not excavated. The same peculiarity is found to exist in the barrows and cairns of other parts of England and in Scotland, and indeed this incompleteness appears to be almost invariable in connection with sepulchral circles³.

The circle, which occasionally is double, sometimes includes the whole barrow, at other times it defines the bounds of an individual burial, it may be of one out of many which have been placed within the barrow, and only encloses a portion of its area. Similar encircling mounds and trenches are found to surround spaces of ground which have been devoted to the purpose of burial, but where, apparently, no barrow has ever surmounted the graves.

¹ The Rev. J. C. Atkinson, of Danby, found a barrow in Cleveland, in the North Riding, to have been made to a considerable extent of sand, basalt, and rolled pebbles, none of which materials are to be met with within several miles of the place.

² Colonel Meadows Taylor remarks that fine earth, brought from a distance, almost universally surrounded the urns and cists in the Dekhan cairns. The same feature has been supposed to have been observed in barrows in England, but, I think, without sufficient foundation. See 'Cairns, Cromlechs, &c., in the Dekhan,' a paper by Colonel Taylor, in vol. xxiv. of the Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy; and 'Archæology of India,' Journal of the Ethnological Society, New Series, vol. i. pp. 167, 168.

³ The great circles of Avebury, Stonehenge, Callernish, &c., are all incomplete, though perhaps it may be said that in those gigantic structures the idea there expressed was an entrance, and not incompleteness. Examples, however, where no such object as the obtaining an entrance was intended, might be multiplied indefinitely from Great Britain. The same feature is found in connection with sepulchral circles in other parts of the world. Colonel Meadows Taylor mentions it as incidental to circles in the Dekhan, *l. c.* p. 336. In a paper in *Revue Archéologique, Nouvelle Série*, ix. 372, entitled, *Description d'un Tumulus sépulchral des Tchoudes à Arrayone sur la Kama (Russie)*, the following passage occurs, 'à l'intérieur on remarque une enceinte formée par des blocs de pierre calcaire et affectant la forme d'un fer à cheval. L'ouverture, large de neuf pas, regarde le sud. Une autre petite ouverture se trouve aussi à l'est.'

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The incompleteness of these circles is so frequent a feature in their construction that it cannot be accidental. They have moreover been left incomplete in some cases in a way which most evidently shows a design in the operation; as for instance, where the circle is formed of a number of stones standing apart from each other, the space between two of them has frequently been carefully built up with one large or several smaller stones¹. The effect of this is to break the continuity, or rather the uniformity, of the circle, and so to make it imperfect. This very remarkable feature, in connection with the enclosing circles, is also found to occur in the case of other remains which belong to the same period and people as the barrows. The sculptured markings engraved upon rocks, and also upon stones forming the covers of urns or cists, consist in the main of two types—cup-shaped hollows, and circles, more or less in number, surrounding in most cases a central cup. In almost every instance the circle is imperfect, its continuity being sometimes broken by a duct leading out from the central cup; at other times by the hollowed line of the circle stopping short when about to join at each end. The connection of these sculptured stones, if so they may be termed, with places of sepulture brings them at once into close relationship with the enclosing circles of barrows, and it is scarcely possible to imagine but that the same idea, whatever that may have been, is signified by the incomplete circle in both cases. The rings of gold and bronze, of various shapes, some of which in their construction show that the penannular form is not caused by the requirements of their use, appear to represent the same incomplete circle. In fact, if some of the gold rings were figured upon stone, they would appear in the very similitude of the circular rock sculptures². I will attempt to give no explanation of this figure,

¹ To prevent encumbering the subject with a large number of examples of circles made incomplete in this way, it may be sufficient to refer the reader to a paper by Mr. James Logan, F.S.A., on 'Circles of Stones in Scotland, presumed to be Druidical,' printed in the *Archæologia*, vol. xxii. p. 198. Mention is there made, and engravings given, of several circles where this feature is quite distinct. The author calls the stone, which fills up the space between two of the separate stones of the circle, the altar, his view being that the circles are temples. I found in a cairn, examined by the Rev. R. J. Mapleton and myself, at Kilmartin, in Argyleshire, two circles, parallel to each other, and surrounding a cist, in which was an unburnt body. The circles were within and covered by the mound, and were both made incomplete by having the space between two of the stones built up with smaller ones. See *Proceedings of Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, vol. vi. p. 339.

² For a description of these sculptured rocks and stones, with accurate figures of them, the reader is referred to 'Ancient British Sculptured Rocks of Northumberland,' &c., by George Tate, F.G.S., published in the *Transactions of the Berwickshire Naturalists' Club*, vol. v. p. 137; to 'Archaic Sculpturings,' by Sir J. Y. Simpson,

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so marked and so frequent amongst the works of the early people of Britain, though I think it not improbable that whatever the Tau symbol of Egypt, the equal-limbed cross with its binding circle, and other like signs betokened, this mysterious figure may likewise have represented.

It has been suggested by some that the enclosing circles were merely made to support the mound at its base. It is only necessary to remark, in refutation of this surmise, that the circle is often within the mound, is sometimes a trench, and is, as before mentioned, nearly always incomplete. Others have, and with more reason, supposed them to be marks of *taboo*, a fence to preserve the habitation of the dead from desecration, but the fact that so many are within, and must always have been concealed by, the barrow, appears to be inconsistent with this explanation. I think it more probable, if the notion of a fence is to be entertained, that they were intended to prevent the exit of the spirit of those buried within, rather than to guard against disturbance from without. A dread of injury by the spirits of the dead has been very commonly felt by many savage and semi-civilised peoples; nor, indeed, is such fear unknown in our own times and even amongst ourselves; and it may well be that, by means of this symbolic figure, it was thought this danger might be averted, and the dead kept safe within the tomb.

