

DEATH, IDENTITY AND THE BODY IN NEOLITHIC BRITAIN*

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Generations of prehistorians have offered a series of interpretations of a change in mortuary practice which took place during the Neolithic period in Britain (4000–2500 BC). The decline of communal tombs and the introduction of single grave burial has been understood in terms of population movement, increasing social hierarchy, ideological change, or a shift from ancestor rituals to funerals. This article considers the treatment of the human body in death, and offers an interpretation which stresses changing relationships between the living and the dead.

For more than a century, one of the unresolved questions of British prehistory has concerned the significance of a change in mortuary practices that took place toward the end of the Neolithic period. Writing in the 1860s, Thurnam was able to distinguish between long mounds and chambered tombs containing multiple inhumations, which he attributed to the Stone Age, and circular barrows raised over single graves, which belonged to ‘a later age and people’ (Thurnam 1872: 288). Subsequent generations of archaeologists have brought different theoretical resources to bear on these materials, and have interpreted them in strikingly different ways. For instance, Fergusson (1872) reviewed the known distribution of megalithic tombs, dispersed from western Europe and north Africa to the Caucasus, and argued that they must all have been built by a single group of people who had emerged from northern India in the early centuries before Christ. Such a notion of a ‘megalithic race’ implies a very close relationship between material culture and ethnic or even biological identity. This equation of culture and race was relaxed to some extent by the culture-historic archaeology of the inter-war years. Childe (1950: 1) presented the archaeological ‘culture’ as an assemblage of artefacts, architecture, and customs which were recurrently associated with one another. These might represent the material manifestation of a ‘people’, but such a people need not be tied by bonds of race, language, or even ethnicity.

For Childe (1940: 47), the monumental funerary structures of the Neolithic were testimony to the emergence of a new religion, brought from the Mediterranean by ‘megalithic missionaries’ and grafted onto the Neolithic

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cultures of western Europe. The apparent disorder of the many skeletons found inside some of these tombs could imply either that the deposition of disarticulated remains had taken place following excarnation, or that the monuments represented vaults to which successive burials were added, disturbing previous inhumations in the process. In either case, however, the motivation for these practices lay in the sphere of eschatology and religious belief, a realm which was inaccessible to the archaeologist. The eventual adoption of a form of burial in which a single body was placed in a grave accompanied by a series of grave goods was attributed to the arrival in western Europe of a new people at the end of the Neolithic, the 'Beaker folk'. As Christopher and Jacquetta Hawkes (1948: 56-7) put it, 'The old idea of communal burial ... had little appeal for these roving warriors, and their dead were buried singly, crouching with the knees so close to the chin that the corpses must have been trussed in position'. Again, the assumption is that while the diffusion of individual traits from one community to another can explain gradual developments of artefact style, wholesale changes in material culture can only be understood as a consequence of population movement. New pots – or burial customs – denote a new people.

These interpretations find a striking contrast in the 'processual archaeology' that emerged during the 1960s and 1970s, which promoted a conception of material culture as a means of adaptation, located in the systemic relationships between human populations and their environments. For Renfrew, chambered tombs and earthen long barrows represented the territorial markers of segmentary Neolithic societies, a means by which early agricultural communities could express their proprietorial relationship with the land (Renfrew 1973a: 159). Later, these communities would band together to form chiefdoms. As they became more internally ranked and their chiefs became increasingly successful in redistributing the surplus of agricultural production, they would turn away from communal expressions of identity in monumental form and adopt styles of burial which emphasized their individual prestige (Renfrew 1973b).

A further elaboration of this argument was added by Shennan in 1982. Shennan's suggestion was that the change from communal burial to single graves need not imply a continuous rise in social differentiation. Indeed, the construction of corporate monuments might have provided a means by which elite groups sought to mystify their own position by associating it with the collectivity. The emergence of single grave burial would thus denote an ideological change, in which differences of status began to be legitimated by portraying them as natural and immutable (Shennan 1982: 156). In this process, prestige goods played an essential role, particularly the copper and bronze metalwork which began to circulate as the Neolithic came to an end. These objects served as a set of symbols which continually reiterated the message of elite authority, whether they were displayed in public or buried with the dead as grave goods. Increasingly, this emphasis on the symbols of elite legitimacy would itself have promoted social change, as the circulation of these objects came to be monopolized by the powerful and formed the basis for contacts and alliances between dominant groups in different parts of Europe.

