

An Early Beaker Burial? at Brean Down near Weston-super-Mare

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The massive limestone promontory of Brean Down is both a landmark and a shelter for the mouth of the little river Axe, where small craft may lie. Once it was the obvious landfall for the hills of North Somerset. Here the Mendips reached the sea but to the north and south were marshy flats.

There is much to add to previous accounts of the deposits banked against the southern cliffs of the Down. It will suffice to say that they are not a raised beach but blown sand and hillwash,¹ their base lying at an unknown depth below sea level. Upon these Pleistocene deposits a red loam marks the damp climate of Neolithic times; whilst a yellow blown sand indicates the drier conditions of the Early Bronze Age.² Above these are later sands. There was considerable occupation on many occasions, including the close of the Neolithic and the Beaker periods. The foreshore is a nearly horizontal section of the deposits just as the sand-cliff is roughly a vertical one.

In September, 1936, the beach was swept clean by tides driven by a south-westerly gale. For a few hours it showed a fresh section. The writers noticed two large potsherds lying together in the red loam, or rather in an intercalated darker patch formed by the filling of an ancient pit (*Fig. 22, A, B*). The site was about 75 yds. south of the down, 15 yds. west of the sand-cliff, and below high-water mark. Thus there could be no delay in excavation.

Sherd A was of thin red beaker ware with comb decoration, typical except for the fineness of the teeth and the presence of twisted-thong impressions; sherd B was 'Neolithic' thicker, dark greyish-brown, and crudely decorated by the finger-nail. Each proved to be from the neck of a beaker not unlike Abercrombie's Type B.1. Mr. W. F. Grimes and Professor Christopher Hawkes have since pointed out their close relationship with the bell-beakers of Brittany. They lay face up, rims to the east; B, the coarser, obliquely so that its south and east parts were still buried.

Although A was isolated, a little scraping uncovered about one-half of the vessel intact and still in situ (A'). It lay at an angle of about 45°, mouth downwards and to the east. Thus almost certainly it was complete when buried and the missing base had been washed away. Not so the coarse sherd; although in situ, extending into the filling of the pit beneath

the beaker, it had no adjoining fragments. Since it was face up, such fragments would have lain deeper and could not have been washed away. It was buried as a sherd. Indeed, one edge was trimmed. It rested upon a piece of limestone.