It is usual to find the wold barrows associated in groups, of greater or less number, though a single one is not very uncommon. I have known as many as thirty and more, which, from their close proximity, might lay claim to be considered as a group. In other parts of England they occur associated in much larger numbers, as for instance in Wiltshire, where, especially round Stonehenge, barrows are very numerous. They are not generally placed quite close together, but are separated by intervals, sometimes of several hundred feet, though occasionally two or more approach very near to each other, indeed to touching. As a rule they crown the heights, and though frequently placed on the slope of the hill, it is rare to find them in the bottom of the valley. We need not be at a loss to suggest the reason of this, for as the object of the mound itself was to be a memorial of those buried within it, so it is natural that such a position should be chosen as would allow that memorial to be generally and constantly seen.

There are certain features in connection with many, if not with

Bart.; and to 'Incised Markings on Stone,' published by direction of Algernon, Duke of Northumberland.

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all, of the barrows, which, as they do not appear to have reference to any particular burial, but rather to the sepulchral mounds themselves, though perhaps the two can scarcely be separated, it will be better to explain, before giving a description of the manner in which the interments have been made. Though, as has been stated, these features do not connect themselves immediately with the burials, they are nevertheless so commonly found in the barrows, that they must have reference to, and originate in, customs pertaining to the rites of sepulture¹.

It is a frequent occurrence to find holes, sunk below the natural surface, within the area of a barrow, and not usually in close proximity to any interment, though in some instances such has been found to be the case. Sometimes as many as four or five have been met with in a single barrow. They are of various sizes, and differ in shape, but they are generally circular, about 1½ ft. in diameter, and the same in depth. In the greater number of cases they are filled with the ordinary materials of which the mound itself is composed, and contain nothing besides; but at other times pieces of animal, and much more rarely of human, bones, charcoal, potsherds, and burnt earth and stone are found in them. There is no appearance, however, of a fire having ever been kindled within them; the burnt matter, when they contain any, having evidently been placed there in that condition. Similar holes are found in the Long Barrows of the south-west of England, but I have never observed anything like them in the barrows of the North Riding or of Northumberland, common as they are in those on the wolds². It has suggested itself to me that they may have been made as receptacles of food or of some other perishable material, and that they answered the same purpose as the vessels of pottery are supposed to have done, which are such frequent accompaniments of a burial. Their not being usually placed in close contact with the body is a fact not perhaps very consistent with this explanation of their purpose, but I am unable to offer any more likely suggestion.

The occurrence of animal bones is another frequent incident. It is rare indeed to meet with a barrow (where the material is such

¹ I am here reminded of a very apposite remark of M. P. Casalis de Fondouce: 'Je n'ai pas une confiance beaucoup plus grande dans celle des rites funéraires. Les auteurs sont, en général, trop disposés à attribuer à des rites funéraires tout ce qu'ils ne comprennent pas.' *Matériaux pour l'Histoire de l'Homme*, Sec. Série, tom. iv. 1873, p. 79.

² Colonel A. Lane Fox, F.S.A., found them in a barrow near Brighton, which contained an unburnt body, with a bronze knife.

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as to further the preservation of bone) without a considerable number of them being found scattered indiscriminately throughout the mound; and where they have not been so found, their absence is no doubt in many cases to be attributed to decay of the bones. In some barrows they are very abundant; for instance, in one at Rudstone they were literally in hundreds, placed, with flint chip-pings and sherds of pottery, in a dark-coloured, unctuous layer, which extended throughout the whole area of the mound, on the natural surface of the ground. They are nearly always, when of a nature that admits of such a process, broken, so as apparently to extract the marrow. There can, I think, be little doubt that these bones are the remains of feasts, held at the time of the funeral, or at some subsequent one, such as its anniversary. Practices of a like kind have been common to many different peoples, and so prevalent was the custom in some parts of Europe in the early times of Christianity that frequent orders, directed against holding feasts or sacrificing at the graves of the dead, are to be found in the Frankish Capitularies¹. They may also be the remains of food offered to the dead, an observance which has extensively prevailed in many countries and in various ages. They would in this case form a part of the practice of the worship of ancestors, which has been a feature almost universal in the growth of the religious feeling of the human race, and allied always with fear. The attempt to propitiate the dead, in one way or other, with the view of averting their displeasure and warding off the danger of their inflicting injury, might be illustrated very fully and from many sources in the history of almost every people and religion. Nor is it impossible that the habit of placing arms, implements, and ornaments in the grave with the dead (of the purpose of which other explanations will be found later on), may have had its origin in ancestral worship. The prevalence of this custom has been of great service in enabling us to gain a considerable knowledge of the animals which, at the time of the erection of the barrows,

¹ Even Christian priests appear to have indulged in the practice. Pope Zacharias in a letter to Boniface says, 'Pro sacrilegis itaque presbyteris, ut conscripsisti, qui tauros, hircos, diis paganorum immolabant, manducantes sacrificia mortuorum.' *Magna Biblioth. Vet. Patrum*, ed. 1618 viii. 130. In a capitulary of Karloman, Dux Francorum, A.D. 742, is a decree against 'sacrificia mortuorum.' Pertz, *Monum. Germaniæ Historica. Legum*, tom. i. p. 17. An 'Indiculus superstitionum et paganismorum,' which appears to be of the time of Karloman, A.D. 743, contains two articles which seem to refer to holding feasts at burial-places--'De sacrilegio ad sepulchra mortuorum,' and 'De sacrilegio super defunctos, id est, dadsisas.' *l. c.* p. 19.