

# How Did Rituals Change with the Changing Ritual Places During the Second Millennium BC in Southwest England?

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**Abstract:** This study explores the transformation of ritual spaces in southwest England during the second millennium BC, focusing on the transition from monumental structures to residential settlements. Initially, ritual activities predominantly occurred within barrows and ring-cairns. By the Middle Bronze Age, however, these activities shifted towards houses and settlements, reflecting broader changes in architectural practices and social dynamics. This research examines the implications of these shifts through archaeological findings and literature review, highlighting how rituals became integrated into daily domestic spaces and the continuity of ritual practices through the reconfiguration of abandoned settlements into monument-like structures. The findings suggest that the evolution of ritual spaces was closely tied to the socio-spiritual landscape of the community, revealing significant insights into the cultural and social dynamics of prehistoric Europe.

**Keywords:** Bronze Age England; Social Dynamics; Rituals; Monumental Structures; Funerary Practices; Archaeology.

## 1. Introduction

In the second millennium BC in southwest England, the locations of ritual activities underwent significant changes. In the early Bronze Age, rituals primarily took place in monumental structures such as barrows and ring cairns. However, by the Middle Bronze Age, these ritual activities gradually moved from monuments to houses and settlements. This change not only reflects alterations in architectural practices but also signifies a shift in social patterns.

By analyzing the changes in the locations of ritual activities from the early to the Middle Bronze Age, we can better understand the social dynamics of this period. The research will focus on southwest England and will also consider archaeological findings from Ireland. The research methodology includes a comprehensive analysis of archaeological discoveries and academic literature. I will explore the changes in ritual locations, the rituals of daily life during the Middle Bronze Age, and funerary rites to discuss the shifts in rituals that occurred in early monumental structures and Middle Bronze Age settlements.

## 2. Changes in Architecture

During the second millennium BC in southwest England,

there was a significant shift in the locations of ritual activities. Due to the evolution of architectural practices and social structures, rituals that were originally centered on monumental constructions such as mounds and ring-cairns gradually moved towards everyday living spaces such as houses and settlements. This transition reflects the increasing complexity of society and changes in residential patterns. This section will discuss the evolution of ritual sites from the early to the Middle Bronze Age in southwest England by examining the relevant literature on archaeological remains.

In the early Bronze Age, the primary sites for ritual activities were in the form of monuments. Stannon on Bodmin Moor in Cornwall is a significant archaeological site where excavations have revealed a wealth of information about early Bronze Age monuments, particularly ring-cairns. Initially, field surveys and archaeological excavations focused primarily on what were thought to be "roundhouses" from the Middle Bronze Age due to their proximity to known roundhouse settlements. However, they were actually ring-cairns from the early to Middle Bronze Age [1]. The structure and arrangement of the cairns resemble contemporary ceremonial monuments, indicating an association with social or religious activities [1].



Figure 1. Stannon ring-cairn [1].

The ring-cairns at Stannon were not just burial or ceremonial monuments but may have also played a significant role in the social structure of the time. Their arrangement and layout could indicate the early Bronze Age community's organizational approach to space and ritual activities.

Another form of monument is the barrow. Barrows are often used for placing special items during the construction, renovation, and abandonment of houses. The stones used in early Bronze Age barrows and cairns were often carefully selected. In Jones [2], it is mentioned that at the Scarcewater site in Cornwall, about 320 meters southwest of the

excavation area, at least three ploughed-down small mounds were found, possibly small barrows contemporaneous with the roundhouse settlement. These barrows were identified through geophysical surveys, and sample excavations confirmed that at least one of them had formal ritual activities. Many early Bronze Age cairns and barrows have been preserved on the high ground outside the excavation area, including sites at Watch Hill, Cocksbarrow, and Caerloggas. The large cairn at St Stephen's Beacon and the Watch Hill barrow are generally found in small clusters. A shard of pottery was placed in the ditch of the Watch Hill barrow.



**Figure 2.** The Watch Hill Barrow with mound in situ [2].

By the Middle Bronze Age, most architectural focus shifted from monuments to houses or settlements. After 1500 BC, large burial monuments were no longer constructed; instead, there was a marked increase in evidence of settlement activity, covering both lowland and highland areas. During the Middle Bronze Age, some monuments continued to be used, and ritual practices from the Early Bronze Age were incorporated into settlement activities. The relationship between monuments and settlements illustrates the continuity of ritual practices from the Early to the Middle Bronze Age. The transition from the Early to the Middle Bronze Age is often viewed as a shift towards a grain-producing society [1].

