



Book Reviews

MEZOLITH: STONE AGE DREAMS AND NIGHTMARES (BOOK 2) BY BEN HAGGARTY AND ADAM BROCKBANK

Boom Studios, 2016, 96pp; extensively illustrated, ISBN- 978-1608868315, hb, £18.99

This graphic novel is the second volume within the MeZolith series. It tells the story of Poika; a young boy growing up as part of the Kansa tribe in Eastern Britain during the Early Mesolithic, and is set sometime after the events of MeZolith, with Poika's father notably older and Poika himself taking up more responsibilities within the Kansa tribe. The structure of Book 2 is similar to that of Book 1 (Haggarty & Brockbank 2010), mixing Poika's over-arching, coming-of-age narrative with shorter interludes of myth and dream which illustrate the wider cosmology of the Kansa and foreshadow various plot points within the main story. It sits alongside a flurry of novels (perhaps best termed 'historical fiction') which have addressed the Mesolithic of Northwest Europe in recent years (e.g. Elphinstone 2010; Paver 2005; 2006; 2007; 2008; 2009; 2010).

For Mesolithic research, a period which suffers from a documented low-level of awareness within the public consciousness (Milner *et al.* 2015), attracting the attention of renowned performance story-teller Ben Haggarty and concept artist Adam Brockbank (who's CV boast *Star Wars: Rogue One*, the *Harry Potter* films and *Captain America: The First Avenger*) represents something of a coup. MeZolith Book 1 was critically acclaimed, receiving a *Times Graphic Novel of the Year Award* in 2010 and glowing reviews from those within the world of comics publishing. The series therefore represents something of a success story for pushing the Mesolithic period into the consciousness of people working outside of archaeology.

As a researcher who specialises in the Mesolithic of Northwest Europe, MeZolith provides a huge amount of food for thought. Haggarty and Brockbank's approach to research is meticulous, often bending over backwards to accommodate new archaeological findings as they are made and disseminated. For example, characters have been re-drawn and eyes recoloured to reflect the publication of new aDNA research into the genetic makeup of the European Mesolithic population (Olalde *et al.* 2014). Some of the recent, and as yet unpublished, findings of the POSTGLACIAL project's excavations at Flixton Island (Milner *et al.* forthcoming) are also alluded to. However, conventional archaeological 'accuracy' or 'authenticity' are not the author's primary focus. At times, some of the imagery and material forms are 'borrowed' from other periods and regions, such as the distinctly Mediterranean Neolithic-looking figurines which appear in the Early Mesolithic of Eastern Britain.

As a medium, graphic novels have an inherent visual content, and the artistic talents of Adam Brockbank help to deliver some stunning moments within the book. However, I would argue that MeZolith is not best viewed as a *visualisation* of the Early Mesolithic of Eastern Britain. Graphic novels, or comics, are designed for the telling of narratives, and this is the key focus of MeZolith. The colour pallets used, the structure and composition of the panels, the use of stylised section markers are all deployed intelligently to aid the telling of a story – not with the primary focus of depicting everyday Mesolithic life. A depiction *is* produced, but as part of the process of delivering the narrative; providing a context in which the characters and events are set. With the strong tradition of reconstruction illustration within prehistory, it is tempting for archaeologists to respond to graphic novels which deal with prehistoric content (e.g. Gally & Huolt 1992; Gotfredsen 2011; Shanower 2001) as a series of reconstruction drawings in a way that other, text-

focused forms of 'historical fiction' are less susceptible to. Following this line of thought brings into acute focus the archaeological 'inaccuracies' mentioned above, and presents further questions for the content. Why are characters so seldom depicted flint knapping? On what basis are the clearly demarcated gender roles ascribed to the characters? However, whilst there is a validity to these questions, focusing on them overly runs the risk of missing the true value and significance of the work. It also overlooks the power of the form itself. Through its composition, MeZolith is able to inject an emotional range into the narrative, setting the pace of the story and forcing the reader's imagination to fill in the gaps in time and space between frames. Through these methods, MeZolith is able to evoke powerful emotional responses and bring these to play within our understanding of the period; the passage of time, the sensory experience of passing seasons, feelings of suspense, horror, relief, passion and wonder. All of these are valuable considerations for Mesolithic archaeologists, who rarely get the opportunity to consider these factors when working more directly with the archaeological record.

