

6. Biography of the Neolithic body: tracing pathways to cist II, Mound of the Hostages, Tara

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Introduction

Archaeologists have a general understanding of the broad structure of Neolithic mortuary practices but only the shallowest of understandings of the different pathways of the Neolithic body from death, through ceremony and modification, and eventually to final deposition. Several recent studies (e.g. Brück 2004; Cooney 1993; Cooney and Grogan 1994; Fowler 2005; Robb 2007) provide us with an important conceptual starting point to understand the treatment of the Neolithic dead and what this tells us about the nature of Neolithic social relations. A nuanced understanding of Neolithic mortuary practices necessitates an understanding of mortuary variability, and requires us to consider the potential pathways of the Neolithic body in specific case-studies. As a starting framework we centre our discussion on specific skeletal materials from cist II from the Mound of the Hostages as presented by O'Sullivan (2005) and, in a more general sense, Neolithic mortuary practices that occur roughly between 3400 and 3100 cal. BC. Broadly stated, our aim is to move discussion beyond the excellent descriptive treatment of the Mound of the Hostages provided by O'Sullivan and reframe current discussions towards an understanding of the different pathways of the dead at Neolithic Tara and how these provide insights into broader Neolithic social systems.

Cist II, Mound of the Hostages, Tara

Like most Neolithic passage tombs, the Mound of the Hostages is characterised by continued and varied use of space through time. The richness of the archaeology of the Mound of the Hostages presents a challenge and, at the same time, an opportunity to pull apart a range of social practices. To start this process we think it would be

helpful to explore a single case-study, in this case cist II from the Mound of the Hostages, which is dated to between 3400 and 3100 cal. BC, as a means of working backwards and reconstructing the possible pathways by which these skeletal materials were eventually placed in a single final location (readers are directed to Bayliss and O'Sullivan, this volume, and Scarre, this volume, for a more detailed consideration of the structural development and dating of the tomb, cairn, cists and perimeter burials).

Cist II is one of three cists identified in the Mound of the Hostages. It was set on the Old Ground Level and against orthostats R1 and R2 (O'Sullivan 2005, 70–4). It is 1.8m long by 0.6m wide and was constructed with a floor of two stone slabs set into a bedding trench. The outer edges were defined by upright stones and it appears to have been capped or roofed by several large, flat stones.

The cist was filled with a mixture of densely packed cremated bone, unburned human skulls, unburned bones of children/infants, and the fragmentary remains of several beads and bone pins. While O'Sullivan notes that there is no detail available on the stratigraphy within the cist, he argues on the basis of contextual analysis that the deposits are probably intact, with minimal contamination from the main tomb (O'Sullivan 2005, 71). The cremated remains of at least 34 individuals were recovered and it is possible that some unburned bones of children were also found in the cist. Two radiocarbon determinations (GrA-17272 and 17746) date the fill of the cist. Both of these dates are somewhat earlier than anticipated but fit within the broader pattern of intensive use of the interior of the tomb for mortuary purposes. Regardless of some minor dating questions, the remains from this cist probably represent an intact collection of material from a single depositional event. Using this as a case-study, let us consider the possible pathways of different skeletal materials before final deposition in cist II.



Fig. 1—East end of cist II after removal of outer skulls, revealing the slabs lining the space between orthostats R1 and R2 (after O’Sullivan 2005, fig. 71).

Cremation, primary and secondary mortuary practices

As with most Neolithic passage tombs, the remains from cist II are overwhelmingly those of cremated bones but also include select unburned remains. It is necessary, therefore, to consider the differences between cremation, primary and secondary mortuary practices. At their narrowest, primary mortuary practices centre on the permanent burial of the dead after a relatively short period of time (often less than a week). While there is an enormous range of variation in these practices, including the placing of burials inside features and vessels, and in the preparation of the dead, primary mortuary practices share one defining element: once the remains are buried, the skeleton and associated remains are left alone.

In contrast, secondary mortuary practice can be defined as the socially sanctioned movement of part or all of a deceased individual (Fig. 3) (Hertz 1960; Kuijt 2008a; Larsson 2003; Metcalf and Huntington 1991; Oestigaard 1999; Pearson 1999). From a material standpoint, secondary mortuary practices can involve the intentional

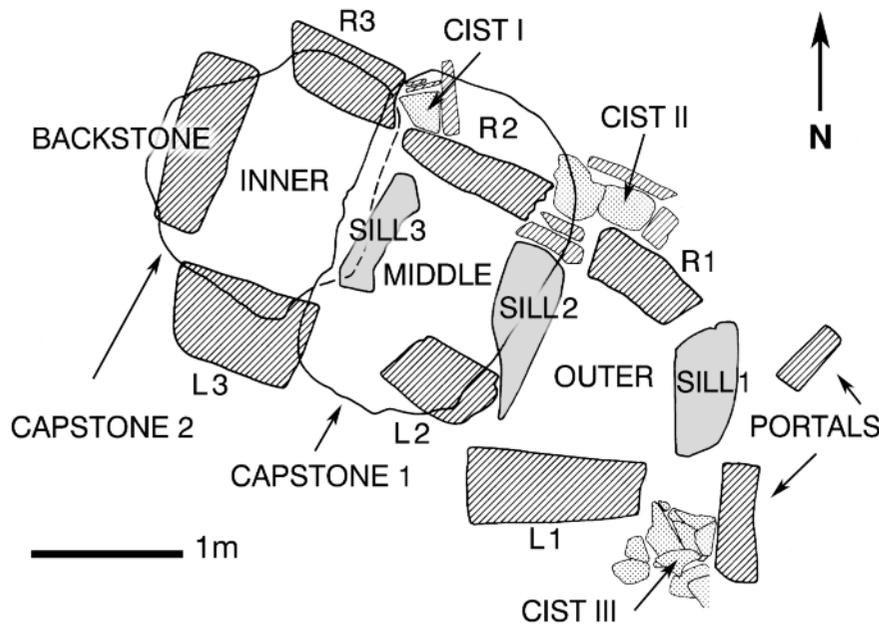


Fig. 2—Plan of megalithic tomb, Mound of the Hostages, indicating features and location of three cists (after O’Sullivan 2005, fig. 59).

