# A Cyst of the Beaker Period at Corston, near Bath

By Herbert Taylor, M.C., M.B., Ch.B.

Interment in barrows was probably exceptional at any time, the privilege of leaders and their households. Such evidence as there is, however, does not suggest that the flat cysts of the Beaker Period were for lesser folk but rather the possibility that some communities did not raise tumuli. Flat and barrow graves, whether or no they are actually complementary in distribution,[1] seem to differ very little in wealth, choice of goods, burial customs, date, or proportion between the A + C and B complexes.[2] Despite the odds against their discovery not a few of these isolated flat burials are known. They may well have outnumbered those in tumuli. The Corston cyst, for instance, might have passed unrecorded but that it lay almost wholly outside the boundary of a quarry and that its discoverers realized its importance.

About July, 1931, John Thrift, of Bath, found part of a human skull and other bones at the foot of a face in the Corston Lime Kilns Quarry and noticed its impression above. With Arthur Longhurst he dug from the face the greater part of a male skeleton, a crushed beaker, a "hone," a flint fabricator or strike-a-light, a piece of limonite, scraps of non-human bone, charcoal and burnt clay, and two sherds from other vessels. Fragments doubtless of the same skull and jaws were seen on the talus by workmen but have disappeared. The find was reported by Mrs. Thrift to Dr. Wallis of the Bristol Museum. Colonel Longhurst, R.A.M.C., identified the bones and showed a few to Sir Arthur Keith. It is, we believe, the first Beaker burial to be recorded within 15 miles of Bath.

In November our Society was invited to co-operate. The conditions were not unlike those at Culbone.[3] In the abandoned southern face of the quarry the lias was exposed beneath 6 or 8 inches of loam; it was interrupted by the section of a cyst, into the bottom of which a hole had been dug. The soil was not deeper in its neighbourhood and there was no reason to suppose that a barrow ever stood there.

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[1] Cf. Fox, *The Archæology of the Cambridge Region*, p. 27.
[2] J. G. D. Clark, "The Dual Character of the Beaker Invasion," *Antiquity*, Vol. V, No. 20.
[3] *Proc. Somerset Arch. and Nat. Hist. Soc.*, XLII (1896), pp. 60–65.

The sites of the chief bones and artefacts were pointed out and recorded, photographs were taken and the spoil was re-examined, but it was found that very little had been missed. The turf, soil, and covering of flags were then removed and the filling was excavated from the exposed face, which was kept vertical as in cave and barrow excavation. Owing to the probability of interference if left overnight the slabs lining the walls and the floor-covering of loam were removed too but replaced for the photograph (Plate V*a*). All the material was examined *in situ* by the diggers, Mrs. Thrift and the writer, and sorted again afterwards. A plan, section, and model were made.

Although it is common to find a flat burial within a stone, timber, or ditched circle, such circles do not seem to have been looked for around known flat burials. The quarry face was examined without result, but probing revealed a shallow ditch or pit which, once found, was plainly visible in the section. Though probably of the Beaker Period it bore no apparent relation to the cyst (see below).

The adjacent plough land yielded a few flint implements, including part of a polished axe.

THE CYST. (Plate V*a*; Fig. 15.)

The cyst, measuring about 5 feet 3 inches by 4 feet 9 inches at the rock surface and 3 feet 2 inches in depth, had been cut by wedging or levering up the strata of the lias, as was shown by the irregular, stepped walls. Most of the north wall had been quarried away in modern times. On the floor was a smooth bed of loam 3 inches deep, distinctly redder than the soil of the field and in the rock fissures and quite barren. Slabs of lias about a foot high lined the base of the south and east walls but not the west and passed around the north-east corner as if to continue against the missing north wall. Although not jointed together they were regular and distinct from the erratic broken stones of the filling.

On the bed was a discontinuous black lamina superficially resembling groups of dead leaves, which, however, could have left no trace unless charred. The specimens crumbled to a powder, amongst which carbonized wood was recognizable.

THE BURIAL. (Fig. 15.)

The following were set on the bed of loam.

