



West of Wessex but only just: round barrow construction on the Mendip Hills, Somerset

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The upland limestone plateau of the Mendip Hills is situated in the northern part of the county of Somerset in south-west England (Fig. 1). It is a distinctive karst landscape, with striking limestone gorges carving the steep sides of the plateau, and caves and sinkholes giving access to another, subterranean, world. Stuart Piggott (1938) considered Mendip geographically to form part of the Wessex region, separated from the chalk only by the Frome Gap: a narrow belt of poor soils as little as two miles wide. He also considered Mendip to be part of the ‘Wessex Culture’ of the Early Bronze Age and artefacts from Mendip barrows are illustrated and discussed in the 1938 paper, demonstrating close links with this cultural heartland. This paper will explore some of those relationships, but also suggest that Mendip had close, possibly closer, links with south-east Wales during this period. All radiocarbon dates quoted in this paper are calibrated at 2 sigma.

THE BEAKER BACKGROUND

Mendip certainly is one of the more impressive, if neglected, Early Bronze Age landscapes of southern Britain. It contains nearly 400 barrows (Grinsell 1971) and at least a quarter of these monuments have been subject to some form of excavation (Fig. 2). Although the records of these investigations are of variable quality, it is possible to say something of the artefact associations. Beakers are rare and there is only one certain Beaker-associated burial beneath a barrow. A little further to the west, two Beakers from a pit on the foreshore at Brean may have accompanied a burial, although no bone survived, if it were ever present, in the acid environment (Taylor and Taylor 1949; ApSimon 2000).

Other burials of Beaker date come from caves and from within the ditch of a henge at Gorsey Bigbury (ApSimon 1951; ApSimon *et al.* 1976). The material from Gorsey Bigbury (as reinterpreted by Lewis 2005) represents two discrete phases of Beaker activity. The first relates to the construction of a cist in the ditch terminal, which contained human remains and sherds of Beaker pottery, together with a barbed and tanged arrowhead, a flint knife, four bone needles and a bone scoop. The second phase of activity is represented by the disturbance of this burial and the deposition of fragments of at least 120 Beakers, animal bones, charcoal and lithics in the ditch of the monument. This echoes the practice of the deposition of Beaker pottery at earlier monuments in Wessex, at sites such as Mount Pleasant and West Kennet long barrow (Wainwright 1979; Piggott 1962).

Beakers and human remains are also found in caves and sinkholes, although the mixed stratigraphy at many of these sites means that it can be difficult to be certain that the two are definitely contemporary. Probably the best example comes from Charterhouse Warren Farm Swallet (Levitan *et al.* 1988; Levitan and Smart 1989; Lewis 2000), where a 21 metre deep natural shaft was found to contain a succession of archaeological deposits of Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age date. A Beaker and human bone was recovered from horizon 2 from which the remains of at least seven individuals including