removal of select skeletal items from one location to other location(s), the movement of the entire set of remains to another context, and/or variation in the timing of reburial and the treatment of specific skeletal elements. Primary and secondary mortuary practices are interlinked and are often perceived by ethnographic groups as being parts of a broader belief system. In the case of the Neolithic of the southern Levant, secondary mortuary practices involve the defleshing of the complete skeleton in the ground and the later removal of the cranium from the ground, leaving the rest of the skeleton in its original articulated context (Kuijt 2008a). Secondary mortuary rituals are often part of high-profile public ceremonies, and serve as spiritual and symbolic acts that have social, political and personal meanings. As multi-stage, intergenerational events

involving multiple households, secondary mortuary practices are planned in advance and require extraordinary levels of community involvement (Downs 1956; Metcalf and Huntington 1991).

The practices of cremation at the Mound of the Hostages at Tara, like other Irish Neolithic and Bronze Age burial contexts, represent a highly complex form of secondary mortuary practices. Oestigaard (1999, 350) argues that cremations are transitional and that cremation is usually not a final act nor sufficient in itself. Cremated remains are rarely left at the cremation pyre; rather they are collected, moved and eventually redeposited in another location. In contrast to mortuary practices of the Neolithic of the Near East, as well as most secondary mortuary practices identified in

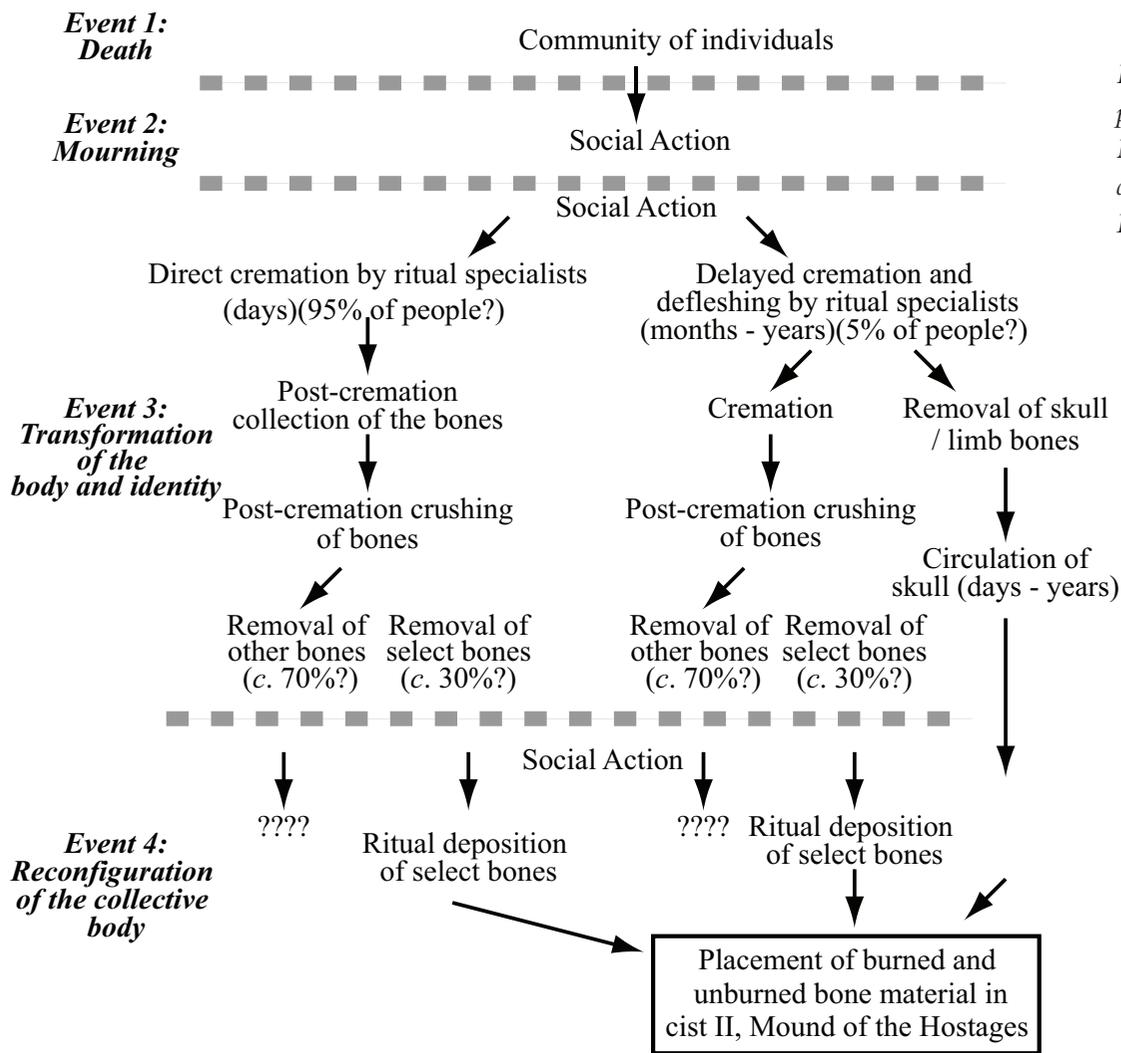


Fig. 3—Conjectural pathways of the adult Neolithic dead from cist II, Mound of the Hostages, Tara.

historical or contemporary contexts (e.g. Downs 1956; Metcalf and Huntington 1991), Irish Neolithic and Bronze Age practices involve complex pathways of removal of skeletal parts, cremation of the majority of people, the complete burial of other individuals, and in some cases the collective burial of select cremation remains with unburned skulls in final burial.¹

Pathways of death: pulling apart the dead at cist II

As in life today, people within Neolithic communities treated the dead in a number of different ways. Framing our discussion around the Neolithic burials from cist II at the Mound of the Hostages, as well as a broader comparison with the perimeter burials that temporally cluster around 3300 cal. BC, we want to reflect upon the different possible pathways of the Neolithic body from death through treatment and eventually to deposition in the Mound of the Hostages. To do this we are going to reflect upon the pathways of children vs. adults and cremated vs. uncremated materials (Fig. 3).

