

Introduction

Wales covers an area of more than 20,000 square km of land bounded to the north and west by the Irish Sea, to the south by the Bristol Channel, and east by a land border with England running between the Dee estuary in the north and Severn estuary in the south. More than 3700 prehistoric monuments from the Middle Neolithic to Middle Bronze Age (MN-MBA) periods, between 3600–1200 BC, have been identified in Wales. Despite more than 400 years of archaeological research in this region, no work has so far been undertaken to provide a synthesis of the evidence for funerary and ritual practices into a single corpus. This research aims to readdress this situation by providing a detailed summary of the types and chronology of funerary and ritual sites as well as a re-assessment of the contextual evidence for funerary rites and ritual practices within a contemporary archaeological framework. This study also aims to refute the oft-quoted idea that the analysis of skeletal material from prehistoric burials is of limited value due to the high levels of bone destruction from acid soils. The collation and analysis of contextual and osteological data undertaken as part of this research has in fact revealed several insightful patterns on the character of Neolithic and Bronze Age practices.



Figure 1: Map of Wales with the administrative regions used in this study.

The location of archaeological sites referred throughout this book is based on the current administrative regions of Wales (Figure 1). However, the 12 administrative regions in south-east Wales have been combined into two regions based on the old historic counties, Glamorgan and Monmouthshire.

1.1 History of archaeological exploration in Wales

1.1.1 Antiquarian period

The first written records of Neolithic and Bronze Age funerary monuments in Wales date to the seventeenth century AD. The earliest of these accounts – Owen’s *Description of Pembrokeshire* (1602–03) and Aubrey’s *Monumenta Britannica* (1663–1693) – include short descriptions of a number of Welsh monumental antiquities. The next major account is found in Gibson’s revised edition of Camden’s *Britannia* (Gibson 1695), where Edward Lhuyd, then Keeper of the Ashmolean Museum, compiled a list of antiquities in Wales. His ‘Additions for the counties of Wales’, the first major attempt to systematically record Welsh antiquities, relies on observations from a number of correspondents from the local gentry, doctors and clergymen (Barker 1992, 4; Emery 1958). One example includes *Krîg y Dyrn* near Trelech, Carmarthenshire, described as a *c.* 15m wide circular ‘heap of stones, as are call’d in Wales *Karnedheu...* cover’d with Turf’ at the centre of which was found a ‘*Kist-vaen*, or *Stone-chest...* [with] some pieces of bones’ (Lhuyd 1695a, 627). The monument is interpreted as a ‘*Royal Sepulchre...* older than Christianity... before the Roman Conquest’ for a ‘*Teyrn* or King, whose corps or ashes might be repositied here.’ (Lhuyd 1695a, 627) Another example is the *Bryn Gwyn* stone circle in Anglesey, interpreted as the possible ‘burial place of some of the most eminent Druids’ which consists of ‘stones pitch’d on end, about twelve in number, whereof three are very considerable, the largest of them being twelve foot high, and eight in breadth where ‘tis broadest; for ‘tis somewhat of an oblong oval form.’ (Lhuyd 1695b, 675) Camden’s *Britannia* (Gibson 1695) has a major influence on the development of archaeological exploration as ‘local investigations were carried out by these amateurs who were beginning to build up the tradition which crystallized into the great nineteenth century county histories and the foundation of regional archaeological societies.’ (Piggott 1985, 18)

Interest in Welsh antiquities increases dramatically in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century with the publication of several Historical Tours (Evans 1804; Fenton 1811; Pennant 1778, 1781; Warner 1799; Wyndham

1775), regional historical accounts (Llwyd 1833; Malkin 1804; Manby 1801; Meyrick 1808; Rowlands 1723) and Topographical Dictionaries (Carlisle 1811; Lewis 1842; Rees 1815). These works often include brief descriptions of visible prehistoric monuments, sometimes with mentions of antiquities found at the sites, although in many cases the descriptions are simply reproduced from *Britannia*. Despite this, some of these accounts provide useful descriptions and mentions of unrecorded excavations at sites which have since been destroyed. Examples include the now destroyed burial mounds at Bedd Gwrtheyrn, Gwynedd, with a ‘stone coffin, containing the bones of a tall man’ (Pennant 1781, 392) and Crug-yr-Udon, Ceredigion, where ‘an earthen glazed coffin was found containing bones, and in an upright position’ (Meyrick 1808, 188). Fenton (1811) publishes some of the earliest illustrations of finds from prehistoric monuments (Figure 2).