Barrett: ancestor rites and funerals

Probably the most sophisticated and closely worked interpretation of the shift from communal mortuary structures to single graves is that which was presented by Barrett, in a series of contributions published in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Barrett 1988; 1990; 1991; 1994; Barrett, Bradley & Green 1991). My intention here is to concur with much of Barrett's argument, but I also want to qualify it in one important respect. This has critical implications for the way in which we understand the development of social relations through the Neolithic period. For that reason, it is important to dwell on some of the details of Barrett's account.

Barrett bases his argument on the understanding that mortuary rituals are, in the first instance, neither a passive reflection of ethnic affiliation nor a means of representing the relative prestige of the deceased. Rather, they constitute one element of a suite of practices through which the social is continually brought into being (Barrett 1990: 182). Mortuary rituals can construct a passage between life and death, within a particular architectural setting, and making use of an array of material symbols, which will include the bodies of the deceased and of the mourners (Barrett 1988: 31). None of the objects or locations employed need be specific to this kind of activity, but the performance itself has the effect of renegotiating the relationships between the living and the dead, and (more importantly) amongst the living. Duties, indebtedness, authority, and affiliation can be either transformed or reinscribed in the course of mortuary ritual, and in the process the conditions of social life are reproduced. Barrett then draws a categorical distinction between two kinds of mortuary practice, which provides the foundation for his discussion of mortuary activity in the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age (1988: 31). On the one hand there are ancestor rituals, and on the other there are funerary rites, and the two are quite distinct in terms of their organization and objectives. The problem that faces the archaeologist is that both make use of the physical remains of the dead, so that it may prove difficult for us to disentangle the two on the basis of their material traces.

According to Barrett, ancestor rituals are characteristic of the earlier Neolithic in Britain, from about 4000 BC onwards. Ancestor rituals bring the living into the presence of the ancestral dead (Barrett 1994: 51). While these rites may make use of the remains of the dead, as well as an architecture and symbolism connected with death, they need not always involve the interment of the recently deceased. The ancestors may be evoked during funerary activities and the deposition of the dead may serve to produce ancestral remains, but ancestor rituals are fundamentally concerned with invoking the presence of the dead in order to structure, and provide sanction for, activities amongst the living. Barrett (1994: 51) suggests that this invocation is most likely to take place in a location which has been set aside for the purpose. This location will contain the material remains of the ancestors, enabling them to be physically encountered, handled, or displayed during the course of ancestral rites.

In the case of earlier Neolithic Britain, Barrett (1994: 52) argues that what have hitherto been understood as corporate tombs are actually places of ancestral presence. Megalithic chambered cairns in the west of Britain set aside one or more secluded spaces for the deposition of corpses, and the continued

accessibility of the chambers would mean that skeletal parts could later be retrieved for display. But the architecture of these structures also provided forecourts and other spaces for the congregation of the living. Dead bodies would have been deposited in the chambers, but this only served to facilitate the primary role of the monuments in achieving access to the ancestors, venerating their remains, and securing their intercession in social life. In the case of the earthen long mounds of eastern Britain, Barrett (1994: 54) suggests that sustained access to the ancestral remains would not have been possible. The deposit of human bones would have built up relatively swiftly within a timber chamber, and would then have been sealed by the construction of the mound (see Piggott 1966: 387).

Since all of these structures were principally concerned with the veneration of ancestors, the change which characterizes the end of the Neolithic was not one from communal to individual burial. Instead, it is the archaeological visibility of burial for the first time that distinguishes the second millennium BC (Barrett, Bradley & Green 1991: 124). Barrett acknowledges that both round mounds and single graves emerged during the course of the Neolithic, so that there is no need to attribute them to any incoming Beaker-using population. But it was with the Early Bronze Age that British landscapes came to be dotted with circular mortuary monuments, each of which was instigated by a single act of funerary observance. Funerary rituals, then, are explicitly concerned with burial, and with the reorganization of relationships amongst the mourners that is occasioned by the death of a particular person. The grave in which the deceased was now laid out represented the terminal point of a series of rites of passage; it was the place at which the moment of social death was located (Barrett 1990: 183).

These graves may contain artefacts, but rather than symbols of prestige sacrificed in order to express the status of the deceased, they represent a complex combination of ritual paraphernalia discarded at the conclusion of the funeral, and gifts which mark out quite specific relationships between the dead person and those who survived. Both the position of the grave, and the round mound that marked it, fixed the point of a person's severance from the community within the landscape. Subsequent events in the vicinity might involve the redigging of the grave to insert further burials, or the introduction of further bodies (often cremated) into the mound, or the construction of other mounds nearby, leading to the development of a barrow cemetery. In each case these events were directly related back to the first burial, creating a spatial and temporal order amongst the dead. By establishing these relations and sequences amongst the dead, lines of descent and the devolution of authority could be secured. The single grave tradition at once enabled the condition of the dead to be revealed and understood, and a complex set of relationships amongst both the living and the dead to be reaffirmed (Barrett 1994: 127).