During the Middle Bronze Age, roundhouses appeared. Excavations in the northwestern area of Bodmin Moor indicate that settlements emerged later than the groups of monuments [1]. Let's turn our attention back to Stannon. The Stannon settlement and other nearby settlements feature clusters of roundhouses and enclosed fields, and they are located right next to the previously mentioned ring-cairns. These roundhouses were built to the north of the monument complex but not on top of it. The boundaries of individual settlements were constructed with stone walls, maintaining a connection with the past. The field boundaries were similarly constructed, incorporating previous monuments without damaging them. After 1500 BC, one of the ring-cairns was used for depositing pottery and constructing a timber post alignment [1]. Its structure and layout likely represent the continuation of social memory and tradition at the time. Clearly, the residents of the roundhouse settlements had an awareness of preserving history and the past. According to Jones [1], this might have been an effort to reference the past to legitimize the new social reality. The same situation applies to the Leskernick settlement. This settlement has

approximately 50 houses, and it and the fields were likely positioned within an Early Bronze Age ceremonial monument complex.

In the Middle Bronze Age, the abandonment of roundhouses in settlements often resulted in the formation of monument-like structures similar to those of the early Bronze Age, such as ring-cairns. Similar to Stannon, the Leskernick settlement [1] also shows preservation respect for earlier sites. During the abandonment of the settlement, the roundhouses were filled with stones, transforming them back into structures resembling Early Bronze Age cairns. At the Scarcewater site in Cornwall [2], the Middle Bronze Age roundhouses followed a similar abandonment pattern. The people of that time completed the process of covering the roundhouses by dismantling the structures, dumping soil, digging ring-ditches, and filling them with stones, transforming them back into forms resembling ring-cairns. This ritualized process of abandonment can be seen as a form of connection between the residents and the roundhouses. Bradley [3] proposed a connection between stone circles and roundhouses, suggesting that the orientations of both types of sites would remain consistent or follow a certain pattern. Additionally, special rituals were sometimes used for abandoning houses. Finding metal artifacts in archaeologically defined 'domestic' contexts is extremely rare. A poorly preserved copper-alloy side-looped spearhead was found embedded in the upper earthen floor of a house, appearing to be used to 'kill the house'[4]. This clearly indicates a ritual behavior associated with the abandonment of the house.

### 3. Rituals in Daily Life

As previously mentioned, ritual activity sites gradually

shifted from monuments to settlements and residential spaces, and this change also influenced the practices of rituals in everyday life. By studying special deposits and ritualistic items found within settlements, we can gain a better understanding of the forms rituals took in people's lives during this period, and the social significance they might represent. This section will explore the rituals conducted within settlements during the Middle Bronze Age.

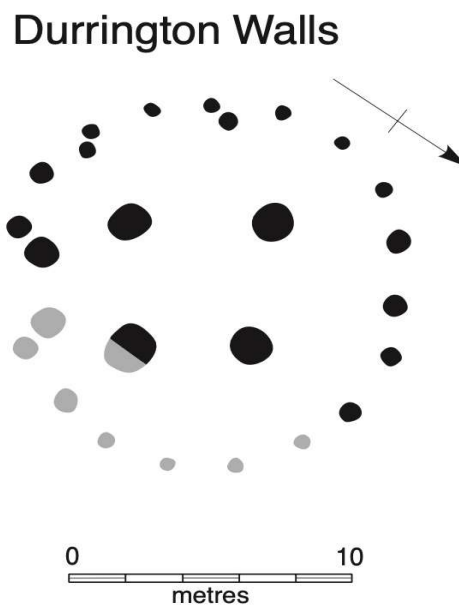
Brück [5] noted that many settlements from this period appear to have been single-generation living sites. By studying the changes in the use of settlement space, we can further understand the changes in the population, social, and economic conditions of the residents within these settlements. Through her research, she found that roundhouses can be categorized as primary and subsidiary based on structural and artifact evidence. The pottery inventory in primary roundhouses includes a higher proportion of fine wares, indicating they were used as dining locations. Additionally, these roundhouses contained flint flakes, stone hammers, and querns, suggesting tool production and maintenance took place there. High-status items such as bronze, shale, and carved chalk objects, as well as evidence of textile production, were also frequently found in primary roundhouses. In contrast, artifacts discovered in subsidiary structures were mainly coarse wares, querns, scrapers, and animal bones, which indicate that food preparation took place there. The pits found in these areas might have been used for food storage. There are also some roundhouses that cannot be clearly categorized as either primary or secondary structures. The roundhouse at Rowden in Dorset [6] not only contained four pits, but also yielded fragments of weaving weights, small bronze objects, burnt flint, plant remains, and animal bones. This indicates that it had characteristics of both primary and secondary structures. Brück [5] also suggested that the rituals or activities conducted within primary structures might vary depending on the specific circumstances of a family or group. Long-standing families would have sufficient resources to build an additional roundhouse for food preparation, while poorer or more transient families might prepare food within the main roundhouse.

