

Roman Coffins found at Ilchester

BY H. ST. GEORGE GRAY, F.S.A.

ILCHESTER is a small Somerset town (its population, with Northover is about 500), but it can still boast of interesting although now somewhat decayed remains of all periods from and including Roman times;¹ and it has a medieval history of some importance. Its position on the Fosse Way brings it many more visitors than it would otherwise get.

Leland, Camden, Gerard and Stukeley all took considerable note of this place, which is famous, apart from any of its buildings, as the neighbourhood if not the exact spot of the birthplace of Roger Bacon, about 1214. (The great philosopher died at Oxford in 1294).²

The town formerly had a surrounding ditch and a wall with four gates,³ and was distinguished by its five churches, only one of which now remains. A friary and almshouse stood near the west gate; the nunnery of White Hall was near the north gate.⁴ Close by the latter was the old gaol, of which the existence is recorded as early as 1429. The gaol was subsequently moved to the other side of the river Ivel or Yeo, in Northover parish (in the position in which a castle formerly stood), and so continued to be used until 1843. The old guildhall was replaced by the sessions house, both long ago demolished. The place figured in the Civil Wars, and earthworks remain on the south side of the river in 'Great Yard' field attributed to that period.

¹ *Vict. County History, Som.*, i, 294-5.

² 'On the Family of Roger Bacon', by T. Bond, *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, xxv, ii, 29-32; 'Roger Bacon Essays', edited by A. G. Little (1914), pp. 1-2.

³ See map and description in 'Ilchester Almshouse Deeds', by Rev. W. Buckler, Yeovil, 1866.

⁴ See the Rev. T. Hugo's paper on this subject, *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, xiii, ii, 21-118.

ROMAN ILCHESTER

Ilchester was never a large Romano-British town, but has sometimes been regarded as a rather important station. At this point the Fosse Way threw out a branch to Dorchester;⁵ close to this branch road Roman remains were recently found at Westland, Yeovil; they are exhibited in the Wyndham Museum there.⁶ Nearer Ilchester Romano-British pottery has been found close to the Roman road at 'Lark Hill Lane', Preston Plucknett.⁷

It is not our intention to enumerate all the Roman remains found from time to time at Ilchester. Some of them are to be seen in the Somerset County Museum at Taunton Castle, including nearly sixty coins ranging from Vespasian to Valentinian I,⁸ and a small bronze human head with silver inlay, weighing 15 dwts.⁹ In the British Museum a massive gold ring from Ilchester is shown. It has angular shoulders in open-work, and the bezel is set with a gold aureus (in fine condition) of Severus Alexander (A.D. 222-35); its date is *circ.* 225.¹⁰

The writer a few years ago collected a number of Gaulish and West-country British skulls which were found in building the police cottage at Ilchester, and these were afterwards examined by Sir Arthur Keith. A number of fragments of red Samian and other pottery of the Roman period were found associated with the bones.¹¹

In 1871 Mr. Hussey presented to the County Museum part of a human skull, a coin of the Constantine period and a shale

⁵ See Searth's Map of Roman Somerset, *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, xxiv, plate facing part ii.

⁶ Fully described by C. A. Raleigh Radford, F.S.A., in *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, lxxiv, 122-143.

⁷ *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, xlix, i, 57.

⁸ *Ibid.* xlvi, ii, 50; lxviii, lxxxix; and lxxvi, lxxxvii. See also 'The Particular Description of Somerset', *Som. Rec. Soc.*, xv, 204.

⁹ *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, xlvi, ii, 50-51.

¹⁰ This ring was exhibited by Mr. John Moore, of West Coker, at the Worcester Meeting of the British Archæological Association in 1848, and is figured in their *Journal*, iv, 315. See also *Guide to the Antiquities of Roman Britain*, British Museum, 1922, pp. 65, 66 (Franks Bequest, 1897); *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, iv, ii, 89; *V.C.H. Som.*, i, 294.