Children as the ‘other’: where are they and why were they treated differently?

Similar to the other cists, and probably representative of most collections of skeletal remains from passage tombs, the excavations of cist II uncovered unburned bone of children or infants. Among others, Cooney and Grogan (1994) illustrate that there was considerable variation in how adult and child members of Neolithic communities were treated in death. Although complicated by methodological issues, such as possible reduced preservation and complications in identification of the carbonised bones of children and infants, current data indicate that the overwhelming majority of pre-adult mortuary practices focused on the burial of unburned skeletons. Illustrating this, O’Sullivan (2005, 122) remarks, ‘... it is interesting that every significant collection of cremated bone retrieved from the tomb and its margins, including the cists, included a small collection of unburned infant bones. These infants appear to have been about term and are normally represented by limb bones.’ Similarly, in a broad comparative article examining

multiple passage tombs, Cooney (1993) illustrates that adults are cremated more frequently than children in passage tombs. While complicated by issues of archaeological visibility, as seen in Table 1, children make up, at best, 12% of the burial population in the Mound of the Hostages. There is, however, variation and this variation within a broader series of shared practices is probably representative of other passage tombs.

The pattern of low numbers of children and high numbers of adults is reflective of broader social practices, as this cannot be an indication of the demographic profile of Early Neolithic people. Recently Bocquet-Appel and others (Bocquet-Appel 2002; Bocquet-Appel and Bar-Yosef 2008; Bocquet-Appel and Naji 2006; Kuijt 2008b) have drawn attention to the dramatic shift between Mesolithic and Neolithic demographic growth and have termed this the Neolithic Demographic Transition (NDT). They have demonstrated a dramatic increase in the frequency of representation in death of children in the Early Neolithic, especially those younger than five years of age. While debating the cause of such an increase with the start of the Neolithic, which clearly must be at least partially due to increased birth rates linked to new sedentary lifestyles and increased food storage, there is shared agreement that the number of children increased dramatically with the Neolithic Demographic Transition. These works illustrate that most Neolithic mortuary profiles, viewed as representative of the broader community, are characterised by around 50% of the dead being children and infants (Bocquet-Appel 2002). This broader NDT mortuary profile stands in stark contrast to what is seen at the Mound of the Hostages and illustrates the active exclusion of most child remains from passage tombs, and, at the same time, selective inclusion of targeted unburned remains of children and infants in passage tombs.

Cremated adults: a normative practice at cist II

In contrast to the treatment of children and infants, the overwhelming majority of Neolithic burials recovered from cist II, the other cists and the perimeter burials around the Mound of the Hostages were cremations. This pattern characterises the evidence from many other passage tombs. As seen in Fig. 3, cremation probably involved several steps, including a mourning period after

death, the cremation of the individual (which likely was a larger household and community event) and eventually the placement of some but not all of these remains into a final resting place in cist II. Comparison of the number of unburned skulls with the number of cremated individuals recovered from cists I, II and III (see O’Sullivan 2005, tables 3 and 4) (Table 1) illustrates that unburned skulls were rarely included in the cists. Although it is difficult to estimate how frequent skull removal was, current data suggest that this involved no more than 5% of the people, and potentially significantly less than this figure.

Given that the overwhelming majority of Neolithic human remains from cist II were cremated, it is important for us to consider how and where the dead were cremated. Surprisingly little research has addressed this question, and the answer probably is variable and linked to the case-study in question. Experimental research by McKinley (1993; 1997) and Marshall (1998) illustrates that effective cremation involves building a crib of wood and other flammable materials (Fig. 4). Once ignited, this rack can burn at between 800°C and 1000°C, igniting body fats. The cremation process is surprisingly self-contained and requires very little supervision.

The research of McKinley and Marshall also demonstrates the complexities of successfully identifying the past presence, location and/or intensity of cremation. One of the major methodological complications is that even intense cremation activity leaves a surprisingly light footprint in the archaeological record. Marshall (1998, 173) notes: ‘Considering the intensity and duration of the burning for experimental pyres at Guiting Power, up to 800–1000°C for several hours, relatively little trace was left in the ground surface, and this as a relatively thick, friable crust, easily disrupted by trampling, weathering, or even careful clearance for extraction of cremated remains’. Marshall’s research, which is echoed by McKinley, illustrates that soil coloration changes are usually restricted to the upper 2cm at most.

