



## Book Reviews

### **NEOLITHIC STEPPING STONES: EXCAVATION AND SURVEY WITHIN THE WESTERN SEAWAYS OF BRITAIN, 2008–2014 BY DUNCAN GARROW AND FRASER STURT**

*Oxbow Books, 2017. 224pp. 108 figures, 63 tables, pb, ISBN 978-1-78570-347-8, £38.00*

This handsome and well-written volume presents the results of Duncan Garrow and Fraser Sturt's excavations of three sites – L'Erée on Guernsey, Old Quay on St Martin's in the Isles of Scilly and An Doirlinn on South Uist in the Outer Hebrides (Western Isles) – undertaken between 2008 and 2014 as the main part of their Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project, *Stepping Stones to the Neolithic? Islands, maritime connectivity and the 'western seaways' of Britain, 5000–3500 BC*. It complements their other main project publication, the 2017 Garrow *et al.* article 'Stepping stones to the Neolithic? Radiocarbon dating the Early Neolithic on islands within the "western seaways" of Britain' (*Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 83, 97–135), which presents a round-up and review of radiocarbon dates falling within the fifth and fourth millennia for the Channel Islands, the Scilly Isles, the Isle of Man, the Outer Hebrides and Orkney.

The principal objective of Garrow and Sturt's project (p.1) had been to shed new light on an old problem, namely the timing and character of the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition in the crucial 'western seaways' zone – a region long recognised (not least by this reviewer) as one probable route for the appearance of Neolithic 'things and practices' in Britain, but which had not featured as prominently as the Straits of Dover in Whittle *et al.*'s 2011 model for the Neolithisation of Britain. Garrow and Sturt chose to explore the question through the prism of islands which, they argue, could theoretically have acted as crucial 'stepping stones' for the spread of 'the Neolithic' to Britain. They point out that islands are often overlooked in broader-brush narratives of this transition, and they set out to produce new primary data with which to inform such narratives, targeting sites that had already shown the potential for dating to the fifth or fourth millennia BC. In order to contextualise the significance of their findings, they explored a series of four wider, related themes: 'the character and archaeological signatures of prehistoric maritime connectivity; the nature and effects of "island-ness" in later prehistory; the extent and implications of Neolithic/Early Bronze Age (EBA) settlement variability across Britain; and the consequences of geographical biases in archaeological research in terms of our understanding of the prehistoric past' (p.1).

Chapter 1 outlines key aspects of the Mesolithic–Neolithic transition debate, introduces the ‘western seaways’ and the changing land-and seascape over the millennia, highlights the advances in our understanding of Early Neolithic settlement in Britain over the past 20 years, offers a summary of our state of knowledge about the Mesolithic and Early Neolithic in each of the island groups, and introduces the four aforementioned key themes. The bulk of the book (Chapters 2–4) is then taken up with reports on the three excavations and their findings; then the brief final chapter considers the overall findings according to the four themes, appraises what the project has achieved, and states what still needs to be done.

As an account of a major project, the volume is satisfactorily clear: well organised, well presented and focusing on the excavated evidence and the inferences that can be drawn from it rather than seeking to fit the data into a preconceived model, it reflects the care and thoughtfulness with which the project was carried out. Specialist reports, by an excellent team including Anwen Cooper, Hugo Anderson-Whymark, Henrietta Quinnell, Mike Copper and Seren Griffiths, to name but a few, are given their due space and weight; the illustrations are excellent; and enough detail is provided to allow readers to interrogate the results and draw their own conclusions. An admirable degree of honesty is shown in handling the surprises that the excavations threw up, and in acknowledging the limits of inference.

Perhaps inevitably – given that projects designed to discover one thing often reveal something completely different, as exemplified by Göran Burenhult’s project to locate the allegedly Mesolithic builders of the Carrowmore megalithic cemetery in Ireland (Burenhult 1984) – the *Stepping Stones* project did not reveal the earliest Neolithic sites, the latest Mesolithic sites or indeed anything pertaining directly to the Mesolithic–Neolithic transition period in Britain. But what it did reveal was a series of fascinating insights into the prehistory of the islands in question, and it made a substantial contribution to enhancing our understanding of developments in the three archipelagos. L’Erée proved to be the most extensively excavated settlement site of the Middle Neolithic, Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age in the Channel Islands, with additional important evidence for Mesolithic and Early Neolithic activity. Old Quay produced an assemblage of Mesolithic microlithic material that differs starkly from that found elsewhere in Britain and Ireland and yet finds parallels on the Continent. It also produced a significant assemblage of Middle Neolithic artefactual material, demonstrating the local persistence of the ‘South-Western style’ of pottery (a.k.a. Hembury Ware) into the c. 3350–2900 cal BC date bracket, along with a much smaller assemblage of Early Bronze Age date, plus a late Roman pit with cereal grains. The authors rightly point out that the findings transform our understanding of Scilly’s prehistory, adding considerable detail and new facets to the story of Scilly that had been established by previous research by Charles Thomas, by the *Lyonesse* project ([http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/lyonesse\\_eh\\_2014/](http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/lyonesse_eh_2014/)) and by others. An Doirlinn produced a sequence of settlement activity extending from at least as early as

