

Death Memory Meaning

1 Grave Goods: stories for the afterlife

A child's grave



Artist's impression of the Folkton Drum burial based on the written account of the excavator, William Greenwell, in 1899.

© Trustees of the British Museum

Three solid chalk, drum-shaped objects were buried with a five-year-old child some 5,000 years ago. The drums were carefully arranged behind the child, touching it at the hip and head, perhaps to guard or protect the body. Their position may have been significant, representing the world and people the child had left behind.

Decorated for death?

The drums were decorated with elaborate patterns that may have been intended to protect and guide a child who died too soon. Two have faces peering from among complex geometric designs, as if wrapped in cloaks, swaddling bands or shrouds. Similar geometric patterns are found on pottery used in important religious feasts and carved onto stones built into massive burial tombs across north-west Europe. These are powerful motifs, drawn from the world of adults and ancestors. However, drum-shaped objects and representations of faces are extremely rare for this time – these are special and personal objects.

'Folkton Drums' by Michael Rosen

In 2018, the children's author Michael Rosen wrote a poem inspired by these enigmatic grave goods.

If I am not to last the summer
If I am not to live out the light
If, when the mists hang in the air
lay me down slow
lay me down soft
lay me down low
just as I lay between you
as a new born.

If I am not to last the summer
If I am not to live out the light
If, when the mists hang in the air
lay at my head
lay at my back
lay at my hip
the treasures I have had
since I was on all fours

If I am not to last the summer
If I am not to live out the light
If, when the mists hang in the air
lay me close to the paths
lay me close to the star
lay me close to the eyes
traced on my treasures
watching me walking into the mist
watching me walking into your minds

Death Memory Meaning

2 Grave Goods: stories for the afterlife

A powerful woman



Small holes placed on either side of a crack show that the cape was repaired some time before it was buried.

© Trustees of the British Museum

This gold cape (a covering for the upper body) must have been worn by an important woman. Her authority may have been linked to sources of copper and gold found nearby, in northern Wales, demonstrating economic success and access to the materials and skills required to create such a spectacular object.

The Mold gold cape is one of the most impressive grave goods from ancient Britain. It was found in 1833 along with up to 300 amber beads arranged in rows on the surface of the cape, only one of which survives today. Pieces of woven cloth were originally discovered but no longer exist, possibly attached to the cape.

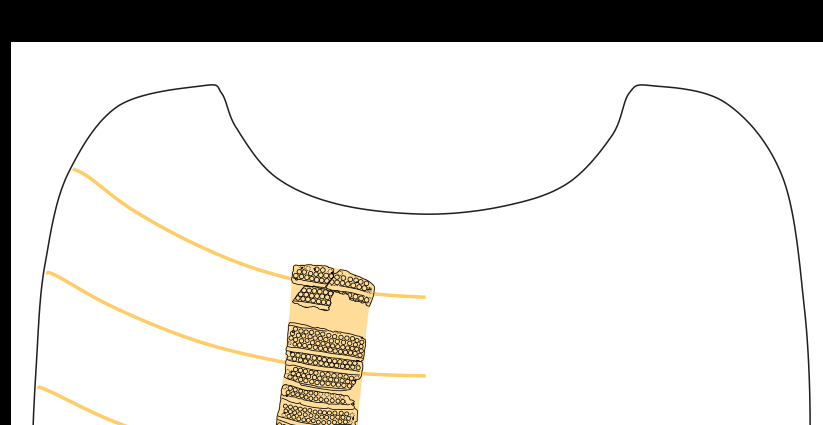
Wearing the cape

Extraordinary gold-working skills were required to make this cape, fashioning and forming its shape then applying the elaborate decoration. Small holes along the edges suggest it was originally stitched to a garment, perhaps as part of an intricate robe or tunic.

The narrow width of the cape was designed to restrict arm movement. The woman who wore it may have been above everyday tasks. Perhaps she was a leader, a priestess or even considered a divinity. Yet the cape was not made especially for her funeral. Repair holes suggest it was well-used before being buried, perhaps in ceremonies or processions.

A rectangular section of decorated gold found with the cape may represent part of a second, similar object. The outline shows how it may have fitted within a now lost cape.

© Stuart Needham



A token or heirloom?

The cape has some sections missing, now replaced with modern materials by museum conservators. Could these pieces have been taken as keepsakes by ancient mourners?

A fragment of a second gold object was buried alongside the cape. It appears to have been cut from a similar object, perhaps as a token or heirloom taken from an earlier or simpler version that was recycled. Perhaps it was a sample or test piece.

