

MULTI-PERIOD CHAMBERED CAIRNS¹

J.X.W.P. Corcoran, University of Glasgow

Within the small area comprised of Britain and Ireland there is a variety of chambered tomb unparalleled in any area of comparable extent elsewhere in Europe. This variety may be seen, for example, in the north of Scotland where tombs of the Orkney-Cromarty group are not only diverse in plan, but among which are forms not found outside the area. This at least demonstrates the vigour of the cult or cults involved, and shows that there was no lack of inventiveness in the development of megalithic architecture as one of the outer limits of the distribution pattern of chambered tombs in Europe is reached. Further, as Piggott and Henshall have shown,² it is possible to offer convincing typological sequences for some of the tombs in the area. Elsewhere in Britain and in Ireland other regional, and possibly cultural, groups may be identified, differing from each other to a varying degree in plan, artefacts, and sometimes burial ritual. In the context of chambered tombs in Britain, the earth-and-timber long barrows must now be included, as the probability exists that some of these contained wooden burial chambers.

One of the outstanding problems in the study of chambered tombs during the past two decades or more has been that of the origins of some of the British and Irish varieties. In many instances it has proved impossible to identify putative ancestral forms outside these islands for some of the well-defined insular types. It is becoming apparent, not only that the search may perhaps have been made in the wrong areas, but that wrong questions as to origins may have been asked, and wrong assumptions made. Set against the present knowledge of the cultural background of the period between 3,500 and 1,500 B.C., it might be assumed that there had been considerably more insular development than had been envisaged at a time when a much shorter chronology for the Neolithic was accepted. Few scholars today would accept that some of the more monumental tombs could have been built by immigrant farmers immediately on arrival in these islands, yet this is what was implied, particularly by those writers who argued that the earliest builders of chambered tombs were the first Neolithic colonists to arrive in specific areas. Another hindrance to fresh thought has been the concept of 'degeneration', the belief that the descendants of people who had built large and impressive tombs were themselves capable only of constructing small, simple tombs. Certainly some 'degeneracy' might be argued in the plan of a tomb such as Pipton (BRE 8),³ but neither the technique of construction,

nor the size, are significantly inferior to comparable, but more regularly planned, tombs of this particular form within the Cotswold-Severn series.

It seems reasonable to assume, on analogy with ritual structures in other places and at other times, that simple architectural forms should have been built earlier than the more complex, from which the latter may have evolved. It would be difficult to argue that the cathedral at Chartres was the prototype from which a simple chapel 'degenerated'. Yet that is the sort of thesis which is offered by those who would envisage a simple form of burial chamber as having 'degenerated' from a more complex type of tomb. This is not meant to imply that simple tombs were not built after more elaborate forms had been developed.

It further seems reasonable to classify chambered tombs in Britain and Ireland into simple and complex types. Among the simple types may be included box-like chambers enclosed within mounds no larger than that necessary adequately to support the chamber, such as Pen-y-Wyrlod (BRE 1), the protomegaliths recently defined by Scott,⁴ and structures such as Arthur's Stone (GLA 3) in Glamorganshire. An elaboration of this form might also include the widespread Portal Dolmens of Britain and Ireland in which a pair of orthostats at the entrance provided some form of architectural embellishment to what otherwise would have been a simple burial chamber. The simple or basic form of Passage Grave might also be included. More complex forms might comprise structures in which there is architectural elaboration to either chamber or cairn, or both, elaborations which structurally were not essential. Within this category perhaps should be included the truly monumental tombs of Britain and Ireland such as West Kennet (WIL 4), Creevykeel (Sl. 2) and Carn Ban (ARN 10), in which ritual or other considerations perhaps had influenced structural design beyond that of merely accommodating the dead in a stone-built tomb. Structures such as these are of particular significance in the study of insular tombs, as they are the types for which precise external analogues in toto cannot be identified. They represent respectively three of the well-defined groups of chambered long cairns in these islands; Cotswold-Severn, Carlingford⁵ and Clyde. In each case the burial chambers and forecourt appear to have been enclosed in a long, often trapezoidal, mound. On account of the shape of the mound it has sometimes been suggested that a common tradition of megalithic architecture had been shared. This partly may be true, but an examination of the plan of the respective chambers and forecourt appears to demonstrate that the construction of these may have resulted from separate architectural and perhaps ritual traditions. Within the Cotswold-Severn region, for example, more than one tradition of chamber construc-

tion appears to have been involved.