*a*. The greater part of a skeleton, buried after the ligaments had decayed but simulating a crouched burial upon the right side, head to the west, facing south by east. The dead was a well-developed

man about 5 feet 7 inches in height and 37 or 40 years of age ; Professor Fawcett reports that the skull is too incomplete for measurement,

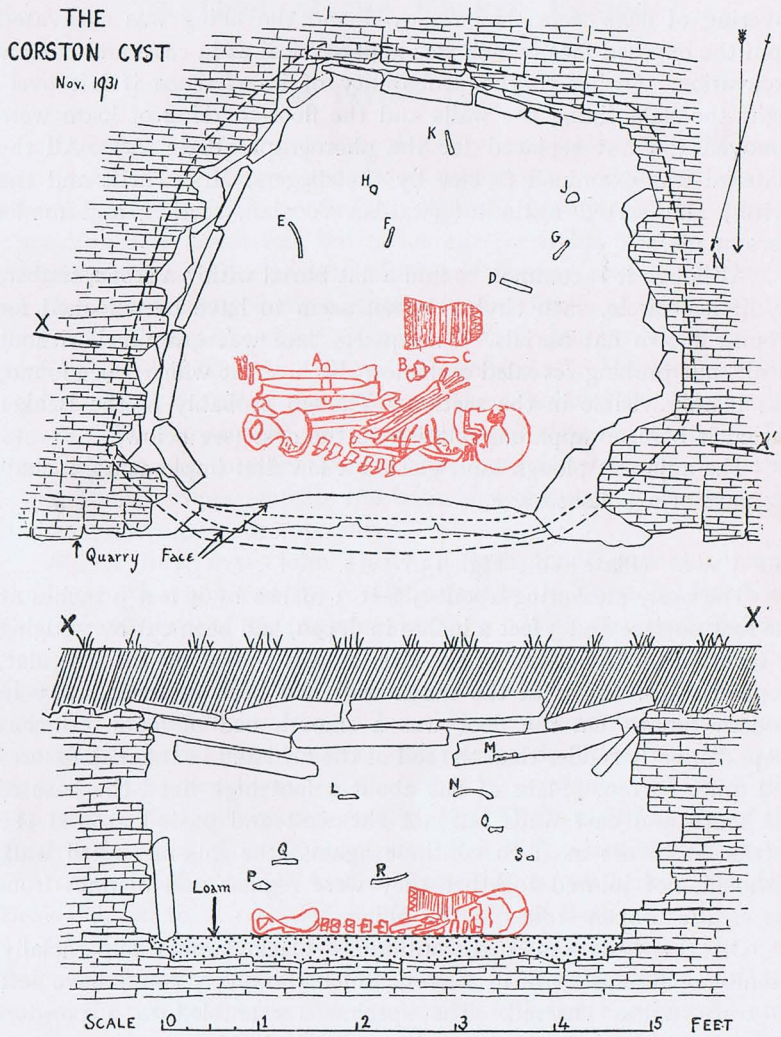


FIG. 15.—The Corston Cyst. Plan and Section.

The approximate position of the early finds is shown in red.
Only objects lying on the floor are marked in the plan.

but that the remains present no feature that would be unusual in a man of to-day ; there are not even squatting facets on the astragali and tibiæ.

*PLATE V*

*a.*—The Corston Cyst.
The rule is one foot in length.


*b.*—The Beaker, Corston Cyst.

*b.* A crushed beaker of Type A,[4] lying upon its side near the "hands," its mouth to the east (Plate VI).

*c.* A "hone" or cult object in slate, beneath and at right angles to the tibiæ (Fig. 15, A; Fig. 16 No. 1).

*d.* A flint fabricator or strike-a-light between the "hands" and the beaker, parallel with the latter (Fig. 15, C; Fig. 16 No. 2).

*e.* A human metacarpal found at a distance from the body during our own excavations (*Fig.* 15, F).

*f.* Half a dozen scraps of non-human bone.