Perhaps the most elegant part of Barrett's argument is the way in which he links the emergence of this new way of placing the dead with more general changes in the inhabitation of the landscape. These funerary practices increasingly promoted both a directional conception of the flow of time, and an affinity between particular people and fixed locations. The Neolithic had been a time in which people had habitually moved along pathways between places of ancestral veneration, periodically cultivating plots which had been left

fallow for lengthy periods. But the connection between place and personal identity that was forged in funerary practice facilitated the development of a more tenurial relationship to the land, while the creation of genealogies which extended back through the generations enabled these claims to be bound to more closed social communities. The conditions were now set in place for the development of a short-fallow cultivation system associated with fixed, enclosed settlements and field systems. This was a pattern which, to some extent, was to characterize the whole period up to the Roman conquest (Barrett 1994: 145).

An archaeology of the human body

It is not my intention here to take issue with any aspect of Barrett's characterization of single grave burial. None the less, we might note in passing that the examples which he draws on to illustrate ancestor rituals and funerals are generally taken from the earlier Neolithic or the Early Bronze Ages respectively. This leaves out the intervening half-millennium of the later Neolithic, and this may mean that the contrast is somewhat overdrawn. Furthermore, Barrett's focus throughout is on the architectural settings of mortuary practice and the actions that are likely to have been performed by the mourners. It may be that extending the scope of analysis to consider the treatment of the human body in death can yield an alternative interpretation, at least as far as the earlier part of the sequence is concerned. Barrett (1988: 31) insists that we cannot hope to 'read off' social relations from the traces of ritual activity. In making this claim he contests the presuppositions of functionalist analyses, which present mortuary ritual as a means by which the status and identity of the deceased are signalled to the surviving community, thereby facilitating their adaptation to new conditions (e.g. Binford 1971; Saxe 1970; Tainter 1978). For Barrett, mortuary activity cannot be a reflection of social relationships, since it forms a part of the process through which those relationships are brought into being. This much is beyond question. However, while Barrett emphasizes the renegotiation of relations amongst the living, which makes use of the bodies of the dead alongside other material symbols, I should like to consider also the relationship between the living and the dead. The dead may not always be extrinsic to a community, and their physical remains may not always constitute inert symbols. If we think of the dead as being an integral part of the social field, their 'participation' in mortuary ritual may have a formative role to play in the construction of the identities of the living.

This interpretation will concentrate on the human body, but I should make it absolutely clear that I am not presenting this body as a given, a biological entity to which cultural things are done. As Butler (1993) would say, the body has to be materialized: it has to be performed in order to be realized. We could argue that, amongst other things, mortuary practice is a kind of performance in which the cultural intelligibility of the body is secured. Moreover, I do not wish to give any impression that the Neolithic bodies under discussion can be straightforwardly equated with 'individuals' in the contemporary sense. As Strathern (1988) demonstrates, the notion of a person

as a whole and sovereign being, a source of action and a centre of creativity, enclosed within one skin and containing a soul or a mind, is a curiously modern Western one (see also Heidegger 1993). If archaeology is to learn from social anthropology, it will not be through simply imposing the ethnographic present on the past. But at the same time, an awareness of the diversity of human experience can alert us to the specificity of our own condition and the prejudices that arise from it. Western modernity has given rise to quite unique, perhaps even aberrant, ways of being human. It follows that we need to be acutely aware of the circumstances from within which we write our pasts. Archaeology, as a practice of modernity, materializes ancient bodies through a medico-scientific mode of understanding. We need to recognize that this is quite remote from the ways in which those bodies would have been lived.

Ethnographers have shown that persons can be understood as amalgams of relationships and substances (Strathern 1996: 526), or as temporary aggregations of materials which are disaggregated at death (Bloch 1982: 225), or as partible combinations of body parts, or as entities linked by flows of energy and bodily fluids (Busby 1997: 269). Moreover, they have successfully identified the polarity between things as anonymous commodities and persons as individuals as a Western peculiarity (Kopytoff 1986: 64). It is not necessary for my argument to be able to specify the precise notions of personhood that prevailed in Neolithic Britain. All that I want to imply is that modern Western conceptions of personal identity and bodily integrity probably did not apply at the time.