In fact, the intellectual strength of MeZolith lies in its ability to address issues which conventional forms of Mesolithic archaeology have struggled to get to grips with in the past. In doing so, MeZolith is incredibly thought-provoking; allowing archaeologists to explore aspects of Mesolithic life which are currently overlooked, and reflect critically on the ways in which Haggarty and Brockbank have approached them. I would like to discuss a few of these aspects now. This list is far from exhaustive, and other readers will find other themes to pick up on, but I wish to use these to demonstrate the wider value that MeZolith can have to archaeologists studying the period.

Myths are told at various points within the volume, and provide an opportunity for Haggarty to showcase his impressive knowledge of folklore and mythologies from across the world, reworking existing stories into an Early Mesolithic context. The importance of mythology within Mesolithic societies has been highlighted by Warren in relation to tree myths (Warren 2003), seafaring (Warren 2000), and to the delayed colonisation of Ireland (Warren 2017, 310). However, whilst their existence has been argued for, and the importance of mythologies in influencing human behaviour and understandings of the landscape has been highlighted, approaching the form and content of these mythologies is a recognised challenge (Warren 2003, 23).

Two myths feature in MeZolith Book 2. These include a tale of the ice-hearted, undead and cannibalistic Skellimen; and a story about the Star Lovers, who abduct two Kansa women and take them to the Star World (providing an excellent excuse for a mouth-watering panel, gazing down onto Doggerland and the North European Plain). However, these myths serve a larger purpose than to simply allow Haggarty the opportunity to flex his narrative muscles. They play into the thoughts and dreams of various characters, serving as lenses through which inter-character relationships are viewed, and analogous morality tales which form a framework of cultural reference for navigating the various events within the overarching plot. As such, these provide neat demonstrations of the ways in which mythologies can exert a direct influence over the ways in which Mesolithic people engaged with the world around them, in a way seldom explored by conventional archaeological discourse. The thoughtful treatment of these myths, in terms of their content, the context of their telling, and the influence that they exert on the characters themselves, may go some way towards addressing how Mesolithic myths might be methodologically approached in the future. Haggarty's credentials as an expert in oral story telling traditions are impeccable; acquired over more than 30 years as a performance storyteller and taking a particular focus on prehistoric mythologies. Given the levels of research which have evidently gone into the production of MeZolith, Haggarty can combine an impressive knowledge of the context with this understanding of the way in which myths work as stories. As such, if Mesolithic research *needs* to consider mythology, then these represent the best-informed attempts to approach Mesolithic myths to have been attempted to date. Whilst their content might remain, essentially, speculative, if our need to develop an understanding of mythologies is based on a desire to produce richer, more human narratives of the period, then Haggarty's attempts can be argued to make a considerable contribution towards our broader understanding of the period.

Another aspect of Mesolithic life which MeZolith tackles directly is the idea of biography and personal history. Mesolithic archaeology has tended to approach this through the study of human remains – identifying traumas and pathologies as significant events in the lives of individuals or using biochemical analyses of human bone to investigate the diets, movement or genealogies of individuals. However, in our efforts to identify wider patterns within these different forms of data, we rarely focus on the biographies of individual people. We seldom find the time or opportunity to tell the story of a single person. MeZolith tackles this head on, through its focus on the central character Poika and the various characters he interacts with. These characters pose some interesting hypothetical questions for our conventional forms of analysis. Given his movements and varied diet, what would Poika's isotopic signals look like in the archaeological record? Would we recognise his early trauma to his thigh, which comes to be so definitive of his identity as he grows older? By placing the focus on a lived human life, MeZolith provides an interesting counter-point to the larger scale models of human behaviour often sought Mesolithic archaeologists. To a certain extent, the character of the Mesolithic data set forces this scale of analysis, as we work across fragmented and dispersed data sets which are difficult to define chronologically to the space of an individual's lifespan. Again, this demonstrates the potential of this medium for considering aspects of Mesolithic life which conventional archaeological investigations are ill equipped to tackle.

