

Pattern and diversity in the Early Neolithic mortuary practices of Britain and Ireland: contextualising the treatment of the dead

Chris Fowler

School of Historical Studies, Newcastle University, Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK
c.j.fowler@newcastle.ac.uk

ABSTRACT – *This article presents the first synthesis of the evidence for a diverse range of mortuary practices across the British Isles, and an interpretation of what they suggest about understandings of the body, relatedness, personhood and ancestry in Early Neolithic Britain and Ireland. By exploring the ways that mortuary practices were interwoven with the development of the places where they were carried out, we can build up a more detailed – and more varied – picture of the principles underlying Early Neolithic mortuary practices. Some practices suggest an interest in the ancestral remains of the dead, while others suggest different phenomena, yet a general picture of how human bodies were appreciated emerges.*

IZVLEČEK – *V razpravi predstavljamo prvo sintezo podatkov o različnih pogrebnih praksah na Britanskem otočju in interpretacijo razumevanja telesa, sorodstva, osebnosti in prednikov v zgodnjem neolitiku v Britaniji in Severni Irski. S pomočjo prepletanja pogrebnih praks in razvoja prostorov, na katerih so potekale, gradimo natančno, a raznolično podobo načel, na katerih so temeljile zgodnje neolitske pogrebne prakse. Nekatere prakse so povezane s predniki, druge nakazujejo drugačne fenomene, vse pa omogočajo splošen uvid v dožemanje človeškega telesa.*

KEY WORDS – *mortuary practice; excarnation; cremation; collective burial; successive burial; bodies; Neolithic Britain and Ireland*

Introduction

Recent research has illuminated in increasing detail the wide variety of ways that the remains of the dead were manipulated in Early Neolithic Britain and Ireland¹. Initial treatments included exposure to the elements and scavengers, cremation, defleshing and disarticulation, intact inhumation, and interment of intact bodies in stone or wooden chambers. Where bodies were cremated or exposed, collections of remains were sometimes gathered up and deposited in tombs or on ground then covered by a barrow. Occasionally those who had been buried might have been disinterred. Bones removed from chambers, caves or other sites of primary mortuary

activity were also deposited in activity elsewhere, including during acts of monument construction. The remains of those interred in tombs were sometimes subjected to later disarticulation both as a by-product of inserting further bodies in successive acts of interment or during later activity in the chamber and during deliberate manipulations of skeletal remains. Sometimes the sites where the collected remains of the dead were invested were themselves dramatically transformed through burning; sometimes they were left to decay or collapse, and often the architecture of the site was elaborated some time after initial use. In this article, I present a syn-

¹ The deposits discussed in this paper all date to between c. 3900 and 3300 calBC, and the majority to between 3800 and 3400 calBC. For a brief discussion of how some of these trends extend beyond 3300 calBC see Fowler and Scarre (*forthcoming*).

thesis of the major trends in earlier Neolithic mortuary practices across the geographical British Isles², and an interpretation of what these practices indicate about Early Neolithic understandings of bodies, relatedness and personhood. This synthesis is necessary as, while there are many excellent regional analyses and/or assessments of specific monument types that include mortuary deposits (*e.g. Ashbee 1970; Kinnes 1992; Smith and Brickley 2009*), no synthesis focussing explicitly on mortuary practice at sites of all types across the British Isles has yet been attempted. The current synthesis is intended to be representative rather than comprehensive, and although the evidence from Ireland has here been investigated in less detail than other regions, this article characterises the main trends in mortuary practice for Britain and for some comparable sites in Ireland (*e.g. court tombs, Linkardstown tombs, caves*). I will suggest that a diverse range of phenomena involving the remains of the dead can be identified from this synthesis, including that human remains were often brought to places during acts of monument construction, often deposited collectively in a single event and occasionally some time after the initial transformation of some bodies in the assemblage, and that 'difficult' bodies and 'difficult' deaths were often contained within special locales rather than allowing those bodies to become distributed into the cosmos through natural processes of decay that were arguably the normal means of dispersal in most communities. I will also argue that the interpretation of specific deposits must rest on contextual, local and regional analyses. I will argue that interpretations favouring a Neolithic interest in the 'ancestral' dead explain some, but not all, of these practices, yet explanations for other practices are compatible with a Neolithic appreciation of the body as invested with properties that would also be appreciated in acts of ancestral veneration. The diverse range of phenomena that this synthesis identifies requires a broad range of explanations and indicates both shared and divergent attitudes to human bodies.

Identifying recurrent mortuary practices

While I have divided the following discussion into distinct groups of practices, this is not an attempt to introduce a strict typology. Single sites and even single deposits combined a range of mortuary practices. Nonetheless, there is a need to employ specific

terms to describe these practices and to reflect critically on the entire *chaîne opératoire* of the treatment of dead bodies and production of places containing the remains of the dead. I will use the term 'collective burial' to refer to the deposition of more than one set of human remains in the same feature, 'single burial' to refer to a single event in which a single body was interred, 'successive burial' to refer to repeated instances of deposition of one or more body in the same feature (or same site if so specified). 'Single-event deposition', which may involve more than one set of remains, will also be discussed. 'Primary mortuary practice' refers to the first event or process in which the body is transformed (*e.g. through cremation or exposure*) or buried if no prior bodily transformation is evident. 'Secondary mortuary practice' refers to a secondary event in which human remains are manipulated, for instance by removing a cranium from a set of skeletal remains in a tomb, collecting up bones from an excarnation site or exhuming a body from a grave. 'Tertiary mortuary practice' refers to the deposition of remains which have already been collected from elsewhere through a secondary practice. In some cases, only primary mortuary activity might be considered funerary, while secondary or tertiary activity may have more to do with 'ancestral rites' (*Barrett 1988*), but I will apply interpretations of which acts are funerary only contextually and, indeed, will argue that Early Neolithic mortuary activity often served to shade the transformation of the dead person into larger concerns, rendering a strict division between funerary activity and other ritual, religious, cosmological and social concerns unhelpful.

Collective primary burial: successive deposition of intact bodies and single deposits of multiple intact bodies

Collective burials comprise the most common form of Early Neolithic mortuary practice, although resulting from different processes. Collective burials have been found in the wooden or stone chambers of tombs, comprising deposits laid out on platforms or paved areas, or in 'crematoria' trenches immediately covered by barrows, and found in caves. While some collective deposits of intact bodies clearly resulted from successive deposition, a notable number of sites exhibit single-event deposition of remains from more than one body, mostly combinations of intact and disarticulated bodies. I will discuss the presence of disarticulated remains and burnt remains in collective deposits in another section.

² The geographical British Isles here consists of England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales and the Isle of Man.

Wooden or stone chambers were first built in southern Britain *c.* 3800–3600 calBC, perhaps a little earlier or a little later in some other areas. Wooden chambers with earthen mounds have been found in eastern Britain and parts of southwest Scotland. Cairns with stone chambers were constructed in many parts of the British Isles, including southern and north-western Wales (including Anglesey), the Isle of Man, north-east Ireland, western Scotland and northern Scotland. The exact forms of these monuments varied, but all provided at least one chamber, and most were probably constructed during the period *c.* 3800 to 3500 calBC, although passage graves in particular were constructed well after this, as were various other types of chambered tombs in some regions (Orkney, for instance) (Scarre *et al.* 2003).

The vast majority of burials in tombs were collective and probably derive from successive deposition. These bodies did not always remain intact once interred, although many were clearly interred intact. The primary deposits of human remains in the chambers at West Kennet all appear to have been intact bodies, deposited from *c.* 3670–3635 calBC: these were probably all laid in the chambers within less than fifty years and disturbed only much later (Bayliss *et al.* 2007). At Ascott-under-Wychwood, it seems likely that around seven of the bodies were deposited intact, although there is also evidence for exposure and partial deposition among others of the 21 MNI (minimum number of individuals) whose remains are represented at the site (Galer 2006; Whittle *et al.* 2006.357). All but one of the intact bodies were later disturbed during the repeated deposition of further bodies within an extended sequence of site development, illustrating the presence of successive deposition. The site is symmetrical along a linear axis, with early occupation structures either side of the central axis later joined by two sets of cists either side, to which passages were built when the cairn was assembled (McFadyen *et al.* 2006.134). The first bodies were laid in the small cists while the cairn was still under construction, *c.* 3755–3690 calBC (Whittle *et al.* 2006.329), illustrating a close connection between site construction and collective deposition. Additional bodies were deposited in the passages once the cairn was built, again probably initially intact, but heavily disturbed by later deposition. Only one of these bodies, of a female older adult, was relatively undisturbed in the northern passage, which was not used for further deposition. The entire sequence of deposition is calculated to have taken no more than ‘three to five generations’ (Whittle *et al.* 2006.329). To cite a fur-

ther example emerging from recent re-analysis, the passage grave at Broadsands, Devon, was used to deposit the bodies of three individuals *c.* 3845–3726 calBC (Sheridan *et al.* 2008.15), and it seems likely that these bodies were interred in a relatively short initial phase of activity. The presence of small bones from the extremities suggests that these bodies were probably intact when deposited, and later disturbed by activity which included laying paving slabs and setting fire to the chamber containing the decayed remains, some of which were already free of flesh when burnt (Sheridan *et al.* 2008.7, 15). The next dated phase of funerary deposition at the site is rather later than the first – a single male adult dating to *c.* 3517–3356 calBC (*ibid.*) – suggesting the sporadic re-use of some tombs during the period.

