

Hydriotaphia, Urn Burial: Chapter II

Sir Thomas Browne

Anglican · Post-Reformation · Meditation

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INTRODUCTION

In this second chapter, Browne turns antiquarian, tracing the Norfolk urns unearthed near Walsingham back through Roman garrisons, British tribes, and Danish invaders in search of whose hands buried them and why. He moves briefly from meditation into method - coins, combs, brass nippers, an opal still holding its blue - cataloguing the small dear things the dead were sent off with. The prose is dense with proper names and conjecture, more antiquary's notebook than sermon, yet the same undertone of Chapter I persists beneath the scholarship: these were people, and burning did not erase what mattered to them.

The Solemnities, Ceremonies, Rites of their Cremation or enterrment, so solemnly delivered by Authors, we shall not disparage our Reader to repeat. Only the last and lasting part in their Urns, collected bones and Ashes, we cannot wholly omit, or decline that Subject, which occasion lately presented, in some discovered among us.

In a Field of old Walsingham, not many moneths past, were digged up between fourty and fifty Urnes, deposited in a dry and sandy soile, not a yard deep, nor farre from one another: Not all strictly of one figure, but most answering these described: Some containing two pounds of bones, distinguishable in skulls, ribs, jawes, thigh-bones, and teeth, with fresh impressions of their combustion. Besides the extraneous substances, like peeeces of small boxes, or combes handsomely wrought, handles of small brasse instruments, brazen nippers, and in one some kind of Opale.

Near the same plot of ground, for about six yards compasse were digged up coals and incinerated substances, which begat conjecture that this was the Ustrina or place of burning their bodies, or some sacrificing place unto the Manes, which was properly below the surface of the ground, as the Aræ and Altars unto the gods and Heroes above it.

That these were the Urnes of Romanes from the common custome and place where they were found, is no obscure conjecture, not farre from a Romane Garrison, and but five Miles from Brancaster, set down by ancient Record under the name of Brannodunum. And where the adjoyning Towne, containing seven Parishes, in no very different sound, but Saxon Termination, still retains the Name of Burnham, which

being an early station, it is not improbable the neighbour parts were filled with habitations, either of Romanes themselves, or Brittain Romanised, which observed the Romane customs.

Nor is it improbable that the Romanes early possessed this Countrey; for though we meet not with such strict particulars of these parts, before the new Institution of Constantine, and military charge of the Count of the Saxon shore, and that about the Saxon Invasions, the Dalmatian Horsemen were in the Garrison of Brancaster: Yet in the time of Claudius, Vespasian, and Severus, we finde no lesse then three Legions dispersed through the Province of Brittain. And as high as the Reign of Claudius a great overthrow was given unto the Icenii, by the Romane Lieutenant Ostorius. Not long after the Countrey was so molested, that in hope of a better state, Prastagius bequeathed his Kingdome unto Nero and his Daughters; and Boadicea his Queen fought the last decisive Battle with Paulinus. After which time and Conquest of Agricola the Lieutenant of Vespasian, probable it is they wholly possessed this Countrey, ordering it into Garrisons or Habitations, best suitable with their securities. And so some Romane Habitations, not improbable in these parts, as high as the time of Vespasian, where the Saxons after seated, in whose thin-fill'd Mappes we yet finde the Name of Walsingham. Now if the Icenii were but Gammadims, Anconians, or men that lived in an Angle wedge or Elbow of Brittain, according to the Originall Etymologie, this countrey will challenge the Emphaticall appellation, as most properly making the Elbow or Iken of Icenia.

That Britain was notably populous is undeniable, from that expression of Cæsar. That the Romans themselves were early in no small Numbers, Seventy Thousand with their associates slain by Boadicea, affords a sure account. And though many Roman habitations are now unknowne, yet some by old works, Rampiers, Coynes, and Urnes doe testifie their Possessions. Some Urnes have been found at Castor, some also about Southcreake, and not many years past, no lesse then ten in a Field at Buxton, not near any recorded Garison. Nor is it strange to finde Romane Coynes of Copper and Silver among us; of Vespasian, Trajan, Adrian, Commodus, Antoninus, Severus, &c. But the greater number of Dioclesian, Constantine, Constans, Valens, with many of Victorinus Posthumius, Tetricus, and the Thirty Tyrants in the Reigne of Gallienus; and some as high as Adrianus have been found about Thetford, or Sitomagus, mentioned in the itinerary of Antoninus, as the way from Venta or Castor unto London. But the most frequent discovery is made at the two Casters by Norwich and Yarmouth, at Burghcastle and Brancaster.

