

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-69762-1 - The Prehistoric Chamber Tombs of England and Wales

Glyn E. Daniel

Excerpt

[More information](#)

---

PART ONE  
DESCRIPTIVE TEXT

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-69762-1 - The Prehistoric Chamber Tombs of England and Wales

Glyn E. Daniel

Excerpt

[More information](#)

---

## CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

THE prehistoric chamber tombs of southern Britain—the ‘dolmens’ and ‘giants’ graves’ and ‘cromlechau’ of popular nomenclature—are among the most interesting and ancient of our national antiquities. Because of the great interest they have always aroused, disputes concerning the nature and origin of our megalithic tombs have for long filled the pages of archaeological journals. For many years the lack of adequate field-surveys and excavations made these disputes difficult to settle, but in the last 50 years about a tenth of the chamber tombs have been excavated, whilst regional field-surveys by Crawford, Baynes, Grimes, Hencken, Phillips and others have listed most of the sites. It is the object of this book to survey the present state of our knowledge concerning these monuments. It will not provide, for the serious student of megalithic monuments, a substitute for the original excavations and survey reports: it attempts rather a general survey particularly with regard to the problems of tomb form and origins.

By southern Britain is meant here the mainland of England and Wales, Anglesey and Holy Island, the Isles of Scilly, the Isle of Wight and the Isle of Man—an arbitrary but convenient area. This chosen area has of course no validity in prehistoric times and this book must be studied in conjunction with the published works on the Irish and Scottish chamber tombs to provide a full picture of the megalithic colonization of the British Isles. From the point of view of the study of prehistoric burial chambers the British Isles are extremely important in European archaeology, lying as they do between the great megalithic centres of south Spain, Portugal and Brittany on the one hand, and southern Scandinavia and north-western Germany on the other. The importance of this position is most marked in the southern half of Great Britain, which has so clearly both Continental and Atlantic aspects.

Before we proceed to describe the burial chambers in our chosen area of study, agreement must be reached as to the use of certain archaeological terms, for megalithic terminology is notoriously confusing. The term *burial chamber* is here used in its technical archaeological connotation of a burial vault, and any structure which contains a burial chamber is said to be chambered, the term *chamber tomb* being used to denote both chamber and any associated structures such as barrows. The prehistoric burial chambers of Atlantic Europe are distinguished from other early grave forms found in the same region in two main respects: (1) the size and capacity of the actual chamber, and (2) the collective nature of their

funerary use, for not only are burial chambers large compartments capable of holding many bodies: usually they do hold such a large number of bodies and are *collective* tombs. The word 'collective' is used here to mean the burial of many individuals in the same tomb, and with no implication as to the ritual details of such burial.

When all the bodies have been placed in a burial chamber at one time, this is a *single collective burial*, but when they are the result of a series of successive burials, this is *successive collective burial*. The customary archaeological usage of the terms *primary* and *secondary* in relation to burial rites does not imply the first and second burials in a tomb or cemetery but respectively the burials for which the tomb was constructed and those which are clearly discontinuous culturally and chronologically with the initial use of the tomb. In the case of a round barrow heaped up over a single interment in a trench grave, which also contains another interment higher up in the barrow, this usage is clear: the primary burial is the one in the trench grave over which the barrow was first heaped, while the one higher up in the mass of the barrow is the secondary. It is equally clear in the case of a burial chamber in which a single collective interment has taken place: obviously all the bodies and funeral furniture deposited at that time are primary. But in the case of, say, an Anglo-Saxon or modern cemetery, it is not, surely, only the first interment which can be described as the 'primary', but *all* those burials placed there which are in the tradition of this first interment. In connexion with successive collective tombs, some archaeologists use the term 'secondary' to indicate normal interments which are made later than at the time of the first use of the tomb.<sup>1</sup> Here, however, the term 'primary' is applied to all burials connected with the continuous successive and collective use and re-use of the tomb. The first interment is referred to as the *initial primary*, and all later burials of this kind as *subsequent primaries*, with such obvious and necessary modifications of terminology as 'late subsequent primaries', etc. Burials in a chamber, or in the accumulation of earth and stones which may cover the chamber, and which are clearly discontinuous with this primary use of the chamber by folk directly connected with its constructors, are here called secondary.<sup>2</sup>

All constructional features which are anterior to the deposition of the initial primary burial are here described as *primary constructional features*: all those, such as blocking, closing and masking deposits, which are subsequent to the burial of the initial primary, and which have to be

<sup>1</sup> Grimes (*AC*, 1936, p. 280) defines 'primary' when applied to burial chambers as belonging 'to the time of the first erection and use of the tomb'.

