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Mortuary Houses and Funeral Rites in Denmark

by POUL KJÆRUM

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IN 1954 a stone and timber-built mortuary house belonging to the Funnel-Beaker (TRB) culture was excavated at Tustrup, in the county of Randers in Eastern Jutland [1]. At that time such structures were unknown in the area of the Funnel-Beaker culture, but, five years later, a very similar mortuary house was found at Ferslev, just south of the Limfjord, in the neighbouring county of Aalborg [2]. From the archaeological evidence Tustrup dates from the very beginning of the period when Passage Graves (*Jættestuer*) were being built in Denmark. The structure and the ritual carried out in both the mortuary houses, as it could be deduced from the content and disposition of the grave goods, adds very considerably to our knowledge of the burial practices of the megalith builders of Denmark. Quite apart from this, the discoveries at Tustrup and Ferslev provide us with good fixed points in the relative and absolute chronology of the Funnel-Beaker culture since each house contained a large number of highly ornamented pots as well as charcoal from the walls and roofs of the houses, which could be dated by the C14 method.

The Tustrup house was sited in the middle of a megalithic cemetery consisting of three chamber tombs: (*a*) a hexagonal burial chamber in a round mound with the entrance to the south-east, (*b*) a small Passage Grave with a short passage, in plan like the letter *q*, and (*c*) a Passage Grave with a chamber 10 m. long with a side chamber off the back wall at the south-west corner [3]. These three megalithic tombs were set in a semicircle with a radius of 50 m., centred on the mortuary house (PL. XXV*b*). All date from the period Ib of the Danish Middle Neolithic [4].

THE MORTUARY HOUSE

The Tustrup mortuary house was constructed of a horseshoe-shaped, stone-built wall defining a nearly square room 5 m. by 5·5 m. opening to the north-east (PL. XXV*a*). The wall was 0·5 to 1·5 m. thick and faced on the outside with stone slabs about one metre high, some of which had been dressed. Inside, the rear wall was faced with orthostats 1·6 m. high, while the side walls were boarded with split oak trunks shaped like the segments of circles, the bark still preserved on the outside. These oaken planks were set up, as in a palisade, side by side in continuous foundation trenches packed with stones. The south wall was straight and unbroken for its full length, but the northern wall was broken by a niche 2 m. wide and 0·8 m. deep, lined by wattle. This

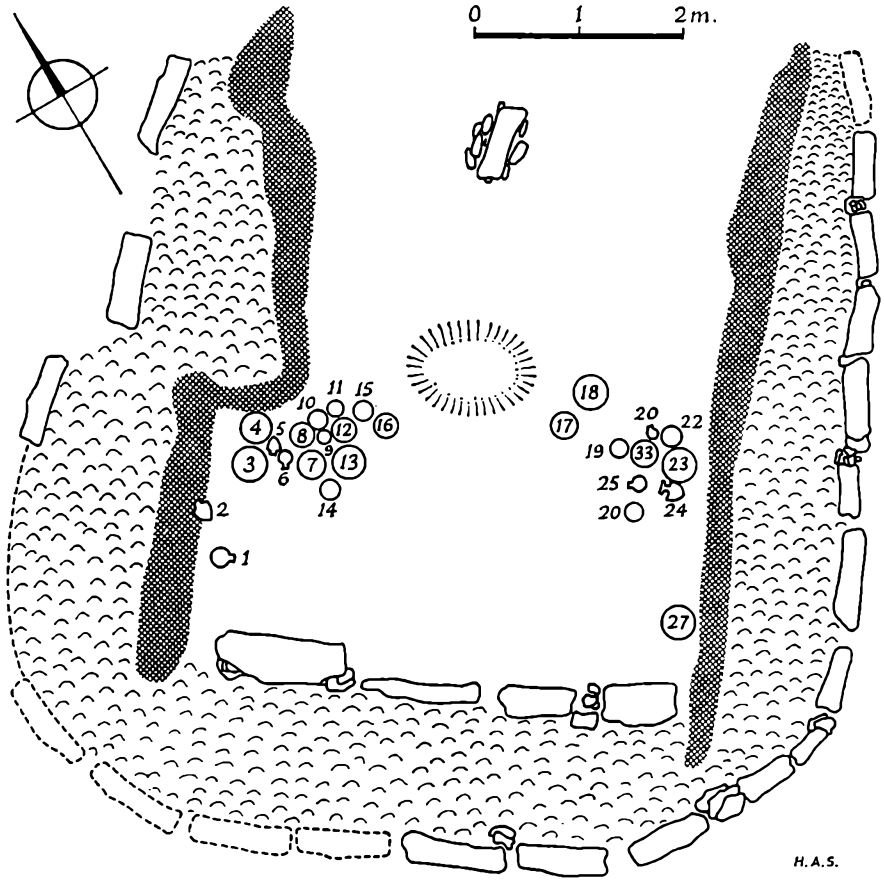

Fig. 1. Ground plan of the Tustrup house with the pottery vessels in their original positions

