

RESEARCHES INTO SOME ANTIENT TUMULI ON DARTMOOR.

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(Read at Exeter, July, 1872.)

SCATTERED over the surface of Dartmoor are numerous tumuli. These differ in some places ; but the most common form is that of a cairn, of small irregular stones.

They vary in size from a few feet to a hundred and fifty or more in diameter, and from four or five to twenty feet in height. The stones with which they were erected are mostly small, such as a man could easily carry. Similar stones are scarce on the moor, so much so that, to obtain a cartload of them for building, persons often come from a long distance.

This circumstance suggests the idea that these cairns were not each completed in a short time from their commencement. They probably grew with years ; and an honoured chieftain would be likely to have raised over him a noble cairn, while the tomb of a hated enemy, who fell among a strange tribe, might long remain uncovered.

PENBEACON.

On the southern slope of Penbeacon is an old hedge or trackway, which extends from an enclosed village or pound, that contains ten or a dozen hut circles, westward for about a mile, reaching nearly to Trowlsworthy Tor. Here it appears to terminate at an ancient cairn of stones, so overgrown with lichens and moss that the pedestrian might easily pass beyond it without detecting its character.

Towards the eastern end, about one hundred and ninety feet north of this same trackway, is another enclosed village or pound, surrounded by a strong wall, having an opening towards the south. This contains five or six hut circles.

About eight hundred feet south of this trackway stands a cairn which is about one hundred and fifty paces round. It is

fifty feet in the longer axis, which lies north and south, and forty-two or three from east to west. It was not possible to take a very exact measurement, as the crown of the cairn had evidently been broken into, and the stones that were removed were thrown down the sides, so as to give the base of the cairn an irregular circumference.

At a few feet from the base were several single stones that, from their position, might readily have been mistaken for a circle of upright stones surrounding the cairn. Although these were apparently embedded in the soil, they were small and evidently not intentionally fixed in the ground.

On the southern side of the cairn, about four feet from the base, in a line that runs S.S.W., stand four upright stones in pairs. Fig. 1.

The two nearest the cairn are two feet apart, two feet long, and eighteen inches above the ground. The second pair is ten feet south of the first, and four feet apart. One is erect, being eighteen inches above the ground, and rather more than a foot in length; the other has fallen, and therefore shows the height of the stone in the measurement of its length. It is three feet long.

On the 30th of March in this year, in company with

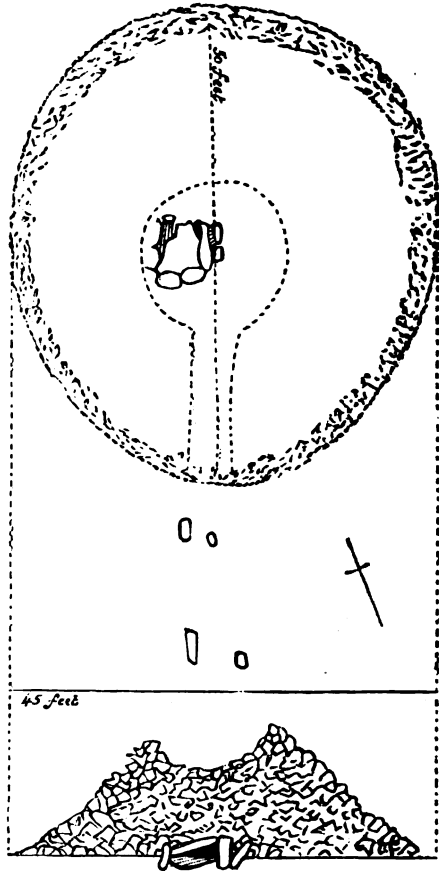


Fig. 1.

Captain Oliver, R.A., I opened a trench into this cairn in a line corresponding with the direction of the two rows of stones. From the circumstance that the centre of the cairn had been previously partially excavated, the labourers gradually lost the direct line, and worked their way into the middle of the cairn. This we opened tolerably extensively, clearing away all the stones until we came to the surface of the soil on which the cairn rested.

Seeing that the line of stones had not been sufficiently followed, we determined to explore farther to the west, so as to open up a line direct from the avenue or double row of stones beyond the cairn.

In pursuit of this plan, we came upon several stones very much larger than any we had met with before, one being about four feet long by two broad. This was placed on its side, and appeared to have been retained originally in its position by the support it received from two other rather large stones, which were obliquely jammed under its base.

