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The Long Dolmen at Asnæs Forskov, West Zealand

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Continuing erosion by the sea necessitated the archaeological rescue of a protected long dolmen on the south coast of the peninsula Asnæs in northwest Zealand[1] (fig. 1). The excavation was conducted by *Kalundborg and Omegns Museum* and provided new insights into the multistage construction of monuments and earth graves with a combined wood and stone architecture. The following pages discuss the topographic situation of the monument and then parts of the construction as it was revealed during the excavations: from the outer line of kerb stones, to the mound itself, and finally the earth grave and its contents. A reconstruction of the earth grave provides some information on the possible appearance of these structures. Evidence from the excavated portion of the dolmen suggests that like in Jutland single earth graves were often the initial stage in the construction of megalithic monuments on Zealand.

The Topographic Setting

The major axis of the long dolmen at Asnæs lies perpendicular to the south coast of the Asnæs peninsula, with one end pointing toward the sea. The intact northern end of the dolmen lies in mixed oak forest. To the south towards the beach, the dolmen today is dissected by a 4 m high wave cut slope, where the sea is continuously eroding both the shoreline and the monument. On the beach below the monument lie several large stones that came either from the outer row of kerb stones or from structures inside the mound itself. Smaller stones similar to the stone cover on the mound are likewise abundant along this part of the beach, while almost no stones are seen west or east of the dolmen. According to local informants the coastline has changed dramatically since the beginning of this century. A section of flat land in front of the present coastline has been removed and the present slope itself has gradually moved further inland.

These changes in the coast line and the concentration of stones at the beach both indicate that the dolmen originally was longer. However, accurate estimates of how much of the monument has been lost to the sea cannot be made. Measurements of the monument prior to the excavation indicated that the dolmen was 23.5 m long – or 1.5 m longer than estimated by earlier surveys from the 1940s onwards. This apparent discrepancy is explained by the fact that the southernmost part of the dolmen was hidden by an impenetrable scrub of whitethorn. The new measurements do, however, suggest that the erosion by the sea has been a gradual process and that only a minor part of the mound has disappeared in recent years.

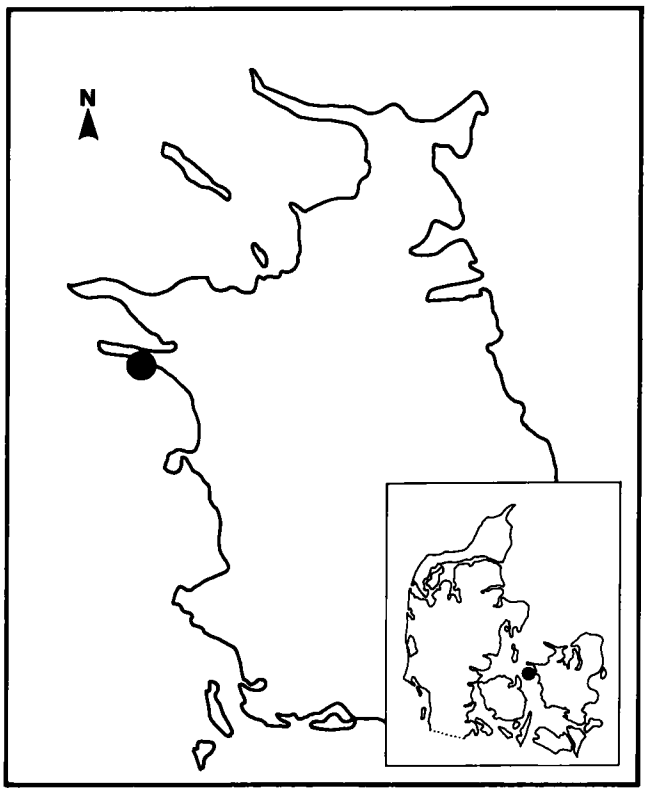


Fig. 1. Location of the longdolmen at the south coast of Asnæs in northwest Zealand.

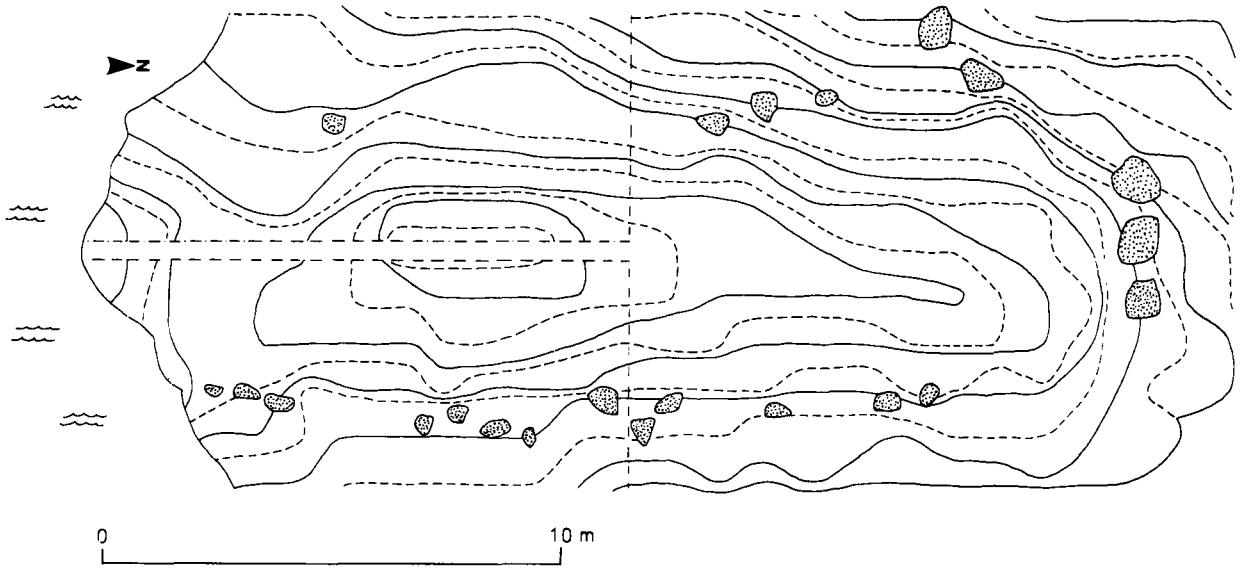


Fig. 2. Dolmen with visible kerb stones prior to excavation. Surface levels are indicated at 10 cm intervals.

The Kerb Stone Line

Twenty-two kerb stones were visible around the dolmen prior to excavation (fig. 2). Most of the kerb stones had slipped out of their original position and were standing or lying in an oblique position. The three largest kerb stones at the northern end of the dolmen suggested that the ends were emphasized by kerb stones larger than those used along the sides.

Within the excavation area, the kerb stones were numbered 1 to 13 from south to north along the east side and 14 to 22 north to south along the west side of the dolmen (fig. 3). Only four stones were found in their original upright position (No. 1, 2, 13, and 22), but the actual line of kerb stones was almost completely preserved. On the west side stones 20 and 21 had been removed, but their position was clear from the foundation pits. Between stone 22 and the south slope, however, no foundation pits were observed. On the east side, kerb stones previously had been removed between stone 3 and 7. A foundation pit was found in place of stone 6, while similar unambiguous traces of foundation pits could not be located for stones 4 and 5 – perhaps only one kerb stone had been placed here.