Bodily transformations

The mortuary activities associated with megalithic cairns and earthen long mounds are extremely variable, and each site possesses quite unique details of body treatment. In many cases these involve identifiable classifications and reorderings of body parts, although it is important to recognize that any pattern discerned by the archaeologist may relate to no more than the final stage in a complicated sequence of events. However, the points that I want to make here are pitched at a very high level of generality. We have seen that Barrett contrasts the open chambers of megalithic cairns with the swift accumulation of the mortuary deposit beneath earthen long mounds, but I should like to dispute this point. Long barrows were commonly raised over linear timber chambers, bracketed between substantial uprights which were sometimes composed of the two halves of a split oak trunk (Kinnes 1975; Vyner 1984). These mortuary structures were internally subdivided, flanked by earth or turf banks, and contained human remains that were relatively accessible from each side. Indeed, at the waterlogged site of Haddenham the chamber took the form of a wooden trough or box with a removable wooden lid, supported by parallel banks of clay (Hodder & Shand 1988). The linear chamber often formed part of a more complex array of architectural devices including post avenues, enclosures, and facades, the latter frequently being burnt down as part of the closing activities that coincided with the raising of the mound. This closure may have taken place a very long while after the construction

of the chamber. Earth-fast oak posts (especially ones of large diameter) can survive for a comparatively long period, and in some cases elements of the chamber have clearly been replaced. At Dalladies, in Scotland, the chamber had largely rotted away and had been replaced by a second, stone and timber structure before the mound was finally raised over it (Piggott 1972). Given that this architecture may have been in use for some generations before the barrows were constructed, we can argue that the mortuary activities conducted within these sites are directly comparable with those undertaken in the megalithic tombs.

While we commonly think of early Neolithic mortuary deposits as consisting of disarticulated and strewn skeletal fragments, they very often contain one or more bodies in a state of full articulation. For instance, at the megalithic cairn of Lanhill, in west Wiltshire, one chamber contained a mass of long bones stacked between two groups of skulls. But the outermost deposit, situated between these bones and the entrance, was a complete and articulated skeleton. The excavators suggested that this implied a process of successive inhumation, with skeletal parts being carefully moved to the back of the chamber as they became defleshed (Keiller & Piggott 1938: 128). Similarly, in the case of the earthen mound of Wayland's Smithy I, the remains within the linear mortuary structure were found in a complicated heap, with those bodies nearest the top being in a more complete state of articulation. Those nearest the bottom were almost entirely disordered (Whittle 1991: 71). Again, the pattern appears to be one of complete bodies being introduced into the chamber and progressively becoming disaggregated.

Once bodies had been interred and their flesh had decomposed, skeletal parts were often moved around, sometimes being relocated in complex and formal ways. At the chambered cairn of Hazleton North, on the Gloucestershire Cotswolds, particular attention seems to have been paid to skulls, which were lined up around the edges of the chambers and passages (Saville 1990: 250). At Hazleton, some of the movement of body parts had evidently taken place before all of the ligaments had perished, resulting in examples of partial articulation (1990: 251). We can suggest that this reorganization was not simply a way of making space for subsequent inhumations, but also served as a metaphor for the changing state of the person, as it was transformed into a different kind of being (Bloch & Parry 1982: 3; Hertz 1960). Lucas (1996: 102) has recently observed that where fully ordered skeletons occur within timber chambers, they are often located at one end of the structure, with disarranged or stacked bones at the other. As he puts it, the linear space of the chamber was a 'conduit' through which the corpse passed as it decayed and was dismembered.

In almost all early Neolithic cairns and barrows, particular skeletal elements appear to be unevenly represented. As early as the 1860s, Thurnam (1869: 185) noted that there were too few long bones present in the mortuary deposit beneath the Norton Bavant long barrow, by comparison with the skulls and pelves. In the better-documented West Kennet long barrow, near Avebury in north Wiltshire, almost all of the skeletons were incomplete. There were fewer skulls than the minimum number of bodies which must have been present to account for all of the bones that were there, and there were insufficient femurs and tibiae in relation to the foot bones. As Piggott (1962: 23) observed, this

is the precise opposite of the pattern which one would expect if bones were being brought into the chambers from a place of excarnation. Under those circumstances, longbones and skulls would be collected, while smaller elements might be overlooked. Piggott could only conclude that bones had been 'robbed' from West Kennet, at some time before the closure of the tomb. Significantly, there are many megalithic chambers which contain no bones at all, or only the most fragmentary of remains (e.g. Benson & Clegg 1978; Chesterman 1977). This need not imply that bodies had always been absent; bones may actually have been retrieved from these chambers.