¹¹ *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, lxxv, 103-5.

spindlewhorl found at the Manor Farm, Ilchester. The lower mandible is deeply stained a bronze colour from the presence of the coin which was no doubt placed in the mouth as a toll for Charon to ferry the bearer over the Styx, in accordance with the ideas of classical mythology.¹²

COFFINS FOUND EARLY LAST CENTURY

It is in the grounds of Northover House that some of the most interesting finds have been made. A coffin cut out of Ham Hill stone, 7 ft. 3 in. in length, was found there in 1840; the cover is a very little less bulky than the coffin itself.¹³ It is still to be seen in the grounds. With the skeleton were found a bronze fibula, a piece of thin bronze band and part of a bone comb (which are in the Somerset County Museum);¹⁴ also a gold bangle ornamented with enamel in several colours (which was still in possession of the Tuson family in 1921). Near the coffin several 'third brass' coins were found, ranging from Postumus to Magnentius.¹⁵ In 1836, a leaden coffin was found on this site, ornamented with a band made up of herring-bone design; pieces of this coffin are preserved in the County Museum (H. Norris and A. Hull Collections).¹⁶

Two miles to the west, between the Yeo and the Fosse Way, near Bearley Farm, Tintinhull, a leaden coffin lying in a N. and S. direction was found some years ago, and a part of it is exhibited at Taunton.¹⁷

It is made clear, in describing two Roman coffins found at Keynsham, near Bath, in 1922, that leaden coffins of this period are not common. Sometimes stone coffins are found having a lead shell or lining, as in one of the specimens from Keynsham.

¹² *Som. & Dor. N. & Q.*, ix, 7; *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, xvii, 123.

¹³ The other dimensions of this coffin are:—Width at head, 2 ft. 4 in., at foot 2 ft. 1 in. The bottom portion is 11 in. in height, the upper 9 in.; both parts have vertical sides externally. The thickness of the sides varies from 4½ in. on the length to 6¾ in. at the ends.

¹⁴ *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, lxxviii, lxxxix. Another fibula, 'of unusual shape', from Ilchester, is exhibited in the British Museum (*V.C.H. Som.*, i, 294).

¹⁵ They are included with those mentioned above.

¹⁶ *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, li, 150; lxxiii, 117; lxxviii, 91.

¹⁷ *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, xlviiii, ii, 52; *V.C.H. Som.*, i, 367. Tesserae are said to have been found near the coffin.

In my paper on that subject,¹⁸ a list, with references, has been given of other discoveries of leaden coffins of this period in Somerset and elsewhere. To this list must be added the coffin of lead found on Bedminster Down, Somerset.¹⁹

COFFINS OF LEAD AND STONE FOUND RECENTLY

The discovery of Roman coffins in the grounds at Northover House, Ilchester, have been by no means exhausted, for since the property was recently bought by Mr. Sydney Vaux, his son with the assistance of the gardener, has uncovered the remains now to be described.

It became known to the new owner that about 1906, when a drain was being laid across part of the garden, the foot of a leaden coffin had been discovered. The foot and cover of this coffin were bent back to make room for the line of earthenware pipes, leaving about 4 ft. of the coffin more or less intact. No further destruction took place; and this coffin had now been laid bare at a depth of 3 ft. 6 in. below the surface. It was found to be much crushed by superincumbent filling, and the upper part of the skeleton (probably male) it contained was not in very good preservation. The head was to the W.N.W., and the top of the skull was 5 in. from the end of the coffin. It was not possible to get the original length of this coffin; the lead was about $\frac{3}{8}$ -in. thick, except the lid, which was only $\frac{1}{8}$ -in. thick; the lid had a turned-down flange, width $1\frac{1}{2}$ in. No pottery or other remains were found with the skeleton. This leaden coffin is No. 2 in Miss Tildesley's report which follows.

At a distance of 14 ft. to the N.E. remains of a human skeleton, formerly disturbed in laying the modern drain, were found under a layer of slabs of lias stone²⁰ at a depth of 5 ft. below the surface. There was no sign of a coffin. Further work is needed here.

The chief discovery was made about 20 ft. west of the above-mentioned coffin. At this point in the grounds the excavators were fortunate enough to find two coffins lying parallel and only 2 ft. 3 in. apart; the west ends were in line (Plate XVIII).

¹⁸ *The Antiq. Journ.*, ii, 371-5; *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, lxxviii, 87-92.

¹⁹ *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, lxxii, 91.

²⁰ The slabs of lias were reached at a depth of 3·4 ft. below the surface.

