



Round mounds or barrows of earth and their counterparts, the cairns of stone found in the uplands, are the most common surviving prehistoric monuments in the British Isles. In Wessex alone, over 4000 Bronze Age barrows have been identified, many fine examples of which can be seen as upstanding sites in the chalkland around Stonehenge.

Because of their high visibility, barrows were widely explored during the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by antiquarian excavators such as Colt Hoare in Wiltshire and Thomas Bateman and J R Mortimer in northern England. Indeed, until the development of techniques to identify and excavate prehistoric settlements in the late nineteenth century almost all that was known of the Bronze Age was the result of barrow digging. In the age before radiocarbon dating, the first chronologies for the period were established by ordering grave goods (for example, pottery and metalwork) into sequences.

The earliest round barrows in fact date to the Neolithic period when mounds were raised over the dead, sometimes individuals but often larger numbers of people. The major increase in burial monuments, however, occurred after the widespread adoption of Beaker pottery around four and a half thousand years ago (c. 2500 cal BC). Beakers are found across Western Europe and this has led to debate over whether they were linked to migration or to adoption through cultural contact. The problem is complicated by the fact that only a small part of the population was buried in graves. Nonetheless, recent research suggests that there was some migration from various parts of Europe, but that internal migration within Britain was also significant in the uptake of Beaker pottery.

The earliest Beaker burials were not covered by very substantial barrows, and some, like the 'Amesbury Archer' burial, do not seem to have been covered by mounds at all. Early Beaker burials are typically single bodies, which can be crouched or extended, accompanied by the Beaker pot that was often placed by the head or the feet. These vessels are very different in

appearance from those of the Neolithic period, being finely made and highly decorated, with the earliest examples having the profiles of inverted bells.

There has been debate over what Beakers contained. Traces of pollen found inside a few vessels has suggested to some that they may have held alcoholic beverages such as mead, but it is also possible that the pollen may have been derived from floral tributes placed inside the grave. Analysis of Beakers found in barrows has also suggested that some were less robust than those found in settlements and that they may have been made especially for funeral use.

Occasionally Beakers were accompanied by metal items such as copper daggers or knives, and very rarely by tiny gold trinkets, including 'basket earrings', such as those found at Radley in Oxfordshire. The most common accompanying artefacts, however, are distinctive flint barbed and tanged arrowheads and stone 'bracers'. The latter are often interpreted as archers wrist-guards but could have been falconers equipment or dress items denoting the status of their wearer.

After about a century (c. 2300 cal BC), Beaker burials become less standardized and across Britain there are regional differences in pottery form and in burial rite too. Multiple burials and cremations are also deposited with Beakers and other ceramic forms begin to appear. In the north of England, for example, Food Vessels are found with, and then entirely replace, Beakers. Copper artefacts, especially daggers start to appear and become more common from around 4000 years ago (c. 2000 cal BC).

The period from around 2000 cal BC until 1500 cal BC is marked by a good deal of regional diversity in burial rite, with cremation becoming increasingly frequent. In the north and east of England, for example some individuals, often adult males, were chosen for burial in log coffins. In the Stonehenge area, a series of rich burials were accompanied by artefacts which could include daggers, golden trinkets such as pendants, or necklaces made of exotic beads of

faience or amber. The majority of people were not, however, buried in this way, and in most parts of Britain individuals were accompanied by single items, most commonly by ceramics such as Collared Urns or, in the west of Britain, Trevisker vessels. It is also the case that much has been lost, with organic items such as highly prized textile garments all but disappearing from the archaeological record.

Recent study has also revealed that barrows were more than simply places of burial. For example, at Raunds large numbers of cattle were slaughtered, which suggests that large-scale feasting took place as part of a funerary ritual. Other sites have been found to contain no burials at all. The ring cairns of western Britain, for example, are more strongly associated with pits containing offerings of charcoal and quartz pebbles.

At the same time there is also a great deal of variation in the form and scale of the barrow site. Some barrows can be just a few metres in diameter while others can exceed 40 m. Likewise, the perimeter of some sites can be encircled by low banks or deeply cut ditches. The covering mounds can be several metres high, but by contrast others are low and are best described as platforms. Other types of barrow, such as pond barrows or ring cairns, have no covering mound at all and are best viewed as enclosed spaces used for communal ceremonies. Careful modern excavation has also revealed that, rather like a parish church, barrows could change their form over time with for example mounds being built over old sites, ditches added and new burials inserted.

