

# Barrows with timber-built structures

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The many impressive megalithic graves attracted a lot of early attention, and were made synonymous with the earlier part of the Late Stone Age in expressions such as "Dolmen Period" and "Passage Grave Period". In the first half of the present century, however, it was realized that early in the period there were also non-megalithic graves. These often appeared as simple hollows with or without simple stone-set bottoms. For this reason they were called (simple) earth graves (Friis Johansen 1917; K. Thorvildsen 1941). The finding of the grave at Konens Høj made it clear that whatever these graves lacked in the way of impressive stone structures they may have made up for in timber (Stürup 1966).

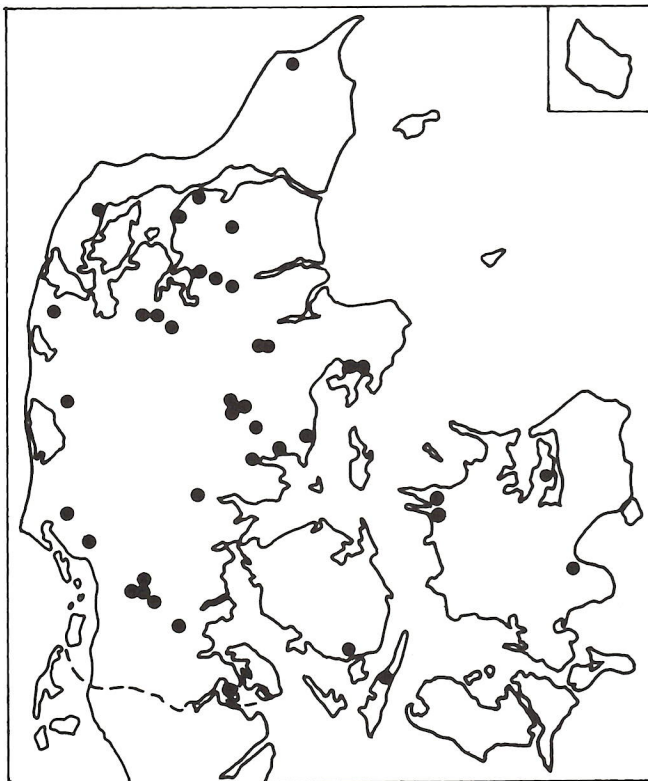
The frequently limited scope of early excavations meant that the earth graves could rarely be seen in a larger context. It occasionally appeared probable that there had been a mound over the graves, but as a rule they were regarded as graves under level ground. Increased excavation in the 1970's and not least the use of ground stripping machines changed this picture. It became clear that the earth graves were extensively associated with long barrows, and that the long barrows themselves could be complicated structures with timber features. Structures such as Barkær too (Glob 1949, 1975), originally

interpreted as buildings, could be re-interpreted as long barrows (T. Madsen 1979; Liversage 1992). This picture consolidated in the 1980's (Kjær Kristensen 1991). We can now be fairly certain that most if not all earth graves had timber structures in the form of coffins if nothing else, and we can therefore refer to them as timber-built graves.

The distribution of the timber-built graves of the Early-neolithic Funnel Beaker Culture in Denmark is distinctly westerly. A difference between East and West in Denmark is also apparent from the easterly distribution of early dolmen-types (Aner 1963) and the lack, so far, of association of the timber-built graves with the easterly Oxie Group. We have only one grave of this group, Dragsholm, with markedly mesolithic characteristics (Brinch Petersen 1974). The explanation may however be that research activity has been significantly higher in the West than in the East. A timber-built grave structure has, for instance, been excavated at Lindebjerg, western Sjælland (Liversage 1981) and new finds of timber structures on Sjælland may be a first indication of a coming change in the picture (Kaul 1988b). The discovery of a timber-built grave in the heart of a long dolmen is particularly interesting as it shows that long dolmens may include earlier phases with timber structures (Gebauer 1990).