Collectively the research of McKinley (1993; 1997) and Marshall (1998) highlights that some of the Neolithic and Bronze Age burned areas around the Mound of the Hostages could have been caused by cremation activities (especially given that the frequent

recovery of cremated remains, if anything, supports the argument that some burn areas along the perimeter may reflect repeated and intensive cremation practices in the Bronze Age and Neolithic periods). Another possibility is that some cremations were originally conducted underneath what is now the physical area of the Mound of the Hostages, and that this evidence was later disturbed and covered over by people constructing the new tomb. Cooney (2000, 99) has convincingly argued that the archaeological evidence from Dooley’s Cairn (Ballymacaldrack, Co. Antrim) illustrates a multi-phase use of the site. Initially three pits were constructed as a cremation feature and were then filled with cremation

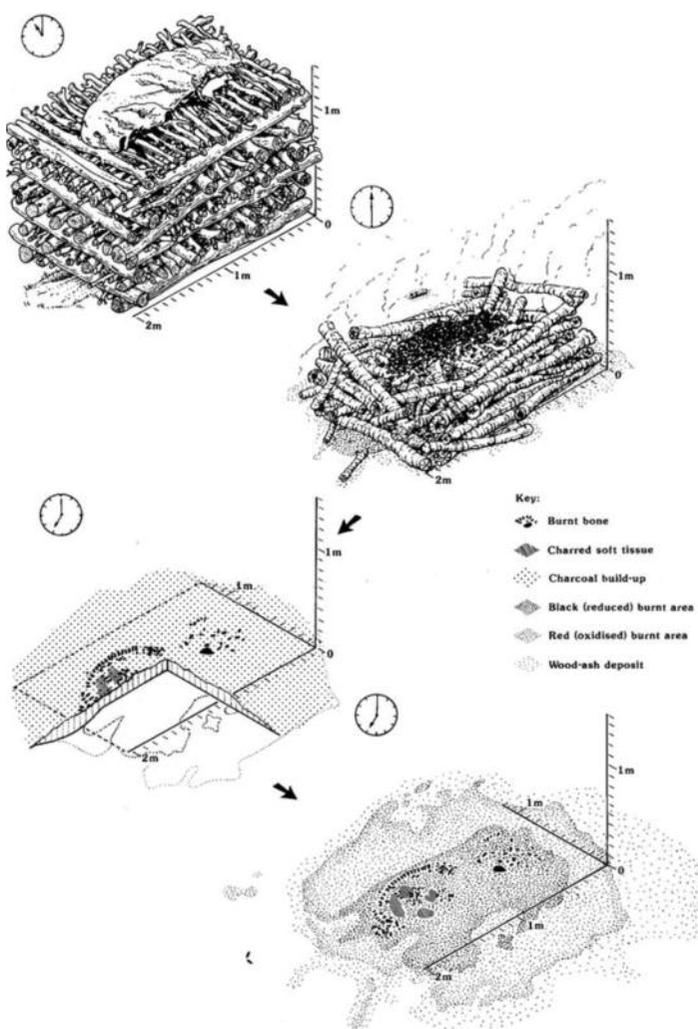


Fig. 4—Schematic illustration showing cremation pyre and different stages of collapse (after McKinley 1997, fig. 4).

remains. After this a stone chamber, court and the rest of the cairn and revetment were constructed. This pattern of continuity in use as well as elaboration and formalisation at Dooley's Cairn is seen at many other sites (see Cooney 2000 and Scott 1993 for expanded discussion of this) and highlights that in some cases later Neolithic cairn and tomb systems are constructed on locations where earlier cremation took place. As with the shift from wooden residential building to stone cairn seen at Ballyglass (Ó Nualláin 1972), our understanding of past mortuary practices at Dooley's Cairn, and possibly the Mound of the Hostages, is confounded by issues of archaeological visibility.

A final possibility, and one that intuitively makes a lot of sense, is that Neolithic cremations would have been organised as individual events (unlike those at Dooley's Cairn, which may have been corporate in nature) and taken place in a range of locations (probably within 30m) around the tomb. This is beyond the area traditionally excavated around passage tombs, and one wonders what expanded excavation away from the Mound of the Hostages would reveal when employing detailed excavation methods and field staff trained in the identification of cremation practices (see O'Sullivan 2005 for expansion of this).

Cremated adults: cist II and pathways of the dead

Based on several lines of evidence, including experimental research (McKinley 1993; 1997) that has looked at the physical changes in the cremation of human bone, it is clear that there were several stages between death and final deposition (Fig. 3). First, it appears likely that after cremation the living collected and crushed the residual bones of the dead. With heating, bone is fragmented by expansion, which can lead to characteristic breakage patterns. The breakage, however, is by no means complete and under most conditions leaves large fragments intact, requiring human actions to create ash and reduced bone piles. The size and weight of recovered bones from the Mound of the Hostages appear to be considerably smaller than those of adult cremated remains from modern crematoria. Fragmentation patterns are consistent with the interpretation that Neolithic people were deliberately crushing the bones of cremated individuals.

Second, comparison of the mean weights from modern cremations with that of recovered material from excavation of the three Mound of the Hostages cists suggests that Neolithic people deposited only some (perhaps as little as 30%) of the total bone produced in cremation in the cists (see McKinley 1993 for experimental framework). Demonstration of this argument is, of course, highly complex and ideally should be backed by high-level recovery methods of analysis, neither of which has taken place in the excavation of Tara. McKinley notes that some bone is probably lost when pyre debris is collected, and argues that on average 40–60% of the expected bone weight is recovered from burials. Even considering collection loss, it is clear that in some cases people were only including some of the cremated remains. Again, McKinley (1997, 138) notes: '... after identification of the bone fragments from both contexts it became clear that a proportion of bone from cremation was not included in either, but must have been disposed of in a third (or more) location'. Coming back to the Mound of the Hostages, while it is clear that the remains of at least 34 individuals were recovered from cist II, research has yet to demonstrate that the recovered cremated bone includes all of the remains. Additional research is necessary to explore this question. If correct, future research will be required to address where these bones were being deposited—perhaps removed off site, or deposited elsewhere on the site.

McKinley (1997, 132) also notes that in her research of 130 Bronze Age burials at least 16% contain carbonised animal bone, most often immature sheep, goat, pig or bird. This suggests that food offerings were frequently included as pyre goods. Their inclusion, moreover, would increase the amount of cremated bone recovered by archaeologists and therefore artificially create the appearance of greater amounts of cremated human bone.

