

Chapter 3

Rates of (Ex)change

Decay and growth, memory and the transformation of the dead in early Neolithic southern Britain

CHRIS FOWLER

University of Manchester

Key words: Bodies, causewayed enclosures, decay, earthen long barrows, materiality, memory, transformation, tempo.

Abstract: This contribution investigates how specific tempos of activity remind people of their place in the material world. It focuses in particular on the relationship between personhood, change, the dead, and processes of decay and regrowth. It is suggested that human bodies and the bodies of artefacts and places were all repeatedly transformed in complimentary ways during the earlier Neolithic of southern Britain. Incremental and gradual changes applied to each type of body. The repeated transformation of those bodies reminded the living of their place in the material world, their connections with the dead and with other bodies including the bodies of monumental places. These transformative acts both commemorated expected features of social identities and also formed the arena through which those identities could themselves be revised.

INTRODUCTION

Earlier Neolithic monuments in Southern Britain formed key locales for repeated activity from around 4000BC. As well as being the first monuments constructed in Britain they provide evidence for the earliest use of domesticated animals and plants. A steady tempo of arrival, clearance, use, deposition and departure was maintained at these monuments, a tempo which was tied to the circulation of artefacts, animals and people through the Neolithic world. Here I will argue that organic remains, including those of the dead, were a key element in the production of this temporality, which drew on an aesthetics of decay and a cadence of incremental transformation. The continuous reworking of human bodies, animal bodies and objects will

be presented as key motifs in Neolithic social life, motifs that were enacted in divergent ways at causewayed enclosures and wooden mortuary structures/earthen long barrows in the Avebury region c.3900-3300 BC. I will propose that durable materials acted as reminders of past acts of transformation. Ephemeral substances fed these locations and provided the basis for renewed growth.

The specific technology of transformation described here produced very specific experiences of death and the dead. Fields of memory were produced at these locales, the mnemonic vehicles being the remains of the dead and of other past activities. These fields of memory were intrinsically linked to the temporality and materiality emergent in the use of these locations. Ageing and decaying materials (including the remains of the dead) and the evidence of re-growth within these key locales, were a vital and dynamic reminder to the living of what it meant to be a person in the world - a person subject to change and reconfiguration throughout existence.

DECAY AND TEMPOS OF SOCIAL ACTIVITY: CAUSEWAYED ENCLOSURES

Causewayed enclosures, chambered tombs and earthen long barrows were among the earliest monuments constructed in the south of Britain, appearing from around 4000BC. Causewayed enclosures were 'stages' used in very different performances and practices. They consisted of (usually between one and three) irregular circuits of broken ditches often around one or two hundred meters in diameter (see figure 1). In some cases an enclosure was used differently at certain points in time. Enclosures in different landscapes were created and employed with the emphasis on one or more of the wide range of practices we have come to associate with causewayed enclosures in general (clearance of vegetation and excavation of ditches and pits, social gathering, exchange, the deposition of human remains and animal remains).

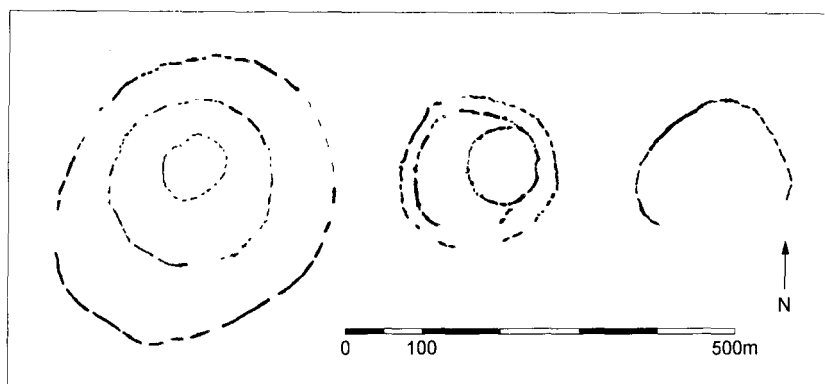


Figure 1. Plans of causewayed enclosures: (left to right) Windmill Hill, Briar Hill and Etton (after Whittle et al. 1998, Edmonds 1993 and Pryor 1998; drawn by Vicki Cummings).

Many causeway enclosures were used periodically. We can imagine a gathering of Neolithic people in an overgrown clearing, the harvesting of coppiced rods and of nettles from the ditches (Pryor 1988). These could have been used in a variety of ways including to make hurdles or fibres (some of which could be used to construct temporary dwellings), or in food preparation. Once the area was cleared and prepared, new acts of excavation or deposition could take place (Edmonds 1993:109 describes the renewed cleaning or re-cutting of the chalk ditches at sites like Briar Hill, Hambledon Hill and Whitehawk). Isobel Smith (1965: 20) suggested that they were seasonal centres, frequented during the Spring to Autumn¹. Enclosures generally involved periodic clearances of the woodland, and clearings left by storm or fire were perhaps inspirational in the development of this phenomenon. Chris Evans, Joshua Pollard and Mark Knight (1999) have argued that voids left by fallen trees in early Neolithic woodlands - tree throws - were deliberately used to deposit accumulations of debris from occupational activity. The tree stumps which left these voids may well have rotted only slowly (ibid.:250), standing (or rather lying) as markers of slow change and gradual death within the woodlands. Layers of deposited animal bone and other materials in clearings may have been open to the elements for some time, ageing visibly. At the same time, vast swathes of landscape have yielded scanty evidence for contemporary occupation (Thomas pers. comm.). Midden material has also been found in long barrow quarry ditches,