Various types of timber-built graves of the Early-neolithic Funnel Beaker Culture are found. The Konens Høj type has deep foundation pits at either end of the base to hold the ends of a raised timber chamber (T. Madsen 1979:309). These ends were regarded as part of a tent-shaped superstructure with a ridge supported by the ends. The finding of a well-preserved chamber of this type at Haddenham, near Cambridge in England, however, shows that we are dealing with a large, coffin-like chamber with sides and a ceiling of horizontal planking that reached from end to end (Morgan 1990). So far, 16 graves of this type have been recorded in Denmark (Kjær Kristensen 1991:83).

The Troelstrup type had a rectangular chamber that was open at one end (T. Madsen 1979:309). The three closed sides were made of timber in foundation trenches supported by massive stone-packing or just by positioned stones. The ceiling was of wood.



*The distribution of known Late-neolithic timber-built graves in Denmark is distinctly westerly.*



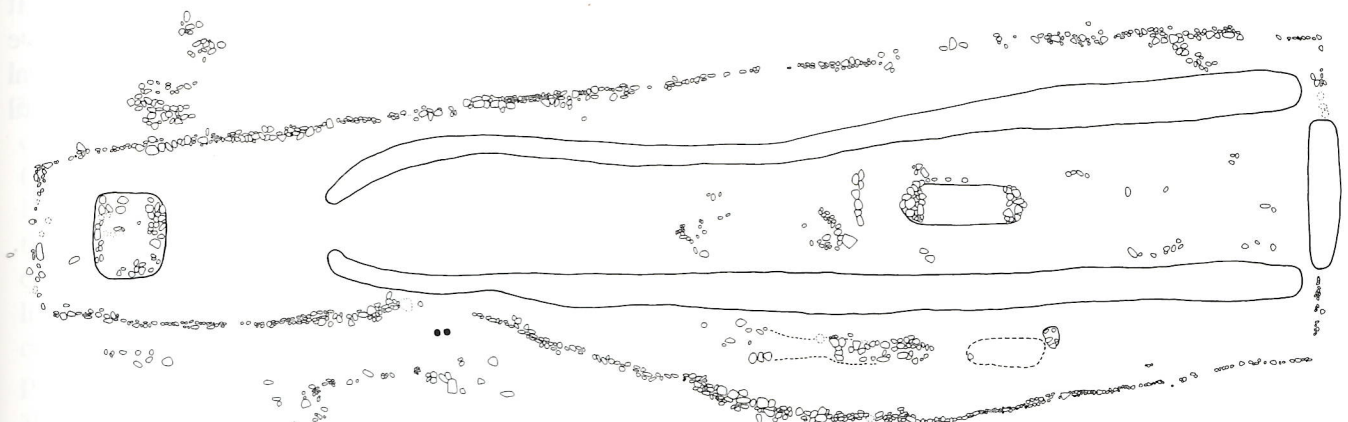
Three stages in the uncovering of the Skibhøj grave. To the left, a flagstone floor with a stone frame and two postholes at the open end to support the roof. In the middle, five very burnt skeletons of persons aged from new-born to 20-30 years. To the right, the split, charred planks from a burnt roof.

which one lucky find shows to have been split planks (E. Jørgensen 1977b). At present, 15 graves of this type are known (Kjær Kristensen 1991:84).

Examples of plank coffins are also known (e.g. Rønne 1979:6; Kjær Kristensen 1991:76f.), and we also find a number of graves with a covered stone frame surrounding the grave-bed. It is likely that the stone frame supported a timber cist of some form but no traces of wood are ever found. At least 22 graves of this type are known (Kjær Kristensen 1991:84).

