

A Research Framework for the Archaeology of Wales
Southwest Wales – Early Prehistoric
22/12/2003

Part A: The Assessment - strengths and weakness of our current knowledge

This first section attempts a brief evaluation of our current state of knowledge. Essentially, what are the strengths (what do we already know a lot about and what are we doing well) and what are the weaknesses (what do we not know much about and what are we not doing well)? A draft table of excavated sites is attached as an appendix. The final version of this paper will be accompanied by current and recent research project, lists of radiocarbon dates and a detailed bibliography that will build on the draft resource audit recently prepared by Cambria Archaeology.

FUNERARY AND RITUAL MONUMENTS

Strengths

The region is characterised by numerous, highly visible Neolithic and early Bronze Age funerary and ritual monuments. Barker lists 31 Neolithic chambered tomb sites from Pembrokeshire and Carmarthenshire in his review of the evidence plus 12 probable sites and 7 well documented lost sites. For the Bronze Age there are over 700 barrow sites and 221 recorded sites of standing stones recorded on the Sites and Monuments Record plus numerous possible sites (including those from documentary and place name evidence). In addition there are numerous stone circles and several possible henges and linear stone alignments.

All the known Neolithic and Bronze Age funerary and ritual monuments are currently the subject of an extensive condition survey being funded by Cadw and being undertaken by Cambria Archaeology (Dyfed Archaeological Trust). This is allowing the preparation of an updated descriptive and photographic record. Chris Barker has undertaken a comprehensive and more detailed review of the evidence for the Neolithic chambered tombs. George Williams has carried out a similar survey of the evidence from standing stones and Cambria Archaeology has undertaken a considerable amount of fieldwork on standing stones.

Weaknesses

The lack of excavated evidence means that our understanding of the Neolithic tomb sites is negligible. Only two sites, Carreg Coetan Arthur and Carreg Samson, have produced any significant excavated evidence in recent years. However, information on the nature of burial or ceremonial activity is very poor. The quantity of human remains (generally cremations) could probably fit into a matchbox and there is very little artefactual evidence. There is generally very poor survival of unburnt bone due to soil conditions. There has been very little excavated evidence from the areas in the immediate vicinity of the sites and yet these areas are currently under threat from erosion and plough damage.

The excavated evidence for the Bronze Age is little better. Although the list of excavated sites appears to be long, only a small handful of sites have been the subject of full scientific investigation. Furthermore, as with the Neolithic sites,

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there has been very little examination of the areas in the immediate vicinity of barrows and standing stones. The few exceptions, such as Stackpole Warren, Plas Gogerddan, Glandy Cross and Llanilar, demonstrate the huge potential of these peripheral areas. The surviving monuments are often just one element of an extensive and complex ritual activity. There has been very little attempt to develop the role of monuments in the landscape, although an important exception been the recent work of Vicki Cummings.

SETTLEMENT

Strengths

The two or three houses excavated at Clegyr Boia, is one of the few excavated Neolithic settlement sites anywhere in Wales and suggests that significant evidence for house structures may exist even if it is difficult to find. However, the series of radiocarbon dates recently recovered from several stakehole structures at Redberth, Pembrokeshire suggests that more ephemeral sites, which have left very little material evidence maybe more common. There are other sites other sites with evidence for Neolithic settlement activity (e.g. Coygan Camp and Plas Gogerddan). However, this tends to be fragmentary consisting of just a few pottery sherds or the occasional radiocarbon date.

Apart from Stackpole Warren, the evidence for settlement in the early Bronze Age is also very fragmentary. A significant concentration of burnt mound sites are known from the region – largely due to the work of Cantrill's geological survey. These have a quite tight Bronze Age date range and, whatever their function may be, they are possibly indicative of the extent of Bronze Age settlement. However, these sites are under threat from erosion.

Weaknesses

Generally the quantity of settlement evidence remains poor – although this is common throughout Wales and indeed throughout much of Britain. This is likely to be because of the lack of visibility of many sites (such as Redberth). They are unlikely to survive as earthworks and they are unlikely to be visible on aerial photographs. As a consequence, much of the available settlement evidence appears to have been incidental discoveries during the course of salvage excavation or while investigating later settlement sites and structures. There is no evidence at all for Neolithic and early Bronze Age settlement in some areas of the region such as the Tywi valley. The lack of sites means, for example, that there is little or no information about the nature of the later Mesolithic –Earlier Neolithic transition.

There is also a lack of chronological understanding of field systems, cairnfields and some sites of upland ploughing. Many of these sites maybe early in date. Similarly, there is a lack of detailed dating information or understanding of unenclosed hut circles and palisaded enclosures, many of which might also have early prehistoric origins.

