

West of Wessex but only just: barrow construction on the Mendip Hills, Somerset

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Mendip is geographically separate from the chalky heartland of 'Wessex', cut off by the clay vale of the Frome Gap. It is a distinctive karst landscape with a range of natural features (caves; gorges) that make it very different to the chalklands to the east. There is evidence of cultural contact and shared practice between these two regions, however, from at least the Early Neolithic which may have come to an end only in the Iron Age.

Piggott (1938) considered Mendip to be part of the 'Wessex' phenomenon due to the presence of round barrows containing rich grave goods, with Fox (1959) going as far as claiming that the Wessex Culture 'entered' south-east Wales via Mendip. Whatever the direction of cultural influence, Mendip has largely become marginalised in recent discussions of Early Bronze Age Wessex, despite having one of the densest concentrations of round barrows in Britain, one of which is the type-site for the Camerton-Snowhill group of daggers. However, evidence for Beaker and Early Bronze Age inhumation burial practices is relatively rare, with most of the round barrows containing cremated remains and artefacts such as Collared Urns, which fit more comfortably within the later phases of the Early Bronze Age. This paper will set the abundant evidence for funerary ritual and barrow construction in the Early Bronze Age on Mendip against the rather poor evidence for that in the preceding 'Beaker' period, present the results of new excavations and analysis and search for wider connections, not only between the heartland of Wessex and Mendip, but from other neglected areas such as south-east Wales. The 'Wessex Culture' has come to be synonymous with both a situated geographical region and a broader cultural phenomenon. Mendip, west of Wessex but only just, is an ideal region to question the margins of both.