

## Forms and functions of megalithic graves in Schleswig-Holstein

In the vernacular megalithic tombs are often called "mounds". This has its explanation in the outdated conception of past times that such enormous plants with erratic blocks partly weighing tons could have been established just only by "giants", thus "giants". They were thought to be places where the "giants" buried their dead or sacrificial sites.

The large stone graves are a phenomenon which can be proved along the Atlantic coast up to the Mediterranean area and cannot be found in the Central and Eastern European inland. Nor do they appear to have been erected further inland than 400 km from the coast. The much older Western European megalithic period, which is altogether richer and more diverse, seems to have been generally considered the region of origin for the spread of the megalithic idea to Central Europe. In Northern Germany most of the megalithic tombs originate from the middle periods of the Neolithic from about 3,500 B.C. to 2,900 B.C. Within Schleswig-Holstein the Baltic coast area stands out as the primary area of origin for the spread of the complexes. Only here are found the older, so-called Urdolmen, which were intended for the burial of only one person.



Their scientific name "megalithic tomb" comes from the Greek (megas: large; lithos: stone) and is explained by their construction form: They consist of vertically standing standing or supporting stones and horizontally placed flat cap stones, which together form a chamber. The sides of the stones, which have been polished smooth by the glacial ice, always face the interior of the chamber. There is only one evidence for intentional processing of the boulders of a megalithic grave by its builders, where an - unsuccessful - splitting attempt was made on a stone block. The burial chambers are mostly provided with an entrance, which - as in the case of a tomb - were suitable for repeated burials. They were built on the ground and mounded over or (more rarely) sunk into the ground.

The megalithic tombs had different forms and probably also different functions as burial places, cult facilities and territorial marking of a settlement area. They are mostly located on the slope zones of the ground or end moraines, only rarely directly on a hill. In the findings that can be proven with certainty so far, the settlements of the people of that time and the megalithic tombs are located about 400 m apart, as in the case of Flögeln, and about one kilometer apart in the case of Büdelsdorf, and thus presumably at the edge of the half-open agricultural area in the vicinity of the settlement, which was mainly used for cattle grazing. Already at the time of their original use they can show a

complicated internal history of construction, reconstruction and extension. In Schleswig-Holstein, several hundred structures are known, about 120 are under monument protection.

In the archaeological terminology one distinguishes in principle between "dolmens" (from the Breton for "stone table"), which have their entrance at the narrow side and which represent the predominant number of all plants in the Holstein area, as well as "passage graves", which are usually larger and characterized by a differently long passage at the long side. The passage graves were not built - like the dolmens - in the early phase of the Middle Neolithic and show as the mound shape covering the chamber mostly round or also long mounds. Only in the polygonal passage graves, which always have a round mound, there is a provable form connection to the mounding. In most cases the entrances point to the east or south and in the intervening directions. We are relatively well informed about the internal structure of these complexes by the investigation of individual graves also in our region. Thus, the empty spaces between the stones were closed with dry masonry made of flat field stones. The floor consisted mostly of a stone pavement with a top layer of rammed earth screed and/or white fired crackled flint. After the completion of the stone chamber, a mound of loose material, usually sand, was piled on top, which reached at most to the upper edge of the capstones and is today mostly abraded. Enclosures of small boulders or of larger stone constructions, typical for the long beds, demarcated the burial mound from the surrounding area. The construction of the megalithic tombs required tools such as pulleys and levers, as well as the coordinated use of man and draft animals to move the stone blocks, which weighed several tons. For the construction of the large stone grave at Kleinenkneten near Wildeshausen in Lower Saxony, the amount of work required was calculated with the aid of computer models: the case of this rectangular long bed measuring about 50 m, about 110,000 working hours were required for the construction of the burial chamber consisting of eleven supporting stones and three, max. 42 tons heavy capstones as well as the burial mound. Thus, the complex could have been built by 100 people working ten hours a day in about three and a half months - although it must remain unclear how this work process was organized: Was the entire regional population involved in the construction, were only selected segments of the population involved, or were "professional tumulus builders" at work? In any case, the existence of a central authority for the coordination of the work alone, which may have been legitimized theocratically, is undoubted. Recent and supra-regional results show more and more clearly that these complexes were built according to concrete construction plans and that specialized master builders or even wandering construction teams of craftsmen must have carried out the work, since otherwise the existence of almost identical complexes in individual regions could hardly be explained.



Many large stone graves were used in the Middle Ages for church construction, but especially in the late 19th century, among other things because of the increasing shortage of timber due to the overexploitation of the forests at that time, as regular quarries for the foundation of houses, roads and bridges as well as for bank protection. Individual stones were also used to erect monuments or as field or driveway markers. In addition, megalithic graves often served as sand and earth extraction sites. A large part of the sites, some of which are more than 5,000 years old, were largely or even completely destroyed in this way in the course of the increasing industrialization and mechanization of rural areas.

