

Recent work on round barrows and cairns in Wales

This volume of the journal includes four articles on the recent excavation of six Bronze Age round barrows or cairns—at Pant y Butler (Murphy and Murphy 2013), Fan (Schlee 2013), Fan Foel (Hughes and Murphy 2013), and Llanelwedd (Britnell 2013)—all within a radius of about 40 kilometres in mid Wales (Fig. 1)—the last of which also incorporates the excavation of various later monuments sharing the same landscape. Each of these projects stems directly or indirectly from a major assessment of prehistoric funerary and ritual sites in Wales (PFRS), carried out largely between 1997–2007 with funding from Cadw.¹ The study, which was primarily undertaken for conservation and management purposes, involved verification in the field of over six thousand sites primarily of Neolithic and Bronze Age date, recorded in the Historic Environment Records (HERs) maintained by the Welsh Archaeological Trusts, and included diverse monument types common to other parts of Britain, such as chambered tombs, cursuses, palisaded enclosures, henges, round barrows, stone circles and standing stones, many of which are under threat from agricultural activities and development. These monuments are important not only for what they can tell us about social organisation and beliefs but also—in view of the paucity of direct evidence of early settlement—they provide evidence about the scale and extent of land use during the Neolithic and Bronze Age periods in Wales, between about the second to fourth millennia BC.

Follow-up work was undertaken after the completion of the field survey element of the PFRS project. Including those in this volume, these projects have been many and varied and were intended to clarify various points of uncertainty in the field, to respond to sites found to be under threat, and to raise public awareness.² A programme of pollen analysis was also undertaken in and around a number of complexes of prehistoric funerary and ritual monuments in Wales with a view to learning more about the contexts in which they were built. The results of some of this work, at Craig y Dullfan and Banc Wernwgan (Fig. 1) and elsewhere, is summarized in a fifth article by Astrid Caseldine (Caseldine 2013), included in this volume.

The methodology adopted for the PFRS project was formulated in the upper Severn Valley by Alex Gibson (1998; 2002) and was subsequently extended to the rest of Wales, largely on the basis of historic counties (Fig. 1). Summaries for each of these areas detailing the range of monument types, numbers and distribution have now also been published for Radnorshire and Breconshire (Jones 2004; 2007a), Denbighshire and east Conwy (Lynch 2002), Flintshire and Wrexham (Lynch 2003), Carmarthenshire, Pembrokeshire and Ceredigion (Cook 2003; 2006; 2008), Merioneth, Anglesey, Caernarfonshire (Smith 2003; 2004a; 2004b), Glamorgan (Evans 2006) and Gwent (Lewis forthcoming). In addition, the results have also been incorporated in the Welsh Historic Environment Records, providing a resource for future research, searchable online via *Archwilio*,³ and as a tool for management and conservation.

The primary purpose of this note is draw attention to this new dataset, particularly with regard to the ring ditches, round barrows and round cairns—by far the most numerous types of monument in Wales examined by the PFRS project—which has already being used in national overviews of the period (e.g. Burrow 2011, 106). These monuments appear to have been largely built between the Middle Neolithic and the Early Bronze Age periods, between about 3400–1500 BC, and form part of a broad spectrum of circular monuments which includes ‘open’ sites such as ring-cairns like Bedd Branwen and Moel Goedog (Lynch 1971; 1984) at one extreme, and which appear to have been primarily but not exclusively associated with ritual, and ‘closed’ sites or round barrows and round cairns at the other, which appear to have been primarily—but again not exclusively—associated with burial (Lynch 1993; 2000, 121–37). The sites vary in size from modest circular cairns no more than 2–3m across to the massive cairn at Gop, Flintshire (Lynch 2003), which is 80 metres in diameter and 12 metres high. They appear across the topographical extremes, from stone built mountain-top cairns like Drosgl and Moel Hebog in Snowdonia

