



## Book Reviews

### **THE MESOLITHIC OF THE KENNET VALLEY BY ROY FROOM**

*Roy Froom. 2012. 340 pp, 153 figs, 48 tables, 10 maps. ISBN 970-0-9574712-0-7, pb, £40*

The central part of the River Kennet Valley in Berkshire is inextricably linked to the study of Mesolithic occupation of Britain. The relationship is a long one and has generated a wealth of fieldwork and analysis, much of it centred on the important series of excavations carried out at Thatcham (Wymer 1962). Throughout much of this work one name has recurred, that of Roy Froom, who has made this reach of the Kennet Valley a lifetime project. Although much of the work has centred on the Mesolithic period a number of Long Blade industries have also been examined. These Upper Palaeolithic sites at Avington VI, Wawcott XII and Crown Acres were published separately in a collaborative volume with the British Museum (Froom 2005), which in many ways provided a companion volume for this one.

Apart from a number of detailed site specific reports, including a monograph on Wawcott III (Froom 1976), a cumulative description of all the Mesolithic sites in the area has been lacking. This issue is now addressed by this volume which details the impressive corpus of work, most of it directly from Froom's researches, on the Mesolithic. The book begins with a personal account of the circumstances under which much of the work was undertaken in a period from the mid-1960s to 1981. Excavations were directed by the author, a teacher of chemistry at St Bartholomew's Grammar School, Newbury, with students from the school archaeology club. This section of the volume is important; the scientific background of the author has strongly influenced his approach to the study of the artefact collections. He is also at pains to make it plain that he regards himself primarily as an amateur, a status of which he should not be ashamed, and that his aim is to set out the facts rather than provide an expansive interpretation. The result is a volume that is undeniably geared towards facts, principally analysis of the flint assemblages from a number of individual sites, and a product for the flint specialist who will find much of interest.

The volume begins with a prologue dealing with the geological framework and climate change within the Mesolithic. Most importantly it also deals with issues influencing the survival of Mesolithic flint assemblages in the Kennet Valley, most notably results of peat digging, canal and railway construction and modern agriculture. It is clear from subsequent site descriptions that peat digging in particular has significantly affected conditions that have led to the discovery and distribution of sites. The writer draws here on a deep personal knowledge of the area to embellish the text.

The bulk of the volume is set out in twelve chapters describing sites chronologically and by area down the central part of the Kennet valley, interspersed with concluding summaries which draw these site descriptions together. Most of the assemblages were collected from excavations undertaken by the author with smaller supplementary field walked assemblages and additional unpublished material recovered from other sources. The Early Mesolithic is described in three chapters, with a single chapter on the important site of Wawcott XXX. This section provides a very detailed description and analysis of the flint assemblage. It also includes in-depth examination of metrical and technological attributes supplemented by distribution and refitting diagrams of this important site where all aspects of Mesolithic flint working and occupation are preserved.



A similar approach is taken to 13 closely spaced sites in the Wawcott-Marsh Benham area in Chapter 3, and to clusters found at Newbury and Thatcham in Chapter 4. Most of the former have been located and examined by excavation, field walking or a combination of both, principally by Froom. Many of the results from the Thatcham area draw on previous work in the area, much of it published; however this chapter also presents unpublished assemblages that have been compiled from archives that are of varying quality. The value of drawing these unpublished sources together is highlighted by the inclusion of probable Long Blade material that might indicate an earlier phase of activity than previously acknowledged from Thatcham. Chapter 5 reviews the Early Mesolithic as described in the preceding chapters. The issue of patination as a chronological indicator is also raised at Thatcham, providing an interesting example of this phenomenon (which is discussed in more detail in an Appendix).

Late Mesolithic assemblages in this part of the Kennet Valley, described in Chapters 6–10, are associated with a deposit of silt (loam): the Wawcott Silt. The introductory chapter provides a review of the site at Wawcott III (Froom 1976) which includes a stout defence of his interpretation that the site represents a stratified series that developed in tandem with the deposition of artefacts over a long period. Detailed descriptions of assemblages at Wawcott XXIII, and Avington VI follow with a miscellany of other probable Late Mesolithic sites and a concluding review of the Late Mesolithic of the Kennet Valley. The final chapter of descriptive text takes the distribution of Mesolithic material into the wider landscape and the tributary valleys of the Kennet. This material is relatively thinly distributed in contrast to the richness of the Kennet Valley. It demonstrates just how much the area has benefitted not only from Froom's research but also from the fortuitous effects of peat digging, which have led to the discoveries of many of these sites.

The volume ends with an Epilogue of the Mesolithic in the Kennet Valley. Here Froom proposes an eight stage scheme of development from the Long Blade industries to a Final Late Mesolithic phase, based on assessment of microlith forms and the results of metrical blade analysis. There is a modest bibliography and an Appendix which describes previously unpublished work specifically on the chemical processes of patination of flint, an area upon which the author may justifiably feel qualified to provide relevant comment.

These chapters clearly contain a wealth of detailed information, although it might have helped the reader to navigate through this complex of sites if much of the data had been presented in tables, for example by site, method of artefact recovery, area of excavation and detailed quantification of assemblage by artefact type. In addition a more specific description of excavation methodology and consideration of artefact taphonomy and microdebitage recovery would have helped place the artefact assemblages in context. These issues, which are crucial to the understanding of site formation, activity and function, are addressed in the chapter describing excavations at Wawcott XXX but, elsewhere in the text, are merely alluded to. The assemblage analysis itself is unquestionably thorough and full of detailed descriptions of the artefacts and their technology. These sections are all comprehensively illustrated (with the artefacts drawn by the author and published at full size). There are no photographs, or index and scales are lacking on some location maps. On a production level this reviewer did note some slight typographic and spelling errors that might have been detected at proof stage. This included, most notably, the section Wawcott III – A Review (pp 202–205), which is repeated in total in the succeeding pages, suggesting that the volume might have benefitted from firmer editing; however apart from these comments the volume is well written and presented.

The text acknowledges the problems of dating; few sites have provided sufficient material for radiocarbon samples. The chronology and dates of the assemblages therefore remain driven by



established patterns of microlith typology, where obliquely blunted points define the Early Mesolithic, and geometric forms define Later Mesolithic assemblages, together with results of blade analysis. Discussion is also given to the surface modification of flint (patination), its formation and use as a chronological indicator. Froom's opinions on this subject, as a chemist, are of interest. Many flint specialists, this reviewer included, will have experienced instances where patination, in isolation, cannot be taken as a chronological indicator, but, when used in association with technological attributes, this may help separate superimposed or mixed assemblages.

Froom is at pains to insist that the story of the Mesolithic in the Kennet Valley should not be viewed simply as one of distinct Early and Late Mesolithic periods but rather as one of continuity, evolution and transition. This tradition stemmed from pioneering activity by makers of Long Blade assemblages into more densely populated activity as the Mesolithic progressed. It produced sites, some with repeated, superimposed occupation of favoured locations, with the variations in assemblage composition taken to reflect the nature of the activities being undertaken.

The volume contains a great deal of information that will make it an unavoidable reference to any student of the Kennet Valley, in particular, and of the Mesolithic in general. The study has received some additional input from a number of external specialists, often linked to Reading University (dealing for example with particle size analysis, molluscs and faunal remains where they were preserved), although the bulk of the work remains essentially that of the author. It marks a great achievement to collate a vast quantity of information together into a single volume and to fulfil an obligation to publish and complete many years of fieldwork.

## References

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