On the western side of these stones were three or four others not quite so large. These were in such position relative to each other, that it was evident they were the sides of a not very perfect kist. The upper or cap stone had fallen in on one side.

Beneath this stone was a hollow space, and in the peat below we found an implement of an oval shape. It was about three inches and a half long by one wide. It is very thin, and has both ends bevelled off on opposite sides. One end is much more so than the other. On the surface of the stone are many fine scratches. It is made out of a yellowish-white soft slate stone. It appears as if it would very readily break into thin lamina. Fig. 2.

I know of no kind of stone in this locality that resembles it. A figure of a piece of slate differing a little in section is given in Mr. Evans's recent work on *The Stone Age of Britain*, and another in

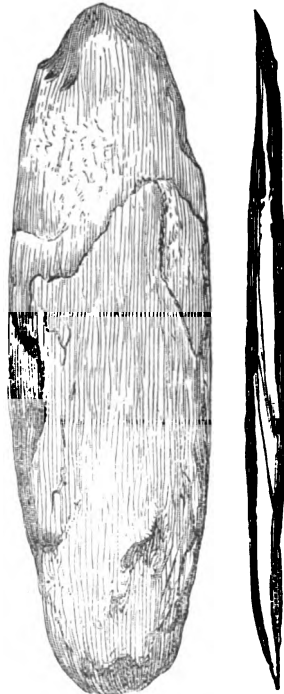


Fig. 2.

Mr. Stephens's *Flint Chips*. Both these authors assert their inability to interpret the uses of the implements they have described.

It appears to me there can be little doubt but that the slate implement found on Dartmoor was used for the purpose of fashioning clay vessels while yet unbaked.

The shape of the tool, the wearing at both extremities on opposite sides, demonstrate clearly its aptitude for the purpose. I have, moreover, been informed that in some parts of Ireland similar pieces of slate are still so used.

We removed all the larger stones and the soil beneath them. Finding that the peat gradually dipped away westward beneath the cairn, we extended our research, but excavation in every direction led only to the conviction that some attempt had been made at a previous examination of the cairn.

The urn, if, as we suppose, there had been one, was destroyed. The evidence of this existed in the numerous fragments that were found in different parts of the cairn, all of which evidently belonged to one and the same vessel. Fig. 3.

One fragment was sufficiently large to enable us to state that the diameter of the mouth of the urn was about eight inches, and that it had a constricted neck about an inch and a half from the edge of the vase. The rim or edge of the vessel was the thickest part of it. At this place it was nearly half an inch thick, from whence it rapidly but gradually thinned away to little more than the eighth of an inch. The material of which it was formed was a coarse clay, in which were still to be seen fragments of quartz. It had the appearance of and in all probability was made from clay found in the locality, of which there is a substratum beneath the peat in most places on the moor. The colour of the unused clay is of an ochreish red. The pot itself is stained dark with age, but it has a reddish hue that resembles the colour of the moorland clay. It might perhaps be due to the heat in the baking of the vessel. It evidently had been fire baked, and is very much harder than these vessels usually are.



Fig. 3.

About 270 yards east of this cairn was another about forty feet in diameter, from which almost all the stones have been removed, probably for the erection of a wall some few hundred yards southward down the side of the hill. In doing this

the central kist has been destroyed. I much regretted this circumstance, for the cairn must have been an important one, since it was surrounded by a circle of upright stones from one to three feet in height. The larger appear to have been on the southern side, on which also a little to the westward is placed, as in the former cairn, a row of two pairs of stones.

THREEBARROW TOR.

Three large cairns marked in the old map of the Forest Perambulation of 1240, and therein called Threeberis, stand upon an eminence 1524 feet above the sea, which is now known as Threebarrow Tor. The largest is one hundred and twenty feet in diameter, and the other two about seventy. They are neither of them more than ten feet high, and that chiefly at the circumference. Towards the centre they are not more than half that height, and have much the appearance of having been ransacked; not, however, in a systematic manner.

There is much in their general appearance to suggest that the cairns may have gradually grown, and so have never been completed. It might be supposed that in early times, when men were mostly their own beasts of burden, that in forming large heaps of stones there would be a tendency to increase by spreading out at the circumference, rather than in height. In this way I think these cairns may have spread out and increased at the edges rather than have been pulled down by explorers. No doubt but that cart-loads of these stones have frequently been removed for building purposes.