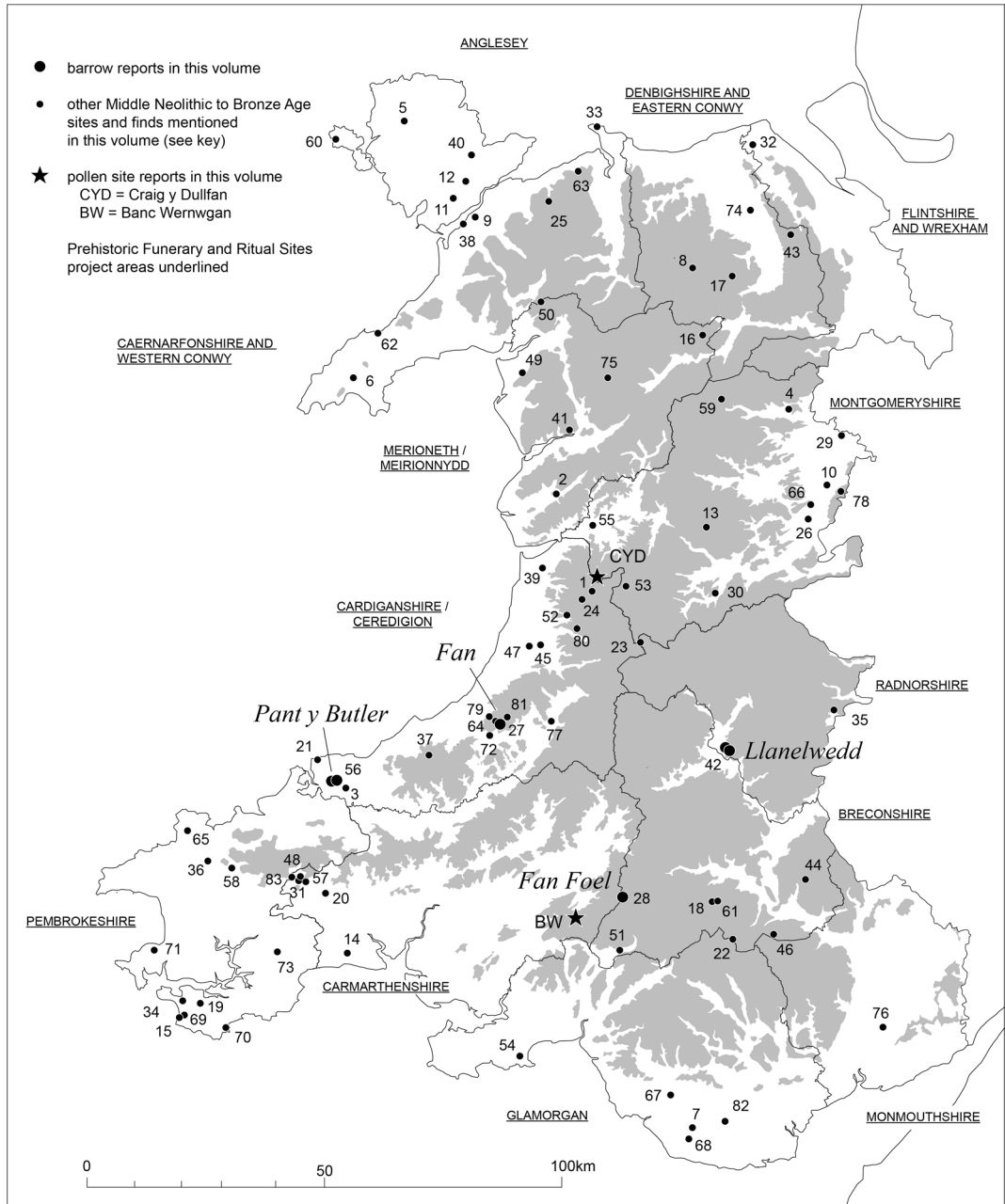


Fig. 1. Prehistoric Funerary and Ritual Sites project areas 1997–2010, the location of the round barrows and pollen sites reported on in this journal. Land over 300m shaded.

