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The monumentality of death: the character of Early Bronze Age mortuary mounds in southern Britain

John C. Barrett

Death . . . makes the meanest of us sacred.

(Wm Hazlitt on the death of Byron)

Recently it has been suggested that if we are going to write of paradigm shifts in the history of archaeology, then the decisive break ‘in the way in which archaeologists actually see the world of material culture’ came, not with Binford’s paper ‘Archaeology as anthropology’ (1962), but twenty years later with Hodder’s edited volume Symbolic and Structural Archaeology (Tilley 1989: 185). The latter explored the way in which material culture operates as a means of communication, and laid the foundations for an increasingly refined understanding of the role of material culture in processes of social reproduction. It was this groundwork which has established that material culture can only be understood as operating in a meaningful way when it is implicated within a particular region of social practice. Material culture does not so much reflect social conditions as participate in the structuring and transformation of those conditions.

Traditional archaeology has operated, and to a large extent continues to operate, as if past acts of human agency resulted in a kind of material trace which survives as the contemporary archaeological record. This leads archaeologists to treat past social processes as partly causing the material patterns which are available for us to study, reducing the aim of archaeology to simply identifying the particular processes which have resulted in a given material record. For example, we are probably all familiar with discussions which have been concerned with isolating the material correlates of certain ideal social types such as ‘chiefdoms’ (Renfrew 1974; Peebles and Kus 1977). Whilst this kind of thinking may seem uncontroversial, it does, I believe, result in an inadequate conceptualization of social processes, presenting them as in some way preceding and thus standing separate from their material consequences.

The alternative is to conceive of social phenomena as practices which extended over regions of time/space. In the past these practices arose as human agents reworked their particular cultural preconceptions about the world through their actions upon that world. Material culture now becomes a set of resources which: 1) guide such actions; 2) enable communicative action to be effective and 3) allow a monitoring of those actions and their effects as the world is itself transformed. Material culture is internal to the very processes which the archaeologist is attempting to understand, and its meaning may be transformed within those processes. Our understanding of material cultural residues is now dependent
upon our ability to reconstruct the historical context of the practices into which such resources were drawn, and which those resources, in turn, helped to structure. Such reconstructions demand an understanding of the way material culture plays back upon the human practices which create it, rather than positing a simple relationship between them, of cause and effect. Such contextual reconstructions are really only going to be possible through our attempts to write history or prehistory (Barrett 1987).

I will attempt to illustrate the implications of this type of approach for the study of monuments, by reference to a specific group of earthworks whose investigation dominated the early development of British prehistory. These are the round mounds of the Bronze Age. Although by no means uniformly distributed across the British landscape (Atkinson 1972), they do (or rather did) survive in considerable numbers, and were amongst the monuments most consistently investigated by the antiquaries of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For these earlier excavators the mounds stood as a mute testimony to the ‘ancient Britons’ whose mortal remains were often found within and beneath them.

Although here we are primarily concerned with the round mounds of the early second millennium BC, some account must be given of the contrast, often made, between these monuments and the earlier megalithic and non-megalithic long mounds of the Neolithic. By the time Thurnam published his survey of British barrows in 1869–72, the distinction between the long and the round mounds was well established in terms not simply of mound shape but also in the nature of the deposits recovered from within them. Crude though the distinction is, long mounds have often produced human remains where more than one individual was represented in a single deposit, where there are few associated artefacts, and where those skeletal remains were often mixed and disarticulated. By contrast, the round mounds often covered primary graves containing single inhumations, sometimes with associated grave goods. Other round mounds covered cremations, and cremations and inhumations did occur in stratigraphically later positions within some mounds. Cremation was also a recognizable component of Neolithic deposits in some regions.

A very general sequence of mortuary deposits thus emerged and has come to be treated as describing a broad, evolutionary, development between the fourth and the second millennia BC. Whilst allowance has to be made for regional variation within this sequence, Burgess, in his review of the late third and second millennia, has still been able to characterize the history of the period partly in terms of an evolving pattern of mortuary architecture and burial deposits which involved the gradual adoption of round mounds and, from the second millennium onwards, the steady displacement of inhumation traditions by cremation (1980).

