

Chapter 2

Building from Memory

Remembering the past at Neolithic monuments in western Britain

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Abstract: This paper suggests that the precise architectural configuration of monuments may not be significant to their understanding, and instead highlights the possibility that the similarity in the experience of encountering and engaging with Neolithic monuments was important. It will be suggested that the role of *memory* may have been crucial to both the initial creation and subsequent use of chambered tombs in Britain. Furthermore, monuments may essentially be 'fragments of memory' in the sense that they serve to activate memories of distant places.

INTRODUCTION

The Neolithic period in Britain (c.4000-2500 BC) saw the widespread construction of monuments in the landscape for the first time. A variety of monumental traditions are found throughout Britain, from Wessex to Orkney, although only the monuments found along the west coast of Britain, most specifically those of south-west Wales, north-west Wales and south-west Scotland, will be considered here (fig. 1). All of these monuments were constructed using slabs of stone to create a chamber, or chambers, which were usually enclosed within a cairn. One of the uses of these chambered tombs was to house human remains, although that was almost certainly not their only role in society (e.g. Leivers 2000). The Cotswold-Severn monuments, for example, have been found to contain a series of human remains which appear to have been deposited over time (Whittle and Wysocki 1998; Thomas 1999, 143-51). At Hazleton North, bodies seem to have entered the monument whole, and subsequently parts were removed

(Saville 1990, 251), perhaps taken to other monuments. A few chambered tombs in north Wales have produced similar evidence, such as Pant y Saer on Anglesey where the remains of 54 individuals were found (Scott 1933). However, the vast majority of monuments in western Britain have small chambers which were not suited for the deposition of large numbers of inhumations. Instead, they may have received cremation deposits, as at Carreg Coetan in south-west Wales (Barker 1992), or perhaps parts of bodies. Chambered tombs were not the only location where Neolithic human remains have been found; caves, rivers and outcrops have all been found to contain Neolithic body parts (Fowler and Cummings forthcoming), and as such chambered tombs should be seen as part of a broader network of places considered appropriate for the disposal of human remains. Nevertheless, it seems clear that chambered tombs throughout Britain were associated with the remains of the dead. Thus it seems that chambered tombs had an important role to play in the commemoration of the dead. However, because chambered tombs had deposits of human bone added over time, they were not necessarily places where memories of the dead were fixed. Instead, these were places where memories could be transformed and altered as time progressed, possibly linked to the transformation of the dead bodies themselves (see Fowler this volume).

Monuments were used for containing the remains of the dead throughout Britain, yet a wide range of different architectural styles were employed to actually create these monuments in western Britain, with distinct differences between regions (fig. 2). Archaeologists have attempted to understand these architectural differences by looking for the continental origins of these sites, as well as by identifying typological similarities across and between areas (Childe 1940; Daniel 1950; Henshall 1963; 1972; Lynch 1969; 1972; Piggott 1954; but for critique see Tilley 1998). More recently the focus has shifted to studies which have demonstrated that monumental architecture would have carefully choreographed similar *experiences* for people traversing them (e.g. Barrett 1994; Bradley 1998b; Richards 1996; Thomas 1993b; Tilley 1994). The experience of encountering these monuments in the landscape has also been shown to be critical to their meaning and significance in Neolithic society (Cummings 2001; papers in Nash 1997; Tilley 1994). Therefore, rather than emphasising the architectural characteristics on which the classification and subsequent understanding of these monuments have traditionally been based, I have conducted fieldwork in these areas in order to consider the range of experiences that these places may have created. I will go on to consider the role that memory may have played in both the initial creation and subsequent experience and use of chambered tombs.

