

A Roman Coffin found at Bath.

BY MARJORIE CROOK, M.B., CH.B.

On June 11th, 1942, by kind permission of Mr. Holloway, of 27, Englishcombe Lane, Bath, members of this Society were able to investigate a Roman stone coffin, which had recently been partially exposed in the side of a bomb-crater.

The covering slab of oolite had already been removed. It measured 2 ft. 2 in. at its wider end, and had a maximum length of 4 ft. 3 in., whilst the average thickness was 7 in. When first unearthed by Mr. Holloway, this slab covered the middle and foot part of the coffin only.

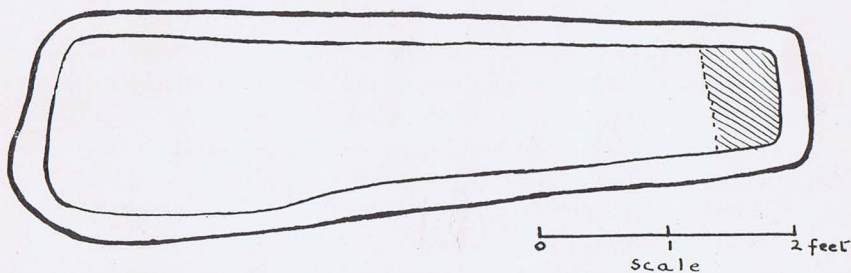


FIG. 11.—Plan of the Roman Coffin from Bath.

The shape of the narrower end suggested that it had been broken off there at some time.

The coffin itself was also of oolite and its long axis lay East and West, the prismatic compass bearing being 90.5° . The head lay towards the East. This orientation is comparable with that of the Roman coffin found at Henrietta Gardens in 1931.¹ (Another coffin was found several years ago about 100 yards East of the present one, by a man putting in drains. He told me that as far as he could remember, it also lay East and West, was round-headed and straight at the foot. It was broken up.)

The depth of the rim of the present coffin below the ground level was only 2 ft. 3 in., and there was 7 in. depth of the removed covering slab to take into consideration.

REFERENCE

¹ *Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society, Proceedings of Bath and District Branch, 1931.*

The coffin was round-headed, but the head-end was somewhat oblique. The left-hand side was straight, whilst the right-hand side was slightly bowed-out near the head end. (*See Fig. 11.*)

This obliquity of the head-end and slight bowing of one side is also present in a Roman coffin in the courtyard of the Royal Literary and Scientific Institute, Bath, and was also present to a lesser degree in the Henrietta Gardens coffin, which was destroyed by fire in the Society's museum at Bristol. Another in the porch of Priston Church is very asymmetrical—also one from Dyrham. There are probably other examples which have not come to our notice, and it would be interesting to know if the asymmetry was due to accident or design.

The measurements of the Englishcombe Lane coffin were as follows:—

| | | |
|--------------------------------------|---|--------------|
| External length at rim near R. side | - | 6 ft. 4 in. |
| " " " " " L. " | - | 6 ft. 1 in. |
| Internal " " " " R. " | - | 5 ft. 10 in. |
| " " " " " L. " | - | 5 ft. 6½ in. |
| External width at head (maximum) | - | 1 ft. 9½ in. |
| Internal width at head (maximum) | - | 1 ft. 4 in. |
| External width at foot | - | 1 ft. 2 in. |
| Internal width at foot | - | 9½ in. |
| Average depth (internal) | - | 9½ in. |
| Average width of rim | - | 3 in. |

The walls comprising the sides and head of the coffin were vertical but that at the foot was markedly sloped, so that the internal length of the floor of the coffin was only 5 ft. 3 in. on the right-hand side, and 5 ft. on the left-hand side.

The inner surface of the sides and head showed well-marked oblique tooling.

The foot end of the coffin was rounded off externally at the base.

The coffin walls had been cracked in many places by the bomb and the pieces of the right wall, that nearest the crater, had been driven in slightly, but could be restored to their original position.

The coffin was filled with clayey earth and stones, and contained some human bones, mostly in a fragmentary condition. There was no trace of the skull, and such bones as did occur were not in their correct anatomical position; for instance, an atlas vertebra was found at the foot and a fragment of femur lying transversely where the dimensions of the coffin would not permit of the complete bone lying in such a position.

The absence of some bones and displacement of those which did occur, the presence of largish stones in the clay infilling, and the

incompleteness of the covering slab, seem to indicate disturbance at some period. After this disturbance the remaining part of the covering slab seems to have been replaced to cover the lower two-thirds of the coffin, instead of the upper two-thirds, which its transverse measurement and shape would fit.

Other finds include a few sherds of Samian and grey pottery, a sandstone pebble, the tooth of a sheep, and a quantity of iron nails. These latter came from the foot of the coffin, and were probably sandal nails.

We wish to thank Mr. Holloway for so kindly allowing us to examine the coffin. We are also indebted to the late Professor Fawcett for his report on the bones.

REPORT ON THE HUMAN BONES

(BY PROFESSOR FAWCETT)

The really interesting thing about the skeleton is the 5th right metatarsal, which is so bent as to suggest the thong of the sandal which was worn. There seem to be *two* 5th right metatarsals, and they are both bent in a very high degree.

The femora show a fair degree of platymeria, and the tibiæ a high degree of platycnemia. Features of the astragalus and internal malleolus of the tibia are such as one might expect in a squatter.

On the whole, I think we may say that the bones are of a short individual—if male, of poor physique and not more than 5 ft. 4 in. in height; if female, of average physique and about 5 ft. 2 in. in height—but the bones are puzzling because they are devoid of any pronounced sex-character.

The individual spent most of his or her life on the hillsides of Bath—hence the platymeria and platycnemia—and was in the habit of wearing sandals.

There is a very large pronator ridge on the ulna, such as one would expect to see on a female bone—no doubt due to excessive working of the quern in grinding corn. No bone was duplicated except the 5th right metatarsal.
