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ROMAN COFFINS, OF LEAD, FROM BEX HILL,
MILTON-NEXT-SITTINGBOURNE.

BY GEORGE PAYNE, JUN.

To the east of the town of Milton-next-Sittingbourne, upon the north shore of Milton Creek, and near its head, there is a field called Bex Hill, from which the owners have been digging brick earth, for the last seven years. At a few yards' distance from the edge of the Creek, the south-eastern portion of this field is considerably elevated; so much so, indeed, that it is marked, as a mound, in the new Ordnance maps of large scale. From the centre of this mound, six Roman coffins and two uncoffined skeletons, have been dug up since 1867.

Mr. Roach Smith communicated, to the 'Gentleman's Magazine,'* an account of the two coffins which were first discovered. One of these contained the remains of a man, whose white beard was perfect when the coffin was first opened; the other enclosed female remains. Masses of calcareous matter, in both, shewed that quick lime had been poured over the bodies. Beside the coffin of the man, were four vessels, two of glass and two of earthen ware, all of which are engraved in Mr. Roach Smith's 'Collectanea Antiqua,' vol. vi. p. 264. One of the glass vessels, although it is $5\frac{3}{4}$ inches high, with a very long neck and a footless body, contains less than

* April, 1867, p. 506.

an ounce of liquid. The other, which is not quite so high, will hold $7\frac{1}{2}$ ounces of liquid. It is jug-like, of a pale green colour and of elegant design, with a broad, voluted handle, bowed at the top and spreading into five points at the bottom. Both these vessels are in the possession of Mrs. Alfred Jordan, of Milton.

In February, 1869, Mr. Roach Smith communicated to the 'Gentleman's Magazine' the discovery of a third coffin at Bex Hill. This was presented by Mr. Alfred Jordan, the owner of the field, to the Maidstone Museum, where it may now be seen. In length, it measures six feet and five inches; while in breadth, it is two feet and ten inches. One sheet of lead formed the bottom and two sides, but for the two ends separate pieces were welded on. The edges of the lid were so turned down, as to overlap the coffin on all sides. The ornamentation upon the leaden headpiece is shewn in the engraving (Fig. 1.) Similar

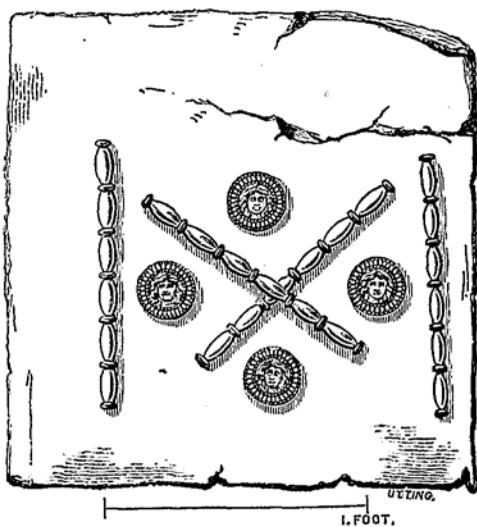


Fig. 1.

combinations of medallions and mouldings covered

the lid, the sides, and the ends. The raised mouldings are, uniformly, composed of alternate narrow rings and long beads. Each long bead is thicker in the middle than at its extremities, both of which are invariably capped by one of the narrow rings. By means of this moulding,* the lid is divided into several rectangular compartments, within each of which it is again used in the shape of an X. Every one of the triangular spaces, thus formed within the rectangular divisions of the lid, contains a medallion of Medusa's head, as shewn in Fig. 1, and enlarged, in Fig. 1 *a*. Within this coffin, lying upon the left

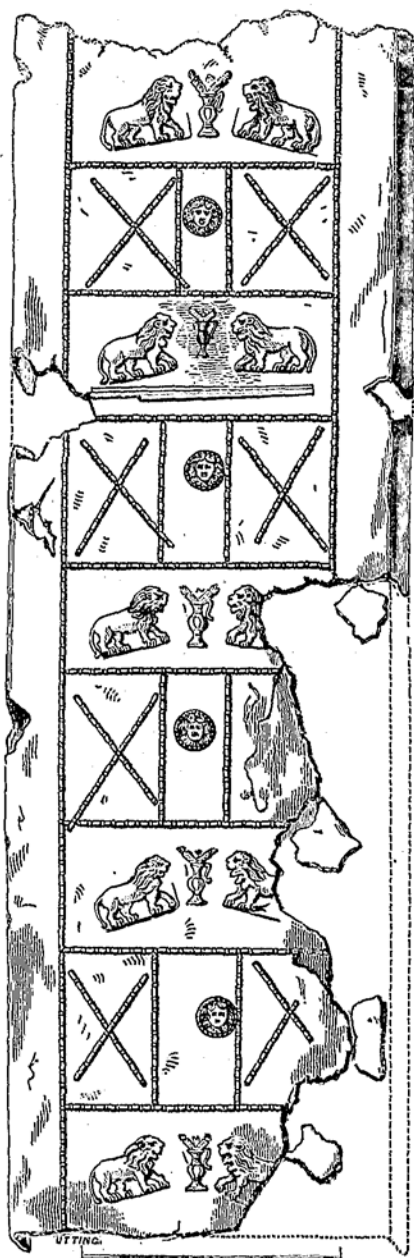
Fig. 1 *a*.

shoulder, there was a long, slender phial, $5\frac{3}{4}$ inches in height. Outside the coffin, there was a glass vessel of peculiar form (see Fig. 2). It is $8\frac{1}{2}$ inches high, and



Fig. 2.