<sup>2</sup> Crawford (*MS I*, p. 5; *LBC*, p. 14) uses the term 'secondary burial' to imply no more than that the bones so described have already been placed in some temporary resting-place prior to their final interment. I think it preferable to use the term '*re-burial*' to describe this process.

## INTRODUCTION

## 5

removed for each subsequent primary in tombs that are successively used, may be described as *secondary constructional features*. It should be noted that the secondary constructional features have no connexions with the secondary funerary re-use of the burial chamber.<sup>1</sup>

According to their modes of construction, we may distinguish two main varieties of burial chamber: one, in which the chamber is entirely excavated in the ground, and a second in which the chamber is entirely built up on the surface of the ground. The first type consists of the 'grottes sepulchrales artificielles' of French archaeologists and the rock-cut chamber tombs of English archaeologists: good examples of this type occur in Portuguese Estremadura, in the west Mediterranean islands and in the Petit Morin (Marne) valley of northern France. The second type is more widespread: it comprises the 'cryptes dolmeniques' of French writers, the 'megalithic' or 'built-up' or 'surface' chambers of English writers.<sup>2</sup> Often, the rock-cut tombs have surface elements such as capstones or mounds of earth or stones, and the surface chambers may be partially rock-cut, while some chambers in the Paris basin are sunk completely in the ground with their capstones on ground level, and are thus intermediate between the two classes.

In addition to these two main types, we must, on constructional grounds, distinguish a third group of burial chambers, which I have called, for want of a better name, the *sub-megalithic* type of chamber.<sup>3</sup> This group consists of tombs in which the labour involved in building a normal surface chamber has been reduced by remarkable makeshift devices. In some of these sub-megalithic chambers a large stone has been underpinned to form the capstone of a chamber constructed underneath it; in others (e.g. Conguel in the Morbihan and Los Millares 39) the live rock has been incorporated into a chamber to serve as a wall or roof. The two best-known types of sub-megalithic chamber are the earth-fast and demi-allée-couverte types. In the earth-fast type of chamber one end of the capstone rests on the ground while the other is lifted in the air and supported by walling, the whole monument being triangular in side-section. It was Mahé who first drew attention to this sub-megalithic burial chamber with partially raised capstone,<sup>4</sup> and he suggested the name 'demi-dolmen'.

1 Grimes (*AC*, 1936, p. 271) refers to lateral chambers in ovate and long barrows as 'secondary chambers', though 'without prejudice as to their date'.

2 The term 'megalithic' is rather a misnomer, for among this type of chamber there are structures which do not employ any megaliths (i.e. large stones) in their construction and which are built entirely of masonry; but it is in general use and there is no ready alternative.

3 See *Ant* (1937), p. 194. The term is admittedly not very satisfactory and has received other connotations: in Scandinavia archaeologists use it to describe cultures derived from megalithic cultures.

4 *Antiquités du Morbihan*, p. 27. Mahé's definition is worth quoting: 'Les demi-dolmens sont des tables de pierre, appuyées, d'un côté sur deux colonnes, comme les dolmens, et donc l'autre flanc porte immédiatement sur la terre.'

