



# Returning and reuse: Diachronic perspectives on multi-component cemeteries and mortuary politics at Middle Neolithic and Early Bronze Age Tara, Ireland



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## ABSTRACT

Archaeologists studying multi-component cemeteries have argued that the societies who reused cemeteries were motivated by connecting to the past. However, often overlooked are the potential roles of mortuary events and sites as key social and political venues for creating, contesting, and unmaking relationships and identities for the later community independent of a connection to the past. In this paper, I explore the social and political roles that mortuary rituals at the Mound of the Hostages, Tara, Ireland played during the Middle Neolithic (3350–2800 BC) and Early Bronze Age (2300–1700 BC).

Tara's emergence as a regional mortuary center occurred only several hundred years after its initial reuse by Early Bronze Age peoples. Just as importantly, the burial activity that marked Tara as special in the Early Bronze Age was very brief, revealing that the regional centralization at Tara was ultimately unsuccessful. The analysis of cemetery formation at Tara is only possible due to the development of a fine-grained site specific chronology. These results have broad implications for how we understand cemetery formation, the reuse of mortuary monuments, and the dynamics of social complexity in prehistoric societies.

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## 1. Introduction

Mortuary rituals are more than just ways of disposing of the dead. They provide a forum for remembrance and celebration of the deceased, for engaging with and potentially challenging cultural norms, and for integrating social collective units in ways that can mimic, mask, or modify social relationships that exist in the non-ritual social structure. While mortuary rituals are reproduced through acts of ritual performance and burial, each act offers opportunities to change the role of these rituals in any society. Consequently, mortuary rituals can serve multiple roles that not only *can*, but *will*, change over time.

In multi-component cemeteries, archaeologists have argued that the people who reused cemeteries were motivated by connecting to the past (see Bradley, 2002; Williams, 1998; Yoffee, 2007). However, often overlooked are the potential roles of these mortuary events as key social and political venues for creating, contesting, and unmaking relationships and identities for the later community regardless of a connection to the past. Archaeologists must also take into account other factors that affected past societies' decisions of who, where, why, and when to bury.

Multi-component cemeteries must be treated as spaces where contemporary social and political relationships were contested regardless of the connections to the distant past.

A lack of emphasis on the multiple tempos of cemetery formation has obscured a significant amount of social information encoded in the mortuary record. Mortuary archaeology has been handcuffed by a lack of fine-grained chronologies for most cemeteries. In most cases, components within a cemetery are treated as long and uniform chronological units (though see Yao, 2008).

In this paper, I explore the social and political roles that mortuary rituals at the Mound of the Hostages, a multi-component cemetery in prehistoric Ireland, played for the communities that used this cemetery throughout its history. The Mound of the Hostages is a passage tomb constructed and used as a cemetery during the Middle Neolithic and subsequently reused as a cemetery during the Early Bronze Age (after a significant gap in time) (O'Sullivan, 2005). More specifically, I investigate the changing processes that led to the Mound of the Hostages at Tara becoming a uniquely large Early Bronze Age cemetery. To understand *why* this transition occurred, it is first necessary to understand *when* and *how* the cemetery became unique within Bronze Age Ireland. As such, I monitor long-term changes in burial practices, tempo of burial, and the demographic profiles of both the living and dead

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populations using the tomb, from the monument's construction in the Middle Neolithic to the end of its use as a cemetery. Accounting for diachronic change in the roles of mortuary activity in multi-component cemeteries provides new insights into the social dynamics and mortuary politics of the past.

## 2. The politics of returning to and reusing cemeteries

This paper is situated within anthropological perspectives of emergent social inequality, mortuary ritual, and social change. The development of institutionalized social inequality continues to be one of the most fundamental issues in anthropology (Ames, 2007; Bowles et al., 2010; Earle and Johnson, 2000; Flannery and Marcus, 2012; Fowles, 2002; Marcus, 2008; Price and Feinman, 2010; Rousseau, 2006; Shennan, 2008; Trigger, 2003). While researchers have often emphasized political and economic strategies for creating social inequalities (Arnold, 1993; Earle, 1997; Earle and Kristiansen, 2010; Flannery, 1972; Hayden, 1995; Hirth, 1996), ideologies also play an integral role (e.g., Aldenderfer, 1993, 2010; Earle, 2002; Wiessner, 2002). Since the development of systematic models of mortuary assessment in ethnographic and archaeological contexts (e.g., Binford, 1971; Brown, 1971; O'Shea, 1984; Saxe, 1970), mortuary rituals have been primary lines of evidence for studying the existence of social inequality (Arnold, 1996; Marcus and Flannery, 2004; Price and Feinman, 2010). Such studies have been useful in identifying whether or not larger social inequalities are present. They have been less successful in examining the roles of mortuary rituals themselves as contexts integral to creating and maintaining inequalities. Combining agency and system-level perspectives can allow archaeologists to examine mortuary rituals as venues for negotiating interpersonal relationships among participants and for bringing about rapid macro-scale changes in social complexity.