The next major development in Welsh archaeology comes with the publication of *Archaeologia Cambrensis*, a quarterly (now annual) journal established by Harry Longueville Jones and John Williams in 1846. This journal provides a platform for antiquarians to record Welsh antiquities, publish the results of excavations and promote discussion: ‘Antiquarian research may thus be carried throughout Wales on something like a uniform plan; discoveries may be more easily compared, illustrated, and classified; difficulties may be more readily solved;

and communication more rapidly sustained.’ (Longueville Jones and Williams 1846, 15) Several lists of early Welsh monumental antiquities are published by Longueville Jones between 1854 and 1856, Williams (1858), Banks (1875) and Barnwell (1870, 1873a, 1877). In 1893, members of the Cambrian Archaeological Association propose a scheme for an ‘Ethnographical, Archaeological and Photographic Survey of Wales’ (Romilly Allen 1895). The purpose of the survey is to record the location of antiquities on Six-inch Ordnance Survey maps, and to provide a comprehensive index with descriptions of the monuments and of human remains or objects found at each site (Romilly Allen 1895). Despite early enthusiasm for the project, none of the surveys are ever published. It is not until the establishment of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales (RCAHMW) in 1908 that a more systematic attempt is made to record ancient funerary and ritual monuments (see section 1.1.2).

More than 50 recorded excavations of Welsh MN-MBA funerary sites are carried out between 1846 and 1900, most of which are reported in *Archaeologia Cambrensis*. Antiquarian excavators include Dearden (1851), Davies (1857), Fox (later known as General Pitt-Rivers) (1870), Thomas (1872), Stanley (1876), Laws (1882), Pritchard (1882), Boyd Dawkins (1902), Treherne (1890), Earwalker (1891) and Cantrill (1898). Several short excavation accounts are also reported anonymously (Anon 1851, 1875, 1883). The most prolific antiquarian excavator is William Wynne Ffoulkes who excavated several burial mounds in Denbighshire and Gwynedd between 1850 and 1851, of which only nine are published (Wynne Ffoulkes 1851a, 1851b, 1851c, 1852a, 1852b, 1852c), and the round cairn at Pentre Farm, Gwynedd, in 1871 (Wynne Ffoulkes 1874).

Antiquarian reports contain details of poorly-recorded small-scale excavations carried out hastily over a few days. These excavations are often only limited to the centre of funerary monuments, where it is thought that artefacts are most likely to be discovered. Owen (1879) recommends that the methods in Greenwell’s *British barrows* (1877) become the ‘standard authority upon sepulchral mounds and their contents’ and ‘the best possible guidance in the method of exploring the barrow and describing the finds, as well as for comparison of the results’ (Owen 1879, 159). Although Greenwell states that ‘my practice has always been to drive a trench, the width of the barrow... from south to north, through and beyond the centre. I have not always thought it necessary to remove the whole of the north and west sides, as they are generally found to be destitute of secondary interments; in very many cases, however, I have turned over the whole mound’ (Greenwell 1877, 27), the structure of the mounds is rarely recorded. In his *British barrows* (1877), Greenwell produces no plans or stratigraphical records for any of the c. 230 burial mounds he excavated. In Wales, Thomas (1872) is the first antiquarian to examine the structure and stratigraphy of the burial mound, and to produce plans and sections from his excavation of the Twyn y Beddau round barrow, Powys.