Whether the megalithic sites are actually graves in the true sense of the word is currently the subject of intense debate. Findings of skeletal parts that were only partially in anatomical association suggest that we may have to speak more of "ossuaries" with secondary burials. The primary burials may have been made for a specific, relatively short period of time in the adjacent earthworks before the remains were exhumed again for permanent deposition in the megalithic tombs. This observation may also represent a development in the course of the Funnel Beaker period use of the megalithic tombs, which in the beginning clearly served as urn dolmens for the burial of individual persons. The chambers could be opened and used for reburials or new burials at any time and may have remains of more than 100 individuals under good preservation conditions. Fires were frequently lit in the burial chamber and in front of the entrances to the tombs, probably in connection with the burial ceremonies, which included the breaking of vessels and the eating of ritual meals. A special social function of the complexes is also evident in the selection of the burial offerings laid down, among which, for example, a high proportion of richly decorated, carefully manufactured pottery is found compared to settlement finds. The megalithic constructions are thus to be classified in a larger context as part of a very complex burial custom - which apparently encompassed the entire settlement group regardless of age, sex and social position. The evidence of various non-megalithic, regularly used forms of burial throughout the Funnel Beaker period - such as cremations, burials in wooden chambers and coffins, and stone packing graves or "normal" earth graves, which could also

be proven at Frestedt in Dithmarschen - underlines this assumption and does not currently allow any statement about what should be considered "normal". The "funerary huts" of the Tustrup type, which are frequently erected near megalithic graves in northern Jutland, have not yet been proven in Schleswig-Holstein, although a small sunken house discovered in Flögeln in the Elbe-Weser area could also have been a cult building.

In recent archaeological research, the significance of these complexes is no longer seen solely in their function as burial chambers, but their presumed importance as objects of territorial marking, for the safeguarding of claims to power, as places of collective remembrance within the framework of an ancestor cult as well as the formation of identity and tradition of the group, or as the result of competitive situations, e.g. due to overpopulation or accumulation of values not previously known to this extent, is increasingly coming to the fore. Such a function of these facilities constructed by man stands with it from the form and the visibility, but certainly also in the mental perception in the complete contrast to the conceptions of the older Mesolithic hunter-gatherers, who possessed certainly many "holy places", which however - perhaps with exception of the cultic reading stone heaps known in some cases also from Paleo- and Mesolithic context - were built in no case by man specially for it. This seems to show a new emancipatory-autonomous consciousness of man in relation to his environment, which besides the emphasis on a conscious contrariness is also noticeable in an "intensified awareness of the religious-existential orientation towards the deity", in a continuous exclusion of the dead from the world of the living and in a hitherto unknown emphasis on the collective of one's own group. Large portions of the landscape are "ritualized" through the construction of monuments and the incorporation of topographical conditions, presumably intended to produce effects such as surprise, fear, and cohesion among contemporaries. Increased construction of such sites in times of socio-economic crisis can be postulated. Since most of the enclosures were built in the late 4th millennium B.C., but some were still in use for centuries during the later Middle Neolithic, the question arises as to the significance of this almost "rhetorical" mode of use, which may indicate that very strong, historically traditional ideas and resulting constraints were at work here. Problematic in an interpretation of the function of megalithic sites is always a possible overlay by (more or less) modern, secondary meanings, as can be well established, for example, at the Brutkamp in Albersdorf. Recent religious-scientific interpretations assume that "the stone in its lifelessness is a synonym for death and non-being, in which highest creative power is active" (Mahlstedt 2004). In each year, the rigidity of the stone had to be broken in order to bring forth new life. Against the background of this interpretation also the archaeologically provable rituals in the entrance area of the megalithic graves could be well explained. In this sense, the sites could also be understood as "places of transformation" from life to death and vice versa. They would then be in the imagination of the people of the Funnel Beaker Period the "geographically localizable (...) realm of death", but where also - presumably in the seasonal cycle - the "transformation" of the deceased ancestors, very significant for a peasant society, took place. The use (and production) of white fired flint as floor material for the burial chambers and the mostly ascertainable orientation of the passage to the southeast (the direction of sunrise, from which one moves in the passage towards the burial chamber to the west, the direction of sunset) may be related to this custom of a rite de passage.

The sepulchral character of the large stone graves seems to extend both in the Albersdorf area and supra-regionally in many cases long beyond the time of the builders of these complexes. The idea that stones contain life and that "the power for its renewal was found there" (Mahlstedt 2004) seems to live on far into the Bronze Age, e.g. in the form of the shell stones that are also frequently found in the Albersdorf area.

The shape and size of the so-called long beds - long rectangular earthen mounds enclosed with boulders and containing at least one burial chamber - which are frequently found in the Albersdorf area, indicate that they are oriented towards the contemporary long houses and are thus a kind of "residence" for the dead, probably also in a socio-ideological sense. Possibly the idea of the longbeds even arose from the fact that in the context of the regular small-scale relocation of settlements the old houses were left standing, these gradually decayed and thus the first long-rectangular mounds were created, which may very well have been - just think of the clearly recognizable relationship to the ancestors who used to live in these houses - the model for the intentional "new construction" of longbeds. So not only the "grave" but also the "house" obviously had meanings at that time that went far beyond their mere functions and may indicate that the deceased may even have been the more important part of the community.

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