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Prehistoric Skeletons from Tormarton

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Prehistoric Skeletons from Tormarton

By R. W. KNIGHT, CHARLES BROWNE and L. V. GRINSELL

WEST LITTLETON DOWN is on the Jurassic Limestone in the south-western part of the Cotswolds, in the parish of Tormarton (Gloucestershire), but it extends eastwards into the parish of Nettleton (Wiltshire). In July 1968, after a pipe-line for a gas main had been dug across this down, the skeletons of two young men aged about nineteen at the time of death were discovered in the disturbed soil east of Wallsend Lane (ST 76737667). They had apparently been inserted without ceremony in a ditch or pit. A human cranium was found in the trench about three hundred yards to the west (ST 76487656).

Skeleton No. I (PLATE IIA) has in the pelvis a hole made by a lozenge-sectioned spearhead which must have been driven into the body by an attacker from the right side when his victim was either falling or had already fallen. The feet of this skeleton were not exhumed, because the trench in which they lay was here covered by a spoil-heap which could not then be removed.

Skeleton No. II (PLATE I) about a foot away, and in the same ditch or pit, exhibits features of even greater interest. Two of the lumbar vertebrae (PLATE IIC) are stained blue-green by contact with a small Bronze Age spearhead, the blade of which was found, but the end containing the socket had broken off at the point of weakness behind the blade. This spear had pierced the spinal cord and would have caused immediate and permanent paralysis in the legs. The pelvis (PLATE IIB) had been pierced by a similar bronze spearhead, the socket of which had also broken off. The point of this spearhead remains embedded in the pelvis and surrounded by bronze staining. The skull bears a hole perhaps caused by a blow or wound. The owner of this skeleton was therefore the subject of a brutal attack during which he received wounds in the pelvis, the spinal cord, and possibly the head. It is not easy to reconstruct the attack to the extent of ascertaining the order in which the blows were struck; but it is possible that the owner of skeleton II was first hit on the head, and was probably already falling when his spine and pelvis were pierced from below by bronze spears. The owner of this skeleton has features of Neolithic type and his remote ancestors could well