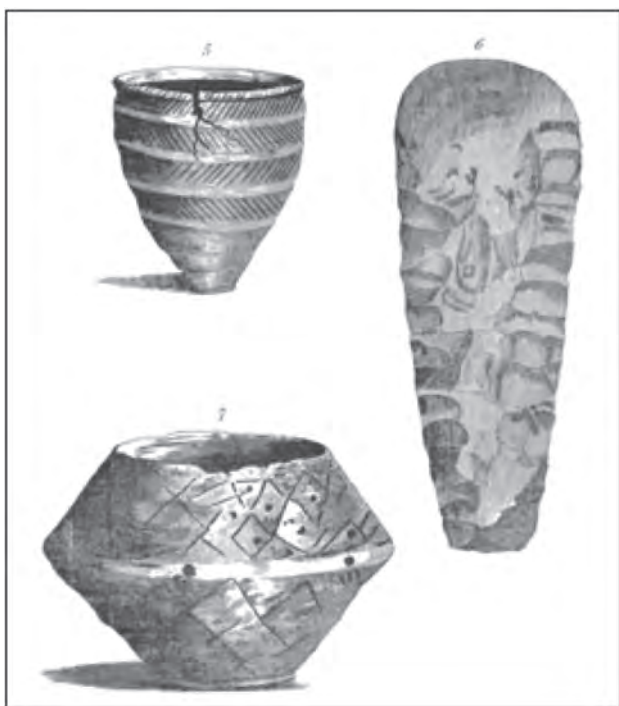


Figure 2: Illustration of prehistoric artefacts in Fenton’s *A historical tour through Pembrokeshire* (1811): Food Vessel Urn from Parc yr Och tumulus (No. 5), flint axe similar to five examples found near the destroyed burial chamber at Fynnon Druidion (No. 6) and Biconical Cup from a burial cairn near Cronllwyn (No. 7) (Taken from Fenton 1811, Plate II).

The end of the nineteenth century is associated with the development of more scientific methods in excavation techniques and publication of excavation results (Daniel and Renfrew 1988, 49). Improvements in fieldwork techniques at that time are heavily influenced by the survey work, sectional excavation methods and stratigraphic recording undertaken by General Pitt-Rivers (Thompson 1977, 109–10). However, the adoption of more modern excavation methods is slow in Wales, with the majority of late nineteenth and early twentieth century excavation reports still focused on the description and illustration of artefacts from burial mounds, with few details on the context of the finds. One notable exception is the excavation report for the Blaen Nedd Isaf round cairn in Powys by Thomas Crosbee Cantrill (1898) of the Geological Survey of England and Wales. Although still short by modern excavation standards, the structure and content of his report reflect an attempt to apply scientific methods to archaeology, with details on the location of the site on the Ordnance Survey map, a description of the local geology, a plan with the location of finds, a description of the stratigraphical sequence and a more thorough description of finds. Although the standards of excavations used by Cantrill are slowly adopted by early twentieth century excavators, major improvements to excavation techniques do not appear until the 1920s in Wales.

1.1.2 Welsh archaeology in the twentieth century

The start of the twentieth century sees the establishment of a number of professional institutions which have a profound impact on archaeological research (Lynch 2011). Created in 1908, The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales publishes the first systematic surveys of monuments starting with the county of Montgomeryshire (now in northern Powys) in 1911. This period is also associated with the adoption of revised legislation to protect ancient monuments, with the Ancient Monuments Consolidation and Amendment Act of 1913 in which the HM Office of Works (replaced by the Ministry of Works in 1940) is to play a more proactive role in the preservation of sites (Thurley 2013, 74–79). Local archaeological societies also become increasingly involved in the study, protection and excavation of monumental antiquities (Lynch 2011). Another important institution is the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff which opens in 1907. John Ward, Keeper of Archaeology at the National Museum from 1912–1922, participates in the excavation of a number of burial mounds in south Wales, several of which are rescue excavations (Ward 1902, 1911, 1918, 1919a, 1919b).

The 1920s are associated with a number of significant developments within Welsh archaeology. In terms of prehistoric sites, the first recorded excavations of ‘ritual’ monuments are published: two stone circles at Hengwm, Gwynedd, by Crawford (1920) and the Ysceifiog henge, Flintshire, by Fox (1926b). This period also sees the first extensive research excavations conducted by the Keepers of Archaeology at the National Museum of Wales.

Wheeler (Keeper of Archaeology 1920–24), Fox (Keeper 1924–26, Director 1926–1948), Nash-Williams (Keeper 1926–?1938) and Grimes (Assistant Keeper 1926–1938) excavated 23 monuments (Fox 1925a, 1926a, 1926b, 1938, 1941a, 1941b, 1942, 1943; Fox and Grimes 1928; Grimes 1928a, 1928b, 1929a, 1934, 1937, 1938; Nash-Williams 1930; Wheeler 1923b).

