

CHAPTER II.

THE ROUND BARROW.

Study of Barrows mostly unprofitable—Postulate that all Barrows are Pagan is wrong—Round and Oval Barrows the rule—Long Barrows and their builders—Peculiar care spent on the Round Barrow—The labour and skill required—Only explicable as matter of Religion—Religion and Sepulture—How the Round Barrows were built—Non-sepulchral Mounds of like design—The Circle the Sign of a ‘Locus Consecratus’—Persistent sanctity of such ‘loca’—The Temple and the Tomb—Relic-worship—Distribution of Barrows—Influence of Cremation on Barrow-building—The Sepulchral Urn.

The study of barrows cannot be said to have yielded results at all proportionate to the time, labour, and brains expended on it. Of the many hundreds which have been opened those of which the age is certainly known are extremely few, nor is there even an approximate certainty except in regard to those which demonstrably show Roman or later influence. Speaking generally, the opening of each additional barrow serves only to raise new problems, doubts, and contradictions.

Amidst all this fog, it has hitherto been believed safe to affirm that at any rate barrow-burial is a mark of paganism, and that therefore no barrow was ever reared for Christian sepulture. It will be proved conclusively that this view is wrong, and that the customary burial-places of the earlier Christianity of these islands were as

¹ The one conspicuous exception is that of Wales, which will be found to admit of ready explanation.

much barrows as were those of their unregenerate forbears. Certain differences there may have been in the details of the sepulture, but in outward appearance the graves of the Christian and the pagan were precisely the same. Each was a barrow, and moreover each was a round barrow.

For, where all else is matter of dispute, the one indisputable fact is that from the first introduction of the round barrow there prevailed one invariable plan, and that circular.¹ Here and there may be found mounds of a rectangular plan, but excavation has hitherto failed to show that they were intended for barrows.² Excepting the round barrows, the only artificial mounds of admittedly sepulchral origin in Britain are the long barrows, the so-called 'star-fish' barrows, and the 'horned' barrows peculiarly characteristic of Caithness; and of these the first and the last belong to an age, or at any rate to a civilisation—and therefore presumably to a religion—prior to that of which the round barrow is the symbol. The 'star-fish barrow'³ is simply the result of the accretion of a number

¹ In England the strictly circular barrow is the rule; in Ireland the slightly oval form is said to be the more usual, and it is very frequent in Cornwall also. Of Christian barrows, *i.e.* churchyards, a very large number are pronouncedly oval. So are most Irish *killeens* and almost all Manx *keels*; but Irish *raibhs*, so constantly surrounding churchyards, are usually correctly circular. Stone circles show the same variation, not in the British Isles only, but wherever they are found in N.W. Europe.

² 'Rectangular mounds with rounded corners, not apparently sepulchral,' occur on Grimston Moor, W. Riding, and in Westmorland (Greenwell, *British Barrows*, p. 343). Francis Villy has noticed and examined others near Keighley, Skipton, and Settle, and in Ravenstonedale, and inclines to believe them medieval on the scanty evidence of the shards found. O. G. S. Crawford (*Wilts N.S. and Arch. Trans.* xlii, p. 59) mentions isolated examples in Gloucesters. and Wilts. The sepulchral purpose of all these is conjectural. In East Yorks, parishes of Hutton Bucsell, Riccall, Skipwith, Thorganby and Arras, occurs a group of proven sepulchral barrows (cremated) of round plan, accompanied by 'square trenches with rounded corners.' See Greenwell, pp. 369-370; Philips, *Rivers, Mountains, and Sea-coast of Yorkshire* (1853),

p. 205; Mortimer, *Forty Years' Researches*, p. xx.

³ The most remarkable 'star-fish barrow' in the British Isles is that of Doohat (Dumha Ait, 'Place of the Tumulus') on Mount Bennaghlin, near Florencecourt, Sligo. It shows a central chambered mound, from which branch off five rays, 'well-defined stony ridges, averaging 16 or 17 ft. in breadth at their junction with the central cist or dolmen, from which point they taper off to distances' varying from 40 to 60 ft., terminating cleanly and abruptly. Each of these rays is formed of a number of separate small cists set in line. Nothing whatever has been found to throw light upon their date, and the whole work is said to be unique in Ireland. At Bighy, 2 miles away on the further slope of the same mountain, is a cairn (diam. 50 ft.), in the centre of which is a chamber 6 ft. by 4 ft. ranged east and west, and around it 'just within the outer edge' of the cairn are some 18 other cists or cells. One of these contained a fragment of an urn, but again there was nothing which could date the whole. See Wakeman, *Handbook of Irish Antiquities*, 3rd ed. pp. 116-120. There is no sufficient reason for regarding either monument as a work of extreme antiquity, and some reasons occur for believing them to be relatively late.