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-69762-1 - The Prehistoric Chamber Tombs of England and Wales

Glyn E. Daniel

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Du Noyer put forward the terms 'primary' and 'earth-fast',<sup>1</sup> while Macalister preferred the term 'demi-dolmen' which he anglicized to 'half-dolmen'.<sup>2</sup> The term 'primary' is, as du Noyer intended it to be, implicit with chronological implications which at present seem most unlikely; while the term 'demi-dolmen' not only savours too strongly of the nineteenth-century controversies that raged around the authenticity and origin of this kind of burial chamber, but is also widely used by French archaeologists to describe ruined burial chambers, much as some English archaeologists use the word 'dolmen'. The term 'earth-fast' is therefore used here for this kind of chamber; it admirably indicates what is, as Reinach pointed out, the chief characteristic of these chambers 'c'est qu'une des extrémités de la table porte directement sur le sol'.<sup>3</sup> The 'demi-allée couverte' is a rarer form, not occurring, as far as I am aware, in Britain: the orthostats of the walls lean towards each other and touch at the top so that no capstones are needed and the whole monument is triangular in end-section.<sup>4</sup>

Most 'megalithic' or 'surface' chambers were originally, and many still are to-day, completely or partially incorporated in a covering of earth or stones. It must not however be assumed that all surface chambers had such coverings. Many of the tombs in the south Spanish cemeteries of Gor, Almizaraque and Los Millares certainly never had any, and it is improbable that the sub-megalithic chambers had barrows either comparable with normal built-up ones or indeed at all.

Many words are used locally in Britain for the mounds covering prehistoric graves: such are *low* in Derbyshire, Cheshire and Staffordshire, *tump* in Gloucestershire and Hereford, *howe* in Scotland and northern England, *carn*, *carnedd* or *twmpath* in Wales, *cairn* in Scotland and *barrow* or *hill* generally in southern England, while English archaeologists generally use the words *tumulus*, *barrow*, *cairn* or *mound*. Here the term *barrow* is used for all sepulchral mounds whether they be of stone or earth, and the term *chambered barrow* where the artificial mound of earth or stones covers or surrounds a grave which is by definition a chamber.

The form of burial chambers cannot be considered apart from the medium in which that form was carried out and the history of a monument since the time of its construction. It goes without saying that burial chambers, like all field monuments, have not remained intact through the many centuries that have elapsed since they were built—barrows have been destroyed, chambers left free-standing and themselves removed or broken up. The phenomenon of the complete disappearance of burial chambers is

1 *JKAS*, 9, 40ff.

2 *Archaeology of Ireland*, p. 115.

3 *RA* (1893), 2, 40.

4 On this type of monument see Le Pontois, *Le Finistère Préhistorique*, pp. 136–8 and Figs. 152–7. Le Pontois calls it the 'allée arcaboutée'.

## INTRODUCTION

7

one of the greatest interest to the student of megalithic distributions, but the phenomenon of which the student of megalithic morphology must constantly take cognizance is not the total but the partial destruction of burial chambers and chambered barrows, for in view of the extensive nature of chamber tomb destruction one can rarely be sure that the form of a monument at the present day reproduces its original form when it fell into disuse after—if it was a collective tomb used successively—the blocking, closing and masking deposits had been placed in position for the last time. It is therefore necessary to distinguish in most cases between the original form of a megalithic monument, and its apparent, actual and present-day form. The terms *genomorph* and *phenomorph* are here used to describe respectively features which are original, i.e. the deliberate work of the tomb builders, and apparent, i.e. the result of subsequent destruction.

Sometimes archaeologists have not been over-careful in distinguishing between genomorphic and phenomorphic features, original features being claimed as phenomorphic or phenomorphs being taken as original. Thus passages and additional chambers have been postulated for polygonal chambers, barrows postulated for all kinds of free-standing chambers, which may never have had them, and intact tombs regarded as the collapsed remains of other tombs. Some still deny the authenticity (i.e. the genomorphic character) of the earth-fast chamber, claiming that such chambers are ‘simply greatly dilapidated exposed dolmens’ or ‘imperfect collapsed dolmens’, and, while there is no doubt that the form of the earth-fast chamber can be, and has been, imitated by certain collapsed chambers,<sup>1</sup> this does not detract from the genomorphic validity of the class as a whole.

