

Beyond Fashion: characterising the shift to cremation in Early Bronze Age Wessex.

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For the past forty years, the change from inhumation to cremation burial practices in Wessex has been seen as subordinate to other aspects of funerary ritual. Changes in artefacts and mound structures have been seen as enhancing the performance of burial rites for the nouveaux riche, and this appearance of sudden wealth has (perhaps justifiably) been seen as the primary factor of interest in the burial archaeology of the Wessex culture. Perhaps the argument for ritual as ideology has been muddied by Modernist notions of ritual or elitist behaviour, but even if artefacts do represent an uptick in individual wealth, changes in burial practices likely represent much more than this: the introduction of cremation implies a different kind of approach to the body, whilst accompanying changes in funerary rites may relate to more socio-political changes. The appearance of cremation burial in Wessex and its patchwork spread, rarely accompanied by wealth, demand a closer look, especially in terms of the dynamics of its introduction and its relationship to the widespread adoption of cremation burial across Britain. This paper examines the latest research on cremation across Britain to evaluate the significance and process of its adoption, before examining in detail the relationship of cremation to other changes in Wessex.