niche contained a stone-filled pit about 0·8 m. in depth.

In the opening of the horseshoe, to the north-east, there were no traces of a wall, but precisely in the middle there was a megalithic orthostat, carefully dressed and parallel-sided. As the upper part of this stone had been split and removed before the excavation, its original height is not known, but it might have been considerable as its socket had been dug to a depth of half a metre into the ground and was packed with stones. It seems reasonable to suppose that it was at least as high as the orthostats in the rear wall, viz. 1·6 m.

The exact height of the side walls is of course unknown, but was at least over 1·5 m. and possibly over 2 m. The house had been burnt and the walling posts were, when excavated, standing as charred stumps 20 cm. high in the foundation trenches. In front of them and at right-angles to the line of the side walls were some beams laid side by side and parallel to each other, with the bark side upwards. These were preserved to a length of up to 1·5 m. and to a distance of 2 m. from the foundation trenches—which perhaps indicates the minimum height of the wall-boarding.

An oval pit was found exactly in the centre of the house. It was 1·2 m. long, 0·8 m. wide, and 0·6 m. deep and, like the foundation trenches for the walls, was filled with sand—still loose when the house was destroyed.

Though no traces of a post were found in it, and its dimensions and shape are rather untypical for a post-hole, it seems possible that it did carry a central post supporting the roof. However this may be, the shape of the roof is unknown, but it does seem to have been covered with bark and turves. Under the charred wall beams were found small pieces of birch bark which, to quote our xylotomist, 'each consist of many layers pressed together while still in a plastic condition'. We have no doubt but that these 'layers' represent a roof of grass turves laid on sheets of birch bark, as is used in Scandinavia up to the present day.

A house constructed like the Tustrup mortuary house seems as though it were built for eternity: in fact it seems to have been burnt down soon after it was built. The oak trunks and even the willow branches in the wattle wall seem to have been still fresh when the house was burnt down; and the filling in the foundation trenches was still soft, if we may judge from the position of the bases of the wallposts—most of which had been thrown out of their original position by the destruction of the house.

An examination of the finds supports this view. Twenty-eight pots and spoons were found in two small groups in the SE and SW part of the house, and near the back wall. All the pots were broken, but the broken sherds were lying so close together that the only possible interpretation is that the intact pots were standing in two groups when the house collapsed (FIG. 1).

All the pots were highly ornamented and comprised 10 pedestalled-bowls (8 of which were accompanied by a spoon), 6 Funnel-Beakers (one with a lid), 3 shouldered bowls, and one hanging-bowl. This is a typical inventory of period Ib of the Danish Middle Neolithic—the so-called *Klintebakken* stage (PL. XXVI) [4].

The C14 date from the bark of the wallposts is 2470 ± 80 BC (K718 + K727B) [5], and this is very important since the Tustrup find is hitherto the largest closed find of pottery from this short period and also has a very special relation to the megalithic graves, both because of the position of the mortuary house in the centre of a cemetery of megalithic tombs, and the fact that it was a mortuary house associated with megalithic tombs, and the presence of the pots—pedestalled-bowls and spoons—more often found in megalithic tombs than in settlements. Last, but not least, the pottery found at Tustrup is the earliest and most common type found in the earliest Danish and South Swedish Passage Graves, and seems to be contemporary with the introduction of this type of tomb into Jutland and apparently into Scandinavia as a whole. In Jutland the types of pottery found in the Tustrup house are so common in the Passage Graves of the area that one asks oneself if Passage Graves went on being built much later than this.