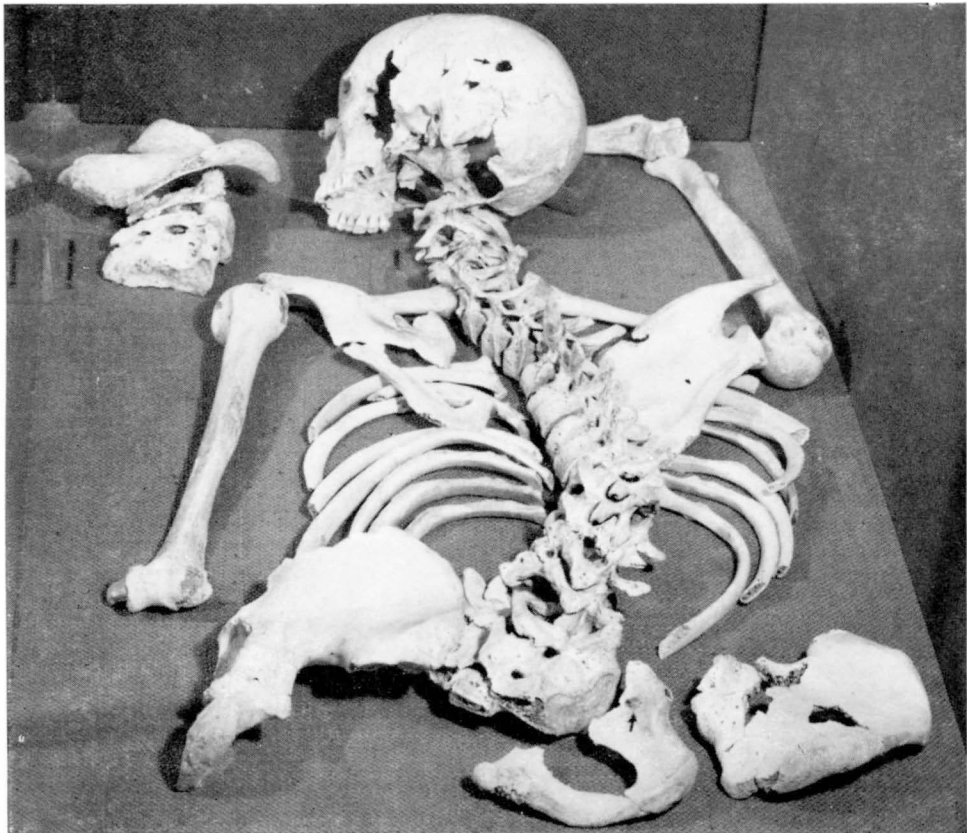


PLATE I. Skeleton II: general view

facing p. 14

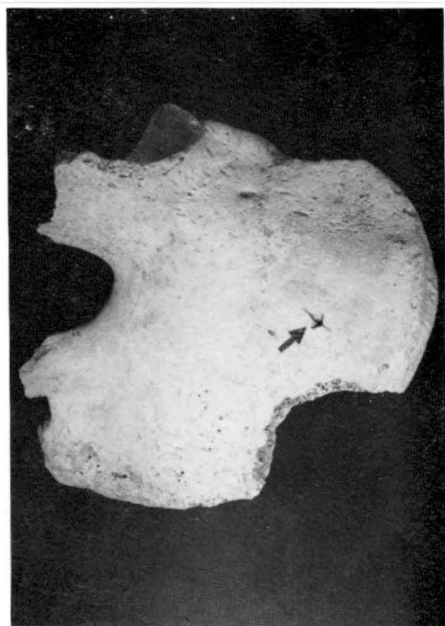


PLATE IIa. Skeleton I: the pelvis, showing hole made by Bronze Age spearhead

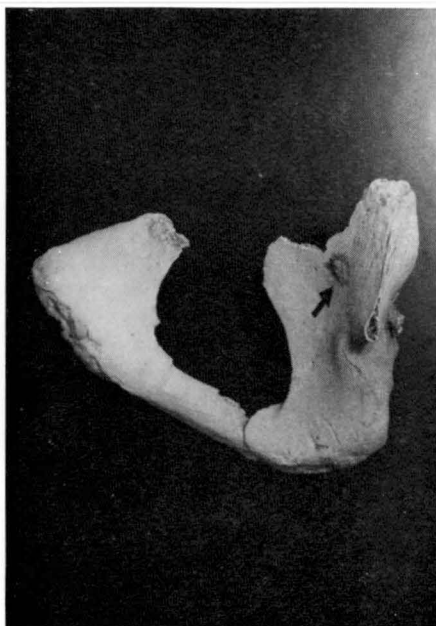


PLATE IIb. Skeleton II: the pelvis, pierced by Bronze Age spearhead



PLATE IIc. Skeleton II: spearhead in lumbar vertebrae of spinal cord

have been among those who built the well-known chambered long barrows on the Cotswolds for the burial of their dead.

Radiocarbon Dating of Skeleton II

Collagen separated from the tibia of this skeleton has been examined at the British Museum Research Laboratory by radiocarbon techniques and gives a date of approximately 2927 ± 90 Before Present — about 977 B.C., taking 1950 as 'present' which is the standard practice with radiocarbon dating (reference BM—542).

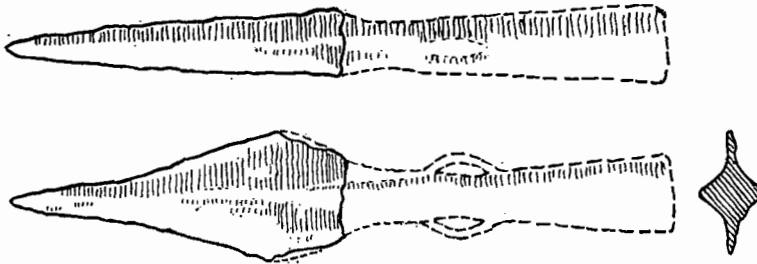


Fig. 1. Bronze Age spearhead (reconstructed) from spinal cord of Skeleton II. Actual size.

The Bronze Spearheads (FIG. 1) are of a smallish type originally with loops in the socket (known to archaeologists as 'side-looped'); the sockets of both spearheads are missing as they broke off at the weak joint between the solid and hollow cast parts of the weapons while they were being withdrawn. Both have 'flame- or rapier-shaped' blades with narrow lozenge-sectioned midrib. The spearhead found in the lumbar vertebrae would have been perhaps 9 cm. in length, and that embedded in the pelvis would have been a little larger—about 14 cm. in length. Until the Tormarton discovery was made, it was thought that bronze spearheads of this small size were intended primarily for hunting. This find shows that they were also capable of being used effectively as weapons. Their date is believed to be between 1200 and 1000 B.C., but could conceivably be a little later.