The southern part of the line kerb stones on the east side (stones 1 to 3) was clearly distinguished. The southern kerb stones were small, very regular in shape, and only a limited dry stone masonry had been put between the kerb stones. There were no foundation pits; instead, stones supporting the base of these kerb stones were placed on the original ground surface.

The northern segment of the kerb stone line was built of larger stones set in foundation pits. Large amounts of dry stone were used for walling along this part of the line. Overturned piles of 6 or 7 flat sandstone pieces were found at intervals in front of kerb stones. The quantity of flagstones suggests that the dry stone walling probably covered the top of the kerb stones as well. The overall impression of the kerb stone line would have been of a dry stone wall enclosing the kerb stones.

Two stages of construction apparently are represented in the kerb stone line. The northern part of large kerb stones and dry stone walling includes stones 6 to 13 on the east side and stones 22 to 14 on the east side. Kerb stones in the northern unexcavated part of the dolmen are likely part of this stage as well.

The southern stage of the kerb stone line includes stones 1 to 3 on the east side of the dolmen. The absence of foundation pits in this stage might explain the difficulties tracing the base of one or two kerb stones between stones 3 and 6. Likewise the apparent absence of kerb stones on the southwest side might be explained

by the lack of the foundation pits in relation to this stage of the line. It remains, however, uncertain whether or not the southern part of the kerb stone line originally existed on both sides of the dolmen.

The Mound

The long dolmen measured 23.5 × 6.8 m and was 1.4 m in height. The surface of the mound was almost horizontal (fig. 2). Some compensation for the northerly sloping ground surface seems to have been made during the construction of the monument. Longitudinal and transverse sections record the construction stages of the mound (fig. 4 A and B). Both sections reveal that north of the earth grave the mound had an inner core of boulders, covered by a layer of earth filling, and a surface cover of smaller stones. With the exception of the surface cover, the following description concerns only the portion of the mound north of the grave.

The surface was covered by two layers of smaller and larger stones (fig. 4A and 5). The southern part of this surface covering consisted of smaller and more closely packed stones than the northern part. Flag stones were incorporated in the surface cover, especially at the north-central portion of the dolmen and in relation to kerb stones. Recent disturbances were detected in the north-central section of the dolmen and in the northernmost 3 m of the inner side of the eastern kerb stone line.

It is likely that the original shape of the mound had a more pronounced transversal vault; the present mound surface was somewhat vaulted prior to the excavation (fig. 2). A great number of stones similar to those in the surface cover of the mound were found on the original ground surface at either side of the dolmen. The distribution of the stones indicates that they had slipped down from top of the mound through erosion, and were not a pavement alongside the kerb stones (fig. 4A).

The fill of the mound beneath the stone cover consisted of pure, or somewhat sandy, greyish-yellow clay with small particles of charcoal (layers 4 and 5). Clays in the mound fill is very similar to the local subsoil. The northern part of the longitudinal section includes a layer with an abundance of charcoal (layer 9), another containing unburned crushed flint (layer 9a), and another of clay mixed with gravel (layer 8). Such layers are often found in the packing around graves. However, no indications of grave structures were found in this part of the dolmen.

The central part of the mound was formed by a pile of large erratic boulders of almost megalithic size. The rocks were covered by a layer of clay (layer 5). The

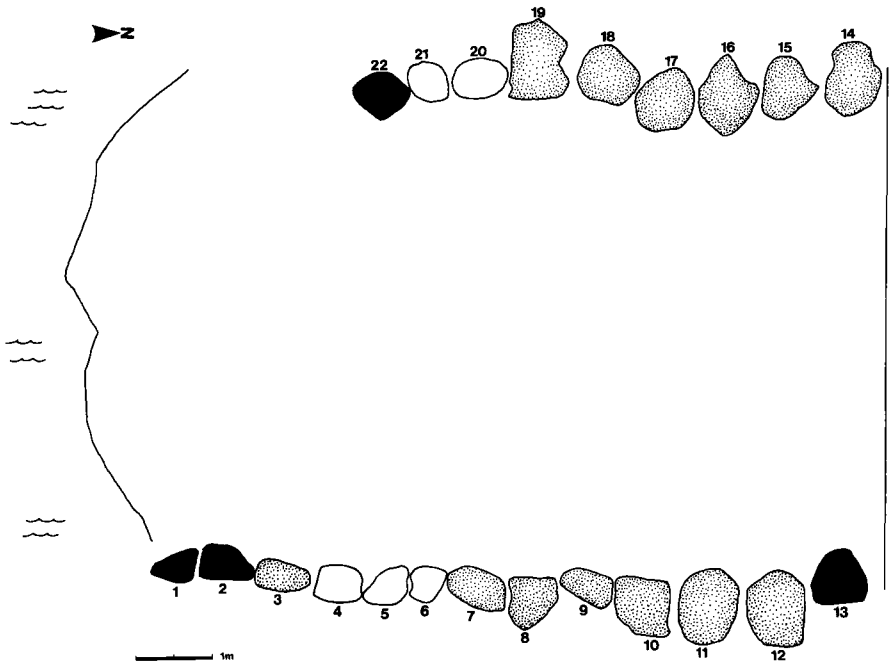


Fig. 3. Line of kerb stones in the excavated part of the dolmen. Stones in original position: black; Stones erected as part of the reconstruction: dotted; Stones added at the reconstruction: white.

outermost rocks in particular were set in solid clay, probably intended to stabilize the stone prior to the addition of the levelling layer of fill.

Beneath the core of rocks was a sandy layer of clay with varying amounts of charcoal particles (layer 6) – the original neolithic ground surface. No indications of settlement activities such as flint flakes or potsherds were found in this layer. Small areas in this layer were greyish-black from charcoal, especially in the area immediately north of the grave and a little further to the northeast. No structures were found in relation to these concentrations of charcoal.

The Relationship between the Mound and the Earth Grave

In the area immediately adjacent to the earth grave was a layer of solid yellow clay similar to the local subsoil, layer 14 in the north-south section (fig. 4B and C, see also 4E). This clay layer is thin and becomes discontinuous at the periphery, apparent only in small lumps. The yellow clay overlies the original ground surface or the subsoil (layer 10) where the original ground surface is absent. The yellow clay is also found beneath both the stone packing of the grave (layer 12 and 13) and the fill of the mound (layer 4 and 5).

The yellow clay (layer 14) most likely derives from original excavation of the northern posthole during the construction of the earth grave. Given this interpretation, it follows from the stratigraphic sequence that the earth grave is the primary structure while the mound north of the grave is a later addition.

Stratigraphic Sequence in the Earth Grave

The west side of the north-south section (fig. 4C) reveals the stratigraphic sequence inside the grave, while the east side of the 0.4 m wide section shows the stratigraphy of the stone frame around the outside of the grave (fig. 4B). A cross-section shows the packing at the northern end of the grave (fig. 4E).