of other, usually smaller, circular interments about a larger one of the same plan; and where similar solitary accretions have now and again interfered with the original symmetry of a large barrow, there is commonly no great difficulty in recognising the fact. The resultant may be an irregularly round barrow, but it is not merely an irregular mound. Dr. Thurnam believed the more regularly planned oval barrows to have resulted from the juxtaposition of two or three separate interments in so many round barrows.¹ But be they round or oval, the area, the height, the material and the situation of these barrows may vary indefinitely, as do the character and the disposition of their contents, but not so the essential regularity of their plan. This, and this alone, is constant. It is no rare thing to find in long barrows secondary interments belonging to a later age,² but no long barrows seem to have been built by the men of the Goidelic time and after. The new fashion in grave-mounds appears to have gripped the imagination of the people of these islands far more completely than did the later fashion of cremation, and the evidence of their skulls proves that even the long-headed race, who had previously built long barrows only, adopting the new vogue, were likewise thereafter buried under round barrows,³ like their round-headed conquerors. From the Atlantic to the Ural Mountains and the Deccan, from the Northland to the Middle Sea, the round barrow and its related monuments are to be found everywhere.

There has not been laid sufficient emphasis upon the laboured circularity of the round barrow. Let the reader take all modern appliances and set about building for himself a perfectly regular and circular mound of only 30 ft.

¹ See *Archæologia*, xliii, 298, where he gives a diagram to illustrate his theory. It is to be noticed that where two round barrows, of presumably much the same age, are thus juxtaposed, very great labour has been spent on disguising the fusion, and giving to the compound barrow the form of a perfectly regular ellipse.

² Greenwell, pp. 485, 488, 491, 502. 'Alien interments, Anglo-Saxon, Roman, and pre-Roman, have been found in the superincumbent mass of earth covering the primary burials of the long barrow' (Windle, *Remains of the Prehistoric Age in England*, p. 139).

³ Greenwell, pp. 121-3. Homer makes implicit mention that Patroclus was buried in a round barrow (*τορνύσαντρο δὲ σῆμα* *Iliad* xxiii, 225). In *Iliad* ii, 813 is a passage which implies either that barrows were already very old in that region, or that their 'proprietaries' were liable to be very quickly forgotten: mention is made of a barrow 'which men call Batieia, but the gods know it as rightly the Tomb of Myrine.' Of the barrows about Troy one at least was a lofty one, for it was used as an observation-post (*ibid.* v, 793).

or so in diameter, of earth, or sand, or stone or turves, and he will be surprised to discover how hard a task he has undertaken. To make a mound is easy enough; to make of such unhandy materials a fairly regular mound is not altogether difficult; but to coax his gathered heap into anything at all resembling the geometrical symmetry of a genuine barrow will test his skill and exhaust his patience. Then let him ask himself how the thing was done by peoples who, while wholly innocent of carts and wheelbarrows and planks, were also in innumerable cases without spades, picks, or shovels as we understand those things.¹ There will be forced upon him the conviction that round barrows did not supersede long barrows because the former were easier to build, but for some other and very much more compelling reason; and that the painful care expended in making the barrow circular was not the outcome of a sense of symmetry only, or because some forgotten Plato deemed this the fairest of all figures.² He will feel that some very cogent reason must have worked toward the maintenance through long centuries of a type of monument so exact and so exacting. And he will ask what that reason could possibly be.

The only answer must be that the driving force was religion. From whatever cause arising, there existed and persisted a feeling that the peace of the dead—and of his living survivors also, if they were not to be haunted by his uneasy ghost—demanded that he should be buried in a circular grave-mound and no other. Differences of race and date, of taste and means and degree, might and did alter details of the monument, and so produced all the wide variety of 'bowls' and 'bells' and 'rings,' of barrows standing singly and in clusters, of barrows with and without peristaliths, and so on; but with the basic fact of the circular plan, when once that was introduced, no later age or later race ventured for many hundreds of

¹ See Greenwell, *Brit. Barrows*, p. 5. He mentions as the largest within his personal knowledge the barrow called Willy Howe, near Wold Newton, E. Riding, nearly 150 ft. in diameter and 24 ft. high. There are others in England as large or larger, and some of the stone-built cairns of Scotland are far larger: 'Three near

Fraserburgh, Aberdeenshire, are 4 ft. in height and 1,000 ft. round the base. In the parish of Minnigaff, Galloway, is one with a base diameter of 300 ft.; and a chambered barrow near Drogheda (Ireland) is 400 paces about and 80 ft. high' (Hunter-Duvar, *Stone, Bronze, and Iron Ages*, p. 224).