¹ This is based on the presence of carcasses of young sheep or goats and cattle - see below - cherry or sloe stones, and hazel-nut shells. If some materials were cached or curated or left in middens then re-used, a slightly different picture emerges.

and under the body of early Neolithic chambered tombs and long barrows (as Hodder 1994: 79-80 noted both for southern Britain and Denmark). In some cases this material was aged and surface-worn before it was sealed by early Neolithic layers, and may be the remains of old occupations or middening. In other cases, open ditches allowed reservoirs of ageing and decaying material to accumulate.

We might associate the presence of old debris in revisited locations with a metaphor of slow change, decay and eventual re-growth. The cyclical re-use of clearings and causewayed enclosures also fits this pattern. Such clearings would eventually fill with scrub and young trees which were cut back on return to the locale, revealing decayed remains. This process of renewal, of growth, 'harvest' and the deposition of further decaying material – whether human, animal or vegetable – seems to have largely been predicated on a tempo of eventual return and gradual change.

In this chapter I will argue that Neolithic exchanges (and experiences of change) were involved in a tempo of slowly repeating events. Tempo here refers to the rhythm of social activity evident from the study of material remains. Within this tempo, periods of lengthy disuse and decay (relative to experiences within a single lifetime) were punctuated by acts of transformation. These acts were generally communal, and required a period of effort – they were perhaps more rapid actions in a cycle of slow change. Henceforth this tempo will be referred to as one of gradual change or attenuated transformation, but its punctuated nature should not be overlooked. The point is that accelerated acts of change occurred within a slowly repeated cycle.

'Rates of Exchange' and rates of (re)production: axes and animals

It seems likely that the repeated re-use of enclosures was also part of a cycle of activity involving acts of change and exchange which were at the very core of Neolithic ways of life (Edmonds 1993). Axe-heads brought over some distances might have been hafted within these locations, using wood obtained from around or within the enclosures such as the coppiced trees that grew in the ditches at Etton, for example (Pryor 1988: 117). Augmenting an object with a long biography in this way may have accompanied a change in life stage among the people involved (Edmonds 1993: 120-2), perhaps, for example, initiations into maturity. At such times, perhaps during rites of passage, the social and physical status of the person may have been in a state of flux. This is most clearly visible in the disarticulation and sometimes re-

articulation of the person after death, but may also have taken at other points in the lifecycle. Persons may be metaphorically unmade and remade (or even 'killed and reborn') during the course of social relations with others, particularly ritualised relations where objects and substances were transferred and transformed (e.g., giving, receiving and consuming food and drink, giving and receiving gifts, producing and destroying objects). Material culture, like hafted axes, may have been vital in demonstrating the articulation of social relations for each person. Just as persons were constituted in the enclosure, and deconstituted in the enclosure – perhaps repeatedly throughout their existence – so were axes and other things we see as objects. Like a person², an axe was a temporary composite of different components (haft, head, resins, fibres), and could be made and unmade, brought together and taken apart. Axe fragments, like human bone fragments, were brought to these places and deposited. These places were appropriate for depositing parts of the person (which included things like axes) since that person had been constituted there. The same may be true of some of these objects. At the very least we could think of these objects as having bodies analogous to the human form (Battaglia 1990: 128-135, Tilley 1996) and subject to similar processes of creation and dissolution. Indeed, I would argue that the qualities which composed the Neolithic person were probably distributed throughout the material of the Neolithic world. The bodies of objects and animals, as well as the bodies of people, could have acted as conduits through which these qualities were transferred from person to person and even generation to generation.

It has also been argued that enclosures were used to corral and exchange cattle, gather herds, which Thomas has argued could be seen as metaphors for the human community, or even a part of that conceptual community (Thomas 1998a, Ray and Thomas in press). The bones of cattle were especially important at enclosure sites like Windmill Hill and Hambledon Hill where they were frequently deposited in association with human bones (or in the same locations where human skulls were found at similar sites). Cattle skulls were used as a kind of marker, deposited against causeway ditch terminals - and particularly the skulls of older cattle (as at Hambledon Hill and Maiden Castle, among others). Meat-bearing bones of domestic

² Persons are perhaps best characterised as composite, being collections of different elements (e.g., mind, soul, body) and substances (blood, flesh, bone). These composite beings are temporary, and when they die the elements are parted from each other. Death rites are the forum for such dissolution of the person and the redistribution of elements integral to the person (Munn 1986, Barraud *et al.* 1994: 40-65, Bloch 1989), which is often a 'reversal of conception' (Battaglia 1992:10). However, in some cultural contexts the components of the person can also be altered (manipulated, exchanged) at other rites of passage, or other events throughout life. See also Fowler 2001, in prep.



<http://www.springer.com/978-0-306-47451-4>

Archaeologies of Remembrance
Death and Memory in Past Societies
Williams, H. (Ed.)
2003, XIV, 310 p., Hardcover
ISBN: 978-0-306-47451-4