Social identities are a key theme within MeZolith, which not only includes details of the Kansa lifeways but also that their contemporaries. The Kumpu and Ranta tribes are also mentioned, and all refer to the same overarching cosmologies – a belief in The Red Mothers and Uljas as dominant spiritual beings. Within these groups there are further identities – at one point Poika's brother Toka declares 'within the Kansa we are Crow, and within that, we are Magpies.', gesturing to the magpie feather in his hair (p.52). Again, Haggarty and Brockbank are able to explore ideas mooted within conventional archaeological discourse concerning group identities, at a scale of resolution seldom attempted within the academic literature. These issues are usually approached through plotting the spatial and temporal distribution of formally diagnostic material culture, such as microliths (e.g. Jacobi 1978) or osseous projectiles (Verhart 1990). These distributions are then interpreted with the aid of ethnographic analogies which demonstrate differing collective identity expressed through material culture, leading to the construction of 'cultures' or 'techno-complexes'. Haggarty and Brockbank pick up on these ideas (members of different tribes use slightly different flint-based projectile arrangements) and explore them in more detail. Interestingly there is little material difference between the members of different social groups, and many of the key material signifiers are expressed in organic forms (the bird feathers) which would be unlikely to survive within the archaeological record given the small number of Early Mesolithic sites in Eastern Britain where organic materials are preserved. In doing this, Haggarty and Brockbank are able to illustrate the levels of social differentiation which might exist beyond those differences which are currently archaeologically observable. This is a key theme in the value of this volume; highlighting the kinds of complexities to Mesolithic life which might exist *beyond* what is currently visible to those researching the period.

Other themes within MeZolith are more equally matched within academic discourses. The relationship between people and animals forms a key part of the narrative, with Poika's life being marked by several dramatic encounters with animals within Book 2. Animals are explicitly recognised as social beings, given names and engaging in complex relationships with individual characters and collective groups, with songs, structured butchery, and dialogue being used as ways to mediate the ongoing health of these interspecies relationships. These ideas on the relationship between people and animals in hunter-gatherer societies have firm routes within anthropological theory and ethnography. Since the pioneering work of Conneller (2004) and Chatterton (2006), this has been an emergent theme within Mesolithic studies. The 2015 *Mesolithic in Europe* conference featured 10 papers which dealt with the social aspect of human/animal relationships across the Mesolithic of Europe, and this approach has been exemplified by the work of Overton (Brittain & Overton 2013; Overton and Hamilakis 2013; Overton 2016). Whilst the specifics of the relationships depicted by Haggarty and Brockbank go beyond the levels of detail seen within academic accounts (giving names to animal and situating their precise place within the Kansa cosmology), many of the behaviours and attitudes demonstrated towards animals are reflected in current academic discourses.

As such, MeZolith makes for a fun and fascinating read, and represents a meticulously researched and expertly told narrative which has helped to bring an underappreciated period of prehistory to wider public attention. Furthermore, I would argue that it makes a valuable contribution to our collective understanding of the period, posing key questions for researchers in terms of the scales of analysis employed and the human experience in the deep past. Many of these questions remain, for the time, unanswerable due to the character of the data we work with and the methods of analysis at our disposal. However, its form and interpretation of archaeological research is both evocative and provocative, and serves as a timely reminder of the limits of our current archaeological understanding of this enigmatic period.

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