Key to sites shown on Figure 1

1 Aber Camddwr	22 Cwm Car	43 Llanferres	63 Penmaenmawr
2 Abergwylwyn	23 Cwmystwyth	44 Llanfihangel Cwm-du	64 Pen-y-Glogau
3 Allt Pengraig	24 Disgwylfa Fawr	45 Llanfihangel-y-	65 Rhos-y-clegyrn
4 Banhadla	25 Drosgl	Creuddyn	66 Sarn-y-bryn-caled
5 Bedd Branwen	26 Dyffryn Lane	46 Llangynidr	67 Simondstown
6 Bodnithoedd	27 Fan	47 Llanilar	68 Sheeplays
7 Breach Farm	28 Fan Foel	48 Meini Gwyr	69 St Twinnells
8 Brenig	29 Four Crosses	49 Moel Goedog	70 Stackpole Warren
9 Bryn Crŷg	30 Glanfeinion	50 Moel Hebog	71 Talbenny
10 Buttington Cross	31 Goodwin's Row	51 Mynydd y Drum	72 Talsarn
11 Cae Mickney	32 Gop	52 Nantyrarian	73 Templeton
12 Capel Eithin	33 Great Orme	53 Nantyreira	74 Tandderwen
13 Carneddau	34 Kilpaison Burrows	54 Newton	75 Trawsfynydd
14 Castle Lloyd,	35 Knapp Farm	55 Ogor Wyddon	76 Tredunnoch
15 Castlemartin	36 Letterston	56 Pant y Butler	77 Tregaron
16 Cefn Caer Euni	37 Llanarth	57 Pantymenyn	78 Trelystan
17 Clocaenog	38 Llanbeblig	58 Parc Maen	79 Trichrug
18 Corn-du	39 Llancynfelin	59 Pennant Melangell	80 Tyn-y-fron
19 Corston Beacon	40 Llanddyffian	60 Pen y Bonc	81 Ty'n Rhos Bank
20 Cross Hands	41 Llanelltyd	61 Pen-y-fan	82 Welsh St Donats
21 Crug-Bychan	42 Llanelwedd	62 Pen yr Orsedd	83 Yr Allor

(Crew 1985) to lowland turf barrows such as Sheeplays in the Vale of Glamorgan (Fox 1959, 129–48). Their construction might be simple or complex (cf. Leighton 1984). Some sites have been shown by excavation to have been built, used and adapted over several centuries, and there are suggestions that the function and purpose of individual sites evidently changed markedly over time. The materials from which they were built—whether of earth, turf, stone or wood—often appear to relate to local circumstances, but might have a functional or symbolic significance.

The completion of the field survey element of PFRS provides us for the first time with a reasonably reliable picture of the frequency, distribution and morphological range of these circular burial monuments throughout Wales, and indicates totals of between about 200–250 ring ditches, and 3,000–4,000 round barrows of all the types defined by the PFRS project, taking into account both certain and possible sites (Table 1).

These monuments were built during a formative period of Welsh history when new landscapes were being colonized, new resources were being exploited, and new allegiances were being forged. The role of these monuments in the development of tribal organisation, kinship, traditional patterns of land use and customary rights and access to land have yet to be fully appreciated, but they have a resonance in medieval Welsh and Irish rituals whose origin, uniquely in Britain, can be traced back to the Bronze Age (Charles-Edwards 1993, 1, 259–303).

The data assembled by the PFRS project provides no more than a snapshot in time, however. The project was designed to visit sites that were already known to exist, rather than to search for new ones, and clearly an unknown number of sites have been destroyed without trace. The dots on the map will change as new sites are identified and as known sites are reclassified or dismissed. It is interesting to note, for example, that the density of recorded barrows in Wales is over twice that in the adjacent counties of

the West Midlands,⁵ most probably because of the higher survival rate in Wales, where intensive arable agriculture is less widespread. In some instances, isolated cists, and cremation cemeteries—as at Capel Eithin and Cae Mickney (Lynch 1991; Smith 2004a, 26) and Pennant Melangell (e.g. Britnell 1994)—also appear to represent all that has survived of former burial monuments.

Like other classes of funerary and ritual sites, numerous terms have been used to describe things that were often similar in character.⁴ A simplified system of classification was therefore adopted by the PFRS project which could readily accommodate all monuments—irrespective of their condition, the materials from which they were built, and whether they had been excavated or not. The intention was to make it easier to search the HERs and enable comparisons to be made across the different regions of Wales rather than necessarily to replace the use of other terms. Two generic types, ‘Ring ditch’ and ‘Round barrow’, were used, both of which included sub-types (Table 1; Figs 2–5; see site type definitions given in the Appendix). Individual sites might also be classed under two or more different terms, if, for example, excavation had shown a sequence from one monument type to another. Multiple site types were identified separately as ‘Round barrow cemetery’, such as Four Crosses (Warrilow *et al.* 1986) and linear cemeteries such as Banhadla (Gibson 2002, Fig. 9), or as ‘Prehistoric monument complex’ for clusters of monuments of different types or date, as at Sarn-y-bryn-caled (Gibson 1994), Dyffryn Lane (Gibson 1995), and Tandderwen (Brassil *et al.* 1991).

