


# In a tomb undisturbed archaeologists encount



**A**RCHAEOLOGISTS HAVE LONG KNOWN of thousands of Neolithic burial mounds and other monumental constructions all over western and northern Europe. Some of the largest are found at Carnac, in northwest France, where stone rows, standing stones, and enormous burial mounds were first constructed around 4500 B.C. But southwest France also has at least two dozen early long mounds. Recently, in one called Prissé-la-Charrière (after the village it is near), archaeologists Roger Joussaume, Luc Laporte, and Chris Scarre found a communal sepulcher that no one had entered for 6,000 years, giving them a view of the burial practices of a people about whom little is known except that they were early farmers.

It was a rare find. The prominence of such mounds on the landscape made them alluring targets for looters and nineteenth-century archaeologists with questionable excavation techniques. And many tombs had simply collapsed over time. Prissé-la-Charrière was on the verge: the limestone walls holding up the grave's four-ton capstone were crumbling, and entering it meant risking being crushed. It was two years before the archaeologists were able to reinforce the capstone and drop down inside.

For Joussaume, entering the tomb was a jarring experience. "It was a dive into the past that gave me a great shock," he says. "It was really an unforgettable moment." Inside were the disarticulated remains of at least seven people, as well as two intact ceramic vessels. It was the third burial chamber they had found in the 300-foot-long mound. The other two held the partial remains of at least 11 more people. The bodies may have been placed in the chamber to decay, and then the majority of the bones moved somewhere else. (Where remains a mystery.) It was a common practice at the time.

For the past 10 field seasons the British-French team has steadily stripped back the turf that covered the mound to reveal the buried structures. "One of the most surprising

A photograph of an archaeological excavation site. In the foreground, there are several large, rectangular stone structures made of stacked, light-colored stones. A dirt path winds through the site. In the background, there are more stone structures and a dense forest of green trees. The overall scene is a well-preserved ancient site.

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er an unexpected world.

*by* JENNIFER PINKOWSKI

things is how complex it all is: a honeycomb of walls, cairns, and burial chambers,” says Scarre. The mound is also evidence of a new way of thinking about the world. Monumental architecture such as burial mounds, standing stones, and stone rows appear shortly after the transition from hunting and gathering to farming. “When you adopt farming, you divide the landscape into the wild and the domestic. It’s only when that distinction gets made that you see people building these long structures,” he says.

Where the idea for the burial mounds came from isn’t clear. Some archaeologists suggest it was the influence of peoples from the east and south, who had brought west their residential longhouses—and the all-important innovation of farming—a few centuries before. Yet in those areas, people were buried singly in graves near or beneath residences, not communally in mounds. And by the time the long burial mounds were built, people hadn’t lived in residential long mounds for centuries. If the influence came through a lingering “cultural memory” of these longhouse builders, as Scarre suggests, it occurred only gradually as an alteration to local traditions: Prissé-la-Charrière, for example, *looks* like a long mound, but it wasn’t originally meant to.

Excavations revealed that the interior elements, including the burial chambers, were built in several stages, and the dry-stone wall surrounding them added at the end. It is this wall that gives the mound its long-house look. “It looks as if they transferred into the mortuary domain a form which was first manifest in domestic architecture,” says Scarre.

They built it fast. “A large monument like this one might be expected to have grown over several centuries, but all the carbon-14 dates suggest it was built, modified, and extended in a matter of decades,





perhaps a century or two at most,” says Scarre. Its builders probably returned yearly to make additions and modifications.

Yet they rarely interred their dead, even though two of the tombs are passage graves, meaning they were built with accessibility in mind. (The third chamber, also the earliest, was effectively closed off by the modifications that completed the long mound.) At least 18 people were buried over the course of a couple of centuries—perhaps only one per generation.

“Because the tomb had never been reopened since the Neolithic, we are sure those placed inside were from the same civilization,” says Jousaume. They don’t, however, know if the interred were from the same family. DNA testing might yield the answer, but extracting viable DNA from very old remains is difficult. Plus, a number of small animals entered the tomb over the years, and their DNA may be mixed in with the human remains. Potential contamination from the archaeologists themselves is a third complicating factor.

Overall, the greatly altered landscape, scarcity of material culture, and vast expanse of time conspire to keep the archaeological record thin on daily life in the Neolithic. Scarre is intrigued by the mystery. “It’s a slightly bizarre picture we see. We have these massive mounds, but not much in the way of houses, and then we have these peculiar practices with human bones. It’s not something that’s very familiar to us. It’s a very strange world.” ■

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JENNIFER PINKOWSKI is associate editor of *ARCHAEOLOGY*.

Above, archaeologist Roger Jousaume surveys the burials of at least seven individuals who died more than 6,000 years ago. Their remains hadn’t been kept separate by those who interred them. Facing page, a close-up of the bones. The hole in one of the skulls shows what is most likely postmortem damage. Below, a vase support that may have been used to burn a ceremonial aromatic or narcotic.