ARTEFACTS AND MATERIAL CULTURE

Strengths

The survival rate and discovery rate of stones objects from the Neolithic and early Bronze has tended to be high. There is now an extensive distribution of known stone axes known throughout the area, many linked to at least two major sources

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within the region. An increasing number of lithics are now being reported through the Portable Antiquities scheme.

There are 12 known prehistoric metal mining sites in the region. Six of these now have radiocarbon dates and these are linked to programmes of investigation. Although the nature of the dating evidence for quarries and mines is not straightforward (and has been questioned) the dates from at least one of the sites (Copa Hill, Cwmystwyth) have been recovered from at least two contextual sources (including artefacts).

Weaknesses

The quantity of ceramic evidence from the Neolithic is very poor and fragmentary. Although this improves in the early Bronze Age, the evidence is predominantly from funerary contexts.

The known distribution of lithics scatters is heavily influenced by collection biases in particular on the Pembrokeshire coastal path. The lack of arable farming also tends to influence the location of fieldwalking. The lithics assemblages often tend to be one dimensional – i.e. they lacked good environmental or settlement context, although exceptions might be located in the sand dune areas. Insufficient is known of the stone axe production sites in southwest Wales. Specific quarry sites have not yet been confidently identified and there is still the possibility that local glacial boulders have been used such as at Glandy Cross and Glyn-y-Fran.

There have been no excavated wetland or waterlogged sites and so the full range of artefacts and material culture is not known.

There is little or no evidence for the exploitation of metal ores outside of north Ceredigion and little or no evidence for ore-preparation and smelting processes.

Part B: Towards agenda - research opportunities

This part of the paper attempts to ask some of the questions that remain unanswered or only partly answered following the evaluation of our existing state of knowledge. That is what are the opportunities, what potential problems do we want to solve and what are the gaps that we want to fill? Of course, it may be felt that many of these themes are unachievable (although Part C tentatively suggests some possible approaches). There are going to be inevitable constraints (threats) on our ability to achieve many of these ambitions that are based on the nature of the archaeological resource and the current political, financial and legislative framework of archaeology in Wales. Nevertheless, this is meant to be a start at considering some of the issues.

1 - The study of later Mesolithic –Earlier Neolithic transitions

- Did farming substitute or supplement the economy of later Mesolithic communities?
- What is the evidence for Mesolithic and Neolithic material being found at the same location?

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2 - The introduction, character and development of agricultural practices - Overlaps with all other themes

- How significant was arable farming during the earlier Neolithic (cf Thomas 1991)?
- Were non-intensive farming practices (with long fallow agriculture) added to activities already being undertaken by Mesolithic groups (cf Barrett 1994)? Were early Neolithic populations of SW Wales essentially pastoralists?
- What is the evidence for the co-existence of different socio-economic groups?
- Do we see a change in farming practice during late 3rd M early 2nd M with more intensive farming and shorter fallow periods?
- What was the attitude toward land ownership? Was there a change in concept from one of right of access to land (by essentially mobile communities) to one of ownership and family tenure (by essentially settled communities)?

3 – The identification of settlement

- Why is the settlement evidence at variance with the data from Ireland and the continent?
- Was the earlier Neolithic landscape and settlement characterized by its mobility (cf Whittle 1997)?
- Was there a change to more permanent settlement during the later Neolithic/earlier Bronze Age?

4 - The study of how different landscape zones were exploited from the 5th to the 2nd millennium BC

- Were earlier Neolithic farmers essentially confined to lowland environments as suggested by distribution of chambered tombs (cf Lynch 2000)?
- Was there only a move into the uplands following population pressures during later Neolithic (cf Lynch 2000)?
- Were there more complex arrangements with different responses to different landscape zones?
- Was there greater agricultural diversification during the later Neolithic?
- What is the evidence for seasonal variations in the exploitation of upland zones?

5 - The development, role and use of ceremonial and funerary monuments and their environs

- What was the nature of mortuary or funerary activity during the Neolithic and early Bronze Age?
- Was there a change from communal to individual burial?
- What can monuments tell us about the nature of society?
- What was the relationship between different monuments and between monuments and the wider landscape?
- What can the immediate environs tell us about the development, role and use of monuments? – This is particularly pertinent in the light of an ongoing threat to the non-visible elements of monument complexes.

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6 - Industrial processes and access to resources and trade connections

- Where were the stone axe production sites/quarries (if formal quarries existed)?
- Was the exploitation of quarries for stone axe production formalised or ritualised with working restricted to certain groups and times or was it more casual with people making axes whenever they needed them?
- Did this change during the Early Bronze Age – both for stone and metal ores?
- Is the evidence for the exploitation of metal ores confined to north Ceredigion?
- What were the mechanisms for dispersal? Was the raw material or finished products formally traded (by merchant class) or passed hand to hand by neighbours?
- Was there a seaborne trade?
- What was the nature of the contact with the east (flint, axes and pottery) and with the west (styles of tomb architecture)? Was there a change in emphasis during the later Neolithic?
- What is the evidence for routeways across mountains or coast?