Naturally enough, the deposit had been regarded as a contracted burial, most of the human bones being in anatomical position. According to the account, however, which was confirmed by Colonel Longhurst, the femora and tibiæ were parallel and close together; an astragalus lay near the hands (Fig. 15, B); most of the left hip bone and right humerus were absent and the hands and feet were represented by a few bones only; a few vertebræ formed a line somewhat as shown, but not many small bones and ribs were found. As a rule the cancellous elements were broken, their fragments widely separated or missing. Some material from the lost part of the cyst may have passed into other hands, but at least it was out of place. The detail of this part of Fig. 15 is conjectural, e.g., it is not known whether the limb bones were apposed correctly.

The deduction that bare bones were buried is confirmed by our own discovery[5] of a few of the missing ribs and bones of the hands and feet, etc., scattered about the floor and in the filling. The absence of cuts shows that not dismemberment but preliminary burial or exposure had taken place. The state of the remains may indicate that the bones were soft, possibly owing to some method of hastening decay, for otherwise the most careless exhumation or collection for reburial could scarcely explain it. However, preliminary burial amongst rather large stones might cause such fragmentation. The bones were not gnawed by animals, nor rubbed as they might have been if broken by rough handling in transport. Ceremonial violence, it might be supposed, would be limited to the more important bones, which seem to have been whole when buried, although now broken by the weight of the stones; the humeri and mandible are possible exceptions. The shaft of the right femur is curiously eroded, doubtless post mortem, but not gnawed by mammals since it bears no tooth marks and the articular ends, which would have been attacked first, are spared.

[4] Abercrombie, *Bronze Age Pottery*, Vol. 1.
[5] In the intact deposit which still filled most of the cyst.

Reburial has been recorded from long barrows,[6] whose builders (or their successors) made Beaker as well as Neolithic wares. We do not know whether it has been established previously for the full Beaker Period—nor whether it has been excluded in any instance. It was possible in the Culbone cyst[3] and the Wick Barrow,[7] although disturbance in Roman times explains some or all of the bones scattered in the latter. There is no doubt of it at Gorsey Bigbury.[8]

The following lay upon the bed, but it is not clear whether they were set there or cast upon the first few stones of the filling; if the latter, probably they were thrown on deliberately as no soil seems to have been used. The two round scrapers were beneath slabs and could not have fallen more than an inch or so (Fig. 15, J and H; Fig. 16 Nos. 3 and 7). In the region of the body were a piece of limonite, two cheek teeth of sheep, and three scraps of beaker ware not from the main vessel (Fig. 16 No. 6, another like it, and a thicker, plain sherd). Scattered everywhere were a few human bones, chiefly broken ribs but including a metacarpal and a metatarsal from the southern third of the cyst (Fig. 15, E, G, K, and others); a few scraps of non-human bone, the size of ox, some charred and some calcined; nodules of burnt red clay, perhaps potters' paste; scraps of charcoal the wood of which cannot be identified. Some of the human and other bone, burnt clay and charcoal lay beneath slabs and could not have fallen far.

THE FILLING.

The cyst was packed with broken lias and soil like that of the field, but many air-spaces showed that the latter, or most of it, had been washed in, the filling having been of stones. Human bones almost certainly of the buried person were scattered here and there at all depths below 13 inches, chiefly small bones of the hand and foot, ribs and fragments, some of which are shown in the section. Fig. 15, P has been fitted to the right scapula of the "body." We found also scraps of large non-human bones (??? ox), some charred; the worn tip of a tine of red deer, perhaps from a pick (Fig. 16 No. 4); a few pieces of unidentifiable charcoal and two very small plain pieces of beaker ware, thicker than the chief vessel, one being shouldered (Fig. 16 No. 9); two chips, a large knife and an end-scraper in flint. The knife (Fig. 15, D; Fig. 16 No. 5), was sealed down by slabs in a space practically free from soil near the base of the beaker and rested almost vertically upon its business edge which was just sunk in the

[6] Crawford, *The Long Barrows of the Cotswolds*, pp. 13–15.
[7] St. George Gray, *The Wick Barrow Report*.
[8] Near Charterhouse-on-Mendip. Excavation is in progress.

