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WEST MERSEA: FOUNDATIONS OF ROMAN BUILDING.

ROMAN MAUSOLEA OF THE 'CART-WHEEL' TYPE.

By A. W. CLAPHAM, F.S.A.

In 1896 the late Dr. H. Laver excavated the foundations of a circular Roman building on Mersea island on the coast of Essex.¹ The plan of this building (fig. 1, no. 1), in the form of a cart-wheel, was then, and is still, unparalleled in this country, and the origin and purpose of the structure have been the subject of some controversy. The report of the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (*Essex*, vol. iii) suggested that the building was in all probability a sepulchral monument, and it is the purpose of these notes to place this suggestion on a firmer basis by a fuller examination of the matter than was possible in that place, and to adduce such analogous examples as will, I hope, remove the matter from the realm of conjecture and place it in that of ascertained fact.

The evolution of this type of memorial of the dead is well known and its distribution is extremely wide-spread. In its simplest beginnings it takes the form of a burial-mound surrounded by a ring of stones, and its development extends through all stages to culminate in such imperial monuments as the mausolea of Augustus and Hadrian.

The essential and basic feature of all these monuments is the mound of earth, masked in the course of its evolution by a gradually increasing proportion of stone or brick facing or revetment, until the final form is entirely architectural. The particular type which at present concerns

¹ *Proc. Soc. Antiq.* xvi, 425.

us is that in which radiating walls are used as so many ties to counteract the outward thrust of the mass of earth (forming the tumulus) on the outer encircling wall or revetment. Of this particular type comparatively few examples are known, but this can hardly be considered a sound argument that the type was particularly rare or unusual; in most instances where the mound survives it must, so to speak, have overflowed its encircling wall and excavation alone could reveal its peculiar character. The excavation of the last century in Italy was very largely

FIG. 1.

1. WEST MERSEA. 2. VIA APPIA. 3. VIA APPIA.
4. VIA TIBURTINA. 5. VIA SALARIA.

pure 'treasure-hunting,' and the form and plan of excavated burial-mounds has been in too few instances recorded.

The arch-type on which this form of tumulus was based seems to have been the mausoleum which the emperor Augustus built near the Campus Martius in his sixth consulship (28 B.C.).¹ It is described by Strabo² as

¹ Suetonius, *Augustus*, chap. c.

² Strabo, *Geography*, V, chap. iii.

consisting 'of a mound of earth raised upon a high foundation of white marble . . . and covered to the top with evergreen shrubs. Upon the summit is a bronze statue of Augustus Caesar and beneath the mound are the ashes of himself, his relatives and friends.' This mausoleum, now known as the Teatro Umberto, or more commonly, the Augusteo, has suffered very serious mutilation, so that the plan of the middle part is somewhat uncertain. The plan here reproduced (fig. 2) is that of Pier Santi Bartoli.¹ The statue of the emperor on the summit of the mound implies a central foundation of some sort but there seems to be no evidence that the 'spokes' were continued to the middle of the circle. The scale of this memorial was gigantic, the external diameter being about 205 feet. Lanciani's plan² differs but little from that here reproduced.

The other examples of the type in Italy are on a very much smaller scale. Two are shown in Canina's³ plans of the monuments on the Via Appia about 300 metres beyond the fifth milestone (fig. 1, nos. 2 and 3); they stand on a common rectangular base and are unidentified. The larger tomb has radiating spokes and the smaller a series of recumbent arches. Canina's engraving shows a series of pedestals encircling the smaller tomb, but on the reconstruction he has apparently rearranged them to form a square, in a way that can only be described as arbitrary. A third example stands just short of the fifth milestone on the right side of the way; it forms a simple circle with four radiating spokes meeting at the centre.

On a by-road near the fourth milestone of the Via Tiburtina⁴, in company with a series of tombs of more ordinary form, is a third example; here, however, there is no proper 'hub,' the spokes meeting at the centre (fig. 1, no. 4).

A final example has been found near the eleventh milestone on the Via Salaria.⁵ In this case the encircling

¹ *Veterum Sepulchra*, in Gronovius, *Thesaurus Graecarum Antiquitatum*, xiii, p. 26.

² *Forma Urbis Romae*.

³ L. Canina, *Via Appia* (1853), ii, tav. xxxi and xxxii.

⁴ Stevenson, *Escavazione al 10 miglio della Via Tiburtina*, in *Bullettino della Commissione archeologica comunale di Roma*, vi (1878), p. 215.

⁵ Persichetti, *La Via Salaria*, in *Mitteilungen des K.D. archäologischen Instituts (Römische Abt.)*, xxiii (1908), p. 325.

FIG. 2. MAUSOLEUM OF AUGUSTUS, NOW TEATRO UMBERTO, ROME.
(After Pier Santi Bartoli) Scale 80 feet to one inch.

wall is of great thickness and the thrust of the superincumbent earth has been counteracted by a series of curved walls, forming recumbent arches, from which the 'spokes' run to the central 'hub' (fig. 1, no. 5). The date of these smaller examples is so far uncertain, but Prof. A. Bartoli is of opinion that they are not widely separated from the period of Augustus.

