

## Who was who in the Neolithic

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*Magdalena S. Midgley*

### Zusammenfassung

Der Tod war kein „Gleichmacher“ zur Trichterbecherzeit. Prominente Ahnen ruhten einzeln unter riesigen Hügeln oder teilten Steinkammern mit ausgesuchten Mitgliedern ihrer Gemeinschaft. Andere wurden in Flachgräbern beigesetzt, in Siedlungsgruben oder anderweitig den Blicken entzogen – sicher jedoch zukünftigem Vergessen anheim gegeben, uns nur durch archäologische Zufallsentdeckungen bekannt. Dieser Aufsatz untersucht diese offensichtlichen Unterschiede – können wir solch verschiedene Totenbehandlungen für Individuen erklären, die offenbar zur selben Gesellschaft gehörten, den selben Alltag lebten, den selben kulturellen Traditionen folgten und eine Weltanschauung teilten?

### Abstract

Death was no great leveller in the TRB. Prominent ancestors reposed in solitude under huge earthen mounds or shared stone chambers with select members of their community. Others were buried in flat graves, settlement pits or otherwise obscured from view – clearly relegated to future oblivion and known to us only through accidents of archaeological discovery. The paper explores these apparent differences – can we account for such varying treatment of individuals who apparently belonged to the same community, shared the same daily life, followed the same cultural traditions and espoused the same world views?

### Introduction

Monumental tombs “...all were symptoms of man’s yearning for immortality, his calculated effort by creating to rescue his person from the ravages of time.”

*Daniel J. Boorstin (1993), The Creators:  
A History of Heroes of the Imagination.  
Vintage Books, New York, p. 76.*

From the middle of the fifth millennium BC onwards, the Neolithic communities in north-west Europe embarked upon a remarkable transformation of their surroundings. Through their agricultural practices, these farmers altered the natural landscapes in which they lived. Forests gave way to crop fields, domesticated animals grazed upon meadowlands; villages heralded a new way of life, with settlements built, lived in and abandoned; natural resources – clay, stone, flint or amber – were transformed into economically and socially beneficial goods.

The most lasting and powerful legacy of these early north-west European farmers was, however, the creation of sacred ceremonial landscapes. While the preceding hunter-gatherers recognised places in the landscape to which they undoubtedly attributed special meaning, the monuments built by the farmers provided permanent settings for social interaction and for the expression of sacred rituals on a scale never before encountered.

The truly dramatic aspect of these ceremonial landscapes manifests itself most visibly in the thousands of funerary monuments – long mounds and various megalithic tombs – many of which still survive today. Less tangibly but no less significantly, votive offerings of pottery, axes and other goods beneficial to community life, identify activities in which individuals could participate singly, as members of a village, or at a wider communal level.

Along the extensive north-western boundary of the Danubian world, from the middle of the fifth millennium BC onwards, long mounds offer the earliest examples of monumentality. Irrespective of regional dynamics and diversity of forms, the long mound idea was clearly an important element structuring the cosmological expressions and practices of these early farming communities. For the purpose of the present paper, I shall concentrate on the Funnel-necked Beaker culture (Trichterbecherkultur or TRB) of northern Europe, but I hope that at least some of the ideas explored here will be of relevance elsewhere in north-western Europe.

The long mound tradition was the first stage of the Neolithic world view which found expression through monumentality and, even at this early stage, it was far from static or uniform. The long mounds over their vast distribution vary in shape, form of burial structure (which may contain from one to several individuals) and in their disposition in the landscape – from single monuments to conglomerations forming veritable cemeteries (Midgley 2005, chapter 4). The process continued in its transformation from largely timber and earth to largely stone and earth, and in the evolution of chamber and mound forms from the dolmen to the most sophisticated burial chamber – the passage grave.

Hand in hand with the variety of architecture there was an equal variety of burial practices, both contemporary and sequential in development, and the numerous patterns of deposition of human bodies attest to different ways of dealing with the dead. Although the general trend still holds good – initial emphasis on individual burials (even if sometimes performed against the background of multiple presences within the confines of a single monument) slowly giving way to a prolonged series of funerary activities which, in their ultimate form, left no more than a handful of bones – such practices were neither uniform nor static.

## Treatment of the dead

In the present paper, I am not so much concerned with the monuments themselves but rather with the individuals whose remains we encounter within these different graves. So I would like to explore some ideas which may help us towards an understanding of the reasons why death was no great leveller in the Neolithic and why some of the individuals appear to have been given exceptional burials.