The importance and size of these conspicuous cairns induced me to explore the most westerly of them. This was done in company with Capt. Oliver, with the assistance of several men belonging to his brigade of the Royal Artillery. We pursued our researches for three days, removing at least half the cairn, and excavated into the soil below, but without being rewarded for our labour; and I only wish to put these facts on record. Some large stones we found near the centre, but without any apparent design or regularity; and two upright ones were implanted in the ground near the margin on the southern side of the cairn. These appear to stand in a similar position in relation to the cairn to those before noticed under Penbeacon.

HAMMELDON DOWN.

On Hammeldon Down are tumuli of different kinds of construction. On Hooknor Tor, immediately north of Grims-

pound, is a cairn of stones similar to those that we have previously described. On King's Tor, about half a mile to the eastward, is another tumulus, known as "King's Barrow," consisting throughout of stones and earth. This has been imperfectly explored without result by our late lamented friend the Rev. R. Kirwan. About a mile to the south-west is a very extensive tumulus, called "Broadbarrow." This consists of earth or earth and stone; it is higher at the margin than within.

South of this last is another, known as "Single Barrow;" it is not more than four feet in height, but extends to a circumference probably of nearly two hundred feet. Farther to the south are two tumuli near each other, and known by the name of "Two Barrows." On the southernmost of these stands a boundary wall. The other was untouched; it was about four feet and a half high, and forty feet in diameter. This I determined to explore.

An interest to my mind is associated with these barrows. Many of the names in this locality bear a Scandinavian interpretation.

Hameldon, or the Hill of Hamel, shows us that the old Viking of that name must have made this place his centre of operations for some time, and the old Hero Grim has given his name to the pound under Hooknor Tor.

Grimspound itself is a formidable, defensive enclosure. Its walls were ten feet thick, and built with massive blocks of granite in double rows. It contains many hut circles. The stream that flows through it is known as Grimslake, and the tor above it as Grimstor, whereas Hooknor Tor finds its root in Hoga or Hock, signifying a hill associated with deeds of importance, and King's Barrow, but a short distance off, tells of royal interment.

Grim and Hamel are the names of two important chiefs among the predatory leaders that crept up the rivers of most northern countries in the days of early civilization.

The barrow was opened on the southern side, taking a space of about fifteen feet in width. The men first passed through a layer of stones moderate in size and irregular in shape. These formed a circle round the barrow. A few stones of similar character were scattered over its surface. Plate 1.

Having cut through this low bank of irregular stones, we found the barrow to consist of peaty earth, black and clayey in character; but this latter quality was perhaps due much to the recent rains. Having excavated our way for about fifteen feet, one of the men struck a stone, and in cutting away the

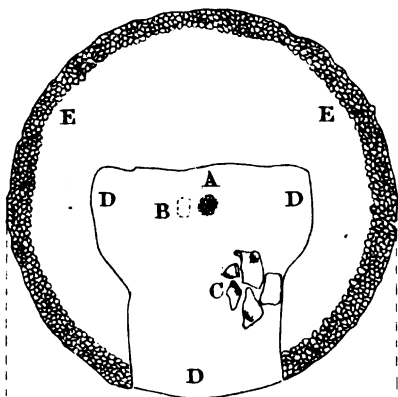


Fig. 1.

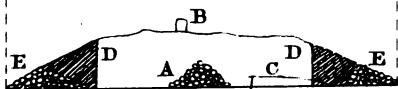


Fig. 2.

