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Passage graves, statues and standing stones: megaliths and social identities in prehistoric Scotland and Ireland

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Abstract

This paper contrasts two ways of thinking about the passage graves of Scotland and Ireland and the relationships between them. The first considers their characteristic structure in terms of architectural style, chronology and distribution. It seems that these features are closely integrated with one another, and in the past this method has led to the idea that the people who built the monuments formed part of a single network. That approach has much in common with Childe's conception of a culture. For many years it was employed in discussion of monuments on either side of the Irish Sea. An alternative approach is to consider the meanings that could have been attached to particular structural devices. The feature that connects many of these monuments is the use of standing stones, either as components of the kerb delimiting a cairn, or as a ring of freestanding orthostats enclosing the other elements. These stone settings are rarely discussed, but comparison with the evidence from other parts of Atlantic Europe suggests that they could have been regarded as statues, even though they lack obvious anthropomorphic elements. The same idea is present in British and Irish folklore. It raises the possibility that there were conceptual links between these different styles of architecture and that they lasted over a considerable period of time, during which individual sites were modified and reused. Thus the factor that links these different monuments may have been the idea that rings of upright stones stood for living creatures. Whether they 'represented' particular figures in the past, ancestors or mythical beings we shall never know, but the use of these images on both sides of the Irish Sea could have fostered a shared identity among the people who used these monuments.

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel stellt zwei Herangehensweisen an das Studium der Ganggräber Schottlands und Irlands einander gegenüber. Einmal steht eine stilistische, chronologische und räumliche Analyse im Vordergrund. Hiermit wurde häufig die Vorstellung eines einheitlichen Netzwerks ihrer Erbauer verbunden, eine Interpretation, die dem Childe´schen Kulturbegriff recht nahe kommt. Eine alternative Herangehensweise konzentriert sich auf die Frage, welche Bedeutungen einzelnen Elementen dieser Gräber zuzuschreiben wären. Ein Merkmal, das viele Anlagen miteinander verbindet, sind stehende Steine, entweder als Teil eines Steinkreises, oder als freistehende Ringe von Orthostaten. Über den Vergleich mit Anlagen aus anderen Regionen wird deren Funktion als Statuen diskutiert, die auch aus der Folklore bekannt ist, wenn auch klare anthropomorphe Formen oder Merkmale fehlen. Hier ergibt sich die Möglichkeit, dass es konzeptionelle Verbindungen zwischen verschiedenen Architektur-

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stilen gibt, die über beträchtliche Zeiträume bestanden, nämlich die Idee, dass es sich bei diesen Steinkreisen um Repräsentationen lebender Kreaturen handele. Ob hierbei konkrete Figuren der Vergangenheit, Ahnen oder mythische Wesen gemeint sind, werden wir nie wissen, aber der Gebrauch dieser Art von Bildern auf beiden Seiten der Irischen See könnte eine gemeinsame Identität der Menschen, die diese Monumente unterhielten, andeuten.

Introduction

Megalithic tombs provide one of the building blocks from which European archaeology is made, and over the last hundred years they have been analysed by similar methods to portable objects. Scholars have classified these structures according to their styles, chronologies and distributions, using the same procedures as studies of ancient ceramics. Indeed, whole cultures have been postulated on the basis of these buildings alone. In the case of stone tombs there was another source of information, for the monuments might be associated with particular ways of treating the dead. Such evidence suggested that there were shared ways of doing things in the past and that they may have been how ancient communities had identified themselves in relation to others. Although this approach has its critics, it is difficult to reject even today.