Besides, the Norman, Saxon and Danish peeces of Cuthred, Canutus, William Matilda, and others, som Brittish Coynes of gold have been dispersedly found; And no small number of silver peeces near Norwich; with a rude head upon the obverse, and an ill formed horse on the reverse, with Inscriptions Ic. Duro. T. whether implying Icenii, Dutotriges, Tascia, or Trinobantes, we leave to higher conjecture. Vulgar Chronology will have Norwich Castle as old as Julius Cæsar; but his distance from these parts, and its Gothick form of structure, abridgeth such Antiquity. The British Coyns afford conjecture of early habitation in these parts, though the City of Norwich arose from the ruines of Venta, and though perhaps not without some habitation before, was enlarged, builded, and nominated by the Saxons. In what bulk or populosity it stood in the old East-angle Monarchy, tradition and history are silent. Considerable it was in the Danish Eruptions, when Sueno burnt Thetford and Norwich, and Ulfketel the Governour thereof, was able to make some resistance, and after endeavoured to burn the Danish Navy.

How the Romanes left so many Coynes in Countreys of their Conquests, seems of hard resolution, except we consider how they buried them under ground, when upon barbarous invasions they were faine to desert their habitations in most part of their Empire, and the strictnesse of their laws forbidding to transfer them to any other uses; Wherein the Spartans were singular, who to make their Copper money uselesse, contempered it with vinegar. That the Brittaines left any, some wonder; since their money was iron, and Iron rings before Cæsar; and those of after stamp by permission, and but small in bulk and bignesse; that so few of the Saxons remain, because overcome by succeeding Conquerors upon the place, their Coynes by degrees passed into other stamps, and the marks of after ages. Then the time of these Urnes deposited, or precise Antiquity of these Reliques, nothing of more uncertainty. For since the Lieutenant of Claudius seems to have made the first progresse into these parts, since Boadicea was overthrown by the Forces of Nero, and Agricola put a full end to these Conquests; it is not probable the Countrey was fully garrison'd or planted before; and therefore however these Urnes might be of later date, not likely of higher Antiquity. And the succeeding Emperours desisted not from their Conquests in these and other parts; as testified by history and medall inscription yet extant. The Province of Brittain in so divided a distance from Rome, beholding the faces of many Imperiall persons, and in large account no fewer then Cæsar, Claudius, Britannicus, Vespasian, Titus, Adrian, Severus, Commodus, Geta, and Caracalla. A great obscurity herein, because no medall or Emperours Coyne enclosed, which might denote the date of their enterments. Observable in many Urnes, and found in those of Spittle Fields by London, which contained the Coynes of Claudius, Vespasian, Commodus, Antoninus, attended with Lacrymatories, Lamps, Bottles of Liquor, and other appurtenances of affectionate superstition, which in these rurall interments were wanting.

Some uncertainty there is from the period or term of burning, or the cessation of that practice. Macrobius affirmeth it was disused in his dayes. But most agree, though without authentick record, that it ceased with the Antonini. Most safely to be understood after the Reigne of those Emperours, which assumed the name of Antoninus, extending unto Heliogabalus. Not strictly after Marcus; For about fifty years later we finde the magnificent burning, and consecration of Severus; and if we so fix this period or cessation, these Urnes will challenge above thirteen hundred years.

But whether this practise was onely then left by Emperours and great persons, or generally about Rome, and not in other Provinces, we hold no authentick account. For after Tertullian, in the dayes of Minucius it was obviously objected upon Christians, that they condemned the practice of burning. And we finde a passage in Sidonius, which asserteth that practise in France unto a lower account. And perhaps not fully disused till Christianity fully established, which gave the finall extinction of these sepulchrall Bonfires.

Whether they were the bones of men or women or children, no authentick decision from ancient custome in distinct places of buriall. Although not improbably conjectured, that the double Sepulture or burying place of Abraham, had in it such intension. But from exility of bones, thinnesse of skulls, smallnesse of teeth, ribbes, and thigh-bones; not improbable that many thereof were persons of minor age, or women. Confirmable also from things contained in them: In most were found substances resembling Combes, Plates like Boxes, fastened with Iron pins, and handsomely overwrought like the necks or

Bridges of Musicall Instruments, long brasse plates overwrought like the handles of neat implements, brazen nippers to pull away hair, and in one a kinde of Opale yet maintaining a blewish colour.

