An Ancient British Interment.

BY F. T. ELWORTHY.

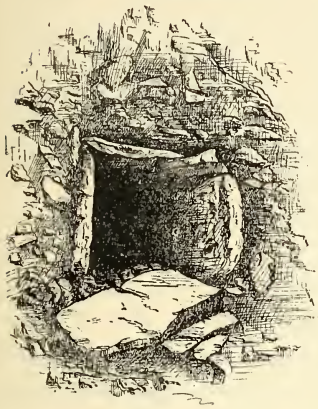
ON August 28th, 1896, some men were quarrying road stones on the hill in the parish of Culbone, Somerset, and while taking in more "heading," a large lump of earth fell into the quarry, thereby exposing an upright slab of stone, about five feet below the surface of the surrounding soil.

The quarry is on land belonging to the Earl of Lovelace, about fifty yards on the north side of the road leading from Porlock to Lynton, and not far from the stables called Broom-street, where one of the Minehead coaches stops to change horses.

Examination quickly showed that the stone first seen was but one of several, and formed the end of a rough enclosure, consisting of four upright slabs of slate, with others placed flat upon them, around and over which was the soil of the hill.

The outer stone was quickly removed, when, to the surprise and horror of the quarry-men, they found a hollow space, and looking out upon them from the back there appeared a grinning skull, with several bones lying near it.

The accompanying sketch shows the end of the grave opening out into the face of the quarry, as it appeared on August 31st. Besides the skull and bones an earthenware vase was found, on all of which we have much to say.



Careful inspection at the earliest possible moment after the discovery, convinced the writer that an interment had been discovered of very high antiquity, and measures were at once taken to preserve all the contents as well as the stone kist, intact, until the rightful owner of the soil had himself had an opportunity of examining and of deciding what was to be done with them. It need hardly be said that the progress of the quarry will necessitate removal, and even if it were possible to protect the grave from mischievous injury where it lies, exposure to the weather would soon destroy or bury it, even if further working in the quarry were discontinued.

It is therefore to be hoped that the noble owner will permit the several stones forming the tomb to be carefully removed to a place of safety, and there to be set up again precisely as they now are on Culbone Hill.

The material of the slaty stone of the tomb is different in colour and formation from that of the quarry. The latter is red in colour, of the ordinary Devonian type, while the former is of a pale greyish blue and roughly laminated. Slate of this kind, however, we are informed, is found at no great distance. The interior of the kist was singularly clean and free from all appearance of earth stain; indeed, it looked as if it had been scrubbed and scrubbed till the face of the stone was quite smooth. It measured three feet six inches long, by twenty-two inches wide. The sides were nearly parallel. There were two large covering stones which make the height uneven, but

