



Living with the dead

Mick Sharp

I have had the privilege to know Frances Lynch for over thirty years, and it was a pleasure to work with her and Jean Williamson recently on our book *Anglesey: Past Landscapes of the Coast*. Frances has close connections—as excavator, site director, specialist report writer, illustrator and interpreter—with many of the Neolithic and Bronze Age ritual and funerary monuments in north Wales. Her lifelong work has greatly inspired and informed me, and in this photographic essay I pick up some of the themes highlighted by her investigations.

Trefignath burial chamber, Holyhead, Anglesey, SH 259805 (Fig. 1)

At some point in the fourth millennium BC, a band of early Neolithic people camped on a gently sloping hummock in an area of grassland, peat bog and open woodland. The ridge had been shaped and aligned by an ice sheet moving south-westwards. It left behind rubble and rock slabs which were used in the Neolithic to build a tomb on the highest point of the knoll. A burial chamber and short entrance passage formed an L-shape inside a circular cairn built over some of the domestic debris—hammer stones, worked flint and chert, broken pots, charcoal—left on the old ground surface, perhaps by the tomb builders themselves. This simple tomb was later incorporated into a trapezoidal long mound built with rounded horns flanking an indented forecourt at its broader, eastern end. Entrance from the forecourt to the burial chamber was between two portal stones the same height as the chamber slabs. The cairn was retained by large stones faced with an outer layer of dry walling made from thin flat stones. Some of the building stone was levered from the western end of the outcrop. During the modern excavations fragments of an Irish Sea ware bowl were discovered lying on one of the quarry ledges. The wedge-shaped cairn was laid out along the ENE–WSW alignment of the ridge with great care and symmetry, and access provided through its northern side to the original passage and chamber.

Access to the second chamber was blocked when a third chamber was built in the forecourt, and the long cairn extended to cover it. The extension was butted up against the revetment of the existing horns, and a new horned forecourt was created and given its own facing of tabular slabs. Two pairs of portal stones—the outer ones rising above the chamber capstones—formed an imposing entrance (illustrated), and a low wall of stones on edge divided the entrance area from the rectangular burial chamber. While each chamber was in use for burials, temporary drystone walling across the entrances allowed them to be opened and closed as required. As interments ceased the passage and entrances were deliberately blocked with soil and stones, and finally the forecourt and other distinctive features of the cairn cloaked by carefully placed layers of ‘extra-revetment’. The eastern chamber was disturbed in Iron Age times when a fire was lit inside it, and in August 1655 John Aubrey found ‘a mountain Beast (or two) were at Shade within it.’ The central chamber survived intact until around 1790 when ‘urns and bones’ were discovered as the cairn was robbed for building materials.

Prior to Chris Smith’s 1977–79 excavations (Smith 1987), Trefignath was generally regarded as



Fig. 1. Trefignath burial chamber, Holyhead, Anglesey. © *Mick Sharp*.

a single-phase segmented gallery grave in an unusually long cairn: Frances Lynch suggested that Trefignath and similar sites such as Din Dryfol (Anglesey) might be ‘composite tombs’ and this has proved to be the case. Trefignath may have been in use into the later Neolithic—a time span of perhaps a thousand years during which, according to pollen analysis, the local woodland was

gradually cleared, rich pastureland increased and arable crops including cereals and beans were grown. Changes of style and funerary practice could have been brought about by new ownership or by the ancestral community responding to a widening range of influences and its own changing circumstances. Trefignath seems to include elements of the European passage grave tradition, Cotswold-Severn long mounds, Irish court cairns and the Clyde tombs of south-west Scotland, while the locally made pottery shows influences from the Irish Sea zone and southern England. Throughout all the changes at Trefignath, the location itself—and alignment of the burial chambers along the ridge—seem to have remained key elements. In 2007, the ground-plan of a rectangular (16m × 7m), early Neolithic timber post-and-plank building was discovered less than 100m west of the tomb (Kenney 2007). The ‘hall’ is on the same ENE–WSW alignment as the tomb and they resemble each other in having three internal parts plus a ‘porch’ at their eastern ends. A second timber building on the same alignment has recently come to light close to the tomb. Similar Neolithic timber structures have been found locally at Llandegai and Parc Bryn Cegin near Bangor, and in other parts of Britain. The remains at Gwernvale (Powys) and Ascott-under-Wychwood (Oxfordshire) were found sealed below Neolithic tombs, reinforcing the theme of strong attachment to a particular piece of land and the links between homes for the living and houses for the dead.



