



Book Reviews

HUNTERS, FISHERS AND FORAGERS IN WALES: TOWARDS A SOCIAL NARRATIVE OF MESOLITHIC LIFEWAYS BY MALCOLM LILLIE

Oxbow Books, Oxford, 2015. 345pp, 57 figs. ISBN 978-1-78297-974-6. pb, £40

It is the sub-title that expresses Malcolm Lillie's inspiration for writing this book, developing from his early career in fieldwork in South Wales followed by study under Roger Jacobi at Lancaster, leading to a huge volume of leading research in scientific archaeology. In this respect his aim 'towards a social narrative of Mesolithic lifeways' forms a tribute to his former teacher, who himself produced many new ideas in that direction (e.g. Jacobi 1979). As research in the pure sciences advances, fields of research grow necessarily more focused. Archaeology is no exception and has benefited greatly from new techniques in, for instance, dating, surveying, material analysis and botanical and osteological analysis. As data accumulates the effect on the broader picture can become difficult to grasp. It is thus a pleasure to find a book that presents a synthesis of the present facts about the Mesolithic period up to the appearance of agriculture. The title is slightly misleading in that, as the author explains, the relatively limited amount of data from Wales means that it must draw for evidence on all that is known from the rest of Britain, Scotland, Ireland and Europe. It is then a thorough presentation of the most useful evidence from this much wider area and will be of great use to students and the interested general reader. The very extensive bibliography provides an invaluable resource although the mass of references makes the text difficult to follow in places and a numbered reference list would have been useful, combined with the full references.

The book begins with a comprehensive overview of the Palaeolithic and Late Glacial human and environmental background. The combination of lines of evidence would have been made clearer by a table summarizing the overall chronological and environmental sequence. The Mesolithic period is approached by a careful and detailed description of the evidence by subject matter beginning with the environmental and other related specialist studies, followed by chapters on technology, habitats and site function, subsistence and economies, and finally ritual aspects, including human burial.

Environmental studies in Wales have far outpaced the cultural archaeological work. The Mesolithic period and discussion here benefit specifically from the contrasting work at the coastal site of Goldcliff and the upland site of Waun Fignen Felin. The chapter provides a very useful summary of the evidence, from site function and changes in climate, woodland and sea-level. The technology chapter provides an overview of the lithic assemblages from some of the key Welsh sites from the Early and Later Mesolithic periods, re-using existing illustrations. It relies rather heavily on written descriptions of overall assemblages where these could have been easier to comprehend by tables. It would also have been useful to illustrate a 'representative tool kit' with explanations of types or at least a description of the different types of tools that are illustrated. These are limited to microliths, apart from the beads from Nab Head, which is discussed at length but does not illustrate the ground stone axes (which appear in a later chapter) or the bevelled pebble tools, and no tranchet axes are shown. The possibility of recognizing cultural or site function differences from the assemblages is discussed but could be made more of, as for instance in the work by Jacobi, attempting to differentiate assemblages by differing proportions of microlith types (Jacobi 1980). These ideas divert off to the more

difficult subject of recognizing 'social' aspects of gender, age and status before returning to more direct matters of topographic site location and the influence of environmental changes.

The chapters on habitats, site function, subsistence strategies and economic activity are excellent and dense descriptions of recent research and thinking, as well as of recent discoveries of Mesolithic houses, if largely from beyond Wales, and concentrate particularly on the 'missing' organic component of wooden artefacts and of bones as evidence of diet. A full consideration of recent stable isotope studies of diet was included in the earlier chapter on environmental information. At several points in the text the significance of the loss of information due to the submergence of the Early Mesolithic rich coastal habitat due to rising sea-levels is mentioned. The fact that the reverse happened in Scotland due to crustal uplift is also mentioned but not how this could inform the understanding of the 'lost' information in Wales. The submerged site of Bouldnor Cliff in the Solent, off the Isle of Wight is not mentioned, although it provides some special palaeobotanical evidence relating to the submerged Mesolithic environment as well as hinting that some Mesolithic economic activities such as foraging and fishing might not utilize microliths, adding a new perspective to interpretation of the existing cultural record (Tomalin 2011). As before, these chapters are summarised in relation to the 'social narrative' looking for scarce evidence relating to gender, age and cultural preferences in relation to, for instance, site location and food types. Similarly, the chapter on ritual aspects and burial relies much on evidence from beyond Wales as well as on ethnographic comparisons but allows a very inspiring discussion of ideas beyond the over reliance on the 'hard' facts, often just of lithics.

The final chapter on the transition to agriculture is a stimulating discussion of current theories and avenues of research. It shows that although Mesolithic and Neolithic technologies appear quite separate, the Mesolithic form of economy continued for at least several centuries in tandem with the introduction of agriculture. This is especially pertinent in Wales, with fewer areas with soils suitable for crop cultivation, upland livestock management was a specialism that had more in common with the Mesolithic economy. The author states more than once that to understand the Mesolithic period in Wales, and Britain, there is a need for more targeted sampling strategies, for topographic studies of site location and a search for areas where possible waterlogged sites may exist, in order to recover the 'missing' organic component. The aim to develop a 'social narrative of Mesolithic lifeways' is really only a part of the book, if being its inspiration. If this is the reader's main interest, then one could jump from the introduction to pages 187 and 243 for syntheses of this aspect. To extend this aim it would have been good to include a discussion of current theorising about archaeology in relation to social structure, human behaviour, foraging strategies and cultural evolution. In general the book is a comprehensive and detailed presentation and discussion of 'hard' facts, concentrating on interpretation and avoiding more speculative theory, although with some mention of the work of Tilley and Cummings. It must be hoped that in future a more widely encompassing social narrative can be constructed for the Mesolithic period, one which is still visible only in fragments and unappreciated, when a still unequalled knowledge of the landscape was needed and passed on through the generations. While Darwin regarded the wandering Fuegian hunter-fisher-foragers of Patagonia as hardly human, their language later proved to be very complex and subtle, revealing a deep knowledge of the landscape, the chronology of the year being finely tuned, one being 'Ĉekana – Canoe building season and time of the snipe calls' (Chatwin 1979, 130).

References

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