



Book Reviews

BLICK MEAD EXPLORING THE 'FIRST PLACE' IN THE STONEHENGE LANDSCAPE BY DAVID JACQUES, TOM PHILLIPS AND TOM LYONS

Peter Lang, Oxford. 2018. 238pp, 87 B&W and col, figs, 62 tables, hb, ISBN 978-1-7807-096-7, £35.00

Not since word of what Ronnie Simison was bringing out of Isbister started to reach the mainland has so much rumour and speculation surrounded the results of an excavation. It is particularly welcome, then, to see this very timely volume on the results of the on-going works at Blick Mead. It is, as the authors declare, 'an interim statement' rather than a full publication, and it is only fair to judge it as such. Both fieldwork and post-excavation analysis continued beyond the period covered by this volume, and it is certain that Blick Mead still contains surprises.

The surprises in this volume come thick and fast. The Summary opens with the statement that 'Excavations at Blick Mead and its adjacent terrace... provide evidence for the people who built the first monuments on the Stonehenge knoll and the first Mesolithic residential and activity area to be discovered within the Stonehenge World Heritage Site' (p.xvii). These, and others from the opening page of the first introductory chapter, are grand claims, but before the supporting evidence is presented, the work itself is introduced.

David Jacques is, of course, to be congratulated for the way he turned his project from a small affair into a thing of wide renown, on a shoe-string budget and powered mostly by good will, with a degree of community involvement that a decade or so ago would have put many other much better-financed projects to shame. For this if nothing else, the Blick Mead team have reason to be proud of themselves.

The key element of Blick Mead's archaeological importance, of course, lies in the assemblages of Mesolithic flintwork and faunal remains recovered partly from below the modern water table in Trenches 19, 22 and 23 and on an adjoining terrace in Trench 24, these trenches forming the basis of the reporting in this volume. Understanding the stratigraphy in these trenches is essential to being able to properly assess the significance of their contents, but sadly the descriptions are something of a muddle. One example is sufficient to illustrate the general lack of clarity.

In Trench 19 'the earliest recorded layer in the sequence [78] was a pale green sandy silt' (p.19) and indeed this is shown in the corresponding section (Fig. 2.2). However, 'Layer 78 was sealed by Mesolithic horizon [59]' although the section shows it to be beneath 67 and 92. It takes some digging to work out that 67 and 92 are divisions of layer 59 into metre squares, and that 59 is both the layer and a metre square within it (or rather three separate metre squares: 59A, B and C). The illustrated section is of square 77 and the adjoining 92 (not evidently a metre square), but it is not made clear at this point in the volume if this same stratigraphic sequence was encountered across the rest of the trench, nor if the rest of the trench was indeed excavated. What we can determine from the description and illustration in Chapter 2 is that layer 59 and its subdivisions lay low in the sequence and contained 11,727 pieces of Mesolithic flint, 'an exceptionally large' quantity of burnt flint, and 2058 large vertebrate bones, but what the extent of this layer was is not made clear. This matters, because these quantities of material over the trench as a whole would be a rather different thing to them concentrated in a couple of metres square, but it is not until Chapter 4 that this becomes apparent.

Treatment of the radiocarbon dates is similarly opaque. Nine are noted from Trench 19 'across a 2900-year period of the Mesolithic' (p.20), but how do the dates relate to each other? Is SUERC-42525 (8542±27 BP) stratigraphically earlier than SUERC-37208 (5900±35 BP)? It is impossible to know, although the inference is that all of the dated material was jumbled up together in the layer. Do the dates cluster around certain points in the long chronology they cover, or are they more evenly spread? Although the dates are listed in Table 2.1, these questions are not discussed. These are not unimportant considerations for understanding the nature of activity at the site.

These things matter because – although it is possible to puzzle out most of the details of the work undertaken and its scale from the various different sections of the volume – not everyone may want to read descriptions of the results of boreholes, or the very excellent report on the lithic assemblage, and readers of different selections of the volume would come away with rather different understandings of the site. On a related note, much of the matter relegated to the appendices would have worked better in Chapter 2, giving the volume as a whole more balance between the account of the fieldwork and the specialist reports. A firmer editorial hand would have dealt with these shortcomings.

As best as can be ascertained, the off-terrace archaeology at Blick Mead – that in Trenches 19, 22 and 23 – takes the form of substantial quantities of struck and burnt flint and animal bone dumped on the edge of or on the boggy floodplain of the Avon: the lack of very small pieces of flintworking waste is suggested as possibly indicative of this by Barry Bishop, although other contributors to the volume confusingly refer to the wet ground as a spring or springline, despite

the geoarchaeological surveys reported in Chapter 3 having established that the Mesolithic context is of a floodplain edge, and Tony Brown having suggested in Chapter 2 that Blick Mead was not a spring. David Jacques addresses this question in the concluding chapter, and rightly notes that 'ongoing research and discussion' (p.160) are needed.

Regardless, the Blick Mead evidence is a notable enough discovery: indications of Mesolithic use of the river and its floodplain in the area have been accumulating for decades, but this is the first substantial body of artefactual and ecofactual material to be recovered.

