

PALAEOLITHIC AND MESOLITHIC PERIODS

Notes from the discussion held during the conference at Bangor University 16th September 2010

Discussion was led by Elizabeth A. Walker, Curator of Palaeolithic & Mesolithic Archaeology, Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales.

Participants: Louise Austin, Dyfed Archaeology Trust; Ian Brooks, Engineering Archaeology Services; Steve Burrow, Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales; Astrid Caseldine, University of Wales Trinity St David; Laura Higgins, Bangor University; Gwilym Hughes, Cadw; Hannah Phillips, Bangor University; Rosemary Roberts, Bangor University; Spencer Smith, Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales; Mark Ward, Land and Marine; Jo Williams, Bangor University and Matthew Williams, L–P Archaeology.

A series of questions were raised for comment and discussion by those present:

- 1) The U.K. research framework for the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic has now separated the two periods. Is there merit in doing this for the Welsh Research Framework?
- 2) Should we be seeking to change the focus of the document away from the U.K. wide framework in order to place Wales more centrally at the heart of future research in Wales?
- 3) To review the existing strategic themes.
- 4) To review the existing research priorities.
- 5) To review the existing research questions.
- 6) Are there any additional or new areas that should be covered in the revised document?
- 7) How should we address the Later Mesolithic/Neolithic transition in the document?

Summary of the key points of the discussion

1) The U.K. research framework for the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic has now separated the two periods. Is there merit in doing this for the Welsh Research Framework?

A U.K. wide research framework document for the Palaeolithic period has been published with one in preparation for the Mesolithic period. This is due in part to the very large and active research community in Britain at the present time working on the Palaeolithic period. Also contributing to the need to separate the periods is the number of major research projects underway, for example the Ancient Human Occupation of Britain project that has created the need for a faster moving research agenda. This work is proving to be very dynamic in raising new questions for future research as it runs.

It was noted that the universities separate the teaching of the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic periods from one another and treat them very differently. Yet it was suggested that if it were felt to be necessary to split the document into two sections that the break should fall at the start of the Upper Palaeolithic with the

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technological change to blade-based industries, rather than at the Pleistocene/Holocene boundary. An alternative might be to use the Last Glacial break in human occupation as a boundary. It was noted that the majority of new Palaeolithic research in Wales tends to be based around University research programmes, often generated and undertaken by researchers outside of Wales, whereas that for the Mesolithic period tends to be dominated by discoveries during development made by those based in Wales.

It was however, felt that there is a lack of understanding of these periods amongst the wider archaeological community in Wales and that if the Palaeolithic were to be separated it would be perceived to be even further removed and remote from the rest of Welsh archaeology. The participants agreed that splitting the periods in Wales was not helpful, rather that it would be better to keep the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic together in a single document.

It was suggested that there is a lack of understanding of the Palaeolithic period and difficulty in knowing how to address Palaeolithic questions amongst many archaeologists. It was suggested that it might be helpful if a tool-box for practitioners could be created to aid commercial archaeologists in the recognition of lithics and to help them to tackle sites of these periods correctly. The discussion moved to the need to engage the right experts at the right time and the need for better understanding of how to achieve this. The difficulties of predicting where lithic scatter sites or Palaeolithic deposits might be found was highlighted. It is easier when sites have a natural physical protection, such as those in crevices or caves, but it is harder when dealing with secondary river gravel deposits, alluvial deposits etc.

2) Should we be seeking to change the focus of the document away from the U.K. wide framework in order to place Wales more centrally at the heart of future research in Wales?

The participants felt overall that this would be a good thing which could be achieved in a number of ways. The observation made in the discussion document was welcomed that research should also reflect the uniqueness of the Welsh record given Wales' position as the north-westernmost edge of the Palaeolithic world. This makes it central to understanding the palimpsest record of mainland Europe where the record is overprinted by continuous occupation. It was thus agreed that there is the need to encourage researchers both within and outside Wales to look at Wales in a more Wales centred way. It is also important for Wales to increase the amount of studies generated for these periods from within. The difficulty identified towards achieving this is the current limitation in the teaching of these periods within the Welsh universities. In the first instance Wales must promote the resource it currently holds of cave sites, museum collections etc. better to ensure its better use by researchers based outside of Wales.

It was suggested that Wales lies behind some of the key sites and key players in England in promoting and publicising new discoveries and also in raising local awareness of key sites. This could be achieved by improving signage of sites, as well as more press coverage of new finds. Aspects of doing this might fall within the scope of the Pan-Wales Heritage Interpretation project being developed by Cadw.

