

A Burnt Burial at Woolacombe, Devon

BY H. TAYLOR, M.C., M.B., Ch.B., AND E. E. TAYLOR

Under the hills north of Woolacombe a small grassy plain rests on relatively low cliffs. It may be a raised beach, for the section shows a stratified sand with small pebbles and rolled flints. There are traces of Bronze Age and later occupation.

Here, in September 1938, a burial pit became exposed in the cliff face south of Barricane Beach and 6 yds. S.E. of the southern concrete platform (*Plate 12A*). No barrow-mound, bank, or ditch could be seen. Since it was in danger from erosion and war seemed imminent the pit was excavated at once, from its exposed side. Its filling was passed across a ground-sheet for minute re-examination and samples were kept.

The pit (*Plate 12B* and *Fig. 21*) was 1 ft. 4 in. deep and 2 ft. 7 in. by 1 ft. 9 in. in plan at the depth of 5 in., above which its outline was lost. At the top the sides were splayed outwards and coated with a substance like pottery—a black carbonaceous clay free from stones, burnt red on its exposed surface. This ended below in a broken edge which was not burnt; nor were the walls and the floor. Apparently a deeper pit was dug in a clay-lined, sloping-sided hollow which had contained fire.

In the pit was a heap of mixed black ash, charcoal and calcined human bone. Two burnt sea-shells and some larger pieces of the bone lay on its apex (*Fig. 21, A*). Above this was sandy gravel, occasionally burnt, containing a few scraps of calcined human bone and charcoal.

The grave may have been paved above with small slabs of shale, for a number were found so arranged at the depth of 4 in.

Pieces of clay similar to that on the walls occurred both in the ashes and the filling. They were plaster and not potsherds, their one surface being smooth and burnt, the others irregular, soft and black. A few burnt red throughout were found in the ashes. It seems, therefore, that the ashes lay at one time in the clay-lined basin but were scraped aside, taking with them some of the plaster; the pit was deepened; the ashes were replaced and buried beneath the stuff dug from it, which of course also included plaster.

The clay-lined hollow may have been the hearth of a dwelling. If, on the contrary, it was made for the occasion, the burnt lining suggests that either it served for the cremation or that the ashes were laid in it still burning. There may have been some ceremonial reason for their temporary deposit

in a hearth or shallow pit, but the functional explanation seems the more probable. It would appear that the cremation was carried out in this shallow hearth (whether new or old) because a deep pit was unsuitable for a wood fire, especially one designed to calcine bone. For burial purposes it had to be deepened.

This can be true only if the remains to be cremated were chiefly bones freed from soft parts. The site seems to have been too small to burn a body. Some of our Neolithic and Early Bronze Age folk practised a form

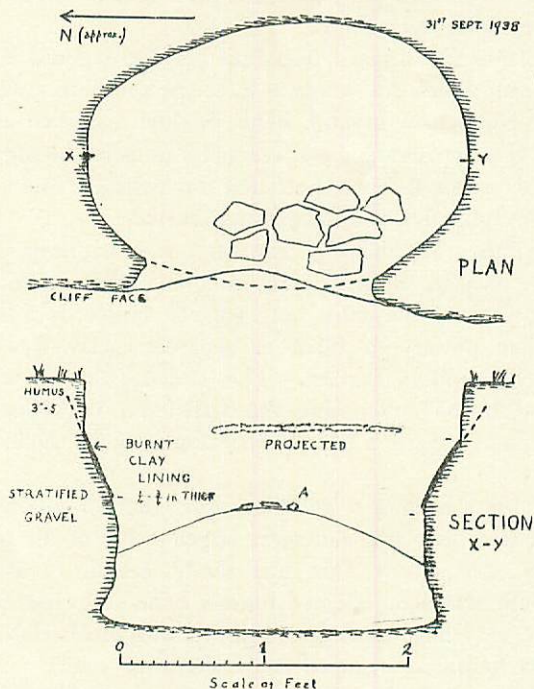
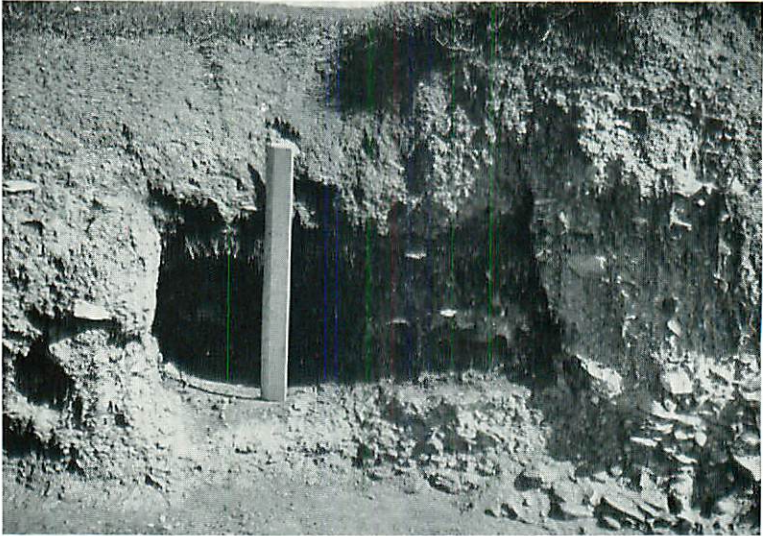