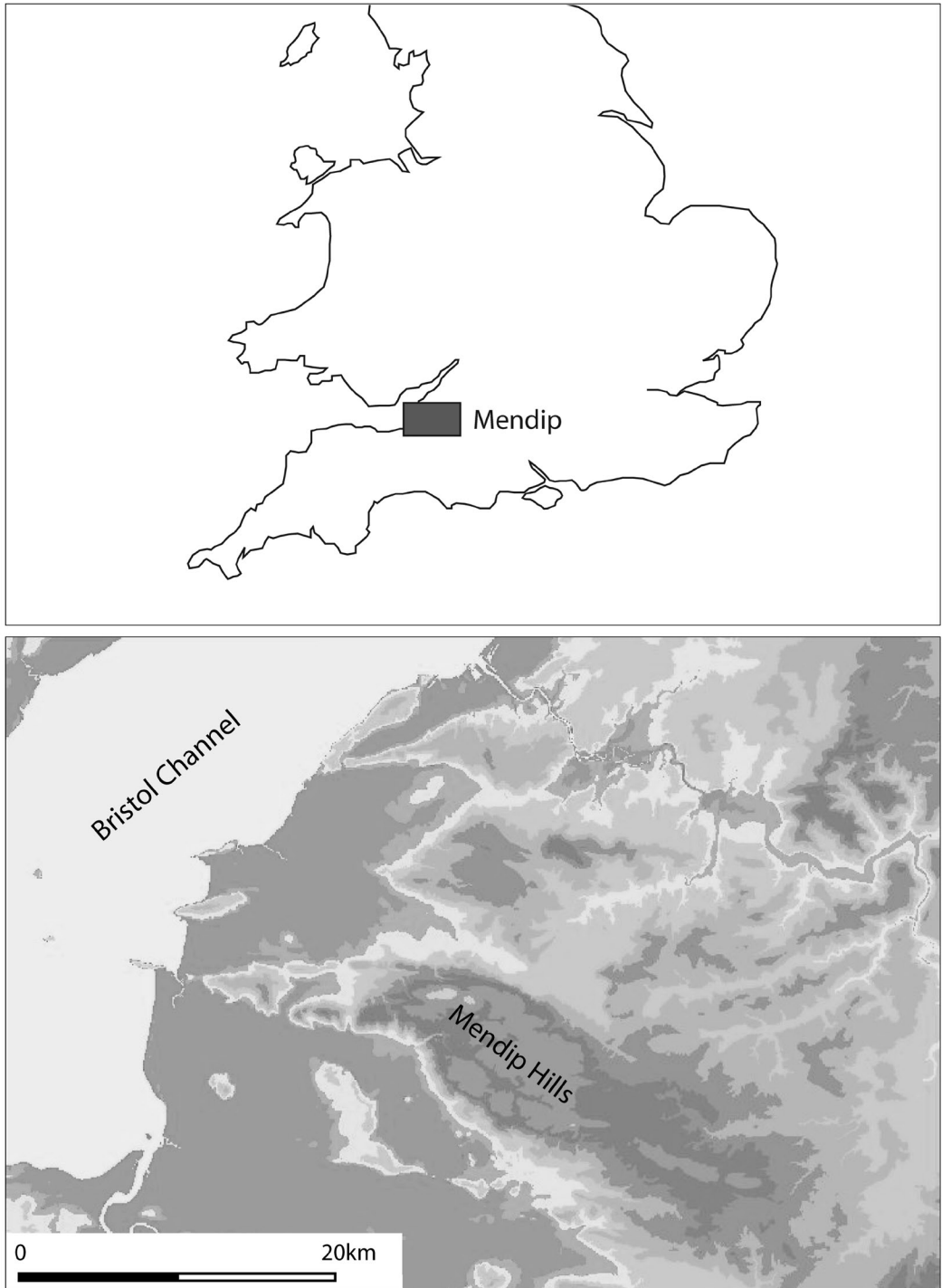


Fig. 1. Location of Mendip.

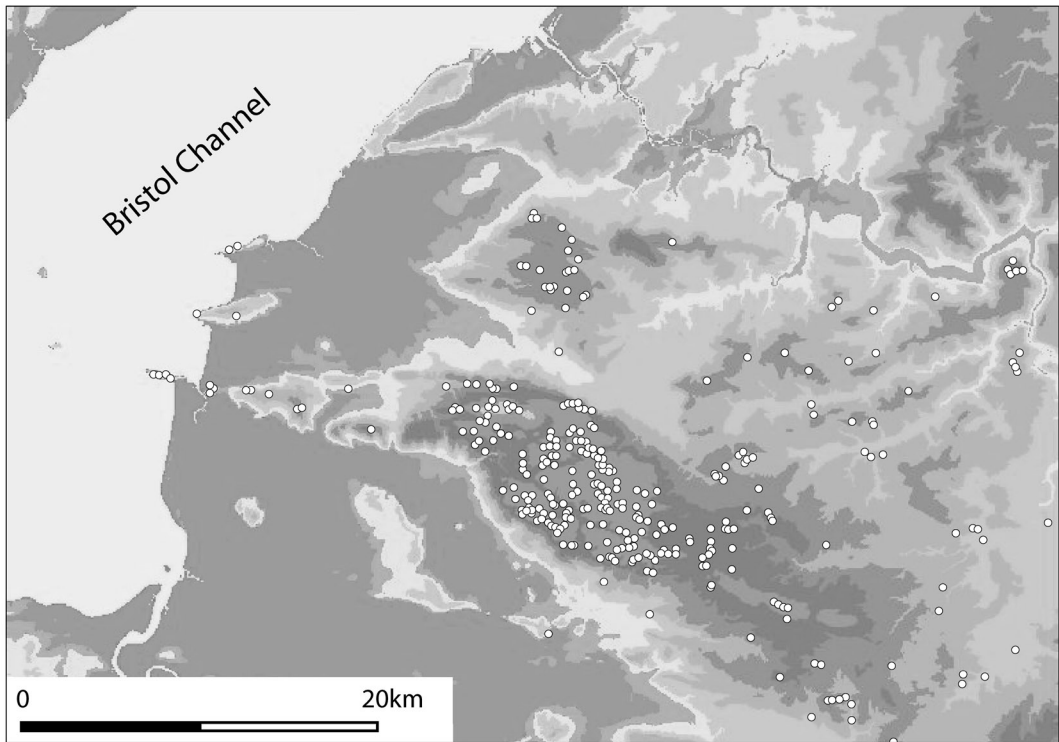


Fig. 2. Round barrows on Mendip.

adults, juveniles and infants were recovered. A single bone returned a calibrated date of 2470 to 1970 BC. From a lower level in the swallet, human remains and five 'sponge finger stones', a bone pin, an antler spatula and a flint dagger were also recovered. A minimum of two perinates or infants were represented here and returned a near contemporary calibrated date of 2460 to 1960 BC.

Beaker has also been found from a further eight cave sites and was sometimes deposited with human remains (see Lewis 2005). In other cases Beakers were seemingly deposited as fragments, echoing the deposition of Beakers in pits.

It may be instructive to analyse the Beaker finds from Mendip chronologically and spatially. This is not easy in terms of absolute dates. The second phase of Beaker activity at Gorsey Bigbury has an unsatisfactory date range of 2500 to 1650 cal. BC, from unidentified and bulk-sampled charcoal (ApSimon *et al.* 1976). The dates from Charterhouse Warren Farm Swallet are somewhat better in that they are at least on the human remains directly associated with Beaker pottery. In the absence of a wide range of radiocarbon dates, we have carried out a typological assessment of the Beakers, using Needham's recent classificatory system (Needham 2005), and this suggests that the Mendip examples, with a few exceptions, are generally of the Long-Necked style and not particularly early in date (Lewis and Mullin forthcoming a). The lack of good radiocarbon dates for the Mendip Beakers is problematic in this regard and it is not possible to be certain how this material fits within the national framework which sees the style starting in at least the 22nd century BC.

