The inverted dead of Britain's Bronze Age barrows: a perspective from Conceptual Metaphor Theory

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Barrows are a prominent feature of Britain's Bronze Age. While they originated as burial monuments, they also appear to have acquired other roles. However, British prehistorians have been hampered in their interpretations, as they are wary of speculating how Bronze Age people conceptualised their dead. Here were suggest that a recurrent pattern of inversion is significant. We use Conceptual Metaphor Theory to argue that Bronze Age people saw their dead inhabiting an inverted underworld directly beneath the surface of the earth. This would help explain not only burial practices, but also barrows' other apparent functions.

Keywords: Bronze Age, barrows, archaeology of death, Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Recently, at a conference on British Bronze Age barrows[1], it was suggested that archaeologists would make more progress understanding these monuments if they had a clearer notion of how Bronze Age people conceptualised their dead. While barrows undeniably have more functions than simply holding and marking graves, it is equally undeniable that some of these other roles were ultimately grounded in whatever it is that the dead were able to do. Prehistorians are understandably cautious about invoking spiritual or supernatural concepts which leave no direct material remains, but there comes a point when committing to some position is essential to advance. It makes a significant difference to the interpretation of barrows if the dead were thought to be aware and active within their barrows rather than inert or departed to some far-off afterlife.

In this paper we suggest one interpretation, based on a common feature of Bronze Age barrow burials—one that can be neatly explained by a well-attested concept of the dead.

A recurring pattern of inversion

Barrows were constructed in Britain from around 2400 BC to 1500 BC, and used for secondary burials until the end of the Bronze Age (c.800 BC). Here, we will focus on those barrows which contained cremation burials, so we are working with comparable practices. In Britain, cremation burials first appeared at the end of the Beaker period (c.2100 BC), becoming almost universal by the second half of the Early Bronze Age (1800–1500 BC) before finally disappearing at the end of the Bronze Age.

Our starting point for interpreting barrows focuses on patterns of inversion found throughout Britain.

Urns

Urns containing, covering or accompanying cremated human remains were often deposited upside down (Figure 1). All the main vessel types which accompanied cremation burials have been found inverted. The practice is reported in all parts of Britain, including Scotland (Medina-Petterson 2013), Wales (Pettitt 2015), northeast England (Fowler 2012), southwest Britain (Owoc 2000), and southern Britain (Bristow 2001).

[FIGURE 1A & B IN AROUND HERE]

Inverting urns became established practice in the second half of the Early Bronze Age, although it occurred occasionally for several hundred years before (Figure 2). At the end of the British

Chalcolithic, a handful of cremation burials were accompanied by inverted Beaker vessels (Clarke 1970: 138–139). Beakers were succeeded by Food Vessels in the Early Bronze Age. The Atlantic Europe in the Metal Ages (AEMA) Project recorded 1,200 Food Vessels: 54% with inhumations and 46% cremations. Where urns' positions were recorded, 20% (106) were inverted while 80% (422) were upright. Inversion only began in earnest when Collared Urns became part of the funerary repertoire (1800–1500 BC). At this time, cremation became the dominant funerary rite, with only 20 of the 510 burials recorded by AEMA involving inhumations. Of the 363 Collared Urns where position was reported, 56% (341) were inverted and 44% (266) were found upright.

[FIGURE 2 IN AROUND HERE]

Caswell & Roberts' (2018) review of Middle Bronze Age cremation burials identified 3133 individual burials from 378 sites, mostly in southern England. Where information on orientation was available, almost exactly half of urns were inverted (460 of 945 reported). Use of inversion was not universal within cemeteries: Caswell & Roberts noted thirty-five sites where urns had been buried both upside down and right way up.

Urns disappeared almost completely from burials in the Late Bronze Age, although cremation continued. The few published examples of urned cremations include inverted examples, such as the Post-Deverel-Rimbury urns at Kimpton barrow, Hampshire (Dacre *et al.* 2014).