Table 1. Numbers of Ring ditches and Round barrows and other related monument types in Wales recorded by the Prehistoric Funerary and Ritual Sites project.
(Source: *Regional Historic Environment Records, 2010*)

monument types and sub-types	total certain sites	total possible sites	total certain + possible sites
Ring ditch	181	53	234
Ring ditch (large)	16	3	19
<i>total</i>	198	56	254
Round barrow	897	361	1,258
Round barrow (cairn)	1,671	535	2,206
Round barrow (kerb cairn)	60	15	75
Round barrow (platform cairn)	24	1	25
Round barrow (structured cairn)	221	6	227
Round barrow (ring cairn)	215	61	276
Round barrow (large) and (very large)	60	12	72
<i>total</i>	3,148	991	4,139
Cist	60	26	86
Cremation burial	35	8	43
Cremation cemetery	16	3	19
Round barrow cemetery	149	20	169
Round barrow cemetery (pair)	104	8	112
Round barrow cemetery (cairnfield)	53	0	53
<i>total</i>	306	28	334
Prehistoric monument complex	48	0	48

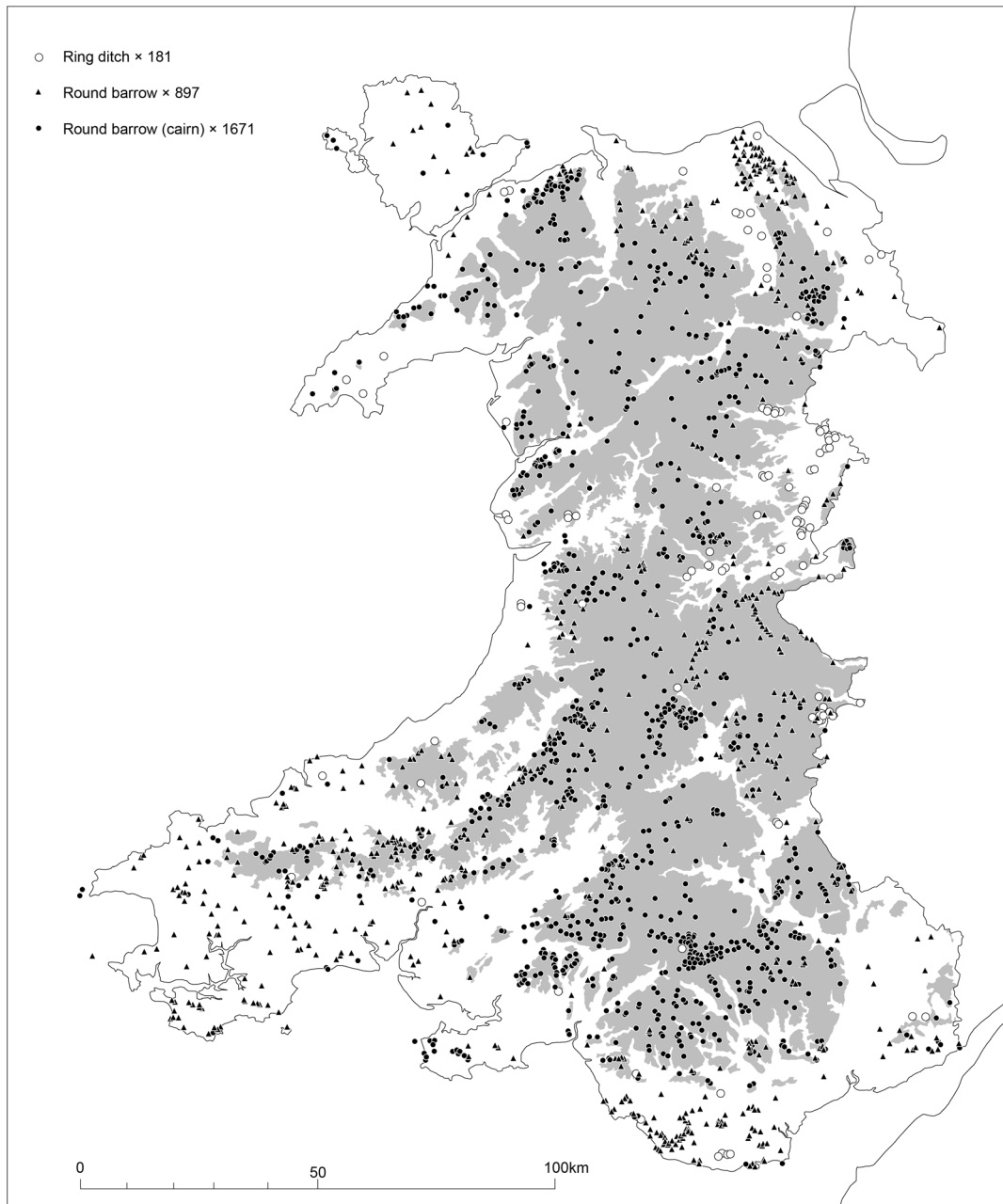


Fig. 2. Distribution of ring ditches, round barrows and cairns recorded as part of the Prehistoric Funerary and Ritual Sites project. Land over 300m shaded. Note that at the scale at which this map is reproduced some clusters of sites are represented by a single dot. Only more certain sites are included. *Source: Regional Historic Environment Records, 2010.*