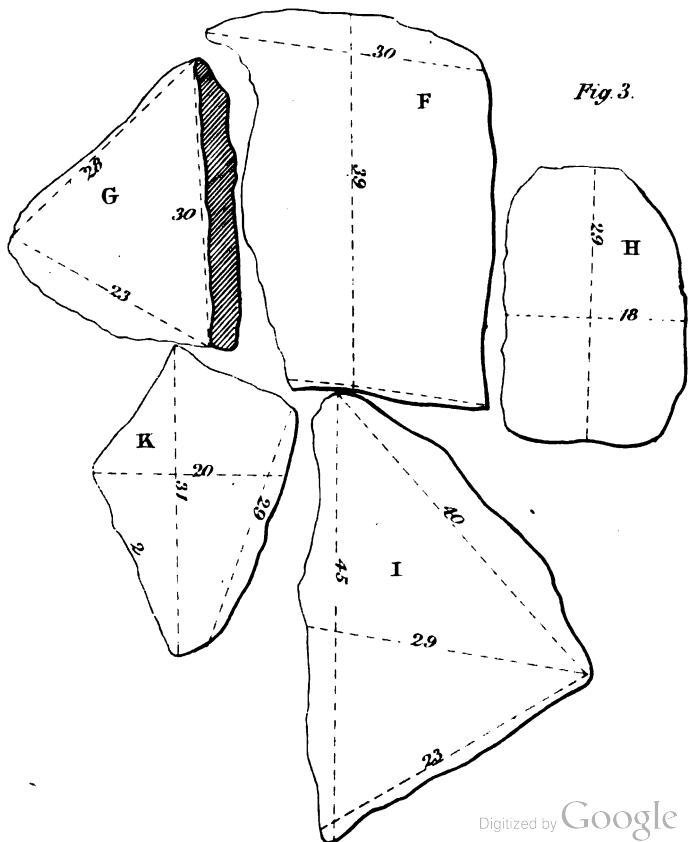


Fig. 3.

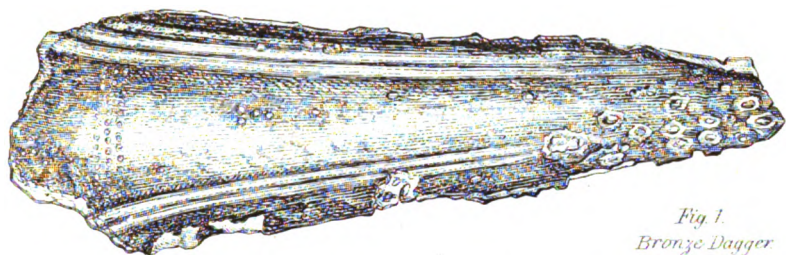


Fig. 1.
Bronze Dagger



Fig. 2.
Amber Pommel of Hilt.
Top View



Fig. 3.
Side View

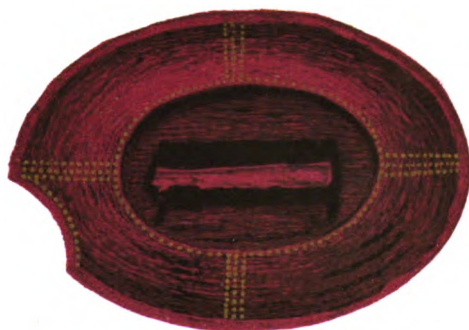


Fig. 4.
Bottom View

soil for the purpose of exposing it, a large hole or hollow space was observed above it. Proceeding with the removal of the earth, we came upon a second stone, and others, until five were discovered, lying flat on the ground. The earth was then removed all round them, to see if any others were there. After sketching and measuring the stones in position, they were carefully removed, and, to our great disappointment, nothing appeared but the same kind of earth as that which existed above them. Close observation, and a little scratching of the surface under the stone marked K in the plan, brought to view a mass of comminuted bones mixed with earth. These were carefully removed to a cart, for the purpose of a closer examination at home, when a shovel disturbed an ornament of beautiful workmanship.

It consists of amber, much darkened by being so long buried in the peat. The surface is inlaid with gold pins,* placed in a line formed of three parallel rows. One line is longitudinal with the longer axis of the oval, the other with the shorter, the two forming a cross on the surface. Plate 2. Each of these two lines are continuous over the back, and a similar line traverses the circumference along the edge. A row of single pins is situated near the margin of the posterior surface on the innermost edge.

The back is bevelled with a concave curve to the distance of half an inch, where it terminates in a flat surface, oval in shape, and corresponding in form, but much smaller than the front surface. The middle of the oval at the back is longitudinally deeply cut on each side, so as to leave a projecting tongue between the two morticed grooves. Through this tongue two holes are pierced, which clearly demonstrate that it was secured by being tied to some other object.

One point of interest exists in the fact that a small portion had been broken off previous to its interment, and again mended by a very neat process, that of uniting the fractured fragments to the main piece by means of a series of gold rivets, thus converting the damage into an additional ornamentation.