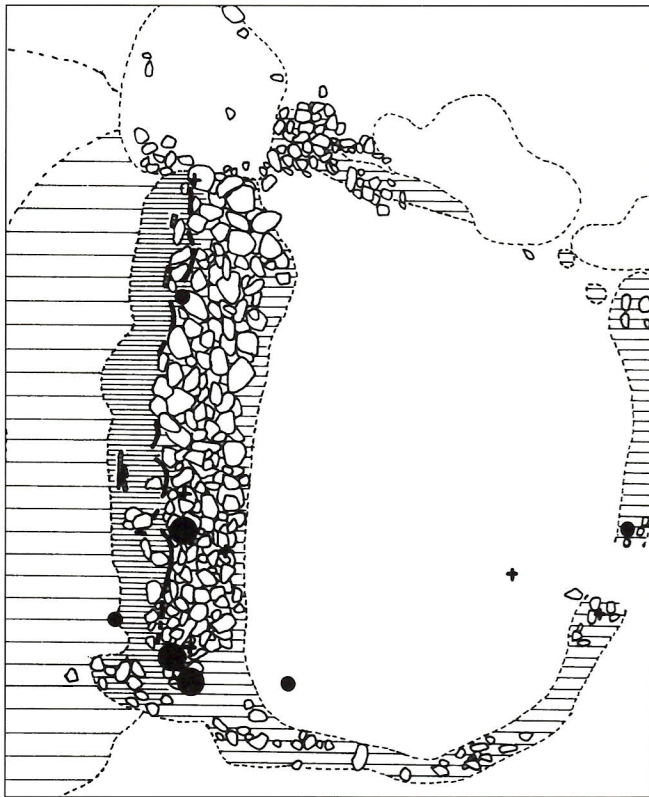
A high proportion of the timber-built graves, but not all of them, were located in (long) barrows. How many may have lain under the level ground is unclear because the absence of a mound does not

necessarily mean that there was not one originally. The situation is also complicated by the fact that what we call "long barrows", on the basis, for instance, of palisaded enclosures, in many cases never had a mound (Faber 1976; Rieck 1982). In all, 36 "long barrows" with timber-built graves are currently known, of which 32 lie west of the Store Bælt (Kjær Kristensen 1991:86). The structures are frequently trapezoid and predominantly oriented east-west. In seven cases palisade enclosures of the mounds have been observed, but as a more general rule there seems to have been no upstanding delimitation of the barrows. Where real lines of boundary stones are found it is demonstrably probable that they are later additions linked to megalithic graves.



The Storgård IV long barrow with two phases. An earlier, trapezoid barrow with an end facade, flanking ditches and a single, central grave, and a later long barrow surrounded by a palisade and with a grave at the western end.





*Plan of the facade from the Rude long barrow and the areas defined by wicker fences associated with it. The split logs, marked by their charred outlines, stood in the densely hatched, stone-free area. Three pots were found on the stone pavement, marked with filled circles on the plan.*

In some cases flanking ditches have been found, but this appears not to be a common feature.

At no less than 17 of the mounds substantial facades have been uncovered at the broader, eastern end, and most of the mounds presumably had such features. The facades appear mostly as a deep foundation trench across the barrow, with traces of logs up to 1 m. thick placed side by side and stabilized on the outside by stone packing. In several cases the logs were split in half and placed with the flat side in towards the barrow (T. Madsen 1980:89; Kjær Kristensen 1991:75). In other cases whole logs were set up, sometimes singly in separate pits. At Rude long barrow there was an area in front of the facade enclosed by a wicker fence (T. Madsen 1980:89), and at Bygholm Nørremark long barrow too post-settings associated with the facade were found (Rønne 1979).

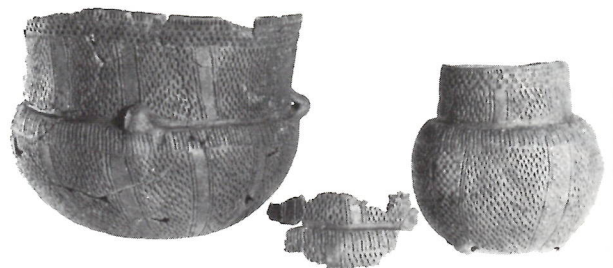
As a general rule, the timber-built graves were placed in the centre of the mounds with a common long axis. A single type, Troelstrup, conversely, is placed across the barrows with the open side out to

the edge of the mound. A barrow often covers more than one grave, and the long barrows can appear a complex, composite structures. Extensions can be made in two ways: either by building over, with new barrows and graves placed on top of earlier ones, or by sequential extension, with new graves added to the end of existing structures. In the latter case wicker fences are often found separating the different sections.

