

ON THE FOOD OF MAN IN PREHISTORIC TIMES, AND THE METHODS
BY WHICH IT WAS PREPARED. BY REV. JAMES BRODIE, A.M.,
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When we are told of places where the partially burnt bones of animals are found mingled with ashes and fragments of charcoal, we are naturally led to suppose that in those localities the early inhabitants of Europe had held their feasts, and that the flesh of various species of animals found in the forest must have constituted the larger part of their repast. When, again, we have descriptions given us of mounds of shells lying by the seashore, with flint implements and other relics of man mixed among them, we come to the conclusion that in these localities the sea as well as the forest had been laid under contribution for the support of man.

Some have supposed that the tribes who followed the chase were a totally different people from those who fed on the products of the deep. This may have been the case ; but the more probable idea is, that those

who, in the summer season, fed on the game and vegetable productions which the woods supplied, were driven by necessity during the winter to live on shell-fish and seaweed. Such has not unfrequently been the course pursued by the inhabitants of the Western Islands of Scotland even in recent times.

In regard to this subject of food, there is one question which has not received the attention to which it seems to be entitled. We refer to the process of cooking and preparation. Heaps of ashes and fragments of burnt wood, intermingled with pieces of bone, suggest the idea that the flesh had been roasted with fire, and probably that may not unfrequently have been the process adopted; but sufficient evidence seems to be afforded that a more artistic method, if it may be so termed, was also employed.

It is a well-known fact, that in early times vessels used for holding liquids were frequently made of the skins of animals. Such were the "bottles" spoken of in holy writ, and such were the vessels that contained the costly wines of the Greek and Roman epicures. Again we are told, that among some of the Esquimaux, and other American races, vessels are made of skins stretched upon wooden hoops, and that water is sometimes heated in them by putting into it stones taken out of the fire. If the stones are kept from coming into immediate contact with the skin, water by this means may not only be heated, but made to boil, so that food of any sort may be sufficiently prepared, while, at the same time, no injury is done to the skin.

The Dacotahs and other hunter tribes in America followed a plan somewhat similar. When they killed a deer, they are said to have taken off the skin, and supporting it on stakes driven into the ground, they then filled it with water, and putting fire underneath, made use of it as a *caldron* for boiling the flesh. If memory does not deceive us, some of the Scottish borderers are reported to have pursued a similar practice in their incursions into the north of England.

In the "Proceedings" of the Scottish Antiquarian Society there are several communications which lead us to conclude, that practices similar to those we have been describing prevailed in prehistoric times. In the volume lately published, we have some "Notes on Cromlechs, Duns, &c., in the County of Sutherland," by J. Horsburgh, Esq., in which we

find the following statement:—"Higher up on the hill, near Skelpick-Burn Wood, I came upon a pit the shape of an inverted cone, 7 or 8 feet deep, and neatly lined with stones. My gillie, an old pensioner, who knew many of the old traditions, said at once that it was a pit for cooking deer in, 'in the old times.' I often looked for it afterwards, but never could find it again, the mouth of it being nearly covered over with heather; in fact, I nearly tumbled into it, it was so hidden."

This description suggests the idea of a pit with a fire kindled in the bottom of it, over which a bag of skin had been suspended by means of pegs driven in around the top of the hole. Such an arrangement, by confining the flame, would form a much more effective apparatus than that which was practised by the Dacotahs.

In a communication from John Stuart, Esq., Secretary to the Society, we have the following statements:—"On the summit of a rising ground, called Hartlaw, are two knolls, adjoining each other. That on the south showed the remains of a circular wall. About the centre of it a round pit was found built with stones like a well, to the depth of 3 feet, and about 2 feet in diameter. This pit was filled with charred wood, ashes, and black adhesive matter. Two graves were found on the south side of the knoll. In the other knoll many graves appeared. They were formed of small stone slabs, with which they were also paved at bottom and covered above. The graves were laid east and west, with the head to the west. The average length was about 6 feet. On the north-east side of the knoll were two pits like wells. One of the pits was deeper than the other. It was lined with stones, and the mouth was formed of slabs on edge. It was about 15 inches across, and 2 feet deep. It was filled with charred wood and slimy earth; and portions of black matter had penetrated below and outside the well, as if it had escaped in a liquid state.

"The graves in question may be compared with the cists at Clocharie, in the same neighbourhood. In that case, three short cists were found which had been covered by a cairn. One of them contained a large urn, inverted on a slab. This urn was filled with incinerated bones and ashes of wood. The other cists contained burnt bones and ashes, but no urn. In an adjoining knoll, a pit was found containing a large quantity of charred wood and unctuous matter; and near it, in different places, two flint implements, three or four stone celts, and round pebbles.

