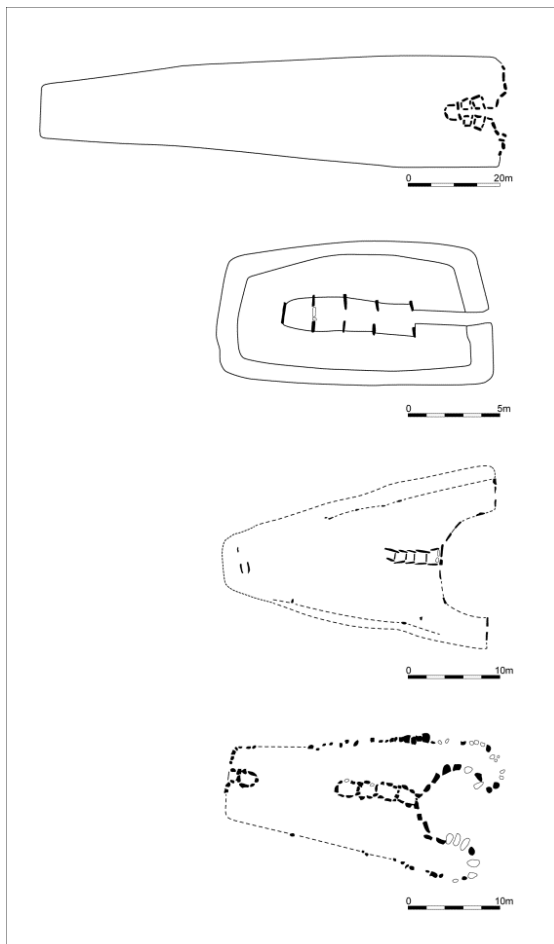




What is a chambered tomb?

Chambered tombs are a type of burial monument constructed during the Early Neolithic period (major phase of use: c. 3800 – 3400 BC). They have an internal megalithic structure which consists of ‘chambers’ concealed beneath a mound of earth (barrow) or stone (cairn). They are essentially closed spaces that have access for visiting and depositing human remains and objects. The construction of chambered tombs represents a sizeable investment of time and effort by Neolithic communities, and are one of a number of types of monument built during the Early Neolithic.



Chambered tomb site plans showing (top to bottom) Cotswold Severn, Stalled, Clyde and Court varieties (C. Williams after Cummings 2017)

The chamber is constructed from large upright stone slabs (megaliths), with drystone walling and large capstones enclosing the space. The size and layout can vary from single chambers to sites with a corridor (or gallery) leading to an end (terminal) chamber, and often with multiple chambers to either side. In many cases the chambers are quite small and would have been accessed from above, by removing the capstones, whilst others are large enough to enter and walk through. At other sites single chambers are subdivided into separate spaces. The chambered structure is then covered in a long cairn or mound and a curving space (or ‘forecourt’) was sometimes constructed. This provided a focal area for people to gather and view the activities associated with the monument.

Although these monuments are a single group of archaeological sites, there are variations in the layout of the chambers, and in the shape and size of the covering mound which points to regionally distinctive styles (see below). Among the categories of chambered tombs are various kinds of ‘dolmen’ or ‘quoits’ (consisting of a single chamber with vertical megaliths supporting a flat capstone) and Middle and Late Neolithic ‘passage tombs’. This Factsheet focuses on chambered tombs and not these related monument types.

Where are they found?

Megalithic tombs are found all over North-Western Europe during the Neolithic, concentrated around the fringes of the Atlantic Ocean. This factsheet focuses on chambered tombs in the British Isles, but their association with contemporary monuments on the European mainland is important to note: the spread of similar sites across this region points to strong links and therefore exchange of ideas and artefacts, and the movement of people during the Neolithic. In Britain, there are concentrations of chambered tombs in Wessex, North Scotland (including Orkney), Ireland, and along the coastline of the Irish Sea.

Four distinctive, regional varieties (or 'types') are found in Britain and Ireland: the Cotswold-Severn chambered tombs of Southern England, the Clyde Cairns of Western Scotland, the stalled cairns of northern Scotland, and the court cairns of Ireland. The four types share many features in common but reflect different architectural styles (see the difference in ground plans in the accompanying illustration) and regional identities. Other regions of Britain did not have chambered tombs but had other types of monuments that fulfilled similar roles (eg, long barrows, see Factsheet 3).