Wooden chambers were occasionally built and used in a similar way to stone chambered tombs. For example, at least five bodies were deposited in the Haddenham (Foulmire Fen) wooden mortuary chamber, Cambridgeshire, *c.* 3600 calBC (Fig. 1) (Evans and Hodder 2006). One adult male was laid across the body of another at the rear of the chamber: both bodies were probably intact when deposited, although parts of the right arm of the second man were displaced. The humerus of this arm exhibited a series of cut marks consistent with removing muscle tendons from the bone, and thus with localised defleshing. A young child was interred in the middle of the chamber, an adult nearer to the front. The remains of a fifth burial, an adult, were more partially represented at the rear of the site, but preservation conditions were poor. All the bodies were oriented with their heads to the rear of the east-west chamber. There was no evidence of gnawing or other effects of exposure (Lee 2006.140–53). The bodies were probably interred successively, and bone elements from some bodies were displaced during the later acts of deposition (Evans and Hodder 2006.156).

Haddenham is illustrative of relatively common pattern: the construction of mortuary chambers on sites which already exhibited a linear arrangement of two or three posts fashioned from the split trunks of trees. The construction of the chamber at Haddenham was also preceded by the erection of a façade of timber posts, suggesting that access to the bodies of the dead was restricted and that the end of the mound formed a focus for gatherings. At Nutbane, Hampshire, two adults and a child were buried intact in a space delineated by split tree-trunk posts and banks and ditches (Morgan 1959). The bodies

must have been protected from disturbance by the surrounding structural features, as the bones show no signs of weathering or scavenging, yet they were not buried as all showed signs of disturbance. This probably occurred during a later restructuring of the site when the mortuary space was enlarged and a further adult body added before the burial area was covered with a linear cairn of chalk (*Morgan 1959. 33; Bunting et al. 1959.47*). Eventually, both the mortuary structures at Nutbane and Haddenham were provided with an elaborated wooden façade which was burnt down before a long barrow was built over the area where the bodies had been deposited. At Haddenham, most of the bones were already dry when this burning and collapse occurred, with the exception of the body found closest to the tomb entrance (*Lee*

2006.152; Evans and Hodder 2006. 156). These two sites exemplify a pivotal role for mortuary deposits in the historical development of Early Neolithic wooden monuments. It is notable that many of the sites with narrow, low wooden chambers, and some with similar troughs delineated by stone, were preceded by two or three split tree-trunks usually set less than 5m apart, set in a line where the chamber would be constructed. At Fussell's Lodge, Wiltshire, *Wysocki et al. (2007)* suggest the third post was an extension to the arrangement, and it is clear that the posthole at the centre of the arrangement was back-filled before bone group B was deposited. It has been suggested that at least some of these structures formed platforms for the exposure of the dead (*Scott 1992*). This is perhaps possible at Ballymacaldrack, but in other cases *Noble's (2006.78–92)* interpretation that the posts at such sites were free-standing split tree-trunk posts left to decay before the locales became used for mortuary practices is more convincing. Indeed, at Haddenham the stumps of these posts were enclosed by the chamber rather than a structural feature of the chamber. Wooden posts might have become co-opted as features of a linear wooden chamber at Street House (*Vyner 1984; Noble 2006.89*). In parts of Ireland, SW Scotland, and on the Isle of Man, the features of some stone-built court tombs resemble features of these wooden sites: some of the stone slabs used to form the side walls to the chambers have the appear-

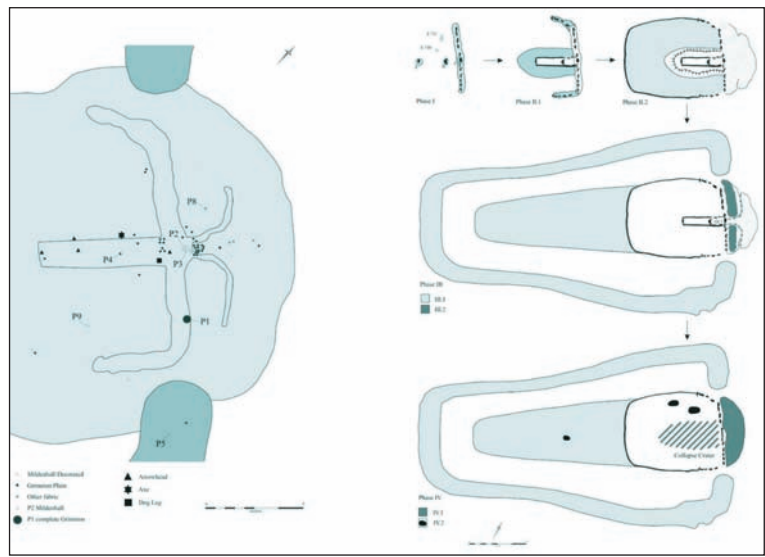


Fig. 1. Mortuary structure at Haddenham (Foulmire Fen): Plan of the chamber showing find locations, and the sequence of site development including wooden chamber and related features. Reproduced by kind permission of the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research from *Evans and Hodder (2006.Fig. 3.60 and Fig. 3.30)*, drawn by Andrew Hall, Cambridge Archaeological Unit. Copyright reserved by the McDonald Institute.

ance of split logs, as at King Orry's Grave SE, and many exhibited a horse-shoe shaped stone façade similar to the wooden façades at sites like Haddenham and Street House. Some stone façade uprights resemble wooden posts (*e.g.* at Cairnholy I). This tends to suggest a transferral of the concept of burial in a wooden chamber to a stone one. However, split tree-trunk arrangements were also the scene of mortuary deposits combining intact bodies and disarticulated remains without the construction of a chamber (discussed below), and it is important to note their existence as a type of site where mortuary practice *later* occurred, sometimes as a single event. Thus collective deposition of human remains at these locales followed earlier activities on site.

Wooden chambers were therefore used for successive burial at already meaningful locales. They may also have been used in some single-event collective deposition. The burials at Wayland's Smithy I, Oxfordshire, probably sat within a wooden chamber set in a sarsen-paved area hemmed with large sarsen uprights near the front (*Fig. 2*). Here, the bodies of around twelve individuals were interred intact; in addition, at least two individuals were represented by excarnated and disarticulated bones (*Whittle et al. 2007.106–7*). Eleven were adult males, two adult female and one was a child. The recent Bayesian analysis of radiocarbon dates from the bones of these individuals suggests that all died

within a generation (15 years) of one another in the 3500s calBC. The bodies were stacked densely in the trough, and it seems possible that some formed a collective deposit during a single event even though some of the bodies may have been subjected to different degrees of exposure beforehand. Three arrowheads with missing tips were found among the bones, two clearly embedded in bodies, and as Whittle *et al.* (2007:107) suggest, at least some of the dead may have been recovered from the scene of a conflict.

There is insufficient space in this article to discuss the presence of animal remains at mortuary sites, or to comment in detail on artefacts, other than to note that while artefacts were commonly found in the chambers of Irish court tombs, objects have been less frequently recovered from chambers in mainland Britain. Most of the remains recovered from Irish court tombs were cremated, but Herity (1987) points out that as these are often accompanied by burnt artefacts where chambers without any surviving bone contain similar but unburnt artefacts (mainly shouldered bowls and decorated pottery, projectile heads, concave scrapers which were probably woodworking tools, plano-convex knives probably used for butchery, rounded scrapers probably used in hide-working, a small number of axes and beads), we may infer that unburnt bodies were deposited in these chambers, but the bone has since decayed. Herity indicates that the unburnt remains of some forty-four individuals have been recovered from six Irish court tombs with reasonable preservation, and while some of these remains were from later in the Neolithic, successive deposition seems plausible at these sites as a whole. Some Cotswold-Severn chambered tombs have yielded beads and bone pins as well as fragments of pots: such objects were probably dispersed as chambers were repeatedly accessed (Darvill 2004:165–71), but it also seems probable that not all chamber interments in mainland Britain were accompanied by such objects. In the preserved wooden chamber at Haddenham (Foulmire Fen) two arrowheads were found among the bones and, in this context where wood was preserved, neither was hafted. Two more were found in fills above the bodies as was an axe head. A yew-wood pin survived, and may indicate that at least one body was buried dressed, although it may equally be an ornament for hair or soft tissue. Potsherds from decorated bowls clustered around the entrance of the chamber, and most potsherds lay outside the entrance rather than in the chamber with the dead (see Evans and Hodder 2006:162,

Fig. 3.60) (Fig. 1). These vessels may have played a role in the funeral process or may indicate later offerings at the mouth of the chamber.