When the geographical distribution of Beaker finds from Mendip is considered, it can be seen that

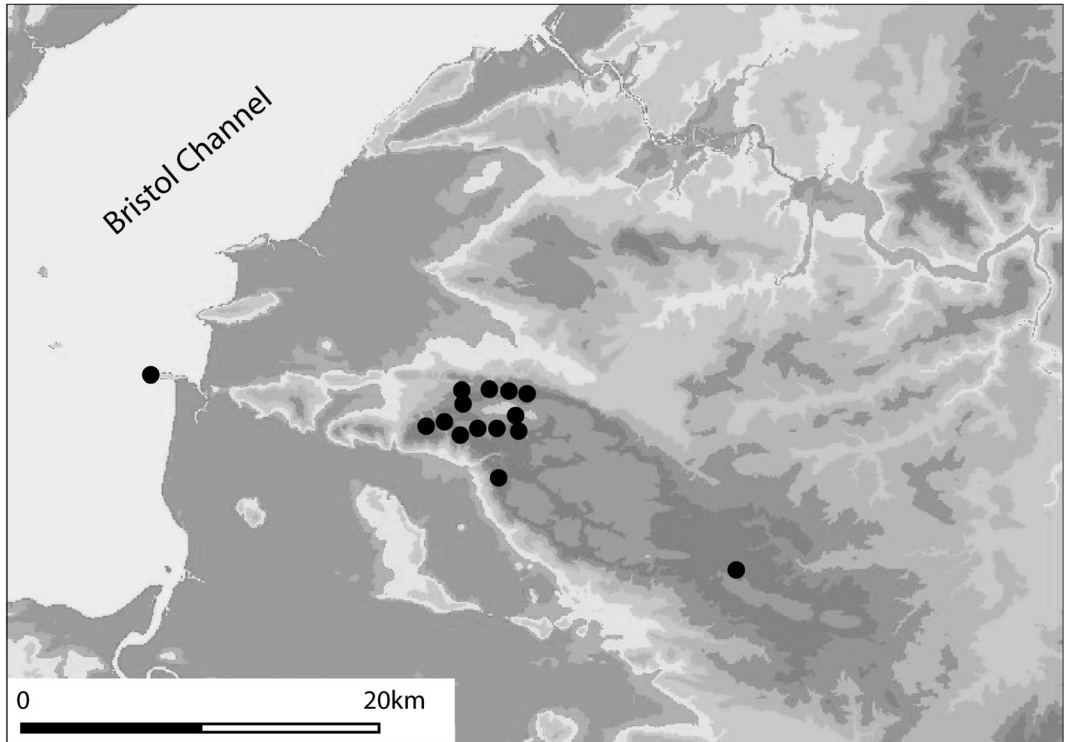


Fig. 3. The location of Beaker finds from Mendip.

they form a discrete cluster at the western end of the plateau, with most of the sites being either in, or in close proximity to, the gorges and coombes that offer access on to the hills (Fig. 3). This is the part of Mendip which is closest to the Bristol Channel, is visually connected to the hills of south-east Wales, and is the most distant from the Wessex chalklands. It is interesting that there are good parallels for some of the Mendip Beakers with Beakers from the other side of the Bristol Channel, at sites such as St Fagans, Riley's Tumulus and Llanmadoc (Savory 1980, 201) (Fig. 4). We have argued elsewhere that during the Beaker period, Mendip may have had closer connections with south-west England and Wales than with Wessex and the physical distribution of sites may support this (Lewis and Mullin forthcoming a).

EARLY BRONZE AGE MENDIP

The relatively few sites of Beaker date can be contrasted with the large number of round barrows on Mendip, which remain poorly understood in terms of chronology and development (although see Lewis 1996; 2007a and Mullin 2011 for recent approaches to these barrows). Notwithstanding the overwhelmingly antiquarian nature of the excavations, details of the finds from 39 barrows are reasonably well understood, although these cannot be related in any meaningful way to the stratigraphy of the monuments. Of these 39 examples for which material or records survive, only five could be



Fig. 4. Beakers from Mendip (right) and South Wales (left).

considered to be 'rich', or well-furnished, Wessex culture graves (containing a combination of objects such as beads, metalwork, pottery and other grave goods): the rest containing single examples of either pottery vessels (although these have not been subject to detailed analysis and many only survive as drawings), amber and faience beads, and metalwork such as awls, pins and daggers (see Table 1).

The grave goods which survive in Bristol Museum have been analysed by the Leverhume Trust-funded *Ritual in Early Bronze Age Grave Goods* project led by Ann Woodward and will not be considered in detail here. It is worth pointing out, however, the presence of nine miniature vessels from six barrows, including Aldbourne Cups associated with daggers and a decorated bulb-headed bronze pin from adjacent barrows at Timsbury/Camerton and a 'grape cup' with amber and faience beads and a dagger from a barrow within the linear cemetery on Ashen Hill near Priddy (Grinsell 1971). A rapid assessment of Skinner's drawings of his finds suggests that most of the 'urns' from Mendip barrows are Collared Urns or related traditions, and that there is a genuine lack of Food Vessels

Table 1: Grave goods from well-furnished Mendip Bronze Age graves

Barrow	Pottery	Beads	Metalwork and other finds
Cheddar 5	inverted urn	segmented faience	bronze awl
Chewton Mendip 11	Grape cup	amber and faience	3-riveted bronze dagger
Shipham 2	‘urn’	‘beads’	dagger
Timsbury 1	Aldbourn cup		grooved ogival dagger bulb-headed bronze pin perforated whetstone
Timsbury 2	Aldbourn cup	biconical bone	bronze knife-dagger

from the region. In all cases, burials with the grave goods are cremations and Grinsell suggested that nearly 90 per cent of all known primary burials from northern Somerset, and all of those with grave goods, are cremations.