THE TUSTRUP MEGALITHIC TOMBS

Before we discuss these matters of interpretation let us look at the results of excavating the megaliths around the Tustrup house as well as at some features from the other mortuary house from Ferslev. As we have already said, the finds from all the three megalithic tombs at Tustrup belonged to the same short period when the mortuary house was used—indeed some of the pots from the tombs are identical with those from the mortuary house, and are surely products of the same master-potter. And all this is in spite of the fact that the megalithic tombs belong to very different places in the traditional scheme of the evolution of megaliths. The finds made in the excavations, except for a few sherds from the chamber of the Passage Grave, were all found on both sides of the passage, in front of the façade of the Passage Grave and beside the kerbstones of the dolmens. Altogether about a hundred pots were found (50 in the Passage Grave, and 25 each in the dolmens). The find spots indicate that nearly all the pots had originally been deposited in the barrows, behind or upon the kerbstones on both sides of the chamber entrances. Only a few examples of the grave goods seem to have been deposited in the chamber and then cleared out of it. Deposits of this kind are, of course, typical of Danish and South Swedish Passage Graves, and

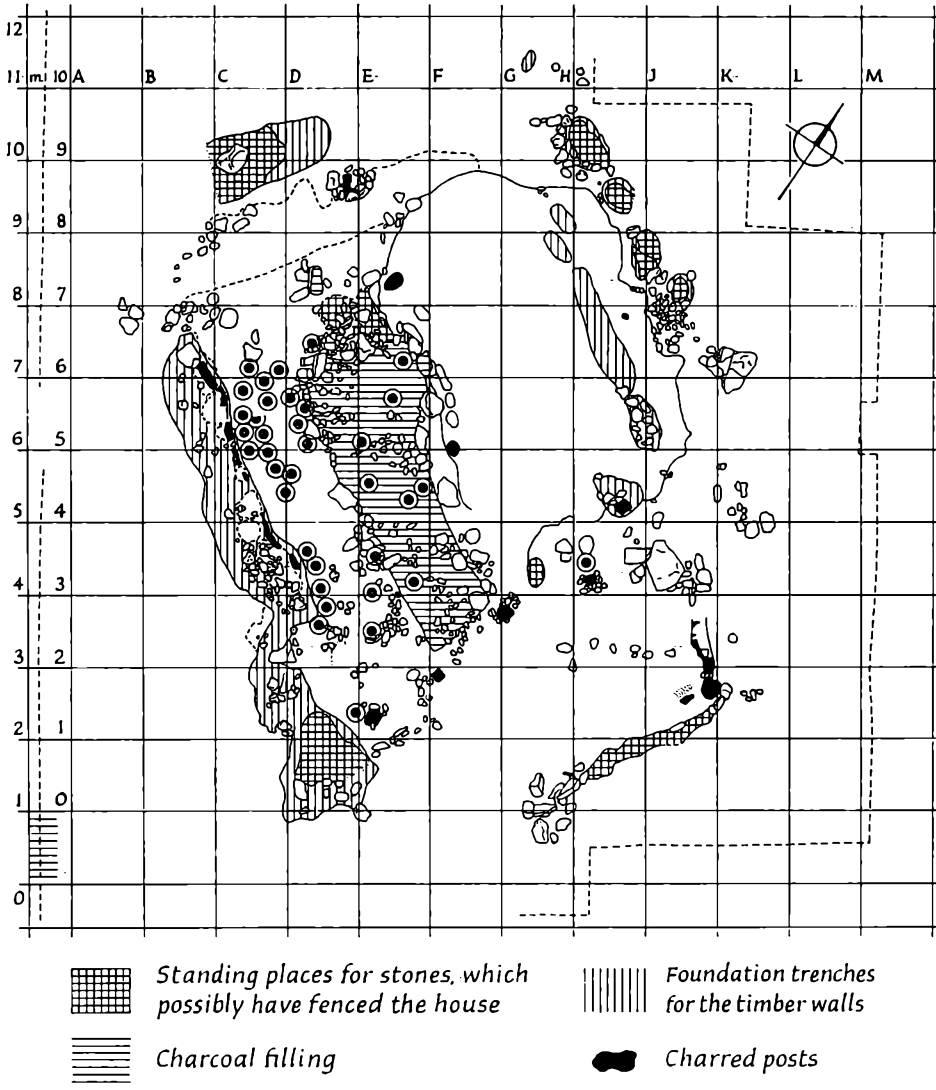

Fig. 2. Ground plan of the Ferslev mortuary house: rings mark the positions of the pottery vessels

although still only a few dolmen-barrows have been excavated thoroughly, these few seem to show that this special ritual had been followed in this type of tomb in the Middle Neolithic.