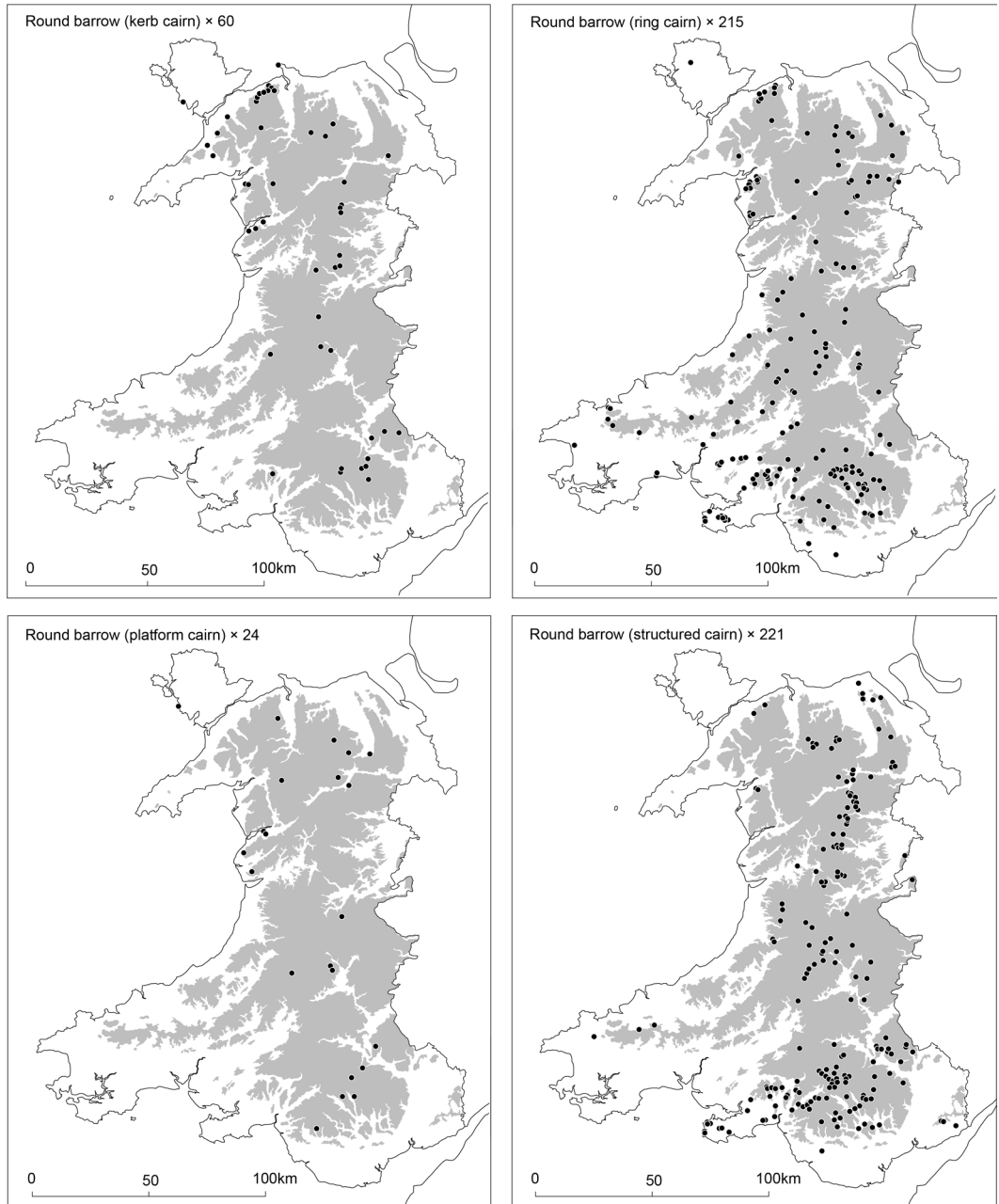


Fig. 3. Distribution of kerb cairns, ring cairns, platform cairns and structured cairns recorded as part of the Prehistoric Funerary and Ritual Sites project. Land over 300m shaded. *Source: Regional Historic Environment Records, 2010.*



Fig. 4. Distribution of large ring ditches, large and very large round barrows, round barrow cemeteries, and round barrow pairs recorded as part of the Prehistoric Funerary and Ritual Sites project. Land over 300m shaded. *Source: Regional Historic Environment Records, 2010.*