Fig. 21.—Woolacombe Burnt Burial. Plan and section.

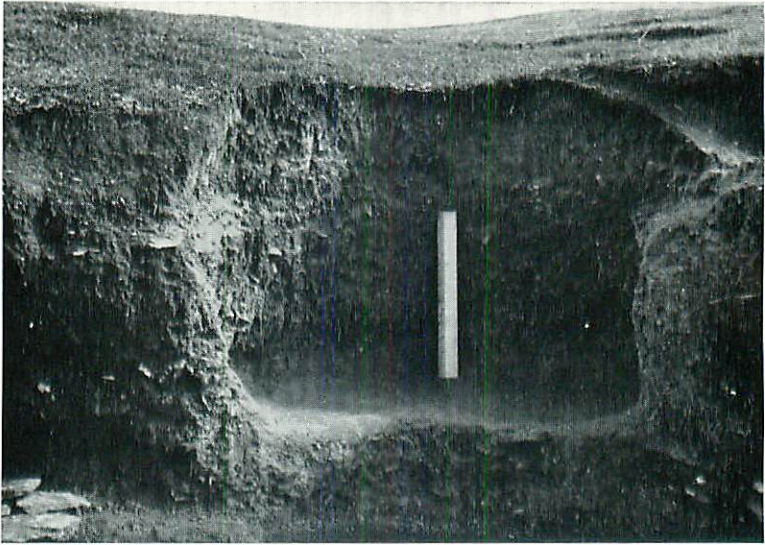
of bone-cleaning (most likely preliminary burial or exposure) before unburnt burials.¹ That their successors did so before cremation is at least probable.² Whether the original purpose was purification or simply to permit choice of site and season for the final rites, for them it also had the advantage of fuel economy.

There were no dateable objects. Since we found no pollen in the deposit it is unlikely that enough is present for a differential analysis. The burial pit dug in a hearth may be compared with Pit C in Tynings Farm South Barrow, of the Early Middle Bronze Age.³

PLATE 12



A.—Woolacombe Burnt Burial before excavation. Rule: 1 ft.



B.—Woolacombe Burnt Burial. Pit after excavation. Rule: 1 ft.

NOTES ON THE FINDS

The bone was fully calcined, human, and adult whenever identifiable, but of uncertain age and sex. Skull, teeth, vertebræ, ribs, pelvis, upper and lower limbs were represented.

The charcoal was derived from small wood, between 1 in. and 3 in. in diameter to judge by the growth rings. It included twigs, branch junctions and bark. It awaits identification.

The marine shells were probably *Gibbula umbilicalis* and *littorina littorea*, both local species.⁴ Barricane Beach is still noted for the bright colour of its so-called "cowries".

Amongst the ash were three burnt flint pebbles, possibly sling-stones, and two types of concretion featureless under the microscope. The white were largely lime but perhaps not derived from bone since they did not react to tests for phosphates; the black chiefly carbon, possibly burnt animal matter.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Crawford, *The Long Barrows of the Cotswolds*, 1925. Bellows: Gloucester (Neolithic). The Corston Cysts, U.B.S.S. *Proc.*, Vol. IV, No. 2, p. 128, and Vol. V, No. 2, p. 141 (A-Beaker). *Tynings Farm West Barrow*, to be published shortly (Debased Beaker?).
 - ² Almost certain evidence was found in *Tynings Farm South Barrow*, to be published shortly.
 - ³ To be published shortly.
 - ⁴ Kindly identified by Mr. R. Bassindale of this University and Mr. R. Winckworth, F.R.S.
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