Another significant factor in the study of the chambered long cairns of Britain and Ireland is the relationship of stone-built and earth-and-timber-built trapezoidal mounds. There can be little doubt on available evidence that the latter influenced the former. In other words, the stone-built trapezoidal cairns of the west and the north appear to be skeuomorphs of those of the south and east. So far as may be determined from radiocarbon assay, there is no evidence to contradict the hypothesis that earth-and-timber trapezoidal mounds in Britain were sufficiently early to have been ancestral to stone-built analogues. In the diffusion of the stone-built exemplars, the cairns of the Cotswold-Severn group may have contributed something to the development both of the Clyde tombs of south-western Scotland and the Carlingford tombs of the north of Ireland. Were this to be accepted it would not necessarily imply that there had been any development in toto from one group to the other. The trapezoidal mound perhaps has suggested an imperfect sense of cultural and ritual unity and conformity. It is necessary, therefore, to examine independently possible external analogues for chamber and forecourt.

It is also relevant perhaps to look beyond the immediate problem of the development of megalithic architecture, and to consider the economic and social background of the builders of chambered tombs. Within the context of any prehistoric society the construction of tombs such as West Kennet, Creevykeel and Carn Ban must have involved the employment of man-power and a supporting economy beyond that capable of the earliest agriculturalists entering virgin land. In other words, tombs such as these could not have been built by incomers within a short time of their arrival. In a roughly comparable context, Christian communities entering new territories would have been able to build a simple chapel, but the erection of a parish church of some architectural pretension would have been difficult until they were fully settled. Within the context of the earliest immigrant agriculturalists of Britain and Ireland, it seems reasonable to suppose that their surplus, if any, would have been available only to build a simple tomb, assuming that on arrival they included megalithic architecture among their intangible cultural luggage. In a simple archaeological context it is unfortunate that contemporary and earlier insular archaeological thought had not followed the reasoning of Montelius who in the nineteenth-century suggested that the dysser, the simple burial chambers of southern Scandinavia, had been the earliest megalithic tombs, followed by the architecturally more advanced Passage Graves and Long Cists. Although as a typological sequence this is not accepted today, the chronological sequence appears still to be valid.

Following this line of reasoning, it might be enquired where in Britain and Ireland are those simple tombs from which more elaborate forms might have been developed. In the respective areas within which are found the long cairns of Cotswold-Severn, Carlingford and Clyde types, it is difficult to isolate simple structures, such as those already suggested as potential prototypes. Two suggestions might be offered. In the first place, a simple structure may have been removed as, being a simple structure, it would have offered little resistance to farmers who might have wished to work the ground on which it stood, or who wanted to use the stone from which it was built. The remains of a tomb such as Newton Anwoth in Kirkcudbright (KRK 1) or the Devil's Den (WIL 8) in Wiltshire, both standing in their denuded state on arable land, suggests that less strongly built tombs may easily have been removed. This may appear to be a negative argument, but there is another factor which may be considered relevant. It has been suggested frequently that earlier Neolithic immigrants not unnaturally chose land near to their sea-borne entry. In more recent times, such areas have been cultivated or otherwise exploited for agricultural purposes. It is therefore not impossible that in some parts of Britain such simple forms of tomb may have been destroyed within the past few centuries.

This may seem to be an unsatisfactory and again a negative argument, but the survival of many obviously denuded Portal Dolmens in Britain and Ireland is not without significance. A feature of many of these tombs is their sometimes massive capstone, of which many survive. Like some of the dysser of Denmark, and tombs in Britain such as Arthur's Stone (GLA 3), it would appear that their builders raised a boulder and under-pinned it by orthostats so as to form a chamber. In more recent times, persons seeking an easy source of stone or who wished to remove the tomb, might reasonably have been wary of interfering with such a capstone, although less deterred by the problems of removing the more portable stones. That something of this nature may have occurred is suggested by the survival of so many Portal Dolmens which, in contrast with many long cairns, retain their roofing stones.

Were this argument to be rejected, that is the disappearance of small, simple and relatively easily removed chambered structures, another hypothesis may be offered. Again, to quote another parallel from other times, comparison with Christian ecclesiastical architecture demonstrates that in many instances an elaborate medieval parish or cathedral church might have been built over, around, and incorporated an earlier and much more simple chapel or church. In other words, there may have been a desire to incorporate an early, original and simple structure from liturgical, spiritual or sentimental

motives.