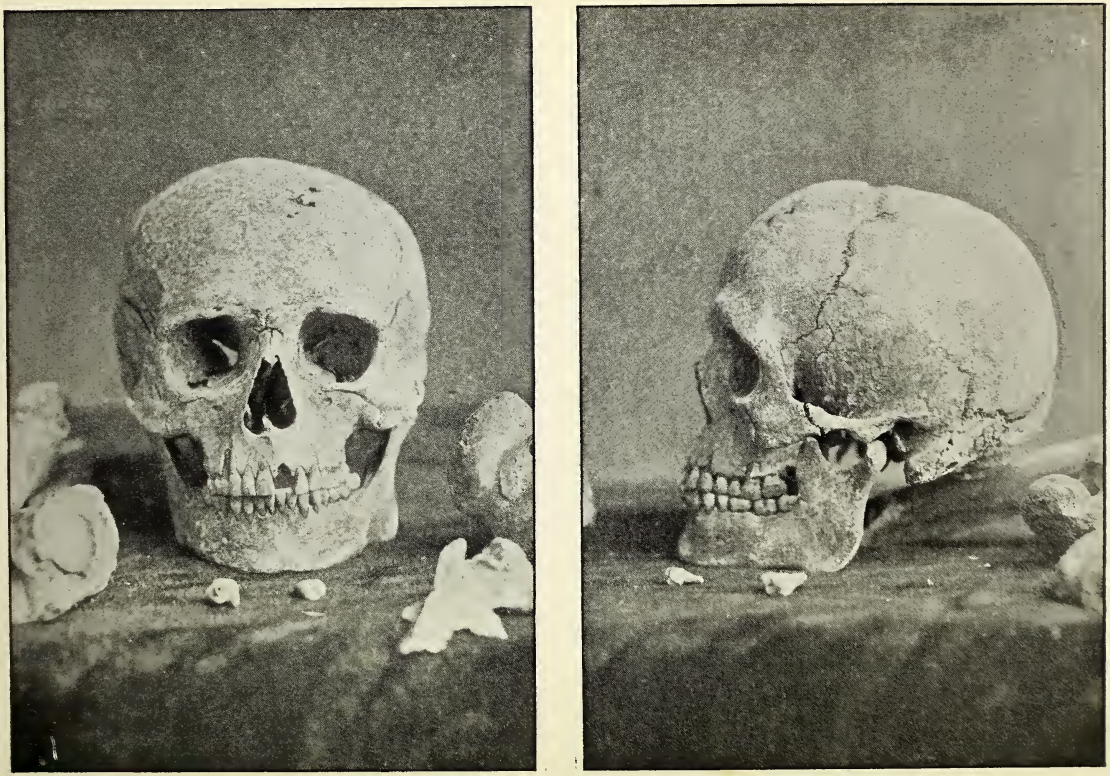
it averaged just eighteen inches—rising somewhat roof-like along the centre, the flat stones lying lengthwise. The floor is composed of several thinner slates, long and nearly parallel in shape, also placed lengthwise. On these was found undoubted human dust, but how much, cannot now be determined, for the finders had so carefully exploited the floor for coin that very little remained for examination.

The axis of the grave is north and south—and the head of the buried man was in the north-east corner, where there seemed to be the stains of decay by contact with the stone.

It is quite certain that the interment was in the well known pre-historic method, by which the corpse was doubled up, with the knees drawn close to the chin; but in this case it is pretty clear that even then a full-sized man could not be crammed into a space of the dimensions given without much force. Having then been lowered down the five feet into the hole, of course, very much larger than the stone enclosure formed at its bottom, the doubled-up corpse was laid on its right side and so pressed into the kist by main force; he was most likely trodden in, and in doing this his head would be pressed on one side by the angle of the kist, so much so as to bring it back upon the left shoulder, as in the accompanying sketch. In the course of the ages, while other parts of his body decayed, his hard head slowly sunk in the upright position into which his friends had forced it, so that when our latter-day quarrymen first saw it, the skull seemed to be looking out upon them, and led to the inquiry whether the head had not been cut off before burial. The process described is fully sufficient to account for the skull being found upright.



The bones found with the skull, which is wonderfully perfect as seen from the front, were parts of vertebræ from the neck, part of shoulder blade, top and two-thirds of humerus, part of first rib, and fragments of other ribs. Also about half of the



BRONZE AGE SKULL FOUND ON CULBONE HILL.

length of each of the two large leg-bones (femur and tibia) meeting at the knee of both legs.

The accompanying plate shows the skull in two positions.

From the bones found, and from the known position of the body, it is easy to affirm that from some cause or other the inner or northern end of the tomb was drier and further from atmospheric influence than the rest, for all the fragments remaining are just those which would be drawn back into the neighbourhood of the skull. By what means these have been preserved we cannot tell, but it is quite possible, even probable that the whole skeleton had lasted until late years, when the withdrawal of soil from the south front has admitted air, and if it had not been found now, it is almost certain that in a short time all the human remains would have crumbled away. There must be some unknown property in the soil surrounding and overlying the interment, which has mixed with the water, percolating through it, so as to have preserved these bones for the many centuries of which we have yet to speak. Although there are several barrows in the neighbourhood, there is no sign or appearance of any such having ever been heaped over this interment. The surface is precisely like the rest, sloping to the south and covered only with scrubby heath.