Packing around the grave was placed on the original ground surface (layer 6) or on a thin layer of yellow clay (layer 14), probably remains of sediments removed from the northern posthole (see above). The packing itself consisted of hard solid clay with a few particles of charcoal (layer 12) or gravel (layer 13). Enclosed in the clay was a double row of boulders, built up in two or more layers at either end of the grave.

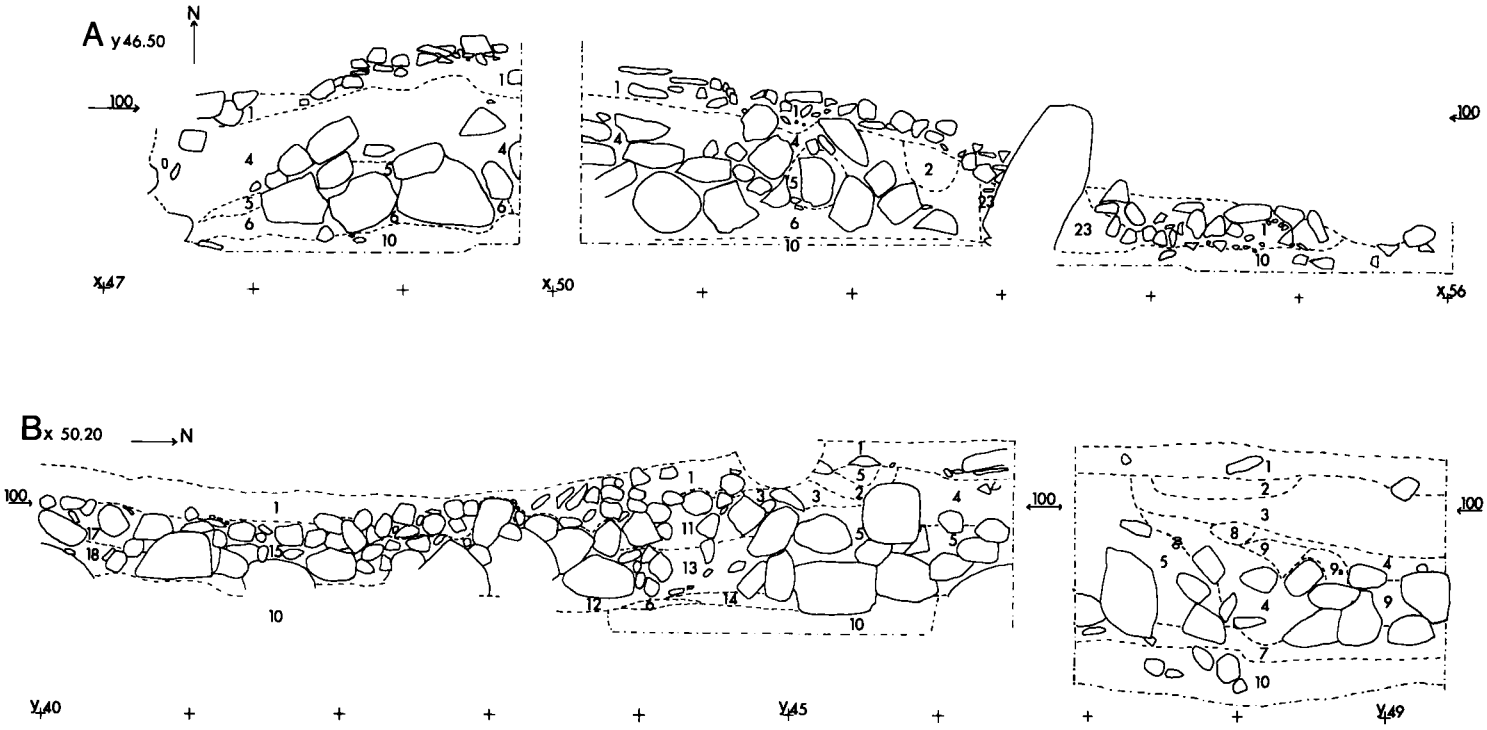
The stratigraphic sequence inside the grave showed two or three horizontal layers of stones above the burial floor. At the northern and southern ends of the grave stones were found in irregular piles, lying at oblique angles. Fill above the floor (layer 15) was homogeneous from the upper humus cover to the level of the grave floor. This layer of loose sandy clay mixed with humus was likely formed by materials which filtered down between the layers of horizontal stones.

Fill between the stones above the postholes at either end of the grave, was formed by two layers. The upper layer consisted of dark sandy clay mixed with humus, fragments of flag stones similar to those found on the grave floor, and unburned crushed flint, which was also found on the floor and in the postholes (to the south: layer 17, to the north: layer 11). Beneath was a layer of lighter clay with inclusions of the above layer, sand and humus, and unburned crushed flint (to the south: layer 16 and 18, to the north: layer 19). Fill in the central part of the postholes was similar to layer 18 and 19, while the fill along the periphery was almost indistinguishable from the subsoil (layer 22).

The stratigraphic sequence in relation to the postholes and the oblique position of the stones found above and in the holes themselves show that the original posts were removed before the wood deteriorated. Likely the stone packing around the posts was removed to roughly the level of the floor and then the posts were pulled up. Through this action, material from the level of the floor was brought to the top of the stratigraphic sequence, forming the darker layer mixed with humus above the postholes (layer 11 to the north and layer 17 to the south).

The Construction of the Earth Grave

The sequence of construction for the earth grave could be determined by combining both the vertical stratigraphy and the horizontal plan of the grave (fig. 6 and 7: 1–6). The first step was the excavation of the two postholes at either end of the grave (fig. 7.1). The northern posthole measured 0.9 × 0.6 m and was 0.9 m deep below floor level; the southern posthole measured 0.8 × 0.6 m and was 0.8 m deep. The northern posthole was carefully lined with flagstone towards the grave floor and along the sides. The bottom of the northern hole was covered by one large flagstone measuring 0.60 × 0.36 × 0.03 m. On the top of this large flagstone were



smaller pieces supporting the base of the post. The position of these smaller flagstones indicated that two posts, each with a triangular cross section caused by splitting a tree trunk, were placed in the hole. Under the lowest flag stone, gray grooves about 0.02 m wide appeared in the clay subsoil. Most likely these grooves are traces of the digging stick used for excavating the posthole.

The southern posthole did not have an elaborate flagstone lining. In the side of the grave floor, the hole was bounded by a round stone immediately below floor level; beneath that was a large flagstone. The bottom of the hole was covered by a pavement to support the base of the post. However, it was not possible to determine the number of posts placed here. Perhaps the southern posthole contained only one large post.

The next step in the construction was the placement of boulders to create a frame measuring 5.5 × 3.7 m on the outside and 3.8 × 2.1 m on the inside (fig. 7.2). At either end of the grave, a boulder partially covered the post hole and likely served to support the post. At the top of both boulders, another stone was lying in an oblique position with a plane surface turned towards the center of the grave. These two boulders must have originally supported the end posts as well. Several other large stones were piled up at either end of the grave as part of the outer stone frame for further support. Removal of the posts allowed the pair of boulders, together with part of the stone piles, to slide down and partially cover the postholes.