Finally, it is possible that Neolithic people selected specific cremated human bone elements from the cremations to be included in cist II at the Mound of the Hostages. While researchers have made strong conceptual arguments for the existence of such practices (e.g. Fowler 2005; Brück 2004), from a methodological standpoint it is very difficult to address this possibility. The complexities of

identifying the elements and sides of cremated bone fragments, the differences in loss rates introduced by variable collection practices by Neolithic people and the sheer scale of bone collections from the cists are all major challenges in demonstrating these practices.

In some ways, of course, it is the scale of this complex refitting puzzle that is the greatest roadblock to such analysis. At the same time, there are cases with a limited number of cremated individuals that provide insight into past practices. One example of this is seen with the excavation of site E2437, a Bronze Age cremation pyre near Newford, Co. Galway, where the well-preserved remains of a single adult and cremation pyre were recovered (Wilkins 2008). Analysis of the weight of recovered cremated bones illustrates that people either differentially selected and buried cremated skull fragments over other elements or, conversely, removed limb elements before burial (Troy 2008, 60) (Fig. 5). Even considering the problems of differential preservation and the challenges involved in successful identification of elements by researchers, this patterning reflects active post-cremation modification of the defleshed body. While in need of further study, it is interesting to note that the identifiable remains of the

single individual, who was at least 21 years old, are from different major limb areas (with the exception of the right femur) and, with one exception, are from the right side of the body (*ibid.*, fig. 1). If this is a by-product of deliberate human action, it may reflect the inclusion of representative human remains in burial and, by extension, highlight that it was not important to recover all the remains and include them in the burial.

Unburned adults: something different this way comes at cist II

One of the most curious aspects of Neolithic mortuary practices at cist II, and by extension at the entire Mound of the Hostages and other Neolithic passage tombs, is that people engaged in a range of practices, including cremation, the inclusion of unburned skeletal parts and, at times, complete inhumations or the inclusion of individual unburned bone items (Cooney 1993; Cooney and Grogan 1994; O'Sullivan 2005). Despite great interest, researchers have only a poor understanding of the coexistence, frequency and variation of these practices at the regional and community scale.

The question of why the bones of some individuals were not cremated, or perhaps were cremated at a later

Table 1—Comparison of unburned and cremated adult, child and infant remains from the Mound of the Hostages, Tara (after O'Sullivan 2005, tables 2 and 3).

Context	Adults			Children	Infants	
	MNI cremated	MNI unburned skulls	MNI unburned skulls to cremated remains	MNI based on unburned bone	MNI based on unburned bone	Combined total (% of pop.)
Cist I	8	0	0%	1	1	2
Cist II	34	3–4	10%	1	2	3
Cist III	13	0	0%	1	1	1
Entrance area	2	?	?	1	—	1
Outer compartment	13	?	?	?	1	1
Middle compartment	24	?	?	3	3	6
Middle/inner threshold	7	?	?	2	?	2
Inner compartment	36	?	?	1	4	5
Margins/trench	19	?	?	?	4	4
Uncertain loc. in tomb	93	?	?	?	4	4
Total	237 (88.76%)			10	20	30 (11.23%)

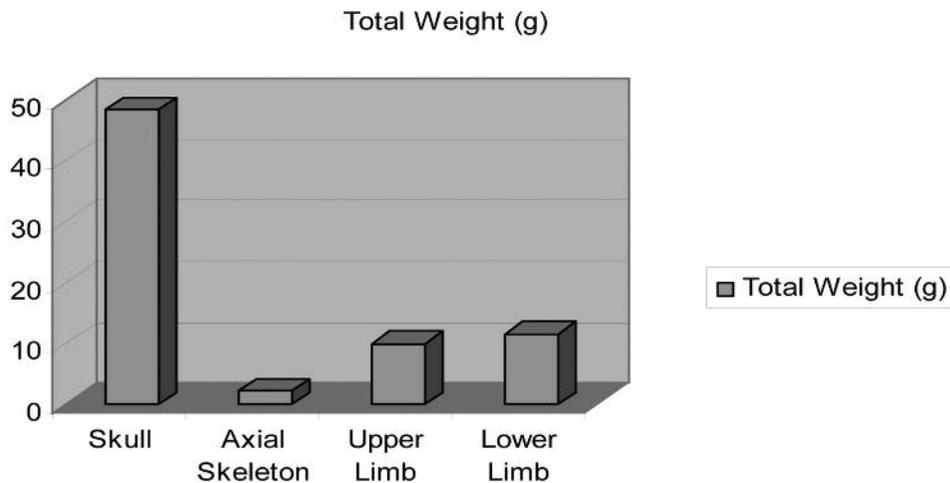


Fig. 5—Elemental and weight distribution of identified fragments from cremation pyre (1104), E2437, Newford, Co. Galway (after Wilkins 2008, fig. 1).

point in time, is both interesting and remarkably complex. People who were not cremated, who probably represent less than 5% of the total number of adults buried in passage tombs (and this is a conservative estimate), must have been selected for specific reasons and were treated in different ways than those who were cremated in their entirety (Fig. 3; Table 1). One obvious difference in treatment is that select individuals had their skulls removed. They were not burned, and it is possible that the skulls were curated as heirlooms over multiple generations (see Kuijt 2008a). Skull removal was widely practised in the past and, depending on cultural context, involved remarkable variation in use, display, modification and curation (Bonogofsky 2006; Hill 2006). In all these cases, however, the living needed either to remove the skull before defleshing or, alternatively, to allow defleshing to take place before removing the skulls.

