



## **Aspects of religion in the Neolithic and early Bronze Age**

c.4000 - 1500BC

### **Introduction**

This brief overview will hopefully be of interest to project volunteers not familiar with the Neolithic and early Bronze Age; everything mentioned here will be discussed in detail at workshops and other events once the project is properly underway. It is anticipated that project fieldwork to investigate the belief systems of people throughout this period will include detailed analysis of landscapes including rock art and burial mounds, as well as some investigation of other types of site. Thanks to the work of numerous scholars over the past 150 years or so we have lots of information about the Neolithic and early Bronze Age of the North-East, but with specific regard to 'religion' we still have a huge amount to learn.

The onset of the Neolithic, in about 4,000BC, saw many fundamental changes in society including the introduction of agriculture, pottery, new types of stone tools including leaf-shaped flint arrowheads and polished stone axes, and the construction of large communal monuments. Archaeologists still debate why these changes occurred, and the extent to which they represent immigration by people from the continent or the adoption of new ways of living by local Mesolithic communities. It seems certain that a degree of immigration was involved, but we don't know how much.

Whatever the explanation, the implications of what has been termed the 'Neolithic revolution' were profound and irreversible. Hunting, gathering and fishing, which had been the means of food procurement for countless generations over millennia, were still important to Neolithic people but were now supplemented by mixed farming. This is not the place to review in any detail the developments that took place throughout the Neolithic north-east (for an up to date overview see the NERRF2 Neolithic and early Bronze Age resource assessment at [www.nerrf.net](http://www.nerrf.net)), but it is fair to say that the onset of the Neolithic ushered in 'new ways of being' for people, very different from those of the Mesolithic. These new ways of being involved far more than just food production and included new belief systems. It is of course impossible for us to fully understand these from the available archaeological evidence, but there are lots of clues. One thing that is very important to remember when thinking about Neolithic 'religion' is that it was not something 'separate from everything else' as religion can seem to be in the modern west. Neolithic people did not satisfy their religious obligations by simply heading off to church on Sundays, rather, it seems

certain that their entire world was imbued with spiritual significance, probably in a way not greatly different to that of the Native Americans of Australian Aborigines of historic (and indeed present) times. It seems certain that the land was of profound spiritual importance to Neolithic people, in a way that is difficult if not impossible for us to appreciate today. Consequently to attempt the study of Neolithic 'religion' as something apart from other aspects of Neolithic peoples' lives is doomed to failure; the spiritual and the practical were often merely different aspects of the same things - stone axes, for example, were clearly of great spiritual significance yet were also used to chop down trees.

This overview also covers the Chalcolithic (Copper Age) and early Bronze Age, as there were clearly significant elements of continuity from the later Neolithic through into these periods. Indeed, it can often be impossible without excavation to know where in this extended period some ceremonial monuments belong; some certainly remained significant throughout the entire period. The Chalcolithic in our region began in about 2400BC and is characterised by the introduction of Beaker pots (it is sometimes called the Beaker period) as well as metalwork. Just as with the onset of the Neolithic, archaeologists have long debated the extent to which these developments were linked to immigrants, or the adoption of new ideas by native people.

Recent DNA work suggests that Beaker and early Bronze Age populations throughout much of Britain are genetically similar, but distinct from Neolithic ones, and that later Bronze Age populations seem to continue the Beaker and early Bronze Age genetic patterns. Thus it would seem that considerable immigration did occur during the Chalcolithic, but that the middle Bronze Age changes in settlement and agriculture so obvious in the archaeological record do not reflect large numbers of incomers. Little such work has taken place so far in our region, but there is no reason to suppose that things were very different here than elsewhere.

## **The early Neolithic (c4000 – 3000BC)**

It is probable that some special natural places (eg distinctive hilltops, waterfalls, rivers) retained spiritual significance from earlier times into the Neolithic, but the first artificially constructed monuments that we might term 'religious' were large earthwork enclosures for communal gatherings and long mounds of earth or stone which functioned as communal burial sites. Only a handful of probable early enclosures are known throughout the north-east and, while it is possible that many others could so far have escaped detection, it seems they were never as common here as in other parts of the country. A recently example adjacent to the Long Meg stone circle in Cumbria, just outside the north-east region, seems to date from a century or so after 4000BC, right at the start of the Neolithic. Long mounds have been recorded in several places, including high in Redesdale and North Tynedale; the impressive long cairn at Bellshiel Law, high above Redesdale, is over 110m long, and despite partial excavation in the 1930s remains poorly understood. The Street House 'long cairn' at Loftus in Cleveland, at the south-east corner of the north-east region, was excavated in 1979-81 and remains the only fully excavated example of a long mound in the region. In common with many sites excavated long mounds elsewhere, the site was originally a timber mortuary chamber, possibly constructed as early as 3800BC, later entombed within the mound. Most of the region's round burial mounds are of