3340–3140 cal BC (68% probability: p.202) until the time when Beaker pottery was in use, and including a Late Neolithic phase, associated with Grooved Ware, dating within the broad bracket of c. 2780–2330 cal BC (p.202). The Grooved Ware assemblage is especially significant as constituting only the fourth find of this pottery type in the Western Isles (after Unival, Calanais and the Udal: p.172), and its association with radiocarbon dates – even though their span is a little wide – is very useful. These dates will feed into Mike Copper's current *Tracing the Lines* project to date Scottish Grooved Ware south of Orkney (<http://blogs.brad.ac.uk/tracing-the-lines/>). The pre-Grooved Ware pottery is recognisable as belonging to the Hebridean tradition, but differing from assemblages such as those from Eilean Dòmhnuill (Loch Olabhat), Northton and Eilean an Tighe in being predominantly undecorated and lacking the heavy, ridged jars and Unstan bowls that figure prominently in those assemblages.

As far as the themes of connectivity, 'island-ness', settlement variability and differing research traditions are concerned, the main conclusions for the first two themes seem to be that contact with the wider world (as attested through imports or through sharing artefact designs and traditions) was variable over time, and that even during periods of contact the island inhabitants expressed their own identity, giving the impression that the islands were 'similar but different' (pp.209–11). Regarding settlement variability, in the Channel Islands the absence of clear house structures at L'Erée is seen as symptomatic of Middle Neolithic settlement evidence across much of northern France, while on the Isles of Scilly the Neolithic pits and postholes are comparable to those seen at many sites on the south-western Mainland. For the Outer Hebrides the intra-archipelago variability in Early to Middle Neolithic 'settlement' sites is underlined, with An Doirlinn contrasting with the islet sites of varying size such as Eilean Dòmhnuill and with the Lewis Lochs 'crannogs' that are the subject of Garrow and Sturt's current project, *The Submerged Neolithic of the Western Isles* (<http://cma.soton.ac.uk/submerged-neolithic-western-isles/>). Note, however, that this project is revealing that the Lewis Lochs sites are so small as to challenge the notion that they had been settlements. Finally, as regards differing research traditions on the three archipelagos, the authors point out that in the Channel Islands, most Neolithic research has focused on funerary monuments rather than on settlements; in the Isles of Scilly there has been very little exploration of the islands' Neolithic (and Mesolithic) past at all; and in the Outer Hebrides, most fieldwork over the past few decades has been on settlement sites rather than on funerary monuments.

So, even though they were not what had been hoped for, do the findings contribute to our understanding of the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition along the western seaways? The Guernsey evidence supports the argument that the Neolithic of the Channel Islands is to be understood as an extension of the Neolithic of the adjacent French mainland, appearing a millennium earlier than it did in Britain, and probably featuring the migration of small numbers of farmers to islands that seem to have had few Late Mesolithic inhabitants (cf. Garrow & Sturt 2017). Were the

Channel Islands a ‘stepping stone’ for what the reviewer has termed the ‘trans-Manche uest’ strand of Neolithisation of Britain (Sheridan 2011)? This is not discussed in the volume, although the Middle Neolithic phase at L’Erée may overlap – just – with the period when the putative small-scale migration from north-west France to south-west England occurred, during the first quarter of the fourth millennium (*ibid.*). The style of French Middle Neolithic pottery found at L’Erée (ie, Pinacle-Fouaillages pottery) is not found in Britain, however, and currently the only evidence suggesting any link with the British Early Neolithic is the simple passage tomb at La Sergenté on Jersey, which resembles that at Broadsands, Devon (Sheridan *et al.* 2008). For the time being it remains an open question as to whether the inhabitants of Channel Islands played a role in the Neolithisation of south-west England.