This ornament tells us of a high degree of advancement made in the arts at this period, and also of the intercourse of the people of Dartmoor with those of distant nations.

* Mr. J. B. Rowe has obligingly sent to me an extract from Fairholt's "Costume in England" (second edition, 1860, p. 7), in which is described the wooden handle of a dagger excavated from a grave in Wiltshire, which was ornamented in a zig-zag pattern by similar gold pins. So very minute were these pins that thousands were thrown away, and only detected amidst the soil by the aid of a magnifying glass.

Amber at this present time is found in various localities ; but in the days of the early civilization of Europe it was only known as the produce of the coasts of the Baltic, whence the Romans, according to Tacitus, obtained it, chiefly from the *Æstvi*.

This ornament, moreover, tells us that they could not only work in amber, but that they had the power of working in metals, of drawing gold into fine wire, and inserting it into the amber, which was probably done by softening the latter, and then pressing in the gold pins previously to their being cut off and polished.

In the earth that we carted home, besides a quantity of bits of bone, we found the blade of a bronze dagger. It is evidently of a long and narrow form, ornamented on each side by a series of three depressed lines corresponding with the margin of the weapon, and by a series of dots or small pits in these rows across the base. No trace of the handle was found, and no evidence of fire, excepting in the signs of its action on the bones.

The next operation was to enlarge the trench to twenty-five feet in width. This we pursued until we had passed the centre by several feet, without any further results, excepting that in the very centre of the tumulus we found a small cairn of stones that appeared to have been carefully heaped up. All these stones were removed by hand, and every one examined ; but nothing was found except one minute fragment of charcoal.

The points of interest in this cairn are, first, the character of the interment ; secondly, the objects found entombed.

According to my experience of the Dartmoor tumuli, most of them consist of heaps of stones, containing a stone kist or small chamber, within which has frequently been found an earthen vase of baked clay, containing the calcined bones of the individual to whose honour the tumulus was erected. These have frequently been associated with some weapon of bronze, and sometimes of stone.

In this instance the mound was of earth, with a course of small uneven stones heaped one on the other round the margin. The stones (pl. 1, fig. C) instead of forming a kist, all lay flat on the ground. Over them, certainly, was a hollow space that is suggestive of the stones having fallen lower. The position, however, in which they were found in relation to each other is such as to show that they never could have been placed so as to have formed a chamber or kist.

Again, instead of the cremated bones being enclosed within

a vase, they were found lying closely placed together in one spot beneath the stones, and on the surface of the ground. Most of these bones were unintelligible fragments. One specimen, about an inch and a half long and one and a quarter broad, was a portion of the frontal bone, including the upper margin of the left eye. The specimen, though small, was sufficient to show that the superciliary ridge was thick and the frontal arch full.

This kind of interment, I have been informed, has recently been observed in the exploration of some Swedish barrows.

In the soil, about a foot or eighteen inches from the little heap of bones, beneath the stone marked K in plate fig. 3, there was also found the bronze blade of a dagger. One side of this is tolerably perfect. The other is much corroded, so also is the extreme point, as well as base. No trace of the handle could be found, which induces us to believe that it was either made of wood, bone, or horn.

It is the opinion of Sir John Lubbock that the amber ornament previously described is the pommel or terminal ornament that was attached to the extremity of the dagger's hilt. Mr. Franks, F.S.A., writes:—"I should conjecture that it is very ancient—quite as old as the bronze period. It may be the pommel of a sword hilt, but I never saw anything like it." While Mr. Evans, F.S.A., thinks it rather too large to belong to this same bronze blade; but thinks it may be the pommel of a sword, or other weapon of larger description.

The little cairn of small stones in the middle of the barrow has yet to be explained. No ashes or any evidence of fire, except one small fragment of charcoal, was found. It is, therefore, difficult to believe it to be the centre of the funeral pyre.

The whole interment is very unlike those found elsewhere on Dartmoor, and the contents strongly evidence an intercourse with a foreign people. Associated as the locality around it is with names of a Scandinavian type, I think that the evidence tends to the direction, that the barrow was erected by some old Viking, who, in the early bronze age, crept up the Dart in search of tin.

I cannot conclude an account of the exploration in the Dartmoor tumuli during this summer, without expressing my thanks to those gentlemen who have accorded to me permission to open the barrows upon their estate.