The spearhead which pierced the lumbar vertebrae has now been analysed at the British Museum Research Laboratory and found to be composed of 81.7% copper, 15.5% tin, 2.8% corrosion products.

Parallels. Only one other discovery of this type is known from Britain. In the spring of 1901, on Queenford Farm near Dorchester-on-Thames (Oxfordshire), a human skeleton was dug up, the pelvis of which had been pierced by a bronze spearhead which had likewise broken while being withdrawn. It was broadly contemporary with those from Tormarton, and is now in the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford. The illustration (FIG. 2) shown as a background to the exhibit of the Tormarton skeletons is taken from an Iron Age rock carving in the Camonica Valley in Northern Italy. It shows a man being pierced through the body (probably the spinal cord) by a spear wielded by a warrior. Beside the wounded man is drawn a human figure without legs, this being most likely an artist's convention for indicating the wound had caused paralysis in the legs of the victim. Beside the victor are two paddle-shaped objects believed to be the awards of conquest.

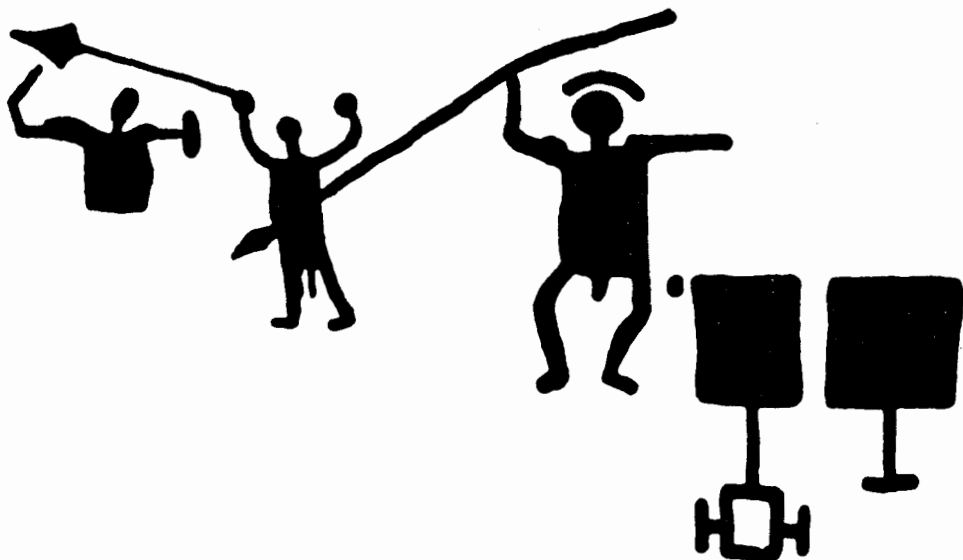


Fig. 2. Pre-Roman Iron Age rock carving in the Camonica Valley, Northern Italy.
E. Anati. *The Camonica Valley* (1964), 205

The Tormarton skeletons were discovered by Mr R. W. Knight and his family, of Marshfield, on 5 July 1968. They were excavated by Mr Charles Browne, Mr Knight and others. They were presented, with the associated portions of bronze spearheads, to the City Museum, Bristol, by the landowners His Grace the Duke of Beaufort and Mr B. B. Blake, after a Coroner's Inquest on them had been held by

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Mr J. A. Seymour Williams (Coroner for Bristol and South Gloucestershire), and a pathological report had been made to him by Dr A. C. Hunt. In preparing this paper, the writers thank all these people; also Dr Don Brothwell and Dr R. F. Everton for examining and reporting on the human skeletons; Mr Michael J. Rowlands for reporting on the spearheads; Mr Dennis Britton for drawing attention to the parallel find from Dorchester-on-Thames; Mr J. S. Loughridge, surgeon of Belfast, for assistance in interpreting the Italian rock-carving; and the British Museum Research Laboratory for the radiocarbon dating of Skeleton II and for analysing the bronze spearhead.

ADDENDUM

One of the writers (Charles Browne) has recently noted in the Museum at Millau (Aveyron, France) part of the spinal column of a human skeleton with the point of a bronze spear embedded in the vertebra, from La Grotte du Pas de Joulie, Trèves (Gard).