The archaeology of society

Present day archaeologists no longer speak of the cultural or the ethnic identity of the mound builders but seek instead to explain the mounds, and the deposits they contained, by reference to processes of indigenous social change. Thus the seemingly rich graves of the southern British Early Bronze Age, originally ascribed to the Wessex Culture and taken to represent a migrant Breton aristocracy (Piggott 1938), are now explained as the conspicuous display undertaken by an indigenous elite whose outward concern was to
make manifest their own individual status. The origins of this form of social display have been traced back to the Late Neolithic and to the rise of the single grave burial traditions, most obviously those characterized by the Beaker grave assemblages. By the same token, the cremation traditions of the Middle Bronze Age, where the cremations were often deposited on the margins of earlier barrow mounds, seemingly represent a period of social devolution. ‘The whole fabric of prestigious burial and ritual implicit in the cinerary urns, grave goods and “fancy” burial sites vanished. The less ostentatious . . . cremations continued alone, suggesting a complete social revolution’ (Burgess 1980: 79).

Binford’s work on the social significance of mortuary practices is well known, often being cited as one of the clearest critiques of cultural explanations for mortuary variability and an explicit statement of the way evidence about social organization might be mapped into the archaeologically recoverable burial data (1971). He argued that the form of the burial rite was determined in part by the need to represent something of the social persona of the individual, and in part by the extent to which other members of the social group recognized responsibilities toward the deceased. Thus, variation in the structure of mortuary data should reflect, in a fairly direct way, the degree of social structural complexity characterizing the society from which the burial data derive. Binford’s study was part of a more general programme of scholarship designed to specify the archaeological correlates existing between social organization and funerary deposits (Saxe 1970; Brown 1971). Whilst Binford’s case was generally confirmed by his ethnographic case studies, the need to develop a more precise, archaeological application of the basic premise has become the focus of more recent work.

Tainter comments upon the traditional archaeological emphasis given to grave associations, to the exclusion of other categories of data, in the analysis of mortuary variation. He draws attention to the need to evaluate the wider expenditure of energy involved in the entire funerary procedure, and also considers the way locational patterns might indicate the existence of such social identities as descent groups (1978). O’Shea has also considered the wider range of variables which are in operation to create the archaeologically recoverable patterns of mortuary deposits (1984). All such work is united by a common idea: that social categories relating to particular individuals are represented in archaeologically observable ways via mortuary rituals. When O’Shea writes about creating an explicit archaeological theory upon which to ground the analysis of this proposition, he is referring to issues of ‘middle range theory’; a programme dedicated to establishing general and agreed links between dynamics (the structure of funerary rituals) and the static material record. This is not a theoretical evaluation of the social phenomena the archaeologist is investigating, and yet it is this which is surely required. We must, for example, establish a more detailed understanding of the relationship between mortuary rituals and social structure rather than assume that the former reflects the latter.

O’Shea’s work involves a detailed evaluation of the efficiency of mortuary data as an indicator of social structural organization. In his studies he argues that ‘vertical’ distinctions of rank are visible in such data, but that ‘horizontal’ distinctions such as descent groups are less easy to identify. He also considers the indications of temporal variation within data drawn from Pawnee and Anikara cemeteries. The indications are of considerable variation over relatively short periods of time, where ‘change was observed in the number and nature of rank and prestige positions, in corporate group membership,
and even in the special status distinctions recognised’ (O'Shea 1984: 283). Such variation
extended beyond changes in the symbolic repertoire in use and indicated apparent social
instability. This was related, by O'Shea, to a period of rapid depopulation leading to
changes in settlement structure and, with it, changes in systems of leadership and
authority. At the same time new trading relations are also claimed to have had profound
effects in terms of social status organization. In short, ‘changes in the society at large
*induced* related changes in the mortuary symbolism of each culture’ (O'Shea 1984: 284)
(my emphasis).

Let us now consider a different kind of reasoning, one which may be summarized by
Parker Pearson’s comment that ‘social systems are not constituted of roles but by recurrent
social practices’ (1982: 100). Society is not something which induces change in particular
social practices (such as mortuary rituals); rather, it is society which is itself carried
forward by such practices. Mortuary rituals are amongst the routine, strategic engage-
ments through which people reproduce the conditions of their own lives. Mortuary
symbolism is thus employed by mourners concerned not simply with the proper treatment
of the dead, but also with the reallocation of rights and duties amongst themselves. It is the
mourners who are the active participants in the funeral ritual, and the practices are
amongst those which continually bring the social system into being. Instead of reifying
society, we should treat it as the routine consequence of institutionalized practices. The
analytical challenge is therefore not to reveal the structure of a ‘society’, but to examine
the recurrent ways in which people drew upon the available cultural and material resources
to restructure relationships between themselves.