* [An exactly similar moulding appears upon two of the leaden coffins found at Colchester, one of which is now in the possession of Mr. T. Bateman, of Youghgrave, Derbyshire. They are engraved in 'Journal of Brit. Archæol. Assoc.,' vol. ii. pp. 298, 299.—W. A. S. R.]



.1. FOOT.

LID OF ROMAN COFFIN,
(In the possession of Mr. G. Payne, jun.)

has two broad handles, one on each side of its neck, which is two inches long and one inch in diameter. The body of this glass vessel is $6\frac{1}{2}$ inches high, and of four inches diameter throughout. Upon the bottom are stamped, in bold relief, the letters I BONI.

On the 21st of November, 1871, a fourth leaden coffin was uncovered at Bex Hill. It contained, amidst a quantity of lime, a skeleton, of which the head was placed towards the south. The lower part of the coffin, which was entire when it was first seen, fell to pieces during the work of excavation; the lid, however, was left tolerably perfect. Long iron nails, and some other traces of an exterior coffin of wood, were found among the *débris*.

The ornamentation of the leaden lid is very elaborate; more so, perhaps, than that of any other yet discovered in Britain. It is represented in the annexed engraving. Five feet long, and of the uniform breadth of one foot and a half, the entire surface of this lid is divided into nine rectangular compartments, by means of a raised moulding* (Fig. 3) more delicate and more elaborate than that used



Fig. 3.

upon the coffin previously discovered. This moulding, like that, consists of beads and rings, but in this case

* [This moulding is exactly like the raised lines, similarly employed, upon a leaden coffin which was found, in May, 1853, in Haydon Square, Minorities, London. It is engraved in the 'Jour. Brit. Archæol. Assoc.,' ix. 163. It likewise resembles that which adorned a coffin found, in Mansell Street, Whitechapel, in 1843, as shewn in 'Jour. Brit. Archæol. Assoc.,' ii. 299. It may also be compared with a moulding engraved in the Transactions of the Evening Meetings of the London and Middlesex Archæological Society, for 1862, page 78, from a coffin found in Camden Gardens, Bethnal Green, in March, 1862.—W. A. S. R.]

two narrow rings are placed between each pair of beads, and the beads themselves are smaller than in the moulding of the other coffin. The nine rectangular compartments are not of equal depth, but are alternately deep and shallow. Each of the shallow compartments, of which there are five, is occupied by a pair of lions (Fig. 4), which stand face to face, having between them a jug-like vase (Fig. 5). Each



Fig. 4.



Fig. 5.



Fig. 6.

of the deeper compartments is divided into three, by vertical lines formed of the "bead and rings" moulding. The central, and narrowest, division in each, contains a medallion of Medusa's head (Fig. 6); while the two broader divisions are occupied by lines of the moulding, disposed in the shape of an X. In the compartment which lies third, from the head of the lid, there is, beneath the lions and the vase, an additional ornament in the shape of a sword-blade which has no outer, or ornamental, hilt. This, however, is not repeated elsewhere. Each of the vases, upon this lid, has one handle, and contains two prominent objects which seem to be burning torches, with some faint indications of a third object, between the two. Upon a fragment of one end of the coffin, we find the lion used, not in combination with the vase, but with the Medusa medallion (Fig. 7). There

is no record of the use of the lion as an ornament



Fig. 7.

upon any other of the Roman coffins, of lead, found in Britain, but Mr. Roach Smith, in the third volume of his 'Collectanea,' mentions lions among the ornaments of a leaden coffin found at Milhaud, near Nismes, in 1836.

Outside the coffin, found in 1871, and at its head, there was a glass vessel, of uncommon form and elegance. It is somewhat like a modern claret jug of pale green glass, and is $8\frac{3}{4}$ inches in height. Its neck is $4\frac{1}{4}$ inches long, and three quarters of an inch wide. The diameter of its base, or bowl, is equal to the length of the neck, being $4\frac{1}{4}$ inches, but its capacity for containing liquid is reduced to a minimum by the domed shape of the bottom, which is pressed up to within an inch and a half of the neck, after the manner of, but to a much greater degree than, a modern champagne bottle. The handle, which is remarkably broad, and grooved, terminates in a pseudo-spiral, which runs down the bowl of the vessel to within an inch and a half of the bottom. The front of the bowl, opposite to the handle, is ornamented with a finely-moulded medallion, which projects half an inch, is $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches in circumference, and represents a female head. This medallion and the handle of the



ROMAN GLASS-VESSEL

Found with a Leadon Coffin at Milton next Sittingbourne, Kent.