Another important landmark is the excavation of Bryn Celli Ddu, a Late Neolithic passage grave in Anglesey by WJ Hemp (1930), then secretary of the RCAHMW. These archaeologists play an important role in the development of field archaeology in Wales, with the creation of more extensive fieldwork projects, for which the standards of excavation methods are improved, the results promptly published in archaeological journals, and a careful attention is given to the preservation and curation of artefacts and human remains.

Both the National Museum and the Royal Commission remain significant players in Welsh archaeology for several decades. Savory, Assistant Keeper of Archaeology at the National Museum in 1938–1955 and Keeper in 1955–1976, excavated 12 burial mounds (Day and Savory 1972; Nye *et al* 1983; Savory 1940, 1948b, 1952b, 1959b, 1961, 1963, 1965, 1969b), a cist (Savory 1959a) and a standing stone (Savory 1949b).

The Royal Commission is also involved in the excavation of several monuments in the 1950s and 1960s in north-west Wales (Griffiths 1960; Houlder 1956, 1957; Lynch and Musson 2001). A number of excavations are also carried out by the Flintshire Historical Society and the Flintshire County Record Office in the 1950s, most of which are poorly recorded (Bevan-Evans and Hayes 1955; Feather 1990; Lynch 1986).

The examination of Barclodiad-y-Gawres, a Late Neolithic passage grave on Anglesey, by Powell and Daniel in 1952–53 (Powell and Daniel 1956) marks the start of university-led excavations in Wales. Frances Lynch, lecturer in archaeology at the University College of North Wales (now Bangor University) between 1966 and 2000, excavated several Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments in North Wales (Lynch 1971, 1980b, 1984b, 1986, 1993a), and contributed to the publication of unpublished excavations (Lynch 1983, 1984a; Lynch and Musson 2001). Her contribution to two of the most important research projects – the excavations of the multi-period site at Llandygai, Gwynedd (Lynch and Musson 2001) and the Bronze Age cemetery in the Brenig valley, Denbighshire (Lynch 1993a) – provided invaluable data on prehistoric funerary and ritual practices in Wales.

A major development within Welsh archaeology is the creation of the four Welsh Archaeological Trusts (WATs) between 1974 and 1976. The four WATs – Gwynedd Archaeological Trust (GAT), Dyfed Archaeological Trust (DAT), Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust (CPAT) and Glamorgan-Gwent Archaeological Trust (GGAT) – are

established as limited companies with charitable status funded by the government and through commercial contracts. Two of the roles played by the Trusts are the maintenance of regional Historic Environment Record (HER) (see section 1.1.3.2) and the rescue excavation of sites threatened by developments.

One of the unintentional impacts of such developer-led excavations has been the discovery of a richer and more varied record of archaeological sites than previously anticipated. New forms of monuments (pit graves, pit circles, timber circles, hengiform monuments, etc.) are discovered which often prompt the re-assessment of previously established typological classifications and national chronologies (Blockley and Tavener 2002; Brassil *et al* 1991; Gibson 1994; Jones 2010; Kenney 2007; Roberts *et al* 2012; Warrilow *et al* 1986).

1.1.3 Welsh archaeology today

1.1.3.1 Excavations

The majority of recent archaeological fieldwork is carried out by commercial units. These include the rescue excavation of timber circles (Gibson 1994), a pit circle (Blockley and Tavener 2002), round barrows (Berks *et al* 2007; Britnell *et al* 2008; Lewis 2007; Murphy and Murphy 2013; Schlee 2013), burial cairns (Britnell 2013; Hughes and Murphy 2013; Jones *et al* 2000; Murphy 1995; Smith 1995) and cremation cemeteries (Roberts *et al* 2012; Smith 2006) by the Welsh Archaeological Trusts. Other commercial units have also excavated a number of sites, including the Llanymynech ring ditch in Powys by Birmingham Archaeology (Colls and Halsted 2009), a round cairn in Glamorgan by Wessex Archaeology (Wessex Archaeology 2010), a cremation cemetery in Glamorgan by Phoenix Consulting Archaeology (Richmond 2009) as well as a number of Neolithic and Bronze Age funerary and ritual sites in Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire by Cotswold Archaeology in 2006–07 and 2012–13 (Barber and Hart 2014; Barber *et al* 2014). The most recent discoveries include multiple Bronze Age inhumation and cremation burials near St Athan, Glamorgan, by APAC Archaeology, Headland Archaeology and Rubicon Heritage.