Although ‘fancy’ barrow forms, such as bell and saucer, are present on Mendip, these are relatively few in number and some of those classified as bell barrows by Grinsell may, instead, be local variants. As Grinsell himself pointed out, the barrow Priddy 43 appears to be an intermediate form between a bell and a saucer, whilst the disc barrow Priddy 35 may be a henge. One of the Priddy Nine barrows (Priddy 32, Grinsell 1971), identified as a possible saucer barrow may, in fact, be a ring cairn. The remaining bell barrows are smaller than the examples found in Wessex and could potentially be bowl-barrows altered to resemble bell barrows (Grinsell 1971, 50). The majority of the round barrows on Mendip are bowl barrows and not all of these have surrounding ditches (see Lewis and Mullin 2000). We have argued elsewhere that for many of the Mendip barrows, the materials used in their construction appears to have been *gathered* from the surface of the land, rather than *quarried* from beneath it (Lewis 2007b). Not all of these materials were immediately local to the monuments, and there is evidence for different coloured subsoil adhering to turf sods which make up the same mound, suggesting that they had a variety of origins. Weathered and rounded stones used in the construction of cairns also suggest that stones were collected from a variety of sources, rather than quarried. Many of the Mendip barrows show elaborate construction sequences, with mounds layered using earth and turf and stone, deployed in a highly structured manner. For some Mendip barrows then, attention appears to have been focused not on making elaborate external forms that can be found in other areas, but on creating complicated sequences of internal construction, seemingly governed by local fashions or prescriptions. It is tempting to see these sequences of addition and enlargement as representing a drawn-out period of construction and negotiation at the sites, but caution should be exercised in such assumptions, as an example below will show.

Whilst there may be less outward variety in the form of round barrows than in regions such as Wessex,

Mendip is notable for the large number of round barrow cemeteries that occur. Of the *c.* 400 barrows present, nearly half occur in some 25 cemeteries. Of these 56 per cent are linear cemeteries, 24 per cent nucleated and 20 per cent area cemeteries (Lewis 1996). The preference for linear cemeteries is reminiscent of the pattern from Wessex, and Paul Garwood (2007) has suggested that this is a practice that seems to date to *c.* 1800–1600BC. Perhaps the most impressive of the linear cemeteries, Ashen Hill and the Priddy Nine Barrows, overlook the Neolithic henge monuments of the Priddy Circles and it is worth noting that the densest concentrations of barrows on Mendip, both individually and in cemeteries, are to be found immediately around these monuments. It is of interest to note that the densest concentrations of barrows on Mendip are to be found on the western plateau: eastern Mendip, closest to the Wessex chalk, and a seemingly equally suitable landscape for barrow construction, has far fewer Bronze Age monuments, although it is much richer in Neolithic long barrows. This may suggest that the idea of Late Neolithic henges having a spatial and temporal ‘draw’ in the Early Bronze Age is true for this region, as all of the henges are to be found on the western Mendip plateau.

The main similarity between Mendip and Wessex, then, can be seen in the construction of linear barrow cemeteries. This, combined with the five ‘Wessex Culture’ graves identified above, was instrumental in Piggott (1938) including Mendip as part of Wessex. Yet, when the results of some recent research projects are considered, connections with other regions are also seemingly represented in the Early Bronze Age practices situated here.

NEW RESEARCH, NEW PERSPECTIVES

Until very recently, little modern work had been undertaken on the Mendip barrows. New radiocarbon dates have been obtained from human remains excavated earlier in the twentieth century from the Pool Farm barrow, Priddy, where a cist contained two individuals, an adult and a juvenile, dating to 1980–1765 and 1920–1735 cal. BC (Coles *et al.* 2000). The site is notable for its cist slab, which is decorated with a series of cup marks and six carvings of unshod feet. The only parallels for the foot motifs occur in the north of Britain and Scandinavia (Horne 1930; Grinsell 1957; Pitts 1978). Just off Mendip, a cairn on Court Hill, near Clevedon (Green 1973) was excavated and contained a crouched inhumation with no grave goods, but radiocarbon-dated to 1880 to 1420 cal. BC, subsequently disturbed by the insertion of a Middle Bronze Age cremation burial (radiocarbon dated to 1130 to 410 cal. BC). Although not directly dated, a project at Middle Down Drove (Lewis and Mullin 2000) also uncovered evidence for the renewal of the kerb of the barrow Cheddar 20 (Grinsell 1971) in the later Bronze Age.