The examination of the Tustrup cemetery seems to show that the same community erected different kinds of dolmens and Passage Graves at the same time, and carried out the same rituals in the various types of tomb.

When the Tustrup mortuary house was excavated it was, as we have said, the first structure of this type belonging to the Funnel-Beaker culture ever unearthed. When it was first discussed it seemed to me to be a ritual structure used in relation to the megalithic tombs in the cemetery around it—or possibly to the presumed grave in the pit under the north-west wall—a pit however in which

nothing was found (neither remains of a skeleton nor any grave goods) and was therefore not with certainty a grave.

It now appears that the Ferslev house provides the solution to the Tustrup problem: whether the Tustrup house is (*a*) a mortuary house, i.e. a structure erected for ritual purposes connected with burial, or (*b*) a grave, or (*c*) both a grave and also an area for ritual and ceremony.

THE FERSLEV HOUSE

The ground plan and the size of the Ferslev house are about the same as the Tustrup house (FIG. 2). It is nearly a square, 5 m. × 6 m. with an inner wall lining of lime-wood (*tilia*) in the side walls built as palisades, while the rear wall was of bole construction, as indicated by grooved vertical posts, in which horizontal beams have been slotted. Along the northern and eastern walls were found vertical stone slabs, whereas none was found along the southern wall, though the area was specially examined with this in mind. These stones however do not seem to be an outer wall-facing, as at Tustrup; most probably they are no more than a boundary.

The roof of the Ferslev house seems to have been thatched, as a row of three posts was found along the centre-line of the house: one was standing just in front of the back wall, one was in the centre, and one exactly between the two outermost posts in the opening to the north-west.

The south-west part of this house had a rectangular setting of slabs 4 m. × 1 m. but widening to the north-west end to 1·5 m. The slabs along the sides were about 0·25 m. high, and at the north-west end about 1 m. high, and the stone in the south-east, to judge from its socket, would have been of the same dimensions.

The interior of this stone setting was paved with burnt and crushed flint mixed with pieces of charcoal. In it were standing 7 nearly intact pots, and in the narrow passage between the stone setting and the SW wall were 28 pots (FIG. 2). One other pot was found by a post in the back wall: this may well be the only surviving member of a group spoiled by later disturbances, as sherds of at least 10 more pots were found in the secondary filling in a pit dug in the NE half of the house.

Besides these 37 intact pots and the sherds of similar ornamented pots (PL. XXVII*a*), which all belong to Period III of the Danish Middle Neolithic, there were sherds of about 25 pots ornamented in an earlier style trodden down in the floor and in the area just in front of the open end of the house. They belong to period II of the Danish Middle Neolithic. The radiocarbon determination, done in Copenhagen, is (K717) 2480 ± 120 BC on lime-wood (*tilia*).

CONCLUSIONS

When we consider the archaeological interpretation of the Tustrup and Ferslev houses, we see that their construction is the same, their inventory the same, as was their destruction—they were both burnt. There were differences. The Ferslev house had a stone-framed cist filled with crushed, burnt flint mixed with charcoal, whereas the Tustrup house had a stone-filled pit sunk under a niche in the wall. The Tustrup house seems to have been burnt soon after its erection, having served only one ceremony, whereas Ferslev had been standing for some time and had been re-used.

To explain these features we have to turn to the Passage Graves, in the floors of which are often found one or more sunken cists lined with stone slabs. The floors of chamber and cist are usually covered with a layer of burnt and crushed flint. There can be little doubt that these cists contained burials and presumably primary burials, but when found nowadays in burial chambers they are usually empty. In a few cases personal ornaments have been found in them: at Tustrup an amber spacer had escaped the clearing of the chamber.

By analogy with the cists in Passage Graves the cist in the Ferslev house is most probably a burial cist and the building a mortuary house. The Tustrup house has to be reinterpreted in the same way. Most probably both houses are grave houses—the actual graves the cist under the floor and the pit under the niche.

When the writer first published an account

of the excavation of the Tustrup house he did not come to this conclusion, as it seemed peculiar that if the burial was the primary reason for the building of a rather elaborate structure, it should have no grave goods, and be cut off from the interior of the house by a wall. And then the composition, quantity and deposition of the finds were different from the usual TRB graves. It is not usual to find large amounts of pottery in dolmens, Passage Graves or simple pit graves, while tools, amber ornaments and weapons are common. So the interpretation, at that time, of the house as a grave house seemed unconvincing.