We want to underscore the peculiarity of inverting urns: Roman urned cremations in Britain were never inverted (Philpott 1991: 30–44), nor apparently were Anglo-Saxon urns (e.g. Hills *et al.* 1984). Nor were other accompanying gravegoods, unless they were used as 'lids' for cremation urns. Inversion flies in the face of the 'right' way to position any filled container, and inevitably means upsetting the contents (as did, in fact, happen in many Bronze Age urned burials). That half of urns were found rim-down attests to the importance of inversion. That it is not a full 100% presumably reflects the conceptual conflict with the 'normal' way of orientating a pot, and possibly a desire not to spill the contents.

Cremated remains

Although micro-excavation of cremation burials and urns is recommended practice (McKinley 2013: 156–157), all too often the results go unpublished. Consequently, British prehistorians lack a detailed picture of how bone, pyre debris and other material went into burials. This contrasts with examples elsewhere, such as the Late Bronze Age cremation cemetery at Cottbus, Germany

where micro-excavation demonstrated that bodies had been 'reconstructed' within urns (Gramsch 2007). Nonetheless, examples of inversion have been reported. For example, Downes' (2005) analysis of all 33 burial cists at Linga Fiold, Orkney, found that, in the unurned primary burials and some secondary burials, material from the pyre was buried in an inverse sequence. At the base of each cist was cremated bone, then cramp, then burnt turf or wood ('cramp' is a glassy slag, peculiar to Orcadian pyres, apparently produced by placing seaweed on the pyre.). Downes emphasises that this ordering must have been deliberate, as all the material had been meticulously picked out, cleaned and sorted before being deposited. She also noted inversion in other Orcadian cremations, such as at Glitterpitten (Downes 2005: 172–174).

In southern England, micro-excavation of an inverted Collared Urn cremation from Lodge Farm, St Osyth, Essex (no. 3914) found that skull bones were most common at the top of the urn while lower limbs were concentrated at the base (Armstrong in Germany 2007: 82–84). Excavation of two urns from Chelmsford found skull fragments were frequent at the base of each urn, axial bone in the centre, and lower limb bones at the top (Anderson in Holloway & Spencer 2005: 15–16).

That the contents of urns are sometimes layered has been noted by various authors (e.g. Brittain 2015: 226). While the inverted ordering of bones and pyre debris may sometimes simply reflect the way materials were collected from the pyre, other examples are clearly deliberate. An example is the inverted Collared Urn excavated at Moel Goedog Cairn I (Lynch 1984: 22–23) where pyre ash was recorded at the base of the urn, overlain by cremated bone.

Detecting inversion in cremation burials requires particular circumstances: the whole skeleton must be present and fitted tightly within the urn. This is rare in most Bronze Age cremations, where burials typically contain 330–470g of bone (McKinley 2005: 13)—far less than the 1,000–2,400g of a typical adult. Furthermore, if the bone is not tightly packed the pieces will quickly become jumbled—especially if the urn is inverted. Small dense fragments will settle to the bottom and larger, less dense pieces rise to the top (apparent in several half-filled urns, e.g. Felter 2007: 14, McSloy & Ellis 2016: 4).

Barrow construction

Many barrows across Britain were constructed of turf and, where evidence exists, the turves often appear inverted, apparently deliberately. Regrettably, we found just twenty the orientation of turves often goes unquestioned and unreported, even when apparent in site photographs. Turf orientation is often difficult to detect in the field and easy to misinterpret. In preparing this

article, we found turf orientation reported for just twenty excavated barrows, and consequently it is not possible to estimate how widespread turf inversion was—although, when discussing soil micromorphology from barrows, Macphail says it is common (Macphail in Tilley 2017, App. 5: 13; also C. French pers. comm.). Inverted turves are reported in southwest England (six examples in Owoc 2000; also McKenzie in Bayer *et al.* 2017: 64–72; Macphail and Lenka in Tilley 2017, Apps. 5 and 11), southern England (Bradley & Lucas 1975; Ashbee & Dimbleby 1976; Drewett 1976; Macphail 1980; Green *et al.* 1984; Parfitt 2018), and Northern England (four examples in Smith 1994: 55, 57, 65 and 66; also Bu'lock, Rosser & Dimbleby 1960).