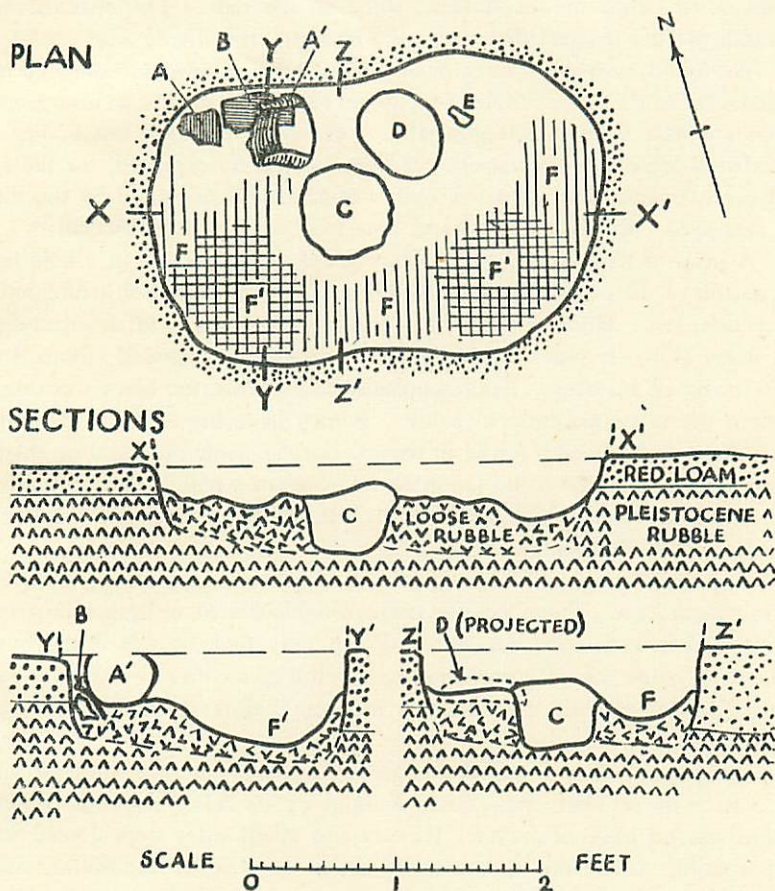


Fig. 22.

Owing to failing light the pottery had to be removed without being photographed, but its position was planned and marked by pegs. The pit was protected from the tide as far as possible by pebbles after samples of its contents had been taken. During this work the beach was searched by one of us but no other part of these vessels was found.

Next day the gale brought showers of fine rain and sand, which invaded the work, the eyes, and the camera. Drifts blocked the road. Photography was impracticable but the work could not be postponed.

The filling of the pit was dug with a knife and re-examined by 'sorting' across a sheet, samples being kept. It consisted of irregular patches of red, grey and black clayey and sandy loams with a few pieces (not pebbles) of decalcified limestone and a few scraps of charcoal throughout. Such loams occur, some on the hillside, some on the flats. The charcoal and blackish patches suggest that they were brought from living sites.

We found no trace of bone or of a body, even in outline, unless certain depressions in the loose rubble of the floor (*Fig. 22, F*) may be so interpreted. Their contents were indistinguishable from the soils above but bodies do not always leave a discoloration. No bone could be expected, for the site had been covered only by a few inches of sand and drenched by the tides for centuries. Even large pieces of limestone were almost decalcified.

A heap of charcoal (C) 6 in. deep and 8 in. across, lay in a hole near the middle of the pit and an unworked flint flake with yellowish-white patina on its floor (E). Between these was a patch of black sticky earth with bright red flakes (D). It was sharply defined, smooth and rounded, about 8 in. by 6 in. by $1\frac{1}{2}$ in. deep. Microscopically amorphous, the black was due to carbon, the red apparently to ochre. It may have been a bag or bundle. Such deposits have been found in barrow burials, sometimes sealing them.³ Their thickness seems to be too great for robes or a pall. The presence of two land snail shells, since destroyed by enemy action, in grey sandy loam, may have been accidental.

The charcoal was of fairly large wood, its growth-rings having diameters up to 3 in. at least. There were no twigs, rough surfaces, or branch junctions as is usual in cremation deposits. Was it only fuel, or was it the burnt remains of some valued possession, e.g., a club or a coffer? Unfortunately it was destroyed with the Society's museum before the wood had been identified.

The pit, or rather its truncated base from 3 in. to 9 in. deep and 3 ft. 1 in. by 2 ft. 1 in. in plan, was clearly marked by its relatively dark content. There was no trace of a cyst. Its east and north sides were dusted with yellow sand, visible only momentarily under the weather conditions, and a trace lay on the floor in the north-east corner—a clue to both its depth and date. A bright yellow sand is the characteristic Beaker Period deposit. Had the pit been dug through any thickness of that loose material much more would have been present on the floor and in the filling. It cannot have been deep enough for safe burial (the loam being less than a foot thick) unless protected by a capstone, stones, or a barrow. It follows also that the pit was dug early in the dry phase, and from its position that the land stood higher above the sea than at present.

The floor of the pit was formed by the underlying Pleistocene rubble, the surface of which had been loosened to the depth of 4 or 5 in. It was

PLATE 13



PLATE 14



A



B

not flat, as is usual in such burial pits. The hollows in it were easy to trace owing to the darker, almost stoneless character of the filling, but could not be kept clear of blown sand sufficiently long for photographic purposes. A wide, shallow depression extended around the south and east sides (*Fig. 22, F*). Its depth was usually less than 2 in. but increased to nearly 5 in. at its western end and 4 in. at a little distance from its eastern. It might have been made by, or for, a body in the contracted position, the deeper hollows lying beneath the hip and shoulder (*F'*). If so, the flint flake and pouch (or whatever *D* was) lay near the hands; the beaker before the legs, which would explain its position close to the wall, and also its obliquity if it rested on the feet. The little pit of charcoal would have been made and filled before the body was in place.

