

ON SOME SUPPOSED CRUCIFIXION NAILS.

At a Meeting of the British Archæological Association, held in May, 1878,* I had the honour of exhibiting two of four large iron nails or spikes, which had been entrusted to me for the purpose by the courtesy of Mr. W. N. Last, of Bury St. Edmund's, who had obtained them some years previously from a man employed in the gravel pits at Horningsheath.

As the discovery to which they refer has through the enquiries of the officers employed in the new Ordnance Survey created some interest in the locality, it is thought that a reproduction in these pages of the short paper that accompanied the exhibition would be desirable.

The nails or spikes were 13 inches long, and weighed nearly a pound each. They were oblong square in section and were furnished with laterally flat fungiform heads a little over an inch in width. The spot where they were found is some hundred yards west by south-west of the "Red House Inn."

"As they are believed to be crucifixion nails by the owner and others, and to have been buried with the person crucified, I thought it desirable they should be submitted to the Association, together with such details of their discovery as could be procured. With this view I recently visited the Horningsheath gravel pit, and was fortunate in meeting with the labourer who, over ten years ago, found the nails in question. He told me that in opening fresh ground on the eastern side of their pit they came upon about twenty-five human skeletons, which lay extended with their feet directed north-east, at from 4 to 5ft. deep, or just upon the surface of the gravel bed. With one of these were the four iron spikes, two of which were found at the head of the skeleton and two at the feet, about a foot apart. They were upright; that is, each spike had its head uppermost and point downwards, and were clear of the bones. Boreham, who well remembered the circumstances, is certain upon the position of the nails, and also that, with the exception of this and another interment, that of a man near 7 ft. in height, who had buried with him some small animal having sharp teeth (possibly a cat), nothing of any description was found with the bodies, nor

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any trace of coffins. The bones generally were sound and well preserved, but otherwise no clue was afforded as to the age of the burials, which apparently extend further into the field, for Boreham informed me that not long since he observed bones protruding from the face of the old working. In view of the facts thus elicited, I cannot see that we have any evidence in support of the theory of crucifixion, or that the nails had been used in any way in connection with the death of the deceased; indeed it would appear far more probable that they once held together the top and bottom boards of a rude form of coffin, all other trace of which had disappeared. The kind of protection to the body I would suggest as probable would be that it was laid between two boards of corresponding dimensions but a few inches longer than the deceased, which were supported by either ends or sides, and that the whole were held together by the long nails-being passed through holes made in the top plank and driven outside the side or end boards into the bottom one. Instances of the finding of large iron nails with human remains of the Roman period in England are not rare, but have not failed to excite considerable curiosity and conjecture. The discovery of interments believed to be of this age, each accompanied by *four large iron nails*, at Bourne Park, near Canterbury,* and the discussion that followed it, in which the hypothesis of crucifixion was set up, is no doubt well remembered. In the chamber of the larger Roman tumulus of East Lowe Hill, near Bury St. Edmund's, iron nails 12 in. in length were found, which were believed by the late Professor Henslow,† who explored it, to have held together the wooden frame over which the arch of tiles was turned, but which I think with greater probability were used to fasten together the planks, between which the heavy leaden coffin there found was once enclosed. I have found similar nails, although not so large, around a lead coffin in a Roman burial place at Icklingham, partially explored by me in 1871; and also with a late Roman interment at Mitchell's Hill, in the same parish. These nails, however, had all of them round flat heads, not like those from the interment at Horningsheath, which are decidedly mediæval in character, and resemble closely the nails depicted in some of the more noted representations of the Crucifixion."

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*Proceedings, Soc. Antiquaries, vol. ii, pp. 79, 94.

†Proceedings, Suff. Inst. of Archaeology, vol. iv, p. 279.