Because of the often chalk-poor soil by the long barrows, skeletons are rarely preserved in the graves. We have, however, a few lucky finds. In the Skibhøj grave, for instance, five persons were found (one adult and four children) buried side by side (E Jørgensen 1977b) and in a plank coffin in Bygholm Nørremark long barrow four adults were found, buried in pairs foot to foot (Rønne 1979). It is striking that the two cases in which we have preserved skeletons also show multiple burials, though this is too weak a basis for generalizations. It does however emphasize that we cannot permit ourselves to assume that the timber-built graves were usually meant for the burials of one particular individual.

The graves are generally poorly furnished and, as a rule, lack pottery. We do however find pottery deposited by the facades. Anything between one and a dozen pots may have been placed here. (To judge by its description, the Vølling "grave" (K. Thorvildsen 1940) was no grave but the facade of a barrow. It appears, therefore, that the facades played an important role in connexion with the burials.

One of the more noteworthy features of the long barrows is the systematic destruction of both timber chambers and facades that can be observed in several cases. This destruction often took the form of the burning both of the grave chamber and the facade. It is clear that the funeral ceremonies, which may have been lengthy and perhaps have included several temporally separate stages, were not completed until



*Three pots from the facade of a long barrow at Bjørnsnholm.*



Bygholm Nørremark  
Plank cist supported by  
stones with four adults  
placed in pairs foot-to-  
foot.



the burial area was "closed" in some way. This "closure" found expression in a regular destruction of both chamber and facade before the final covering.

The timber-built graves in long barrows pertain, in the earliest cases, exclusively to the Volling and Svaleklint Groups, which represent closely related pottery traditions that are distinct from the pottery tradition we find in the third early group, the Oxie Group. There can be no doubt that the Volling Group at least and thus the timber-built graves start at the beginning of the Neolithic in western Denmark. The now plentiful C 14 datings support this, together with the location of Volling pottery in shell middens on top of Ertebølle layers and the fact that the Oxie Group in Jutland is restricted to certain coastal tracts (T. Madsen & Petersen 1984).

In a broader perspective, the pottery of the Volling and Svaleklint Groups shows close relationship with the pottery of the Svenstorp Group in Skåne and the central Swedish Vrå Culture. Looking southwards, we can point to the north-western German lowlands as a possible source for aspects of this ceramic tradition. Local groups in Lower Saxony (Schwabedissen 1979) and now in Holland too (J.A. Bakker, pers.comm.) that emerged on the margins of the late Rössen Groups show general similarity and certain genuinely shared characteristics with the Volling Group. There is, for instance, a special type of corded loop in two-ply cord for the decoration of pottery (Schwabedissen 1979:216) which is also occasionally found in the Volling Group.

The south-western contact area of the Volling and Svaleklint Groups is certainly not without interest

when we turn to the graves. It has been suggested (T. Madsen 1979:318f.) and later confirmed in various ways (Midgley 1985:199ff.; Kaul 1988b:73f.; Kjær Kristensen 1991:85), that the nearest parallels to the Danish long barrows are at present found in England. This applies first and foremost to the facades at the eastern ends of the mounds, the use of graves that are structurally identical to the Konens Høj type, and the burning of both graves and facades. It also applies to the use of trapezoid barrows, flanking ditches alongside the barrows, and the partitioning of the barrows with wicker fences.

The close English parallels do not have to mean that there was intense direct contact between Jutland and England - as a comparison of the material culture would also deny. The similarity, however, draws attention towards the south-west. The low-lying lands along the North Sea are especially interesting. Now, for the first time, cultures are being found here that are parallel to the early Funnel Beaker Culture in Denmark, and it is probable that we shall find much of the basis here for the earliest Neolithic in Denmark, which the parallels in southern England presumably also reflect.

Since the Second World War, Danish archaeologists have focussed their attention very much to the south-east when external impulses towards the Early Neolithic were to be sketched. The studies of recent years of, for instance, the timber-built graves in long barrows have opened our eyes to the fact that there is also a very relevant context to be found to the south-west. Researches of coming years will probably produce much that is new from this angle.