"A careful investigation of our early sepulchral remains seems to show that the burning of the body had, at one time, been all but universal. This practice was confined to the pagan system, and was denounced by the Christian missionaries. It seems not unreasonable, therefore, to suppose that the long stone cists we have described mark the burials of a transitional period, when the Christian rite had been adopted, but the older practice of feasting at the grave had not been abandoned. It seems most likely that the traces of burning at Hartlaw are to be accounted for by a continuance of the ancient feasts."

In a notice of some stone cists near Kirkliston, by R. Hutchison, Esq., Carlowrie, in the same volume we have an account of an ancient burial-place very similar to that at Hartlaw. The writer goes on to say—"A small kist has repeatedly been found in other barrows, similarly situated, at the extreme south end of a row of graves. . . . In these cases, the small cist is placed a little apart from the general line of graves. These small cists have no covers."

A careful consideration of these quotations seems to leave very little room to doubt that the small cists, near the Scottish burial-grounds, were the places where they hung the skins in which they prepared the funeral feasts. In most of the cases referred to, the fire seems to have been kindled in the bottom of the pit. The round pebbles picked up at Clocharie lead us to suppose that there the water may have been made to boil by putting heated stones into it. The urn and flint implements found beside the pebbles seem to point to the practices of an earlier period.

Mr Jamieson of Ellon, in Aberdeenshire, in a paper printed in the sixth volume of the "Transactions" of the Antiquarian Society, says—"The shell heaps at the mouth of the Ythan are generally from 30 to 90 yards in length. The stratum of shells is sometimes only a few inches deep; in other cases, layers of shells and sand alternate with one another to a depth of several yards; and, in one mound, there is a thickness of 4 or 5 feet, consisting entirely of shells. The most plentiful species is the mussel; but there are also a good many cockles and periwinkles, all of them large and full grown specimens. Intermixed with the shells, there is always a number of stones, which have evidently been in the fire, and one of the largest mounds is strewed all over with small stones, a great many of

which have a scorched appearance. There is also always a mixture of charcoal, or what seems to be the remains of charred turf, with some bits of burnt twigs. I also found a few teeth and bits of bone, which Professor Turner, who examined them, says belong to deer and oxen."

In the seventeenth volume of these "Transactions," we have a notice of a shell mound on the coast of Sutherlandshire, in which "the periwinkle and limpet are very numerous, along with bones of birds, beasts, and fishes, all mingled with scorched stones and charred wood."

The facts we have quoted, showing that these stones, in different localities, have the appearance of having passed through the fire, lead us to conclude that the early inhabitants of Scotland, in preparing shell-fish for food, used vessels of skin like those employed by savage races in more recent times, in which water was made to boil by putting into it stones that had been heated in the fire. Whether this supposition be considered probable or improbable, it is evident that in whatever way the stones were employed, these prehistoric races must have made use of fire in the preparation of the shell-fish they used for food.

This inquiry may seem a matter of very little importance; but we must remember that the advancement made by any tribe in the culinary art forms one of the most important elements by which we are to be guided in determining the progress that has been made in civilisation. It is said that there are some savages who are ignorant of the use of fire. If this be the case, these miserable specimens of humanity, who feed on flesh and roots altogether unprepared, must be placed at the very bottom of the social scale. Those who roast their food by laying it on the fire, or by covering it over with embers, have made a very decided improvement in the arts of life. But those who are acquainted with the effects of boiling water, as a means of fitting both animal and vegetable substances for nourishing the human frame, have made a still further advance. The fact of "scorched stones" having been found in such abundance in our Scottish "kitchen-middens," is therefore a circumstance, trifling as some may regard it, that tends very considerably to enhance the idea we form of the progress which the early inhabitants of our island had made in the arts of life. It shows that, though they had been driven farther and farther into the wilderness by successive invaders, and had thereby been deprived of the appliances to which their forefathers had been accustomed,

they were not the low degraded creatures which some have supposed them to have been.

In one particular, at least, in preparing by boiling the mollusca they used as food, their habits were far in advance of the custom which prevails among some of our modern barbarians, who not only swallow their oysters raw, but look on the uncooked abomination as one of their choicest dainties.

In the report of the committee for exploring Kent Cavern, given in to the British Association in 1865, we are told that "the collection of the articles in the black mould consists of stones of various kinds, human industrial remains, charred wood, bones of various animals, marine and land shells. . . . The stones are, in most cases, well rounded, and were undoubtedly selected and taken to the cavern, but for what purpose it may not be easy to determine."

The committee do not seem to have ascertained whether there was any evidence of the stones having been in the fire. It would be interesting to know whether, like those found by Mr Jamieson, they have any mark of scorching upon them.