In some parts of Britain, caves may have been used in similar ways to tombs, and include evidence of successive or collective deposition of intact bodies. Stephany Leach (2008) has examined Early Neolithic human remains from five caves in the Yorkshire Dales, concluding that some were deposited as intact bodies (*e.g.* at least two children at Cave Ha 3, an adult female and neonate at Thaw Head Cave, and a 40–50 year old man from Jubilee Cave [Leach 2008:46–9]) while others were not. For instance, an adult male at Cave Ha 3 was probably brought to the site while still fleshed, but his left tibia was then split longitudinally while still fresh (Leach 2008:48). Leach suggests that the pathologies she identifies on several of the individuals whose bodies were left intact within the caves is particularly exceptional, although it should also be noted that a general undercurrent of hard labour and occasional malnutrition can be detected from pathologies in human remains from many Early Neolithic mortuary sites (*e.g.* Haddenham), as can signs of violence (Schulting and Wysocki 2005). She also makes the intriguing suggestion that the intact bodies buried in caves were isolated from other members of the community, and left to a very lengthy decay process: “*lack of fragmentation might imply an aspect of spiritual exclusion*” (Leach 2008:51). I will return to ideas of ‘spiritual exclusion’ among Neolithic mortuary deposits more generally below.

Caves were probably special places linking the world of the known surface landscape with an underworld;



Fig. 2. Mortuary structure at Wayland's Smithy I: Photograph of human remains in the chamber area. Reproduced by kind permission of the Prehistoric Society from Whittle (1991:Pl. 7a), Copyright reserved by the Prehistoric Society.

places carved from stone by running water and dripping with tufa which could accrete around bodies and bones left there; places where milky water dripping from rock could coalesce and in time become stone itself. Caves were probably not the only natural places where corpses were placed, but were probably one of only a few locales where such corpses might remain intact for any length of time. Most of the radiocarbon dates from the individuals in the Yorkshire caves pre-date *c.* 3500 calBC and deposition in caves certainly occurred in other parts of the British Isles during the Early Neolithic as in Devon (*Sheridan et al. 2008. 17–18*). Some of the bodies left in caves in Derbyshire may date from towards the end of the earlier Neolithic, although dating evidence is largely by association with artefacts (*Barnatt and Collis 1996.135; Barnatt and Edmonds 2002.117–8*). Caves were not usually modified in the same way as tombs or mortuary structures during the Early Neolithic.

Collective deposition is the practice that has left the most evidence, including successive deposition in chambered tombs. In many ways, this practice would leave more readily identified evidence than others (*e.g.* exposure), but as Beckett and Robb (2006) argue, the repeated use of chambers may have been even more common than these deposits suggest if chambers were occasionally cleaned out. ‘Empty’ chambers are a particular feature of tombs in south-west Scotland, for instance. In some cases, tombs were containers of the dead from one or two generations; in other cases, they were accessible places holding the slowly decaying remains of the ancestral dead (as with Orcadian stalled cairns – see below). Furthermore, deposits of bodies or bones around the outside of tombs are known in several cases, adding to the community of the dead located there. Bodily decay would have been gradual, and, at wooden sites, structures decayed slowly following construction. However, the chambers (and the condition of human remains and access to them) were frequently, but not always, further transformed through events such as acts of burning, paving, chamber enlargement, and later elaborations including closure, mound construction and the placement of new chambers next to or on top of the site of older ones. I would suggest that when bodies, or the remains of bodies, were brought together and deposited, they became inalienable from the sites and their transformation was often entangled with the transformation of the mortuary monuments.

Burials of intact bodies

Early Neolithic single burials were relatively rare and no cemeteries of more than three burials have yet been found. A type of burial in the southern chalklands from Sussex to Dorset stands out. Mercer and Healy (2008.759) identify the crouched burial of a child at the Stepleton enclosure, Hambledon Hill, and two single graves in the surrounding Dorset landscape (one near Wor Barrow) where the grave was marked with posts. The grave of a child buried in a pit at Whitehawk causewayed enclosure was marked with a similar post (*ibid.*). A burial pit in the main enclosure of Hambledon Hill was also marked with a post, but the pit had been recut and any human remains removed, suggesting that some bodies might have been exhumed following this primary burial, but clearly not all were. At both Windmill Hill and Hambledon Hill complex enclosures were built following single burials of adult males. The Windmill Hill burial was left exposed in an open grave which was later covered by the bank from the outermost ditch circuit. The Hambledon Hill Stepleton burial also pre-dated the first earthworks at the site, probably buried *c.* 3780–3630 calBC (*Healey 2004.21, 24*). In both of these cases it is possible that the deposition of a single body was foundational to later activity in which a wider range of bodies were manipulated through a far wider range of mortuary activities over several generations.

Intact bodies were also placed within the ditches of British Early to Middle Neolithic causewayed enclosures during the period *c.* 3650–3400 calBC. At the Stepleton spur of Hambledon Hill, in addition to the two single graves mentioned so far one more was found, while two single burials of children in the main enclosure ditch at Hambledon Hill were both covered with flint cairns (*McKinley 2008.515*). The earlier one was accompanied by three bone beads placed near the head, and a flint flake behind the back; in the later one, two carved chalk nodules were placed by the head (*Mercer and Healy 2008.102–3*). Each child suffered the same deformity: premature fusing of the cranial sutures (*McKinley 2008.511*). In one case, this probably caused significant disability. Although these children died over 170 years apart, they were buried in the same way in the same locale, strongly suggesting a continued conception of how such persons should be treated in death (*Harris 2006. 194–9*). The only two burials of complete bodies found in the ditches at Windmill Hill were also of young children, from the outer ditch

(Whittle *et al.* 1999.361–2). At Offham, the crouched inhumation of a male aged approximately 20–25 years old was buried in a pit cut into the chalk base of the outer ditch ‘tightly packed into the pit without any grave goods’ (Drewett 1977.209). At The Trundle (Curwen 1929) and Whitehawk (Curwen 1934), both in Sussex, two burials were accompanied by incised chalk blocks. At Whitehawk, a heavily pregnant young woman was buried with two perforated chalk pendants, bounded by substantial chalk blocks in the outer ditch. Death so close to an anticipated birth is particularly likely to fall into the category of a ‘bad death’. She was accompanied by two fossil echinoids; another burial in the next ditch segment included one of these fossils (Curwen 1934. 108–110). As a group these enclosure ditch deposits seem to point to a very specific kind of mortuary practice, one which was sometimes concerned with premature death. Beads may have been part of charms intended to protect vulnerable bodies (as observed among the Beng in the twentieth century where, among other things, these are designed to tempt ancestors reborn as children to stay among the world of the living [Gottlieb 2004.85–9]), while borders or cairns of flint or chalk and the placement in outer ditches suggest a need to contain these dead bodies.

There were other Early Neolithic burials, such as the recently-discovered single grave of an adult lying flexed on the left side and with potsherds from a carinated bowl placed around the head at Yabsley Street, London (Coles *et al.* 2008). The excavators note the foreshore location of this grave, and find comparators from Croyde, Devon, and Hartlepool: Yabsley Street provided a date from an oak plank of 4220–3970 calBC³ and Hartlepool of *c.* 3640–3350 calBC (Coles *et al.* 2008. 231). These burials are arguably in liminal landscapes. Some single burials may be another version of the single event deposit, which might bury one body or more. While some were single burials, as at Pangbourne, Berkshire, where an adult female was buried with an Early Neolithic bowl in a pit (Piggott 1929), others were collective burials or at least part of a sequence. A large pit at Nethercourt Farm, Kent, contained a crouched inhumation of a young adult covered with a scatter of broken pottery from an earlier Neolithic bowl, and disarticulated bones were found in an upper fill of the feature (Dunning 1966.8–11), while at Haddon Moor in Derbyshire plain potsherds and a leaf-shaped arrowhead were found with the dis-

articulated remains of six individuals (Bateman 1844 cited in Barnatt and Collis 1996.135). Burials in pits are also known from Yorkshire, such as the earliest inhumations at Duggleby Howe (Kinnes *et al.* 1983) currently under re-analysis by Alex Gibson and Alex Bayliss (*in press*; Gibson *pers. comm.*), and at least some of the Yorkshire pit deposits under barrows were clearly not of intact bodies (see Thornborough, below).

Natural places were occasionally used for singular deposits of bodies. Marion Dowd (2008) describes intact (though not successive) inhumations at a number of Irish caves, at least two of which dated to the Early Neolithic. Flint mines in the southern chalklands were not often used to dispose of the remains of the dead. There is one crouched inhumation of an adult male, discovered surrounded by chalk blocks in shaft VI at Cissbury (Barber *et al.* 1999. 63). A flint axe head was placed by the knees, and the body was accompanied by six flint tools “eight snail shells, a chalk disc, and a pebble marked by burning” (*ibid.*). Two other bodies at Cissbury, both adult females, may have been burials, or victims of mine collapse in one case and a fall into a mineshaft in the other.