Fig. 2. Bryn Celli Ddu passage grave and henge, Llanddaniel Fab, Anglesey. © *Mick Sharp*.

Bryn Celli Ddu passage grave and henge, Llanddaniel Fab, Anglesey, SH 507702 (Fig. 2)

Midwinter frost forms an icy carpet around the partly reconstructed mound. The tomb's entrance faces north-east towards the midsummer rising sun, whose solstice rays shine along the constricted passage and enter the more spacious burial chamber, where a guardian spirit waits in the form of a freestanding, rounded stone pillar. 'The Mound in the Dark Grove' is an unusual monument whose exact nature is still being debated. It was excavated in 1927–31 by W. J. Hemp (1930) who firmly believed it to be all of one construction. Following the work of M. J. O'Kelly (1951) on the decayed turf layer across the monument, Frances Lynch and others see it as a two-phase site, a dramatic example of an established ceremonial tradition imposing itself upon a new one. The tomb appears to have been built over the internal ditch, and violently dismantled stone circle, of an existing circular earthwork. Before the burial chamber was covered with a round mound—formed partly from the henge's external bank—the tomb builders dug a ritual pit where the central feature of the stone circle had been. A fire



Fig. 3. Barclodiad y Gawres, Llanfaeolog, Anglesey. © Mick Sharp.

was lit in the pit and an adult ear bone placed on its floor. It was backfilled and sealed by a flat slab with a decorated stone laid beside it. The wavy-lines-and-spirals pattern on its two flat faces and top suggest that the stone had originally stood upright. Megalithic tombs are usually regarded as older monuments than henges, but henges were being built early in the third millennium BC at a time when sophisticated, decorated passage graves, some surrounded by stone circles, were still in use in parts of Ireland. Was Bryn Celli Ddu built as an unusual hybrid, did it evolve peacefully into a complex and wayward monument, or is it evidence of the ‘killing’ and ‘rededication’ of a centre of rival religious and cultural ideas?

Barclodiad y Gawres passage grave, Llanfaelog, Anglesey, SH 329707 (Fig. 3)

‘The Apronful of the Giantess’ stands on a coastal headland looking westwards to Ireland where similar tombs and megalithic art may be found, especially in the Boyne Valley of Co Meath. The long passage entering from the north, corbelled central chamber and three lower side-chambers at east, south and west formed a rough Latin cross in plan within a circular mound of stones and turves. Three of the passage stones are decorated along with the rear slab of the western chamber, and the rear and northern side slabs of the eastern one. Frances Lynch made a special study of the tomb’s art



Fig. 4. Bachwen burial chamber, Clynnog, Gwynedd. © Mick Sharp.

(Lynch 1967), with its dramatic repertoire of horizontal and vertical chevrons (zig-zags, wavy lines, serpents), lozenges and spirals. Curving lines form ‘eyebrows’ over diamond ‘eyes’, spirals pair up to stare, and the passage stones have the look and presence of standing figures, especially stone 22 (illustrated). Frances drew attention to the high skills of the artist-carvers, especially in being able to integrate the motifs and fill surfaces with coherent and balanced designs. The passage graves of Iberia, Brittany, Ireland and Britain share anthropomorphic carvings and suites of ‘magico-religious symbols’ (Shee Twohig 1981) which are tantalizingly similar, but with very marked regional differences: lozenges and zig-zags are common to all, whereas Britain and Ireland share a liking for lozenges and spirals. The idea of megalithic missionaries spreading the rituals and symbols of an ‘Eye’ or ‘Mother’ goddess throughout western Europe is currently out of fashion, but some influences do seem to have been carried to and fro in the Neolithic by those braving the winds and currents of the Atlantic sea-ways.

Bachwen burial chamber, Clynnog, Gwynedd, SH 407495 (Fig. 4)

This small portal dolmen also enjoys sea views and enigmatic marks. Four uprights forming a rectangular chamber support a capstone whose surface is dimpled by around 118 cup-marks, two groups of which are joined by incised grooves. There is a definite connection between human remains and cup-marks, but they were also carved on stones indicating astronomical alignments and on natural outcrops at key points in prehistoric landscapes. Victorian excavations in the chamber uncovered ‘nothing very remarkable’, but a modern sheep’s skull nestling in the grass is a reminder of the chamber’s sepulchral purpose.



Fig. 5. Maen y Bardd burial chamber, Rowen, Conwy. © Mick Sharp.



Fig. 6. Cors y Gedol burial chamber, Dyffryn Ardudwy, Gwynedd. © *Mick Sharp*.

