



a European Cultural Route

The Project

The Megalith Culture

General

Stones and humans

Denmark

Germany

Netherlands

Sweden

Organization

Partners

Units

Events

Research



DOLMENS AND PASSAGE GRAVES IN DENMARK

About 5.000 years ago, the area of present-day Denmark saw a tremendous amount of construction projects. Within a period of just a few hundreds years, thousands of dolmens and passage graves were erected throughout the country. Some of these complicated and technologically advanced burial monuments are still preserved in the landscape. They bear witness to a pervasive revolution in religious beliefs and living conditions in general shortly after agriculture and livestock breeding became commonplace.

The introduction of farming meant a revolution. Until now, people would have to move around according to the seasons to find food. Agriculture and livestock allowed people to settle the same place all year round, and the traditional huts were replaced by larger houses. This was a radical shift in lifestyle. Society got a new structure, which also influenced religion and ritual life.

This is clearly visible through the presence of the large burial monuments built with stones, the so-called megaliths, which at the beginning of the fourth millennium B.C. were erected by the thousands throughout northern and western Europe.

The earliest dolmens in Denmark were just simple rectangular chambers with one large capstone on top. They were only meant for one or a few burials, but soon the architecture of the dolmens developed. The shape changed from rectangular to round as more orthostats were added to the walls. And a passage was mounted on the chamber,

allowing access to the deceased after the burial was finished. Now the dolmens could be reused and more burials could take place.

The earliest passage graves, which are more complicated constructions than the dolmens, were built in southern Scandinavia around 3.200 B.C. The architecture was inspired by impulses from the south. In Denmark, the passage graves were erected within a rather short time span of just one or two hundred years.

Passage graves are sophisticated and delicate structures that have required highly specialised knowledge and techniques to construct. A frequent question is how the enormous capstones were placed on top of the orthostats.

No two passage graves are alike. There are numerous variations and technical details, hinting that the builders were highly specialised workers, who mastered their craft to perfection. The layout of the passage graves varies a lot. Mostly they have a single chamber, but sometimes they have little side chambers attached to a larger main chamber. Double and twin passage graves are other variations. Double passage graves are mounds with two separate passage graves. Twin passage graves are chambers with individual passages but built together and situated in the same mound.

The functional use of the megaliths was probably closely tied to the burial rituals, which took place in or very near to them.

Potsherds are often found in front of the entrances. The pots may have contained offerings to the dead or the gods. The pots appear to have been broken deliberately. The passage graves are common burial chambers, and in some cases bones from more than a hundred individuals have been found. Some passage graves have divisions in the floor made by stone slabs, and maybe this was done in order to keep members from different families or people of different status apart. Several accounts of early excavations of passage graves report that the dead appeared to have been placed in a sitting or squatting position, leaning against the walls.

The dolmens and the passage graves were part of a highly complicated ritual system that is difficult if not impossible to comprehend fully, given the scattered remains. In recent years, a number of large ritual enclosures have been discovered. They span over several hectares and are usually associated with nearby dolmens and passage graves. The most famous of these enclosures in Denmark lies at Sarup on the island of Funen. The enclosures appear to have a role in the burial rituals.

The tradition of building megaliths ceased almost as abruptly as it began. Even if the megaliths were reused for burials for many centuries after this point, no new ones were built. And the burial rituals changed too, shifting the focus from common burials to individual inhumations in mounds.

SPECIAL AREAS

Dolmens and Passage graves on Møn

On the island of Møn an unusually large amount of dolmens and passage graves are preserved. Nowadays, 60 megaliths are known in the western part of the island, but many more are believed to have existed. Five of the most

interesting are:

Klekkendehøj

Sparresminde

Jordehøj

Kong Asgers Høj

The Sprove dolmen



Klekkendehøj

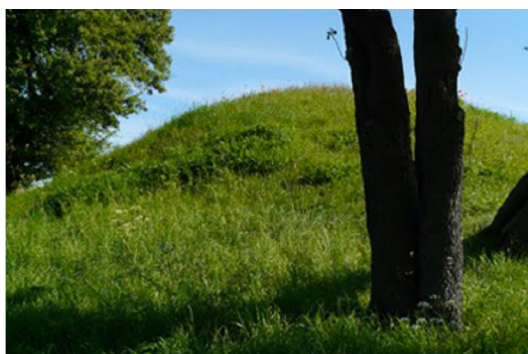
on the island of Møn is a twin passage grave containing two 5,200-year-old tombs from the Stone Age. In circa 1798, the chambers were opened and excavated by the lord of Marienborg Manor, Pierre Antoine Gérard Bosc de la Calmette, and his butler. It took 14 men two weeks to dig down to the chambers, haul out ceiling slabs and excavate the two chambers and their separate passages. The damage to the grave was so severe that the stones later had to be repaired with concrete and stainless steel mountings. The bottom section of the barrow is a terrace-shaped bank dating from the earliest period of the passage grave. The excavation of Klekkendehøj barrow is described in 1815 by Pastor Johan Paludan whose source was 'Berg the butler' who had done the donkey works in the barrow. The shafts of the spades had been shortened for the cramped conditions. The stench had driven the labourers to climb out from the grotto every once in a while for fresh air. The investigations and report are thorough for their time. Berg the butler had excavated horizontal layers and in so doing remarked that the flint daggers dating 1,000 years later were on top, while the flint axes (from the earliest users of the grave) were at the bottom. Pastor Paludan had his own lurid interpretation of this: at the bottom was a chief and his people, while the top layer of bodies were sacrificed warriors, whose hearts had been gouged out with the daggers. Today, Berg's observations are regarded as the more probable.