By way of background, we may remind ourselves that in the late Mesolithic and the Danubian cultural contexts, certain selected dead were given specific and elaborate burial treatment (Jeunesse 1996; Larsson 1995, 2004, 2007; Modderman 1998; Podborský et al. 2002). This included, among other things, the choice of a specific location,

particular funerary rites performed before or during the burial ceremony, and grave goods chosen to accompany the dead which emphasised a distinction from other individuals. Nevertheless, such differences were part of the actual burial ceremonies and, while they may have remained vividly imprinted on the memory of the participants, they were largely invisible afterwards.

The TRB communities altered this approach dramatically and engaged in burying some of their dead with ostentatious ritual, in a privileged location that was visible at all times and which, through the then-present, merged the past with the future. However at the same time, and we do not acknowledge this often enough, the living dealt with all their other dead – those for whom there was no monumental edifice or who were not going to be buried in the family megalithic vault. This fact is perhaps less apparent on a small geographical scale or in a specific context, as at this seminar when our attention is focussed on a particular theme – in this case monumentality and its multiple implications – but seen globally, across the whole of the TRB culture, the commonality of ordinary burial is apparent and must not be forgotten (Kossian 2005). Indeed, ordinary burials provide a counter-balance to all our ideas on monumentality.

The ordinary dead were buried in a variety of different ways and their bodies were subject to different treatment. We find them in pits, on settlement sites, in unmarked graves singly or in cemeteries; placed in wooden canoes and allowed to drift across rivers, or else sunk deep into bogs. They were also subject to elaborate funerary ceremonies, not necessarily any less complex than those for which the evidence survives in the megaliths. But they were not interred in a manner which ensured their remembrance in perpetuity by subsequent generations. Indeed, we may surmise that the majority of the Neolithic dead were consigned to future oblivion and we only know of them through accidents of archaeological discovery.

As an example we may consider just one relatively well-known Neolithic burial, that of the individual from Dragsholm in North-West Zealand (Fig. 1). Recent re-dating and other scientific analyses have now settled the chronology and the cultural attributions of the Dragsholm burials (Price et al. 2007). Past discussions of the Neolithic man revolved around a possible – now clearly impossible – relationship to the two females found in close proximity and the isotopic values revealing dramatically different diets (Brinch Petersen 1974; Brinch Petersen and Egeberg 2009; Fischer 2002; Price et al. 2007). But I am not concerned with that.

This man, now thought to have died at the age of thirty, appears to have been reasonably well equipped for the afterlife: he had a beaker pot as well as numerous stone and flint tools. His garments were decorated with amber beads and he also wore an amber necklace (altogether over 60 beads were recovered); flint knives and enigmatic pebbles were placed in his hands, while a bone wrist guard and nine arrows suggest he may have been an archer.

The new chronology for the Dragsholm burials has, interestingly, shifted scholarly attention in new directions, one of which revolves around the interpretation of the possible roles of the Neolithic individual. Thus, in a fascinating sequence of possible identities, Jimmy Strassburg has suggested that in this grave there was a "... dreaded and partly unrealised archer shaman, who may have upheld a reputation of an ancestor hunter, a fire commander, a spirit birther, a ghost burster and a soul inscriber" (Strassburg 2000, 356). In a different version, taking into consideration the process of emergence and consolidation of the farming way of life in southern Scandinavia, it has recently been suggested that not only was he an archer but moreover "an itinerant warrior" – a young warrior promoting a Neo-