The pit was just large enough to contain a crouched burial but there is no conclusive evidence that it did.

THE BEAKER (*Plates 13, 14, A*)

Fragments of this vessel have been recovered from the ashes of the Society's museum destroyed by enemy action in 1940; most are distorted, some blistered or even actually fused. Originally we had most of the rim and neck, stopping short at or just above the greatest diameter of the body. Thus the lower part and the height are conjectural. We have reconstructed the vessel as an early beaker of Type B.1 with a body adopted from Abercrombie's illustrations which could be removed without damage to the pottery. We are willing to admit that the pot may have been a Bell-beaker or some intermediate form.

The simple rounded rim was about $6\frac{1}{8}$ in. in diameter, the height as reconstructed 8 in., the profile somewhat bell shaped. The decoration consisted of horizontal bands of close-set lateral chevrons, bounded and bisected by horizontal lines. A horizontal line ran below the rim. The chevrons were impressed by a remarkably fine-toothed convex comb or notched slip, the horizontal lines by a thin twisted cord or thong. The ware was thin ($\frac{3}{16}$ in.), uniformly fired but rather soft, of short fracture, buff to brown internally and having the usual red exterior (or slip?) which adhered to the fingers slightly when wet. The paste was dark brown, very fine, and free from sand and grit.

THE SHERD (*Plate 14, B*)

Most of this has been saved. Some is in good condition, some fused and flattened. Here again we know the profile of the neck and upper part of the body but not the height nor base. It seems to have been a larger and coarser version of the beaker. The rim, about $7\frac{1}{4}$ in. in diameter,

varied from slightly flattened to rounded or bulging. The ware was about $\frac{3}{8}$ in. in thickness, very hard and well fired, dark greyish-brown, of a fine dark brown paste without obvious sand or grit. Its fracture was not so short as that of the beaker, but not ragged. It was unlike local Neolithic ware and the coarse finger-tip sherds found with A-Beakers. The decoration was crude, consisting of oblique finger-nail impressions set more or less in horizontal rows. The lower edge was cut or ground perhaps in the process of making a bowl from the base of a broken vessel.

Mr. W. F. Grimes and Professor Christopher Hawkes have pointed out that both the shape of the beaker and the character of its decoration, especially the association of notched and corded technique,⁴ indicate a close association with the Breton bell-beakers, from which our south-western group of B-Beakers may have been derived. Further, the finger-nail impressed sherd conforms to one of the standard types of domestic ware of the Megalithic Bell-beaker folk. Although sherds decorated by the finger-nail and twisted thong are often associated with the British A-Beaker complex they are probably unknown with the south-western B group. As has been said, the ware differs markedly from local examples known to us and the beaker may well be unique in the extreme fineness of the comb and cord with which it was decorated.

These authorities conclude that the beaker is the most exotic and Breton-like in the country except one, but that our reconstruction as an early B-beaker is probably correct. It tells of contact with Brittany (whether immigration or trade) in Megalithic times or soon after.

We are most grateful for the help and courtesy of Professor Hawkes and Mr. Grimes, and also for that of Dr. D. P. Dobson, but for whom the full significance of this coastal find would have been missed.

REFERENCES

¹ Palmer, Prof. L. S., U.B.S.S. *Proc.*, Vol. III, No. 3, p. 156.

² Often mixed with red loam at its base.

³ Cf. The Fernhill and Tynings Farm Barrows, U.B.S.S. *Proc.*, Vol. II, No. 3, p. 212, and Vol. II, No. 2, pp. 138, 140, 145.

⁴ Both found on domestic sherds from the earliest Beaker horizon at Brean Down.