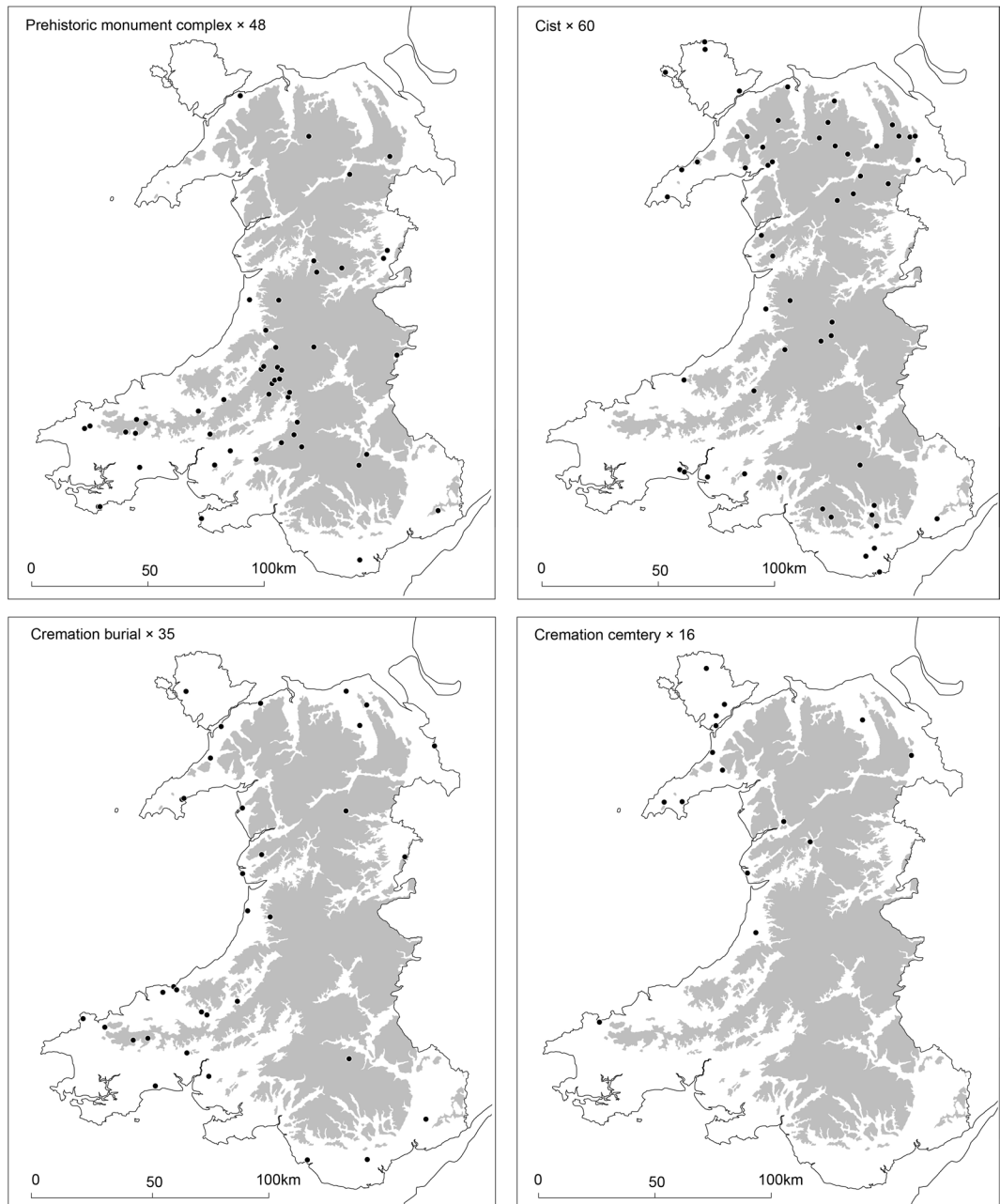


Fig. 5. Distribution of prehistoric monument complexes, cists, cremation burials and cremation cemeteries recorded as part of the Prehistoric Funerary and Ritual Sites project. Land over 300m shaded. *Source: Regional Historic Environment Records, 2010.*

From a demographic point of view it is important to note that other types of site were being used for human burial during the periods in question but are not included on Figure 1, including caves, standing stones (e.g. Lewis 1974), penannular ring-ditches as at Sarn-y-bryn-caled (Gibson 1994), timber circles such as those at Sarn-y-bryn-caled and Meusydd (Gibson 2010; Jones 2010), and pit graves as at Trelystan (Britnell 1982).

The PFRS project has highlighted the gradual loss of round barrows during the last century. The threats facing sites reported on in this volume are quite typical and include agricultural land improvement and ploughing at Pant y Butler and Fan, damage caused by hill walkers in the case of Fan Foel, and quarrying at Llanelwedd. The recent loss of these six sites out of a total population of those which are known might appear slight; but this rate of loss is more than would be tolerated if the casualties were more than just tokens of past lives.

APPENDIX

MONUMENT TYPE DEFINITIONS

The following are abbreviations, in alphabetical order, of the monument type definitions given in the Prehistoric Funerary and Ritual Sites project methodology (CPAT 2010), which provides a concordance where possible with English Heritage's Monument Class Descriptions⁶ and RCHME's *Thesaurus of Monument Types* (RCHME 1995).

Cist

Isolated stone-lined pit assumed to have held a human burial of prehistoric or later date. It is generally assumed that the shorter cists are more likely to be Bronze Age in date, while the longer cists may be Iron Age or later. Examples currently identified as falling within the monument type definition locally are between 0.5 and 2.1m long and 0.3 to 0.5m across.

Cremation burial

Single cremation burial possibly accompanied by grave goods and/or contained within a pit and/or a ceramic vessel but not associated with surface features, of later Neolithic to middle Bronze Age or Romano-British date.

Cremation cemetery