After erecting the end posts and the outer frame of boulders, the grave chamber itself was constructed. Low walls were built along each side by piling up three or four layers of red sandstone flags (fig. 7. 3a–b). Large flagstones formed a continuous base of the wall along the full length of the inner side of the boulder frame. At the southwest corner of the northern posthole, one of the bottom flagstones was dressed with a right angled corner to make it fit with the stone lining of the posthole underneath. On top of the large flagstones the frame wall was constructed of separate piles of two or three smaller flagstones.

The stone walls likely served as the foundation for wooden walls of horizontal planks. The wooden planks would have lain flush with the end post on the inner side of the frame wall. A number of stones were packed between the lowest plank and the outer frame of boulders as support on the outside (fig. 7.4). These stones were found immediately outside of the stone walls or partly on the walls.

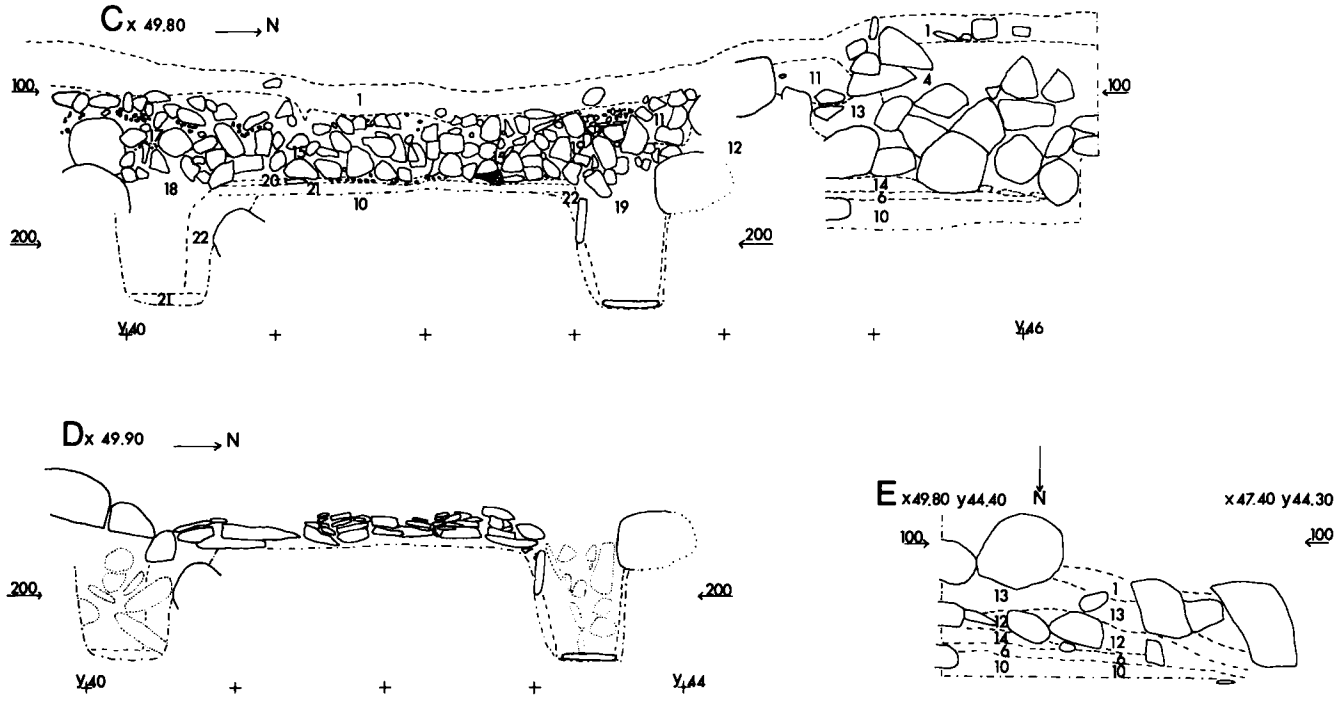


Fig. 4. (A) Cross section seen from the south; (B) longitudinal section seen from the east; (C) same section as (B) seen from the west 0.4 m apart from (B); (D) section through bottom part of the earthgrave showing the eastern dry stone wall and a projection of a section through the central part of the grave and the end postholes. Profiles (C) and (D) are laterally reversed to facilitate comparison with (B). (E) Cross section through the northern end of the stone packing around the earth grave, seen from north. 1:50.

Layer 1. Loose brown-black humus – forest turf.
Layer 2. Loose brown-black layer from animal activity.
Layer 3. Greyish yellow-brown clay – recent disturbance.
Layer 4. Loose to hard greyish yellow to yellow-brown clay mixed with sand and some charcoal particles – mound fill.
Layer 5. Hard greyish yellow clay, more homogeneous than layer 4 – mound fill.
Layer 6. Loose greyish black sandy clay with charcoal – activity layer / original ground surface.
Layer 7. Greyish yellow-brown spotted sandy clay with some charcoal particles – activity layer / original ground surface.
Layer 8. Hard yellow clay mixed with gravel.
Layer 9. Hard greyish yellow to black clay mixed with charcoal.
Layer 9a. Layer 9 mixed with crushed flint.
Layer 10. Solid yellow clay with occasional grey or yellow brown spots – subsoil.
Layer 11. Loose homogeneous brown-grey sandy clay.
Layer 12. Hard greyish yellow clay with some charcoal particles – packing around the earth grave.
Layer 13. Hard greyish yellow clay mixed with gravel – packing around the earth grave.
Layer 14. Solid yellow clay similar to the local subsoil.
Layer 15. Loose greyish yellow sandy clay – fill between stones above the earth grave.
Layer 16. Loose light grey sand with spots of yellow clay – enclosed in layer 18.
Layer 17. Loose homogeneous brown-greyish yellow sandy clay like layer 15, but darker and mixed with fragments of flint and sand stone flagstones similar to the layer just above the burial floor.
Layer 18. Spotted greyish brown clay mixed with dots of layer 17 and of grey sand, enclosing layer 16.
Layer 19. Spotted greyish yellow clay with brown dots, mixed with sand and humus.
Layer 20. Loose dark brown clay mixed with fragments of flint and sand stone flagstones and sand stone gravel.
Layer 21. Red sand stone flagstones.
Layer 22. Solid greyish yellow clay.
Layer 23. Loose grey-brown spotted clay – foundation and fill immediately around kerb stone.