7 - The distribution and context of material culture deposition

- Was pottery essentially domestic or ritual in the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age?
- What was the nature of Neolithic stone axe and BA metalwork deposition?

Part C: a suggested strategy – possible approaches

This part of the paper attempts to set out some ideas or approaches to answer some of the possible agenda questions outlined above. Consequently, an attempt has been made to link the approaches to the questions suggested in the agenda. However, it is written with much trepidation. There is already a concern that it maybe far too soon to draw up of a set of methodological approaches in this way and that any attempt to do so may appear to be too prescriptive. It maybe felt that this stage of the research framework exercise should be confined to the identification of the key issues. It is also debateable whether the approaches that are suggested could result in SMART outcomes (Specific/Measurable/Achievable/Realistic/Timebounded). Nevertheless, it was felt that it would do no harm to put some ideas down to start the debate. Without a discussion of how we can approach the key themes and questions we will never be able to determine whether or not the answers to those issues are achievable or not.

1 - The study of later Mesolithic –Earlier Neolithic transitions

- Reassessment of lithics assemblages (eg 'flint working floors') from Pembrokeshire especially those with recorded Mesolithic and Neo artefacts
- Examination of locations with mixed assemblages (eg cave sites) including sub-surface investigation linked with comprehensive dating programme and palaeoenvironmental sampling
- Examination of submerged forests and coastal wetlands that may have deposits spanning this crucial period for forager-farming transition – linked to dendro programme (see Caseldine 1990)

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- Considerable potential for the use of isotope analysis and C14 dating has been highlighted by the work of Rick Schulting. This suggests a possible way forward.

2 - The introduction, character and development of agricultural practices

- Essential to undertake comprehensive palaeoenvironmental sampling programme from all excavated Neolithic and Early Bronze Age sites – including sampling for charred plant remains.
- Examination of buried land surfaces beneath funerary and ritual monuments. Also under later prehistoric earthworks and enclosure banks.
- Pollen studies need to be integrated into programmes of archaeological fieldwork
- Examination of nature and chronology of field systems – perhaps focused on areas with complex palimpsests such as St David's Head

3 – The identification of settlement

- Early sites cannot be found using existing locational strategies unless by chance (eg Redberth). Perhaps more innovative locational strategies needed – eg greater use of remote sensing (phosphate surveys, magnetic susceptibility surveys) and perhaps closer investigation of apparent blank areas (eg during topsoil stripping of developments such as road building).
- Reassessment of known lithics assemblages. Targeted programmes of fieldwalking in Pembrokeshire using transects across different landscape zones to locate discrete earlier Neolithic scatters with re-survey at closer resolution is necessary.
- Programmes of aerial survey linked with programmes of systematic fieldwalking, especially in those areas being ploughed for the first time.

4 - The study of how different landscape zones were exploited from the 5th to the 2nd millennium BC

- Development of survey and fieldwork techniques to undertake comparative mapping of different landscape zones

5 - The development, role and use of ceremonial and funerary monuments and their environs

- The examination of ceremonial and burial monuments will enable the exploration of the nature of Neolithic and Bronze Age societies – eg though different types of burial and the character and potential status of grave goods.
- The development of terrain modelling, examining visual relationships between individual and groups of monuments and between monuments and their topographic settings.
- The examination of the use of space within monument complexes. For example, from the perspective of the observer or participant.
- Identification of landscapes that were re-used or avoided (due to the 'historical knowledge of past communities'). Perhaps though an examination of monument complexes with evidence for multi-period use.
- Fieldwork involving monuments and monument complexes should include examination of the gaps between them – especially in the light of the ongoing threat.

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- Unpublished excavation archives (eg Bedd yr Afanc and Pentre Ifan) need to be studied and brought to publication

6 - Industrial processes and access to resources and trade connections

- Systematic programme of fieldwork and rock outcrop characterisation linked to existing petrographic data needed to identify stone axe production sites.
- Improved provenancing of Bronze Age metal artefacts linked to geochemical fingerprinting of Welsh ore deposits – as a means to identify sources of raw material.
- Review of excavated evidence for metal ore processing.

7 - The distribution and context of material culture deposition

- Re-assessment of distribution and context of artefact locations – both hoards and individual finds
- Examination of the context of deposition of artefacts within sites

8 - Other possible strategic goals relating to Neolithic and earlier Bronze Age

- Re-assessment of existing archives – examining potential for further research eg scientific analysis and radiocarbon dating, lipid analysis etc
- The need to integrate research programmes with agri-environment schemes
- Continued development and enhancement of the SMR – in particular the creation of records for artefacts in local museum and private collections and the development of shared data with NMGW and other ENDEX partners

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