Maen y Bardd burial chamber, Rowen, Conwy, SH 740717 (Fig. 5)

This small portal dolmen stands high on the western slopes overlooking the Vale of Conwy. The ‘Stone of the Bard’ is situated just above a prehistoric and Roman route linking the valley with the north Wales’ coast via a mountain pass. The surrounding area is rich in the remains of prehistoric farming, settlement and ceremony, and the burial chamber, stripped of its mound and standing open to the winds, is a poignant reminder of those Neolithic people who lived and died on these ruggedly beautiful hills.

Cors y Gedol burial chamber, Dyffryn Ardudwy, Gwynedd, SH 603228 (Fig. 6)

Streams of cattle and their drovers passed this way on one of a network of routes leading southwards to the Mawddach estuary and then inland to English markets. At the north-eastern end of a much reduced long cairn, a weary capstone rests its bulk against one of the two remaining uprights of the burial chamber. Around this Neolithic tomb, the ancient upland landscape is littered with the remains of settlements and fields from the late Bronze Age through to medieval times and beyond. Ahead, to the ESE, lies the ridge of Craig y Grut, to the south-east the drovers' route via Pont Fadog and Bwlch y Rhiwgyr ('Pass of the Drovers'), to the west rough grazing turns to better pasture as the land slopes down to the sea, and to the north-west lies Moelfre ('bare hill') from whose summit King Arthur hurled the capstone. Folklore also suggests that the location of buried treasure will be revealed near 'Arthur's Quoit' when a rainbow strikes the capstone. A spindle-whorl of later date than the tomb has been found under the capstone.

Lligwy burial chamber, Moelfre, Anglesey, SH 501860 (Fig. 7)

The unburnt bones of Neolithic men, women and children were placed in the partly rock-cut chamber beneath this massive limestone slab supported by low stones. Along with the remains of up to 30 individuals, buried in two groups separated by stone paving, were animal bones, flint implements, pottery and a bone pin. Offerings are still made inside the chamber which has the feel of a natural limestone cave or rock shelter.



Fig. 7. Lligwy burial chamber, Moelfre, Anglesey. © *Jean Williamson*.