More than one cremation burial possibly accompanied by grave goods and/or contained within a pit and/or a ceramic vessel but not associated with surface features, of later Neolithic to middle Bronze Age or Romano-British date.

Prehistoric monument complex

A reasonably close grouping of two or more different prehistoric funerary and/or ritual monument types which is perceived as having some association. An example might be a round barrow and standing stone in close proximity, or a group including a wider range of monuments.

Ring ditch and sub-types*Ring ditch*

One or more concentric ditches (5–30m in diameter) with no visibly surviving internal mound identified by excavation or by cropmarks and assumed to be associated with funerary and/or ritual monuments of later Neolithic to middle Bronze Age date. More frequent smaller examples (<30m in diameter) are assumed to be the ploughed-out remains of a round barrow or internal ring-bank.

Ring ditch (large)

Rarer larger examples (30–60m in diameter) have relatively narrow ditches, they appear too large to have enclosed a barrow and may have enclosed an internal ring bank and/or be related to henge monuments.

Round barrow and sub-types*Round barrow*

Round mound of earth and/or stone with a flattened or rounded top presumed to be for burial and/or other ritual activity of Neolithic, Bronze Age date or early medieval date. The mound may be enclosed by a circular or intermittent outer ditch and may have a complex structure including stone kerbs, stone settings or burial cists. Ring ditches are a related type with no visibly surviving internal mound, the smaller examples of which are generally considered to be ploughed-out round barrows. Included in the definition are sites first identified as ring ditches subsequently found to have an internal mound. Due to difficulties in distinguishing the internal structure of unexcavated and damaged sites and for ease of information retrieval subdivisions of the type are included in brackets. Where no sub-type is indicated, the mound is either assumed to be predominantly composed of earth, or the site has been lost or destroyed and surviving records may be insufficient to determine the exact nature of the monument. The definition includes round barrows which may form part of a henge.