It seems that fleshed corpses were commonly introduced into both timber and stone chambers, and broken down there into skeletal elements, even if this was not necessarily a procedure which was afforded to the whole of a community. Having said this, there are examples of bones which clearly have been brought to these sites already in a defleshed condition. At Parc le Breos Cwm, in south Wales, an appreciable proportion of the bones in the transepted chambers of a long cairn appear to have suffered weathering and gnawing by carnivores before deposition (Whittle & Wyzocki 1998: 158). Remains in the passage area show no such depredations, and were probably introduced in a fleshed condition. Likewise, at the long barrow Giant's Hills 2, in Lincolnshire, the timber chamber contained a single tight grouping of bones, which appear to have been deposited in a single event (Figure 1). No small bones were present, and all of the skull fragments and longbones had suffered weathering, breakage, and animal attack (Evans & Simpson 1991: 16).

Bodily circulation

So, bodies were processed and disaggregated within both timber and stone chambers, bones were removed, and sometimes other bones were introduced from elsewhere. Significantly, these are not the only early Neolithic contexts where human remains occur. At the causewayed enclosure of Hambledon Hill, in Dorset, a site used for gathering, exchange, and also perhaps habitation, colossal quantities of human remains were found in the ditches, as well as in some of the pits within the enclosure (Mercer 1980: 30). Cut-marks have recently been identified on some of these bones, attesting to the removal of tissue with stone tools (J. McKinley, pers. comm.), and it seems likely that some of this processing took place at Hambledon itself. At a number of other causewayed enclosures, isolated human bones including skulls and longbones have been recovered from ditches. Moreover, skeletal parts have also been found in isolated pits, in the quarry ditches which flank the long barrows, in the ditches of linear cursus enclosures, and even deposited in rivers and caves. It is no overstatement to say that in earlier Neolithic Britain the remains of the dead were ubiquitous. If bones were both being removed from and introduced into mortuary structures, it is highly likely that some of these other locations were tied to them in a more extensive pattern of circulation. We might talk, then, of a general economy of human remains.

One way of understanding these activities would be by drawing a loose comparison between the circulation of bones through the Neolithic landscape and the circulation of objects in a gift economy. Gifts are non-alienated goods,