Excarnation, defleshing and deposition of exposed or disarticulated remains

There are various forms of evidence for the deliberate disarticulation of bodies, including exposure to animals and the elements and active cutting away of flesh or limbs. Exposure was perhaps one of the most common fates for corpses, although it will have left very little evidence. Martin Smith (2006) has identified that the bones of at least four different bodies were gnawed by dogs or wolves for a period of weeks before they were collected and deposited in the megalithic chamber at Adlestrop. Bones from two individuals buried in the mortuary structure at Wayland’s Smithy I had also been ‘scavenged by canids’ (Whittle *et al.* 2007. 107), while bones from the chambers at Parc le Breos Cwm show signs of weathering and animal scavenging which indicate excarnation before deposition (Whittle and Wysocki 1998.155–7), and bones from Bole’s Barrow, Wiltshire, also show signs of scavenging (Schulting and Wysocki 2005.116–7). It is hard to be sure whether bodies were deliberately left for dogs or wolves as part of a funerary rite or whether, as Schulting and Wysocki (2005.127–8) suggest, these people died violently or away from relatives, who had to find

³ This date is likely to be older than the burial itself given that it comes from oak, but the burial is clearly from the earlier part of the Early Neolithic.

and collect the remains. The latter explanation fits well into the emerging picture that some proportion of those buried at monuments may have died difficult deaths, although it does not explain why some of the bones from Adlestrop, for instance, bore cut-marks, and the recovery and deposition of such remains in tombs has to be set against the probability that many more corpses must presumably have been completely exposed to the elements, perhaps as part of a common mortuary practice. A blanket interpretation of canid-gnawed bones should perhaps be avoided, although the scenario of remains gathered from the scene of conflict may explain a number of deposits extremely well.

Some of the remains placed in the small stone chambers of Irish Linkardstown tombs in central southern Ireland during the period *c.* 3600–3300 calBC were disarticulated, possibly prior to deposition. At Ashleypark, the bones of an older adult and child lay in a disarticulated pile with a pot in a corner of the chamber, while a second child was placed at the other end of the chamber (Cooney 2000.97–9). Beckett and Robb's (2006) analysis of the bones recovered from the central chamber at Poulawack Linkardstown cairn suggest that the remains of five skeletons or bodies in advanced states of decay were deposited there. While both human and animal remains found in ditches at Hambledon Hill showed signs of weathering and occasionally gnawing, the extent of these processes was more marked on the human remains (McKinley 2008. 496), suggesting that they were exposed to the elements for more extended periods, and the same pattern was noted for the few disarticulated human bones from Etton (Pryor 1998.363). At Windmill Hill, the cranium of an infant found in the middle ditch circuit was attached to its mandible when deposited, but some of the twelve crania found in the ditches at Hambledon Hill were lacking mandibles, suggesting they were not deposited soon after death. The skull elements were often in a weathered condition. There is no evidence for decapitation marks, the only cut marks coming from localised defleshing on three crania (McKinley 2008. 513–4).

Cut-marks denoting deliberate human modification of the bodies of the dead have been noted in other cases. The legs were removed from the pelvis of an adult whose bones, yielding the cut marks that indicate this, were found at Coldrum chambered tomb (identification by Mick Wysocki, cited in Smith and Brickley 2009.49). Here, Schulting and Wysocki (2005. 129) report that a skull bears cut-marks sug-

gesting that an ear was removed. Not all cut marks seem to have served a functional purpose in defleshing or disarticulating bodies; some simply seem to have deliberately marked the body and/or bone. This may be suggested by the cutmarks on a rib and long bones at Adlestrop (Smith and Brickley 2009. 49) or the humerus from Haddenham discussed above, or an adult pelvic bone from Hambledon Hill marked with a grid of cut marks (McKinley 2008. 502–3).

Schulting and Wysocki (2005.128) note that a number of Early Neolithic skulls have not only mandibles, but also cervical vertebrae still attached, and cut-marks on these are reported for a head from Staines causewayed enclosure, Surrey. Cut-marks on clavicles suggest that a head was removed from a body at both Swell and West Tump (Smith and Brickley 2004; 2009.49). Heads, and skulls, were probably specially valued parts of the body and curated for various reasons including mortuary transformation-cum-ancestral veneration, and possibly in order to appropriate the power of others as a result of violent head-taking as Schulting and Wysocki (2005.128–9) have suggested. Some heads or skulls might have moved between such categories – for instance, we could imagine a raid in which a head was taken, and later reparations in which it was returned. Funerary activity for that deceased person might occur only after a period when the skull was moved through other contexts.

It is also interesting that seven of the twelve skulls from Hambledon Hill were from females and five from sub-adults (McKinley 2008.513). If any member of a clan, *etc.* may be seen as a manifestation of the whole, then perhaps even the skulls of children may stand for 'the ancestors'. Indeed, in some communities ancestors may be reborn. Among the Beng, for instance, children who die young are said to have been tempted back by the ancestors (Gottlieb 2004.85–9). Equally, anyone might have become victims of feuding raids if responsibility for perceived misdeeds lay at the door of the clan, tribe or lineage rather than specific individual members. A generic belief about the value of the head within a conception of the vital essences conveyed by other parts of the body, and of a metonymy in which one part of the body was potentially as good as the whole and one member of a community as good as their clan, may have underlain a range of different practices including feuding, head-hunting, beliefs about appropriate fates for the dead immediately following death, and ancestral veneration.

The complex at Hambledon Hill (which consists of two causewayed enclosures and two long barrows, as well as pits and other features), has yielded the remains of some thirty-five children and some forty adults (Healey 2004.23; McKinley 2008.490), deposited between c. 3700 and 3300 calBC and indicating a range of mortuary practices. The remains of twenty-three individuals bore cut marks from various defleshing practices. There is evidence of some structured deposition of fully defleshed bones and the deposition of defleshed bones in substantial groups comprising much of the skeleton of the dead (Mercer and Healy 2008. 759), as well as deposits of, for instance, isolated crania. Two skeletons of young males in the ditch of the adjacent Stepleton enclosure at Hambledon Hill and possibly killed in conflict were originally thought to have been shot in the back and given no funerary treatment; however, McKinley (2008. 513) argues that one was given a covering of chalk rubble, while the other exhibits some cut marks to the right tibia, but no evidence for further defleshing or gnawing. Although they may have been killed some funerary attention was still seemingly given to their corpses. Disarticulated bones were also found in ditch fills at the causewayed enclosure at Offham, Sussex, including a mandible placed at the bottom of a terminal to the outer ditch, and other bones which ‘probably arrived in the ditches in a more casual way with the other rubbish’ (Drewett 1977.209); while at Whitehawk, Sussex, human bone was also deposited along with flints, potsherds and animal bone, suggesting a connection with either occupation debris or the remains of meals or feasts (Curwen 1934.111–2).

Exposure did not just take place at enclosures and deposition following exposure did not only occur in tombs. Human remains might have been exposed to facilitate processes of decay in caves. Marion Dowd (2008.309) notes that at Elderbush Cave, (where some of the bone is firmly dated to the earlier Neolithic), Gwendoline Cave and Alice Cave (undated), all in County Clare, small bones remain, but larger bones were collected and removed, and Dowd suggests that these caves were used as locales for controlled excarnation and bone removal – further noting that no scavenging on bones has been identified for Neolithic remains from any of the Irish caves (*ibid.*).

While some disarticulated human remains accumulated at a site over time, others were deposited collectively in single events. Some of the collective deposits placed between split tree-trunk posts where

no chamber was built were demonstrably single events which brought together the remains of some people who had died more recently than others, or whose remains had at least been exposed to different treatments after death resulting in different states of decay. Mortuary deposits at the two long barrows at Giants’ Hills, Skendleby, Lincolnshire, exemplify this phenomenon (Phillips 1936; Evans and Simpson 1991). At Giants’ Hills 1 (Phillips 1936) a platform of chalk slabs was laid out approximately 20m to the rear of a curved façade of split tree trunk posts. A long barrow was built around this platform, but leaving it uncovered. The remains of eight MNI were placed on this surface and the void backfilled with chalk rubble. Four of the dead were intact bodies laid out in a crouched position suggestive of a primary mortuary event, but the other four were fragmentary (Phillips 1936.82–4). Many of the bones of the fragmented bodies were weathered, and one of the skulls (cranium and mandible were both present) contained the egg of a snail which lays its eggs on the land-surface and thus probably entered the skull before it was buried (*ibid.* 83). A large sherd from a shouldered bowl and a cattle atlas bone were also found with the bones. Here, then, some remains underwent a tertiary mortuary practice alongside others receiving primary burial – and here it is clear that the distinction between these categories should not be drawn too sharply. What must be emphasised is that this was a collective deposit laid down in a single event, drawing together bodies which were in an advanced state of decay with those that were still intact, and bringing them all together during the completion of the construction of this long barrow. As in this case, the sites chosen for such events often displayed histories of previous use, such as occupation debris (spreads of which were woven into the layers of mound construction at Giants’ Hills 1) or split tree-trunk post arrangements.