Death Memory Meaning

3 Grave Goods: stories for the afterlife

A well-connected man

This is the skeleton of an important man buried in eastern England, but with connections that reached across ancient Europe. The objects in his grave tell us about the existence of complex and far-reaching networks through which people moved and goods were traded.

Recent analysis of the chemicals preserved within his teeth and bones reveals that he grew up close to where he was buried. This stands in contrast to his grave goods, some of which can be traced from across Britain while others are associated with the arrival of new people from continental Europe, around 4,500 years ago.

Exotic materials

The copper in the man's dagger probably came from mainland Europe. The polished toggle or pendant found by his left arm is made of sea-mammal ivory, perhaps walrus, which is surprising considering the burial was located many miles from the sea.

Beside his wrist lies a stone object with gold studs, thought to represent an archer's wristguard, worn as protection when using a bow. The gold probably came from Cornwall, south-west England, while the stone was quarried in the Lake District, north-west England. The quarry was perched on a mountaintop overlooking the lakes. It was renowned for polished stone axes, made for many centuries before the wristguard was made.

Burnt offerings

The burnt wooden object buried alongside the skeleton is the most unusual discovery. Only a small number of comparable objects have been found, all from the same region of eastern England, perhaps reflecting a local burial custom. It may have been part of a coffin or bier on which the body lay. It may have been passed over fire as part of the funerary rituals, possibly to preserve the wood for the man's journey to the afterlife.

Today, many cultures around the world still use fire to cleanse and purify as part of the funeral ceremony.

An infant burial

A second burial took place nearby at about the same time. This smaller grave contained the body of a baby, just three or four months old. The goods from the infant burial can be seen in the case behind you, located at about the same distance from the adult grave as they were originally.

Death
Memory
Meaning

Grave Goods: stories for the afterlife

4

An infant burial

In a ditch surrounding the grave of the man behind you, a smaller burial contained the body of a baby. This undecorated beaker pot and a small flint flake, perhaps like a miniature tool, were placed alongside the body. The infant would have been too young to use the pot and tool while alive so perhaps they were intended for use in the next life.

It is likely that the man and baby were buried at the same time. Could they have been related, buried nearby for protection or company? Or did the baby symbolise the man's power as protector and father figure for the whole community?

Death Memory Meaning

5 Grave Goods: stories for the afterlife

A hawk to guide the dead



Pike of Stickle in the Lake District, a mountain-top quarry and source of stone for highly-prized archers' wristguards.

© Adam Burton / Alamy

When the grave of an adult male was found in 1851, it contained the skull and beak of a hawk, now lost. This unusual inclusion may relate to hunting with birds of prey, or it may have had a more symbolic significance related to speed, beauty or the heavenly domain of birds. Objects and animals from the sky may have been associated with heavenly powers.

The other grave goods were similar to those found in Barnack (trail number 3). Both graves contained an archer's wristguard made of polished stone from a mountain-top quarry in the Lake District, northern England, shown in the photograph, left.

Plan of the grave from Kelleythorpe, East Yorkshire. The hawk skull with beak is shown near the centre of the grave, in line with the man's elbow.

© John R. Mortimer 1905, fig. 740



Death Memory Meaning

6 Grave Goods: stories for the afterlife

A grave without a body

Around 4,000 years ago, this gold cup was placed in a small pit with two amber objects. An earth mound was built over them, similar to the monuments that cover many graves of this period. The goods were valuable, yet no body was found despite detailed and extensive excavations and good soil conditions for preserving human bone. The Ringlemere cup, now known after the place where it was found, was deliberately buried without a body.

Rare things

In ancient Britain and Europe, precious cups accompanied human burials. The Rillaton cup (also displayed here) was found with a cremation burial and shows how the Ringlemere cup might have looked before it was crushed by modern farming equipment.

Grave goods were surprisingly rare in Britain and Europe for much of the period explored in this gallery (about 10,000 to 800 BC). Most people were buried without objects, often their bodies were scattered without a trace, making these gold cups even more remarkable.

Too powerful to own?

The Ringlemere cup may have been considered too important to be buried with an individual. The mound that covered it was placed inside a larger monument that was already ancient. The site may have been associated with ancestors from the deep past, and the cup may have been intended for them. Being gold, it did not tarnish or decay: a powerful symbol that defies time and mortality. Perhaps it evoked a community bound by shared beliefs and rituals, similar to cups used in religious ceremonies today.