Recently, two projects have looked at individual barrow sites, both of which, incidentally, occur within linear barrow cemeteries. On Beacon Hill, above Shepton Mallet, Peter Leach excavated a trench across a mound and found it to be a small, turf-constructed barrow, into the top of which had been inserted a biconical urn with cremated bone (of an adult ?female), radiocarbon-dated to 1690 to 1500 cal. BC (Peter Leach, pers. comm.). The relatively small size of the barrow (*c.* 20m in diameter), along with a series of radiocarbon dates spanning 2880–1950 BC from below the barrow are strongly suggestive of a Beaker date for the construction of the barrow, followed by the insertion of the urn into the mound several hundred years later.

At about the same time as the excavations at Beacon Hill, a project directed by the authors excavated what appeared to be a long mound at the junction of west and east Mendip, close to the village of Chilcompton, only 5 kilometres distant from Beacon Hill (Lewis and Mullin forthcoming b). The sequence here is complex but it rapidly became apparent that the site was, in fact, two round barrows:

a large barrow with a smaller barrow partly constructed over its west side. The east barrow had a complex sequence of mound construction, whereas the west barrow appears to be a single-phase monument.

In the east barrow, the first phase of activity was the construction of a small, oval, corbelled cist, which had a rectangular stone surface or platform adjacent to its northern side (Fig. 5). Both the cist and the platform were surrounded by burnt planks. The defined edges and lack of charcoal and ash spread suggests that these were placed perhaps when smouldering but not alight. This phase was then covered by a rectangular cairn which itself was enclosed by an earth mound and another stone cairn. This last cairn was then covered by a further, and final, earth capping, during the construction of which the earlier cairns and mounds were reopened, down to the primary corbelled cist (Fig. 6). One of the capping stones of the cist was removed and it appears that the primary burial deposit was removed and replaced by the cremated body of a female, aged 25–30 years at death. Accompanying this burial deposit was a bronze awl, faience beads, an amber bead, fossil crinoid beads and a fragmentary accessory vessel. The cremated remains were tightly organised into a rectangular shape, strongly suggestive of their having been packed inside an organic container. The dates for the human bone are 1880 to 1680 cal. BC.

The stone removed during the opening of the monument was spread over the northern part of the mound in a rather haphazard fashion and buried below the subsequent earth capping. However, on top of these stones was a small deposit of cremated human bone, dated to 1890 to 1730 cal. BC, and a



Fig. 5. The primary monument at the east barrow, Chilcompton.

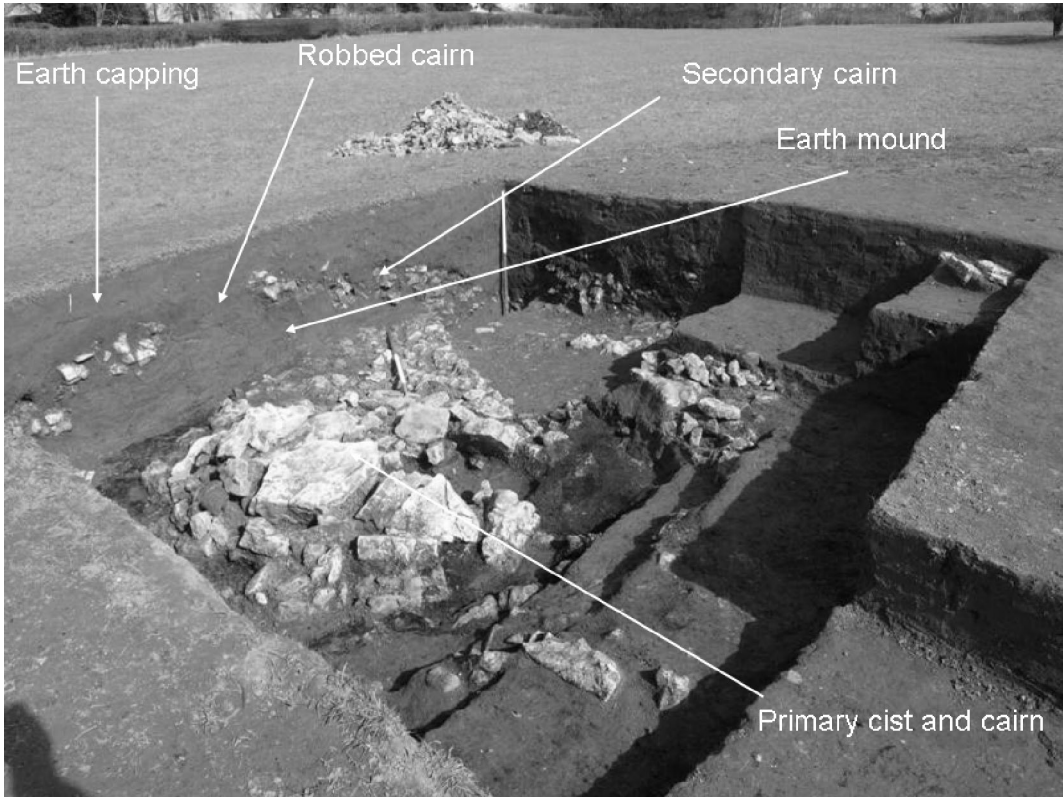


Fig. 6. The later phases of the east barrow at Chilcompton.

perforated jet button. Also, during the construction of the earth capping, a circular arrangement of stones was constructed and a deposit of cremated bones placed on it (Fig. 7). This was covered by a larger stone which matches the dimensions of the missing capstone removed from the primary corbelled cist. A row of vertical stones was placed above the deposit, seemingly marking its position. The human remains from this feature returned a date of 1910 to 1740 cal. BC. This is the earliest date for human remains from either of the two barrows and it is probable that this deposit represents the original burial from the primary corbelled cist, carefully reburied with part of the original structure within the newly created earth capping. A similarly early radiocarbon date was also obtained from the burnt timber surrounding the primary monument, further strengthening this interpretation. A final feature in the upper earth capping was a stone cist, containing an incomplete cremated body with a shale bead. This cremation burial was dated to 1880 to 1660 cal. BC. The closeness of this date to that of the female burial in the primary corbelled cist is noteworthy. The final, visible phase of activity at the barrow was the construction of a ring of white lias stones, pressed into the margins of the mound, defining its edge.