later date (see below) but a small number are probably Neolithic; without excavation it is impossible to know how many. Neolithic round cairns include excavated examples at Broomridge (north Northumberland) and Copt Hill (near Sunderland). These monuments were neither large nor plentiful enough to have held the remains of most people, whose bodies were presumably disposed of in a way that left no archaeological trace. We know from excavated sites elsewhere that Neolithic burial mounds often contained jumbles of bones from several different bodies, rather than individual skeletons; it seems they acted as collective ancestral tombs rather than monuments to individuals. It is likely that some of the north-east's enigmatic rock art (discussed below) dates from the early Neolithic.



*A view over the great early Neolithic long cairn at Bellshiel, Redesdale.*

## **Later Neolithic, Chalcolithic and early Bronze Age ritual/ceremonial monuments**

The recent discovery of a late Neolithic cremation cemetery dating from about 3000BC at Lanton Quarry, Milfield, is an important development, suggesting that similar cemeteries, with no above-ground trace, may survive elsewhere. Finding them, however will not be easy. In contrast, several different types of later Neolithic or early Bronze Age ceremonial monuments are known throughout the north-east, many of them highly visible in today's landscape, though they all remain poorly understood and much new fieldwork is needed if we really want to try and understand them.

Only a single certain example of a cursus is currently known from our region, that in association with a probable enclosure at Hasting Hill (Sunderland), although a couple of other possible examples have been recorded elsewhere as cropmarks. Cursuses are long, linear earthworks defined by banks and ditches, so named after the Latin word for a 'race', as antiquarians thought them most likely to have been racetracks; their actual purpose remains a mystery, but excavations elsewhere have demonstrated them to be ritual monuments.

Several henges (the label 'henge' is now of debatable value, including as it does a bewildering array of banked and ditched circular sites) of late Neolithic or Chalcolithic date are known, most in the Milfield Basin. Of the Milfield examples, the Coupland 'henge' is much larger than the others and may be considerably older; establishing the date of its construction remains a priority.

The smaller 'hengings' at Milfield, of which nine are aligned roughly north-south in a linear band some 6km long on gravel terraces to the west of the Till, are all of similar size, averaging about 25 metres in diameter. They vary in form, but most seem to have contained timber circles. The available dates suggest initial construction perhaps a century or so prior to 2000 cal BC; they are therefore not Neolithic but the Chalcolithic or early Bronze Age. A similar date was recently obtained for a small henge at Dryburn near Alston. A timber circle known as the 'The Street House wossit' (Loftus, Cleveland) has similar dates. All these sites seem to have been communal ceremonial sites, but exactly how they were used by people is not known. Some pit alignments (lines of pits that may have contained timber uprights) may also date from this period.



*Reconstructed henge monument at Milfield, north Northumberland.*

The range of megalithic stone settings includes circles, four-posters, rows, and individual standing stones. Little recent excavation has been carried out on these sites, but an important recent excavation at Duddo suggests a date of about 2000 BC for the erection of the stones, probably a few centuries later than many would have forecast. The larger stone circles at Hethpool and Threestoneburn in the Cheviots may well be older; they may have been located in relation to key routes into the Cheviots, just as several of the great Cumbrian stone circles are thought to relate to routes into the heart of the Lake District. Few stone circles are recorded in County Durham. One stands on Barningham Moor at the head of Osmonds Gill, overlooking a number of rock art sites and on the same ridge line as several major burial cairns, including How Tallon to the east. A smaller stone circle stands on the watershed between Lunedale

and the Eden Valley. A circle recorded at Eggleston in the 18<sup>th</sup> century is now lost. Two well-preserved 'four-posters' are known in Northumberland: the Goatstones in Bellingham, and the Three Kings in Kielder Forest. The best surviving example of a stone row in our region is the Five King's standing stones, near Holystone Grange, the date and original purpose of which are unknown. Isolated standing stones are quite numerous; over 60 are recorded in Northumberland alone. This project aims to complete a new survey of all standing stones throughout the region.