Besides the bones, there was found in the grave a vase, placed near the skull, in the position shown on figure (p. 58). The accompanying plate from photographs in two positions, gives a very clear impression of this piece of very ancient pottery. Its exact measurements are: $6\frac{3}{4}$ inches high, $4\frac{7}{8}$ inches diameter at top, $16\frac{3}{4}$ inches greatest circumference.

It is hand made, therefore its date must be earlier than the potter's wheel, for it may be confidently asserted that no pottery was made by hand after the wheel became known.



The pattern upon it is of the earliest known type, consisting of straight lines made by pressing a little chisel-shaped piece of wood, of the size, and of the

kind shown in the accompanying sketch, thus breaking up the lines into small dashes. It will be seen that the rings surrounding the urn are made with the same tool, and not, like many later examples, by a cord pressed round the soft clay.

The vase has been well burnt, or it would have perished long ago, but has become very brittle. When found it was perfect, but rough handling by the finders has broken out and lost a piece. Nothing whatever was found in it, much to the disappointment of the quarrymen.

Thus far we have dealt simply with the bare facts, and at most with such conclusions as are based upon the evidence of our own senses, but these facts open up a very wide field for reflection and discussion, not only as to who the man was, whose skull we have, but to what race he belonged and when he lived.

It is fortunate that the tomb was found at an opportune moment, for within a few days, the meeting of the British Association enabled the photographs, here reproduced, by Mr. Hole, of Minehead, to be examined by some of the most eminent of living scientists, several of whom have permitted the writer to use their names as authority for what he states.

On examining the skull first, Dr. Beddoe, F.R.S., said decidedly "one of the round-headed barrow builders," without seeming to enquire whence it came. Dr. Garson said "this is a round barrow skull. Index about 82"; and several other well-known physiologists unhesitatingly gave the same judgment.

The concurrence of expert opinion both of those who have examined the remains themselves, and of those who have seen only the photographs is remarkable, not only as to his physique, but as to the period in which the man lived. In height he is pronounced to have been from 5 feet 7 inches to 5 feet 9 inches, and not more than from twenty-five to thirty years of age.



ANCIENT VASE FOUND ON CULBONE HILL.

When we first consider the immense antiquity of these relics, referred to later on, one is astonished and quite staggered at their remarkable preservation; yet when we remember that many instances exist of the conservation of bones of extinct animals, which lived in the untold ages before man came into the world, we are the more ready to accept the confident assertion of science, not only that such preservation is by no means to be doubted, but that these bones are verily those of a man who lived at the remote period of which we have now to treat. Moreover, if we concede at all that the bones are those of a pre-historic man, it matters little at what precise epoch he lived, so far as time is concerned; for the conditions which have assuredly preserved his bones for many centuries, have been always the same and could therefore have just as effectually preserved them for as many millenniums.

In considering the general form of the grave and the mode of the disposal of the body we find that in these matters there have been fashions and customs widely prevalent at different stages of human history and development; that just as it has been customary since history began, to bury the body at full length, so it is well known that pre-historic man—the man who lived before he knew the use of metal, who made his tools and weapons of stone—buried his dead in a doubled-up position. Indeed, there are to-day savages so backward as not to know how to work metal, who in fact are still in the Stone Age, and who, consequently continue to bury in the old manner common to primeval man. It is therefore necessary in dealing with this subject to take into consideration every separate locality, together with the known subsequent historical conditions of its inhabitants, and to bring them to bear upon such relics as we have now found in Somerset.