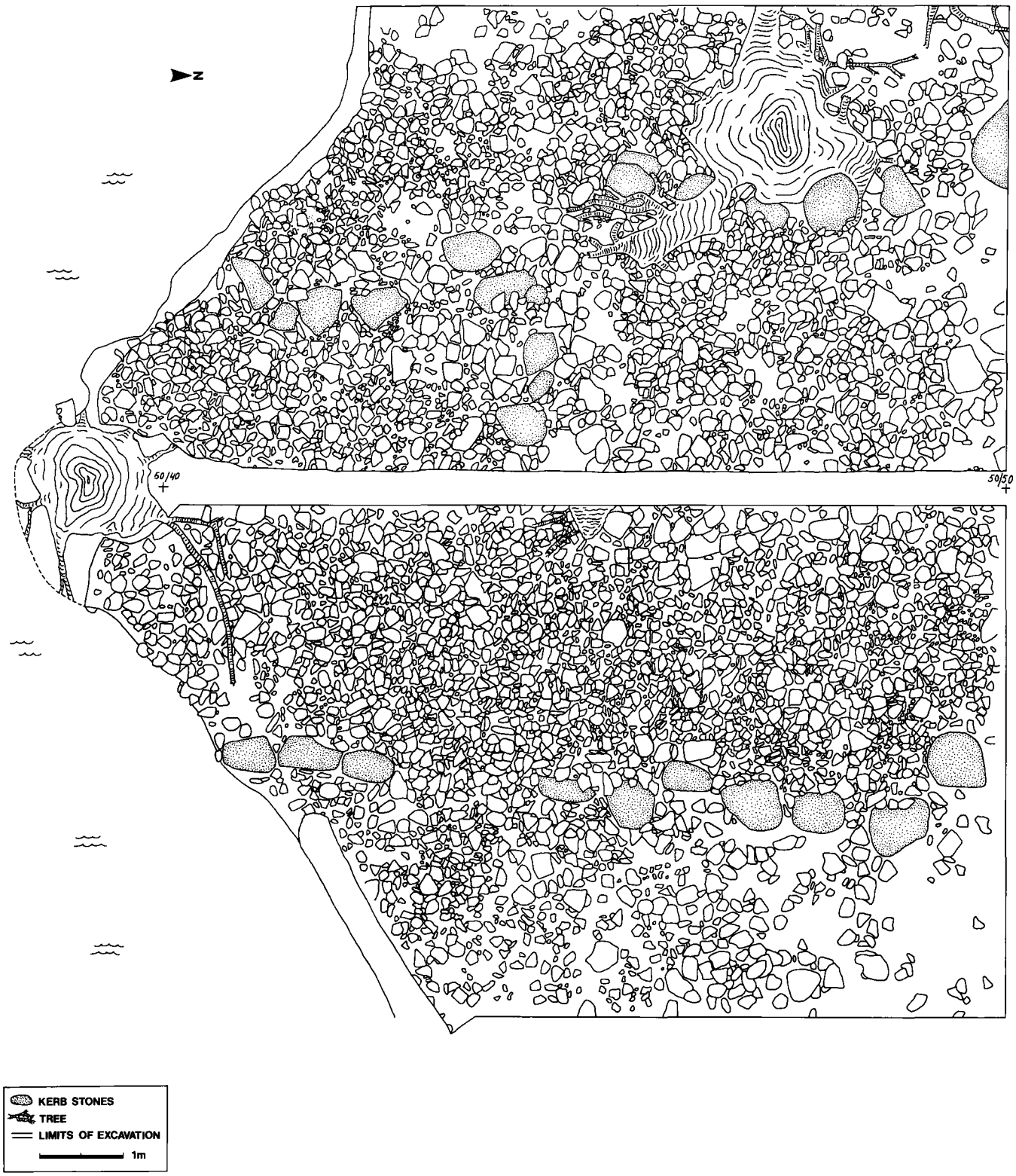


Fig. 5. Surface cover of the mound with kerb stones and the stone frame around the earth grave marked with a dotted signature.

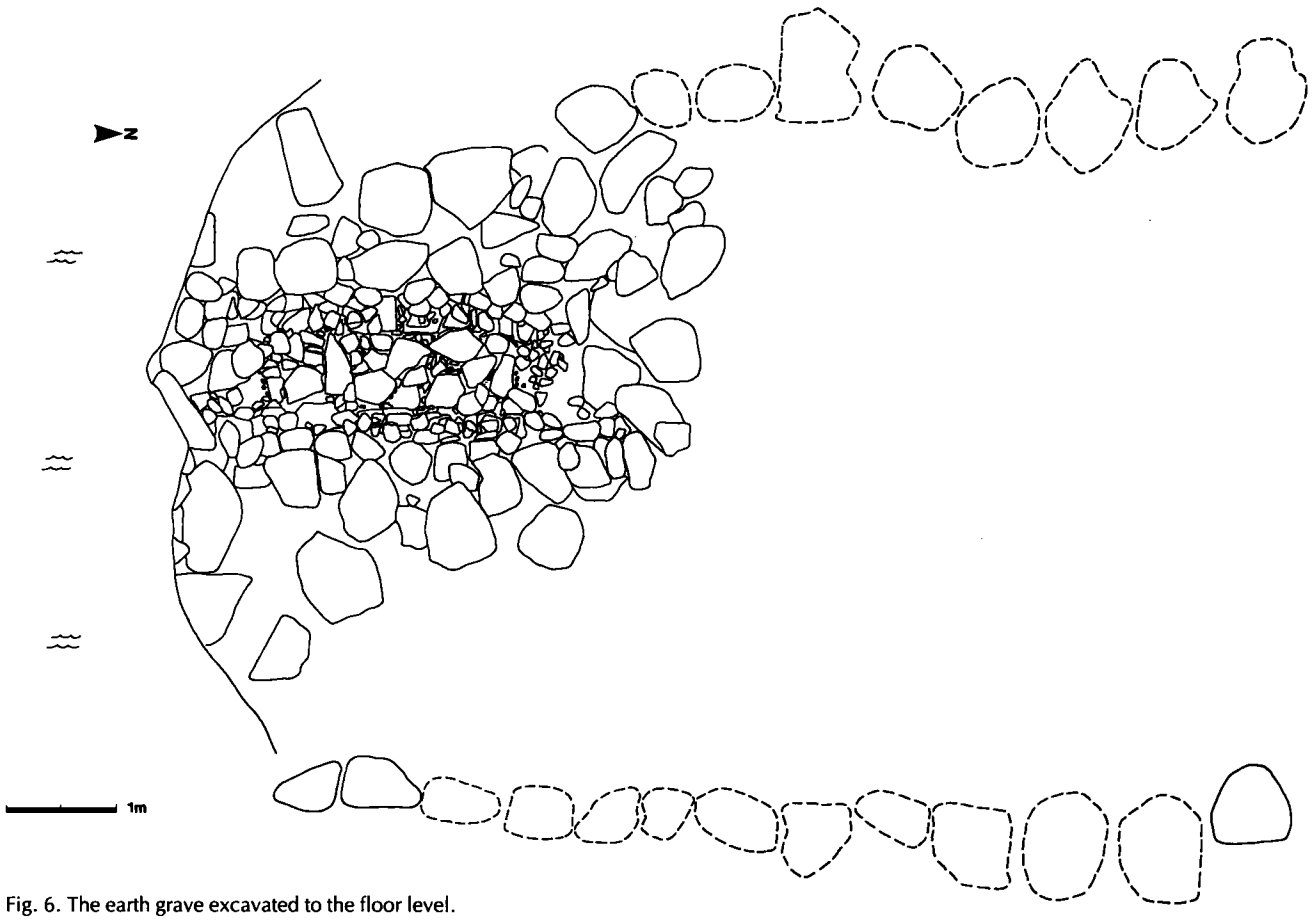


Fig. 6. The earth grave excavated to the floor level.