*Two fine views of the Duddo Stones (north Northumberland).  
(Above: Andy Curtis. Below: Jorvey / Wikimedia Commons)*



*Standing stone monuments exist in a wide range of forms throughout the north-east. Shown here (clockwise from top) are the cup-marked standing stone at Matfen, the 'Battle Stone' at Yeavinger, the stone circle at Threestoneburn, and the Three Kings 'four-poster' in Redesdale (all Northumberland).*

## Chalcolithic and early Bronze Age burial monuments

A bewildering array of burial monuments is known from the Beaker period and early Bronze Age, beginning in about 2400BC and running through to perhaps 1600BC. Hundreds of such sites are known throughout the north-east, many of which were 'dug' in the 19<sup>th</sup> century resulting in numerous finds, but such 'diggings' were often poorly recorded. A few recent excavations have enabled scientific dating and analysis of finds and skeletal material. Although traditionally grouped together simply as 'cairns' or 'barrows', and often regarded as simple burial monuments for individual burials (albeit with a few secondary burials in some cases) we now recognise the huge complexity demonstrated by these monuments and the range of funerary practices employed (including a mix of inhumation and cremation).



*Many Bronze Age burial mounds were excavated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, using somewhat cruder techniques than we would use today. This photo shows the digging of a mound at Low Trewhitt in Coquetdale in 1908. It is thanks to such antiquarian excavations that our museums have so many pottery vessels and other artefacts from the early Bronze Age.*

The earliest such burials contain Beakers; two very early examples from about 2300BC, both recently excavated, are those at Kirkhaugh (Alston Moor) and Low Hauxley (Northumberland coast). The former contained a pair of gold hair tresses, some of the earliest metal objects known from Britain, and is thought to be the grave of an early metal prospector. The latter developed into a large and complex monument containing many more burials over subsequent centuries. Other recent excavations of cairns include those on Wether Hill and Turf Knowe at Ingram in the Cheviots, the finds from which are displayed in the village tearoom. Numerous finds, including often very attractive pots, from other excavated burial mounds can be seen in various museums throughout the north-east.

On account of their quantity and variety, it is not possible here to attempt any meaningful discussion of early Bronze Age burials (for discussion of a range of sites see the NERRF2 Resource Assessment noted above). But they will feature prominently in project work; despite much very important recent work by Chris Fowler at Newcastle University there is still much to do with regard to the investigation of these sites throughout our region.



*Excavation of a small mound at Kirkhaugh (near Alston) in 1935 recovered a fragmentary beaker, a 'cushion stone' for metalworking, and a gold hair tress ring – one of the earliest metal objects known from Britain. Further excavation in 2015 recovered a matching tress ring (very few such objects are known, but they are usually found in pairs), along with superb flint arrowheads and jet buttons. Sadly no skeletal remains survived for analysis, but by analogy with other sites elsewhere we assume the burial to have been of an early metal prospector, probably in about 2400BC.*



*The excavation of an early Bronze Age burial cairn at Turf Knowe, Ingram, resulted in the discovery of a central cist within which was a cremation accompanied by a food vessel and jet beads. Elsewhere within the mound were secondary cremations, including one of an infant within an inverted food vessel urn; others were accompanied by food vessels or were unaccompanied. The cremations have provided radiocarbon dates ranging from about 2200BC to about 1700BC.*

## Rock art

Our quite splendid rock art represents arguably the greatest puzzle in north-east archaeology. But it absolutely must not be studied in isolation. Progress in our understanding will only come through integrated studies that consider it within the context of the wider archaeological landscape. The Belief in the North-East project aims to work with local volunteers to attempt some such work.

