

NEOLITHIC AND EARLIER BRONZE AGE

Introduction

The introduction of farming around 4000 BC had a dramatic impact on the landscape of Wales and fundamentally changed the ways in which people lived and interacted. However, we understand very little about the nature of the transition from a 'hunter-gatherer-fisher' lifestyle to one of agriculture. Wales also has a particularly rich legacy of field monuments dating to this period. However, most are associated with funerary and ritual activities and there is little evidence for early domestic activity or settlement.

Themes

Later Mesolithic – Earlier Neolithic transitions

Did farming replace or supplement the economy of later Mesolithic communities?

What was the environmental context for the transition?

- There is a need to reassess the types of tool and working practices recognisable in early lithic assemblages, for example 'flint-working floors', especially those with recorded Mesolithic and Neolithic artefacts.
- Locations with mixed-date assemblages, for example cave sites, should be examined, including sub-surface investigation linked with comprehensive dating programmes and palaeoenvironmental sampling. Extensive use should be made of isotope analysis and radiocarbon dating.
- Submerged forests and coastal wetlands that might have deposits spanning the crucial period of forager-farming transition should be examined in conjunction with a dendrochronological programme.

The introduction, character and development of agricultural practices

What was the relative significance of arable farming and of animal husbandry during the earlier Neolithic? For example, were early Neolithic populations essentially pastoralists?

Were non-intensive farming practices, with long fallow agriculture, added to activities already being undertaken by Mesolithic groups?

What is the evidence for the co-existence of different socio-economic groups?

Do we see a change in farming practice during the later Neolithic and Early Bronze Age (late-third to early-second millennia), with more intensive farming and shorter fallow periods?

Is there evidence for a change in concept from one of right of access to land, by mobile communities, to one of ownership and family tenure, by largely settled communities?

- It is essential to undertake comprehensive palynological and other palaeoenvironmental sampling programmes whilst excavating all Neolithic and Early Bronze Age sites and during other programmes of archaeological work.

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- Buried land surfaces beneath funerary and ritual monuments should be examined, as well as those under later prehistoric earthworks and enclosure banks.
- New scientific techniques, such as lipid analysis, should be utilised. A potential dataset exists in museum collections and other archives.
- Known field systems should be examined to establish their dates and nature, and further prospection undertaken to find others.

Settlement

Why do we have so few house sites from the Neolithic – in contrast with Ireland and the continent?

Was settlement in the earlier Neolithic landscape characterised by its mobility?

Was there a change to more permanent settlement during the later Neolithic/earlier Bronze Age?

- Early sites are rarely found using existing fieldwork strategies. This may, in part, reflect the nature of early settlement in which permanent places were rare or special. There is a need to test this by more innovative locational strategies, for example greater use of remote sensing such as phosphate and magnetic susceptibility surveys, and, perhaps, closer investigation of apparent blank zones in areas of known activity, for example during topsoil stripping at building developments.
- There is a need for better training for field staff in recognising artefacts and features.
- Known artefact distributions as established by lithics surveys should be reviewed to examine patterning and landscape zones; this should be followed by targeted fieldwalking in transects to provide reliable quantitative comparisons and to define the spatial extent of clusters.
- The locations of known artefact scatters should be reassessed, using targeted and close-interval remote-sensing techniques.

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

Were earlier Neolithic farmers confined to lowland environments as suggested by the surviving distribution of chambered tombs?

Was there a move into the uplands during the later Neolithic because of population pressures?

Was there greater agricultural diversification during the later Neolithic?

Is there any evidence for seasonal variations in the exploitation of upland zones?

- There is a need to consolidate existing landscape evidence to examine different zones through time.
- Survey and fieldwork techniques need to be developed to undertake comparative mapping of different landscape zones.

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

What do monuments tell us about the nature of society?

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In terms of location, how do monuments relate to each other and how do they relate to their wider landscape setting?

What can the immediate environs tell us about the development, role and use of monuments?