While there are exceptions, for example in the Neolithic villages of the Near East, in most cases prehistoric groups relied on time and nature to deflesh the bones of skeletons. So where might this have taken place at the Mound of the Hostages? There are several possibilities and these are not mutually exclusive. First, after the tomb was constructed bodies could have been placed inside for defleshing. This would have required people coming back and removing the bones after defleshing. Indeed, dating of the burial materials inside the Mound of the Hostages illustrates that the cairn was used through the Neolithic and Bronze Age, and this

must have required people repeatedly opening up and closing parts of the tomb (O’Sullivan 2005, 68). Assuming that O’Sullivan is correct in his sequencing of the cists and the cairn, this explanation cannot work for the cist remains.

Second, people may have placed the dead bodies on some kind of platform around the Mound of the Hostages, likely elevated to stop the removal of the bones by animals. In an interesting treatment of select Neolithic sites in Britain and Ireland, Scott (1993) argues that pre-cairn construction of pit features and post-holes may have been linked to the construction and use of cremation features and mortuary platforms (Fig. 6). While there is no direct evidence for something similar at the Mound of the Hostages, this may be related to the continued use of the site through time, the complexity of the features that have resulted from reuse and the limited horizontal exposure beyond the area next to the cairn. While the past use of platforms is entirely plausible, current evidence makes it difficult to support or discount this explanation.

Third, it is possible that people used buildings for defleshing, including the development of special-purpose mortuary buildings or the shifting use of existing residential buildings. Mortuary houses have been recognised in several European contexts. Buildings for decarnation, storage and even disposal of the remains existed in Neolithic villages in a range of locations, including Sweden and Denmark (Larsson 2003). Excavated remains from Turinge, in Sweden, have been

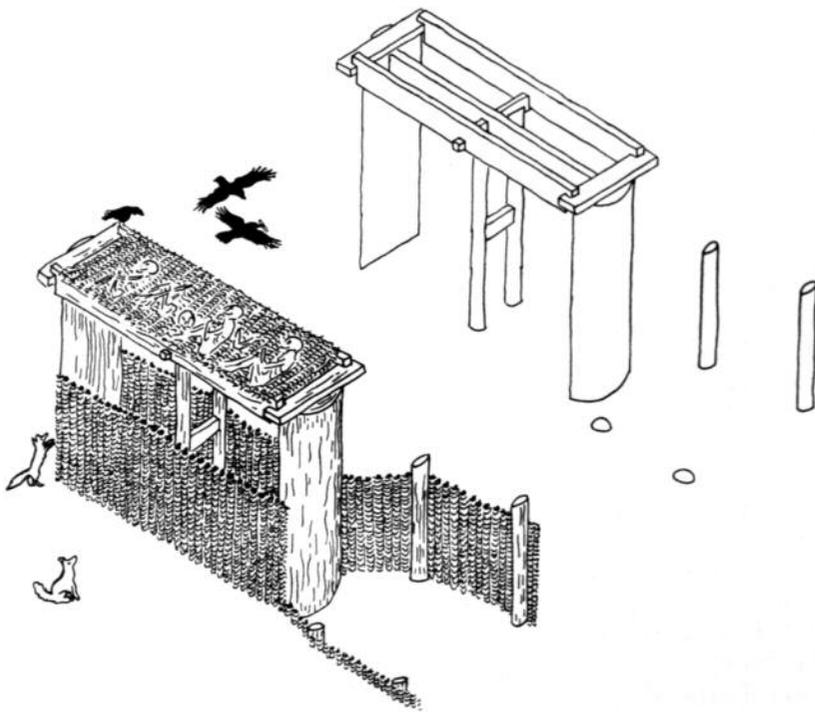


Fig. 6—Possible pre-cairn mortuary platform, based on post-holes from Wayland's Smithy, Russell's Lodge and Street House, Loftus (after Scott 1993, fig. 8.7).

interpreted as decarnation houses, where the bodies were stored before the bones were buried (Fig. 7). Again, while there is no direct evidence for such structures at the Mound of the Hostages, it is hard to rule out this possibility given the growing evidence for sequential use of space, with the repeated building of houses, cremation features, cairns, cists and other features.

The end of the path: reuniting some of the people in cist II

One of the interesting aspects of cist II at the Mound of the Hostages is that while some of the dead passed through different pathways and treatments, some of which involved delayed timing of cremation, in the end all of these pathways brought back the remains to cist II as a single final resting place. While physically separated from each other, with remains being moved through different pathways with separate treatments and timing, in the last moment it was important for the living to bring select, perhaps representative, remains of the dead back together. Collectively, the coexistence of different pathways, different treatments of the dead and associated views of when they were living reflect slippage between shared practice and social segmentation.

As with other Neolithic case-studies (e.g. Kuijt 2008a; Larsson 2003), it can be argued that the organisation of cremation at the Mound of the Hostages reflects aspects of remembering collective ancestors, memorialisation of past villagers and, to some extent, even forgetting of the dead. It is important to consider what cremation alone does not do: draw attention to social differences between individuals. In contrast to other mortuary practices, the power of Neolithic cremations at the Mound of the Hostages is that they are collections of multiple individuals (in opposition to the later Bronze Age individual inhumations), shaped by social action and location of deposited remains. Complete inhumations, especially those connected to grave-goods, provide a physical and symbolic means of highlighting the individual, social differences and identity. Similarly, the spatial location of remains, such as those selected for inclusion in the Mound of the Hostages, potentially reflects the social position of known historical individuals. Other than location, however, collections of cremated bone all look the same. From this perspective the cremations in cist II, as well as the other cremations at the Mound of the Hostages, combine communal identity, integrative social practices and, with the passage of time,