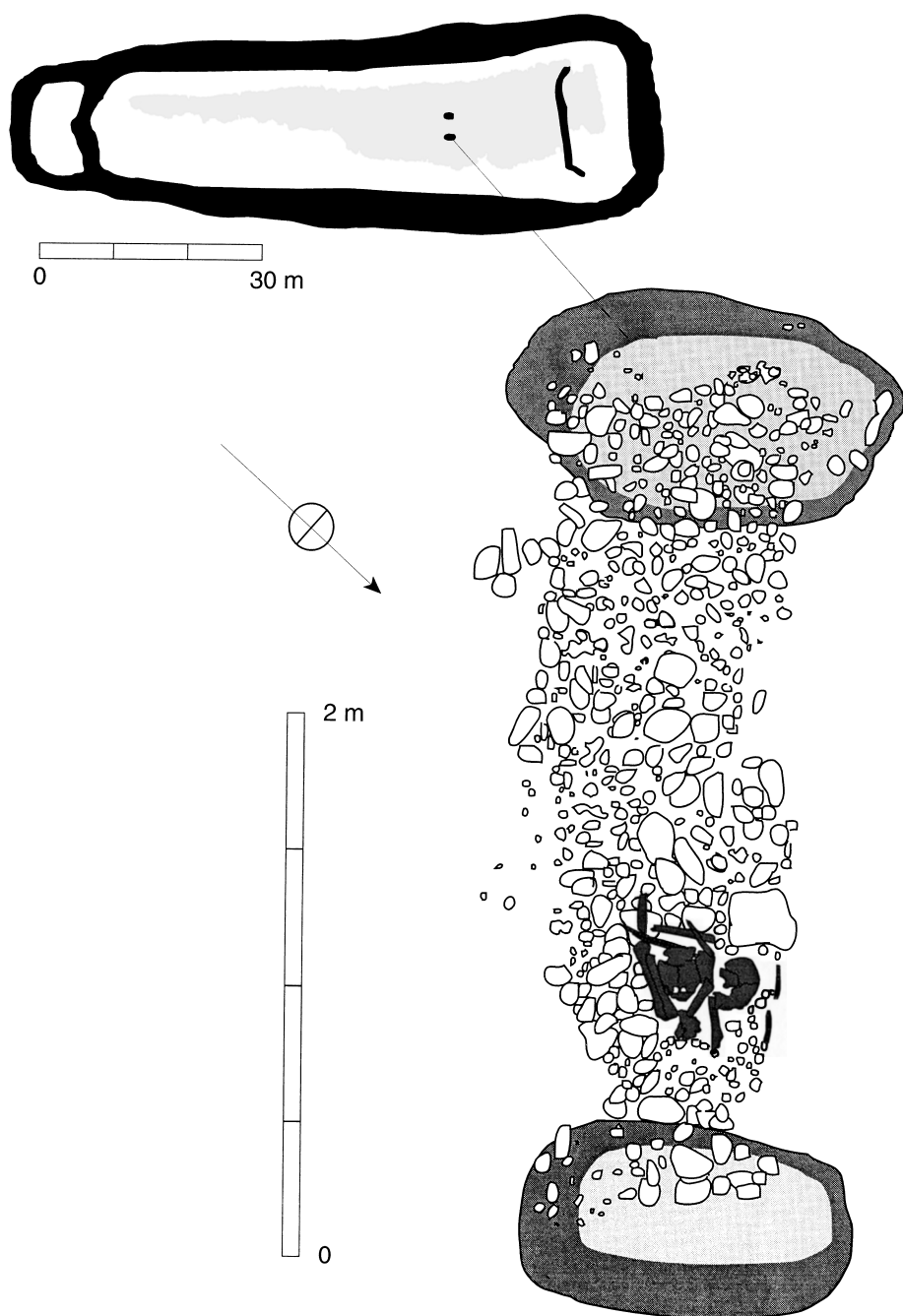


FIGURE 1. Giant's Hills 2 long barrow, Lincolnshire. The contents of the timber chamber beneath the mound.

which pass from hand to hand through a series of transactions without ever being fully severed from their producers and owners (Gregory 1982; Weiner 1992). In some cases artefacts are discussed as if they were part of a person or their body (Cambell 1983). Transactions do not result in objects being valued, one against another. Instead, they create relationships between givers and receivers, in the process extending the social field (Munn 1986: 163; Strathern 1988: 143). In a similar way, the circulation of body parts in the earlier Neolithic can be conceived as a flow, segmented by a series of transactions. The rotting-away of the flesh within a monumental chamber was a transition which rendered bones eligible for entry into this circulation. Thereafter, they might pass from person to person, or be carried from place to place with groups of people, or be deposited in any of the auspicious or significant locations that have already been mentioned (cf. Hertz 1960: 57; Watson 1982: 155). The worn or battered condition of some of the bones introduced into chambers from elsewhere may indicate that they were in circulation for a comparatively long period. Conceivably, this movement of disarticulated remains from person to person and place to place served not simply to create relationships between givers and receivers, but also between the living and the dead. In a sense, although the dead were no longer social agents, they were actively involved in the production of social relationships.

One very interesting piece of evidence that we can set alongside this argument comes from the very first phase of construction at Stonehenge. Within the ditch of this earth and timber monument dated to c.3000 BC, a number of cattle bones, including skulls, had been deliberately deposited. Radiocarbon determinations from these bones indicate that they were already very old by the time that the ditch was dug (Bayliss, Bronk Ramsay & McCormac 1997: 48; Cleal, Walker & Montague 1995: 64). Evidently they had been curated for a considerable time before deposition. This is particularly significant because in several earthen long mounds, cattle skulls have been found amongst the deposits of human bones (e.g. Ashbee 1966: 65), suggesting that there may have been some form of equivalence between human and cattle remains. Both would appear to have been cared for over long periods, and carried between different locations.

All of this indicates that we should reconsider the identification of long barrows and megalithic tombs as places of ancestral presence. These monuments did not so much hold the ancestors as contain a series of operations which were conducted on the bodies of the dead. Human bodily substance flowed through mortuary structures. The circulation and deposition of skeletal remains established the presence of the dead *throughout* the landscape, so that stone and timber chambers could have had no exclusive association with ancestors. What would have set them apart would have been their status as places of transformation and transition; places where categories of personhood were dissolved and recreated. These were certainly locations where a variety of performances were undertaken, but they may have been rendered significant by their powerful liminality, rather than because they contained human remains. This being the case, the earthen mounds which were built over the linear timber chambers can perhaps be seen as a means of memorializing the processes that had taken place there.