As for the Isles of Scilly, while the authors wisely fight shy of talking about a ‘Mesolithic-Neolithic transition’ on the archipelago itself, given the ‘possible absence of permanent settlement during both Mesolithic and Neolithic’ (p.18), they emphasise the importance of the distinctive Mesolithic lithic assemblage from Old Quay to the broader debate about whether there had been regular or persistent, two-way, contact between Mesolithic groups in Britain (and Ireland) and Continental farming groups during the fifth millennium BC. The argument that there had been such links – and, arguably, by implication, that Britain’s Mesolithic inhabitants may have played an active role in the introduction of domesticates and Neolithic practices and beliefs from the Continent – is a theme that is articulated by the authors more emphatically elsewhere, in other publications on the western seaways (Garrow & Sturt 2011; Anderson-Whymark *et al.* 2015). As such, the Old Quay evidence deserves close scrutiny. While there are undeniable similarities with microlithic assemblages dating to between the seventh and fifth millennia BC in France north of the Seine, Belgium and the Netherlands, up to 700 km to the east along the Channel (p.130), there are, crucially, also differences, as Anderson-Whymark’s admirably thorough and even-handed assessment points out (pp.113–4, 129–31). While this does not disprove that there had been at least one episode of long-distance movement along the Channel at some point between the seventh and fifth millennia, it weakens the argument somewhat. Likewise, the impossibility of directly radiocarbon dating the Old Quay material is an acknowledged drawback. Various scenarios are discussed to account for this ‘similarity but difference’, but whether the evidence is strong enough to support the inference that there had been ‘*persistent* contact between people living on (or regularly visiting) [the Isles of Scilly, indicating] substantial long-distance maritime connectivity at that time’ (p.131) is a moot point, and we indeed await the discovery of further similar assemblages that ‘may well lie unexcavated (or unrecognised) in southern England and beyond’ (p.131). The temporality of the Mesolithic activity on St. Martin’s is also worth scrutinising: on p.129 it is claimed that ‘These quantities [of lithics: possibly a sizeable proportion of the 11,000 lithics found at Old Quay] imply persistent occupation over a lengthy period of time’. But without stratigraphic evidence for multiple episodes of Mesolithic activity, this begs the question of how many microlith users and episodes of microlith use, over what

length of time, it would actually take to generate the 80 microliths plus an indeterminate number of other lithics that were found. It is necessary to emphasise the limits of inference here (as Anderson-Whymark indeed does) since clearly, as noted above, the authors are in favour of the idea that there had been ‘regular and extensive Mesolithic sea travel’ prior to 4000 BC (p.113), something that might tie in with the notion of persistent, long-term Mesolithic occupation.

Other evidence that Garrow and Sturt use to support this view of regular and extensive pre-4000 BC sea travel can be challenged. Their citing of Thomas’ claim that ‘the occurrence [in maritime western Scotland] of raw materials away from their source is the clearest indication of regular and extensive Mesolithic sea travel (Thomas 2013, 210)’ (p.113) seems to ignore the fact that raw materials did **not** travel very far in Mesolithic western Scotland, as specialists in this material have pointed out (most notably Ballin 2015; 2018a; 2018b). Likewise, the claim that Alpine jadeite axeheads ‘could potentially have been imported during the fifth millennium BC’ (p.3) – while technically correct – is not supported by any evidence: no example has been found in a context earlier than the 39th century BC and until one is found in an indubitably fifth millennium, culturally Mesolithic context, these axeheads cannot be used as proof of ‘regular and extensive Mesolithic sea travel’. Likewise, as the authors acknowledge (p.3), the claim for sixth millennium wheat DNA at Bouldnor Cliff, Isle of White has been the subject of much heated debate and cannot be accepted as evidence for regular Mesolithic maritime contact with the Continent. So, to this reviewer, the case for regular and extensive seaborne contact between Mesolithic communities in Britain (and Ireland) and the Continent remains very weak. Moreover, in their review of pre-Neolithic cross-Channel contact on page 3, the authors inexplicably lump the Ferriter’s Cove domestic cattle, the Achnacreebeag Breton-style megalithic monument with Breton-style pottery and the ‘possibly very early causewayed enclosure found at Magheraboy, Co. Sligo’ in with ‘indicators [‘some contentious’] of cross-Channel contact **possibly prior to the start of the Neolithic in Britain and Ireland**’ (my bold lettering). This misses the point that these are evidence for ‘the Neolithic’! The Ferriter’s Cove cattle bones did indeed end up in a Mesolithic camp site but, as this reviewer has argued elsewhere in more detail, in her multi-strand model for the Neolithisation of Britain and Ireland (eg, Sheridan 2010), the interpretation that offers the best fit for the evidence – there being no Irish Mesolithic material in north-west France, while there is other evidence for Morbihannais farmers sailing long distances – is that cattle may well have been brought from north-west France to south-west Ireland by immigrant Neolithic farmers who were so small in number that they failed to establish a critical mass and consequently died out. As for Achnacreebeag, this monument and its pottery owes absolutely nothing to the Mesolithic communities of western Scotland (who do not appear to have travelled any further than between the western mainland and the Hebrides) and is, instead, part of an extensive Atlantic façade coastal colonisation process by farmers from the Morbihan region of Brittany, who had a long-standing tradition of sailing; while Magheraboy has produced Carinated Bowl Neolithic pottery and appears to

constitute early evidence for the Carinated Bowl Neolithic in Ireland (although the site needs to be investigated further).