Research-led excavations include a Middle Neolithic enclosure at Lower Luggy, Powys (Gibson 2006), the Dyffryn Lane I henge, Powys (Gibson 2010b) and the Pillar of Eliseg round cairn, Denbighshire (Edwards *et al* 2014). The National Museum also carried out excavation projects at Llanmaes, Glamorgan, where an Early Bronze Age ring ditch (Gwilt *et al* 2006) and pit burial (Lodwick and Gwilt 2010) were uncovered, and at the site of the Mold barrow, Flintshire, in 2013 (Deacon, pers comm). A number of projects are also undertaken as part of the Cadw-funded pan-Wales survey of prehistoric funerary and ritual monuments (see section 1.1.3.3) in order to investigate the nature and date of several monuments (e.g. Jones 2009, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c; Smith 2012).

1.1.3.2 Historic Environment Record (HER)

The Historic Environment Record (HER) is a database of sites held by each of the four Welsh Archaeological Trusts. At the time it was retrieved between July and September 2011, this database contained 3754 records for MN-MBA funerary and ritual sites in Wales. Each entry contains the site name, monument type, Primary Record Number (PRN), National Grid Reference (NGR), a brief description of the visible archaeological remains and a summary of any archaeological work carried out at each site.

MN-MBA funerary and ritual sites include burial cairns, cists, cremation cemeteries, henges and hengiform monuments, passage graves, pit circles, round barrows, standing stones, stone rows, stone settings, stone circles and timber circles. 529 (14.1 per cent) of these funerary and ritual monuments have been excavated.

1.1.3.3 Prehistoric Funerary and Ritual Monument Survey

Between 1997 and 2003, the four Welsh Archaeological Trusts carried out a survey of all prehistoric funerary and ritual sites as part of the Cadw-funded *Prehistoric Funerary and Ritual Monument Survey*. The purposes of this survey were to identify and assess the condition of each site, improve HER entries with more detailed descriptions on the nature and condition of each site, and standardise terminology across Wales for the description of funerary and ritual monuments (Gibson 1998, 1, 4–5). As a result of this project, the information for each site was updated on the HER. Region-based summary reports on the nature of prehistoric funerary and ritual monuments were also produced for Breconshire (Jones 2007), Radnorshire (Jones 2004), Denbighshire and east Conwy (Jones 1999), Flintshire and Wrexham (Lynch 2003), Anglesey (Smith 2004a), Gwynedd and west Conwy (Smith 2004b), Carmarthenshire (Cook 2003), Pembrokeshire (Cook 2006), Ceredigion (Cook 2008), and Glamorgan and Gwent (Evans and Lewis 2003).

1.1.3.4 Museum collections

Most excavated finds from MN-MBA funerary and ritual sites are held within several museums and County Record Offices across Wales. Museums which hold human remains from excavated monuments include the National Museum of Wales (Cardiff, Glamorgan), Swansea Museum (Swansea, Glamorgan), Gwynedd Museum and Art Gallery (Bangor, Gwynedd), Oriol Ynys Môn (Llangefni, Anglesey), Wrexham County Borough Museum, Carmarthenshire County Museum (Abergwili, Carmarthenshire), Tenby Museum and Art Gallery (Tenby, Pembrokeshire), Powysland Museum (Welshpool, Powys) and Llangollen Museum (Llangollen, Denbighshire). The Flintshire Record Office (Shotton, Flintshire) holds finds from two round barrows, Llong and Pant-y-Dulath. The Grovesnor Museum in Chester also holds finds from excavated

Welsh Bronze Age funerary monuments. Cremations from two excavated monuments are currently held at Bangor University (Tir Mostyn B) and the University of Birmingham (Llanymynech). The above list includes all museums, County Record Offices and universities in Britain which currently hold human remains from excavated Welsh MN-MBA monuments.

