

Memory, Death and Time in British Prehistory: Round Barrows of the Early Bronze Age

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Abstract: *Grasping at memory and remembrance in prehistory can be akin to catching smoke; however, the monuments of the Neolithic (c. 4000 – 2500 BC), and Early Bronze Age (c. 2500 – 1500 BC), exist in an active landscape of emotion, life and death, both of the present and the prehistoric past. In particular, the round barrows have inspired the imaginations of the antiquarian, author and archaeologist alike, and there are almost three-thousand examples across Yorkshire. From recent developments in identifying a clearer later prehistoric chronology using artefact typology and the work of archaeologists such as Paul Garwood in contextualising the round barrow in time and space, this paper will attempt to elucidate the morass of relationships between the living, the dead and these monuments during the Early Bronze Age through worked examples in Yorkshire and the impact of previous scholars' contribution to the evidence.*

Like other striking prehistoric sites such as stone circles, barrows of various kinds attracted the attention of the antiquarians and became the subject of many of their early investigations. As monuments or archaeological sites, they represent to us the themes of death, the un-chronicled past and the allure of hidden treasure, which capture public and academic imaginations alike. They are part of our myths and legends as fairy hills and palaces, and

have been adapted into fictional works such as Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, as the home of his malevolent barrow-wights. Barrows have become part of the language: forming the basis of place names such as 'Howe', from the Old Norse for hill, often found in Yorkshire. From their beginnings during the Early Neolithic, from around 4000 BC onwards, they have been adopted, adapted and altered until well into the 20th Century, becoming the sites for beacon fires during the Medieval period, pill-boxes or anti-aircraft gun emplacements during the Second World War, or as disposal pits for animal waste during the nineteenth century.

Traditionally, archaeologists have defined the Early Bronze Age as the period beginning from 2500 BC and finishing at the latest c. 1400 BC, which is characterized by the introduction of bronze and copper tools, an increase in monumental architecture like stone circles, and single-grave burial beneath round mounds. This was in stark contrast with the previous Neolithic period where long barrows and chambered tombs featured the dead as collectivised and homogenous, structures such as cursus monuments dominated the landscape, and tools such as axes were made of stone. This prehistoric canon has been used to describe the period from c. 4000 to 1400 BC in very broad strokes but in the landscape of the Early Bronze Age, monuments such as round barrows, henges and standing stones did not exist in singular vacuums; they were part of a vibrant continuum of life, death, cosmology and memory for peoples that raised them and moved amongst them. Even older monuments such as cursus monuments, long barrows, and timber circles were part of the spiritual and cultural landscape of the third and second millennia.

Burials and Round Barrows

Vere Gordon Childe in his book: *The Bronze Age* attributed round barrows to the influx of Beaker people who brought single-grave burial and metalwork to Britain (Childe 1930). Ever since, archaeology has linked these particular pottery vessels with the phenomena of round

barrows in Britain. The leading hypothesis being that they are mounds constructed over the graves of high-status individuals, whose graves lay at the heart of the barrow along with things they would need for the afterlife. Buried around them were the subsequent ‘satellite’ burials of lesser-status individuals, later insertions into the mound were attributed to an appropriation of the memory of the great descendent in order to bask in the reflected status.

Following this assertion, many archaeologists attempted to define and categorise the round barrows of prehistoric Britain into acute taxonomies defining them as the ‘bowl’, the ‘disc’, the ‘saucer’ or even the ‘pond’ – labelling the variety of forms, all ready to be checked off akin to Michelin spotter’s guide. The best example of this type of archaeology can be found in *The Bronze Age Round Barrow in Britain: An introduction to the study of the funerary practice and culture of the British and Irish Single-Grave People of the second millennium B.C.*, which was dedicated to the memory of V. G. Childe (Ashbee 1960). This line of thinking was supported by the underlying assumption that the transition from Neolithic to Early Bronze Age was marked by a drastic social change from largely collective, agrarian society to a more dynamic, hierarchical chiefly society.

Although, it is not entirely borne out by the archaeological evidence it makes for a very compelling interpretation, and as we shall see, this kind of work has proved useful for later archaeologists. Nonetheless, the round barrow as a purely Bronze Age phenomenon is a misnomer - there is extensive evidence from Yorkshire that there was an existing practice of burying the dead beneath large round mounds during the Earlier Neolithic, with sites such as Whitegrounds and Duggleby Howe (Manby, King, and Vyner 2003).