3) A review of the existing strategic themes:

- Colonisation and recolonisation
- Settlement and settlement histories
- Social organisation and belief systems

The three main strategic themes were seen to still be current. It was noted that they are very much more people focused, rather than site and material culture focused, as might have been expected for these periods. It was agreed that there are however, important areas missing namely; the human interaction with the natural world. Also if the agreed aim of promoting research into these periods is to be achieved the themes should become more headline grabbing. One way to achieve this could be to promote the links to climate change and the opportunities that such periods have to contribute towards the understanding of past climate change and thus to funded current political agendas. The colonisation and recolonisation theme could therefore be rebranded in a way that would link human and animal presences and absences at specific times to climate change. Climate change becoming a key area of the future strategic themes

The need to engage with all members of the archaeological community from professional and amateur was continually highlighted during the discussion. One suggestion towards achieving this was to promote scientific techniques through time by using a history of the discipline approach as a good way to engage the public with the themes.

4) A review of the existing research priorities:

- Improvement of the databases
- Targetting specific landscapes
- Application of recent advances in science and technological studies
- Planning archaeology

The pre-circulated discussion document covered some of these in some detail and the outcomes were endorsed. Work highlighted by the working group that has looked at maritime and coastal archaeology has also picked up the same point of targetting the marine landscapes of the past. The discussion focussed on new techniques and how we should work with researchers in other fields to ensure that their work knits with and contributes to an increased understanding of the sites from which specimens may originate. This is particularly important for DNA work and palaeo-environmental work.

The need for practitioners to have advice about the scientific techniques available was also raised. It was agreed that this might be beyond the remit of the research agenda, but that IfA Wales/Cymru might investigate the possibility of a day school focussing on this topic in the future.

5) A review of the existing research questions:

- What was the geographical extent of the human presence in Wales at specific times?
- What is the extent of the potential for survival of extant deposits containing both the archaeological and/or environmental evidence for these periods?

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- What is the social significance and patterning of sites?

The question about the geographical extent of the human presence in Wales at specific times continues to be relevant. There is though the need to stress the importance of obtaining and of using accurate chronologies towards achieving this. It was agreed that non-professionals could have a role in answering some of these questions. There was consideration given to the need for the professionals to be more pro-active in their guidance and in role in establishing projects for and with non-professional groups. The need to forge better links between such projects, their discoveries and the HERs was emphasised. At the moment there is often little opportunity for amateur discoveries to be followed up by a professional and when opportunity presents such action needs to be undertaken in such a way that the finder of a site feels involved and a key player in the project that develops out of such work. It was agreed that there is an important contribution that can be made here, and one that, if well managed, would have considerable benefit, particularly towards addressing questions arising from Mesolithic and later lithic scatter sites.

The value of modelling past landscapes was also discussed. Opportunities exist to use data collected for other purposes in new ways. It was noted that the Environmental Agencies, water authority and data from surveys undertaken ahead of off-shore developments all provide an excellent and currently largely untapped resource. The need to develop some new research in partnership with people working in other agencies was emphasised, for it presents considerable opportunities for an increased understanding of the archaeology in marine and river areas. This is an aspect that needs expansion in the revised document.

The social significance and patterning of sites was agreed to still be a highly valid point today.

6) Are there any additional or new areas that should be covered in the revised document?

A discussion about how the research agenda might be better used during development work was held. This hinged on the need for education and awareness across the board. From those preparing the archaeological briefs, to those undertaking the work in the field. All involved with this process need to be up to date and aware of new techniques if the maximum and best retrieval is to be obtained from sites. It was also agreed that new discoveries need to be added into the HERs swiftly as a means of encouraging research. But it was observed that this needs to be more than an ability to identify and recognise lithic artefacts, it is a need to recognise the potential a site could offer in terms of adding to the palaeo-environmental understanding of a place in time. As such evaluation strategies need to be appropriate to the landscape in which they are used – for instance wide-spaced test pitting in the uplands does not work – appropriate techniques should be applied according to the landscape and area in which they are to be undertaken.

It was agreed that the discovery of a lithic scatter on a site can become a highly labour intensive and very expensive process. The need to introduce sieving strategies and then the labour intensive analysis of the finds generated can be

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prohibitive should the developer have to pay for this. Given the current difficulty in predicting where such discoveries might be made can cause problems and as such lithic scatter sites deserve more attention and a higher status than is given to them at present and their potential towards addressing our research questions emphasised.

7) How should we address the Later Mesolithic/Neolithic transition in the document?

At present this period transition tends only to be addressed by Neolithic archaeologists and it is rarely considered by the later Mesolithic specialists. It was thought to be an interesting question to pose for researchers to look at this transition from the other direction and to see what arises from this.