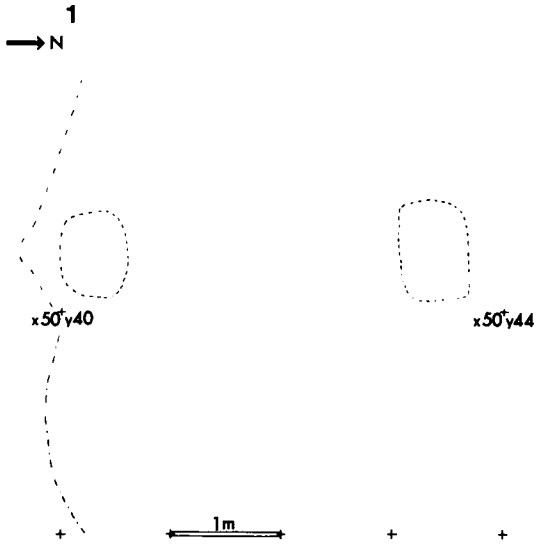
A few flagstones from the top of the stone walls apparently tipped over and were found in vertical position just outside of the wall. This indicates that there was some free space outside the grave chamber and that no other packing or mound was added directly around the chamber.

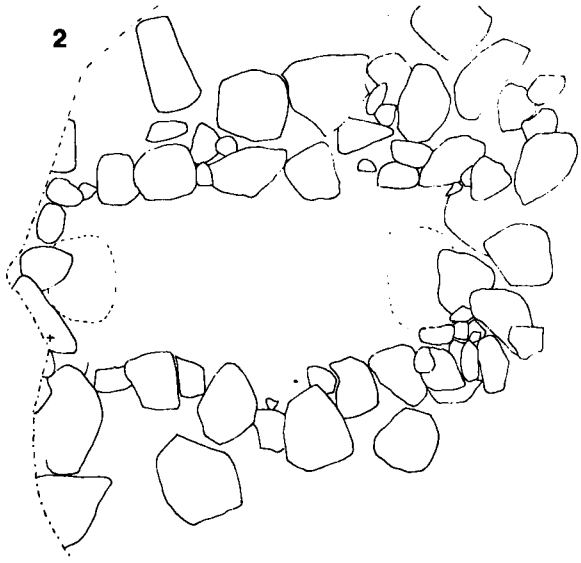
After erecting the stone walls, the next step was to pave the burial floor with red sandstone flags (fig. 4. Section C, layer 21; fig. 7.5). The floor pavement was made in one even layer across the area between the end posts and the side walls. The pavement was very regular with smaller flag fragments added as fill between the floor and the walls.

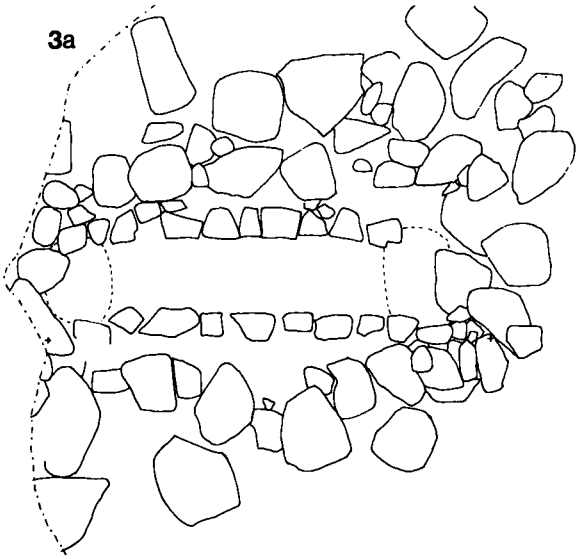
Following the pavement of the floor, wooden side walls and perhaps a wooden roof would have been built prior to the actual burial. Grave goods were found on the floor pavement inside the grave, covered by a dark brown layer mixed with unburned crushed flint, fragments of sandstone flags and sandstone gravel (fig. 4. Section C, layer 20). This layer must have formed the immediate covering in the grave chamber. On top of this were added three horizontal layers of stones. Perhaps these stone layers were added as a final cover for the grave when the end posts were removed. There was no indications of a mound in connection with the earth grave.

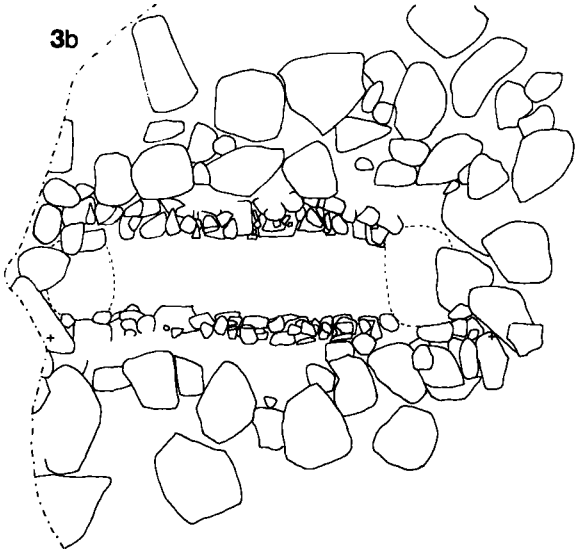
Grave Goods

Grave furnishings were found along the stone wall on the eastern side of the grave (fig. 7.6). At the northern end two clay flasks had been placed together. One of these pots was a collared flask with vertical incised grooves on it's strongly curved bottom. The other flask had similar grooves on the bottom and two lugs at the









neck/bottom transition. Neither of the flasks were decorated at the at the rim (fig. 8).

To the south, two flakes and two blades were found (fig. 7.6). One of these blades and one of the flakes were lightly retouched; the other blade had a regular retouched back. Analysis of the four pieces of flint by Peter Rasmussen of the National Museum showed that only the blade with retouched back had microwear polish preserved. This blade knife showed traces of meat cutting (fig. 9).

No traces were found of the body. Given the position of the grave goods, it was placed along the western wall. In early dolmens the dead are usually placed in surpine position, often with one or two pots near the feet (Thorsen 1980). If these rules were followed at Asnæs, the dead person(s) would have been laid out on their back with the feet to the north and the head to the south. Thus the flint tools would have been placed in the breast region of the body.