Artefacts and human remains from excavated monuments are usually deposited in the nearest county museum. In some cases, however, the finds are deposited in the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff. The National Museum currently holds the largest collection of excavated finds from Welsh prehistoric monuments, which includes a collection of finds from excavation projects carried out by the Keepers of Archaeology. Several of the finds from antiquarian excavations, such as from Wynne Ffoulkes' limited excavations into burial mounds in North Wales, have also been donated by private collectors to the National Museum since it opened in 1907.

1.2 Research context for this volume

Prehistoric funerary and ritual monuments have been the subject of interest for more than 400 years in Wales. Despite the considerable amount of archaeological data created over the years through the survey and excavation of funerary and ritual monuments, no work has been carried out so far to collate and analyse this data. This book therefore aims to bring together this evidence in order to examine the changing character of Neolithic and Bronze Age funerary and ritual practices between 3600–1200 BC into a single corpus. This research focuses on the analysis of funerary and ritual practices from all recorded MN-MBA monuments in Wales. However, caves and rock shelters are not included as deposits from such sites often lack good stratigraphical and chronological data.

The aim of this research is to identify the key characteristics – in terms of monument types, deposit types, demographics and grave good associations – of funerary and ritual practices in Wales between 3600–1200 BC. Patterns identified in terms of demographic data and grave goods are discussed in order to examine the nature of these prehistoric communities. This research also identifies the periods when major changes in funerary and ritual practices occur and discusses the significance of such changes. In order to examine these issues, this study focuses on five research areas:

1. Critical review of past approaches and interpretative themes related to funerary and ritual archaeology, especially in relation to the Welsh material, in order to highlight the key ideas explored in previous studies (Chapter two). This includes themes associated with the classification and dating of monuments, the interpretation of funerary and ritual monuments, as well as theories related to ethnicity, identity and treatment of bodies. The aim of this book is to build upon these ideas within a solid osteoarchaeological framework.

2. Development of a chronological sequence for the construction and use of MN-MBA funerary and ritual monuments (Chapter three). The primary source of data for this chapter comes from the *Wales and Borders radiocarbon database* (Burrow and Williams 2008), which is supplemented with radiocarbon dates for more recent excavations (2010–17) from published excavation reports. The five chronological periods used throughout this book are as follows: Middle Neolithic (c. 3600–2900 BC), Late Neolithic (c. 2900–2400 BC), Chalcolithic (c. 2500–2200 BC), Early Bronze Age (c. 2200–1700 BC) and Middle Bronze Age (c. 1700–1200 BC).
3. Osteological analysis of all MN-MBA human bone deposits identified in museums, Record Offices and universities. The term 'human bone deposit' is used throughout this study to define a discrete assemblage of human bones from a single context. The material and methods for the osteological analysis are described in Chapter four. The aim of this analysis is to provide more accurate data in terms of the minimum number of individuals (MNI) represented in each burial deposit as well as their age and sex.
4. Analysis of the nature of MN-MBA funerary and ritual practices in Wales (Chapter five). The sample used for the analysis includes all excavated monuments with published and detailed excavation accounts identified from the Historic Environment Record (HER) data retrieved from the four Welsh Archaeological Trusts (WATs). This data is then used to perform a detailed analysis to examine the context (in terms of types of monuments, types, sizes and orientations of burial features, and types of deposits), demographic data (MNI, age and sex) and types of associated grave goods for human bone deposits from each chronological period. The final part of this chapter examines changes in funerary and ritual practices across time. Chapter six focuses on the analysis of pyre technology and cremation ritual practices based on data gathered during the osteological analysis.
5. Interpretation and discussion of the results from chapters five and six to define the nature of MN-MBA funerary and ritual practices in Wales, and a wider comparison to the practices recorded elsewhere in Britain for each chronological period (Chapter seven).

This book therefore provides a summary of all available evidence for funerary and ritual practices in the Middle Neolithic to the Middle Bronze Age periods in Wales. This is based on a re-assessment of archaeological data – in terms of monument type, chronological data and contextual data – combined with the analysis of osteological data from human bone deposits. The interpretation of this data within a developed chronological framework aims to examine some of the key themes associated with funerary and ritual practices in Wales between 3600–1200 BC, such as questions on identity, social structures, and the nature of belief systems associated with the treatment and disposal of the dead within these prehistoric communities (Chapters seven and eight).