

Neolithic and earlier Bronze Age

Summary of comments on the Neolithic and earlier Bronze Age research agenda (Wales)

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Introduction

Twenty-one people responded with comments on the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age research agenda (2004 version); those contributing came from the university, commercial and museum sectors, and also included a number of senior independent researchers.

The original research framework can be found at:

www.archaeoleg.org.uk/pdf/neolithic/VERSION%2001%20NEOLITHIC%20AND%20EARLIER%20BRONZE%20AGE.pdf

Progress made in addressing these themes can be gauged through a review of research published in the past five years (2004 to 2009), and in the summary of major fieldwork projects for the same period.

Generally responses to this review opportunity indicate that the research framework is still fit for purpose, although the point has been made by several contributors that it requires resourcing if it is to set the direction for future research. (See 'Making it easier to use the agenda').

All of the current themes (transitions, agriculture, settlement, landscape, monuments, and industry) are still thought to have value, although recent changes in theoretical direction and ongoing improvements to methodologies and techniques have led to calls for amendments to their description. These amendments generally take the form of alteration to phrasing, and suggestions as to how a theme might be progressed. (See 'Comments on themes').

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The past few years have seen considerable advances in our understanding of the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age in Britain and Ireland and these are reflected in calls for the incorporation of new themes into the framework, notably chronology and inter-regional studies. (See 'Emerging themes').

Making it easier to use the agenda

- Need clearer prioritisation of the questions in the agenda.
- Need to be more pro-active in answering the agenda's questions (role for universities, research grants).
- Need to provide incentives to focus researchers on the agenda's questions (grants to start projects, resources to support projects with high potential).
- Need greater structure to the agenda's website so it's easier to identify previous work and areas that need to be addressed.
- Need to ensure site information and references are updated more regularly, with all documents dated.

Comments on themes

Later Mesolithic – Earlier Neolithic transitions

- Need to be more explicit in the diversity of techniques and approaches which can be applied to the study of the transition (eg, Bayesian modelling, DNA studies, stable isotopes, palaeoclimatology, palaeopedology).
- Need a clearer emphasis on targeting 'at-risk' sites (eg, coastal areas and wetlands).

The introduction, character and development of agricultural practices

- Need to be more explicit in recommending the use of additional techniques (eg, lipid analysis, charcoal identification, microwear) to

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combat the absence of pollen and molluscs from many prehistoric sites in Wales.

Settlement

- Need more evaluation of sites known from aerial and field survey in order to identify those belonging to the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age.
- Need more work on settlement sites in areas where palaeoenvironmental evidence could also be obtained.
- Need more focus on 'neglected' monument types which can inform understanding of settlement patterns and landscape use (eg, burnt mounds, rock art).

Exploitation of different landscape zones between the fifth and second millennia BC

- Need to improve the links between palaeoenvironmental and archaeological evidence.
- Need to consider the potential of archived peat cores and other palaeoenvironmental samples.
- Need to target attention on potential buried landscapes (eg, coastal plains, peat bogs, river valleys).
- Need to define regions which are key for the study of specific landscape issues (eg, areas where monuments cluster).
- Need more targeted efforts to identify early field systems (eg, by repeat flying over areas) linked to follow up dating exercises.
- Need a mechanism to increase the amount of upland research in areas where commercial archaeology cannot reach.

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

- Need more small scale evaluation of multiple sites to refine monument chronology and classification.
- Need more focus on 'neglected' monument types which can address UK and Ireland-wide issues (eg, long barrows, portal dolmens).

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- Need to re-visit well-known monument types with excavations which utilise a full-battery of modern techniques.
- Need greater integration of monument and settlement evidence.
- Need more survey and excavation of the area around and within ceremonial and funerary monuments.

Industrial processes and access to resources and trade connections

- Need more focus on the origins of stone quarrying, potentially back into the Mesolithic (eg, Gronant chert, Mesolithic date from Graig Lwyd).
- Need more consideration of stone and ore resources found in coastal and superficial deposits.
- Need more critical review of the evidence base for resource exploitation and exchange models.
- The potential for settlement sites around mines should be explored.

The distribution and context of material culture deposition

- Need more effort to incorporate material culture studies and monument-based narratives.
- Need to produce corpora relating to specific artefact types.
- There is generally a low priority for material culture (no mention of pottery and little mention of metalwork in the agenda).

Emerging themes

Inter-regional relationships

- More effort should be given to recognising and understanding the links between Wales and neighbouring areas across this period (eg, where did Wales's Neolithic come from, what do our artefact and monument types tell us about Wales's place in the world).

Intra-regional patterns

- Need for more study of patterns in monument and artefact types to identify regional relationships.

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Chronology

- When did the Neolithic start in Wales?.
- How did Wales change over the course of the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age.
- Recognition of the end of the period (EBA / MBA transition) as a focus for study.
- More critical approach to the selection of material for radiocarbon to allow coherent Bayesian models to be produced.
- Consideration of other dating techniques to complement radiocarbon analysis (eg, OSL, cosmogenic isotope dating).
- Need an online database of radiocarbon dates. [NB: this is already available at: www.museumwales.ac.uk/en/radiocarbon]

Contributors

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