The larger, reached at a depth of 2 ft. 8 in., was a coffin of Ham Hill stone of the same length as the coffin found in 1840; and on its north side (met with at 4 ft. 3 in. below the surface) a complete leaden coffin, also of typical Roman character, was found. Beyond the extended skeleton no grave goods accompanied these interments, but on the south side of the stone coffin part of the base of a red Samian bowl was found.

The lid of the stone coffin (3 in. minimum thickness), which was strengthened by a slight longitudinal midrib or thickening, was found fractured; its width at the head was 2 ft. 9 in., tapering to 2 ft. 2 in. at the base. The depth of the coffin, internally, was 9 in., and the length 6 ft.²¹ The skeleton was complete and fully extended, with head to west, and was in a good state of preservation. From Miss Tildesley's report we learn that this woman was about twenty-four years of age and 5 ft. 2 in. in height, with a big head and very prominent nose.

The leaden coffin (No. 1 of Miss Tildesley's report), found at a depth of 4 ft. 3 in., was also complete, except for a cracked cover. Its length was 5 ft. 7½ in., external height 8 in.; thickness of lead ⅜-in., except the ends which were ¼-in. thick and the cover which was only ⅛-in. Like the other leaden coffin this specimen had a flange to the cover 1½ in. wide. The sides of this coffin were ornamented with a horizontal band of herring-bone design, 1¼ in. wide, at 4½ in. below the rim, and precisely similar to that seen on the coffin found at Northover House in 1836.

The skeleton (probably female) was in fair order; the back of the skull touched the west end of the coffin, and the feet were tight against the base.

The coffin-lid was found much bent owing to the weight of the superincumbent stones which had been put here intentionally, some being placed on end. The coffin was also somewhat crushed in at both ends.

Since this record was made the coffins have been brought to the surface, and the excavations filled in. They will remain in these grounds for exhibition.

²¹ The depth of the lid at the margin was 7½ in., the sides being 6 in. in thickness. The thickness of the sides of the coffin at the top varied from 4 to 6½ in. Internally the coffin was 18 in. wide at the head and 13 in. at the foot. Externally it was 12½ in. thick at the head and 11 in. at the foot.

REPORT ON HUMAN REMAINS OF THE ROMANO-BRITISH PERIOD FROM ILCHESTER

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THE human remains sent me by Mr. St. George Gray are derived from three coffins, one of stone, the others of lead.

(a) The bones from the stone coffin consist of the greater part of the skeleton of a woman. The fact that all her epiphyses were fully united except those of the clavicle (partly fused on) and of the symphysis pubis (still quite free), points to her age being probably about twenty-four years. She had cut no wisdom teeth, and a break at one end of the upper alveolar ridge enables us to see that she never would have cut a right upper wisdom tooth. The absence or presence of undeveloped third molars in the bone at the other three sites could only be determined by further damage or by X-ray examination. The twenty-eight remaining teeth are all present and all healthy, though somewhat crowded and irregular in the upper jaw. The amount of wear they exhibit is not such as to suggest an unusually hard or gritty diet.

The woman was not tall, her most probable height (whether estimated from right femur alone, from the combined length of right femur and tibia, or from right femur and right humerus) being 5 ft. 2 in.²²; but she had a very prominent nose and a big head. Indeed, in maximum head-breadth (151.5 mm. as against an average of 136.2 mm. for 62 skulls²³) and in length of skull base (107.5 mm. as against 95.7 mm., the mean of 34), she would be near the limit of the range for Romano-British females. Her skull was however also rather long, and the resultant breadth-length index is 80.2, a proportion that would not be at all uncommon in a population with average index 75.8, the Romano-British figure as far as the available data indicate.

(b) From lead coffin No. 1 we have the right femur and tibia. They are very close in length and slenderness to the corresponding bones from the stone coffin, and are presumably those of a female. Her most probable stature, whether estimated from femur alone or from the length of femur plus tibia, would be 5 ft. 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ in.

It is stated above that the skull touched one end of the coffin (whose internal length works out at 5 ft. 7 in.) and the feet were tight against the other. We have here a difference of 5 $\frac{1}{4}$ in.—13.3 cms.—to account for between the most probable height of the woman as estimated from the leg-bones, and the observed length of the space

²² Stature estimated by Prof. Karl Pearson's formulae, *Phil. Trans.*, Series A, 1898, vol. cxcii, p. 196.