In the neighbouring county of Devon, kists like this are not uncommon, especially on Dartmoor, showing that the men who made them were more numerous than in Somerset, where

so far as is known, this is nearly* the first find of this sort of interment, and certainly the earliest. The stone kist found at Rodhuish (described by Savage, *History of Carhampton*, pp. 248, 310) was of a much later time, when interments at full length had come in, a period, as we shall presently show, divided by unknown ages from that with which we are now dealing. Many of the early stone chamber tombs are found with barrows raised over them, but the fact that our Culbone grave never had any cairn or other surface mark above it, is a proof according to Professor Oscar Montelius, that the burial is distinctly earlier than the barrows, and is probably that of one of the earliest immigrant chiefs of a new colony, or of a conquering race. The same authority points out that here too, nothing but the food pot was found in the grave, and that, experience proves to be an unquestionable feature of the very earliest interments. Later, and specially in the barrows, it is usual to find some weapon either of flint or bronze for use of the dead in the happy hunting grounds : later still, as metal became commoner, ornaments as well as weapons are met with, and the later the burial, the larger is the number of such objects found. Sometimes in the same barrow, are traces of the interment of the entire body, alongside of cinerary urns—which then (as now in these latter days when history is repeating itself) marked the rising fashion of cremation, and shows how the two systems at first overlapped, until after long periods of time as in Rome, burning and *columbaria* became the rule, while ordinary interments of the body at full length, were the exception, and practised only by the *Plebs*, or by Christians, whose ideas of a future state led them to continue like

* A grave somewhat similar and, doubtless, of the Bronze Age, was found at Wincanton some few years ago. This also was found in working a quarry, but the remains were not carefully examined or preserved, while the kist itself was allowed to fall into the quarry, and was destroyed. Some fragments of pottery were found along with the skull, and are now to be seen in the Society's Museum at Taunton. There were also pieces of stag-horn and a flint scraper.

the Egyptians of old, to dispose of the body with extreme reverence and care.

Dr. Montelius declares that in all interments of the Bronze Age the later they are, relatively, no matter the locality, there are to be found the greatest number of articles buried with the dead: hence for the reasons given he pronounces our find to belong distinctly to the earliest of that kind of burial, and that it is of the very beginning of the Bronze Age in Britain. This statement is supported by Professor G. Coffey, of Dublin, Sir John Evans, Dr. Robert Munro (President of Glastonbury Committee), and all others who were consulted; while Mr. Arthur Evans inclined to place it earlier in the Stone Age. These opinions were based upon consideration of the entire evidence relating to kist, skull, and vase, all taken together.

Confirmative of all this, the writer would point to interments now to be seen in the Etruscan Museum at Bologna, of an age there described as the Bronze period, where the complete skeletons have been preserved in a matrix of clay, doubled up as described, and with rings, fibulæ, spear heads, and vases along with them. These are, of course, by reason of their accompaniments, of a later relative period of the Bronze Age than that to which our Somerset man belonged.

How do we know that he lived in the Bronze Age and not before metal was known?

We have alluded to the archaic pattern on the hand-made vase and to the way in which the pattern was produced. Pottery of nearly similar shape, known to be of the earlier Stone Age is often found to have the same diagonal lines, but they were made by a scratch of a single point, as of a fish-bone, in one straight cut, whereas the implement with which these lines were stamped must have been made by some cutting instrument, such as a bronze knife, sharper and finer in edge than any stone implement, and that assuredly marks an advance in civilization.

Again, there are at Bologna, Bronze Age vases on which the lines are impressed with a tool of the kind described, but which, instead of the dashes, have a line of little round dots, thus proving itself to have been marked by a tool of a higher type, requiring a still better knife to fashion it; for each little round point of the comb-shaped tool would have to be more carefully cut and rounded off than in the chisel shaped: another advance in mechanical skill.

We may therefore conclude that the Bologna pottery was of a later stage than ours in the Bronze Age, though possibly earlier in point of time, and that it corresponded with the later interments found with it. It is, however, when we come to compare the Culbone vase with the bronze bowl and pottery found in the Lake Village at Glastonbury, that we perceive the great contrast. Examine the plate here given with those at pp. 147, 149 of vol. xl of this Society's *Proceedings*, and the least experienced eye will at once perceive the immense progress made by the Lake dwellers.* Both these examples, so easy of comparison, are from our own West Country, and it may be admitted that in every part of so limited an area civilization was at any given epoch practically in the same condition. Yet between the death of the Culbone man and the time of the Glastonbury people, the potter's wheel had been introduced from somewhere, and iron tools, very good ones, too, had been obtained, as good as are used to-day in parts of Italy. The Lake dwellers were far on in the Iron Age: they had learnt many of the arts of civilization: they were very good coopers and wheelwrights: they had lathes and could make any kind of woodwork: while one plate (p. 149) shows that bronze bowls of considerable artistic merit were in use among them. Beyond all, they had