**The monumentality of death**

Mortuary monuments are both the context for funerary rites and their consequence; they
are amongst both the causes and the effects of the phenomena we are investigating.

Funerary rites are thus partly structured by the physical settings they employ, a
structuring which involves allocating regions of time/space to those who partake in those
rites. This distinguishes between different groups of participant, and distributes the
various symbolic resources across the region occupied by the funeral. To give an example,
it may seem a requirement of the funeral that ancestors are present to receive the dead. In
his study of the Merina of Madagascar for example, Bloch (1971; 1982: 213) shows how the
dead cannot reside alone in the tomb; the bones of ancestors must be there to receive
them. Individuals may die under diverse circumstances, but the corpse, after a lengthy
period of transition, can be brought to a place of common ancestral veneration. It is quite
possible that the megalithic architecture of Neolithic Europe enabled such a dualism; a
focus of ancestral veneration to which access was possible occasionally, and where
additional burials might take place. Whenever adequately investigated, these monuments
display a complex architectural history (Kinnes 1981). As Kinnes comments, this should
occasion no great surprise for they represent the physical result of acts involving the
re-inscription of meaning and order upon the cultural landscape, including: the selection
of a place where ancestral intervention was regarded as being possible; the construction of
shrines and containers for ancestral remains; the building of a mound and façade to
orientate acts of veneration; and the building of chambers and passages to facilitate both ancestral and burial rites (Kinnes 1975; Barrett 1988). The building of these monuments was not so much a product of the Neolithic as a contribution toward its creation. This is not a Neolithic of ‘cultural diffusion’, nor of the steady ‘wave of advance’ of people, animals and grain across Europe. It is, instead, a Neolithic built out of the changing material conditions of Atlantic Europe (Thomas 1988). The seemingly sudden emergence of the Neolithic just after 4,000 cal. BC (c. 3,200 bc) in Britain comes at that point when the world could never be the same again. For example, the mounds by their use began to make possible a particular form of ancestral intervention amongst the living, and enabled the staging of practices which now distinguished between those who could approach the monument and those who had to keep a distance; between those who might enter the chambers and those who could only watch from the outside. Where they existed, the forecourt areas beyond the tomb, backed perhaps by the façade of the mound, and the chambers within the mound created a possible distinction between a ‘front space’, visible to all who were permitted to approach the mound, and the hidden and restricted area of the chambers available only to the few. Used in this way, the monuments might reinscribe basic social distinctions, such as those of age and gender, with new and powerful cultural metaphors. If the Neolithic emerged from the Mesolithic as a period of increased social differentiation (Bender 1978; 1985), then that differentiation was formed out of practices such as these and they required increasingly elaborate architectural settings to render them effective.

The mixed and fragmentary human remains often recorded in the megalithic chambers do not therefore reflect the operation of funeral rituals determined by some type of ‘egalitarian’ society. Rather, they are the heavily reworked symbolic residues through which communities will have re-established the primacy of certain cultural values and, in so doing, will have inscribed those values upon the social identities of the living.

The apparent contrast between these ‘communal’ monuments and the single grave traditions of the later third millennium BC may now be clarified. The contrast is in the strategic outcome of the funeral ritual itself. If some Neolithic funeral rituals did terminate with the addition of the corpse to a common ancestral tomb, then single grave burial involved the selection of a location, specific to that individual, for the termination of the funeral. Graves, which may be marked by a low covering mound, encircling ditch and fence, required that each future deposit within the cemetery established either an identification, or a contrast, with that which had gone before. Thus, in the barrow cemeteries of southern Britain, we find an increasingly elaborate topography of the dead emerging as funeral strategies were regularly required to rework this ordering. In some cases earlier graves were reopened, a process which involved digging down through both the covering mound and the primary grave fill. Elsewhere additional graves were dug alongside earlier deposits, or placed within, or immediately beyond, the ditch of the covering mound. These deposits were not arbitrarily placed, nor were they choices determined entirely by the perceived status of the dead. Such strategies ordered the dead as a means of carrying forward distinctions between the living; strategies which may be best understood in the context of an orally transmitted tradition of genealogical reckoning, where future political alliances required that their origins be written into the past.