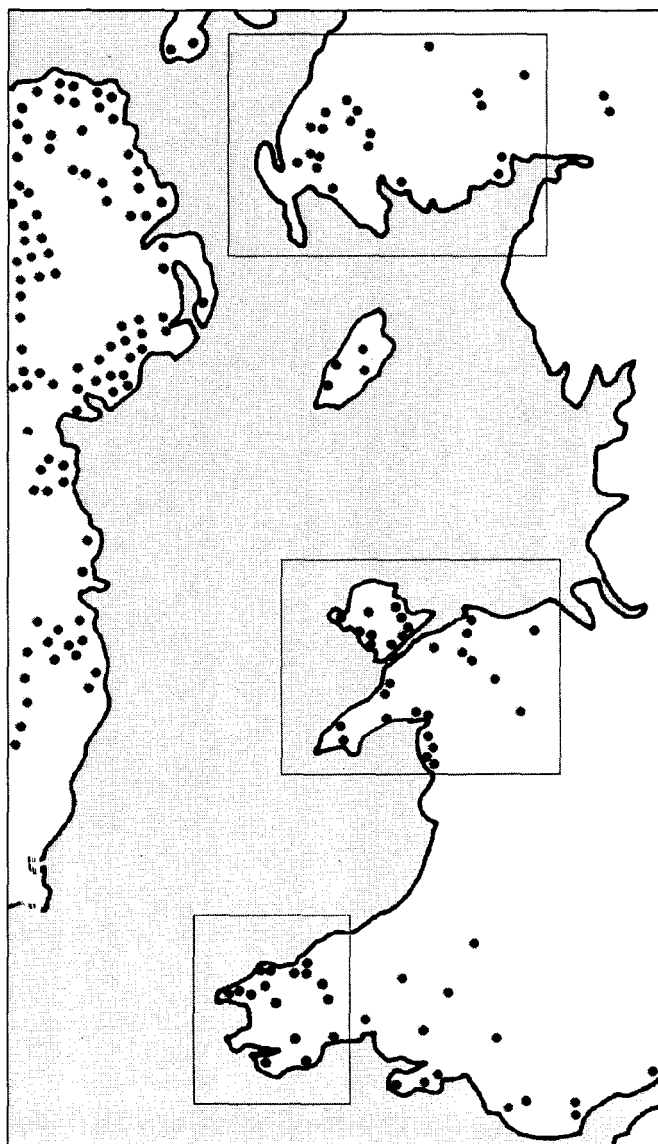


Figure 1. Schematic of monuments in Britain, with the three case study areas highlighted