Flint flakes were also included in the fill of the post

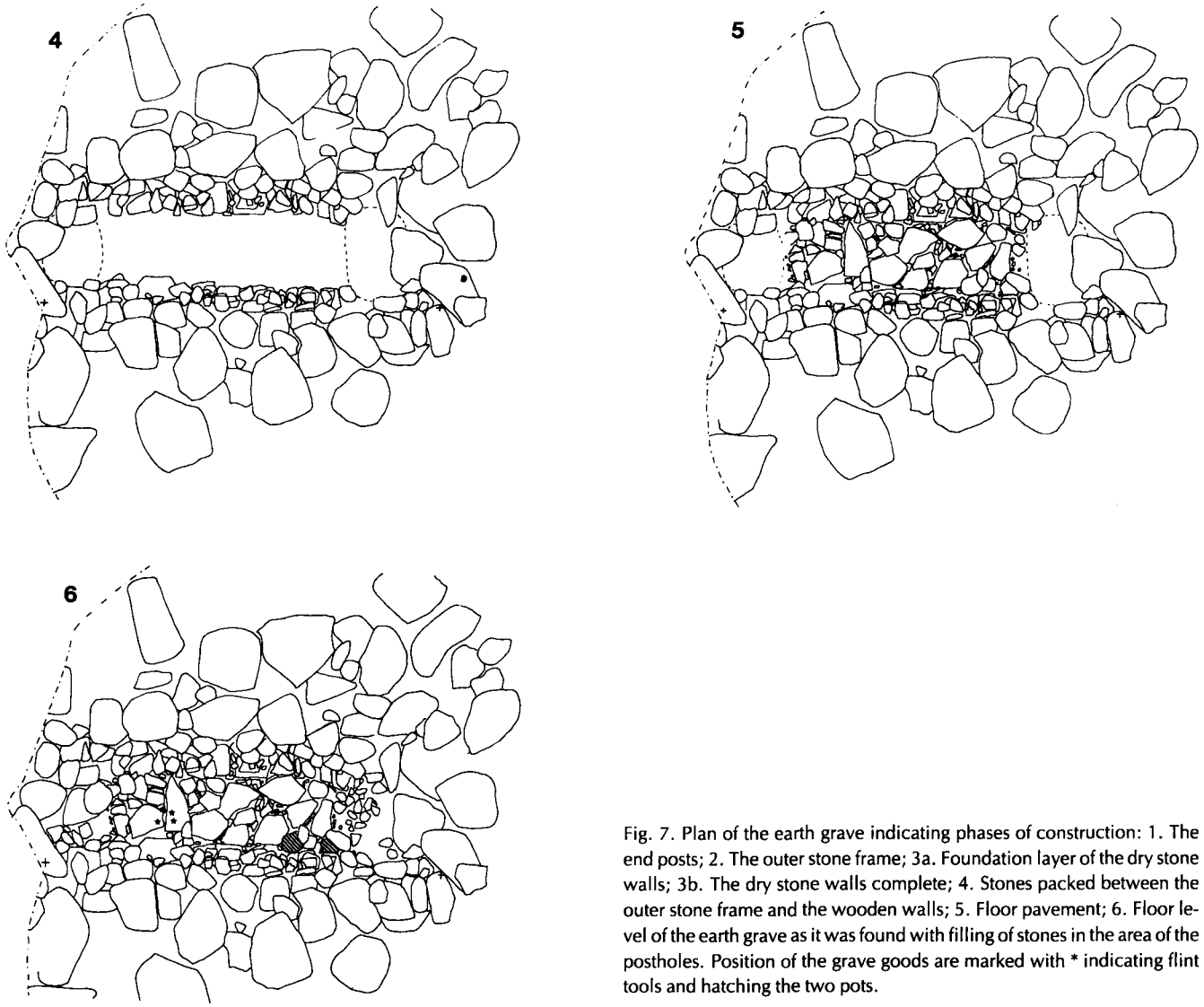


Fig. 7. Plan of the earth grave indicating phases of construction: 1. The end posts; 2. The outer stone frame; 3a. Foundation layer of the dry stone walls; 3b. The dry stone walls complete; 4. Stones packed between the outer stone frame and the wooden walls; 5. Floor pavement; 6. Floor level of the earth grave as it was found with filling of stones in the area of the postholes. Position of the grave goods are marked with * indicating flint tools and hatching the two pots.

holes, together with unburned crushed flint. However, it is unlikely that these flakes should be considered as grave goods. The flint flakes might derive from later flintknapping at the site and could be accidentally mixed with the filling of the holes during the removal of the posts.

Reconstruction of the Burial Structure

The stone foundation of the grave was constructed of a heavy outer frame of boulders, low flagstone side walls, and a floor pavement. One or two posts were raised at either end of the grave. Given the depth of the postholes, the posts themselves would have been 1.5–2.0 m above floor level of the grave. The posts would have formed the ends of the grave chamber. The side walls were made of horizontal planks lying on the low flagstone walls and resting against the inner side of the end posts. On the outside the lowest plank was kept in place by a stone packing between the plank and the outer boulder frame. The distance between this stone packing and the posts, as indicated by the well preserved northern posthole, suggests that the planks used were about 0.25 m wide. Ground plan of the chamber measured 3.6 × 1.1 m on the outside and 2.4 × 0.7 m on

the inside. Thus the structure was heavily built and rather long and narrow.

The height of the wooden side walls and the appearance of a possible roof is uncertain. Vertical side walls of horizontal planks might have been raised to the top of the end posts perhaps 2 m above floor level. Any covering would have been a flat roof. It is perhaps more likely that the wooden walls were only partially raised against the end posts. In this case a flat roof might also have been constructed, resulting in a large coffin-like structure with free-standing wooden pillars at either end. It is also possible that a tent-like roof structure was built on top of the wooden side walls by connecting the end posts with a central ridge and leaning planks for the roof against the ridge, as suggested at other sites (Madsen 1972, 1979). However, the horizontal stone layers above the grave suggest that either a flat cover was made for the grave or a tent-like roof was torn down before the grave was covered by stones. The solid ends covering the full width of the interior of the grave likewise suggest a rectangular, rather than a tent-like, structure.

Most likely the grave at Asnæs was constructed as a low coffin-like chamber with freestanding wooden pillars at either end. Access to the chamber would have been possible from either the sides of the roof. The boulder frame around the chamber would inhibit possible entrances from the side. Thus the chamber might have been left open on top as long as access to the dead was desired. After a certain period of time, the end posts were removed and the grave closed almost forever by a stone cover.

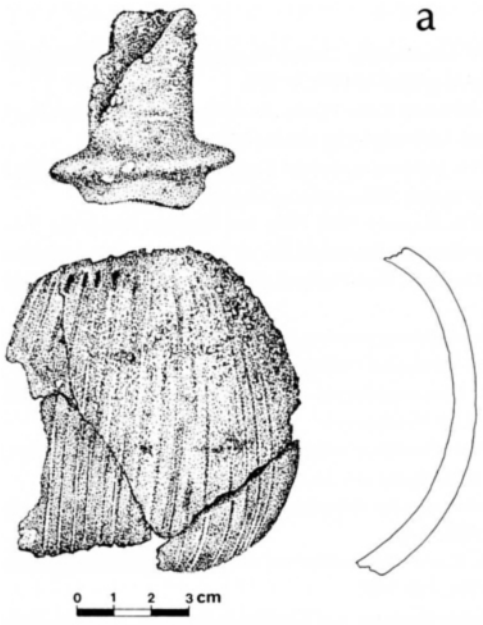
Conclusion

The Asnæs grave is an example of burial structures which combine wood and stone architecture. It is the first grave of the Konens Høj type to be found on Zealand. Konens Høj structures are characterized by solid ends, formed by posts or rectangular-hewn planks set in deep stone-packed foundation pits, at either end of the burial floor (Madsen 1979: 309). By comparison with graves where large triangular megaliths constituted one of the gables, a tent-like structure has been suggested with side walls leaning against a central ridge supported by the gables. Access to the chamber likely would be through an opening in the side. These selfsupporting wooden structures are sparsely furnished with stones. The structures are deliberately destroyed, usually by fire. In some cases, however, the posts were removed and the structure itself torn down. Most of the pottery found in the Konens Høj burials belong to the megalithic C-style. Radiocarbon dates from Hejring with a mean value of 2655 ±100 b.c. suggest a date late in Early Neolithic TRB at the transition to MN I for this type of structure (Madsen 1979). A similar date for the Asnæs grave is suggested by the shape and decoration of the two clay flasks (Becker 1947, Ebbesen og Mahler 1980, Madsen og Petersen 1984).