- The study of the broader landscape context is particularly pertinent in the light of an ongoing threat to the non-visible elements of monument complexes.
- Terrain modelling needs to be developed to examine the visual relationships between individual and groups of monuments and between monuments and their topographic settings.
- Spatial analysis should be conducted to consider monument complexes from the literal and figurative viewpoint of users.
- Can we identify landscapes that were re-used or avoided due to the 'historical knowledge of past communities', through an examination of monument complexes with evidence for multi-period use.
- Fieldwork should include examination of the spaces between individual monuments and monument complexes and not focus simply on the monuments themselves.
- Existing site archives need to be assessed so that the integrity of the data can be evaluated. Any unpublished excavation archives need to be studied and brought to publication.
- Existing archives need to be examined and/or archaeological intervention undertaken to obtain dating material for intra-site sequences. The development of new techniques, for example the dating of cremations, and a review of existing radiocarbon dating and key sequences using modern calibration techniques, for example Bayesian algorithms, may allow a more developed absolute chronology to be constructed from archive material.

Industrial processes and access to resources and trade connections

What stone was being employed for implements and where was it procured?

Was the exploitation of quarries for stone-axe production formalised or ritualised with working restricted to certain groups and times? Alternatively, was stone axe production more casual with people making axes whenever they needed them and from whatever appropriate material that they could find?

Did this change during the Early Bronze Age, both for stone and metal ores?

How widespread is the evidence for the exploitation of metal ores?

What were the mechanisms for dispersal? Were the raw materials or finished products formally traded by a merchant class or passed hand to hand by neighbours?

Was there a seaborne trade?

What was the nature of the contact with the lands to the east and west? Was there a change in emphasis during the later Neolithic?

What is the evidence for route-ways across mountains or along the coast?

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- A systematic programme of fieldwork and rock-outcrop characterisation linked to existing petrographic data is needed to determine whether or not there are unknown stone-axe production sites.
- Improved provenancing of Bronze Age metal artefacts linked to geochemical fingerprinting of Welsh ore deposits is needed as a means of identifying sources of raw material.
- The excavated evidence for metal-ore processing should be reviewed.
- The evidence for marine and estuarine exploitation of raw materials should be reviewed.

The distribution and context of material culture deposition

What can we understand about the nature and use of material culture through its depositional context?

What was the nature of Neolithic stone-axe and Bronze Age metalwork deposition?

- Re-assessment of the distribution and context of artefact locations, both hoards and individual finds, is needed.
- More attention should be paid to the examination of the context of the deposition of artefacts within sites.

Priorities

The nature of the Mesolithic/Neolithic transition - There is a need to study sea level change and the origin of sedentism. There should be a particular focus on those locations with mixed date assemblages (eg cave sites) including sub-surface investigation linked with comprehensive dating and palaeoenvironmental sampling.

Understanding monuments – a comprehensive field assessment has recently been completed of all the known Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments of Wales. There is now a need for detailed investigation to provide a better chronological understanding of monument types and their broader social and topographical context. In all cases attention needs to be paid to buried soils and palaeoenvironmental evidence. There is also an opportunity to re-examine archives and material from previous excavations and collections.

Where are the settlements? - Settlements throughout the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age are poorly represented in Wales and in particular for the early Neolithic. Where did the monument builders live? On the basis of present evidence, it has also been observed that there is very little continuity of settlement from the early Neolithic to BA and beyond. There is a need to review specific groups of cropmarks and artefact distributions perhaps through targeted surface collection and sample excavation.

How big was the landscape? - How did prehistoric populations use the landscape of Wales and what were their concepts/understandings of the landscape? At a local level this could include an examination of the sacred and economic landscapes in the immediate vicinity of monuments and settlements and could include the identification and examination of field systems. Natural resources such as palaeochannels and bogs should not be forgotten as potential sources of

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important landscape information. At a wider level this could include an examination of the nature of early trade perhaps employing new approaches to how raw materials may have been collected and used.