The west barrow had a much simpler sequence of construction. Here, a shallow pit was dug into the stripped old ground surface and a small deposit of cremated human bone placed within it (Fig. 8). It was not possible to determine the sex of the individual, but the age at death was 20–45 years. A miniature collared urn was placed in the southern part of the pit, deposited in a fragmentary condition and placed upon fragments of a second urn. The human remains were dated to 1890 to 1730 cal. BC:



Fig. 7. Structures in the earth cap of the east barrow, Chilcompton: linear stones (upper) over circular structure containing cremated human remains (lower).

almost identical to the replacement burial in the primary cist of the east barrow and that in the cist in the final earth capping. Several slabs of white lias, identical to that used in the kerb of the east barrow, were placed at the sides of the pit and a burnt hurdle framework, visible as discrete lines of charcoal, was then deposited over it. An earthen mound was constructed over the area, seemingly in a single phase, overlying the western margin of the east barrow. A stone kerb of the same material as that from the east barrow, and probably robbed from it, was placed around the edge of the mound, deviating slightly from the circular in order to join the kerb of the east barrow.

The excavations carried out at Chilcompton are the only ones from Mendip, to date, to recover a near-complete sequence of construction and use of a round barrow, with a suite of radiocarbon dates covering all of these phases. The relatively short period of construction and use is notable.

CROSS-CHANNEL CONNECTIONS?

The accessory vessel from the east barrow was identified by Ann Woodward as a Longworth (1984) Type 10 bipartite cup, the best parallels for which come from Wales. Similar vessels have been found in barrows at Breach Farm and Marlborough Grange Farm in Glamorgan (Savory 1980), although parallels are also known from southern England. The example from Breach Farm is more elaborately decorated than that from Chilcompton, and was accompanied by a cremation burial, four low-flanged

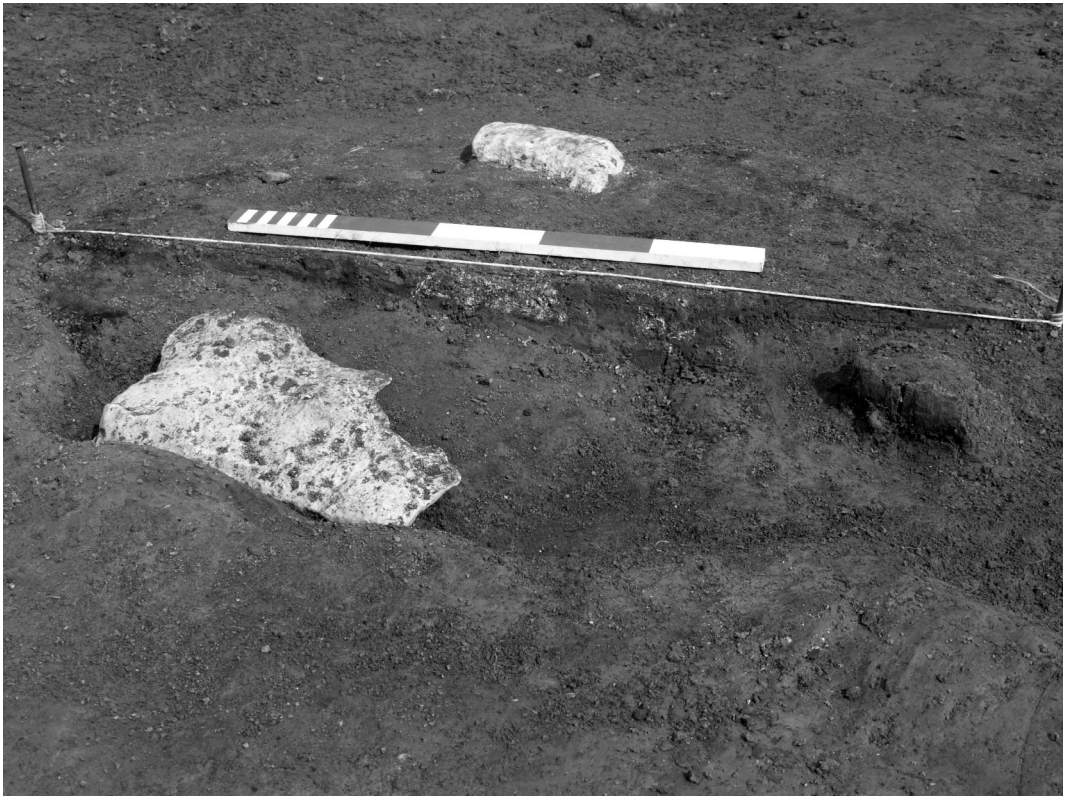


Fig. 8. Primary features at the west barrow, Chilcompton.

bronze axes, thirteen barbed and tanged arrowheads and two 'shaft smoothers'. The cremation from Breach Farm has recently been radiocarbon dated to 1960 to 1740 cal. BC (Brindley 2007, 367), and overlaps with that from the West Barrow at Chilcompton. Savory (1980) has previously noted that this biconical form of accessory vessel is the most common form within Wales, where they are frequently part of 'rich' grave assemblages, and examples cited in Longworth (1984) of Group 10a cups are likewise all from Wales.