Construction of the Asnæs grave is unique in the combination of the Konens Høj type layout with a heavy stone structure and a delicate floor pavement. After erecting the end posts an outer frame of boulders was built around the chamber area. The chamber itself was constructed with a stone foundation of low dry stone walls and a floor pavement and with a wooden superstructure of vertical sidewalls partially raised against the end posts. The wooden structure itself seems more massive than those found at other sites of the Konens Høj type. Also, the Asnæs grave seems to have a coffin-shaped chamber with freestanding wooden pillars at the ends rather than a tent-like superstructure. No indications of a facade was found with the grave, but it might have been removed by the sea like the rest of the dolmen to the south of the grave. The wooden superstructure was destroyed by removing the end posts and no traces of fire was found in relation to the grave itself. However, a few concentrations of charcoal near the grave suggest some use of fire at the site. Graves of the Konens Høj type are usually placed longitudinally in a mound. No trace of a mound was found with the grave at Asnæs, only two or three layers of stones were applied as a cover. Both the stratigraphy and the asymmetrical location of the grave in relation to the mound indicate that the long dolmen north of the grave was added at a later stage.

The Asnæs grave is an example of the overlap in the types of earth graves (Thorvildsen 1941, Madsen 1979). Local differences might be involved, but to date little is known about earth graves on Zealand. In case of the Asnæs grave, the availability of raw materials such as the red sandstone flags and the stones and boulders along the seashore could have directly influenced the final appearance of the structure.

Several aspects of the construction of the grave at Asnæs recall similarities with megalithic chambers. Boul-



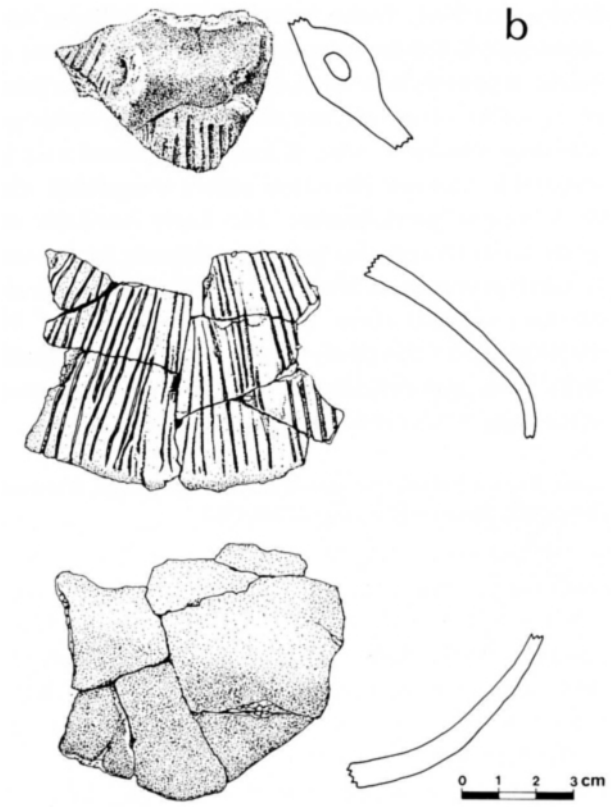


Fig. 8. The two vessels, a collared flask (a) and a lugged flask (dolmen flask) (b) found in northern end of the grave. Both vessels were decorated with vertically incised lines on the upper part of the belly arranged in a continuous row at the collared flask and in groups on the lugged flask. (Drawn by Kurt Petersen) 1:2.

ders used in the outer frame and to support the posts were almost of megalithic size. The floor pavement and the dry stone walls are elements normally included in megalithic tombs. Combined wood and stone structures such as the Asnæs grave emphasize the similarities between megalithic and non-megalithic chambers (Kjærum 1971, Madsen 1979). The layout of the burial itself with pottery in one end and flint tools at the other – as well as the inclusion of clay flasks typically found in Zealand dolmens – also implies a parallel between the two types of chambers (Thorvildsen 1941, Becker 1947).

The distribution of Early Neolithic earth graves has exhibited a clear concentration in Jutland (Thorvildsen 1941, Madsen 1979). Earth graves found in recent excavations at Lindebjerg (Liversage 1980) and Onsved (Kaul 1988) on Zealand, however, suggest that this pattern might be the result of archaeological research strategies. Megalithic chambers are more easily recognized during survey and excavation. Often these chambers are the only part of the monument that has

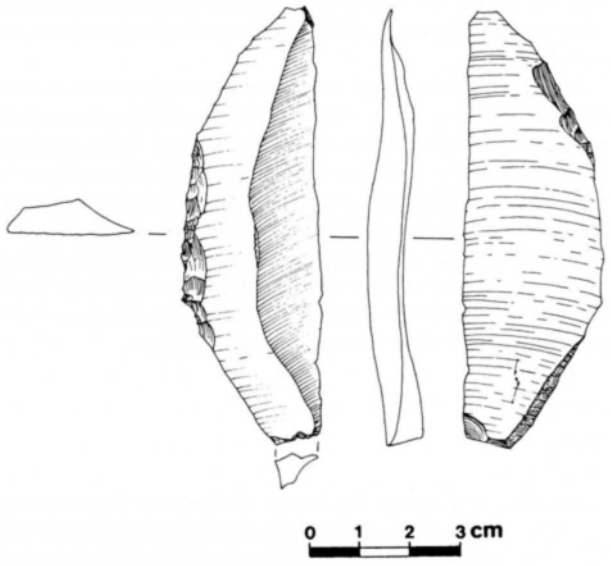


Fig. 9. Blade knife showing microwear after meat cutting. (Drawn by Kurt Petersen) 2:3.

been excavated. Today roughly 3000 dolmens of the early type is known from Zealand. Many of these sites might originally have been built as earth graves prior to more substantial constructions. Thus an earth grave tradition similar to what is found in Jutland may have existed in eastern Denmark before megalithic chambers became predominant. The Early Neolithic earth grave from Dragsholm and the relatively high number of earth graves from Middle Neolithic TRB on Zealand further support this assumption (Petersen 1974, Hansen 1974). Certainly a continuous burial tradition with both non-megalithic and megalithic chambers seem to be evidenced by the Asnæs dolmen.

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NOTE

1. Sb. 325, Årby parish, Ars herred, Holbæk amt. Excavated by the author as part of a project for young unemployed people organized by Kalundborg and Omegns Museum during the summer 1986. KAM J. No 1/86; KAM Inventory No 18455. National Museum J. No 520/69.

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