Now that they accustomed to burn or bury with them, things wherein they excelled, delighted, or which were dear unto them, either as farewells unto all pleasure, or vain apprehension that they might use them in the other world, is testified by all Antiquity. Observable from the Gemme or Berill Ring upon the finger of Cynthia, the Mistresse of Propertius, when after her Funerall Pyre her Ghost appeared unto him. And notably illustrated from the Contents of that Romane Urne preserved by Cardinall Farnese, wherein besides great number of Gemmes with heads of Gods and Goddesses, were found an Ape of Agath, a Grashopper, an Elephant of Ambre, a Crystall Ball, three glasses, two Spooones, and six Nuts of Crystall. And beyond the content of Urnes, in the Monument of Childerick the first, and fourth King from Pharamond, casually discovered three years past at Tournay, restoring unto the world much gold richly adorning his Sword, two hundred Rubies, many hundred Imperial Coyns, three hundred golden Bees, the bones and horseshoe of his horse enterred with him, according to the barbarous magnificence of those days in their sepulchral Obsequies. Although if we steer by the conjecture of many and Septuagint expression; some trace thereof may be found even with the ancient Hebrews, not only from the Sepulcrall treasure of David, but the circumcision knives which Joshua also buried. Some men considering the contents of these Urnes, lasting peeces and toyes included in them, and the custome of burning with many other Nations, might somewhat doubt whether all Urnes found among us, were properly Romane Reliques, or some not belonging unto our British, Saxon, or Danish Forefathers. In the form of Buriall among the ancient Brittaines, the large Discourses of Cæsar, Tacitus, and Strabo are silent: For the discovery whereof, with other particulars, we much deplore the loss of that Letter which Cicero expected or received from his Brother Quintus, as a resolution of Brittainish customes; or the account which might have been made by Scribonius Largus the Physician, accompanying the Emperour Claudius, who might have also discovered that frugall Bit of the Old Brittaines, which in the bignesse of a Bean could satisfy their thirst and hunger.

But that the Druids and ruling Priests used to burn and bury, is expressed by Pomponius; That Bellinus the Brother of Brennus, and King of Brittaines was burnt, is acknowledged by Polydorus, as also by Amandus Zierexensis in Historia, and Pineda in his *Universa historia*. Spanish. That they held that practise in Gallia, Cæsar expresly delivereth. Whether the Brittaines probably descended from them, of like Religion, Language and Manners did not sometimes make use of burning; or whether at least such as were after civilized unto the Romane life and manners, conformed not unto this practise, we have no historicall assertion or deniall. But since from the account of Tacitus the Romanes early wrought so much civility upon the Brittainish stock, that they brought them to build Temples, to wear the Gowne, and study the Romane Laws and language, that they conformed also unto their religious rites and customes in burials, seems no improbable conjecture.

That burning the dead was used in Sarmatia, is affirmed by Gaguinus, that the Sueons and Gothlanders used to burne their Princes and great persons, is delivered by Saxo and Olaus; that this was the olde Germane practise, is also asserted by Tacitus. And though we are bare in historicall particulars of such obsequies in this Island, or that the Saxons, Jutes, and Angles burnt their dead, yet came they from parts where 'twas of ancient practise; the Germanes using it, from whom they were descended. And even in Jutland and Sleswick in Anglia Cymbrica, Urnes with bones were found not many years before us. But the Danish and Northern Nations have raised an Æra or point of compute from their Custome

of burning their dead: Some deriving it from Unguinus, some from Frotho the great; who ordained by Law, that Princes and Chief Commanders should be committed unto the fire, though the common sort had the common grave enterrment. So Starkatterus that old Heroe was burnt, and Ringo royally burnt the body of Harald the King slain by him.

What time this custome generally expired in that Nation, we discern no assured period; whether it ceased before Christianity, or upon their Conversion, by Ausgurius the Gaul in the time of Ludovicus Pius the Sonne of Charles the great, according to good computes; or whether it might not be used by some persons, while for a hundred and eighty years Paganisme and Christianity were promiscuously embraced among them, there is no assured conclusion. About which times the Danes were busie in England, and particularly infested this Countrey: Where many Castles and strong holds, were built by them, or against them, and great number of names and Families still derived from them. But since this custome was probably disused before their Invasion or Conquest, and the Romanes confessedly practised the same, since their possession of this Island, the most assured account will fall upon the Romanes, or Brittaines Romanized.

However certain it is, that Urnes conceived of no Romane Originall, are often digged up both in Norway, and Denmark, handsomely described, and graphically represented by the Learned Physician Wormius, And in some parts of Denmark in no ordinary number, as stands delivered by Authours exactly describing those Countreys. And they contained not only bones, but many other substances in them, as Knives, peeces of Iron, Brasse and Wood, and one of Norwaye a brasse gilded Jewes-harp.

Nor were they confused or carelesse in disposing the noblest sort, while they placed large stones in circle about the Urnes, or bodies which they interred: Somewhat answerable unto the Monument of Rollrich stones in England, or sepulcrall Monument probably erected by Rollo, who after conquered Normandy. Where 'tis not improbable somewhat might be discovered. Mean while to what Nation or person belonged that large Urne found at Ashburie, containing mighty bones, and a Buckler; What those large Urnes found at little Massingham, or why the Angelsea Urnes are placed with their mouths downward, remains yet undiscovered.

Source: Sir Thomas Browne, *Hydriotaphia, Urn Burial* (1658), Chapter II.

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Translation: Author died 1682. Original English composition, no translation involved. Verified consistent 17th-century register throughout, no modern paraphrasing detected.

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