Giants Hills 2 further supports Noble’s (2006) interpretation that human remains were sometimes laid out between the decaying or decayed remains of a split tree-trunk arrangement. A discrete mortuary deposit between two split wooden posts included two adult crania and fragments of thirteen long bones, comprising three MNI (Harman and Evans 1991.16) (Fig. 3). One humerus exhibited cut marks, and some bones were gnawed by scavengers (ranging from snails through rodents to large carnivores). All were weathered. Sometime after the bodies were initially exposed, the bones were collected in a ‘perishable container’ and this was placed between the

two posts and covered with a layer of chalk rubble (*Evans and Simpson 1991.14*). The barrow mound was then erected, again indicating a connection between bringing together bodily remains, deposition, and monument construction. The collected essences of several absent people were made present at the monument through the act of deposition, and the nature of the site was transformed.

Disarticulated remains were also buried, again sometimes during acts that founded barrows. At Thornborough, Yorkshire, one pit under the centre of a round barrow was cut by another: the earlier pit contained a cranial fragment and finger bones, the later one the skull (cranium and mandible) of an older adult male along with fragments of bone, some of which had been disarticulated for some time before deposition, and at least one piece of which was disturbed from the earlier pit. This later feature seems to have been cut through a mound covering the earlier pit, which was not large enough to contain an intact burial (*Harding et al. forthcoming*). Here, human remains were deposited when a barrow was constructed and the deposit was not only remembered, but sought out in a subsequent act when human remains were deposited, notably a skull.

While it is possible that victims of violence were left for scavengers and their remains only found and collected later, we can also suggest that excarnation was deployed in funerary sequences which only in some cases ended with the selection of bones to place at chambered tombs or other sites, and only in some cases left human remains in ditches or pits. Remains may also have been left where they lay on the land-surface, may have been placed in trees, or collected from their initial place of exposure (or even burial) only to later have been cast into rivers or treated in other ways that did not leave deposits that could be recovered by archaeologists. Emotive rites of passage might have accompanied any such activities. It is difficult to assess how frequent bodily exposure was, but the tens of thousands of earlier Neolithic people whose remains have not survived to the present day were probably exposed to the elements in some way.

Cremation and burnt bones

Some bodies were transformed in a dramatic funerary rite involving the immolation of the body. Cremated human bone was deposited behind the façade prior to the construction of the wooden mortuary chamber at Haddenham, for example (*Evans and Hodder 2006.101*). Smith and Brickley (*2006.351–*

2) report that cremated bones have been recovered from at least twenty chambered tombs in southern England and Wales. Cremated bone has been recovered from wooden chambers or from layers underneath stone structures, for instance at Pinacree (*Coles and Simpson 1965*) or Lochhill (*Masters 1973*), both sites with split tree-trunk arrangements. Cremated or otherwise burnt bone has also been recovered from many Irish court tombs and passage graves, as well as several Scottish tombs, and Manx tombs such as Mull Hill (*Fowler 2001.153–5*) and Ballaharra, where cremated bone (including some children's bones) mixed with fragments of shouldered bowls overlay a disturbed set of unburnt remains (*Fowler 2004. 92*). Cremated remains have been found in at least twenty-six Irish court tombs (*Herity 1987.111*), which probably date to *c.* 3800–3500 calBC. At Tully, Co. Fermanagh, an analysis of the cremated remains located scraps of bone from a second individual among a greater quantity of bone from one individual suggesting the re-use of a pyre site for successive cremations (*ibid. 112*).

There are numerous accounts of human bone which specify that the bone is burnt, scorched or charred, and not all of these necessarily resulted from cremation. At Tulloch of Assery A, Caithness, some bones were scorched, but none were fully burnt (*Davidson and Henshall 1991.63*), and Noble (*2006. 136*) reports that there is evidence that flesh was seared from bones within chambers in Caithness, Sutherland and the Hebrides. McKinley (*2008.497*) states that none of the bone from Humbledon Hill was cremated, but some was charred when already dried and fleshless. At Ballymacaldrack, Co. Antrim,



Fig. 3. Mortuary deposit at Giants' Hills 2, Skendleby. The patches of chalk rubble lie within the top of the postholes from the two split tree-trunk posts. Reproduced by kind permission of the Society of Antiquaries of London from Evans and Simpson (1991.Pl. VIIIb), Copyright reserved by the Society of Antiquaries of London.

a split tree-trunk post arrangement was burnt some time c. 3800–3600 calBC and replaced by a dry-stone walled chamber (Cooney 2000.100–103). The five adults whose cremated bones were found in the postholes and underneath the chamber may have originally been laid out as corpses between the posts. The wooden mortuary structure at Street House, North Yorkshire (which incorporated a split tree-trunk arrangement in its architecture), was also burnt down, cremating the remains of the bodies of adults and children within, before a low cairn was built over the mortuary area (Vyner 1984). While the bone report concludes that some bones were probably fleshed when the burning occurred the remains were extremely fragmented, although the body of a child was clearly intact when the conflagration occurred. Some bodies were cremated collectively *in situ* in stacks of fuel covered by earthen mounds at sites that have been termed ‘crematoria’ (Kinnes 1992.84–5). At Willerby Wold, an earthen trough was formed around two posts, and already disarticulated remains were covered with wood and chalk and burnt within this ‘crematorium’ (Manby 1963). A similar structure may also have stood between the two split tree-trunk posts at Copt Hill, Tyne and Wear, where disarticulated remains were cremated (Young 1985.8–10), and cremated bodies were found among quartz pebbles, charcoal, peat ash, and burnt and broken stone in the centre of the non-megalithic mound at Ballafayle, Isle of Man (Kermode 1927). Façades and wooden structures that contained human remains, were sometimes burnt at a later point in their history, charring the bones as observed at Haddenham (Lee 2006). In fact, the number of instances where the dead were cremated singly and then deposited in the earth or at a mortuary monument in mainland Britain would seem to be low in comparison with the number of cases where collections of remains were burnt. Bodies might be burnt at various stages following their deposition in wood or stone chambers or in linear mortuary arrangements at sites that would later become barrows, and the act of burning seems to have formed a pivotal part in this process. These acts of collective transformation deserve further interpretation alongside acts of collective deposition of remains at unchambered long barrows, and I will return to this below.

Further forms of manipulation of human remains in secondary and tertiary mortuary practices

I have already outlined some examples where bodily remains were collected from the context of their

primary treatment, combined with other bodily remains, and deposited elsewhere. The bones of bodies that were left in stone chambers were particularly susceptible to later activity, potentially a long time after death, as the architecture afforded the possibility of enduring access. As such, these tombs projected the dead into the future. Sometimes bones were removed from tombs; sometimes they were reorganised within tombs; and sometimes bones were re-articulated with one another.

In the court tomb at Audleystown, County Down, the long bones from two adult males were selected for deposition under a shale slab and were laid out parallel to one another along with a flint flake and quartz crystal (Herity 1987.118). At West Tump, one of the femurs from a still partly-articulated skeleton was removed and replaced with the ball joint at the wrong end (Smith and Brickley 2009.64). Skulls were placed along the walls at a number of sites, including Lanhill, where mandibles were re-articulated with crania, and in one case, the mandible clearly did not belong to the cranium with which it was articulated (Keiller and Piggott 1938. 125, 127) (Fig. 4). Here, bodies were condensed into the small chamber as new ones were added, but the re-articulation, and the way that long bones were stacked parallel to another suggests sorting at some point in this process. At Windmill Hill, an infant cranium was placed within a cattle frontlet, and the femur of an infant inserted into the humerus of an ox, indicating a degree of deliberate manipulation of human bones here too (Whittle *et al.* 1999.362).

Discrete piles of bones selected from different individuals who were probably initially interred in chambers intact have been found at Pipton (seven bone groups, 11 MNI), Penywyrlod (seven bone groups, five MNI) and Ty Isaf in the Black Mountains in Wales (Wysocki and Whittle 2000.596–9). Cranial fragments were placed in the same group at Penywyrlod which did not originate from the same cranium, while bone group C at Pipton consists mainly of bone from two adults, but mandibular fragments originated from four different skeletons (*ibid.* 598). Furthermore, in bone group B, one skull was placed on a pile of long bones which rested on top of a further skull on top of long bones, suggesting a sequential dimension to this practice. Thomas (1999. 151) sees these examples of bodily re-assembly as evidence that ‘specific dead people were now of importance’. The bodies of the dead may have formed a notably collective body. At the Knowe of Yarso, Rousay, (Richards 1988.Fig. 4.8), crania were clus-

tered at the rear chamber of the site and post-cranial bones along the ‘main body’ of the tomb. At Torlin and at Clachaig, both on Arran skulls were pressed into the corners of each chamber, and long bones lined along the chamber walls (Jones 1999: 346–7). In such examples, the composite body of a community of the ancestral dead was laid out within a stone chamber presenting an homology between tomb, body and community, as Jones (*ibid.*) suggests for Arran. In these and other cases, the bodily remains of the ancestors were located within the body of a monument which was itself an assembly of materials from the wider cosmos, and it is possible to infer a broader logic in which tombs were a manifestation of the community as a single, yet composite, body (Fowler 2004b; 2008b).