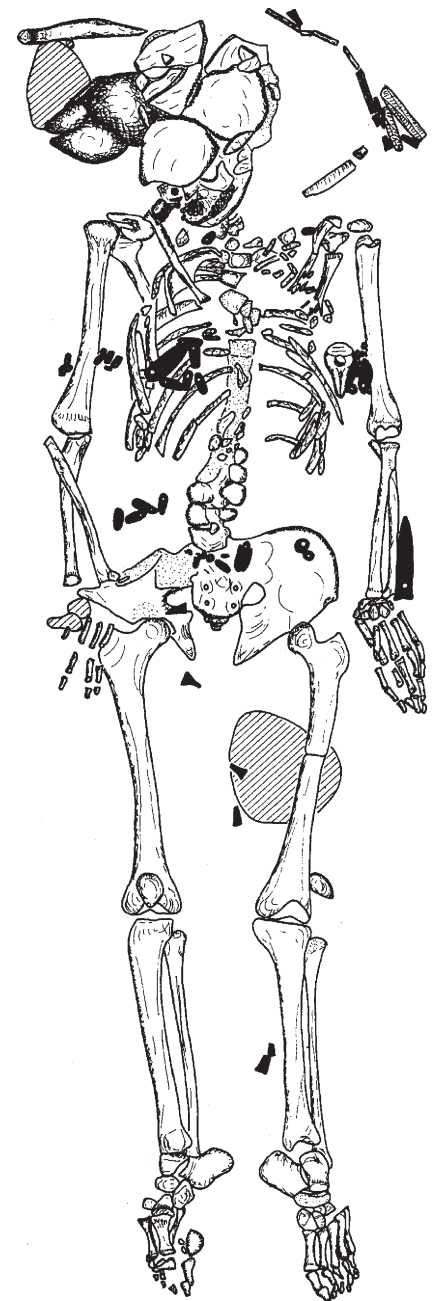


Fig. 1. Neolithic individual from Dragsholm, NW Zealand (Source: Brinch Petersen/Egeberg 2009).

Abb. 1. Neolithisches Individuum aus Dragsholm, NW-Seeland (nach Brinch-Petersen/Egeberg 2009).



Fig. 2. Grøjægers Høj long dolmen on Møn with a burial chamber capped with white quartzite stone (photograph: M. S. Midgley).

Abb. 2. Der Langdolmen von Grøjægers Høj aus Møn mit einer von Quarzitsteinen gekrönten Grabkammer. (Foto M. S. Midgley).

lithic way of life and, literally, "... pushing the Neolithic frontier further north" (Brinch Petersen and Egeberg 2009, 458, 460).

Personally, I do not subscribe to the view that every slightly unusual grave must represent either some spiritual leader (a shaman) or another unusual personality (be it a stranger or a warrior); indeed I do not think there is anything unusual about the young man found at Dragsholm. All the items accompanying him are of a quotidian nature: the tattooing needle – if such it was – is hardly surprising; amber beads decorating his garments need not necessarily imitate Late Mesolithic female fashions, tools and weapons are normal. The young man probably was an archer – and he most likely hunted – but dare I say that, rather than upholding "a reputation of an ancestor hunter" he may have been just an average hunter; or even a poor one, unable to provide much game and thus to make a name for himself among his peers. As for his warrior status, on occasions he may well have had the need to resort to arms (arrowheads are just as deadly be they fired at wild animals or at fellow men) but this does not mean that he was a community founder, buried in a Gründergrab (Brinch Petersen and Egeberg 2009, 460).

I suggest this quite seriously because, if the revised dates are correct, he died sometime between 3780 and 3640 Cal BC. Thus he could easily have been buried in an ostentatious way and, as becomes an accomplished hunter or a community founder, had a long barrow erected above him or been placed inside a fine dolmen with a gleaming quartzite cover over his grave (Fig. 2). But he was not selected for such a burial; instead, he was put on an absolutely tiny islet that barely protruded above the water, where his grave was "constantly washed over by wave and storm" (Price et al. 2007, 208).

I find it interesting that, in our interpretations, we hardly ever think in terms of just plain ordinary folk, as most of the TRB population must have been. I will, of course, be saying something about the privileged and exceptional people – but they can only be considered as such against the multitude of ordinary community members. Of course we do not know the Dragsholm young man's place in life and we can only speculate upon the various scenarios. However, just because he has emerged accidentally from the mists of time, this does not make him special. Or, if I may re-phrase this, he is special to us but he need not have been special to his contemporaries and clearly does not appear to have been destined to become a perpetual ancestor.

So, having established that there must have been at least some ordinary folk during the TRB, let us return to the monuments, starting with the long barrows. Such mounds clearly were burial monu-





Fig. 3. Plan of the monumental cemetery at Słonowice, SE Poland (Source: Tunia 2003).

Abb. 3. Übersicht über den monumentalen Grabplatz bei Słonowice, Kleinpolen (nach Tunia 2003).

ments, and often they covered just one grave although double or multiple graves are also occasionally encountered. The cemetery at Słonowice, in south-eastern Poland, illustrates my point well – the six massive mounds were between 80 and 110m in length and were constructed as vast, timber-framed edifices; with one exception all the mounds covered just one grave (Tunia 2003, 2006; Fig. 3).

Whatever the precise regional scenarios, it is clear that only certain individuals were buried in such magnificent structures, vastly in excess of what was needed to cover, in the most liberal fashion, the burial of a single individual. Was the size of the mound a reflection of the projected time that the living were expected to remember these dead?

I shall consider the question of ancestors and ancestorship shortly. For the moment we should note that, while the long barrow monuments were conspicuous, the dead inside the closed chambers – while not really accessible – by and large retain their identity, at least in skeletal form. We may also postulate that, over the course of several generations, these dead were destined to become a distant memory of an even more distant past.

