



Book Reviews

PREHISTORIC COASTAL COMMUNITIES: THE MESOLITHIC IN WESTERN BRITAIN, BY MARTIN BELL

York: CBA Research Report 149. 2007. xviii + 381 pages, 152 b&w figs and photos + CD. ISBN 978 1 902771 64 9 pb (£40)

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Prehistoric Coastal Communities offers an outstanding example of modern archaeology at its very best: this monograph addresses a set of focused research questions through original fieldwork in a setting that has not been over-explored, with sampling in the field and post-excavation analysis undertaken by teams of specialists, brought together in clear overviews that contextualise the information in broader geographical and theoretical frameworks. As such, Martin Bell and his team of 42 collaborators, all mentioned on the title page, should be congratulated.

The research questions centre on the lives of Mesolithic communities affected by environmental changes in the coastal zone especially in the period 6000-4000 cal BC, and on the nature of the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition in such geographical contexts. Within these long-standing research themes, specific questions are asked about the evidence for seasonality or sedentism, about territory and patterns of movement, and about the role of human agency in environmental change. The fieldwork is undertaken on the coast of western Britain in Wales: at Goldcliff, Llandevenny, Woolaston, Oldbury Flats, and Hills Flats in the Severn Estuary (albeit the latter two are on the English side of the Severn Estuary), and around Prestatyn in North Wales. The multidisciplinary nature of the research is demanded by the levels of preservation of organic and inorganic remains that are so much better from wetlands, and include a range of environmental micro- and macrofossils, sedimentary material, material culture studies, high resolution dating through radiocarbon and dendrochronological methods and the analysis of footprints (!). The overviews all integrate these specialists' analyses, and place the information in a broader western British geographical context, with material consequences for the debate on the Mesolithic and the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition in north-western Europe clearly drawn out.

The organisation of the book requires a bit of familiarisation. After the first general introductory chapter, one finds 18 chapters on the work at Goldcliff East including a concluding chapter which integrates the results from Goldcliff and places these in a broader context. This is followed by a short chapter on the four other sites from the Severn Estuary (ie, Llandevenny, Oldbury Flats, Hills Flats and Woolaston), by Alex Brown. The next chapter concerns the research of the shell middens and their environment at Prestatyn in North Wales. A final, concluding chapter draws all the preceding information together. The initial impression is that this monograph includes the results of three, quite separate, projects. Whilst that may indeed be the case, the final concluding chapters makes good use of the disparate parts, and one can only conclude that the sum of this book's parts is indeed greater than the parts themselves.

The research at Goldcliff will be well known to many. The later prehistory of the site was also published as a CBA Research Report (Bell *et al.* 2000), and here evidence of Mesolithic activity was reported. The current monograph is the result of new fieldwork but, as was the case in the previous report, the footprint tracks in the intertidal mud are the most intriguing. The banded sediments with footprint-track are introduced in chapter 4 by Bell, and further analysed in chapter 12 by Rachel Scales. The footprint tracks of people and animals date to the period between 5600 and 4800 cal BC, and the annually laid down sedimentary layers allow for a detailed analysis of which footprints belong together. In all, 21 persons could be identified who were all barefoot. On the basis of the sedimentary regime in the Severn, and the associated bird footprints, it is as suggested that people explored the saltmarsh during the spring and/or summer. The majority of human footprints belong to children, some estimated as young as 3-5 years. It is hypothesised that the footprint tracks included those of a group of children out on a hunting/gathering trip on the foreshore. Children's activity on the foreshore was also noted on the mudflats at Uskmouth, Usk and Fornby, where similarly footprints of children have been found. Activities could include stalking and driving larger mammals, emptying of fish traps, fowling and gathering. Children tend to be invisible in the archaeological record and this aspect of the research is rightly hailed as a significant contribution to Mesolithic studies.

The analysis shows that the various Mesolithic sites on the Goldcliff island represent different types of sites, but the authors argue for the presence of a 'tippee'-type structure, c. 3 m diameter at several of these activity areas. This structure is smaller than houses found elsewhere in north-western Europe, which is understood as representing a transitory shelter (chapter 18). As one might expect, much attention is paid to the exploitation of natural resources, leading into a discussion of a detailed analysis on seasonality. It is concluded that the peak of activity at Goldcliff was in the late summer and autumn, but lower levels of activity are evidenced at other times through the year.

The study at Llandevenny, Oldbury Flats, Hills Flats and Woolaston (chapter 19) are intended to place the Goldcliff site in a wider context, a somewhat unenviable task in the space of 14 pages. This short chapter does show,

however, that Goldcliff is unique neither in terms of preservation, nor in terms of the periods represented. For example, the site at Llandevenny offers a richer resource to study the continuation of Mesolithic and Neolithic activity than the Goldcliff site.

The study of the middens at Prestatyn and their environmental context in North Wales (chapter 20) is, in effect a piece of rescue archaeology. The earliest finds from the coast go back to beginning of the 20th century, and in 1990 a shell midden of Mesolithic-Neolithic date was discovered. The advance of a housing estate necessitated further research, and during this a total of 6 middens were identified, partially excavated and analysed. Four of the middens contained mainly mussels, and two cockles, and the sites were dated to 4600-3400 cal BC. There is evidence that at least one of the middens had been scratch ploughed in antiquity, possibly as early as c. 4000 cal BC, but the authors pull back from pushing this interpretation forward too strongly because they can not be wholly confident about the origin of the wood charcoal that dates the layer overlying the scratch plough marks – otherwise, this would represent the earliest date of ploughing in Britain (p. 316).

In the concluding chapter (21), Martin Bell offers an overview and wider context, and considers the contribution of this work to broader theoretical debates. One such debate concerns Frans Vera's (2000) ideas on the role of large ungulates in the creation of open grassland is clearly one. Using the evidence from coastal western Britain, Bell warns against the readily acceptance of this theory, by pointing out that it fails to consider the spatial variability of landscapes, the role of other animals (for example, the beaver cf. Coles 2006) and (typically in traditional ecology) the importance of human agency, especially through the use of fire, in creating clearances and changing environments more generally. The determination of simplistic ideas of seasonality is another such debate. On the basis of detailed analysis of the evidence from Goldcliff and Prestatyn, Bell argues that whilst there was certainly a seasonal pattern discernable, this was not a simple one of repeated annual visits but one that was more dynamic, and would have included shorter and longer periods of activity. A third debate concerns the classification and definition of hunter-gatherer settlement patterns. Bell offers a new classification, with the number of type sites now risen to 15 (p. 328-330). A fourth debate concerns the location of Neolithic sites on the coast. These were not, as argued by others, determined by phenomenological associations, but Bell sees these influenced by the preceding Mesolithic activity and the vegetation created by their activities (mainly burning but also trackways) – this created extended timescales, what Bell calls 'the structuration of landscape by antecedent conditions'.

In short, a superb publication, which comes highly recommended.

References

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Review submitted: September 2009

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