In addition, the concept of Single-Grave Peoples was challenged by a study of burial practices in round barrows which demonstrated that out of over 400 round barrows, only 35% had graves occupied by single individual burials, and therefore this was the least

common form of inhumed burial (Petersen 1972). This research was based on the examination of the excavations carried out in East Yorkshire by Drifffield-based antiquarians: John and Robert Mortimer during the latter half of the 19th Century: *Forty years' researches in British and Saxon burial mounds of East Yorkshire* (Mortimer 1905), as well as their contemporary William Greenwell's less-weighty *British Barrows* (Greenwell and Rolleston 1877). Between them, these works represent the sizable majority of recorded excavation in the East Riding of Yorkshire and we are fortunate that they both amassed sizable collections and produced detailed volumes that have formed the basis of fascinating work on round barrows.

Other archaeologists have employed Mortimer and Greenwell's research; Anna Tuckwell concluded in the seventies that the deceased's gender was a key factor in the arrangement of the body within a grave (Tuckwell 1975). In particular, Beaker burials were divided by gender: male burials were interred on their left side, with their heads easternmost and facing south; while female burials were placed on their right side, with their heads to the west but also facing south (Tuckwell 1975, 113). Furthermore, in 1993 Koji Mizoguchi built on this by adding a temporal element by identifying a common sequence for interments in round barrows. Examining the burial sequences of graves, Mizoguchi discovered that in the majority of cases, they would follow the same basic pattern: a male interment placed first, then usually followed by either a female or a juvenile burial (Mizoguchi 1993).

Observing the trend that over the Early Bronze Age, burial practices moved away from the inhumation of intact remains toward cremation, Mizoguchi drew upon the work of sociologists: Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens. Employing Giddens' theories about authority and his concept of 'structures' - the internalised rules of social practice (Giddens 1984), and Bourdieu's 'habitus' - the recreation of society's rules and internal dynamics

through repeated practice (Bourdieu 1990), and, combining them with ethnographic examples, Mizoguchi proposed that a select group would hold the knowledge of the alignment of the first interment, and thus, authority over the rites and practices of their present. In addition to the fallibility of memory, Mizoguchi also proposed that this authority needed to be demonstrated more readily and the spectacle of cremation provided a more visual, more accessible demonstration of this group's power of knowledge through the significant transformation from fleshed remains to unfleshed.

Mizoguchi's importance in drawing attention to the role of memory and its capacity to transform over time in individual barrow sites should be acknowledged, but it fails to fully capture the context in which these practices were embedded. More recently, scholars have engaged with the role of time in the structure and contents of round barrows in an attempt to create more interesting and varied chronologies from the available evidence. This has been the influence of Garwood in establishing patterns amongst the data and studying the landscape situation, internal mortuary practice and architecture of barrows (Garwood 2007). Although his approach is interesting, it draws heavily from terminology defined by Ashbee in the 1960s (Ashbee 1960), and does tend towards generalising the evidence available, particularly regarding Northern British round barrows.

Round barrows are part of an active monumental landscape and their location near existing Neolithic structures such as cursus monuments, linear banks that can extend for miles across the landscape, and henges, circular ditches surrounded by a bank of earth, is not coincidental. Furthermore, round barrows were part of a plethora of options for the passage from death to life during the Early Bronze Age. Evidence of alternative mortuary practices and their implied commonality, is indicated by the deposition of remains in water, as suggested by the human remains recovered from the River Trent, near Langford, dated to between 2250 and

2100 BC, and the presence of ritual sites near to other water sources. Additionally, the dead of Early Bronze Age Scotland were placed in slab-lined graves known by archaeologists as ‘short-cists’; these were often topped with earthen mounds, although covering by stone cairn has also been reported. Similarly, clearance cairns, commonly associated by archaeologists with agriculture and field clearance, have also been found to contain human remains deposits (Parker Pearson 1999, 87). As Early Bronze Age round barrows often contain multiple sets of remains, variation exists: burials can be placed directly on the prehistoric ground surface, in grave pits, or inserted into the mounds themselves with an array of internal differences or all three. These burials can include near-intact inhumations with extensive grave goods, cremations accompanied by a simple pottery vessel, or anything in-between. These variations have been observed in burial mounds within close proximity to one another.

This evidence of landscape referencing can be found most famously at the Stonehenge landscape where round barrows are visible from the Greater Stonehenge Cursus and the famous stone circle itself. This is also the case in East Yorkshire, at the Rudston cursus complex, in the north-east of the Yorkshire Wolds (Stoertz 1997). However, we will provide a closer example with the Ure-Swale interfluvium.

Memory, Myth and the Ure-Swale catchment

This region is an area of low-lying land between the two rivers: the Ure and the Swale, which flow down from the Pennine hills. It is also the site of several Neolithic monument complexes, including one at Thornborough. This is a confluence of three henges, cursus monuments and Early Bronze Age round barrows, lying close to the River Ure.