The location which fixed the termination of the funeral ritual could thus be used to
restate the contrast between different genealogical lines. The importance of graveside rituals as part of an inhumation tradition now becomes clear. Burial rites as a whole may involve a lengthy liminal phase, signifying the cultural transition between life and death. It is during this period that the mourners, attending upon the corpse, are isolated from the wider community. Only when the burial rites are brought to a close, perhaps at the grave itself when the corpse after a period of procession and display is finally consigned to the ground, might the mourners return to the wider community. The grave not only forms a receptacle for the safe consignment of the dead, but becomes a focal point for the redefinition of genealogical status and for the redefinition of the status of the mourners amongst the living. The heavy significance placed upon this precise moment, the placing of the corpse in the grave, might explain something of the ‘wealth’ of certain inhumation burials. Where associated material occurs, it could represent both the dress of the corpse and some of the symbolic attire of mourning, finally discarded at this point of the ritual. Inhumation associations do include body ornaments (Needham 1988), and Hoare's description of the remarkable grave assemblage from the Bush Barrow gives the impression of a body laid out with items placed both around and upon it (1812: 204).

The wealth of such Wessex I grave assemblages may have much to do with the structure of the funerary ritual. By way of contrast, burial rituals which employ cremation may begin to close by the lighting of the pyre. If the ashes were then buried, little or none of the symbolism associated with the earlier stages of the ritual may be represented in archaeologically recoverable deposits (cf. Tainter 1978: 121).

Wessex II graves are in fact dominated by cremations and they are also generally regarded as the ‘poorer’ graves in the Wessex sequence. None the less, these cremation deposits do have a quite specific character in the range of their associations, distinguishing them from the wide cremation traditions which had emerged by about 1650 cal. BC. Cremation urns are rare in the Wessex II deposits, and the associated assemblages are still relatively complex, with daggers, a feature of the Wessex I assemblages, still represented (Piggott 1938; Proudfoot 1963; Barrett and Needham 1988: 133). Significantly, the pyre and the grave deposits were sometimes close to one another. Here the ashes were deposited in an area immediately adjacent to the pyre, and these deposits, and the remains of the pyre, might then be buried beneath a single barrow mound (Proudfoot 1963: 400; Ashbee 1986: 20).

It was the clear expectation of the earlier barrow investigators that the form of the barrow mound would correspond in a fairly direct way to the type of deposit found beneath it. This proved not to be the case. Hoare complained that ‘there seems so much variety and so little uniformity in the construction and contents of all our barrows that I almost despair of forming any regular system respecting them’ (quoted in Cunnington 1975: 52). Unfortunately such excavators left us with little information regarding the structure of the mounds through which they were digging. More recent work has remedied this to some extent, although excavation policies which have concentrated upon salvaging information from plough eroded sites have contributed little (cf. Green and Rollo-Smith 1984). However, it is certainly clear that many round barrows were composite structures, where a long history of additions to the mound will mean that its final form had little to do with the nature of the initial deposit. Mounds were enlarged by additional cappings of turf, soil and chalk and these additions need not be directly associated with the inclusion of any burial
deposit (Barrett 1988: 38). Indeed some mounds were constructed on fresh ground without any primary deposit beneath them (Ashbee 1986: 35). The enlarged mounds contributed toward the increasingly monumental form taken by the classic barrow cemeteries of Wessex (Pl. 1), and they became the architectural setting within which future burial rituals had to operate. Such an architecture might have been employed to evoke specific references to the past, indicating distinct lines of mythical ancestors amongst whom the dead were to be placed.

The monumental elaboration of certain cemeteries, through the building of additional round barrows and the enlargement of pre-existing mounds, probably took place throughout the early centuries of the second millennium BC, and was accompanied by the widespread adoption of cremation. Some cremations, including the Wessex II deposits already discussed, are primary burials beneath newly constructed round barrows, but

many more were now inserted into earlier and enlarged mounds. Indeed Burgess (1980: 115) characterizes his Bedd Branwen period, which starts around 1650 cal. BC, by reference to the southern British barrow of Amesbury G71 (Christie 1967) where cremations, some urned, were dug into the mound and the ditch. Might we suppose that the two processes of mound elaboration and the widespread adoption of cremation are connected in some way?