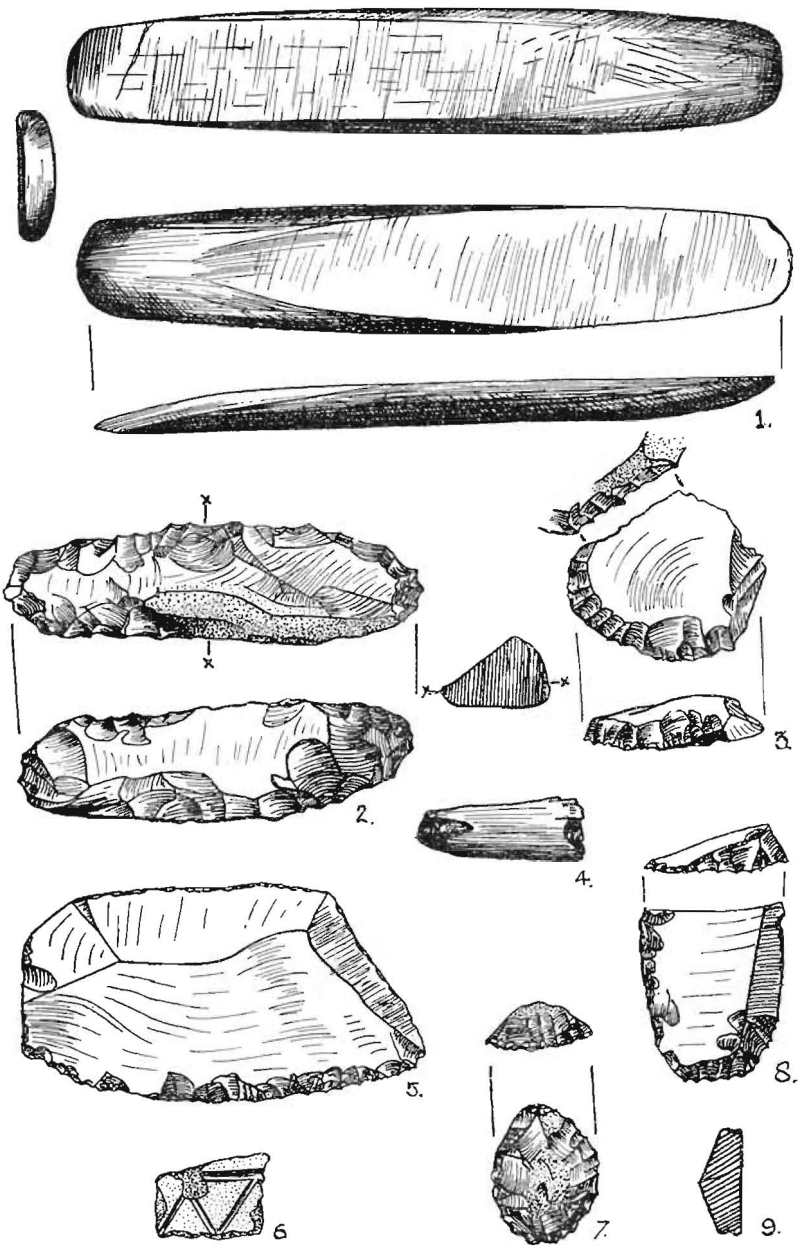


FIG 16.—The Corston Cyst.

Artefacts, two-thirds natural size.

loam bed; it was certainly placed in the filling and not thrown in with earth nor fallen from above. Several human bones, the shouldered sherd No. 9 and the end-scraper No. 8, were also in relatively clean spaces between the stones (Fig. 15, O, P, R, S, L). It is possible that the flint chips and the other sherd entered with the soil, but it should be noted that in the search for a ditch an area about forty times as great as the cyst was excavated and that it yielded only one worked flint and two flakes, and no pre-Roman pottery, except in the pit described below.

Thus there is evidence that industrial débris and human bones were scattered in the filling of the cyst and on its floor and that they were not introduced with soil; compare the barrows at Tynings Farm described elsewhere in this number.

THE COVERING. (Fig. 15.)

Flags of lias, two or three deep, sealed down the contents though permitting the entry of soil. They were covered by less than six inches of humus and must have been almost flush with the surface before the filling settled.

THE BEAKER. (Plates V*b* and VI.)