² Cf. Cicero *De Natura Deorum*, 1, 10, 24.

years to interfere. It remained unaltered through the ages. As Christian England marks the graves of the dead by the symbol of the cross, so did pre-Christian humanity in Britain, from the coming of the Celt onward, mark its graves by the symbol of the circle. And as the sequel will show, in scores of cases to this day the Christian congregation still performs its ritual and still buries its dead within the same immemorial circle, albeit upon that circle has now been surcharged the more familiar figure of the cross.

It would be interesting, but it is not essential, to know what methods the builders of the round barrows followed in order to attain such remarkable exactitude in their results. Where there exists a fosse, it is supposed that this was usually constructed first, it being relatively easy to keep the mound in proper relation to such a definite periphery; but even so the evidence proves that in many cases the mound itself was built up not from the fortuitous upcast from such a fosse, but with materials gathered elsewhere, sometimes brought from great distances, and systematically laid stratum by stratum over the whole area. Clearly the plan of the whole was marked out upon a radius from the centre selected, and in the case of the larger barrows this radius was perhaps at first obtained by the simple linking of the hands of a number of the workers. In the construction of the perfectly elliptical barrows, and of the more highly developed forms, such as the superbly planned and executed disc-barrows of Wilts and Dorset, some much more accurate means¹ must have been employed. At or near the central point were laid the bones or the ashes of the dead, but there was less precision aimed at in this regard than was manifestly insisted on in regard to the circular plan of the completed monument. The burial is not seldom eccentric, and sometimes markedly so, but such eccentricity is probably due to accidental

¹ Exceptions to this general symmetry of construction are rare. The most striking instance is perhaps that figured by Pitt-Rivers, *Excavations*, iv, pl. 293, where however it is only the fosse that is irregular, and this possibly because the work never received the final touches. Cf. the case of the long barrow of Worbarrow figured

in the same volume, pl. 249. In Ireland the planning of *raths* was the work of professional *rath*-builders, and there is every likelihood that there were professional barrow-builders in Britain. The 'grave-maker' was doubtless an even more 'ancient gentleman' than Shakespeare's character imagined (*Hamlet* v, i.)

causes.¹ In not a few cases excavation has failed to find any trace of any burial at all, and some archaeologists have regarded such barren mounds as cenotaphs.² Local conditions may in some cases have been such as to cause the complete disappearance of the body, but in other cases there is reason to think that the mound was not built to be a funeral monument at all. Moreover the case of the mound 'No. 24' in Cranborne Chase shows that such a mound might mark a holy place without itself serving as a place of burial.³ Reason will be adduced later for believing that this was never intended for a barrow, and that some of the Celts habitually built works of precisely this form for purposes entirely different. Nor is this the only source of perplexity to the student of barrows. In their most rudimentary forms—the simple circular mound and the simple ringwork—such works are too little specialised to be determinable as barrows upon the evidence of shape, plan, and position only. They may have been built by any race for any one of a score of purposes. The habit of raising such mounds to serve, for example, as boundary-marks is certainly as old as the Romans, if not older, and is scarcely yet obsolete. It flourished vigorously all through the middle ages,⁴ and if in most cases the mound so reared was merely a diminutive 'bowl' and nothing more, this was not by any means always so. There are lines of so-called 'barrows' in Ashdown Forest which were raised merely to demarcate the various 'walks' of the Forest, and they vary from big 'bowls' and 'bells' to diminutive ring-barrows.⁵

The circular sepulchral barrow was holy ground. Created by the impulse of religion, it was consecrated by

¹ Cf. Greenwell, *British Barrows*, p. 27.

² Greenwell, pp. 27, 28. Cf. what O'Curry's editor says (*Manners and Customs of the Irish*, p. cccxxv) of the 'cairns of the Dibergaib,' which were not meant for burial-places.

³ Pitt-Rivers, *Excavations*, iv, 149-157.

⁴ E.g. in an 'Indenture of Accord made at Woky (Wookey, near Wells, Som.)' fixing the boundaries of certain lands of the bishop of Wells and the abbot of Glastonbury, 25 Ed. iii, 'by a hedge below the highway which is the boundary between their lordships to the new-made barrow by the corner of the wood . . . thence to

another new barrow, etc.' (*Hist. MSS. Commission, Cat. of MSS. of Dean and Chap. of Wells*, i, 324).