²³ Data concerning Romano-British given by Dr. G. M. Morant, *Biometrika*, xviii, 84.

she occupied in the coffin. Now the chances of finding a woman with the observed femur-plus-tibia length who is even as much as 5 ft. 6½ in. tall is estimated at one in about 1,000,000,000; but we need not cry error on either coffin length or calculation. First, the stature estimated is standing height: the same body lying flat is always rather more stretched out and we can add about a couple of centimetres on this score, thus reducing the apparent discrepancy to 11·3 cms. Secondly, leg-length forms no invariable proportion of stature: the figure given is what would be most frequent, but about a sixth of the women with the given length of leg-bones may be expected to exceed it by 2 cms. or more, and about a fortieth by 4 cms. or more. The limb-body proportions of the lady in lead coffin No. 1 could not be regarded therefore as very exceptional if we put another 4 cms. on to her stature and thus reduce our difference to 7·3 cms. Thirdly, stature is measured from heel to crown with the head in a given position. Even if Mr. St. George Gray's description means that heels as well as soles were right up against the foot of the coffin (and it may not), we have no guarantee that the head was buried in the correct anthropometric position; and lastly, the subsidence of the skeleton as the flesh decays and the frequent rolling over of the denuded cranium, are facts which help to provide a very adequate explanation of what at first sight seemed inconsistent figures.

(c) Lead coffin No. 2 supplies a right humerus and radius. These are more likely to be male, and the individual in question suffered severely from 'rheumatic' pains in his right upper arm and shoulder. There are bony deposits down the posterior surface of the humerus for nearly a third of its length, while the worn and burnished condition of the articular surface of its head shows how this bone grated painfully against the shoulder-blade socket. The humerus is 360 mm. long, the radius 263·5 mm. The most frequent height for a man having a right humerus of this length would be 5 ft. 8¾ in., and the most frequent height with a right radius of 263·5 mm. would be 5 ft. 7¾ in. As however the relationship between stature and humerus is rather more stable than that between stature and radius, the former estimate of probable stature is the more likely to be correct.

The following measurements, with the exception of those starred, have been taken by the same method as was used by General Pitt-Rivers in the Cranborne Chase publications, the notation following the measurements being that used by workers in the Biometric Laboratory, Univ. Coll. Lond. :—

CRANIUM FROM STONE COFFIN

Greatest horizontal circumference	U	545	mm.
„ glabello—occipital length	L	189	mm.
„ ophryo— „ „	F	189	mm.
„ breadth	B	151·5	mm.

1st cephalic index	100 B/L	80.2
" " "	100 B/F	80.2
Basio—bregmatic height	H'	130 mm.
2nd cephalic index	100 H'/L	68.8
" " "	100 H'/F	68.8
Basion to nasion	LB	107.5 mm.
" " , prosthion (Flower's alveolar point)		99.5 mm.
*Basion to the alv. pt. of the Biom. Sch.	GL	95.5 mm.
*Nasal height, right side	NH.R	52 mm.
* " " left "	NH.L	51 mm.
Nasal width	NB	25 mm.
* " index	100 NB/NH. L	49
Orbital height	O ₂ R	33.5 mm.
" width	Lacr. O ₁ R	41 mm.
" index	100 O ₂ R/Lacr. O ₁ R	81.7
* " width (Biom. method)	O ₁ R	42.5 mm.
Least frontal breadth	B'	96 mm.
Greatest zygomatic width	J	136 mm.

LONG BONES

		Length in millimetres	Least circumference in millimetres	Perimetral index
Stone Coffin	R. femur	435.5	83	19.1
" "	L. "	438.5	82	18.7
" "	R. tibia	349.5	67	19.2
" "	L. "	352.5	67	19.0
" "	R. fibula	345	33.5	9.7
" "	L. "	349.5	33.5	9.6
" "	R. humerus	315	58.5	18.6
" "	L. "	308.5	58.5	19.0
" "	R. radius	238	38	16.0
" "	L. "	234.5	38.5	16.4
" "	R. ulna	257.5	35	13.6
" "	L. "	251.5	35.5	14.1
" "	R. clavicle	139	39	28.1
" "	L. "	136.5	39	28.6
Lead Coffin, No. 1	R. femur	431	81	18.8
" "	R. tibia	347	66.5	19.2
Lead Coffin, No. 2	R. humerus	360	69	19.2
" "	R. radius	263.5	44	16.7