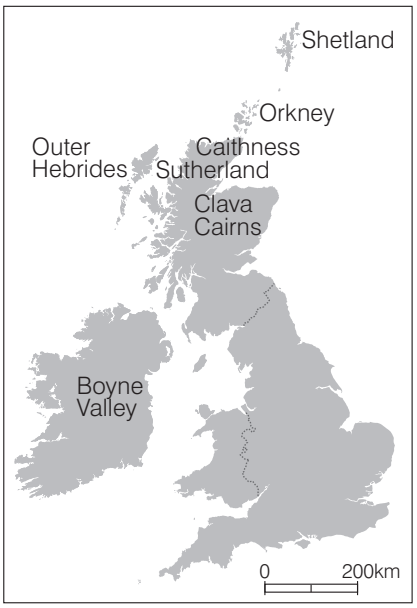


Fig. 1. The regions with groups of chambered tombs discussed in the text.

Abb. 1. Die Regionen mit im Text erwähnten Ganggräbergruppen.

Observing style, distribution and chronology

I would like to consider a group of megalithic monuments on either side of the Irish Sea. They have a discontinuous distribution, but for a long time there appeared to be a chain of connections between them. There were architectural links that extended from passage graves in the Boyne Valley in Ireland (Eogan 1986) through the Hebrides (Henshall 1972, 111–57) and northwards across the Scottish mainland (Davidson / Henshall 1991; Henshall / Ritchie 1995) to Orkney (Davidson / Henshall 1989) and Shetland (Henshall 1963, 135–82). In fact they were studied by Johannes Müller (1988) in the publication of his Master's thesis. I would like to add one more group of monuments to his scheme (fig. 1): the Clava Cairns of Northern Scotland (Bradley 2000; Henshall / Ritchie 2001, 80-95). In doing so, I am following an interpretation advocated by Gordon Childe (1935, 51–3).

There is little evidence of how human remains were deposited at these monuments, although the Boyne passage graves contain cremations and a few of the Hebridean tombs include inhumations. There is no evidence from Shetland whilst megaliths in Orkney are associated with unburnt remains. On the other hand, the forms of these monuments do share a number of elements. There is the circular plan of the cairns and the distinctive configuration of the passages and chambers. At most of the sites there is also some evidence that the structure was bounded by a monumental kerb. A still more striking feature is the presence of standing stones (fig. 2). A ring of menhirs encloses the famous tomb at Newgrange (O'Kelly 1982); the tiny monument at Calanais is inside an impressive stone circle (Burl 2000, 202–6); and the Hebridean tombs incorporate a series of standing stones in their outer kerbs (Henshall 1972, 111–57). Still more striking is the evidence of the Clava Cairns where every passage grave is enclosed by a ring of monoliths (Henshall / Ritchie 2001, 80–95).

Apart from the Clava Cairns, these monuments are not confined to one geographical area, and most of them are distributed over a

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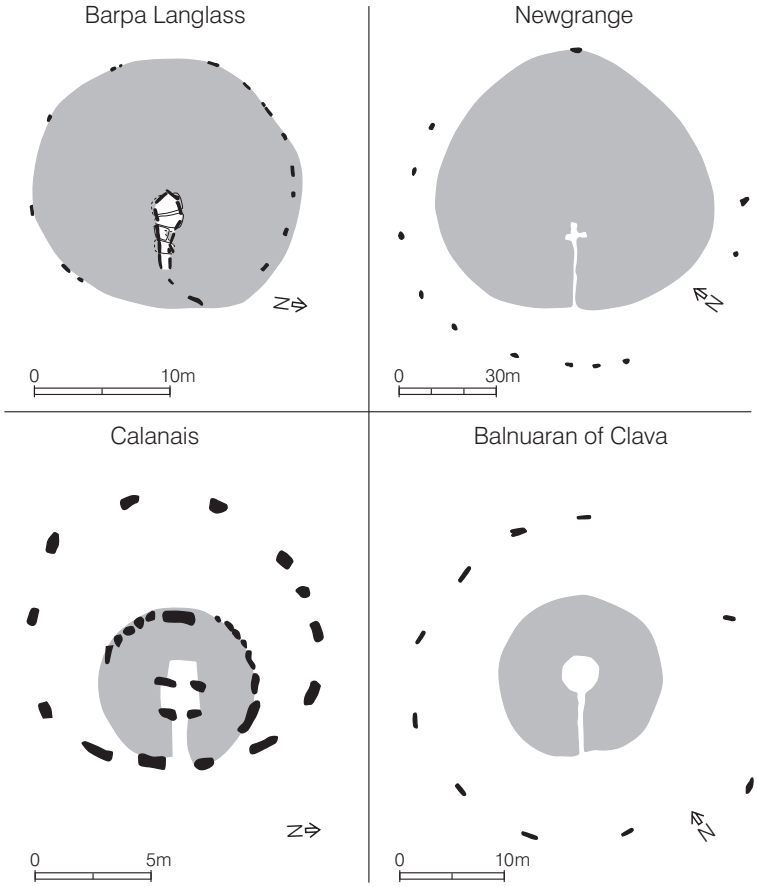