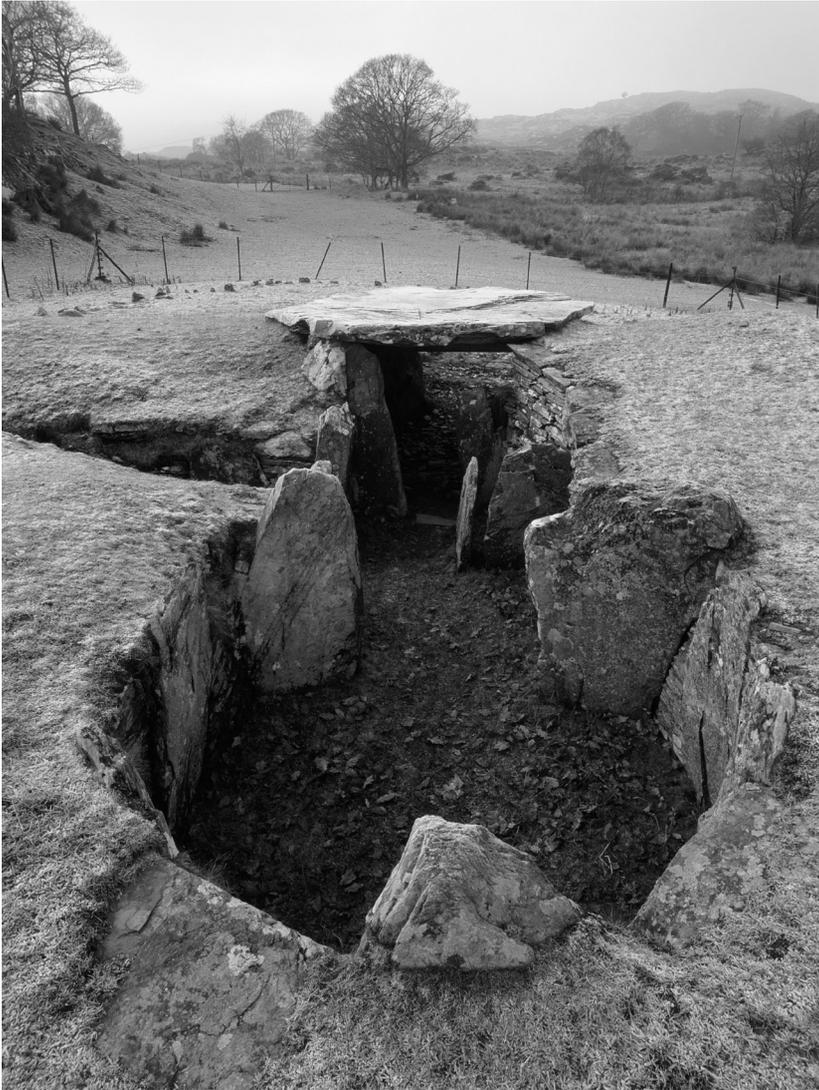


Fig. 8. Capel Garmon, Betws y Coed, Conwy. © Mick Sharp.

Capel Garmon burial chamber, Betws y Coed, Conwy, SH 818544 (Fig. 8)

Capel Garmon Neolithic chambered long cairn is situated on a hillside with a panorama of Snowdonian peaks to the north-west. Built in the classic Cotswold-Severn style, it has interesting similarities of design with the *mastaba* houses of the dead built over rock-cut burial chambers in ancient Egypt. The wedge-shaped cairn is retained by drystone walling, and horns at the broad ENE end form a narrow forecourt leading to a false portal: a symbolic doorway, part of a stage set for ceremonies or perhaps an attempt to mislead tomb robbers. The real entrance passage (illustrated) leads from the southern side of the long cairn into a central rectangular compartment flanked by a

circular chamber at east and west. Modern access is through the far, western chamber which was broken open and used as a stable in the 1850s. Just a few bones and pot sherds were found during W. J. Hemp's excavations in the 1920s (Hemp 1927). On a cold December day, frost coated the capstone but left the fallen leaves untouched in the relative warmth of the chamber.

Moel Goedog West ring cairn, Harlech, Gwynedd, SH 610324 (Fig. 9)

The prehistoric trackway up from the coast below Harlech and over the hills to Trawsfynydd, is marked by numerous standing stones and other Bronze Age monuments. On ascending from the south-west the circle is not immediately visible, it is its eastern twin on a ledge above the track which first appears. Approaching from the opposite direction, the uphill ring is hidden while this one below the track stands revealed. A low stone bank, with regularly placed upright stones, surrounds a circular platform cut into the hillside. Frances Lynch excavated here in 1979 (Lynch 1984) and partly restored the ring by placing four new uprights in original stone-holes. Before the levelled interior was finished off with a thin layer of stones, several pits had been dug at different times in the period between 1700 and 1400 BC. Deposits of charcoal, burnt human bone, and charcoal with burnt bone—some in pots—were placed in the pits. Based on soil analysis, one cremation had been 'buried near the coast' before being dug up and reburied on this hillside overlooking Tremadog Bay.



Fig. 9. Moel Goedog West ring cairn, Harlech, Gwynedd. © Mick Sharp.



Fig. 10. Bryn Cader Faner cairn circle, above Talsarnau, Gwynedd. © *Mick Sharp*.

Bryn Cader Faner cairn circle, above Talsarnau, Gwynedd, SH 648353 (Fig. 10)

Deeper into the hills along the trackway lies what Frances Lynch (1995) has described as ‘arguably the most beautiful Bronze Age monument in Britain.’ A string of cloud appears to connect the circling of stone rays to the whitened peaks of the Snowdon range forming a dramatic backdrop to the NNW. The

cairn has been carefully sited just below the crest of a grassy outcrop, tilting downhill to present its spectacular profile to those approaching from the south-west, on the trackway passing other funerary and ritual sites in the marshy upland valley. Of the 30 or so stones originally set leaning out from the body of the cairn only 15 remain, some of which have been reduced in length from their original 2m (6ft). The centre of the tomb was dug out in the 1800s, but even in its denuded state Bryn Cader Faner is a wonderful example of a simple but striking design beautifully placed in the landscape.

Bedd Branwen, Llanddeusant, Anglesey, SH 361849 (Fig 11)

This Bronze Age burial mound became an inspiration to later story-tellers who included it in the ‘Second Branch’ of the collection of four Welsh tales known as the *Mabinogi*. Branwen believed herself responsible for the death of her brother, the giant and king Bran the Blessed, along with