Stalled cairns in Orkney provided benches along the walls of the tomb where bodies could be placed while they decomposed. Successive deposits probably built up communities of the dead fairly rapidly. Following Colin Richards (1988), Stuart Reilly (2003) argues that some of the bones from bodies interred in Orcadian stalled cairns on Rousay were removed from one tomb and taken to another, postulating that the Rousay stalled cairns form a kind of extended cemetery. He suggests that bodies were interred intact in the tombs nearest sea level, then skulls and other bones from these bodies were later taken to tombs on a terrace uphill from the low-lying sites; and finally, crania were selected from these to be stored in tombs highest on the island (*ibid.* 142). Indeed, no mandibles have been found in the high-lying tomb at Knowe of Yarso at all (Richards 1988: 49). Reilly (2003:142) argues “*these tombs form part of a large cemetery and a long process in which the body (and the person) is seemingly distilled into the skull.*” We might equally suggest that this process distributed the person throughout the landscape, perhaps locating specific aspects (*e.g.* those associated with the head or skull) higher up in the landscape than others (*e.g.* the flesh, or the hands or feet). Bones that were inalienable from one place, one community, were then carried elsewhere to become inalienable from yet another community that drew on the extended bodily histories of a select membership. Stalled cairns like these, then, were designed with the expectation of successive

deposition, and this also provided the opportunity for the later manipulation of bones. The mortuary practices that unfolded here did so very differently from those at unchambered barrows in England, for instance.

At Fussell’s Lodge, Wiltshire, either bodies were left to decay in a wooden structure *c.* 3630–3620 calBC along with some bones brought in from an older site before remains from four bodies were re-assembled to resemble two skeletons (Wysocki *et al.* 2007:69, 82), or remains from individuals who had died at different times were deposited at the site in one event following decay of the split tree-trunk arrangement (Noble 2006:75–8). Whichever interpretation is correct, Wysocki *et al.* (2007:69) are clear that the state of the remains indicate “*a minimum period of between five to ten years, and very possibly at least two or three times that, may have passed between the deaths of the individuals represented at Fussell’s Lodge and the final arrangement of their mortal remains.*” Thus, while Fussell’s Lodge might have been the scene of successive primary deposition or single-event deposition of remains from those who died at different times, a collective deposit was ended by the assembly of the collective ‘skeletons’. The low cairn of flint covering the remains seems to have been draped with an ox hide, leaving a low mound composed of bone, flint and hide. After some thirty years, a long barrow was erected to cover this mound, probably preceded by burning at the locale (Wysocki *et al.* 2007). In this case, then, the remains of the dead were rearticulated at a key juncture in the development of the

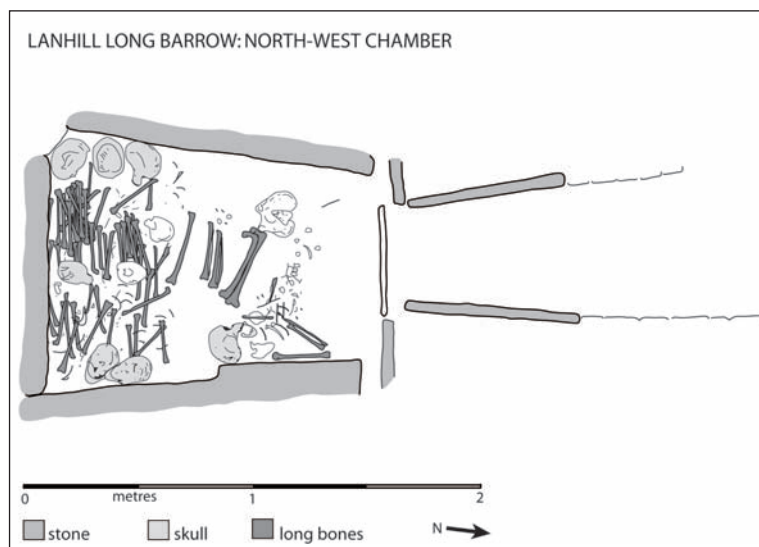


Fig. 4. Human remains within the north-west chamber at Lanhill. Redrawn by Sheila Severn Newton (after Keiller and Piggott 1938, Fig. 2).

site, and while these were not left available to later generations, the sequence exhibits practical interaction with the bodily remains of those who had died some years before at one or several points in the site's history.

In some cases, the architecture of the tombs enshrined the idea that they would provide only limited access to relic bones. 'Port-holes' enclosed chambers at Rodmarten, Avening, Luckington (Wiltshire) and Bryn yr Hen Bobl (Anglesey), among others (*Clifford and Daniel 1940; Fowler 2004b.98–100*). A very small portal lay between the second and third cells producing a separate rear chamber at King Orry's Grave South-west on the Isle of Man. Two other Manx tombs – King Orry's Grave North-east and Cashtal yn Ard – have portals between arched stones that provide access only to the first chamber of a series, while the rest were very difficult to access over high sill slabs. Human bones or even bodies were also worked into the structure of some chambered tombs, including when they were elaborated later in their history. For instance, a skull was found behind the false portal at Belas Knapp (*Smith and Brickley 2009. 71*). Smith and Brickley (*ibid.*) summarise a number of other instances where human bone was incorporated into acts of construction including bones on a land-surface prior to the construction of Gwernvale long cairn, mixed in with cairn material during construction at Rodmarten, and placed on top of an early phase of a monument before it was extended and elaborated at both Sale's Lot and Notgrove. At Haddenham, two crouched inhumations (one child, one adult) were buried into the primary mound, and while it is uncertain when this occurred (they remain undated), the excavation report offers the possibility that they were buried preceding the enlargement of the mound. (*Lee 2006. 147; Evans and Hodder 2006.157*). Human bodies – and particularly human bones, which I suggest were important essences and objects that were the congealed evidence of past relationships – were again articulated in constructing new relationships and changing the nature of places.

Disarticulated remains were occasionally deposited outside of mortuary sites, providing evidence for secondary and tertiary mortuary activity. For example, the cranium of an adult male was deposited in a ditch at the end of an oval barrow at North Marden, Sussex (*Drewett 1986.41*). One of the mineshafts at Grimes Graves pit 1 contained an isolated human skull at a layer about half way up the shaft (*Barber et al. 1999.62*). In Orkney, where bone circulation

seems to have been fairly prominent, Richards (*1988.49–50*) points out a human skull fragment from occupation debris at Knap of Howar, and human skulls and two polished stone axes found in a mound at the Knoll of Skulzie. Thomas (*1999.68*) provides a brief summary of human remains from pits in southern Britain from throughout the whole of the Neolithic period, citing four examples of pits associated with habitation containing fragmentary bones, along with three examples of pits that may have functioned as primary graves, but from which most of the remains were later removed. As a whole, Thomas interprets the deposition of fragmentary (and intact) human remains in ditches and pits as part of a meaningful interaction with substances that conveyed particular values that were articulated contextually (*Thomas 1998.81 inter alia*): human remains were deployed alongside a host of other materials (chalk, flint, animal bones, ash, etc) in ritual/cultural practices (*Thomas 1999.75–7 inter alia*). While in agreement with Thomas' interpretation of valued substances, I think further work needs to be published evaluating how frequently (or rarely) human remains were deposited at occupation sites or in pits with other materials. Nonetheless, it is clear that skulls and other human remains did have currency long after the death of the person from which they originated, although diversity in how such remains were valued and manipulated still merits further discussion.

Discussion: Interpreting pattern and diversity in Early Neolithic mortuary practices

It is important to consider the mortuary practices outlined above both in terms of an unfolding history of changing practices – as excellent dating and re-analysis programmes now enable us to do – and alongside the broader context of mobility patterns, subsistence practices, biographies of artefacts and architecture, and dwelling alongside animals. Such concerns are vital in considering how human bodies were treated and conceptualised in their material world – for instance, how human bodies were related to the bodies of animals (*e.g. Ray and Thomas 2003*) or how mortuary practices related to mobility and subsistence patterns, exchange, and experiences of material phenomena as part of an overall experience of time and place (*e.g. Cummings et al. 2002; Edmonds 1999; Pollard 2001; Fowler 2003; Fowler and Cummings 2003; Harris 2006; Bradley 2007*). While the interpretations presented below are narrower in scope, focussing primarily on mortuary practices and monuments, they offer further

inferences about earlier Neolithic beliefs about bodies, persons, and relationships between the living and the dead based on the pattern and diversity in mortuary practices revealed by this synthesis.