Perhaps the best parallel for the construction of the east barrow also comes from Wales. At Tremeirchion, Flintshire (Hayes 1996), a barrow with almost exactly the same sequence was excavated in the late 1950s: indeed the sequence is so similar the sections could almost be interchanged (Fig. 9). It is also apparent from the section that the barrow at Tremeirchion has multiple phases of construction, including a central cairn which appears to have been covered by a turf mound, a further cairn and another earth mound. Again, the outer cairn seems to have been partly dismantled and a burial placed within the 'robber pit'. Very little of the primary cremation burial survived and the site has not been radiocarbon dated, but this burial was associated with a small oval cairn and burnt wooden planks. Planks have also been found at Brenig 40 where, although the burial had been disturbed in the nineteenth century, evidence for a 'mortuary structure' of charred oak timbers was uncovered (Lynch 1993, 62). This latter structure was radiocarbon-dated to 1920 to 1520 BC, overlapping with that of the timbers from Chilcompton. Burial 4 in Barrow I at Trelystan (Britnell 1982) was cut through a burnt area and burnt stakes, whilst the primary burial from Marlborough Grange Farm (Savory 1969) was also associated with burnt wooden planks, as well as the bipartite cup, mentioned above.

Whilst the examples outlined here may indicate connections between Wales and Mendip, shared practices with Wessex in the east are less easy to identify. The recently published excavation of 18 barrows on Snail Down, Wiltshire (Thomas 2005) reveals few parallels with the sequence at Chilcompton: the cemetery here contains a variety of architectural forms such as bell, disc, saucer and pond barrows and, whilst burial ritual may have been relatively complex, the sequence of construction of the barrows appears to have been relatively straightforward. Indeed, in the list of multi-phase barrows produced by Garwood (2007, 33), most lie outside southern England. Unlike the barrows from Mendip, the majority of those at Snail Down have ditches which supplied the material for the mound. Site II at Snail Down contained the cremation of a female with an accessory vessel and a copper awl, but the vessel is different in form and decoration to that from Chilcompton and the barrow itself is of saucer form. Burnt timbers were found at Site III, a bell barrow, and interpreted as the remains of a pyre, as they comprised logs and coppiced poles of oak. Radiocarbon dates from this feature overlap with those from Chilcompton, spanning 2125 to 1690 BC and the primary burial, despite having been largely removed by Colt Hoare in the nineteenth century, appears to have been that of a female. Elsewhere in the cemetery, there is variety in final outer form of the barrows, but these appear to have been the result of short-lived episodes of construction. Having said this, there is evidence for activity within the landscape over a long period of time with Early Neolithic pottery, Grooved Ware, Peterborough Ware and Beakers all recovered during excavation. Food Vessels were also present at the site, although in relatively small numbers.

Whilst Snail Down may be seen as only a single example of a cemetery within a landscape which contains enormous numbers of barrows, the general patterns here can be seen as fairly typical of elsewhere in Wessex. Like Mendip, however, excavations of Wessex round barrows were largely undertaken in the nineteenth century and records of structure, rather than finds, are poor. Whilst this allows a typology of Wessex graves based on their burial assemblages (see Needham *et al.* 2010), it is uncertain how far outside Wessex this scheme can be extended, especially given the relative paucity of grave goods further west and north. Although there are some commonalities between