The beaker, of Type A, is $9\frac{5}{8}$ inches in height and $7\frac{1}{8}$ inches in diameter at the mouth; the latter measurement may have been $\frac{1}{3}$ inch less or $\frac{1}{4}$ inch more. The ware, less than $\frac{3}{16}$ inch thick, is of a black fine homogeneous paste without visible grit. It is burnt reddish brown externally but internally buff near the mouth, black below. The rim has been flattened slightly on top, causing the outer lip to bulge a little. The decoration, in the "cogged wheel" technique, consists chiefly of parallel horizontal lines in groups separated by small chevrons; there are five chevrons on the neck and one to every band on the body, one tending to degenerate to the criss-cross pattern. At rim and base are hanging triangles, the latter group shaded, the former plain on a shaded ground. One of the four plain zones is on the neck.

Features regarded as early[4] are the high neck and globular body—the least diameter is scarcely above the middle of the vessel—the wide splay of the neck and the slight inward curve near the rim, (Plate V*b* shows the only aspect in which it is not marked); the four plain zones, the good technique of the decoration, and the good quality of the ware. On the other hand, the angle between neck and body is not very sharp, the simplicity of the motives does not seem to be an early feature and the high neck persists to the end of the series in this southern province.

*PLATE VI*


The Beaker from Corston Cyst.

The beaker may be placed in Abercrombie's Phase 1, a date between 1800 and 1900 B.C. being probable. The nearest vessels he figures seem to be Nos. 8 (Wilts.) and 12 (Wick Barrow, Somerset), but both are typologically later, of Phase 2, the curve of the body being flattened and the plain zones reduced to one.

OTHER ARTEFACTS. (Fig. 16.)

The so-called hone, No. 1, is in an almost black fine-grained spotted slate, which, Dr. Wallis reports, " is so prevalent in Devon, Cornwall, and North Wales that it is impossible to give an exact locality for its origin." The ends are bevelled, one from either face, to a convex sharp edge. The bevels and the lateral edges are covered with parallel longitudinal striæ due to rubbing upon a gritty stone or sand, the faces are polished. The polish ends abruptly and coincides with the truly plane area of either face ; it was produced after the longitudinal grinding by rubbing from side to side against a flat, fairly smooth surface. If due to use as a hone or polisher it would have passed on to the bevels, its faint striæ would have been longitudinal or oblique instead of transverse, and probably the surface would not have remained plane ; if due to dressing skins it must have extended a little on to the edges as well. The object is so nearly symmetrical that it seems to have been shaped, not worn to shape, and indeed it bears no sign of use. The suggestion that it was an unused hone, polisher, or rubber does not explain either the bevelled ends or the care with which it was made, for the idea of a ceremonial hone seems rather far-fetched. Possibly it should be regarded as a cult object comparable with the schist " idols " of Spain and Portugal[9] and the plate amulets—if such they be—of this country.[10] Of course, some hones are similar in plan, e.g., a " whetstone," possibly used, found by Canon Greenwell in a barrow at Rudstone along with a riveted knife-dagger and other graves-goods of the A + C complex.[11] Its resemblance, however, is superficial for the faces are not plane and the ends are rounded off from the same face.

The slug-shaped fabricator or strike-a-light (Fig. 16 No. 2) was made on a curving flake, the ends of the bulbar face having been " scaled " to flatten it. Both ends and both edges have been worked and battered. A lump of limonite was found nearby ; this substance,

[9] Obermaier, *Fossil Man in Spain*, p. 334, Fig. 140.
[10] Cf. that from T. 12, the East Barrow, Tynings Farm. *Proc. U.B.S.S.*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Plate X, 4.
[11] Evans, *Ancient Stone Implements*, Fig. 182, p. 239.

Dr. Wallis reports, is softer than pyrites but capable of striking fire with flint.

The long edge of the knife, No. 5, has been strengthened or resharpened by chipping at a low angle and the two edges forming the back have been blunted by "nibbling."

The larger round scraper, No. 3, is worked along half its circumference and an uncomfortable edge is cut down for the finger by inverse chipping which does not remove the whole thickness of the cortex. The bulbar surface is the upper one, an unusual finding.