Items that appear "strange," such as animal bones, weapons, and jewelry, are often found in pits, ditches, postholes, and house floors. Many "strange" deposits are located in the corners of ditches, at the ends of ditches, or in the corners of postholes, or in the postholes at the entrance of roundhouses [5]. These deposits also display deliberate arrangements, such as ten weaving weights lined up along the bottom of a pit, or four broad-axe heads placed in a fan shape. Brück argues that these deposits cannot simply be explained as mystical ritual activities, but rather serve more practical purposes. During the Middle Bronze Age, people also wanted to distinguish between family and society or the external environment. For example, boundary ditches of Middle Bronze Age settlements were often used for waste disposal, as trash was considered an external item and thus would be dumped along the boundaries of the "safe zone" of the settlement.

In agricultural communities, quern stones are often found in late prehistoric settlements. The role and significance of quern stones have different interpretations in various studies. Some complete quern stones, often found in important spatial locations, are thought to be tools reprocessed from other broken objects. Others were deliberately broken and burnt, included in ritualized communal activities, and then discarded. There is also a view that they were "broken" by separating the

upper and lower stones, making them unusable. The reuse of quern stones is also seen as functional [7], such as broken quern stones being used as packing material in the structural components of roundhouses. Cleary's study found that the context in which these items were deposited is consistent, indicating that they are not just purely functional but also have specific meanings.

In southern England, a significant number of artifacts were unearthed at Durrington Walls, particularly decorated pottery and finely crafted items, as well as animal bones. There is an abundance of food remains, indicating that feasts were held within this mound. Earlier archaeological research suggested that Durrington Walls might have been a ritual center [8]. Four years later, other archaeologists proposed that this enclosure was actually a settlement. In southern England, at the site of Saint's Gussage, there is an Iron Age enclosure, which is two thousand years later than Durrington Walls, but it shares similarities, along with some additional pits. During the excavation here, archaeologists identified numerous artifacts and food remains. The additional pits contained charred grains, confirming their use as granaries for storing corn during the winter. Since such deposits are not uncommon in storage pits in southern England, archaeologists believe they conform to some fairly specific conventions [9]. A new investigation of Durrington Walls emphasized the "structured deposition." Certain items were placed at the base of individual posts in the main circle of posts. In the same wooden structure, pottery shards were stored separately from flint artifacts, and across the site, more elaborately decorated pottery fragments were associated differently from those with simpler designs. In other words, the materials placed in the henge were intentionally controlled, possessing a degree of formality [8]. The patterns in which deposits were handled and arranged at these sites indicate that ritual activities were closely integrated with the daily lives of people in the Middle Bronze Age.



**Figure 3.** The organization of space inside the Northern Circle at Durrington Walls [8].

## 4. Changes in Funerary Rites and the Treatment of Human Remains

From the early to Middle Bronze Age, funerary rites and the treatment of human remains changed as ritual sites shifted from monuments to settlements. Human remains, initially concentrated in mounds and monuments, gradually moved into houses and settlements.

In the Early Bronze Age, in Wessex, southern England, burials typically occurred in low mounds or in earlier long barrows. During the period from 2000 to 1700 BC, the grave goods in Wessex burials were the richest, and the rate of cremation significantly increased. Large barrow cemeteries appeared in Britain, and the size and extent of the mounds also increased accordingly [1]. However, many cairns and barrows in the southwest of England did not contain burials. Other burial sites and deserted barrows contained only token amounts or multiple burials. Inhumation was relatively uncommon throughout the Early Bronze Age, with cremation being the dominant practice. The "rich" burials found in the southwest rarely contained metal artifacts [1], indicating that metal objects were only incorporated into burial sites under certain specific conditions. Jones [2] also mentions that barrows such as the large cairn at St Stephen's Beacon and the Watch Hill barrow typically appear in small clusters of two to three loosely grouped sites and were used during the Early Bronze Age. The deposits and location of pits in the early phases of the Scarcewater roundhouses have clear similarities with practices found in Early Bronze Age monuments. Fragmented objects were often placed in ditches and pits, and this practice of placing pottery sherds and other items may have originated from Early Bronze Age barrows [2]. Cleary [7] pointed out that Early Bronze Age funerary architecture took the form of pits or stone-lined cists, sometimes commemorated by the addition of stone cairns, earthen mounds, encircling ditches, or standing stones. The burial practices included both individual and group burials. He also noted that cremation dominated the burial record during this time. Additionally, a series of funerary pottery styles

