

THE PALAEOLITHIC AND MESOLITHIC

Introduction

In Wales the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic periods covered a long time-span, which included the first record of early Neanderthals at Pontnewydd Cave and the first appearance of Anatomically Modern Humans, concluding with the almost complete demise of hunter-gatherer-fisher communities in the early Holocene. Throughout this period the human presence was influenced by the glacial-interglacial cycle and the accompanying climatic and environmental changes.

The effects of the last glaciation have apparently removed much evidence for an earlier human presence in all but a few exceptional sites. The scanty evidence needs to be supplemented by new research in order for us to improve our understanding of changing patterns of human presence and behaviour during this time.

Themes

Colonisation and recolonisation

What was the geographical extent of the human presence in Wales at specific times during the Palaeolithic?

Do relationships exist between the bio-stratigraphic evidence and that of human occupation?

- The pattern of human presence and absence across Wales at specific times is a theme capable of further elucidation. An increased understanding is required of not only when absences occurred, but also why they took place.

Settlement patterns and settlement histories

How extensive is the survival of deposits containing both archaeological and environmental evidence for these periods?

When were people present at sites in Wales and how were sites used?

Are there undiscovered Upper Palaeolithic open-air sites in Wales?

Can Mesolithic sites be better related to the environmental record preserved in the coastal zone?

How extensively were upland zones and open-air locations occupied during the Mesolithic?

What were the relationships between sites, and over what area can we identify these?

- Settlement distribution across Wales apparently shows biases at certain periods, for example mainly in caves in the Palaeolithic, and along the Pembrokeshire coast in the later Mesolithic. These distribution patterns and the gaps and interrelationships between sites need further elucidation. An improved chronology needs to be developed to underpin such studies.

Palaeolithic and Mesolithic

- Predictive modelling should be applied in Wales to investigate the potential presence of sites in a range of different environments, such as off-shore/inter-tidal and alluvial/colluvial areas.

Social organisation, action and belief systems

What is the social significance and patterning of sites?

Can social systems and social territories be elucidated at the regional, national and international scale?

Is there art in any of the Welsh caves?

What happened to the bodies of early Mesolithic people after death?

What raw materials were used in Wales at specific times?

Can any patterns or trends be identified in their use that might indicate preferences for certain sources of raw materials at specific times?

- Social organisation and the potential interactions between people at sites across the country are largely unexplored in Wales.
- Patterns of raw material exploitation during the period need examining, and modern approaches to lithic assemblages need adopting to elucidate these aspects further.
- Belief systems need full study, since we currently know of no Upper Palaeolithic cave art and little about early Mesolithic burial sites in Wales.

Priorities

Colonisation and recolonisation

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