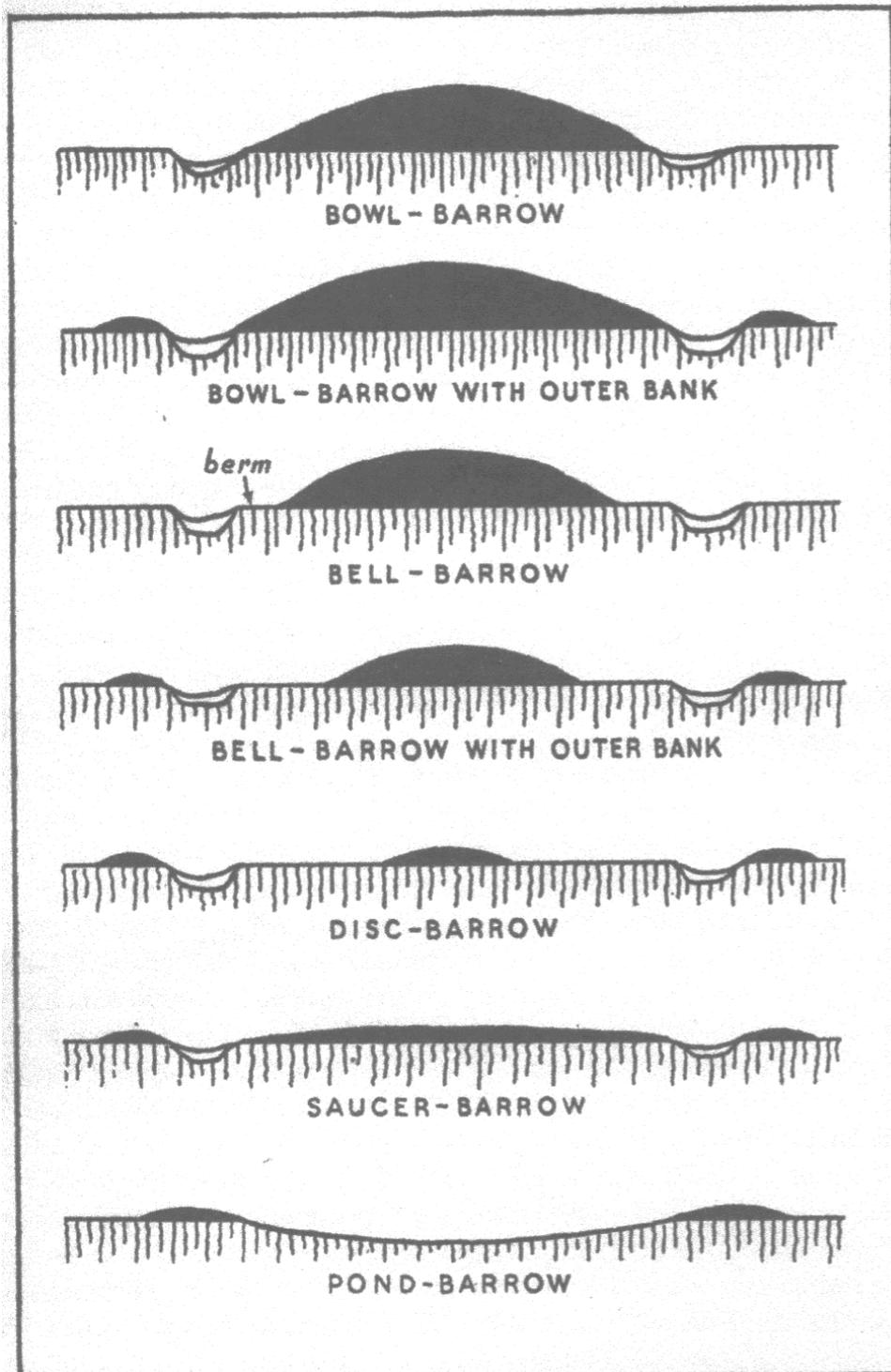
This diversity was in fact something that had been noticed early on in Wessex by Colt Hoare who, recognizing that there were many types of barrow on the chalk, attempted to categorize them. Some of his names, such as 'bowl' barrow have been retained, but others such as 'cone'

barrow have been discarded. Some researchers have, however, suggested that Hoare may have been correct in assuming a greater range of site types than current typology allows for. It is certainly the case that in the uplands of Britain a wide diversity of cairn type has been recognized, with for example 30 different types being identified on Bodmin Moor alone.

Barrow building reached its peak around 1700/1600 cal BC. From this period there is a marked decline in the construction of new sites, and those that are built tend to be smaller and associated with cremations buried inside urns. This shift is marked by the use of Deverel Rimbury ceramics and the widespread appearance of fields and roundhouses, which characterize the Middle Bronze Age.



*Beaker burial from Shrewton, Wilts. (Courtesy of Salisbury Museum).*



*Round barrow types.*

*This factsheet was prepared for the Prehistoric Society by Andy Jones (Cornwall Archaeological Unit)*