Along with turf, barrows were also constructed from stones and layers of soil. It has long been recognised that their layers may reverse the stratigraphic sequence of the earth from which they were made (e.g. Bradley & Fraser 2010, Owoc 2000: 218–219 & *passim*). While this inversion may sometimes simply reflect the order in which soil was excavated and heaped up, this does not explain all cases. In Wessex, for example, many round barrows were built with a turf core covered by chalk dug from the surrounding ditch. However, the amount of grass involved must have come from a much wider area than the ditch could possibly have provided—over ten thousand square metres for large mounds. Consequently, placing chalk over the turf must have been a deliberate choice, not simply a by-product of excavation. In Orkney, Downes (2005) reported excavations of a dozen barrows, all showing a similar inversion: some with turf being packed around the burial cist overlain by subsoil; others with clay subsoil overlain by stones. In upland areas, there are numerous cairns with turf or soil cores which also display this inverted stratigraphy (see Smith 1994 and Fowler 2012 for examples).

Barrow form

The treatments discussed so far all involve physical inversion. One last potential type involves inverting the form of the barrow.

The most common barrow types in Britain—bowl, bell, and saucer barrows—consist of a mound of earth surrounded by a ring ditch. A rare alternative is the pond barrow: a basin typically 10–25 metres across and 0.5–2.0 metres deep, with a surrounding earthen bank. In cross section, this appears to mirror the form of regular barrows (Figure 3). While not barrows in the usual sense of an earth mound, they do nonetheless contain burials and are often found alongside regular barrows.

[FIGURE 3 IN AROUND HERE]

Pond barrows first appear in the second half of the Early Bronze Age—around the same time that inverted urns become common.

Interpreting inversion: Conceptual Metaphor Theory

It is one thing to identify a recurring pattern like inversion. It is another matter entirely to connect it with an idea like 'the dead'. Here we outline one way archaeologists may interpret this immaterial realm using only material evidence.

Whatever other associations barrows later acquired, they are ultimately about the dead. Being dead, however, is not just the physical state of the deceased: it is also a concept in the minds of the living. There has been much work by cognitive scientists in recent decades into how people form concepts. One particularly productive area has been *Conceptual Metaphor Theory*. What we propose here is that the inversions displayed by the barrow builders are an expression of two underlying conceptual metaphors: THE DEAD ARE UPSIDE DOWN and THE DEAD ARE IN AN UNDERWORLD (UNDER THE BARROW). Moreover, it is straightforward to explain how these two concepts could have formed in the Bronze Age.

The formation of primary conceptual metaphors

To understand how conceptual metaphors form, consider a well-understood example: INTIMACY IS WARMTH. People express this concept when they speak of '*warm* friendships', '*warm* smiles' 'a *warm* welcome'. Such uses are found worldwide (Wiseman 2014). From this concept also derive expressions of dislike or rejection based on a lack of warmth such as: 'the *cold* shoulder', 'an *icy* stare', and 'a *lukewarm* reception'. (In this article, we will follow the usual convention in Conceptual Metaphor Theory of writing the underlying metaphor in SMALL CAPITALS and particular expressions in *italics*.) The connection between warmth and intimacy is not just linguistic: psychological experiments have found that providing warmth (e.g. in the form of a hot beverage) can induce positive feelings toward others (Williams and Bargh 2008, IJzerman and Semin 2009), while people who are scorned or excluded can feel cold (Zhong and Leonardelli 2008).

This concept develops in the first few months of life, and is a direct result of the way human babies are brought up. When very young children are played with, fed or loved, their brains register several types of stimulation. One is positive emotion; another is the warmth of the person holding them. Since human babies have to be held for many months after being born, the two experiences frequently coincide. It is a basic property of brains that when two different areas are

activated, neural connections develop between them: what is termed ‘Hebbian learning’ (Feldman 2006). The result of infants experiencing positive emotions and warmth at the same time is that a neural connection develops between those parts of the brain involved. Because this link is established while the child’s brain is growing at its fastest, and reinforced by frequently-repeated experience, the outcome is a very strong neural connection—one that lasts into adulthood. This is the grounding for the conceptual metaphor POSITIVE EMOTION IS WARMTH. And because the warmth is experienced literally at the hands of those the growing baby has intimate social relations with, warmth becomes linked with intimate social experiences.