Excavation during the past decade has confirmed the belief that some complex chambered cairns in their final form had resulted from additions to an original structure which sometimes was of quite a simple type. Such evidence is known from the north and south of Scotland, from Wales and England and from Ireland. In some instances the final form of the tomb resulted from the construction of a second, but separate chamber close to a small, self-contained tomb. Both structures then were enclosed in a straight-sided mound, as at Mid Gleniron II (WIG 2) and Dyffryn Ardudwy (MER 3). At Mid Gleniron I (WIG 1) two small self-contained burial cairns arranged in tandem were enclosed within a straight-sided cairn, which also had a third, lateral chamber and an orthostatic façade. Wayland's Smith (BRK 1) is at present unique as a transepted megalithic chamber and an earlier mound, containing a wooden burial chamber, which were enclosed in a long trapezoidal mound. At Annaghmare in Co. Armagh a pair of back-to-back lateral chambers was added to the rear of a conventional long cairn of Carlingford type.⁶ At Tulach an t-Sionnaich in Caithness a long mound of earth and stone, which apparently did not enclose any burial chamber, had been built on to a heel-shaped cairn. From the sides of the long mound, walls were extended so as to enclose the greater part of the earlier cairn, which itself may have been of two periods of construction.⁷

It seems probable, therefore, that excavation will reveal further examples of multi-period construction, and surface indications at present visible in some structures suggest this. In the past there has been a tendency during field reconnaissance to concentrate on the ground plan of unexcavated monuments. Some consideration of the elevation, even of disturbed mounds, however, may suggest evidence of multi-period construction. Before excavation, for example, it could be seen that the southern end of Tulach an t-Sionnaich was more prominent than the remainder. This was not comparable with the profiles of many long mounds which increase in height gradually from one end to the other. There was a distinction between the two parts, which was marked by a lateral hollow extending across the mound. It was shown by excavation that the rear of the earlier heel-shaped cairn and the southern end of the later 'tail' were joined at this position. Miss Henshall has identified in northern Scotland a number of long cairns which resemble Tulach an t-Sionnaich in having a large and distinct terminal mound and a lower 'tail'. The junction between the two is marked sometimes by a lateral hollow.⁸ It seems possible then that these mounds of Na Tri Shean type were of multi-period construction, and this hypothesis is supported by the fact that the chamber in the higher end is aligned sometimes on an axis lying several

degrees from the longitudinal axis of the long mound as a whole, as at Tulach Buaille Assery (CAT 59).

It is not known yet to what extent, if any, surface features such as these may be identified elsewhere in Britain and Ireland. There are some indications, however, that some structures in the Cotswolds may originally have comprised a prominent terminal mound to which a long 'tail' may have been added. The best preserved example appears to be Camp Barrow North (GLO 11).

A more complex sequence also may be suspected in other long mounds. There are two lateral depressions across the long cairn of Camster Long (CAT 12). The northern end of the cairn is both considerably higher and broader than the remainder, and has the appearance of having been an independent tomb. It seems possible that two separate Passage Graves, each originally enclosed in its own cairn, were incorporated subsequently in a long-horned cairn. The fact that the two Passage Graves are of differing types further suggests that this monument was not planned and built as a unit. It is also relevant perhaps that this is the only known long-horned cairn in the north of Scotland in which the chambers are set laterally.

The long cairn of Mid Gleniron I (WIG 1) has been mentioned already. Excavation revealed that probably there had been three periods of construction. Despite much interference with the body of the mound, the contour plan indicated before excavation the position of the inner cairns which enclosed the two earlier and independent chambers.

Alterations to monuments, however, may not have been confined to the construction of additional chambers. Existing chambers may also have been enlarged. Scott has demonstrated recently that the segmented chambers of some Clyde cairns may have resulted from the enlargement of a 'proto-megalith', a small, box-like chamber.⁹ It seems possible that something similar may have occurred in Ireland where some of the segmented chambers in the north of the country appear to have developed from the addition of a second chamber to a Portal Dolmen. It seems reasonable to enquire whether, when there is evidence of a break in the alignment of the side-walls of a chamber, or where there is a recognisable difference between the type of orthostats used in both parts of such a structure, as at Heston Brake (MON 3), such chambers had been lengthened.

Two complex cairns in Ireland demonstrate this hypothesis. At Audleystown (Dw. 3) two chambers, each comprised of four segments, are placed back-to-back in a long, trapezoidal cairn. There is a distinct break in the align-

ment of the north-western chamber between the second and third segments. The south-western chamber is more regularly planned, and has the appearance of having been built as a unit. It might be suggested that the inner two segments of the north-eastern chamber had been built first, perhaps enclosed in a small cairn. When it was decided to build the south-western chamber, the original chamber may have been extended by the construction of two additional segments in order to maintain symmetry of design. It may not be without significance that, unlike the majority of trapezoidal mounds in the north of Ireland, the south-western end is broader than the north-eastern. This perhaps suggests that the builders of the south-western chamber were also responsible for the construction of the cairn proper, and that they wished that the new chamber should have precedence over the earlier. A stake-hole found by the excavator beyond the north-eastern forecourt may have held a post in laying out the alignment during the later stage of construction.