The distribution of chambered tombs in Britain and Ireland (C. Williams after V. Cummings 2017)

Chronology

Dating from a number of Cotswold-Severn tombs have shown that a major phase of use between c. 3800 – 3400 BC. Despite this lengthy time span, the use of individual tombs has revealed that they were in use for a relatively short period (c.10-30 years).

The dating of other regional types is less clear. However, it is likely that Cotswold-Severn, Clyde and Court tombs were being used at around the same time. Stalled cairns are not well dated but they appear to have continued in use considerably later than their English equivalents.

The sites themselves, however, often have a long history of importance – excavations have shown timber structures, middens and hearths had existed before the construction of the stone chambers. The prominence and stone construction of the tombs meant that they were also revisited during the centuries that followed

and there is considerable evidence for burial and the deposition of pottery during the Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age (c.2500-1500 BC) and during later historic epochs.

Interpretation: Burial rites and interaction with ancestral remains

Human remains of all ages and both genders were deposited within these monuments, although figures indicate only a select number of people were granted burial within a tomb. The treatment of the dead differed across the British Isles, for instance some tombs were filled with cremated bone while others contained unburnt bone.

Bones within chambers were mixed over time: fragmented and disarticulate bone suggests that interment within the tomb was a later part of the burial process, occurring after the bone had been exposed or defleshed elsewhere. Other bones appear to be quite worn and could have been circulated for a time before being deposited. At West Kennet, bones from 34 individuals were found, disarticulated, appearing to be ordered by age and sex, whilst only one articulated skeleton was found. The mixing and sorting of bone suggests that remembering individuals was not a priority; instead, ideas about communal and ancestral identities may have been key.

It is possible that tombs were seen as 'houses' for the remains of the dead: a way of containing the transformation process from the living into the dead, especially for those who had difficult deaths and could perhaps not be treated in the same way as the rest of the population.

Interpretation: Why were they built?

The Neolithic period in Britain is marked by the introduction of large earth-moving projects to create the monuments that we see today. The Neolithic is also the period when pottery, polished stone artefacts, and the domestication of plants and animals occur widespread across the landscape of Britain and mainland Europe.

Chambered tombs are some of the most well-known sites to survive from the Earlier Neolithic period, and archaeologists originally linked their appearance with the spread of pastoralism and permanent occupation of land and the marking of territory. The picture has now changed. The chronology of the tombs (see above) does not support the idea that they were instrumental in the spread of new farming practices or people.

Although there are some connections with changes in land use and seasonal migration of people, the tombs were significant additions to the landscape in their own right and reflect a particular expression of belief and identity that flourished after farming had been introduced. The tombs are often located in particular (and similar) points in the landscape, for instance with views of rivers and mountains. This may reflect territorial factors (e.g. boundaries) but also relate to beliefs and, possibly, origin stories.

Although defined as tombs for the deposition of human remains, their significance extends beyond that of funerary monuments. The limited number of human remains deposited inside, and the way in which they were moved, rearranged, and perhaps removed at times, suggests that these sites had a much more important role for the society, in rituals and ceremonies and for creating a sense of identity and history.



Facade of West Kennet Long Barrow, Wiltshire

Tombs were eventually sealed off, either by the mound or by further megalithic embellishment such as façades or large slabs closing off the entrance, e.g. the impressive sarsen façade seen at West Kennet. Some tombs also included areas for public display and performance of ceremonies and rituals related to the role of the dead and the ancestors.

It is very unlikely that there was a single 'function' for chambered tombs. In some cases it may have been a relatively rapid construction intended to deal with a difficult death or a period of social upheaval that required new 'founders' or ancestors. In other cases there could have been a series of such events that punctuated the construction of the tomb or a more regular and repeated return to observe rituals and ceremonies relating to the ancestors. It is also worth noting that construction of these monuments may have been important in its own right. It would have brought communities together and helped to build social bonds and relationships between groups who may have lived relatively far apart.

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