Fig. 2. Four chambered tombs associated with rings of monoliths. Barpa Langlass and Calanais are in the Hedrides, and Newgrange is in the Boyne Valley. Here they are compared with a passage grave at Balnuaran of Clava. Information from Henshall (1972), Burl (2000), O'Kelly (1982) and Bradley (2000). Note that the separate monuments are of very different sizes from one another.

Abb. 2. Vier Ganggräber mit assoziierten Steinkreisen. Barpa Langlass und Calanais liegen auf den Hedriden, Newgrange im Boyne-Tal. Hier der Vergleich mit dem Ganggrab von Balnuaran of Clava. Informationen nach Henshall (1972), Burl (2000), O'Kelly (1982) und Bradley (2000). Die einzelnen Monumente haben sehr unterschiedliche Größen.

distance of 800 km along the coastline or near to sea routes. Thus it seemed entirely reasonable to suggest that these structures were connected with one another and that those around the Irish Sea were of approximately the same age. Excavation at Tara and sites in the Boyne Valley suggested dates on either side of 3000 BC (O'Sullivan 2005). The stone circle and passage grave at passage grave at Calanais were built between 2900 and 2600 BC (Ashmore 1999).

Thus these buildings seemed to share three features: a common architectural style, an identifiable geographical focus and a similar chronology. On that basis researchers postulated long distance connections between communities in Scotland and Ireland. The same ideas apply to the study of stone circles which are not found with megalithic tombs, as both styles of architecture may have originated at about the same time.

Over the last decade some of these connections have been severed. To a large extent this has been the outcome of new fieldwork, although the results of older projects have also been reconsidered. I shall explain how this has happened before proposing a different approach to the evidence.

The first important issue is style. These monuments look like one another when they are studied in two dimensions: an inevitable problem with monumental architecture. We can compare portable artefacts by bringing them together in one location, but cannot do this with monumental tombs whose study depends to a greater extent on site plans. In fact there are striking contrasts between the structures considered here, but they concern the distinctive ways in which they were built, rather than their outlines on the page. Thus the Clava Cairns include a number of circular structures containing passage graves, but the kerbstones are graded by height from the rear of the monument to the entrance. The basal course of the chamber follows the same convention, and it also extends to the mono-

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liths which enclose the passage graves (Bradley 2000). There is no indication of a similar arrangement in the other regions studied here, and in the Hebrides the ring of monoliths and the kerbstones are combined in a single circuit which can be placed some distance outside the edge of the cairn (Henshall 1972, 127–8).

There is even more diversity. The tiny monument at Calanais was added to an already existing stone circle (Ashmore 1999), whilst its larger counterpart at Maeshowe may have been built out of the dismantled uprights of a similar setting (Richards 2004, chapter 9). That is not surprising as freestanding stone circles had existed from about 3000 BC, although few had other monuments inside them.