Round barrow (cairn)

Circular cairn assumed to be predominantly composed of stone.

Round barrow (kerb cairn)

Small circular cairn (c. 5m in diameter) with an outer kerb of disproportionately large stones (interior normally has low infill).

Round barrow (platform cairn)

Circular cairn with a levelled flat top.

Round barrow (ring cairn)

Circular bank of stone surrounding a hollow central area, the inner and/or outer edges of which may be retained by stone kerbs or spaced stones.

Round barrow (structured cairn)

Circular cairn assumed to be predominantly composed of stone and with evidence of deliberate construction such as a kerb or inner stone setting.

Round barrow (large)

Rarer, larger examples the size of which would appear to set them apart from smaller monuments. Sites may be large in diameter (>30m in diameter), or in height (>3m), the latter possibly being of late Neolithic date.

Round barrow (very large)

Exceptionally large examples, over 60m in diameter, the size of which sets them apart from all other monuments of this type. Only one monument, Gop Cairn (Flints.) (c. 100 × 68m across and 12m high), is included within this sub-type.

Round barrow cemetery and sub-types*Round barrow cemetery*

Group of two or more round barrows or ring ditches within reasonably close proximity to each other, possibly associated with other monument types. Currently, the largest barrow cemetery locally comprises about 8 monuments.

Round barrow cemetery (pair)

Two round barrows in close proximity and assumed to be associated.

Round barrow cemetery (cairnfield)

Group of small cairns within close proximity, assumed to be associated with funerary and/or other ritual activity of Neolithic, Bronze Age. To be distinguished from clearance cairns.

NOTES

1. The principal staff of the Welsh Archaeological Trusts involved in the project were Nigel Jones (Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust), Nikki Cook (Dyfed Archaeological Trust), George Smith (Gwynedd Archaeological Trust), and Richard Lewis and Edith Evans (Glamorgan-Gwent Archaeological Trust). Acknowledgement must be given to the late Richard Avent of Cadw who helped initiate the project, Dr Sian Rees of Cadw who steered liaison group meetings, and the Historic Environment Offices of each of the Trusts; also to Frances Lynch, Stephen Briggs, Frank Olding and others who provided academic guidance and advice during the project. The methodology for the project is outlined in an unpublished paper (CPAT 2010). Thanks are due to Nigel Jones and Jenny Britnell who helped in the preparation of this note.
2. Follow-up projects have included work on the following: stone and timber circles (Smith and Hopewell 2007; Jones 2007b, 2010a; Crane and Wilson 2009; Jones 2010a); cursus monuments and palisaded enclosures (Britnell and Jones 2012a), causewayed enclosures (Jones 2010b; Lewis, Pearson and Yates forthcoming); large ring ditches (Britnell and Jones 2012b); barrow cemeteries (Lewis 2009; Poucher and Ings 2010); trails and self-guided walks in south-west Wales <<http://www.dyfedarchaeology.org.uk/projects/PrehistoricFuneraryRitualSites.htm>>, mid and north-east Wales <<http://www.cpat.org.uk/walks/index.htm>>, and Anglesey <<http://www.heneb.co.uk/angstones/angleseystonesintro.html>> and north-west Wales, <<http://www.heneb.co.uk/merionethcairns/cairnsmap.html>>.
3. Available at <<http://www.archwilio.org.uk>>. A summary of the results of the studies by the four Trusts was presented at a conference entitled 'Wales and the West during the Bronze Age: character, comparison and contacts' organised by the National Museum Wales and the Royal Archaeological Institute held at the National Museum in 2010 (Britnell 2010).
4. These terms included the following: Barrow, Bell barrow, Bell disc barrow, Bowl barrow, Burial cairn, Burial mound, Cairn, Cairn circle, Disc barrow, Kerb cairn, Kerb circle, Kerbed cairn,

- Platform barrow, Platform cairn, Pond barrow, Ring barrow, Ring cairn, Ring ditch, Round barrow, Round cairn, Saucer barrow, Structured cairn, Tumulus.
5. Garwood 2007, 136 quotes a figure of ‘more than 900’ in the West Midlands, an area of 12,615km². The Welsh counties cover an area of 20,779km².
 6. Available online at <<http://www.eng-h.gov.uk/mpp/mcd/intro2.htm>>.

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