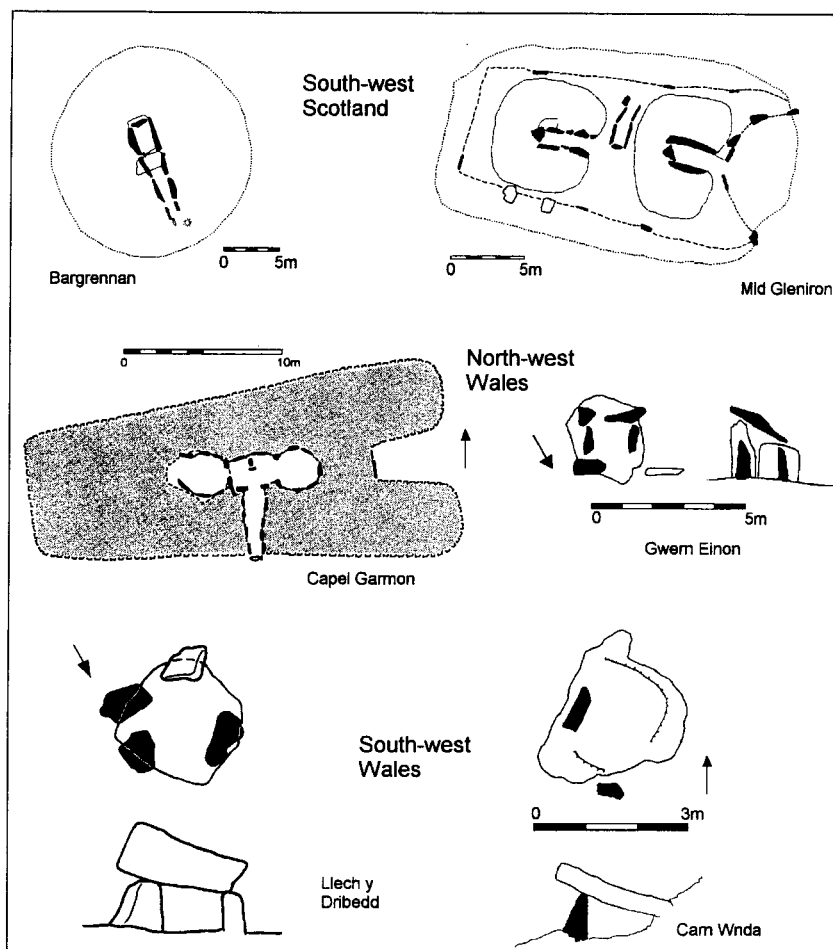


Figure 2. A selection of plans of monuments from western Britain demonstrating that the monuments are quite different architecturally (after Barker 1992, Henshall 1972 and Lynch 1969). Bargrennan (Bargrennan type), Mid Gleniron (Clyde type), Capel Garmon (Cotswold-Severn), Gwern Einon (portal dolmen), Llech y Dribedd (portal dolmen) and Cam Wnda (earth-fast).

THE EXPERIENCE OF CHAMBERED TOMBS

Landscape

An interest in the landscape settings of monuments has been growing over the past few decades and it has been demonstrated that landscape is not just a neutral backdrop but an integral part of monuments (e.g. Bender 1993; Fleming 1999; Nash 1997; Tilley 1994; Ucko and Layton 1999). The landscape settings of the early Neolithic monuments of western Britain have been examined as part of a broader study (Cummings 2001; Cummings and Whittle in prep) and it has been shown that sites are located at quite specific points in the landscape. The vast majority of monuments are situated away from the valley bottoms which may have been one of the focuses of settlement activity, but are still set in rich and fertile land (Hodder 1990, 255). All sites are set part way up gentle hills, and would have been skylined when approached from low-lying areas. The location on the side of a hill also ensures that the view is restricted in one direction by the immediate hillslope and this is found at virtually every site in western Britain and beyond (fig. 3). This may not seem remarkable. However, later Neolithic stone circles are frequently positioned in 'circular' landscapes with no restricted view in any direction (Bradley 1998b; Richards 1996; Watson 2000) while many Bronze Age cairns are positioned on the summit of hills with wide-ranging views in all directions (Cummings and Whittle in prep). This suggests that monuments were very carefully positioned in the landscape and adds weight to the idea that a restricted view may have been significant (see below).

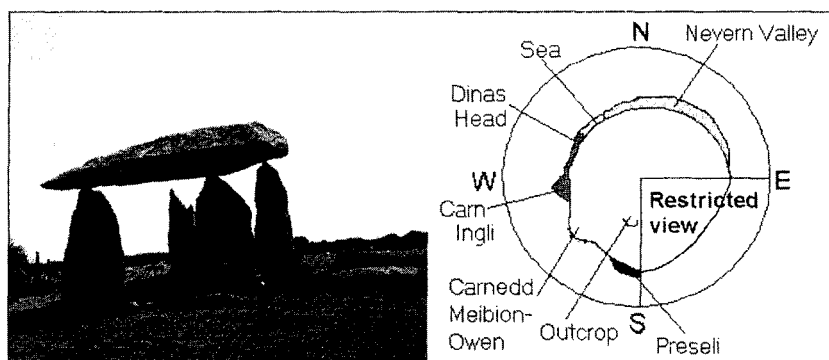


Figure 3. The 'restricted' view at Pentre Ifan. The ground rises up to the south-east so that there are no wide-ranging views in this direction. The landscape schematic also shows the phenomenon in plan form.



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