There are chronological problems, too. The great mound at Newgrange dates from about 3000 BC. According to the excavator, this was also the date of the ring of monoliths outside its decorated kerb, but more recent work has shown that it was a secondary feature erected during the Bell Beaker phase (Stout / Stout 2008, 9 and chapter 8). In the same way, the stone circles associated with Clava passage graves were built after the tombs themselves, but in this case the interval was very short, and possibly less than a decade. Radiocarbon dating reveals that the passage graves were built in the Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age (Bradley 2000). This creates the paradoxical situation that monuments which look like one another in plan had completely different histories. The structures at Newgrange developed over a thousand years and the ring of standing stones enclosed an ancient monument. Similar structures at Balnuaran of Clava were effectively unitary constructions, and, if there was any connection between these separate sites, it was not established until the end of the third or the beginning of the second millennium BC (fig. 3).

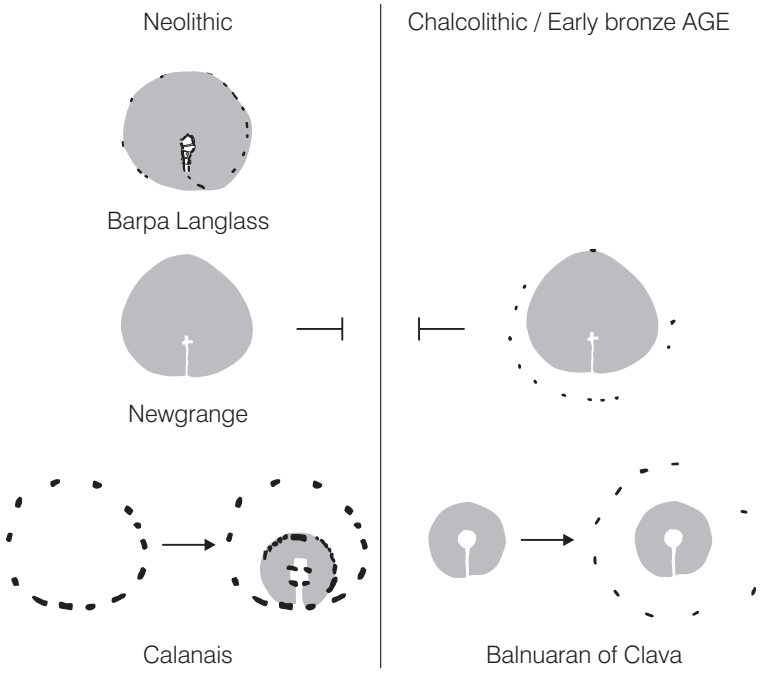


Fig. 3. The monuments illustrated in fig. 1 rearranged according to their chronology. The diagram distinguishes between structures built in a single phase, those with a short archaeological sequence, and Newgrange where the primary monument was reused after a considerable interval of time.

Abb. 3. Die Monumente der Abb. 1 in chronologischer Reihenfolge. Das Diagramm unterscheidet zwischen Bauten, die in einer Bauphase entstanden, solchen, die eine nur kurze archäologische Sequenz aufweisen und Newgrange, wo das primäre Monument nach beträchtlicher Zeit wiedergenutzt wurde.

These observations raise several questions. Why were passage graves built in part of Scotland a thousand years later than had been supposed, and why were they constructed in such an unusual way? For many years the forms of the Clava Cairns had been contrasted with the passage graves of Sutherland and Caithness on the premise that were built by neighbouring communities who expressed their identities by using different styles of architecture. That view is no longer tenable. Although these groups of megaliths have mutually

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exclusive distributions, they were built at quite different times: Orkney Cromarty tombs in the Neolithic (Davidson / Henshall 1991; Henshall / Ritchie 1995) and Clava Cairns in the Chalcolithic and even the Early Bronze Age (Bradley 2000). The crucial point is that the older structures remained open and accessible, so that many of them were reused for burial during the Bell Beaker phase. In that sense they were also Metal Age monuments, and it was then that some of their structural elements were copied by a new group of tombs. That happened at a time when corbelled structures were no longer used. It was difficult to learn the right techniques for building them, and as a result Clava passage graves were structurally unstable. They were imitations of older buildings – albeit ones that were still being visited - but the skills required to build complex chambers had been lost.