Given that people generally choose not to live in bogs, is there any indication of where and what the activity resulting in this material was? The answer is perhaps. Trench 24, on the terrace a little way to the north and west of the other trenches reported on here, contained tree-throw hollows, one with a little struck flint and a radiocarbon date in the first quarter of the 8th millennium, the second with a good deal of Late Mesolithic knapping waste, but with radiocarbon dates which do not overlap with those from Trench 19 or anywhere else on the site. Indeed, the most notable feature of this material is that it lies in the period 4236–4041 and 4234–4045 cal BC, as close to the transition from the Mesolithic to Neolithic as we are likely to get (and, as Jacques points out, overlapping with the dates for the curated domestic cattle bone from Stonehenge: p.165).

What was happening at Blick Mead? Much of the remainder of the volume is taken up by specialist contributions (geoarchaeological investigations, environmental analysis, lithics, faunal remains) which, as would be expected, add variously detailed contributions to their respective larger bodies of evidence, dependent on the quality of the datasets recovered. There are interesting observations on the dating of peat formation and the evidence of cultivation in later prehistoric periods, but, revealingly, 'a lack of evidence for ground disturbance, for example, by trampling, and no obvious evidence for soil formation' at any point in the Mesolithic sequence (p.61).

Barry Bishop's consideration of the large quantities of heated stone recovered from the off-terrace Mesolithic layers lead him to suggest that 'large-scale cooking was occurring... and this resonates with the large quantities of animal bone recovered' (p.76). It is difficult to find alternative explanations for this mass of fire-cracked flint, and butchery marks on parts of the fragments of at least four aurochsen from the Mesolithic contexts support the contention, but nowhere within the excavations was evidence of burning found, and one is led to wonder exactly where in the surrounding landscape these feasts were taking place? Talk of a 'residence' on the higher drier ground point in the right direction, but it is open to question

whether two tree-throw hollows some three thousand years apart in use really count as a Mesolithic 'settlement'.

A word on the figures: although the volume is handsomely and generously illustrated with both line drawings and plates (in a single sequence of figures), and while these are for the most part attractively presented, there is one failing of major import. Nowhere are either the site or the excavated trenches accurately located. The Trench Location Plan (Fig. 1.3) cannot be located on the plan of sites investigated (Fig. 1.2), which in turn can only be generally identified on the General site location (Fig. 1.1). Neither the overall Trench Location Plan nor the individual trench outlines, plans and sections in Chapter 2 contain any means of working out where the trenches actually were. Only in Chapter 3 are the drawings accompanied by National Grid References, and these are still insufficient to locate any of the trenches within them with any acceptable degree of accuracy. That the figures are sometimes incorrectly referenced in the text, and do not always show what they purport to show (the figure mentioned in text as showing intervisibility between various sites, for instance, is wrongly referenced, and is merely a site location plan, with nothing relating to intervisibility shown) does not help.

Some of these are editorial failings, of which there are many. Occasional lapses of sense and misspelling of names – Chippingdale for Chippindale, Pommery-Killinger for Pomeroy-Kellinger, for example – are annoying, but do not hamper understanding too badly. More serious are oversights such as 'In order to elucidate the stratigraphic position of the lithic material *within* the BCH...' (p.19) when nowhere has the reader been told what the BCH is, and it is not until page 32 that the term is introduced. Table references in text often refer to the incorrect table. SUERC-66820 (5412±30 BP) is quoted in the text as 4340–42323 cal BC. This might not matter too much, were the same date not given in Table 2.1 as 4340–4183. None of this results in clarity or ease of understanding, and one can only hope that these errors will be corrected on final publication of the results of what is, after all, a site of some importance.

Does the volume live up to its own claims? Partly. The more sensational claims for the site reported in national and international news media are not for the most part addressed in this volume, which is thankfully a rather more sober undertaking. While there is some congruity between the radiocarbon dates for some of the Mesolithic features in the old Stonehenge visitor's car park and those from Blick Mead, and while it does not stretch the bounds of credulity too far to suggest that the people passing through the latter knew of (and perhaps even built) the former, or that the posts were in some way related to the hunting of aurochs (p.164), the notion that the evidence on the terrace represents the first Mesolithic residential and activity area to be discovered within the Stonehenge World Heritage Site is a claim too far. Late Mesolithic activity is already known elsewhere in the WHS, and to claim that collections of

lithic material in tree-throws equates with 'residence' or a 'tree throw dwelling area' (p.162) is too rich for this reviewer's blood. It seems more likely that the material dumped into the marshy floodplain and into the tree hollows on the terrace both represent redeposited material deriving from cooking and feasting activities that were taking place episodically over a very prolonged period elsewhere. David Jacques notes this himself, at least partly, when he states that 'the assemblage in the wet areas may have originally been homebase debris, middened from the terrace' (p.161) and this is undoubtedly correct. It is impossible to know how frequently Blick Mead was visited, but an assemblage of 30,000 pieces of struck flint accumulating over 3000 years need not be very many or unusually large-scale visits. We do not know, of course, how far the lithic scatters extend, nor what the actual scale of the activity at and around Blick Mead was. What seems certain is that the activities that resulted in the material deposited in the river took place elsewhere, probably nearby, on the dry land. Precisely where on the terrace that was remains to be determined. Perhaps future seasons of work in and around Blick Mead will provide the answer. One hopes that the site receives the attention (and resources) it deserves.

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Editor