The metaphor INTIMACY IS WARMTH is what is termed a ‘primary conceptual metaphor’. These are grounded in direct embodied experience and develop through the repeated coincidence of two otherwise unrelated activities. Linguists and psychologists have identified over a hundred such primary metaphors (Grady 1997: 281–299). Other readily-intelligible examples include MORE IS UP, BIG IS IMPORTANT, ANGER IS HEAT, SIMILAR IS CLOSE, and DIFFICULTIES ARE BURDENS. These all arise from experiences common to everyone: direction, size, heat, distance, and weight. Not surprisingly, therefore, such metaphoric concepts are also found across many unrelated cultures. The way that primary conceptual metaphors form means that, if archaeologists can show that ancient people had the same formative experiences that contemporary people do, then archaeologists can deduce that ancient people would also have developed similar concepts.

Forming the concept of the inverted dead

Being dead is not something people know by direct experience. To comprehend death, people unavoidably draw on experiences from other domains. In the process, they create metaphors. Known conceptual metaphors for death include DEATH IS DARKNESS, SLEEP, WINTER, and the goal of a JOURNEY (Lakoff & Turner 1979, Wiseman 2019). Here, we want to highlight one other widespread example: BEING DEAD IS (UPSIDE) DOWN.

This concept derives from another well-understood primary conceptual metaphor, LIFE IS UP. It arises because humans an upright body which lives in a world with gravity. We feel gravity pulling us down at every instant. Every moment we are ‘up and about’—every moment we are alive—we have to apply effort to keep our bipedal bodies upright. Moreover, our brains are constantly engaged in monitoring and maintaining our posture. So the parts of our sensorimotor system involved in keeping us upright are constantly active at the same time as we are conscious and aware. The result is a tight association of being alive and being up(right). This is the basis for the conceptual metaphor BEING ALIVE IS UP. From this, we infer that when we lose

consciousness—such as when we die—we cease to hold our bodies up: we '*drop down* dead' or '*lie down* and die'. The metaphor DYING IS GOING DOWN is apparent in expressions like "the soldiers *fell* in battle", "She *dropped* dead of a heart attack" and "the firemen laid *down* their lives". Resurrection involves movement in the opposite direction: being *"raised* from the dead". Linguists have found similar expressions in unrelated languages around the world, including most European languages (Vogel 2009), Turkish (Özçahşkan 2003), and Chinese (Cong 2014).

The concept of DYING as DROPPING DOWN arises from our physical experience of keeping ourselves upright. The state of BEING DEAD is more complex, as we have a variety of experiences of being down. We can draw not only on our physical experience of verticality, but also our perceptions of UP and DOWN, and the associated notions of ABOVE and BELOW. The last of these is enormously productive, and is used worldwide to infer where the dead are. In ancient Rome, the dead were *inferi*, 'those *below*', and the place of the dead was *infero* 'below'. For the Zulu, the dead are *abaphansi*, 'those below' (Ngubane 1977: 51, 56). It is striking just how many cultures worldwide thought their dead were somewhere below (Siikala 1987:300; Taylor 2000 *passim*). Examples include ancient Egyptian *Duat, Neter-khertet*; Greek *Hades, Tartaros*; Roman *Avernus*; Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon *Hel*; Finnish *Manala*; Saami *Jabmeaimo*; Biblical Hebrew *She'ol, Eresh*; Islamic *Jahannam*; Old Persian *Duzakh*; Sumerian *Irigal, Ešgal, Kiši, Halib;* Akkadian *Erşetu*; Swahili *Ku-Zimu*; Indian (Hindu and Buddist) *Naraka, Pātāla*; Early Chinese *Huángquán*; Chinese (Daoist) *Diya*; Japanese (Shinto) *Yomi*; Aztec *Mictlan*; Colonial Mayan *Xibalba*; Inca *Ukhu Pacha*; Māori *Rarohenga*; and the Society Islanders' *Po*. The metaphor doubtless finds some corroboration in cultures that bury their dead, as this physically places the dead below the world of the living. Unsurprisingly, in some of these, the words for 'grave' and 'underworld' are identical (e.g. Sumerian *Irigal,* Hebrew *She'ol)*.