When we turn again to the megalithic chambers we find complex problems of interpretation, particularly of the ritual areas. In the megalithic tombs of Western Europe the ritual areas seem to be structurally well-defined—such as forecourts. Forecourts are rare in Scandinavian megaliths, and here the rituals seem to have been performed in front of the façade of the barrow near the entrance to the chamber. It was here that mass offerings were placed. In contrast to the Dutch and Oldenburg megalithic chambers which are often packed full with pottery, only a few pots seem to have been deposited with each burial in Scandinavian megalithic tombs. But large quantities of pottery are found outside, alongside and upon the kerbstones or façade on both sides of the entrances, as was mentioned above for the Tustrup graves. In one site in Scania more than 50,000 sherds of pottery were found, representing the remains of more than a thousand pots [6]. In Jutland usually anything from 50 to 100 pots are found during the excavation of a megalithic tomb.

The meaning of these finds has been under discussion since the beginning of this century [7]. It has been argued that they were either grave goods cleared out of the chamber to make room for fresh burials, or that they were offerings made at the tomb. The excavation of the Passage Grave of Grønhøj near Horsens demonstrated that the bulk of the pots had been standing intact in front of and behind the kerbstones where they were found, before the tomb fell into ruin [8]. Later excavations have further confirmed this evidence, and in a still unpublished excavation it was possible to separate two layers in front of the kerbstones [9]. The upper layer contained material cleared out of the chamber—typical grave goods such as axes, arrowheads, amber beads and scattered sherds of a few pots. In the lower layer the sherds were lying in rows of small heaps concentrated under the topmost point of the sloping kerbstones, and immediately in front of the slabs originally set on top of the kerbstones, forming a platform all round the barrow. According to this evidence it seems beyond all reasonable doubt that the vessels used at the tomb were placed on this platform, and that when the barrow became ruined they fell down and were covered with stones, sand and broken flint from the barrow. Then, later, the burial chambers were re-used by intruders (in this case the Battle-Axe people), who cleared the grave of its primary burials. A detailed examination now shows that the pottery from deposits outside the Passage Graves is often more or less homogeneous: this is true at least for groups of pots, and by detailed excavation it has been shown that such homogeneous groups occur in restricted areas [10]. The ritual of the builders of these megalithic Passage Graves would therefore seem to have involved offerings of large quantities of pots, and, or so it seems, pots of certain special types. Pedestalled-bowls, for example, are the most common type of vessel from the Passage Graves of Jutland, while, compared with other types, these are rare in the corresponding settlements.

Thus the evidence of these finds coincides in every respect with the evidence from Tustrup and Ferslev, and reciprocally they explain each other. Both houses seem to be grave houses, as burials certainly took place in them. But at the same time they were mortuary houses—consecrated areas corresponding to the rôle of the forecourts of the megalithic graves in Western Europe and façades of the Passage Graves in Scandinavia, since the funeral ceremonies also took place in them. In Tustrup only one ceremony took place: in Ferslev the house was standing for

some considerable time, and here exactly the same thing happened as happened in the Passage Graves: the primary deposits and probably the primary burial as well were removed to make room for another burial and for the performance of new ceremonies and the depositing of fresh offerings—after which the house was burnt down.

We know of no exact parallels to the Tustrup-Ferslev structures in the TRB culture or among the megalithic groups of Western Europe, but in both areas there occur related mortuary and grave houses. From Kujawia in Poland there are two Kujawian long barrows with wooden buildings at the broad end of the long barrows, both of which date from late in the Early Neolithic TRB culture [11]. Though nothing was found inside the houses their position indicates their ritual use. In the Saale area there are structures which can be interpreted as collective grave houses, or even burial chambers belonging to the Walternienburg-Bernburg culture, contemporary with Tustrup and Ferslev, and these too had been burnt down [12]. Finally in the Western Megalithic area wooden-built grave or mortuary houses burnt down and covered by long barrows are well known [13]. It would seem then that the grave house/mortuary house idea is common to the megalithic builders, at least in the West, in Scandinavia and in Northern Europe.