*The Medallion and Handle
same size as Original.*

vessel are represented separately, in their exact size, in an accompanying plate.*

Several small urns, mostly of Upchurch ware, were found about twenty feet west of this coffin in 1871; and with them was a finger ring of bronze. Six feet from the urns lay two skeletons, and at the feet of one of them were three small earthen vessels. Traces of decayed wood, around these skeletons, suggest the probability that they were interred in simple wooden coffins.

Two more leaden coffins, have subsequently been discovered at Bex Hill, but both of them were devoid of ornament. Within that which was last found, in 1873, there were two small finger rings, of gold wire, and three thick long pins of dark wood or of Kimmeridge coal. The rings are of the most primitive kind, each being simply a circle of gold wire, the ends of which overlap considerably. Each end is then fastened by being turned, once, round that part of the wire upon which it lies. Each of the pins is about three inches long; and the pin-heads are cut into facets, like a modern diamond ornament.†

It is almost needless to point out that the Bex Hill coffins, and their accessories, betoken the high rank and wealth of the persons who were interred at that

* [In the Society's Collection at Maidstone, there are two fragments of vessels, found by the late Mr. Bland, at Hartlip, which were probably similar to this. Both consist merely of the neck and handle of a bottle, but the neck and handle, in each case, are precisely like those of the perfect vessel here described. One of these, in the Bland Collection, is green, but the other is of amber glass.—W. A. S. R.]

† [These pins are exactly like one of those which were found in the Bethnal Green coffin, as engraved by the London and Middlesex Archæological Society, in the Transactions of their Evening Meeting, March 18th, 1862.—W. A. S. R.]

spot. There can be little doubt that the Romans had here a large and important settlement upon the land which lies north of Bex Hill, where foundations of walls have often been found, and extending beyond the site of Milton Old Church, near which various Roman domestic remains have recently been discovered.

The total absence of the escallop shell from the ornamentation of the Kentish Roman coffins is worthy of remark. That shell forms a prominent feature of the decorative patterns upon all six of those found in Essex, upon both of those which were found in Surrey, and upon those found in Haydon Square and in Stepney.

[The Roman Cemetery at Bex Hill, in Milton-next-Sittingbourne, has disclosed more leaden coffins than any other Roman Cemetery in Britain. Thirty-six such coffins, of the Roman period, are known to have been discovered in England; and of these no less than twelve, or one-third of the whole, have been found in Kent. Six came from Bex Hill; one was found on the opposite side of the same creek, in the parish of Murston; two were discovered at Southfleet; one at Petham; one at Sturry, and another in a Saxon cemetery in the Isle of Thanet. Six have been found in Middlesex, at Stepney; Mansell Street, Whitechapel; Old Ford, Stratford-le-Bow; Haydon Square, Minories; Shadwell; and Bethnal Green. Essex likewise has yielded six, three from Colchester and three from West Ham. From Surrey we hear of two; one at Battersea Fields, and one in the Kent Road, London. Two have been found in York; two in Gloucestershire (at Upper Slaughter, Stow-on-the-Wold, and at Kingsholme); and two in Wiltshire (at Roundway, and at Headington Wick, both near Devizes). Others have been found at Meldreth, Cambs.; Caerwent, Monmouths.; Bishopstoke, Hants; and Heigham, Norfolk. Mr. Roach Smith considers that the leaden coffins, recently found at Leicester, are not Roman.

The Petham and the Murston coffins were ornamented with a cable-shaped moulding, not with the combination of beads and rings which is seen upon those at Bex Hill. The other Kentish specimens were devoid of ornament.

It may be well to mention that not far from Bex Hill, upon the opposite shore of Milton Creek, there is a small estate which has, from time immemorial, borne the name of Bayford. It lies between the sites of the Bex Hill, and Murston, Roman Cemeteries; east of the former, and west of the latter. This name seems to point to the former existence of a ford, across the Creek, which would have been approached by means of a road passing near the Bex Hill Cemetery, on the one side, and the Murston Cemetery, upon the other.

As the field, called Bex Hill, lies at the lowest possible level, it must have acquired its name from that elevated, or mound-like, portion in which the Roman coffins have been found.

Much information respecting Roman coffins of lead may be gathered from—

- 'Collectanea Antiqua,' iii. 45; iv. plate xl.; vi. 264.
- 'Journal Brit. Archæol. Assoc.,' ii. 297; iv. 383; ix. 163; x. 386.
- 'Archæological Journal,' x. 61, 255; xii. 78, 283; xiii. 291.
- 'Gentleman's Magazine,' Dec., 1854, p. 63; March, 1864, pp. 330 and 365; April, 1867, p. 506; Feb., 1869.
- 'Transactions Essex Archæological Society,' iii. part 3.
- 'Norfolk Archæology,' vol. vi., 213.
- 'Archæologia,' vii., 376; xiv., 38; xvii., 333; xxv., 10; xxvi., 293; xxix., 399; xxxi., 308.—W. A. S. R.]