developed during the Early Bronze Age, which ceased to be used around 1500 BC.

By the Middle Bronze Age, the locations for conducting funerary rites and handling human remains had also shifted to within the settlements. Some residents would choose to handle remains at their former dwelling places. In Nowakowski's [4] study, the handling of human remains at former settlements suggests a connection between death and the residential area, possibly marking a significant end event for the community or a specific location within the community. The adult male remains found under the central hearth in a house on the eastern side of the Trethellan Farm settlement were buried while the house was still in use, indicating that these remains are contemporaneous with the settlement. At that time, human remains were deliberately fragmented during processing. The phenomenon of finding both burnt and unburnt human remains in prehistoric settlements is well-documented throughout Europe. In the Middle and Late Bronze Age settlements in Ireland, unburnt human remains are mainly found as fragments of skulls and long bones, which are highly representative, while the significance of other bones may have received less attention. This is similar to data from Late Bronze Age settlements in Britain [7]. Additionally, in many temporary settlements or peripheral sites of houses, fragmented skulls are found with the facial parts removed. In the Early Bronze Age, burials contained larger quantities of cremated bones that were not deliberately crushed, but in the Late Bronze Age, burials only had small amounts of metatarsal and phalangeal fragments. Through cremation, human remains were deliberately reduced or selected, possibly as a form of symbolic burial [7]. These cremated bones were sometimes deposited in ditches and also appeared at the entrances of roundhouse structures. In other words, fragmented human remains were deposited in locations associated with Middle Bronze Age settlements, such as roundhouses and ditches, which is different from the ritual sites like ring-cairns and monuments used in the Early Bronze Age.

**Table 1.** Comparison of Ritual Practices and Locations from Early to Late Bronze Age in South-West England.

| Period                     | Ritual Location                          | rites                                 | Treatment of Remains   | Typical Sites/Examples  |
|----------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|--|---|
| Early Bronze Age           | Ring-cairns and monuments.               | Primarily cremation, few inhumations. | Larger quantities of cremated bones.   | Low mounds and long barrows in Wessex, St Stephen's Beacon, and Watch Hill barrows. |
| Middle and Late Bronze Age | Within settlements (houses and ditches). | Fragmentation of human remains.       | remains were deliberately reduced or selected, possibly for symbolic burial. | Trethellan Farm settlement, Middle to Late Bronze Age settlements in Ireland.       |

## 5. Conclusion

By exploring the shift of ritual activity places from monuments to settlements in southwest England from the early to Middle Bronze Age, and examining the preservation and continued use of previous ritual sites, it can be concluded that these sites were closely linked to the social and spiritual life of the time. The movement of rituals from monumental structures to settlements associated with daily life reflects changes in architectural practices and indicates broader social transformations. Integrating ritual activities into everyday living spaces represents a more domestic and routine spiritual expression. The analysis of archaeological findings from Stannon, Scarcewater, and Leskernick makes these changes in physical space more evident. Moreover, converting

abandoned roundhouses or settlements back into structures resembling original ring cairns demonstrates the continuity of social memory and tradition.

In the daily life of the Middle Bronze Age, as shown in the studies by Brück [5] and Cleary [7], special deposits and ritual items found within settlements illustrate how everyday activities like food preparation were ritualized and formalized.

Funerary practices and the treatment of human remains also changed with the shift in ritual locations. From complete remains to fragmented ones, and from full burials to symbolic burials, these changes reflect the community or family's evolving perceptions of death.

In conclusion, the transformation of ritual spaces from monuments to settlements in southwest England during the second millennium BC reveals changes in social structure,

cultural practices, and spiritual life. The study of these transformations also deepens our understanding of the prehistoric cultural and social dynamics in Europe.

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