There is an important variation on the concept of DOWN. One of the ways in which the normally-upright human body can go down is by tripping or falling—an uncommon experience, but a psychologically prominent one because it literally upsets us. In its most caricatured form, falling turns a person upside down, 'head over heels' or 'topsy-turvey'. UPSIDE DOWN is another attested notion for the dead. The Saami of northern Finland believed their dead walked upside down in an inverted underworld, *Jabmeaimo,* "with the soles of their feet against those of the living on earth" (Pettersson 1956: 148 and 155). The Egyptian *Book of the Dead* includes a prayer to protects the dead from the fate of walking upside-down in the underworld (no. 53, Taylor 2010: 190) The Hebrew Bible suggests that, come Judgment Day, the world would be turned upside-down (Isaiah 24:1).

Apart from DEAD, there appears to be just one other primary conceptual metaphor based on inversion: CHAOS IS BEING UPSIDE DOWN. We see this in expressions like 'her word turned *upside down'*, 'the thieves *turned* the house *over'*, and 'his life is *topsy turvy'*. This concept plainly does not apply in the case of Bronze Age barrows. Archaeologists, therefore, can infer that the various expressions of inversion found in barrows refer only to the dead *and nothing else*.

The inverted dead of Bronze Age barrows

We suggest that where inversion first appeared in barrows and burials, Bronze Age people may have been taking the concept of their upside-down dead quite literally. Inverting the urn or its contents was actually placing the cremated remains 'right-way up' into the underworld. Laying turves upside down may have been taking the idea one step further—placing grass and earth 'beneath' the newly dead. Pond barrows would have taken the concept to its limit by 'building' an inverted barrow and ring ditch. Later, inversion appears to have become more conventionalised, so that several aspects of burial might appear upside down—e.g. inverted remains within an inverted urn—multiplying the concept even though it would negate literal inversion.

As the dead were rarely buried more than a metre below ground surface, it seems to us that Bronze Age people might have seen the underworld as just beneath the surface of the earth, close to the living. This idea finds parallels elsewhere. As noted above, the Saami's inverted underworld, *Jabmeaino* also lay just beneath the earth. We are not claiming any direct connection between these two cultures. However, the existence of this belief in the recent past demonstrates that such a way of conceptualising the dead was also possible in Britain's Bronze Age.

The idea that the dead are just underfoot would explain one curious absence from these cremation burials: gravegoods associated with travel. Objects such as shoes, carts, and boats commonly accompany the dead worldwide. Their inclusion derives from what is possibly the most common conceptual metaphor for death: DYING IS A JOURNEY (TO A DISTANT PLACE) (Wiseman 2019). Cultures that see death this way often help their dead travel to the afterlife by placing travel-related objects in graves. But during the period when inversion was common in British Bronze Age burials, this category of gravegoods was effectively unknown. The dozen 'boat-shaped' log coffins (Parker Pearson *et al.* 2013: 47–48) and five 'coracle burials' (Watson 1980) excavated in Bronze Age Britain all predate 1900 BC—that is, before the time when inversion became commonplace. And horse gear only started to appear in British burials from the Early Iron Age (c.800–400 BC)—after all evidence for inversion had disappeared from British cremation burials.

Yet for the thousand-odd years when inversion was widespread, we suggest that people thought their dead were immediately underfoot, not in some distant 'Land of the Dead'. Consequently the dead needed no transportation to reach the underworld. A modest hole in the ground would have been sufficient to deliver them to their now home.