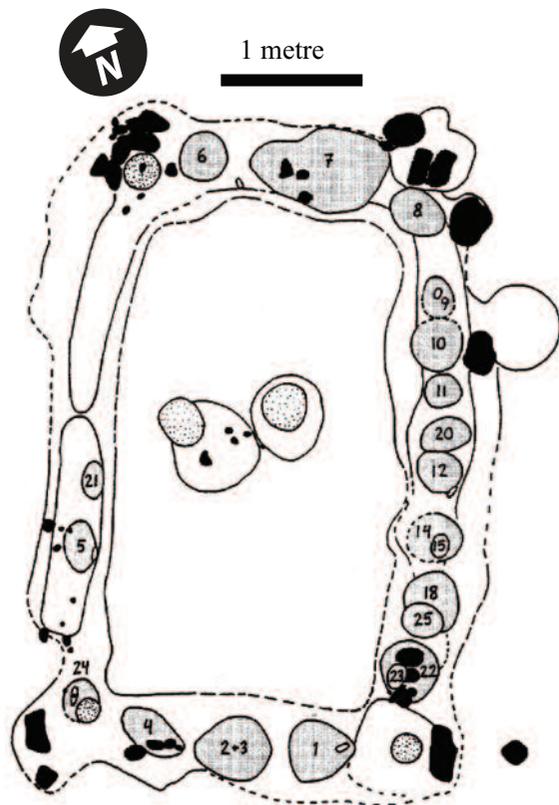


Fig. 7—The mortuary house of Turinge, Södermanland. Stones are black, post-holes are dotted and pits with cremated human bones are numbered (after Lindström 2000, 19).

reference to anonymous ancestors.

In contrast, skull removal and the circulation of skeletal materials have the potential to frame social relations in very different ways. As circulating ritual objects, unburned skulls would have existed as tangible symbolic manifestations of collective ancestry, as well as individual people. It is important, therefore, to consider who were the individuals selected for defleshing and delayed cremation. The original selection of Neolithic skulls to be placed in cist II was likely focused on specific historical individuals, such as elder leaders or other people of importance. Given that fewer than 5% of people buried at the Mound of the Hostages had their skull removed, one can assume that only specific deceased individuals would be selected. These individuals were probably chosen from within the community because of their importance and skills. It is likely that these skulls were initially identified with the deceased,

perhaps even having the same name. There would have been a deep personal and direct memory of the deceased, creating a series of tangible links between personhood in life, death and the memorialisation of individuals. As outlined by Kuijt (2008c), the structure of treatments and the variability that emerges from this can be conceived of as reflecting common differences, with variability a partial by-product of geographical scale, and thus a social balancing of similarities and differences within these communities. At the broadest of perspectives, we argue that the social process associated with cremation and the cists reflects a transference from individual identity to a communal identity of nameless ancestor.

Secondary mortuary practices, such as the elaborate cremations at the Mound of the Hostages, are often viewed as enriching ties to ancestral lines, responsibility to the deceased and beliefs about universal orders (Hertz 1960; Metcalf and Huntington 1991). It is important to note that in some societies secondary mortuary practices are organised in such a way as to facilitate participation in community events that cross-cut kin, generation and household lines. While focused on specific individuals, secondary mortuary practices involve, be it perceived or unperceived, an element of communal ancestor worship. The broader articulation of a shared identity, in this case physically manifest through the physical destruction of the body, is conventionalised as well as simplified through cremation. This is partially accomplished by systematic treatment of the dead and the development of highly standardised social rules. In addition, secondary mortuary practices permit scheduling of funeral events at a pre-arranged time that does not conflict with other tasks, and are at times envisioned as a season of festivities (Hertz 1960; Metcalf and Huntington 1991).

Within secondary mortuary practices, identity and personhood are often viewed as mutable, while simultaneously linked to life histories. As seen elsewhere (Kuijt 2008a), cremation and skull removal provide insight into the construction of memory and identity. When first removed from their bodies, the historical identity of individuals, and probably their household, would have been physically and referentially linked to specific skulls. With the passing of generations, the nature of these memories and relations would have changed