The evidence from Tustrup and Ferslev explains for us an important group of finds associated with megalithic graves, and quite apart from the C14 dates—the first dating of the Middle Neolithic Funnel-Beaker culture from Scandinavia—shows the contemporaneity of Passage Graves in Scandinavia, in the continental Funnel Beaker area, and in the Western Megalithic area. The first Danish Passage Graves are of the same date or only a little later than the Dutch *hunebedden*—the Odoorn tomb, a TRB flat grave containing Funnel-Beakers, overlain by a Hunebed, was dated to 2640 ± 80 BC [14], and the related graves in Western Germany; and are partly later, partly contemporary with the Breton and British megalithic structures [15].

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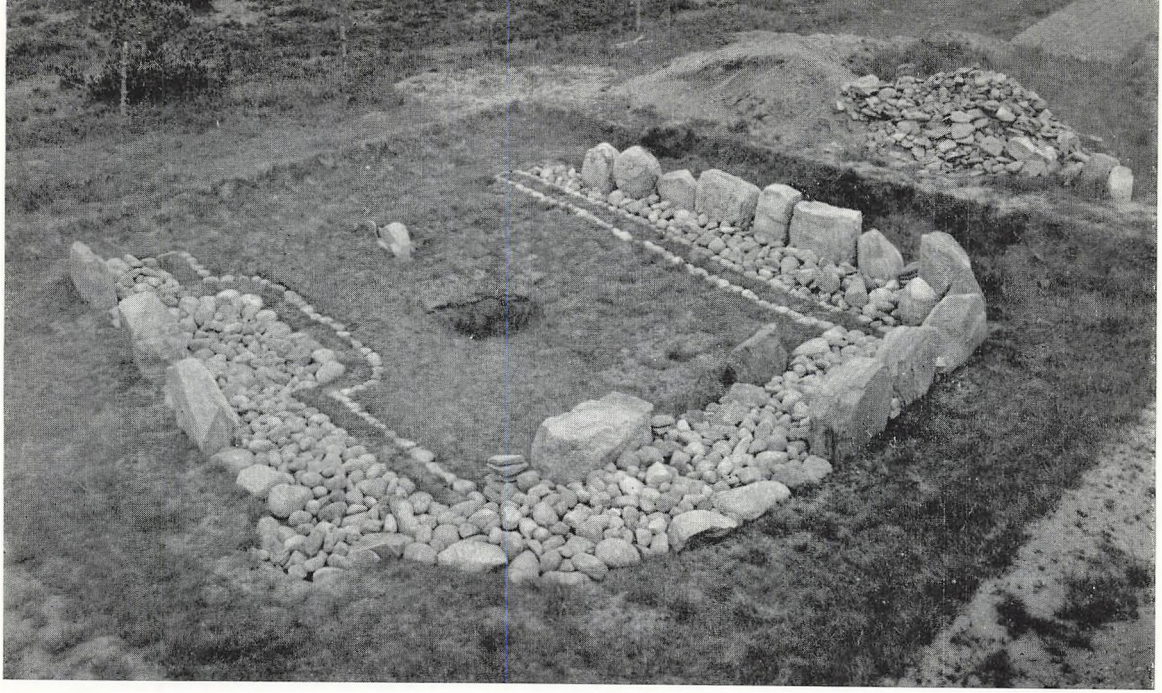

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PLATE XXV

MORTUARY HOUSES AND FUNERAL RITES IN DENMARK

(a) The mortuary house at Tustrup restored after excavation (from W). Foundation trenches for the timbers of the inner wall indicated by stones. Stones in the outer facing have been re-erected. (b) The megalithic cemetery at Tustrup after restoration, viewed from the NW: Foreground: freestanding Passage Grave chamber; middle distance, (left): mortuary house, (right): Passage Grave covered by barrow; background: round mound with hexagonal chamber.

See pp. 190–6]

[*Photo: b:* Copyright Reserved, University of Cambridge



b





MORTUARY HOUSES AND FUNERAL RITES IN DENMARK

(a) Funnel beakers, one with lid found beside it. The ornament has been executed in incised and notch-stamped technique. (b) Four of the ten pedestalled-bowls and pottery spoons found in association with them—they would seem to have been made in pairs

See pp. 190–6]

PLATE XXVII



(*a*) MORTUARY HOUSES AND FUNERAL RITES IN DENMARK

Typical bowl from the Ferslev house with ornament in a notch-stamped technique

See pp. 190-96]

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