Anthropologists have long been interested in ritual as an important context in which the nature of social relationships and structures are negotiated (Rappaport, 1999; Schechner, 1994; Turner, 1972; Van Gennep, 1960). Through rigorous analysis of material traces of patterned behavior in archaeological contexts (e.g., Buikstra and Charles, 1999; Fogelin, 2007; Marcus, 2007; Marcus and Flannery, 1994, 2004; Renfrew, 1994, 2001; Spielmann, 2002; Wright, 2014), archaeology has the potential to understand the social roles of ancient ritual (Howey and O'Shea, 2009).

I approach mortuary rituals as processes rather than events (Bourdieu, 1991; Brück, 2004b). Mortuary treatments are the conscious and intentioned results of decisions made by the living (Bradley, 1998b; O'Shea, 1996). As the results of choices, mortuary deposits are unique contexts in which archaeologists can examine the politics of materializing agency, structure, and identity (Brück, 2004a,b, 2006; Fowler, 2005; Keswani, 2004; O'Shea, 1996). Mortuary rituals also provide contexts in which the structures and rules of society, that is, institutions (North, 1990; Wiessner, 2002), can be unmade and reformed (Mills, 2004). Because of the recursive dialogues of mortuary rituals – between participants and observers, and between agency and structure – the mortuary record encodes processes of social negotiation rather than fossilized past relationships (Kuijt, 1996). This approach encourages archaeologists to consider the timing, space, and scale of mortuary rituals in order to better understand who participated in different stages of funerary processes, who witnessed different ritual performances, and what sorts of integrative or inequality relationships were actualized in these social contexts (Kuijt, 1996, 2000, 2008; Lukes, 1975).

The emotionally charged nature of mortuary rituals can generate a wide range of meanings, significances, and experiences for the participants (Inomata, 2006). At the scale of the individual

participant it is impossible to reconstruct the exact emotions, or meanings, that mortuary rituals played (Howey and O'Shea, 2009). Indeed, the meanings associated with ritual performances are so fractured and malleable within any given community that assessing the specific experiences of people in the past is both impossible and a diversion from the significance of examining ritual action for archaeologists interested in past lifeways (Inomata, 2006).

Given the impossibility of reconstructing individual experiences or meanings associated with mortuary rituals, we are better served by examining the roles these mortuary rituals played within societies. Mortuary practices are political acts (Parker-Pearson, 1993), each involving different participants and providing the opportunity for changes in the politics of mortuary activity. Such an approach to the mortuary practices of the Irish Neolithic and Bronze Age requires examining mortuary rituals within multiple time scales: the intra-tradition process of returning and the change of mortuary traditions over time.

### 2.1. Diachronic perspectives on cemeteries

Cemeteries – spatially bounded places on the landscape where multiple individuals are buried – are one of the fundamental units of study in mortuary archaeology (O'Shea, 1984). Cemeteries are rarely formed as a single event. Instead, cemeteries are formed through repeated actions at the same location to bury the dead (Parker-Pearson, 1999). The amalgamated archaeological record in cemeteries can obscure that each burial event involves a different set of participants with a different range of experiences and a different set of choices (Bailey, 2007). This complexity is accentuated when cemeteries are reused over multiple periods. Considering the different time scales across which cemeteries form provides opportunities to integrate the diversity of human action into narratives of past human behavior.

The human choices and social processes that form cemeteries have particular temporal dimensions. These include (1) *returning* and (2) *reusing*. The process of *returning* is defined as the act of burial within an existing cemetery within a single mortuary tradition (a spatially and temporally bounded set of mortuary practices). The process of *reuse* is defined as the act of burial that, following a hiatus in activity, establishes a new temporally distinct burial tradition within a cemetery where an earlier mortuary tradition existed. Reuse results in multi-component cemeteries. Reuse only happens at the start of a new temporally distinct burial tradition. Once a cemetery has been reused, it has been repurposed as a functional cemetery within the new tradition. As such, continued burial in multi-component cemeteries with multiple components is actually a process of returning rather than reusing. Because mortuary practices are dynamic, we must account for cemetery formation when examining the changing social roles of mortuary rituals.

### 2.2. Archaeological perspectives on reuse and returning

The reuse of mortuary locations is a global phenomenon (Dillehay, 1990; Honeychurch et al., 2009; Williams, 1998, 2014; Yoffee, 2007). Monument reuse has been particularly well studied in Europe (Bradley, 1987, 1993, 1998a,b, 2002; Dillehay, 1990; Gosden and Lock, 1998; Hingley, 1996; Honeychurch et al., 2009; Johansen et al., 2004; Newman, 1998; Porter, 2002; Semple, 1998; Williams, 1997, 1998, 2006; Yoffee, 2007). Explanations of reuse from across the globe have ranged from seeing returning as a form of legitimization of territorial access or power (Buikstra and Charles, 1999; Chapman, 1995; Saxe, 1970), to a complex political interaction that makes or unmakes ancestors (Hingley, 1996; Schurr and Cook, 2014), to considerations of social memory, forgetting, and identity formation (Kuijt, 2008; Sørensen, 2014;

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