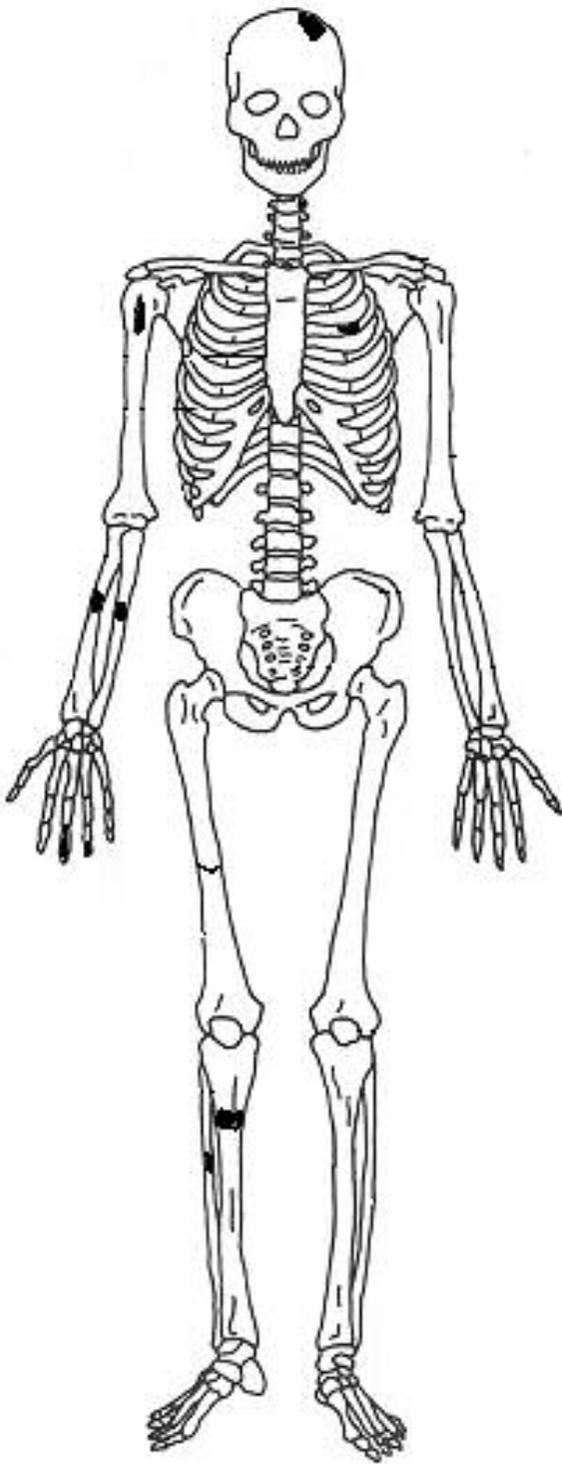


Fig. 8—Representation of identifiable elements from cremation burial (1104), E2437, Newford, Co. Galway (after Wilkins 2008, fig. 1).

from experiential and personal to abstract and referential. It is through this process of the intergenerational manipulation of the human body that identity and memory were transformed from those of named person to a symbolic collective.

People and place: linking cist II with contemporary events at the Mound of the Hostages

As noted by Gabriel Cooney (2000), traditional osteological research on the Irish Neolithic has not devoted significant time to exploring the human body, cremated or non-cremated, as an object with a social history. Given that the Mound of the Hostages was excavated nearly 50 years ago and that the primary excavator died prematurely, it should come as no surprise that limited discussion has focused on the significance of the human remains from the site. At the same time, the publication of these materials provides us with a significant opportunity to think about the social history of the Neolithic body. Moving towards this in this paper we have reflected upon the different pathways of the human body and framed our discussion around the remains from cist II from the Mound of the Hostages. Expanding beyond the case-study of cist II, it is necessary to briefly consider the possible different pathways for roughly contemporary people who were buried in other areas of the Mound of the Hostages and at the Rath of the Synods (Grogan 2008).²

The first, and in many ways most local, scale of comparison is that between cist II and other cists within the Mound of the Hostages. While O’Sullivan (2005) notes that radiocarbon dating suggests that cist II may have been used and constructed later (perhaps 100 or so years), our understanding of the context and stratigraphic positioning of the main orthostats, the foundation trench containing cist II and the location of other cists indicates that cist II is likely to be roughly (within 100 years?) contemporary with the other cists and some of the cremated material within the chamber. Assuming that this is correct, it is interesting to see the variation in burial goods between the cists. Does this variation reflect different social groups, such as households, that were

cremated and buried in separate cists? Alternatively, it may reflect collections of biologically unrelated individuals who were cremated together as part of a single community event. Both of these models are plausible and would potentially have required different pathways of the dead compared to cist II.

Similarly, it is important to reflect upon the potential different pathways of death between the remains from cist II and the other materials inside the chamber of the Mound of the Hostages. In many ways this is a much more complicated scale of comparison as it involves a much greater number of cremation events—reuse of the mound through multiple periods of time that would have altered the spatial organisation of the original deposits. While it is not really possible for researchers to identify discrete archaeological deposits from the Mound of the Hostages, place them in time and link them to clearly defined past burial events, it is important for future researchers to theorise about the relationship(s) and significance of roughly contemporary groups of people buried in cist II, the other cists and the main chamber.

Finally, it is important to expand our discussion beyond the edge of the Mound of the Hostages. Why were some contemporary people in the Neolithic buried around the perimeter of the cairn of the Mound of the Hostages and others in cists that became the special focus of the cairn? As is outlined by O'Sullivan (2005, table 10, figs 190 and 191), at some point around 3300 cal. BC Neolithic people at the Mound of the Hostages placed certain individuals in different locations. It is unclear whether this patterning represents different pathways compared to those inside the cists. Intuitively this is an appealing explanation, as the perimeter burials appear to be of single individuals while the cists contain multiple individuals. It is also unclear what the rationale was for this practice. Researchers have traditionally adopted an inward-looking perspective on passage tombs. The recovery of numerous contemporary cremations from around the Mound of the Hostages should cause us to rethink this and to look beyond the edge of these monuments. Were some people privileged to be buried in the cairn, as is commonly assumed, or, alternatively, does the individualisation of perimeter burials tell us that these were actually the privileged ones? Finally, how

were the mortuary practices in cist II, the other cists, cremations in the chamber of the Mound of the Hostages and the perimeter burials physically and symbolically interconnected with the archaeological features and prehistoric actions that would have taken place at the Rath of the Synods (Grogan 2008)? The publication of these materials, as well as the fascinating results of the remote sensing around the Rath of the Synods, challenges researchers to develop integrative models of human action during the Neolithic period at Tara.

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Notes

1. This is complicated by the methodological and interpretive problem that not all of the Neolithic and

Bronze Age dead entered into the archaeological record. As noted by Fowler (2005) and Robb (2007) it is likely that significant numbers of individuals would have died off site owing to warfare and travel, or be missing from the record owing to the existence of alternative, yet less visible, mortuary treatments.

2. It is important to note that while O'Sullivan (2005) illustrates a possible chronological separation within the Neolithic for use of the Mound of the Hostages, in many ways the main Neolithic period use of the Mound of the Hostages is remarkably brief and intense. This period, which is probably no more than 300 years of main use, is characterised by the construction of the cists, the cairn, several large features, the cremation of many (*c.* 200) people, and the burial of all or parts of them inside, on top of and around the Mound of the Hostages. Collectively this highlights a remarkable intensity of human action in a relatively short period of time.