Outside Italy but few buildings of the same character seem to have been recorded. In the neighbourhood of Trier, however, is a mound described by Herr Krenker as follows:—'On the right bank of the Mosel rising up to the high part of the town, on the Petersberg, is a large and prominent hill. The story goes that Trebeta, the unlucky stepson of queen Semiramis of Babylon and the reputed founder of Trier, was buried here. In the year 1868 excavations revealed that the hill covered a great round wall of over 51 metres in diameter, with recumbent arches (Erdbögen) and with other foundations in front. In the middle of the mound was a core nearly 4 metres square. No burial was found.'¹ The author compares it with a similar mound near the villa at Nennig (42 metres in diameter) and with the mausoleum of Augustus and concludes that it formed a tomb and monument to some unknown Roman. It will be noticed that the building at Trier must have very closely resembled the smaller of the two tumuli on the Appian way, with the 'earth-arches' and the central core.

Turning now to the building on Mersea island we find all the salient characteristics of this type of monument there exemplified. The central 'hub' no doubt supported a statue or group on the top of the mound; the compartments between the spokes would be filled with earth and the series of 'buttresses' round the outer wall would be so many bases for columns forming an architectural enrichment to the masonry base of the mound. This explanation accounts for the absence of any trace of a floor or any remains of doorways in the walls which, when first excavated, were standing in places several feet above the rubble foundations. The only doubtful point is the position of the burial, of which there is no record in any

¹ D. Krenker, *Das römische Trier* (1923), pp. 56-57.

of the instances cited above: this fact alone, however, goes to show that it was above rather than below the original ground-level.

The building on Mersea island was in the immediate neighbourhood of a large Roman house of unusual extent and richness of decoration. It would seem, therefore, to have been the family mausoleum of the owner thereof, and perhaps to have commemorated a later generation of the same house that in the early years of the Roman occupation raised the great tumulus of Mersea Mount one mile to the north.

In the latter half of 1923 a cremation burial of early Romano-British type was found about 20 yards away from

FIG. 3.

Scale 80 feet to one inch.

the Mersea building, thus adding a further and cogent argument as to its sepulchral character.

As has already been said, no parallel has yet been found in this country to the foundations at Mersea, but in conclusion attention may be called to a small cognate group of structures, which, though differing in type, served the same purpose and probably had the same outward appearance as the buildings just discussed. They differ, however, in having no 'hub' and no radiating spokes. The examples of this group occur at Pulborough in Sussex,¹ and at Keston in Kent²; both were in the immediate neighbourhood of a Roman house, and are of similar plan, consisting of a circular enclosing wall, the Keston example being

¹ *Sussex Arch. Colls.* xi, p. 141.

² *Archaeologia*, xxii, p. 337 and xxxvi,

pp. 120-128; *Gents. Mag.* (1828), i, pp. 255-256.

provided with buttresses in addition, as here the enclosing wall is much thinner (3 feet) than at Pulborough ($11\frac{1}{2}$ feet), and the diameter is only about half (62 feet to 30 feet). A number of coffin burials were found in the immediate neighbourhood of the Keston example. It is probable that both buildings enclosed and supported earthen mounds, though the presence of a doorway in the Keston example makes this doubtful in this instance.

I am indebted for assistance in the preparation of these notes to Dr. Ashby and Miss M. V. Taylor; also to Mr. G. H. Duckworth and, through him, to Prof. A. Bartholi of Rome.

Note.—As it has been suggested¹ that the plan of the building at West Mersea was directly derived from that of the twin towers at Old Cairo² (Babylon of Egypt), it may be as well to place on record here the reasons why no mention of these very curious buildings has been made in the foregoing remarks. In plan they bear a very close resemblance to the Mersea building, the radiating walls and central 'hub' being both present, but their position, details and probable purpose, render the analogy purely superficial. The towers at Old Cairo are each about 130 ft. in external diameter and are placed some 60 ft. apart on the line of the fortress wall, towards the Nile. They have each on the inner face, where they approach most nearly to one another, a segmental cut-back as though for the working of a gate on the turn-stile principle. The walls of the most complete of the two towers (now incorporated in a Greek church) are pierced by certain channels and ducts which have never been scientifically examined, and on which, in consequence, no theory can be based.

As to the purpose of the towers, they are obviously not a gate in the ordinary sense, since a Roman gate of the same date and of normal form still exists only some 150 ft. to the south of the towers; their size and form place them in a class quite apart from the ordinary bastions of a tower or fortress. That they formed, in some sort, a gate, is indicated by the segmental cuttings, referred to above, which indicate

¹ *Antiquaries Journal*, iv, p. 285.

² Plan in A. J. Butler, *Ancient Coptic Churches of Egypt*, 1884.

that the space between was closed only with a movable barrier. It is fortunate that a solution of the problem, alike reasonable and striking, is indicated by a passage in Ptolemy which has hitherto been either set aside or ignored: he says (iv, 5, 24) that the Red Sea canal, 'Trajan's River,' passed *through* the fortress of Babylon. Here then, in all probability, we have the defences at the mouth of the canal, and probably also some system of lock gates, which must have been necessary if the canal was to be of use during the inundation.