It is the three large henge monuments, in their north-west alignment across the landscape, that form the focus of this complex. The central henge directly overlaps a cursus monument

that runs towards the Ure, towards the south-east, however, excavation has indicated an existing feature that the cursus segued into, which the henge was constructed over. There has been speculation that this could have been a Neolithic causewayed enclosure but evidence has not been forthcoming (Bridgland et al. 2011). Furthermore, there is another cursus that runs parallel to the alignment of the henges, however, it has yet to be investigated fully (Harding and Johnson 2003b). Around these monuments are situated a number of round barrows; four of these were excavated in 1864 by the Rev. William Collins Lukis: the Three Hills barrows and the Centre Hill barrow (Lukis 1870). These excavations uncovered a number of finds within the round barrows – a tree-trunk coffin burial in Centre Hill, cremation burials throughout all of the barrows and a number of ‘course jars’ that are likely to be Food Vessels; these would place the primary graves of these barrows at around the beginning of the second millennium BCE.¹ What is interesting is that these monuments align with the rest of the complex quite neatly. In particular, Centre Hill, which lies directly on the axis of the henges, as well as being connected to another barrow via a double pit alignment, is one of the most interesting barrows in that it features a timber coffin burial. In addition, its position on such a central location within the complex indicates significance for the monument or possibly the individual interred within it.

Another henge alignment further down river, encompassing sites at Nunwick, Cana Barn and Hutton Moor, also has a number of round barrows around it. Three of these were excavated by Lukis during his excavations in 1864 and the finds from these sites were similar to the barrows around the Thornborough complex (Lukis 1870). The exception was the discovery of an Accessory Cup, a small pottery vessel, found amongst a cremation in the

¹ In addition, when the northernmost of the Three Hills barrows was resurveyed and excavated by the Thornborough Project in 2003; it only revealed additional cremated remains and non-diagnostic flints (Harding and Johnson 2003a).

northernmost barrow. However, the remaining barrows featured similar assemblages of Food Vessels and flints amongst the cremations.

In and of themselves, these finds are not particularly interesting, however, in relation to their surroundings they reveal a little of the chronology of the region. The pottery evidence in most of the barrows in the region and especially those situated around those existing Neolithic monuments date to the second millennium BC, at the earliest corresponding with the introduction of Food Vessels and Collared Urns. Interestingly, in the Thornborough complex and elsewhere in North Yorkshire, we see the presence of cremation practices over more textbook inhumation practices of the Early Bronze Age. Only three barrows in the Ure-Swale washlands feature inhumations out of the fifteen or more excavated over the past 150 years and judging from the pottery evidence it is highly likely that these burials are contemporary with the cremation round barrows in the region. Thus, here we have an active landscape that appears to break the mould of the standard British Early Bronze Age with later round barrows dominated by cremation practice. Nonetheless, these sites reference the existing Neolithic landscape and exist as a conscious continuation and acknowledgement of the past.

In other cases, this landscape manipulation was quite overt, the past was not just passively observed from a distance, it was engaged, manipulated and narratives were altered physically. This alteration would be in line with other sites elsewhere in Britain – chambered tombs, Middle Neolithic mortuary monuments likely dating from c.3700 to around 3000/2900 BC, are sealed off and pottery vessels deposited in the tombs from 2500 BC onwards (Bradley 2007; Parker Pearson 1999). Returning to the Yorkshire Wolds, there is evidence of the ‘rounding off’ of Neolithic long barrows. This is evident at sites such as Kemp Howe, where excavation has revealed indications of a long barrow structure beneath a round mound, or

Cowlam Cross Roads where a ring ditch surrounding an oblong chalk mound showed up in aerial photography (Stoertz 1997). This would indicate that evidence of the Neolithic round barrow tradition in Yorkshire could warrant more investigation with these sites beginning life as long barrows and being converted much later.

Conclusions

As archaeologists, we literally re-member the past, piecing together the disparate elements of the hidden and unwritten from the material culture that remains to us in the present, and attempt to people those distant times. This observation aside, let us attempt to draw these threads together somewhat – round barrows individually, as monuments are complex and still have a great deal to tell us about those who built them as well as the dead contained within them. Nonetheless, we can take from this that a ‘textbook’ Early Bronze Age is still something of a misnomer. The people of the second millennium BCE did not simply engage with the past in a passive manner observing and attempting to engage with it from a safe distance. They engaged with memory and altered the material world to correspond, as at Cowlam Cross Road and Kemp Howe. Furthermore, they exist within a continuous timeframe: one that references and reflects the past possibly in order to connect the present dead with passing ancestors. Going forward, I think we can attempt to contextualise the round barrows of the Early Bronze Age as part of a narrative of engagement with past on a much wider scale than the sequences outlined amongst the Yorkshire Wolds and attempt to unpick the contrasts between lesser studied areas, such as North Yorkshire, in an attempt to discover more about the people of the Early Bronze Age.

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