⁵ The boundaries of estates on the South Downs are constantly described in old deeds as running 'to the burgh,' 'by three burghs,' etc.; where *burgh* commonly means 'summit,' 'hill-top,' but in other cases certainly means 'barrow.' 'Burgh' is to this day the common term for a large barrow in Sussex (e.g. Five Lords' Burgh, the Long Burgh, Money Burgh), but it occurs also as an appellative of hills, e.g. 'the Burgh,' a crest beside Saxon Down near Mt. Caburn (*vide* O.S.), Lewes.

the burial within,¹ and its circular form declared its sanctity to all and sundry. Fosse, vallum, peristalith or revetment of stone, or all of these combined, marked it off from profane ground and safeguarded it from sacrilege. Why one barrow should be larger or more elaborate than another is a question of which the answer is written plain in every modern churchyard: why does one of the dead enjoy a 'monumental perpetuity' of Carrara marble, while others must be content with a cross or rail of perishable wood, or often with no monument at all? The larger the barrow, the greater the man, and the greater also the *religio loci*. The fact is so obvious as to demand no proof, but the proof is to be seen in the frequent grouping of many meaner burials about the great one. These were in the first instance the graves of the lesser dead of the great man's own generation, tribe, and race; but—and this is an all-important point—the sanctity of the spot was such as commonly to survive all normal changes of time and race, and even of creed. Anglo-Saxons laid their own dead within barrows of every preceding race and every earlier creed,² and perhaps most secondary interments are due to this abiding recognition of the sanctity of the ground within the charmed circle, rather than to any assumed kinship on the part of the dead.³ There is nothing unlikely in this suggestion, seeing that the same tradition of the barrow's sanctity actually survives in places to the present day. In Ireland it is still an active influence, and it is legitimate to say that it retains more of its force wherever there is more of Celtic blood.⁴

¹ In Roman custom, when cremation had supplanted the older practice of inhumation, the idea that a fleshly burial was still necessary was satisfied by the *os resectum*; some portion of the body, e.g. a finger, was cut off and separately buried. 'The object was to consecrate the place of burial, to make it a *locus religiosus*.' Smith, *Dict. Class. Antiq.* (Murray, 1890), vol. i, p. 893, b.

² 'There can be no doubt that the burial-mounds were used over a considerable period for later interments'; Greenwell, *Brit. Barrows*, p. 16. For examples see *ibid.* pp. 135, 395, etc., and J. R. Mortimer, *Forty Years' Researches*, *passim*. Even the great 'Saxon' barrow at Taplow, built between 450-600, had been used as a place

of burial by lesser folk. The sequel will show that in some cases the Christian treated the barrows of his pagan forbears exactly as the latter had treated those of their predecessors.

³ Cf. Homer, *Iliad* xxiii, 246. Achilles bids his Myrmidons make Patroclus' barrow 'big enough, but not so very big. My survivors shall make it bigger and higher, when I am buried' in the same barrow. The passage tells us emphatically that the barrow was proportionate to the man, but it also tells us that it was quite usual to use a barrow as a collective burial-place, and that those buried in it need not be of one and the same blood.

⁴ 'As late as 1859 in the Isle of Man a farmer has actually been known to offer up

So far as we have any evidence at all for the plan of pagan places of worship in these islands, those of Celtic origin were invariably circular. Religion and burial being inseparable, the same circularity which marked the burial-place marked also the *temenos*; tomb and temple had one common plan. Further every pagan tomb was, according to its degree, likewise a place of worship,¹ and every pagan place of worship as surely attracted new sepultures to its vicinity. But as there was no *religio loci* where there was no burial, the tomb is in point of evolution prior to the temple; and even when there had at last arisen a conscious distinction between the two, none the less was it still essential that the temple should be built upon the grave of at least one human victim. In precisely the same way in the Roman Church of to-day no altar is complete without its relics, and in the Greek Church such relics are even sewn into the cloth which is used to cover the sacred elements, that it may on occasion serve as a portable altar.² The word 'relics' is literally *reliquiae*, and though other things will serve, the most desired relics are actual portions of the body of some holy person, the entire body if it may be so. The pagan Swedes refused to allow the body of their king Frey to be burned, as was customary with kings, for 'it would be well with them so long as he abode in Sweden'³; and when Haldan the Black died, his body was cut in four pieces and given to as many different 'folk,' that those who had a share of it 'might look to have plenteous years therewith.'⁴ The practices of paganism and of Christianity have one and the same origin in the same firm belief in the peculiar virtue that abides in the very bones of the dead.