Death Memory Meaning

7 Grave Goods: stories for the afterlife

The sword-bearer

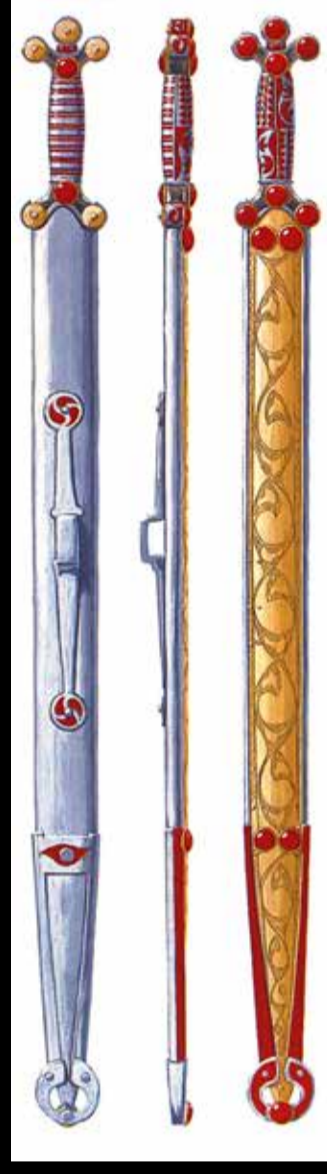


Illustration of how the Kirkburn sword and scabbard would have looked at the time of burial.

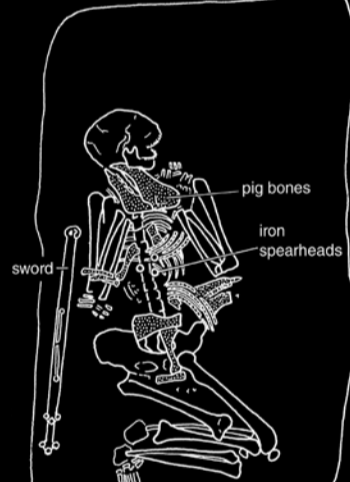
©Trustees of the British Museum

The young man buried with this sword was presented as a warrior, but was this really the case? Elaborate items of weaponry could symbolise rank and prowess but, equally, may have been intended to create an idealised persona to represent the living in the afterlife. By the time it was buried, the sword had been damaged and repaired multiple times, suggesting that it was a valued heirloom. The man must have been highly regarded or skilled to inherit such a gift. Perhaps the weapon may have equipped him for his final journey, as a sacrifice from the living to the dead.

A blood-red scabbard

The sword's elaborately decorated scabbard and hilt were intended to strike fear and awe in an enemy, symbolising the sword's power to take life. The scabbard was incised with a swirling design and the hilt and tip inlaid with red glass, giving the impression of being blood-stained. In the grave, the sword reminds us of the mortality of even the most fearsome warriors. Its power may have come from the skill needed to make it as well as the stories connected to the many hands through which it had passed.

A final salute



Plan of the Kirkburn grave showing the skeleton and sword. A pig had been placed on the dead man's chest, perhaps as sustenance for the afterlife.

©Trustees of the British Museum

As the grave was being filled, three spears were thrust into it, piercing the dead man's chest. The spear-shafts remained visible above the earth as an enduring reminder of the deeds, real or imagined, of a youthful warrior.

This vivid act of remembrance and honour, perhaps by the man's brothers-in-arms, might be the equivalent of a modern-day gun salute – a noisy, dramatic spectacle to demonstrate respect for a fallen comrade.

Death Memory Meaning

8 Grave Goods: stories for the afterlife

The charioteer

Over 2,000 years ago, a man of about 40 was buried with an impressive horse-drawn chariot, which was taken apart and laid in the ground next to his crouched body. Only the metal parts of the chariot survive: the iron wheel-rims and bronze rings from the horse harness. The largest bronze ring was decorated with Celtic designs and bone studs (displayed nearby with similar items from other chariot burials in northern England). Although the wooden wheel-spokes had disintegrated, they left an impression of their shape and size in the clay earth, showing us how they were made.

Was the man a famous charioteer or was he being equipped for a speedy departure into the afterlife? Was the chariot dismantled to signal the end of its life or to prevent the deceased from returning from the grave?

The Garton Station chariot burial, reconstructed to show the grave's layout.

© Trustees of the British Museum



Death Memory Meaning

9 Grave Goods: stories for the afterlife

The crown-bearer



The crown was worn directly on the head and, when it was discovered, it still held impressions of human hair on its inner surfaces.

