Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

ROUND BARROW PH 11



This model shows an excavation of a Bronze Age round barrow.

Archaeologists traditionally divide the prehistoric era into a number of rough periods. The Neolithic period is traditionally the last part of the Stone Age. In Great Britain the Neolithic extends from about 4500 BC to 2000 BC. During the Neolithic period stone tool making became very sophisticated, with axes, for example, often being beautifully smooth. Farming - the growing of crops and the keeping of domesticated animals - was introduced and led to increasingly settled communities. Large monuments consisting of huge standing stones were also built in this period, perhaps the grandest of which is at Avebury, Wiltshire.

Stonehenge, the most famous such monument, is thought to have been started in the Neolithic and completed in the Bronze Age. In Great Britain, the Bronze Age is considered to have been from around 2000 to 700 BC. The distinguishing feature of this period is that techniques for smelting copper and tin from naturally occurring outcroppings of ore and then making tools from the resulting alloy became common.

READING MUSEUM SERVICE

Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

ROUND BARROW PH 11



In the Neolithic Period in Britain the most striking funeral monuments are long barrows - long mounds of earth, usually about 33 to 1000 metres long, inside which there were chambers where the bones of the dead were placed. The West Kennet Long Barrow (see pictures on right), for example, has stone burial chambers at one end in which archeologists found the skeletal remains of several people. The construction of the West Kennet Long Barrow has been dated to between 3650 and 3625 BC and it is now thought that it was only in use for a short period.



By the time we get to the Bronze Age the construction and use of long barrows had ceased and round barrows were the prevailing fashion. Whether this shift was due to new groups of people coming into Britain or because ideas changed within the existing culture is uncertain. There are between 10,000 and 20,000 barrows in Britain and there were probably once as many more, but destruction by farming and building has obliterated them.

Round barrow cemeteries are found throughout Wales and Scotland although the main concentration of recorded examples is in the southern counties of England, with a very marked focus in Wessex. They are often found in groups, usually on elevated ground, although not necessarily always on the top of hills; examples in river valleys often lie on gravel ridges.

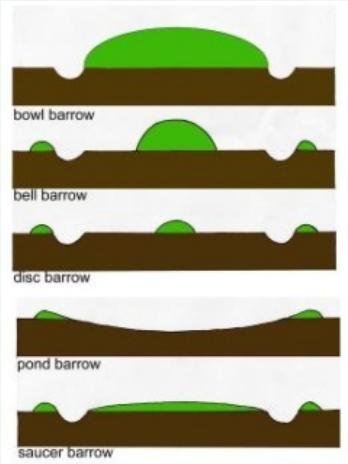


Left: Round barrows on the chalk ridge of Bronkam Hill in Dorset, UK.

Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

ROUND BARROW PH 11

Round barrows come in many different forms. The diagram on the right illustrates some of the commoner shapes.



Round barrows can be categorised according to their shape. Bell, bowl and disc barrows have a mound and ditch and sometimes an external bank. Pond barrows feature an artificial shallow depression surrounded by a bank. Saucer barrows have a flattened top and a surrounding ditch. Although erosion has lowered the height and softened the shape of many barrows, it is often still possible to see the particular features showing which type they are.

The model shows a bowl barrow, the most common form found in Wessex. Some studies suggest that disc barrows frequently contain female remains while bell barrows have mostly male occupants. Pond barrows are perhaps the most enigmatic. In the barrow's centre there is generally a pit or shaft, sometimes containing a burial, sometimes of great depth. However, the fact that only small amounts of human remains are found in such barrows has led some archeologists to suggest that they may have been used to expose dead bodies and that the bones were removed for burial elsewhere, after the flesh had decayed. In the end, all such ideas are based on insufficient and ambiguous evidence, and the reason for such a variety of forms eludes us.



Above: A 15 metre diameter bowl barrow in the New Forest.

Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

ROUND BARROW PH 11

Burial practice within individual barrows also varies greatly.

Looking at the period as a whole, in the early Bronze Age the dead were buried in a crouched position in a grave cut into the chalk. Later, cremation became universal, the ashes being deposited in a small pit or in a pottery urn before the barrow was heaped up over them. However, within this overall picture each barrow usually has individual peculiarities.

For example, excavation of a barrow at Guiting Power, Gloucester, dating from about 1600 BC revealed a cremation of a mature adult female, probably aged between 30 and 45, along with a full-term foetus or newborn infant. Afterwards the ash was carefully cleared and the cremated bones were placed in a shallow pit at the centre of the site. The mound was then built and at some point the remains of a cremated infant were placed in a shallow depression on the flank of the mound. The cremated remains of another adult were also found in the space between the barrow and the ditch.

The model shows evidence of a large funeral pyre at the centre which has deeply scorched the soil surface. The pottery containers in the area around the central pyre may represent the burial of the ashes of other individuals or they may be associated with ritual practices carried on at the site, perhaps the giving of offerings.



Left: Beakers similar to those shown in the model. These kinds of pottery vessels start to appear in Britain in the early Bronze Age and are associated with the change from long barrows to round barrows.