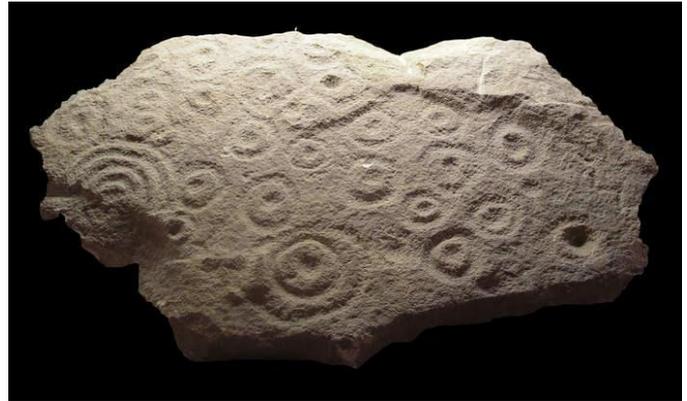
Rock art occurs in two main kinds of context: first, in the open air, on outcrops of living rock or, more rarely, large boulders; second, incorporated into monuments such as on standing stones or within burial monuments, the latter including cist slabs, kerbstones and small decorated stones incorporated within the structure of burial cairns. In many cases rock art exists within complex archaeological landscapes offering much potential for integrated studies aimed at establishing its place within the lives of Neolithic and Bronze Age people. Of the examples on rock outcrops, some are very complex and may have been produced over long periods of time, while others consist of nothing more than one or more simple cupmarks. There are two main concentrations of rock art in open air, non-monumental contexts. In the north of the region, the Fell Sandstone hills that extend in an arc from the eastern fringes of the Milfield Basin in the north to Coquetdale in the south are home to several of the most exquisite rock art panels anywhere in Britain. Well-known examples include Roughing Linn, Doddington Moor, Weetwood Moor, Chatton Park Hill, Old Bewick and Lordenshaws. The region's other main concentration of rock art sites is in the south, extending from Baldersdale and Teesdale southwards into North Yorkshire. The art here, to our eyes, may not appear as attractive as many of the northern panels, but there are complex and fascinating examples at places such as Barningham Moor (where some 140 individual decorated rocks have been recorded), Scargill Moor, Stob Green near Eggleston, East and West Loups's, and Goldsborough. While several examples of rock art have been recorded outwith these two major concentrations, there are also vast areas of our region without even a single example; the reasons for this remain obscure.

The chronology of our rock art is still very poorly understood. It appears probable that motifs on natural rock outcrops and naturally occurring boulders are mostly if not entirely Neolithic in date, though it is far from clear exactly when during the Neolithic they were first produced, or for how long they remained significant. There is no evidence for the continued production of such art after the Chalcolithic, and it is possible that its decline is linked in some way to increasing degrees of sedentism in the settlement pattern; whatever the original 'purpose' of the rock art, it appears to have become redundant by the middle Bronze Age when permanent farmsteads were being established in many places.

A general sequence that appears to hold true is that an early phase of rock art occurs on natural outcrops of exposed rock; these carvings are then later incorporated into the full spectrum of Neolithic ceremonial monuments, from long cairns and stone circles to standing stones and henges. By the early Bronze Age they are incorporated specifically within the burial monuments of the dead. While some early Bronze Age cists incorporate pre-existing rock art that had clearly been eroding in the landscape for a long time, possibly several centuries, prior to being quarried for use in these 'new' monuments, in some cases pristine new decorated slabs were produced

specifically for cists, the best such example perhaps being the splendid slab from Fulforth Farm, Witton Gilbert, 6km north-west of Durham City.

Volunteers in the *Belief in the North-East* project will be encouraged to think in all sorts of different ways about our rock art, and will be able to take part in fieldwork specifically designed to try and answer questions about its chronology and purpose.



*Above: Two fine examples of 'cup-and-ring' rock art in the landscape: Chatton Park Hill (left) and Lordenshaw (right), both Northumberland.*

*Below left: Decorated rock on Barningham Moor in the south of County Durham.*

*Below right: The cist cover from the excavated site at Fulforth Farm, Witton Gilbert, Co Durham. A sample of charcoal from the cist was radiocarbon dated to c.2100BC, which seems likely to be the date of the 'art' on the slab.*

## Summary

From this brief account it will be appreciated that the north-east contains a wide variety of fascinating sites reflecting aspects of people's belief systems or 'religion' throughout the Neolithic, Chalcolithic and early Bronze Age, between roughly 4000 and 1500BC. While these sites are all potentially very interesting in their own right, and all are unique to their own particular time and place, there are some landscapes which contain a range of sites in close proximity; it is these on which the *Belief in the North East* project intends to concentrate resources over its lifetime. By studying the ways in which different sites relate to each other, and to aspects of the wider landscape including 'natural' features such as rivers and hills, we will hopefully end up with a better understanding of all the individual elements as well as of the whole. Details of the belief systems of our prehistoric ancestors will always be elusive, but we can have a lot of fun thinking about them and thereby perhaps even improve our understanding of ourselves, and of our own spirituality.



*The Five Kings stone row, Coquetdale, drawn by John Turnbull Dixon (reproduced from David Dippie Dixon 1903).*



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