© Trustees of the British Museum

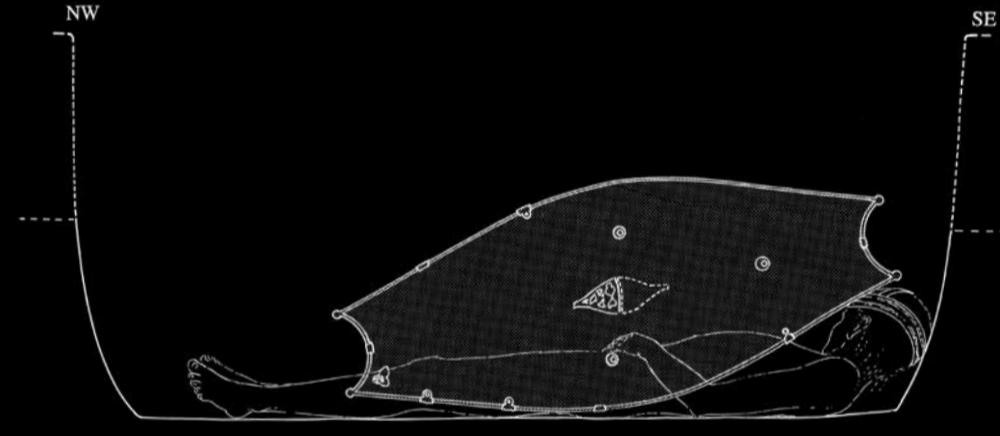
The bearer of this crown or headdress was a man in his early thirties, who died around 2,250 years ago. As the ultimate symbol of rank, status and power, the crown would have identified the man as someone special, possibly somebody with influence over life and death such as a priest, warrior or king. This small circle of metal may have been an object of adoration with the capacity to bring a noisy crowd to a hushed standstill.

Breaking and making a memory

Known as the Deal Warrior after the place where he was found, his grave is one of the richest discovered from ancient Britain. It contained an impressive range of metalwork including a sword and scabbard, a coral-decorated brooch, and a shield. Only the bronze edges of the wooden shield survive. The shield was snapped in two and broken before being placed over the body. This moment of destruction would have provided the funeral with noise, energy and drama. It may have played an important role in dealing with the grief and emotions surrounding the death, and in creating an enduring memory.

Artist's impression of the Deal Warrior with his crown at the time of burial, showing the shield still intact.

© Trustees of the British Museum



A link to the past

This burial was one of the first in a large and long-lasting cemetery. The special status of the Deal Warrior is not only reflected in the grave's isolation from those of a similar date but also its proximity to a much older burial mound. Connecting to meaningful places from the past, such as monuments from previous generations, offers both ancient and modern communities a way to renew their sense of identity and heritage following the confusion and disruption caused by a significant death.

Death Memory Meaning

10 Grave Goods: stories for the afterlife

Living in a new world

This is one of the richest known graves from the earliest stages of Roman contact with Britain, over 2,000 years ago. The cremated remains of a man lie heaped at the centre. The mix of local and imported grave goods reflects a well-connected, high-status person – or even a whole community – embracing ties to the wider Roman Empire well before the conquest of Britain in AD 43.

People found different ways of dealing with this changing world. When discovered, this grave was surrounded by other simpler cremation burials in urns, suggesting that it may have served as a focal point for the wealth and identity of the wider community.

Wrapped in a bearskin

Fragments of bear claws were found with the cremated remains, suggesting that the body was wrapped in a bearskin before being burnt.

Bears were rare in England by the time of this burial, and their skins may have been a high-status and symbolic item. As the human body was transformed by cremation fire, the bear pelt may have imbued it with magical qualities required to negotiate the dangerous space between the worlds of the living and the dead.

Hearth and home

The grave goods in this burial emphasise the comforts of hearth and home, of a man who, both in life and death, was an excellent host and perhaps also a skilful game player and strategist.

The neatly arranged dining and drinking services suggest a funerary feast, possibly with the bowls and jars filled with provisions for the afterlife. The inclusion of 24 exquisitely-made glass gaming pieces shows the importance of recreation in a society where leisure may have been associated with elite status. Perhaps these objects were considered essential for negotiating death and for providing a comfortable afterlife.

Death Memory Meaning

11 Grave Goods: stories for the afterlife

Creatures to guide the dead

The animal heads on this fire-dog may represent powerful creatures to help guide the dead through the transition to the afterlife.

Fire-dogs are rare and enigmatic objects. Placed over an open fire at the heart of a high-status home, they may have been used to spit-roast meat. Viewed from all sides, the bull or ox-heads would take on a magical quality in the flickering firelight. A few fire-dogs have been found in prestigious burials in eastern England. Perhaps they were used to cook meat for a funeral feast or to symbolise feasting in the next world.

The animal heads may have possessed a supernatural meaning, possibly as symbols of fertility and power, inspired by the strength of the bull.