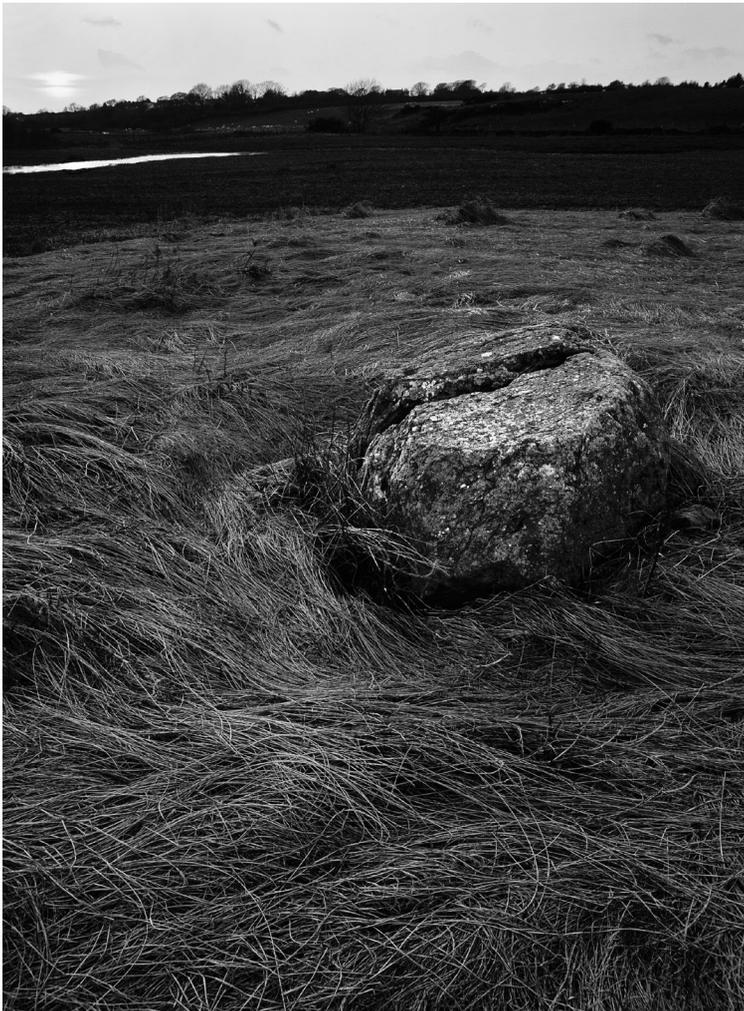


Fig. 11. Bedd Branwen, Llanddeusant, Anglesey. © Mick Sharp.



Fig. 12. Brenig platform cairn, Llyn Brenig, Denbighshire. © *Mick Sharp*.

many Irish and Welsh warriors in a war fought on her account. Lamenting her birth and the laying waste of ‘two good islands’, her heart broke and she was buried here on the bank of the river Alaw. Frances Lynch excavated the round barrow in 1966 (Lynch 1971) and revealed a complex sequence. The stone, erected at the end of the third millennium BC, stood alone for several centuries before cremations were buried around it. A broad circlet of stones then covered the urns, pots and personal belongings, and the area between the ring cairn and the central stone was filled in with overlapping pitched slabs. A circular kerb of boulders retained the final covering mound of soil and turves into which further cremation urns were inserted. Three small pots, each containing a pair of neonatal carbonates, had been placed beside urns holding adult cremations—perhaps an indication of the dangers of childbirth rather than the results of cruel practices.

Brenig platform cairn, Llyn Brenig, Denbighshire, SH 991568 (Fig. 12)

Two small valleys were flooded in the early 1970s to create Llyn Brenig reservoir. Frances Lynch (1993), along with other archaeologists and volunteers, was able to examine over 50 sites in the area, some of which were reconstructed to create archaeological trails. This Bronze Age platform cairn was first built to cover the burial of an adult and child within a domestic occupation surface. Their cremated bones were placed in an urn beneath a large stone in the far (S) side of the cairn. At this stage the centre was open, the ring cairn’s inner edge retained by small upright stones. A second cremation burial was made in the open area at the centre of which stood a large timber: flagpole,

maypole, or totem pole? The centre was then filled in to produce a platform hiding the upright stones. An urn containing charcoal was placed in a pit under a small, semicircular cairn built into the near (NE) edge of the platform. Although the reconstructed surface is rather uneven, this raised floor with a central post-hole lends itself to the idea of circular movement. Sir Cyril Fox (Fox 1959) found broad, circular bands of well-trodden ground within some of the Bronze Age burial monuments he excavated. He was persuaded by the evidence that a type of circle dance had formed part of the cremation rituals along with the lighting of sacred fires and the scattering of charcoal: feet repeatedly passed over newly filled graves and ‘clouds of charcoal-dust enveloped the performers’.

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