It seems quite possible that both processes indicate changing and increasingly elaborate funeral practices. The suggestion that the more complex inhumation grave assemblages, such as those of the early Wessex grave series, are indicative of the competitive display of rank has already been noted. If this were indeed the case, it is difficult to see how such displays might have worked effectively. As we have seen, much of the material may have been attached to the corpse, and other artefacts were perhaps placed in the grave by the mourners. It was the mourners, those most closely connected with the care of the corpse, who would have been aware of this material, but they would also be the very people most acutely aware of the status of the dead and their own relations to that individual. To use the funeral as a stage upon which to express one’s own status to a wider audience demands more efficient methods of display, amongst which we could include procession, sacrifice and feasting. By these methods the spatial and temporal range of the ritual process may have been extended, thus drawing more people within its influence. This process is likely to have culminated around the pyre, archaeological traces of which are normally limited. Some were clearly located quite near to the final spot where the ashes were buried, for occasionally these were still hot when placed in the ground, but there is quite considerable variation in the way the ashes were gathered, sorted and cleaned prior to final deposition (Longworth 1984: 47). The enlarged mound of Amesbury G71 was used as a platform upon which a pyre may have been established (Barrett 1988: 38). The chalk capping of other mounds, along with additional burials cut into these mounds, suggests that the use of the mound as an elevated platform may have been a relatively common occurrence; as such they would have effectively separated at least one group of mourners from their wider audience and made the final stages of the ritual more clearly visible. The idea of an extended rite also harmonizes well with Needham’s suggestion that certain dagger finds belonging to the later stages of the Early Bronze Age were deposited in rivers rather than graves as part of a more extensive process of votive deposition connected with the funerary ritual (Barrett and Needham 1988: 133).

The history of southern British mortuary rituals could now be seen as progressive attempts to make some of these rituals increasingly effective media for display. This would have demanded more than the simple use of exotica for burial with the corpse, requiring instead a more public staging of the ritual process. Such developments were contingent upon the cultural expectations of those involved and their ability, based upon those expectations, to rework the physical resources available to them. We perceive a long archaeological sequence in the development of the material, with the occasionally complex grave associations of the earlier inhumation rituals giving way to apparently ‘impoverished’ assemblages accompanying the adoption of cremation and the building of enlarged mounds. These complex barrow mounds, which so characterize the period in the archaeological literature, are the end result of attempts to form a final stage upon which increasingly elaborate funeral dramas might have been performed.
Conclusion

It has not been the intention of this paper to recite yet more cautionary tales for archaeologists by pointing out that there is not a direct correlation between social structural complexity and the variation in archaeological mortuary data. This is not really the issue once we are prepared to accept the view of archaeology as an interpretive exercise where an understanding of the past emerges out of our attempts to give meaning to its material residues. That act is not the same as linking certain residues to particular actions (or ‘dynamics’), but to situate that material within specific strategies of social reproduction. The material residues of mortuary rituals do not arise as the by-product of abstract social processes but were the means through which people once renewed certain rights and obligations between the living and re-evaluated their own cultural understandings of the world against the empirical reality of death (Bloch and Parry 1982: 6).

The implications of this approach for archaeology include the realization that the meaning of material culture may be transformed by these strategies, may be constantly open to challenge, and that attempts to control and fix the meaning given to certain cultural conditions is itself an act of political control. Bradley has recently pointed out some of the implications of this thinking for the analysis of grave assemblages (1988), noting that what the archaeologist is observing is not a simple sequence of artefact development but a history of the competitive control over the media of sacrifice. He has since gone on to demonstrate how these competitive strategies work across a wide range of sacrificial contexts, creating long-term cycles in the histories of artefact deposition (Bradley 1990). A similar case has been made by Cannon (1989), who suggests that as an elite begins to lose control of the cultural mechanisms by which they redefine themselves in the acts of burying their dead they may both abandon those mechanisms and attempt to control their wider use through ridicule or legal proscription. Once again the material will reflect a long cycle in the changing history of its use. Such cycles in the use of display and sacrificial items should be recognizable archaeologically, but we should be careful not to erect these cycles as explanations of the past. They are but the unintended outcome of the routine practices of people who could have acted otherwise. It is through the uncovering of the history of these routines that archaeology makes its contribution to the understanding of the past.

References


Abstract

*Barrett, John C.*

The monumentality of death: the character of Early Bronze Age mortuary mounds in southern Britain

The archaeology of Early Bronze Age mortuary practices in southern Britain can be described as a sequence running from inhumation through to cremation in which the more elaborate grave assemblages are those associated with some of the earlier inhumation deposits. This sequence was accompanied by the building of burial mounds where many of the later cremation deposits were buried in the margins, or dug into the surface, of those mounds. By considering the burial ritual from the point of view of the mourners who employed the symbolic resources available to them to facilitate the safe disposal of the dead and to confirm inherited rights and obligations, it is possible to interpret the sequence of archaeological remains as indicating the increasing use of funerals as periods of display which contributed toward the establishment of complex genealogical systems.