Regional patterns

Certain aspects of Early Neolithic mortuary practices were widespread throughout Britain. Bodies were usually laid out in a crouched position, whether deposition was single, successive or collective (and perhaps occasionally bodies in chambers were set in a sitting position [*e.g.* an adult at Ascott-under-Wychwood who was killed by an arrow; *Whittle et al. 2006.357*]). This is seen from Cissbury in the south to Midhowe in the north: the way the dead were laid out according to the same grammar might imply a shared cosmology at some level. Single burials were rare outside of the south of England, where they often appear to be contemporary with causewayed enclosures – which are also seldom found outside the south of England. The occasional pendants and beads found in the unusual single burials and some chambered tombs in the south of Britain, along with the bone pins in Ireland and the wooden pin from Haddenham, hint at a broader decorated, adorned body. Throughout Britain, if not Ireland at present, there is evidence for primary exposure or defleshing of bodies. Mortuary deposits laid down on paving or the ground and covered rapidly by low cairns and then earthen long and oval barrows occurred in eastern and southern England. In eastern England in particular, but elsewhere too, these collected remains were sometimes burnt. Trough-like chambers of wood or stone built between or replacing split tree-trunk post arrangements were more widespread, found across southern and eastern Britain and also in southwest Scotland and northeast Ireland. Some of these were set alight before a mound or cairn was built. Many of the mortuary practices at split tree-trunk post arrangements were contemporary with radical transformation of the site, often by conflagration in northern England, southern Scotland and eastern Ireland. In Scotland, this coincides with the burning of houses *c.* 3800–3600 calBC (which perhaps occurred in parts of Ireland – *Smyth 2006*) and the burning of post-defined cursus monuments *c.* 3700–3500 calBC (*Thomas 2006*), suggesting that dramatically transforming and purifying wooden structures was an experience that connected different contexts. Court tombs in Ireland seem to have been used to deposit the dead singly and successively, sometimes following cremation, though detailed radiocarbon sequences have yet to be established for most of these sites. As a whole, chambered cairns,

mainly found in western Britain, Ireland and northern Britain, display a wide range of mortuary practices and increased opportunity for later manipulation of the remains of the long dead. Such manipulation, although widespread, was more common in some areas than others and took locally distinctive forms. I will not attempt to draw out any further chronological detail here, as so much rests on ongoing research programmes. Instead, I now want to consider what further inferences about Neolithic bodies and Neolithic personhood can be drawn from these patterns.

Aggregation and dispersal: different rates, kinds, means and experiences of transformation

Different local or regional practices produced different experiences. The bodies of the dead were transformed at different rates, as were the places where their remains were lodged or interred. The dead were exposed to different means of transformation and different degrees of aggregation or dispersal. Bodies might be left to decay, consumed by wild creatures and the elements, hidden in caves, cremated, assembled into a group and buried under a low cairn, or buried in a pit. Where bodies were placed with those of others who had died not long before them, the proximity of the bodies in the same space suggests these people were being defined as sharing close relationships, forming a community. We can interpret the significances of particular local combinations of these practices alongside patterns in daily practice, routine activities and other material conditions of existence.

In Ireland, as Richard Bradley (*2007*) notes, houses and bodies were often burnt following death, and domestic goods were placed in tombs along with the dead. The dead were aggregated near to the sedentary community of the living, and a strong sense of community ancestry may have emerged, even though the remains of the dead may have entered the chambers in the course of individual funerals. Bradley contrasts Ireland with southern Britain, where, he argues, bodies were not usually deposited with objects, where houses were more ephemeral, and the living probably moved around the landscape more frequently. In each region, the fate of the human body was parallel to the fate of the community: in Ireland, the dead aggregated near the settlements of the living (*Bradley 2007*); in southern England, the communities of the living and the dead were subject to moments of aggregation, conviviality and wholeness (*e.g.* through gatherings at

enclosures), but also destined for dissolution and dispersal in an ongoing cycle of social renewal (Bradley 2007; Fowler 2003). We should beware of drawing distinctions between regions that are too neat, but there is much to be said for characterising the general phenomena we can detect in this way. It is notable that many of those buried in graves were not accompanied by the objects of daily life and that relatively few artefacts have been recovered from many tombs. Where personal objects and the trappings of daily life did not accompany the dead (or were later retrieved) we have to ask where those ended up and what roles they played in funerary rites and/or in extending personhood and commemorating the dead within wider society. Indeed, it has been noted that while mortuary ceremonies among small-scale communities may acknowledge the loss of the group, intimate memories of the specific dead person are remembered in routine life by the survivors as they encounter the tools used by the deceased and inhabit the places where they lived together (e.g. Battaglia 1990. 197–199 *inter alia*). Thus, aspects of dead persons may have remained distributed in the world of the living, invested in objects and places that evoked memories among the living. Furthermore, if the dead in some regions were knowingly left for wolves and other scavengers, it might have been believed that certain spiritual aspects of the person were either to be consumed in this process, or released to inhabit the wilder parts of the landscape. Bodies were at times deposited collectively in singular acts particularly in northern England and southern Scotland: even though they may have each passed through individual funerals beforehand, their final transformation produced an aggregation of the dead and this was often commemorated architecturally. We could even suggest that some people did not receive individual funerals, but collective ones. However we interpret the funerary process, these collective deposits were seldom added to later, suggesting a finality to the mortuary sequence. This finality was not present at many chambered tombs, but the remodelling of tombs did eventually close some chambers and some remains from later access.

There were arguably a range of key metaphors and experiences that applied to the transformation of the dead, some of which were more prevalent in some regions than others. The kinds of experiences generated varied, differently articulating dramatic transformation through burning with acts that buried or hid bodies from view and/or recovered bones from sites of decay, or juxtaposing the permanence

of stone and bone with the transience of flesh and fluidity of water (Fowler and Cummings 2003), or setting bodily transformation in liminal landscape contexts (Cummings *et al.* 2002). The differing ways that people treated the bodies of the dead, the different rates and means of transformation that were employed, reflected on the impermanence and transmutability of the living and dying body in differing ways, yet resulted in monuments invested with the remains of the dead across large areas.

Difficult lives and difficult deaths?

The impact of specific life histories or sudden deaths may have set some people on a course of mortuary transformation very different from the norm. Premature or violent death has been noted in a number of cases above. Some of those buried at causewayed enclosures and unchambered barrows were hidden from view, the dead being weighted down under cairns of flint or chalk or stone. As is often noted, only some acts of violence leave traces on the skeleton, but it is also worth bearing in mind that ethnographies record that in some communities, death does not occur ‘naturally’, but is the result of an assault through sorcery, the action of the dead or spirits, *etc.* Some deaths are more likely to be thought the result of witchcraft than others, and some people might be more likely to be accused of witchcraft than others (e.g. those who marry in to a community). Moreover, certain members of a community may be seen as especially potent, their remains needing special containment. This may apply to witches and other anti-social persons, but it might also apply to shamans or, in a hierarchy, to the bodies of those from high-ranking lineages. In some cases, it might be the bodies of the particularly vulnerable who require special treatment, both during life through special activities (including body ornamentation or modification) and after death. It may have been necessary to contain the spirits of those who had died badly or who had not been given the appropriate funerary rites at the right time. It may have been inauspicious to allow the remains of certain people to disperse back into the cosmos in the normal way. For the archaeologist, it may not be possible to clearly identify good and bad deaths for Early Neolithic persons, or find a single umbrella to identify why all the members of a certain chamber or ditch were buried there, since certain places might be appropriate for burying those whose lives and deaths were seen as ‘difficult’, but for differing reasons. Nonetheless, in a world where most people’s bodies were cast to the winds, water or wild animals, the containment of the dead in closed tombs, under

barrows or in delineated burials within ditched enclosures suggests that they were perceived as distinctive in some way and that particular anxieties surrounded their bodies and/or their deaths.

Death and the regeneration of life

Deaths, even bad deaths, may also have begun new relationships, new projects. For instance, the men buried prior to construction at Windmill Hill and Hambledon Hill may have been directly related to the development of places of gathering there. Above, I have also noted instances where collections of bodies or body parts were laid down before or while cairns and barrows were built, as at Giants' Hills 1 and 2. Many such deposits were not later accessible, and some of these were not primary, but secondary or tertiary mortuary practices for bodies already in states of decay and fragmentation. Furthermore, they were invested in places with a local history, but potentially widespread meaning. For instance, while later activities at locales with split tree-trunk arrangements illustrate some diversity in whether a stone or wood chamber was constructed or whether bodies were laid out on a paved area and covered with stones and/or earth, and in whether the bodies were left to decay or burnt, the initial referent of the split, decaying tree was widespread through much of Britain and into Ireland. As Noble (2006. 100–1) suggests, the deposition of human bodies often took place at a locale where the split trunk of a tree had decayed – indeed, the bodies were brought together within a space originally delineated by the exploded body of a substantial tree. Only once the tree had been transformed could decaying or decayed human bodies be incorporated at the site. As Noble argues, the overall pattern of events indicates that the ancient, even ancestral, tree was replaced by flimsier wooden structures in which bodies were placed. These structures either decayed or were burnt before the site was redeveloped into an enduring form, usually a stone chamber or cairn or an earthen barrow. Thus, the transformation of human bodies at such sites needs to be put in the context of a longer sequence of practices, and we could suggest that meaningful sites were transformed when human bodies were introduced (*cf. Fowler 2003.56*). While the entire sequence need not have been preconceived from the outset, and regional variations are evident, the material conditions presented by the earlier activities were responded to in broadly similar ways when bodies were introduced and sites were reconfigured. An event of growth followed a process of decay or destruction, and human bodies were inserted into that process

at the point where decay was transmuted into growth (*cf. Fowler 2003*). These deposits might have been believed to be cosmogenic; part of an act of social and cosmic renewal at sites that were already socially and religiously meaningful.