Tremeirchion

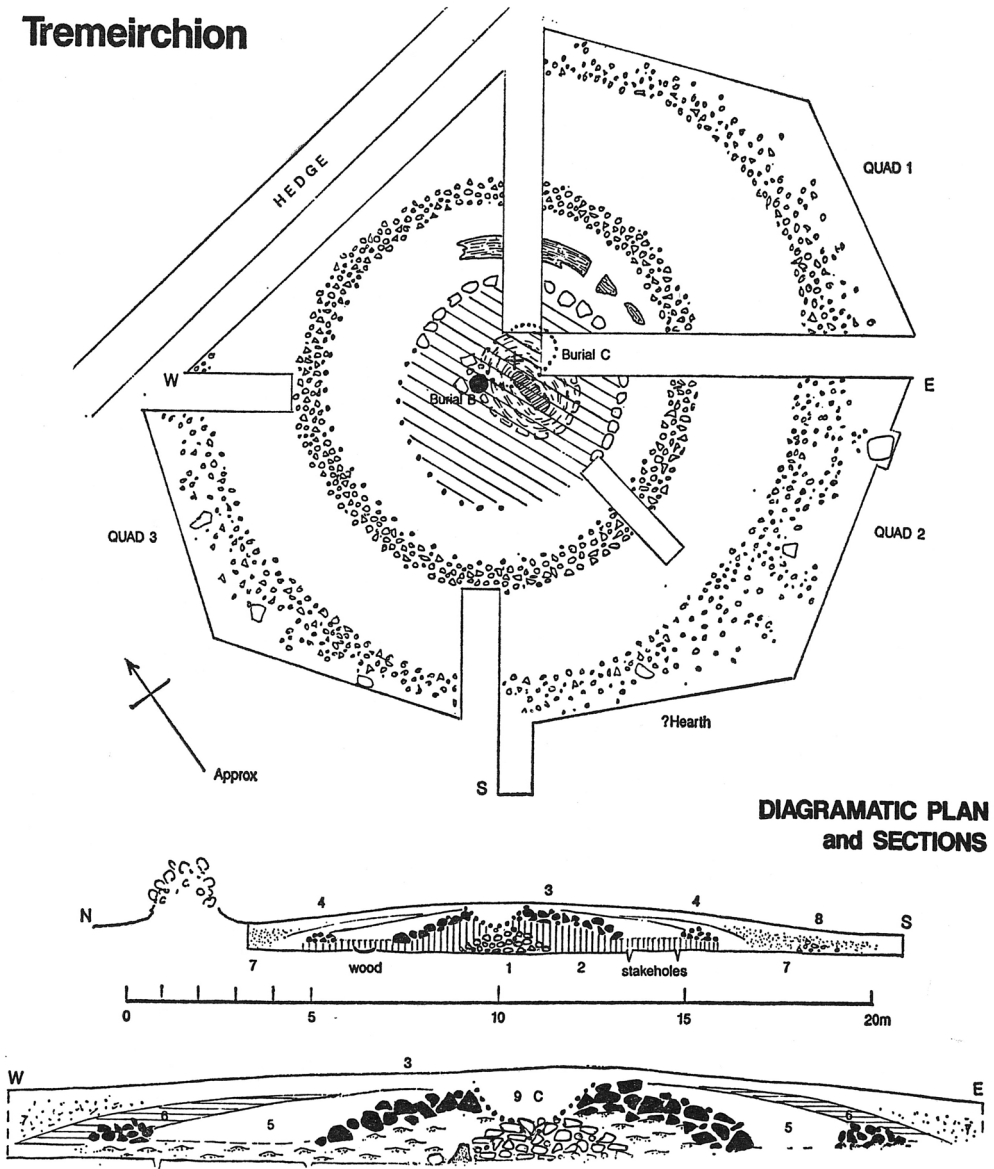


Fig. 9. The round barrow at Tremeirchion, Flintshire (after Hayes 1996).

Wessex barrows and those on Mendip and in Wales, Lynch (2000, 117) has previously noted the lack of Early Bronze Age inhumation burials in Wales and an associated dearth of Food Vessels. Similarly, Beaker graves are rare, particularly in south-east Wales. There is also a lack of Wessex-style ‘fancy’ barrows in Wales and both Mendip and Wales can be contrasted to Wessex by the relatively complex sequences of construction of barrow mounds, their apparent lack of ditches and the attention paid to combining different kinds of materials within the mound (Brittain 2007; Lewis 2007a).

WEST OF WESSEX?

A consideration of the sequence from the Beaker period to the Early Bronze Age on Mendip may indicate the relatively late uptake of Beakers as an immediate precursor to the uptake of the ‘full’ Early Bronze Age. Yet the, admittedly few, Early Bronze Age dates and artefact types from the region are also relatively late and this, together with the lack of inhumation burials and Food Vessels, suggests an apparent break between Beaker and Early Bronze Age burial traditions. At present there is little evidence to suggest that the same sites were continuously occupied or reused between the two periods. There has been no Early Bronze Age material found from any of the Mendip caves for example, and with the exception of a single site, no Beaker sherds have been identified in barrow mounds. The disjuncture is further emphasised when it is considered that Beaker deposition on Mendip seems to have been happening at ancestral places, including henges and caves. It has been argued elsewhere (Lewis and Mullin forthcoming a) that the uptake of Beakers on Mendip appears as a period of slow negotiation, with ideas, people and things perhaps first avoided, then tentatively accepted, but in places made safe by their associations with existing people and with reference to existing practices. By contrast, Early Bronze Age barrows seem to occupy new landscape positions, though echoes of the Beaker fascination with old places can perhaps be paralleled by the high concentrations of barrows around the Priddy Circles. It cannot, however, be assumed that such places retained the same meanings over the centuries in question.

The similarities in Early Bronze Age artefact types and barrow construction sequences between Mendip and south-east Wales strongly suggests that these two regions were connected, rather than divided, by the Bristol Channel and it is also worth remembering that these are intervisible landscapes. Indeed, Fox (1959, 125) noted that the composite barrows of south-east Wales were paralleled in Somerset and Devon and went as far as to argue that ‘settlers hailing from the other side of the Severn sea’ were responsible for their introduction to this part of Wales. Both Mendip and south-east Wales contain barrows with what could be described as ‘classic’ Wessex Culture grave assemblages, yet these occur in low numbers when compared to the total of excavated assemblages from barrows in the region. At its simplest, this could be explained by individuals moving between regions and transplanting selected traditions at particular points in time, similar to Fox’s argument, above. Yet representation in death was undoubtedly subject to more complex social and political decisions than this alone: there is variety and difference and clear links with other regions. Perhaps it is more productive to think about Mendip as connected with both central southern England and the coastal south-west, rather than part of one or the other. Indeed, being west of Wessex—but only just—might have been a productive place in which to play on differing allegiances and cultural affiliations.

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