The small button scraper, No. 7, is flaked steeply all round except at the very narrow butt.

The end-scraper, No. 8, possesses a steeply-chipped convex end and a straight edge retouched in blunting fashion, whether to serve as a protection for the finger or as a sidescraper.

No. 4, the end of an antler tine of red deer, has been worn smooth or polished and damaged at the tip. It may be from a pick.

No. 6 and another are scraps of beaker ware bearing shallow incised decoration, a chevron bordered by a horizontal line. They are less than $\frac{3}{16}$ inch in thickness. No. 9 is shown in section. It is undecorated; the internal shoulder or ridge may be due to food-vessel influence, cf. Abercrombie's Beakers Nos. 230, 231 (Aberdeen). Like a plain sherd from the floor and another from the filling, it is thicker than the main vessel. All these fragments resemble the beaker itself in paste and colour. Doubtless they were from domestic pots.

The scraps of clay found on the floor were burnt red throughout. One contained coarse granules of nearly decalcified (local ?) limestone, one fine white sand, the remainder no addition. They may have been potters' paste.

THE OUTER EXCAVATIONS.

In the face of the quarry a hollow in the rock was visible, extending from about 32 to about 40 feet west of the western edge of the cyst. It was about 2 feet deep, or 2 feet 9 inches including the humus. It proved to be the section of a long depression running roughly north and south, filled with broken rock. Most probably it was natural, for the quarrymen are accustomed to find such broad shallow trenches, which may be of great length and 3 feet or more in depth, but become gradually shallower at either end and are invariably barren.

In the present case, however, a small pit had been dug along the eastern edge. This pit was about 2 feet wide, 1 foot 9 inches deep in the rock and 4 feet 6 inches in length, but it was originally longer, being truncated by the face of the quarry. Near the bottom

of its filling of dark, greyish soil were 30 or 40 very small chips of incompletely patinated, greyish flint, four crumbs of what may be Beaker ware and scraps of the bones of sheep, ox, and pig.

In order to determine whether the pit was one of a series surrounding the cyst, the S.W. quadrant of a circle 40 feet in radius, having its centre in the cyst, was examined, together with the ground immediately surrounding the latter. The greater part was excavated down to bedrock, the remainder being tested by probing for rock and "bosing." The whole of the ground within 50 feet of the cyst was probed and "bosed" also, and the face of the quarry was examined but no other such pit or depression existed.

A series of small holes was discovered. These varied from about 10 inches to 1 foot 3 inches in depth (excluding the humus) and from 1 foot to 2 feet 3 inches in diameter at the rock surface, decreasing to about half that size at the bottom. In each small upright slabs of lias surrounded a central space and had the appearance of wedges set to secure a post some 3 inches in diameter. Their tops seemed to have been broken and scored by the plough; some seemed to have been displaced. The soil in these "stake-holes" was clean and barren, no trace of a post remaining.

Six "stake-holes" were set at intervals varying from 5 to 8 feet, to form an irregular line running roughly S. by W. from a point near the quarry face and about 26 feet W. of the centre of the cyst. A solitary hole was found about 21 feet S. of the cyst and another actually in the loose rock of the depression already described. The last lay so close to the Beaker Period (?) pit that one must have been filled in solidly when the other was made. Thus although no artefacts were found in them it seems that the "stake-holes" were considerably later or earlier than the Beaker Period. In any case they bear no obvious relation to the cyst. Indeed, they may not be artificial pits at all.

All these features have been photographed and measured to facilitate further excavation.

Our thanks are due to Mr. Gullock, of Manor Farm, Corston, and to Mr. Coombes, owner of the quarry, for permission to excavate; to Professor Fawcett, Dr. Skene, and Dr. Wallis, who have examined the human and other bones, the charcoals and the geological specimens respectively; to Dr. S. B. Adams who has drawn the artefacts and rendered varied assistance. Especially are we indebted to Mr. and Mrs. Thrift, Colonel and Mrs. Longhurst and their sons, who undertook the earlier and shared in the later excavations and placed the finds in the Society's Museum on permanent loan.