While human remains in the north European long barrows are on the whole poorly preserved, it is clear that age and sex were not among the discriminating factors, with men, women and children of various ages represented. Although this is a subject which merits a separate and fully developed study, the presence of children is particularly intriguing. Indeed, recent investigations of long barrows in south-eastern Poland have demonstrated that children's burials are more common than was previously assumed. At the site of Malice Kościelne children were buried within, as well as in close proximity to, the two long barrows and accounted for more than half of all the individuals buried in this locality (Kozak-Zychman and Gauda 1998; Kozak-Zychman and Gauda-Pilarska 1999; Bargieł and Florek 2006 a). Other sites in this region currently only known from preliminary excavation reports, for example Karmanowice, also indicate a considerable presence of children (Kozak-Zychman 2006).

Children's status in such contexts is ambiguous. Some scholars are keen to interpret this as evidence for Neolithic communities as hierarchical societies, in which the presence of children reflects the social position of a family within such a system. On the other hand, ethnographic evidence suggests that children can sometimes be regarded as personifications of the dead, closer to the world of the dead ancestors than to that of living adults, while elsewhere the children may

be thought of as a medium through which adults can express understanding of the universe and of humans' place in it (Helms 1998). It is a subject which indeed requires much deeper investigation.

## Dolmens and Passage Graves

The transition from closed to open chamber took place sometime after the early dolmens were built, and was not merely an architectural but a functional change, accompanied by a profound change in the way the living dealt with the dead and performed rituals within and outside the chambers. Such open chambers became the repositories for the dead members of households, shrines in which their bones, after ritual cleaning, were brought and preserved. While burial practices at individual monuments differed, there were certain similarities: the recurrent and probably most significant acts were rituals involving temporary storage of bodies, permitting purificatory separation of body and soul, and secondary (often fragmentary) burial within the megalithic chambers. After a period of time some of these open chambers seem to have become family vaults: complete interred bodies continued to be accompanied by bone rearrangements, skull displays and other manipulations.

## Ancestors

Let me now turn briefly to the question of ancestors and ancestorship, although I do this with the proviso that it forms only one of many aspects of monumentality.

Naturally not all community members were destined to become ancestors, and the particular accomplishments qualifying for the achievement of such a status would have varied from one community to the next. Indeed, as developments throughout the duration of the TRB suggest, the criteria were most probably not static but reflected changing social and other circumstances.

The criteria for ancestral status within the Neolithic are difficult to judge, but ethnographic evidence suggests that contributions to the communal well-being, and perhaps relations with the outside world, may be particularly significant. Moreover, the status of an ancestor could be variously bestowed upon a successful farmer – one who provided well not just for his family but for a larger community – or, indeed, an accomplished craftsman. Establishing and maintaining alliances with neighbouring groups, procurement of exotic goods from beyond the home range, or ritual and religious knowledge acquired in some faraway land and then used for the benefit of a local community – these are just some of the accomplishments which must have played a role in differentiating individuals who shared the same daily life with the rest of their community (Midgley 2008, 196–198).

The TRB culture was a dynamic entity, with cultural, social and doubtless political re-orientations at various stages of its development. By the same token the idea of ancestors and the way they were conceptualised during the TRB (or indeed other Neolithic cultural contexts) was by no means static and we can postulate changes to the ways in which this concept was expressed. The orthodox wisdom suggests that the role of ancestors in a farming community is related to its stability and social complexity, and that it increases in importance as these parameters become more pronounced. Indeed, following upon ethnographic explorations of Mary Helms (1998), I myself have thought that, within the TRB, the adoption of an increasingly sedentary lifestyle and agriculture was accompanied by an im-

portant cosmological restructuring, in which a temporal dimension was added to the already existing spatial dimension and that – at the time when open chambers came into use – this resulted in new images and metaphors which transformed the dead into a temporal category of “ancestors” (Midgley 2008, 195 – 196). However, at the risk of being somewhat provocative, I would like to suggest that the TRB monumental record could, in fact, be read slightly differently.

One may suggest that the initial idea of “ancestors” and “ancestorship” within the TRB – when the long barrow monuments were prominent – may have been a global and perhaps somewhat ambivalent concept, perceived at multiple levels and reaching back into mythological roots, with a spatial dimension playing a double role as geographical distance and also as indicator of a mythological time. Consequently, by the time open dolmens and passage graves were being constructed, some of the global ancestral values faded away and, instead, the concept operated on a geographically reduced and distinctly local level.