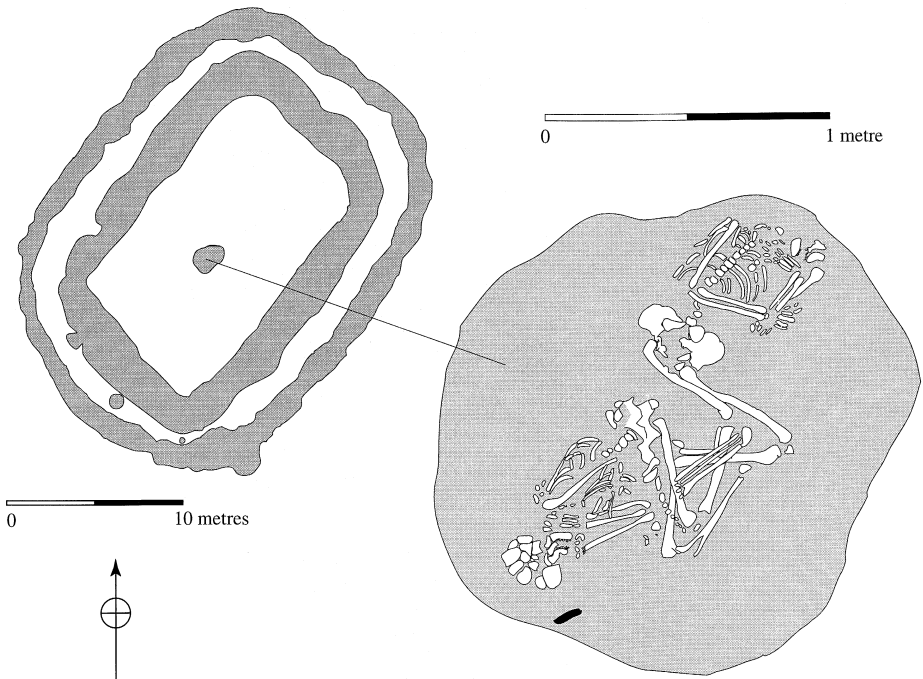


FIGURE 2. Barrow Hills, Radley, Oxfordshire. Two bodies in a pit grave beneath the earthen long barrow.

Distancing the dead

In this light, the eventual change to single grave burial also needs to be reassessed. As we have mentioned, Barrett sets up a comparison between earlier Neolithic and Early Bronze Age mortuary practices. This has the effect of neglecting the initial emergence of the single grave rite within traditional monumental contexts. Round barrows are the characteristic funerary structures of the Early Bronze Age, but there are earlier Neolithic round mounds in the north of England built over linear chambers containing a number of bodies (Kinnes 1979: 9–14). More significantly, some of the latest long barrows to be constructed contain articulated bodies deposited in pit graves. A particularly important site in this respect is the long mound at Barrow Hills, Radley, in Oxfordshire (Figure 2). Here, two adult skeletons were placed in a single grave, accompanied by a flint arrowhead, a flint blade, and a jet slider (Bradley 1992: 138). The mound was surrounded by a dual concentric ditch. Such encircling ditches are a general feature of late long barrows, replacing the flanking ditches which had previously allowed access to the forecourt area at the proximal end of the mound. Taken together, the replacement of the timber chamber with a cut grave and the introduction of encircling ditches would have created a greater distance between the mortuary deposit and the living community.

At around the same time as long mound practices started to change, towards the end of the fourth millennium BC, the entrances to many of the stone

chambers of western Britain began to be deliberately blocked with stone and earth (e.g. Britnell & Savory 1984: 150). The effect was again to render the mortuary deposit inaccessible. At some of these sites, like Pipton, in south Wales, one of the last acts before closure was the gathering-up of groups of bones into piles, each presumably intended to represent a complete skeleton (Figure 3). Yet at Pipton, each heap of bones was actually derived from a number of different bodies, suggesting an attempt to re-create whole dead persons after the event (Savory 1956: 26).

These various efforts to separate the dead from the living, and to maintain or reinstate the integral human body, can be seen as an example of what Strathern (1996: 518) calls 'the stopping of flows' or 'cutting the network': a process of alienation. Not only would the dead have become more conceptually distant, their remains would have been physically prevented from moving out of the chamber. This is a social change, and it can best be rationalized as involving a transformation of conceptions of ancestry. Archaeologists have sometimes been guilty of discussing ancestors as if they formed an undifferentiated category, regarded in much the same way by all non-Western communities (but see Barrett & Fewster 1998: 848). This is clearly not the case. In the earlier Neolithic, the dead were very much alongside the living, in the present, integral to the social field. They had been transformed into a different kind of being, and yet they moved from place to place, in much the same way as living people, and cattle, and gifts. The closure of tombs and the digging of single graves created ancestors who were fixed in both space and