What we are proposing here is more than a 'just-so' story about the Bronze Age dead. It potentially explains not just why barrows were built, but some of their other functions. For example, it has suggested for decades that barrows might have 'claimed' grazing land, 'guarded' boundaries, and 'controlled' or 'overlooked' routeways. Such proposals have advanced in all parts of Britain (e.g. Field 1998, Watson 2001, Pryor 2001: 407–408, Kitchen 2001, Buteux & Chapman 2007, Garwood 2007: 151–153; Johnson 2017) Implicit in such suggestions, however, is that barrows have *something* that controls, guards, claims and looks—and moreover, this *something* must also take action against those who transgress. The presence of this active *something* is most easily explained if the dead had some ongoing existence within their mounds, close to the world of the living. Such an interpretation, however, is one that many prehistorians have been wary of committing to.

A connection between inversion and the dead in Britain's Bronze Age raises questions about other inversions found in the same period, such as the occasional metalwork hoards found in inverted pots. It might also prompt archaeologists to think about the significance of reflections, particularly in pools of water, in which images are inverted. If watery reflections are images of the dead, this may provide insights into why materials from butter to metalwork were deposited in watery locations during the Bronze Age: possibly placing them into the care of the dead.

Other concepts

While we think the concept of INVERSION was important in structuring Bronze Age barrows and burials, we certainly do not see it as the only concept at work. It is worth highlighting other features of barrows which were also likely symbolic, but quite unrelated to inversion:

- barrows are circular
- Bronze Age cremation burials were preceded chronologically by 'crouched' burials, laid tightly lying on their sides, akin to a sleeping or foetal position
- barrows were often built in prominent locations, such as on skylines or routeways

- grass is food for domesticated herds, and the turf provides organic matter for crops, so denuding hectares of grass to construct turf barrowfields would have involved the conscious destruction of a significant economic resource for the community

- stripping turf for barrowfields would have transformed the local flora for decades after. Moreover, in the first spring after turf stripping, the newly disturbed earth would have germinated prominent flowering species such as poppies and cornflowers—quite unlike the grasses they replaced.

None of these 'contradicts' the concept of INVERSION, any more than an Egyptian pyramid 'contradicts' the Egyptian belief in death as a voyage on the sun god's barge: significant monuments often express a number of concepts. Nonetheless, inversion is expressed in many aspects of barrow construction, which suggests it was a primary concept used to comprehend death for around a thousand years in prehistoric Britain.

Conclusion

People structure sites to conform with their concepts. Burial sites, unsurprisingly, reflect ideas about death. Interpreting such sites, therefore, demands that archaeologists understand these concepts. Conceptual Metaphor Theory provides a robust method for interpreting how ancient people conceptualised their world. The idea that the Bronze Age dead inhabited an inverted underworld immediately below the surface of the earth is consistent with well-understood concepts of death. It also helps explain why barrows appear to overlook, control and guard the lands around them—because it implies the dead are close by.

Endnote

[1] 'Landscapes of the Dead: exploring Bronze Age Barrowscapes', Prehistoric Society Research Day, held at the Society of Antiquaries, Burlington House, Piccadilly, London, Saturday 16 March 2019.