Most common is the mistaking as a genomorphic whole of the surviving portion of a partly destroyed site. The disappearance of the passage of a passage grave produces a chamber apparently the same as a simple polygonal or circular chamber, but the genomorphic forms of such apparently identical chambers would be very different. Occasionally destruction of burial chambers produces structures looking like three-legged milking stools and consisting of three spaced orthostats supporting a capstone. Such structures were christened ‘tripod-dolmens’ by early antiquaries and their true nature much disputed, some claiming them as genomorphic but most asserting they were the result of destruction. It seems to me probable that most ‘tripod-dolmens’ are phenomorphs, but Estyn Evans’s account of Aghnaskeagh A<sup>2</sup> serves as a reminder that at least some monuments of this type are still in their original state.

<sup>1</sup> See Macalister, *Archaeology of Ireland*, pp. 115 ff., where he instances the chamber at Mount Browne, Carlow (figured in his *Ireland in Pre-Celtic Times*, p. 328), as a good example of a collapsed chamber, now ‘pseudo-earth-fast’ in appearance.

<sup>2</sup> *County Louth Arch. Journ.* (1935), pp. 235 ff.

The most celebrated case of the confusion of geomorphic and phenomorphic features is afforded by the free-standing chamber, around which there raged during the nineteenth century one of the most violent and classic disputes in the whole development of chamber tomb theory. Approximately a quarter of the burial chambers at present in southern Britain have no visible traces of barrows. Have these chambers merely been denuded of their barrows (i.e. are they phenomorphs of chambered barrows) or were they all geomorphically free-standing? There is neither

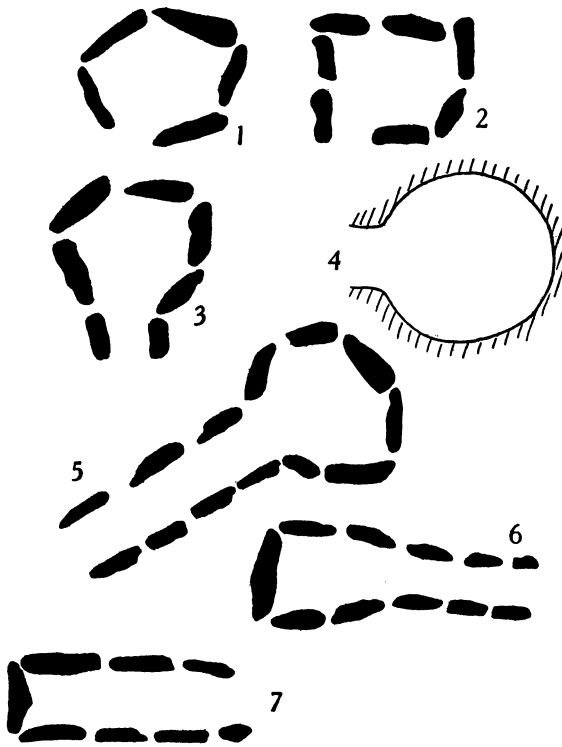


Fig. 1. Types of tomb in the passage grave series: 1, polygonal B-Dolmen; 2, rectangular B-Dolmen; 3, B-Passage-Dolmen; 4, tholos; 5, Pavian passage grave; 6, V-shaped passage grave; 7, entrance grave.

need nor place here to discuss at length the theory of the free-standing chamber. It seems to me beyond all doubt that some chambered barrows have been denuded and have thereby become free-standing chambers: literary records attest the reality of this process. It is therefore theoretically possible that all free-standing chambers were so produced. On the other hand it is equally clear that all chambers did not possess barrows, and that sites such as some of the Gor, Los Millares and Almizaraque tombs, and perhaps some of the chambers in the barony of Burren (Co. Clare)



## INTRODUCTION

9

to which Kinahan drew attention,<sup>1</sup> must be excepted from our generalizations about free-standing chambers. The great strength of the phenomorphic school of thought regarding free-standing chambers lies in the application of the analogical method. Free-standing chambers are morphologically identical with parts of chambered barrows with which they are functionally identical, and in their free-standing condition are ill-fitted to fulfil this function. It seems reasonable then to assume that the large majority of free-standing chambers in southern Britain which are morphologically identical with parts of chambered barrows, were in fact produced by the denudation of similar barrows.