* Dr. Robert Munro, author of "The Lake Dwellings of Europe," writes:—"The style of art which controlled the manufacture of Late Celtic objects involves such an enormous advantage in metallurgical skill over the Bronze Age that it is impossible to suppose the two are connected by any evolutionary stages in this country."—(*Times*, Oct. 24th, 1892).

adopted the fashion of burial as we now practise it, and had quite discarded the doubled-up system.

Sir John Evans says that iron was used in England as early as 500 B.C.; while all the authorities have decided that the things found at Glastonbury date from 200 to 300 B.C. When it is considered how very long what is called the Bronze Age lasted, how very slow progress was in remote ages, and that our man certainly was buried at the very beginning of the Bronze period, we begin to understand the immense antiquity of the time in which he lived. This is not the place to discuss the chronology nor the succession of the use of metals. Bronze was certainly known in Egypt from 3500 to 4000 B.C., and Sir John Evans places the beginning of it in Southern England at about 1400 B.C., but "with all reserve," as the intervals and stages of process may have been of far longer duration. And in another place he says bronze was one to two thousand years earlier than iron. Dr. Montelius, who has made the Bronze Age, particularly its chronology, his special study, and is the first living authority, places the introduction of bronze into Britain at a much earlier date. Upon a careful consideration of all the evidence he concludes that the interment on Culbone Hill was "not later than the beginning of the second millenium, *i.e.*, 1900 to 2000 years B.C.," and though some of the scientific men place the date somewhat earlier, no one would commit himself to later than 1500 B.C., seeing that the interment is distinctly earlier than the Bronze Age barrows.

When we look back upon the ascertained dates of Scripture history, our prehistoric Briton seems to be a veritable link with the patriarchs of old. He must have lived before Moses, for the Exodus was about 1320 B.C., and may even have been contemporary with Abraham!

Homer wrote, about 900 B.C., of the siege of Troy (burnt about 1183 B.C.), so that Hector, Agamemnon, and the other heroes, were moderns in comparison with our Briton.

Such dates as these are altogether new in dealing with

Somerset archæology, but there is nothing so astonishing to those who have looked ever so slightly into Egyptian history, and have seen to what perfection even high art had arrived quite two thousand years before the earliest date assigned to the very beginning of bronze in Britain.

To those who desire to consult authorities on the subjects here dealt with, the following are recommended :—

Montelius.—*La Civilisation primative en Italie.* Stockholm, 1895 ; specially Introd. and pp. 394, 474.

Evans.—*Stone Implements.* Introduction.

Tylor.—*Early History of Mankind.* 2nd Ed., p. 221, etc.

R. Munro.—*Lake Dwellings of Europe.* 1890.

Das Grabfeld von Hallstadt und dessen Alterthümer. Vienna, 1868.

Evans.—*Bronze Age of Britain*, pp. 4, 5, 472 *et sq.*

Wilkinson.—*Ancient Egyptians.* Vol. i, 41 ; ii, 247—9.

On primitive decoration upon pottery. *See* Haddon. *Evolution in Art*, 1895, p. 97 *et sq.*

Forman and Nuttall.—*The Lost Soul of Pattern*, in *Good Words.* September, 1896.

P.S.—Since the above was in the printer's hands, the Earl of Lovelace has most generously handed over the entire interment to this Society ; and having been removed under the careful supervision of Mr. Bidgood, the Curator, may now be seen restored in the Museum at Taunton Castle, to the precise condition in which it was found on Culbone Hill. Thus the bones of our very Ancient Briton are again at rest.