The same process of reusing older structures is seen at the other sites. There is a large collection of Bell Beaker pottery from Newgrange, and it was probably deposited there when the stone circle was built around the Neolithic mound (Stout / Stout 2008, chapter 8). Something similar could have happened at Tara, where the site was reused as one of the largest Early Bronze Age cemeteries in Ireland (O'Sullivan 2005). It seems as though ancient structures assumed a new significance a thousand years after they had been built.

Another problem is why this distinctive combination of passage grave and stone circle was important for such a long time. After all, the stone circle at Calanais may be a millennium older than that at Newgrange, yet both of them contain passage graves. Similarly, the demolished circle postulated by Colin Richards at Maeshowe would have been roughly contemporary with the nearby Stones of Stenness, yet it was centuries earlier than the settings of monoliths associated with the Clava cairns 140 km to the south. The same arguments apply to the rings of uprights in the kerbs of Hebridean tombs. Although the chambers were reused during the Bell Beaker phase, the monuments themselves were much older.

Introducing a different approach

I began by stressing the traditional practice of grouping megalithic tombs through their distribution, style and chronology. In this case two of those links have been severed, whilst individual monuments are associated with very different ways of depositing human remains. Must the case for close connections be rejected?

I suggest that there is another way of thinking about these sites. The first scheme between them implies that particular structures had the same significance in the past. It was their *meanings* that suggested a shared identity among the people who built the monuments.

Another way of looking at the same problem is to invert the usual procedure and to begin with the question of meaning. Why were these superficially similar structures associated with rings of standing stones, and why was this particular element so long lived? Perhaps the best starting point is to consider the roles of freestanding stone circles. They are not easy to interpret, but many examples, including the oldest, share the same feature. They are rarely associated with many artefacts or with food remains. Instead they can include deposits of cremated bone. They are quite different from the timber circles built during the same period and appear to have been associated mainly with the dead (Parker Pearson / Ramilsonina 1998)

Another point is so obvious that it usually passes without comment. Why is it that standing stones associated with megalithic tombs in France and the Iberian Peninsula are considered to be anthropomorphic, but not those in Britain and Ireland (Bradley 2009, chapter 4)? In

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one sense there is a simple explanation for this contrast. To varying extents menhirs in mainland Europe were carved with human features, whilst those in these two countries are either left undecorated or embellished with cup marks. That distinction does not stand up to scrutiny. The passage graves along the Atlantic coastline share so many features in common that it is illogical to regard the British and Irish standing stones as an isolated phenomenon. Moreover, the absence of decoration – let alone naturalistic decoration – is no reason for treating them separately from the anthropomorphic statues in Continental Europe. Insular folklore suggests a completely different approach, for where local legends are recorded the menhirs are nearly always interpreted as people who were turned to stone (Grinsell 1976). These stories may not include any prehistoric element, but they show that that these stones can be interpreted as human figures. The same applies to freestanding stone circles, and it seems possible that the same interpretation was important during prehistory.

The British and Irish evidence suggests that studies of megalithic tombs are incomplete unless archaeologists are prepared to speculate about the original meanings of particular structural elements. In this case there were few direct connections between the people who built the tombs on either side of the Irish Sea. There is too much structural diversity to suggest one architectural tradition, and the passage graves themselves were constructed and used over a long period of time. Indeed, some of them were reused long after they had been built. When that happened, their characteristic features were copied in erecting new monuments. The only consistent feature was the idea that they should be associated with a ring of standing stones. Perhaps the separate monoliths had been considered as statues, as representations of the dead. In that case a new set of connections becomes important. Whether the stones represented particular people in the past, ancestors or mythical beings it is impossible to tell, but the use of the same device on either side of the Irish Sea could have fostered a shared sense of identity among the people who constructed these buildings. If so, it proved remarkably tenacious, for it held them in its grip for hundreds of years.

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