Sparresminde

The ancient monument on the field at Sparresminde manor is a passage grave from the Neolithic period. It was opened in the 1850s by Gustav Hage, a merchant from Stege. Little is known about how he went about this, but the

structures inside are undamaged. In the wall facing the entrance, two small stones sit on either side of a gigantic wallstone. Only on the tallest of the 21 wallstones is one of the capstones resting directly on top of it. In the rest of the chamber, the ceiling height is levelled using small slabs of stone wedged in between the capstones and wallstones. While the multi-ton megaliths are the most striking features of the passage graves, they are not the only reason why these monuments have survived. The stacks of small stone slabs used to fill the gaps between the wallstones are just as important. The resulting structures are known as dry stone walls because the flat stones appear just to be placed one on top of the other without mortar. But the Sparresminde passage grave tells us that the walls were not only dry stone; that lime mortar was used, just like in a latter-day brick wall. In other passage graves, birch bark was used. The aim was for the walls to keep the chamber sealed and dry. Today, traces of lime and bark are seen in only a few passage graves.



Jordehøj

on the island of Møn is a Neolithic passage grave, that is, a 5,200-year-old burial chamber. The passage grave was investigated in 1836 by Gustav Hage, a merchant from Stege. He opened the chamber, which was empty of earth, and found flint implements, earthenware vessels and skeletons. A study in 1988 demonstrated how the structure had been built. The stone chamber was damp-proofed using small thin slabs of stone. Inside the mound, two layers of these slabs and lime mortar were laid on top of the earth ceiling. On the exterior of the walls and in a trench around the chamber are tons of flint chip that draw seeping water away from the interior of the chamber. Stone Age techniques for placing the 10-20 ton capstones on top of the passage graves were a mystery until archaeologists found traces of an earthen ramp extending from level ground outside Jordehøj up to a horizontal platform level with the top of the chamber wall. The wall was erected first. After hauling the capstones up the ramp, they then had to be placed over the chamber. This was a very tricky stage in the construction process, and at Jordehøj it went wrong. One of the capstones slid too far into the chamber, where it was left lying. And so to this day, the chamber contains a tell-tale piece of flawed construction from 5,000 years ago.



Kong Asgers Høj

Towering in the landscape on the island of Møn is Kong Asgers Høj (“King Asger's Mound”). With its 10-metre-long chamber, this is one of Denmark's largest passage graves. From the road, the long passage into the grave on the eastern side is clearly visible. Kong Asgers Høj was excavated in 1839 by Gustav C. Hage, a grocer from Stege, the main town on Møn. He found a number of flint implements and pots. One megalithic (large-stone) burial chamber was constructed each year over a period of 300-400 years. The distance between the construction sites was relatively short in the years of this building boom. “We were fortunate enough to immediately find the entrance, which faces south, but it cost much effort to excavate the compacted clay with which it was almost entirely filled. Inside the passage grave, there were some two feet of loose, dry sand or ash, in which I had anticipated a rich find, but, sad to say, I was disappointed.” These were the words written by Hage the grocer in 1839 to the National Museum of Denmark. Only few archaeological specimens were found in the passage grave: a fine battle axe made of rock, a few flint tools and crumbled skeletal remains. But for this old treasure hunter and amateur archaeologist, no one could take away his delight in being the first to enter a chamber where time had stood still for 5,000 years.



Sprove dolmen

Not far from a rare and protected seaweed dyke is the Sprove dolmen. The barrow is made up of a long entryway paved with stones, and two boulders barring entrance to the burial chamber itself. Bronze Age cup marks pock the boulders, but the barrow dates back to the late Neolithic Age, probably between 3300 and 3200 BC. Originally, a layer of earth covered the burial chamber and the boulders. Shards of clay vessels covered with attractive patterns have been found in front of the entrance and are believed to stem from ritual offerings to the dead. They bear witness to the burial rituals carried out by people of the Neolithic age.

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