The barrows which survive to-day in the British Isles are but an insignificant fraction of those which once existed,

a heifer in sacrifice to prevent any harm from befalling him in consequence of the opening of a tumulus on his land' (Boyd Dawkins, *Early Man in Britain*, p. 338). The scene of this, 'probably the last sacrifice offered in Europe,' was close by the Tynwald Hill, a fact of some significance.

¹ *Et tot templa deum Romae quot in urbe sepulcra Heroum numerare licet.* So wrote Prudentius (iv cent.) of Rome as he knew

it. The words apply with at least equal force to Britain, *whether pagan or early Christian*. 'The temples of the heathen,' wrote Hospinianus (*Opera*, i, 20) 'arose out of tombs.' So also did those of Christians.

² Maugham, *Liturgy of the Greek Church*.

³ *Story of the Ynglings* (Saga Library), c. 13.

⁴ *Story of Haldan the Black* (Saga Library) c. 9.

and for every one burial which was deemed worthy of the dignity of a barrow there were probably hundreds which never boasted any such memorial. If the extant barrows are for the most part to be found upon the hills, this is only because cultivation has not yet obliterated them on all these higher levels. Even as it is there still remains a considerable number of such monuments upon the lower levels, and it is to be supposed that the dead of a community were commonly laid to earth in the vicinity of that community. The earlier peoples dwelt chiefly upon the hills because the lowlands were largely uncleared; and as time went on the population moved gradually in greater and yet greater numbers to the lower grounds.

But in course of time there came also a change in the type of barrow: its height steadily diminished, and the earlier 'bowls' and 'bells' eventually gave place to one or other of the many forms of the ring-barrow. Barrows of this type were much more liable to destruction, and for the most part they were constructed at levels where the plough very speedily came to destroy them.¹ This is one amongst several reasons why 'disc' barrows, for example, are so few. A still further development was the common urn-field, which stood but small chance of survival on the arables. It is rare to find an urn-field upon the high grounds, for such a thing belongs in Britain to a time when the population had ceased to be, to any great extent, dwellers on the hills.

Sir William Ridgeway has shown² that the practice of cremation probably originated in Central Europe and was thence carried into all quarters by the wandering Celts. He gives reason also for thinking that cremation remained to a great extent the privilege of the upper

¹ Moreover the soil of which they were composed was frequently of the finest quality, 'top-spit,' and not seldom enriched with potash from innumerable burnings. Its peculiar quality has indeed led some antiquaries to speak of it as 'churchyard soil,' and it was—probably still is—popularly regarded as a safeguard against magic and trickery. See *Reliquary*, 1896, p. 158.

² *Early Age of Greece*, vol. i, c. vii. In regard to England he remarks that the

question of the prevalence of inhumation or of cremation 'appears more complicated' than elsewhere, but flatly says that 'it cannot be maintained that cremation was the practice of the Bronze Age (p. 501).' The Sagas explicitly declare (*Story of the Ynglings*; *Story of Hakon the Good*, c. 17) that Odin introduced burning into Scandinavia, and that after the age of Burning there was a reversion to barrow-building in the age of Howes, but that the older practice long continued side by side with the newer.

classes. In the case of some peoples it became the general rule, as with the Celts of Wilts, Dorset, and Cornwall, and with the Jutes of Kent ; in other cases it remained the exception, as with the Angles of Yorkshire and with the generality of the Irish. Where it became the rule it led to the ever wider use of urn-fields without individual barrows to mark the graves, and only in exceptional cases was there accorded to the dead man the honour of a separate and imposing monument.

Thus the manner of disposing of the dead varied with every people and with every tribe, as well as with the dead man's degree, and a variety of different sentiments had each its voice in determining the method to be adopted. Foremost of these was the older habit of inhumation at feud with the newer vogue of cremation. But where everything else is variable there remains constant the predilection for a circular burial-place. Even in cremated burials within otherwise indeterminable urn-fields this predilection made itself felt, for the ashes were invariably laid in a circular urn.¹ In this country there is known nothing analogous to the rectangular hut-urns of Alba and of Crete,² or the model pile-dwellings of Melos and Amorgos. Like the barrow, the urn also was circular, and never of any other form. 'The mortal right-lined circle must conclude and shut up all.'³