Depositing such remains, sometimes burning the site, and covering the remains with a cairn or barrow might have 'covered' and 'converted' especially traumatic deaths, in some cases, but communal production of the mass of the mound might more generally have celebrated growth following death, particularly collective deaths. This has to be set alongside the increased construction of mounds in many contexts – not just following the deposition of the human dead – across mainland Britain after *c.* 3600 calBC (*Thomas 2006*). Some acts of monument construction may actually have required the investment of human flesh and/or bone while others did not, as among some of the earthen long barrows near Avebury or in Sussex where no human remains were present. Few earthen mounds formed chambered tombs for people to access the ancestral remains of the dead, although they did produce monuments where future generations could gather and, perhaps, venerate their ancestors who had built the monument. We might consider some mortuary deposits at earthen barrows as 'foundation deposits', then, perhaps establishing a new lineage or clan or a new status for existing ones – votive and cosmogenic practices necessary before construction could take place, rather than simply funerals.

Healing the wounds?

Some single-event collective deposits may have resulted from a process whereby those who died in a certain period were buried on a specific event in a ritual calendar (*Smith and Brickley 2009.68–9*), although we might expect to find more sites or more bodies at each site if this were so. Some may have resulted from events in which a broad community of more than one lineage or clan came together to bury those who died in, say, a feud, ending that episode in their mutual history and starting another as they co-operated in building a mound or enclosure. In this context, it is worth remembering the scale of these monuments, and also worth bearing in mind that the deliberate destruction, dismantling and deposition of axes have been noted at several causewayed enclosures. Schulting and Wysocki (2005. 125) point out that antler picks, which are commonly found in ditches at causewayed enclosures and other sites, might have been weapons as well as tools (providing a good match for some of the

healed injuries found on crania)⁴. Perhaps feuding groups sometimes ‘buried the hatchet’ (cf. *Edmonds 2006.353*) by using weapons as tools and discarding them and/or burying their dead. Perhaps some of these events helped to transform bad deaths into good relations. We are used to considering that the remains of the long dead might be manipulated in forming connections between communities (e.g. *Richards 1988.50*), but perhaps displaying and burying the remains of the fairly recently dead played similar roles at times: assisting in the forgetting of insults and injuries as much as (or more than) remembering the dead themselves; or forgetting the traumatic deaths of these persons and remembering instead the social ties that bound the surviving community together (cf. *Fowler 2003. 57–9*). Perhaps some mortuary deposits were events of atonement, regret, reconciliation. These events served also to remind the living of the ephemeral nature of life, and that their deaths, no matter how traumatic, could be converted into renewed relations and new growth. Furthermore, it has been suggested that Highland New Guinea *moka* exchanges may have originated in mortuary exchanges, whereby one clan offers gifts to its mourning neighbour, and later receives a greater gift in acknowledgement (*Nairn and Strathern 1974; cf. Barraud et al. 1994*). Thus, one of the contexts of Neolithic gift exchange might have been debts related to deaths, funerals and other mortuary events, while, as Schulting and Wysocki (2005.132) note, ‘[g]roups that exchange axes and marriage partners one day, may fight the next.’

Bodies, persons and ancestors

It is possible to characterise Early Neolithic concepts of the body and person in general terms which encompass the diverse range of practices discussed above, although local patterns and histories of the body were probably distinctive. It has been pointed out before that, while funerals may commemorate the deceased, Early Neolithic mortuary practices do not accentuate a singular bounded body or person (e.g. *Fowler 2001; Thomas 2002*). Such interpretations have often focussed on the evidence from chambered tombs, and this wider synthesis illustrates that the general interpretation of relational personhood and bodily matter that is charged with cultural value (*Thomas 1998*) fits well with the wider diversity in Early Neolithic mortuary practice.

Even where bodies were left intact in tombs, the collective nature of the tombs indicates a concern with relations between the dead over the celebration of individual features of distinctive identity.

Bodily remains were clearly meaningful both soon and long after death, and objects (and animals) encompassed by the deceased were probably similarly meaningful. As personhood can be distributed beyond the human body, such objects, animals, etc, could all be considered as inalienable from a person (e.g. *Fowler 2001; 2004a*). Thus, the gift (or theft) of these parts would be felt deeply. Body parts were extracted from bodies, perhaps sometimes as a result of an assault with exactly this appropriation in mind (e.g. in exercising grief [*Rosaldo 1984*] or coping with other emotions arising from tense relations with others). At the level of the community, which might have been considered as a corporate body and composite person, animals or even humans might be given away or taken by force in a parallel way. Bodies, and even parts of bodies such as heads, were in some cases ‘exchanged’ in a range of interactions between persons and communities. In Orkney, this interchange was probably focussed on the remains of the ancestral dead as part of an unfolding mortuary sequence which ultimately led to a situation whereby relations between communities could be re-articulated by bringing the remains of the dead together. Other exchanges might have been predatory: for instance, in southern Britain, efforts might have been made to appropriate the remains of the dead or take heads from the living. In some regions the blocking in of chambers as cairns were reshaped or extended might have safe-guarded the ancestral remains of the dead (and thereby the community of the living) from disturbance, dissipation or theft; the loss of spiritual essences associated with the material remains. Indeed, we could infer that bodies were believed to contain vital essences manifest in flesh and blood and other bodily substances as well as in bone. Where does this leave the view of a Neolithic concern with their ancestors?

No matter how diverse Early Neolithic mortuary practices were, they left the material remains of human ancestors in the landscape in an enduring way – sometimes as the decaying remains of the recently dead; in others, the long dead and mounds covering them. I would suggest that human remains be-

⁴ Harris (*forthcoming*) develops the idea that many of the non-lethal blows in Schulting and Wysocki’s corpus could have been produced using antler tines in acts of violence that were not intended to be lethal but rather harm and mark bodies (during rites of passage, penalties for transgressions, etc.), and various kinds of violence probably shaped as well as ended Neolithic lives. The discard of antler tines and axes might have had other connotations connected with personal biographies.

came inalienable from the sites where they were invested, and from other remains sharing that locale, and that a distinctive sense of place and community emerged from the ongoing series of practices to which bodies and sites were subject. Chambered tombs set up conditions from which ties to the ancestral dead could be traced time and again even when other practices had different results. As Whittle *et al.* (2006:360) outline for Ascott-under-Wychwood, particular deaths (*e.g.* violent deaths, the deaths of specific people) were invested in and transformed at these sites, as the sites themselves became sedimented with a particular history or biography which combined place, community and the memory of specific persons. Later activities reached back into the past at these sites, further reworking formative relationships for the present community.

Only in some places, at some times, were the *bones* of the ancestral human dead a key focus of concern. The realisation that some tombs were only used to deposit the dead from one or two generations or included victims of violence might erode some of our faith in Neolithic cults of the ancestral dead. Yet, there need be no conflict between a belief in potent ancestors and the other practices discussed here: all were concerned with the values invested in and effects of interacting with Early Neolithic bodies. Indeed, ancestry is usually something that is invested in the living body, made evident in the materials of the body. One of the classic ethnographic analyses used to discuss the value of bone as ancestral – Bloch's (*e.g.* 1982) studies of the Merina – indicate that flesh and blood are used to trace ancestry along the female line, while bone relates to the male line, for instance (see also Carsten 2004:88–91). Thus, bodies might be understood as measures of relatedness regardless of whether they were alive, recently deceased or long dead, although the precise relationships and identities characterising those bodies/bodily remains at different points in this biography arguably changed. Furthermore, the sites cho-

sen for depositing the Early Neolithic dead were very often places with a history. Occupation sites and 'shrines' of split tree-trunk post arrangements may have been associated with the ancestors (or other spiritual or divine agencies) long before anyone was buried there, and mortuary practices may have changed how living humans and dead humans related to other beings with whom they believed they shared ancestry (trees, cattle, deer, *etc.*) at that locale. Human bodies cannot be understood in isolation from the bodies of animals, plants, objects, buildings and places, but are co-existent and co-emergent with them through particular practices, cosmologies, and experiences (*e.g.* Cummings *et al.* 2002; Edmonds 2006; Fowler 2004a; 2004b; 2008a-b; Ray and Thomas 2003; Thomas 2002). Thus, to grasp Early Neolithic beliefs about the body, we need to move beyond the material remains of the human bodies themselves and place them in context. Interpretations of the wider context of death and mortuary practice – including analysis of mortuary sites as contexts of bodily transformation and consideration of the role of mortuary practices alongside monument-construction in the transformation of communities and places – are vital in building interpretations of Neolithic bodies, persons and social relations.

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