Mary Helms, in her book “Craft and the Kingly Ideal” has argued that “...the ultimate source of cultural legitimation derives from whatever constitutes ideological origins, and the true centre of cultural identity and especially political legitimation is located at the place of origins, wherever that may be” (Helms 1993, 192). She further argued that, for some societies, the distant centre of legitimating origins is located far away beyond the horizon. Consequently, some societies recognise a distant place and foreign people (as well as foreign objects, and here I would also include foreign ideas and practices) from geographically distant locales as ancestor-like conveyors of legitimising authority.

It is in this sense – of associating one’s origins with mythological events – that I have been suggesting that the monumental long mound tradition embodies such a mythological link with the distant Danubian world and that the significance of long barrow cemeteries – among other things – does not lie merely in monumentalising the Danubian long houses but in monumentalising entire ancestral villages (Midgley 2005, 131).

As far as northern Europe is concerned, this impulse arose in the southern swathes of the north European plain. Here were the regions where the Danubian tradition – so clearly documented in the presence of villages of long houses – reached its northernmost limit, and where the first farmers lived side by side with the last hunter-gatherers. This was the region where the Danubian villages themselves provided powerful images of ancestral places. The awareness of these sacred places, imbued with memories of distant communities and times past, provided an appropriate ancestral symbol expressed in monumental cemeteries.

In areas beyond the immediate impact of the Danubian world, on the northern fringes of the plain and across the whole of southern Scandinavia, where echoes of the Danubian presence reached via stories and gifts from distant places, this idea was also adopted but in a more individualistic fashion; here single or paired long mounds rather than large cemetery formations became the norm.

In this sense the appearance of monumentality – its initial physical manifestation in the form of huge earthen mounds – combines two elements: that of distant “mythological” and that of immediate “local” ancestors. The mythological ancestors, the master farmers responsible for the passing of agricultural knowledge from the Danubian realm, were dramatically evoked through the architectural medium, where the long mounds imitated long houses and the cemeteries imitated villages. The individuals buried within, however, could be seen as the successors of these mythological ancestors.

Moreover, against the background of the “distant origins” of agriculture, the relationship between cultivation and the dead conveyed an important idea. Farming in northern Europe may initially have been considered as much a practical as a symbolic activity – where ancestors were thought of as instigators of agriculture, as guardians of the newly cleared lands and as a medium through which rich harvests could be assured.

With the construction of open dolmens and passage graves we see the transformation of the concept of ancestorship; the enigmatic, mythological link to a distant land and a distant past, which was the initial *raison d'être* of monumentality among the early northern farmers, gives way to more immediate quotidian concerns and the specific, significant goals achieved by individuals within their lifetime give rise to a more conventional concept of ancestorship.

Hundreds of megalithic tombs are built in a relatively short period of time, and access to the dead housed within now becomes all-important. Communication with the dead – through manipulation of their bones inside the chambers, and through elaborate ceremonies conducted in the vicinity of the tombs – suggests that the ancestors are no longer regarded as “first principle” ancestors (placed at a cosmologically distant locale) but rather as active members of a community.

Indeed, as Kopytoff suggested a long time ago, the dead are not necessarily thought to be dead, merely departed to a different world from which they continue to influence life (Kopytoff 1971). They provide a medium through which personal requests and solicitations can be made and, having only just departed, they still play a part in that life in which communities and their households engage with one another in the quest for leadership, social prestige and political power.

Thus, interpreting the monumental funerary practices within the TRB culture from this perspective, we may argue that concepts of ancestorship were very much part of the natural dynamic of the Neolithic world. The incorporation of the farming way of life in northern Europe, whatever its actual practicalities, was initially expressed in the grand mythological perspective which gave priority to the “idea” of ancestral farmers (as expressed in the monumentality of the long barrow cemeteries and all the symbolism which this entailed). Over generations, the conceptual models of the northern farmers’ universe moved away from mythology to the realities of earthly life. In this context a new structuring element emerged which permitted a closer connection between the living and their immediate rather than mythological ancestors.

I have briefly explored some possible scenarios for the identification of such ancestors. It is, however, important to recognise that they tell only part of the story of the TRB folk. Our focus on those individuals whose remains we encounter inside the monuments, inevitably relegates to a “second oblivion” the story of those for whom such monuments were never going to be an option. As scholars interested in interpreting Neolithic monumentality we must now address this shortcoming and put forward imaginative interpretations which embrace the whole story: of those buried outwith as well as within the monuments.



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*Dr. Magdalena S. Midgley  
Archaeology, School of History  
and Archaeology,  
The University of Edinburgh  
Old High School  
Infirmary Street  
Edinburgh EH 1 1LT*

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