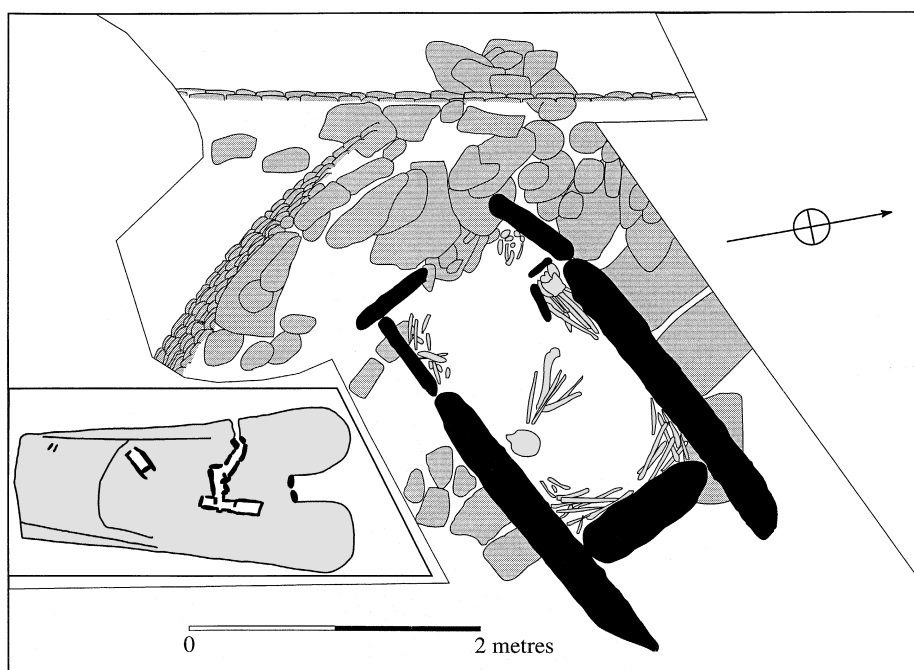


FIGURE 3. Pipton chambered tomb, south Wales. The northern chamber and deposits, with inset plan of the whole monument.

time. Exactly as Barrett says, the funerary rite now identified the location of a person's death; but it also placed them in the past, and within a recognizable line of descent.

These two principles, of being alongside others in the present and of being descended from others in the past, are by no means mutually exclusive. Indeed, we might expect them to be found together in many, if not all, societies. But we can argue that in the years c.3000 BC a shift in emphasis overtook many British communities. Increasingly, people's identities were constructed less out of being part of a bounded community in the present, and more out of descent from a series of identifiable ancestors. This interpretation can be substantiated to some extent by putting it into the context of broader social and cultural changes. In the earlier part of the Neolithic, it is likely that group identities were founded on a range of commonly experienced social practices. Communities moved from place to place in seasonal cycles, followed cattle between pastures, attended calendrical ceremonial events, and acquired lithic and ceramic resources in repetitive and predictable ways (Edmonds 1997). It is commonplace to contrast this pattern with that of the later Neolithic, after 3000 BC, in which the breakdown of some of the established cycles of everyday life was accompanied by a general increase in cultural diversity. There were new and more complex ceremonial monuments, new artefact styles, and more elaborate means of presenting oneself in public. Generally, this greater complexity of cultural life has been explained in terms of increased social asymmetry, or ranking (e.g. Renfrew 1973c; Pierpoint 1980). It is certainly the case that many of the monuments were designed to allow access to some and to exclude others, while some of the complex artefacts now in circulation were socially restricted in their distribution.

However, I have argued elsewhere that, rather than a simple escalation of hierarchy, the later Neolithic saw the development of a series of overlapping social networks and contexts for action (Thomas 1996: 178–82). The proliferation of monumental architecture and fine artefacts need not all have been under the control of a single elite group. Instead, a diverse range of experiences, prerogatives, and forms of authority may have been generated. Particular people would have had access to specific combinations of artefacts, spaces, contexts, and performances. As a result, people living in the middle to late Neolithic would have begun to develop more diverse and differentiated life histories. As communities ceased to be held together by commonly held experiences and understandings of the world, personal identity would have been gathered less and less from group affiliation, and more and more through descent. It was this realignment of personal identity that created an imperative to identify the dead as a point of origin from which the present descends. The dead had to cease to be part of the present, and had to be relocated both spatially and in the past, placing them in a different kind of relationship with the living.

NOTE

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La mort, l'identité et le corps dans la Grande Bretagne néolithique

Resumé

Des générations de préhistoriens ont offert une série d'interprétations d'un changement de pratiques mortuaires qui a eu lieu pendant la période néolithique en Grande Bretagne (4000-2500 av.J.-C.). Le déclin des tombes communes et l'introduction d'enterrements en tombes individuelles ont été interprétés en termes de mouvements de populations, de

hiérarchie sociale croissante, de changement idéologique ou d'une transition des rites pour les ancêtres aux funérailles. Cet article considère le traitement du corps humain dans la mort et offre une interprétation qui fait ressortir les changements des rapports entre les vivants et les morts.

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