The classification of burial chamber types used here is that outlined by the writer elsewhere some years ago.<sup>2</sup> This classification recognizes two morphological series within the prehistoric burial chambers of Europe—the *passage grave* series, and the *gallery grave* series. The typical passage grave consists of two parts: (1) a passage or approaching element leading inwards from the edge of the barrow, and (2) the chamber itself where the burials were made and which is wider and bigger than, and usually demarcated from, the passage. In some tombs of the passage grave series, however, the clear demarcation between passage and chamber is not visible; these are described as V or undifferentiated passage graves and in some of them—the so-called entrance graves—the tomb is practically the same width throughout so that they are practically indistinguishable from gallery graves. The gallery grave is a burial chamber usually rectangular or sub-rectangular in form the whole of which is normally used for burial, i.e. there is no formal approaching element. Eight main types of burial chamber within the two main series are recognized in the morphological classification here used, as follows:

- |                              |                                    |
|------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1. The <i>tholos</i> .       | 5. The B-Dolmen.                   |
| 2. The Pavian passage grave. | 6. The Loire gallery grave.        |
| 3. The V passage grave.      | 7. The wedge-shaped gallery grave. |
| 4. The entrance grave.       | 8. The A-Dolmen.                   |

The passage grave types are illustrated in Fig. 1. The word 'dolmen', used in the widest variety of ways in megalithic literature, is here only used with the prefix A- or B- to distinguish single rectangular or polygonal chambers.

The barrows which cover burial chambers are usually carefully constructed to a prepared plan executed in detail by revetment walls and sometimes surrounded by a free-standing spaced curb of stones (the peristalith). Round barrows are associated with the passage grave series (types

<sup>1</sup> G. H. Kinahan, quoted in Wood-Martin, *Pagan Ireland*, p. 265.

<sup>2</sup> *PPS* (1941), pp. 2 ff.

1 to 5) and long barrows with the gallery grave series (types 6 to 8) but this association is by no means universal. The term 'long barrow' itself covers a variety of forms and in exact description we should perhaps distinguish four types:

1. The short ovate barrow such as Nympsfield and Browndod.
2. The long ovate barrow such as Carrowkeel E and Camster Long.
3. The short rectangular barrow such as Garrywhin and Pederstrup.
4. The long rectangular barrow such as Emmen 6.

Sometimes a barrow contains only one burial chamber, sometimes more than one, and these chambers may be *open* or *closed*. A closed chamber is one closed on all sides, and entirely enclosed in the normal primary construction of the barrow; no structural features lead up to the chambers from the edge of the barrow and subsequent access to the chamber could only be obtained by the demolition of the primary structure of the barrow. Open chambers, on the other hand, have one of their sides open, and access to them could always be obtained by clearing away the secondary constructional material. The use of these phrases 'open' and 'closed' must not be taken to mean that the closed chambers *could* only be used once, or that open chambers were, except at the time of construction and when each successive burial was being made, open to the general gaze. The distinction between these classes is not based on special burial rites but on the degree of their accessibility for subsequent re-use.

The entrance to an open chamber may be merely a break in the outer revetment wall of the barrow or it may be marked by a recessed area in the barrow or special walls built outside the barrow. These walls outside the barrow or the revetment walls incurving to demarcate the recessed area, mark out the forecourt of a chamber tomb which may be semicircular, or U-shaped, V-shaped, or cusped. The walls of a forecourt may rise in height from their outer edge of the chamber entrance forming a crescentic façade, and the stones at the entrance to a chamber are often especially large forming *portals*. In some chamber tombs the meeting point of the side-walls of the barrow with the walls of the forecourt is emphasized by a projection or 'horn'.

Burial chambers may have side-chambers opening out of them, or they may be divided up into a number of smaller chambers. This latter division is especially frequent in gallery graves and is effected by transverse elements or septae which may be: (1) jambs projecting from each side, (2) transverse slabs or 'septal stones' which reach half-way up the height of the chamber, (3) sills or low transverse slabs, or (4) combinations of projecting jambs and transverse stones. Usually these transverse elements, while narrowing and segmenting the chamber, still leave enough room for entering the inner