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Captions

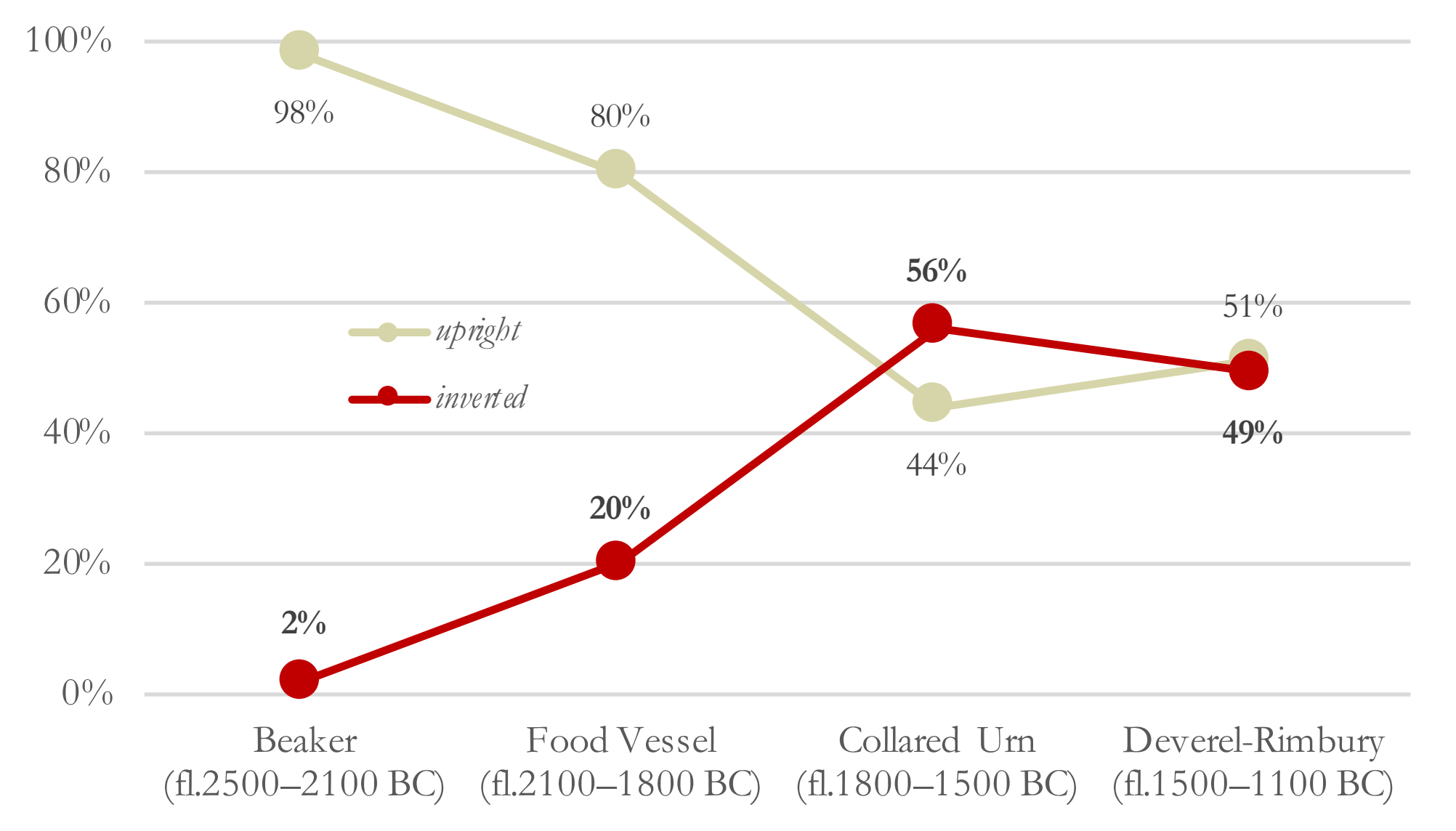
Figure 1: inverted urns in excavation.

Top: EBA Collared Urn from Petersfield Heath, West Sussex (with permission Stuart Needham and People of the Heath Project)

Bottom: MBA Bucket Urn from Newark-upon-Trent (with permission, Oxford Archaeology and Urban and Civic Plc.)

Figure 2: Percentage of urns found upright (grey) and inverted (red, bold text).
Sources: Grave Goods Project, AEMA, Cowie (1978), Gibson (1978), Kinnes & Longworth (1985), Wilkin (2013), and Caswell & Roberts (2018).

Figure 3: schematic profile of a ring barrow (above) and pond barrow (below) illustrating the potential inversion of form.


100%
80%
60%
40%
20%
0%
98%
80%
44%
51%
56%
49%
20%
2%
upright
inverted
Beaker
(fl.2500–2100 BC)
Food Vessel
(fl.2100–1800 BC)
Collared Urn
(fl.1800–1500 BC)
Deverel-Rimbury
(fl.1500–1100 BC)