As for the evidence from the Outer Hebrides, the An Doirlinn site is too late to be of relevance to the question of the Neolithisation of that archipelago, and it is perhaps regrettable that the authors did not offer a more detailed discussion of the Neolithisation process in this part of Scotland in their otherwise very useful review of the evidence for Mesolithic and Neolithic activity on the archipelago (pp.19–22). When applied to the Outer Hebrides, the term ‘stepping stone’ seems to be a misnomer since this archipelago was more of a *destination* in the secondary expansion of farming groups within Scotland than a stop upon the way. This reviewer has considered this secondary expansion of farming groups from the western Scottish mainland around the late 39th or 38th century BC in several publications (including Sheridan 2010; 2016; Sheridan & Brophy 2012, Section 3.3), and this is only mentioned in passing in Mike Copper’s discussion of the Neolithic pottery on An Doirlinn (p.171). This is a pity, since the ceramic and monument evidence point clearly to colonisation of the Outer Hebrides by farming groups featuring a cultural fusion of the ‘Atlantic, Breton’ strand of Neolithisation and the Carinated Bowl Neolithic<sup>1</sup>. This is visible both in their pottery (Sheridan 2016) and in their monuments, with Clettraval having elements of both passage tomb and Clyde Cairn design, as has been pointed out several times in the past (Scott 1935; Henley 2004; Gannon 2016). Indeed, it is likely that the reason why the pre-Grooved Ware ceramic assemblages from Western Isles chamber tombs lack the elements that characterise settlement assemblages such as those from Eilean Dòmhnuill (Loch Olabhat) – elements that include large ridged jars with extensive decoration, and Unstan bowls, as noted by Mike Copper (eg, pp.170–3) – is that the former are earlier, dating to the time of the colonisation.

Minor gripes with the volume include the fact that the term ‘Chalcolithic’ comes and goes in discussions of post-Neolithic activity (with ‘Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age’ creeping in), and in the L’Erée chapter there is some inconsistency in the date ranges used for specific periods. In Chapter 4 it might have been useful to order the illustrations of the pre-Grooved Ware pottery from An Doirlinn by phase as far as possible. Discussion of the Early Neolithic in the Channel Islands should really have included a reference to the research undertaken by *Projet JADE* on the Alpine axeheads and arm-rings found there (Sheridan & Pailler 2012); and the somewhat cursory discussion of Beaker domestic pottery in the Outer Hebrides (pp.172–3) might have benefited from reference to the more extensive discussion in the Calanais publication (Sheridan *et al.* 2016). There are a few spelling, grammatical and factual errors (eg, ‘bourn out’ for ‘borne out’, p.11; ‘Britanny’, p.15; ‘Callanais’, p.19; ‘complimentary’, p.74; ‘practiced’, p.112; ‘different

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<sup>1</sup> Whether the ruined monument at Leaval on South Uist (Cummings *et al.* 2005), with its simple, closed chamber, had been a monument in the Breton tradition like the Achnacreebeag example is unclear; small-scale excavation by Vicki Cummings and Niall Sharples failed to produce any datable material.

to', p.171; 'floatation' and 'floats', eg, p.121; Grand Pressigny flint was quarried, rather than mined, p.210).

These are, however, minor criticisms of a book that is rich in primary information and that will be of long-term use to researchers, not just as regards the three archipelagos and future directions in their research, but in terms of the broader British Mesolithic-Neolithic debate as well. It highlights and addresses the pressing need for more primary data, and especially more material from targeted, research-driven excavations, to inform that debate. It also helps to maintain awareness of, and stimulate debate on, the importance of the western seaways. It is a delight to read, with plenty to think about and useful pointers to the many gaps in our current knowledge – gaps which the authors are busy helping to fill, through their excellent current fieldwork. This reviewer is fully in accord with the statement that 'in order to move our understanding of the prehistoric past forwards, it is very important that we let the archaeological record surprise us sometimes, and incorporate the unexpected into our narratives' (p.131). Amen to that!

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*Dr Alison Sheridan, Principal Archaeological Research Curator, National Museums Scotland*

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