The second monument is the large burial mound at Knowth in Co. Meath. In the structure discovered in 1957 there is a rectangular chamber, approached by a very long passage in which there is a marked change of alignment near to the chamber itself.¹⁰ Set back-to-back with this chamber is a large cruciform chamber, also approached by a long passage.¹¹ It seems possible that the simple chamber, approached by a short passage, was the earlier structure. It may have been decided subsequently to incorporate this structure, which perhaps was enclosed in its own mound, in a larger mound built to contain the cruciform Passage Grave. In order, both to achieve symmetry and to allow access to the earlier chamber, it would have been necessary to lengthen the passage, and this may account for the break in alignment of the latter.

It is possible, of course, to speak with certainty of multi-period construction only at those monuments which have yielded relevant evidence from excavation. It is not to be implied that all the more complex forms of tomb resulted from successive structural additions or alterations to a simple structure. There can be little doubt that some of the truly monumental tombs of Britain and Ireland were built as structural units. Recognition that multi-period tombs do exist, however, may help to understand the manner in which the evolved form of some of these more complex tombs, for which precise external analogues are unknown, may have developed.

Reference has been made to Scott's hypothesis concerning the evolution of the Clyde tombs of south-western Scotland, and the possibility that the segmented chamber of the Carlingford tombs of the northern part of Ireland derived from the Portal Dolmen. The writer has discussed recently the origin of the long cairns of the Cotswold-Severn region,¹² and suggested that external analogues

exist for each of the three principal types of chamber, for the 'blind entrance' of cairns with lateral chambers, and for the long trapezoidal mound. There is little direct evidence from excavation in these three areas of proved multi-period construction, but this does not invalidate the relevant theses, as examination has so far not been directed to this end.

It is apparent, therefore, that complete excavation or re-excavation of carefully chosen structures is necessary before the full significance of multi-period construction may be appreciated. This obviously will take some time to achieve. In the meantime, however, a more detailed study in the field of the plan and elevation of many structures may provide some indication of possibly multi-period cairns. In addition, some earlier excavation reports may repay study. An early excavation report of Belas Knap (GLO 1), for example, states that each of the four chambers was covered by its own mound. In view of present knowledge, it now seems difficult to accept the view that a monument such as Ty Isaf (BRE 5) was planned and built as a structural unit.¹³

In conclusion, evidence of multi-period construction is significant on two counts. First, there is the intrinsic interest in an architectural and a ritual context derived from the recognition that some cairns were enlarged and modified by successive structural additions. Second, the evidence so far revealed by excavation and hypotheses based on it may contribute something to an understanding of the means by which some well-defined types of chambered tomb evolved in Britain and Ireland.

Notes

1. This short essay is offered as a summary account of work in progress, which it is proposed to publish more fully elsewhere. It has not been possible to prepare illustrations, but the limited readership of this volume will be familiar with most of the structures referred to in the text. Plans of these will readily be found in the publications by Henshall, Scott, De Valéra and the present writer, and referred to in these notes.
2. S. Piggott (1954) Neolithic Cultures of the British Isles, Cambridge, 232-45.
A.S. Henshall (1963) The Chambered Tombs of Scotland, Vol. 1, Edinburgh, *passim*.
3. Letters and figures in parenthesis refer to inventories published in T.G.E. Powell et al. (1969) Megalithic Enquiries in the West of Britain,

Liverpool, for tombs of the Clyde and Cotswold-Severn groups, and those of A.S. Henshall (1963) for tombs in the north of Scotland. An explanation of the code letters denoting counties is given in T.G.E. Powell et al. (1969), xix-xxi. A three-letter code denotes a tomb in Britain, and a two-letter code a tomb in Ireland. For Ireland the system used is that of R. De Valéra (1960) on pages 12-13 of 'The Court Cairns of Ireland', P.R.I.A. 60 (C), 9-140. Full bibliographical references to individual tombs are given in the respective inventories.

4. In T.G.E. Powell et al. (1969), 175-222.
5. R. De Valéra (1960).
J.X.W.P. Corcoran (1960) 'The Carlingford Culture', P.P.S. XXVI, 98-148.
6. D.M. Waterman (1965) 'The Court Cairn at Annaghmare, Co. Armagh', U.J.A. XXVIII, 3-46.
7. J.X.W.P. Corcoran (1966) 'Excavation of three chambered cairns at Loch Calder, Caithness', P.S.A.S. XCVIII, 5-22.
8. A.S. Henshall (1963), 75-6.
9. In T.G.E. Powell et al. (1969), 193-8.
10. G. Eogan (1967) 'The Knowth (Co. Meath) Excavations', Antiquity XLI, 302-4.
11. G. Eogan (1969) 'Excavations at Knowth, Co. Meath, 1968', Antiquity XLIII, 8-14.
12. In T.G.E. Powell et al. (1969), 13-104.
13. See arguments in T.G.E. Powell et al. (1969), 84-6.

