

Research Framework for the Archaeology of Wales 2016 'Refresh'

Neolithic and Early Bronze Age

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1. Introduction

The following document was compiled following the receipt of information about site discoveries from the WATs and other commercial organisations and academics and discussions with the contributors listed above. The summary of current knowledge is not an exhaustive list of newly discovered sites, but provides an overview of how work over the last 6 years has moved our understanding of the Neolithic and EBA periods forwards.

2. Summary of current knowledge

Since the last 'refresh' of the Research Framework in 2011 a number of significant new discoveries have been made that have expanded our knowledge and understanding of the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age periods in Wales. Most of these discoveries have resulted from development, with large scale developments contributing considerably to the distribution of early prehistoric sites. Research excavations have also been carried out by the Welsh Archaeological Trusts and several Universities and individuals.

The sites included in this update comprise both those excavated and/or published since 2011. The update will discuss sites that have been either fully published or for which there is an interim report or statement available.

Settlement

There have been a number of significant discoveries of new Neolithic settlement sites, or sites producing evidence of occupation, since 2011. The most significant is the group of 4 early Neolithic houses at Llanfaethlu on Anglesey which was excavated in 2015. The houses are broadly comparable to those previously identified in Gwynedd but

produced an exceptional assemblage of pottery, struck lithics and botanical remains. The houses were partly overlain by a cluster of middle Neolithic pits which produced Mortlake pottery, and two features produced sherds of Grooved Ware. Elsewhere on Anglesey, at Penmynydd, late Neolithic settlement evidence was identified during the replacement of a water main. This included 5 pits and some postholes but no well-defined structure. The pits contained layers of charcoal and evidence of *in situ* burning and seem mainly to have been hearths. Radiocarbon dates of Cal BC 3100 to 2900 and Cal BC 3260 to 3250 and Cal BC 3100 to 2910 were obtained.

In the Towy valley in Carmarthenshire, excavations on the route of the LNG pipeline revealed a significant cluster of pits containing early Neolithic pottery, struck lithics and charred corn, partly overlain by a circle of large postholes. A second cluster of pits produced sherds of grooved ware, which was previously unknown in this part of west Wales. A further 10 sites producing Neolithic and EBA pits and/or finds were identified on the route of the pipeline through Pembrokeshire and Carmarthenshire. Elsewhere, isolated finds of pits containing early Neolithic pottery have been recorded in Cardiganshire and Gwynedd.

Monuments

There have been two significant new Neolithic monuments discovered since 2011: the Class II henge at Llanddowror near Carmarthen, and the causewayed enclosure beneath Caerau hillfort in Cardiff. The henge at Llanddowror consists of two rock-cut curved ditches and produced a small assemblage of beaker and Bronze Age pottery. At Caerau, the causewayed enclosure was identified beneath the Iron Age hillfort and consists of at least 5 lines of causewayed ditches which contained large quantities of Neolithic pottery, flint tools and polished stone axes.

Other significant excavations of monuments have included the evaluations at Penywylod chambered tomb in Powys, Garn Turne in Pembrokeshire, St Lythans in Glamorgan, Trefael in Pembrokeshire and Perthi Duon in Anglesey. At Penywylod one of Savory's trenches was re-opened and small test pits dug which revealed features cut into the pre-cairn surface and the remains of a façade wall surrounding the monument. A geophysical survey of the site has also hinted at the presence of 5 previously unknown chambers within the long mound. At St Lythans early Neolithic pottery was identified at the back of the cleared chamber and the site was revealed as a long cairn with a horned forecourt. Excavations at Garn Turne revealed the collapsed remains of two dolmens. The largest site was already known, and has the largest

capstone recorded on any monument in Britain. The pit from which the capstone was dug was excavated and produced early Neolithic pottery and radiocarbon dates. The enormous capstone partly overlay the capstone of a second dolmen which once stood next to it. At Trefael a cup marked stones was identified as the remains of a probable portal dolmen. Similarly at Perthi Duon, a cairn was identified surrounding the capstone, and a piece of copper was recovered from within the monument.

At Brynsiencyn on Anglesey excavation near the two large Bryn Gwyn Stones standing stones confirmed that they had once formed part of a stone circle c. 16m diameter consisting of 8 stones dated to the Later Neolithic period and associated with cremation activity. Fragments of some former standing stones remained while others had been removed entirely. Evidence was also found of modification of the circle in the Early Bronze Age.

A series of Bronze Age monuments have been excavated and published since 2011, including a ring ditch at Steynton in Pembrokeshire that was identified during a watching brief on the LNG pipeline and was found to contain the largest assemblage of funerary vessels from SW Wales. In Gwynedd, the A497 road improvement scheme revealed a circular ditched enclosure within which was a small round cairn covering two cremations contained within urns. At Pan-y-Butler in Cardiganshire two round barrows were excavated, one of which contained a secondary cremation deposit with a jet bead necklace. At Nantcwnlle in Cardiganshire excavations of the remains of a round barrow revealed that the site had been the focus for activity from the early Neolithic through to the end of the Early Bronze Age. Cremation burials accompanied by pottery were identified in pits, and a pit containing probable early Neolithic pottery and a struck crystal bladelet was also found. At Fan Foel in Carmarthenshire a round barrow was excavated and found to contain cremation deposits and pottery, and a sizable palaeoenvironmental assemblage was collected (awaiting analysis). At Tinkinswood in Glamorgan a small round barrow containing a central pit but no burial deposits was identified 50m away from the Neolithic chambered cairn.

Burnt Mounds

Since 2011, a significant number of burnt mounds have been identified, predominantly in SW and NW Wales. In SW Wales, 39 burnt mounds were identified during excavations on the route of the LNG pipeline, all of which produced charcoal and have been dated to the Bronze Age. One produced a wooden trough and was dated to around 2400BC. In

NW Wales several burnt mounds were investigated during the construction of the Pwllheli to Blaenau Ffestiniog Pipeline, Gwynedd including a large site near Pentrefelin. The earliest burnt mound was dated to probably 2800–2670 cal BC with others dated to around the Neolithic/Bronze Age transition and into the Bronze Age. The large mound with several troughs and pits probably started being used in 2715–2510 cal BC and continued until probably 2105–1895 cal BC, with later activity in the late Bronze Age (980–810 cal BC).

Extraction Sites

Research around the Preseli Hills in Pembrokeshire has identified two possible sources for the Stonehenge Bluestones. Research has revealed that the Preselite (spotted dolorite) pillars from the bluestones horseshoe came from the Carn Menyn and Carn Goedog outcrops on Mynydd Preseli. The rhyolitic stone pillars, and the rhyolite debitage found in the Aubrey holes and around Stonehenge have been sourced to the Craig Rhos-y-Felin outcrop at Pont Saeson at the base of the northern side of Mynydd Preseli.

Rock Art

New finds of cup-marks have recorded in 3 locations at Pant-y-Ilan, Arthog, Meirionnydd; a cup and ring mark was recorded at Llyn Du, Llanbedr, Meirionnydd, and a cup-marked stone was discovered at Camarnaint, Llanfairfechan, Conwy. A design with a central cup and three concentric rings was recorded at Treferwydd, Llangaffo.

Rock Shelters/Caves

Excavations of a pit outside the mouth of Goldsland Cave in the Vale of Glamorgan recovered human remains of late Neolithic date associated with lithics and pottery. Recent work has been undertaken to re-examine and date caves in Flintshire and Denbighshire ([info to follow](#))

3. 'Refreshed' Themes

It was decided that while the original 2003 themes remained valid it was possible to 'streamline' them and to make them more specific to Wales. The themes proposed below do not replace the 2003 and 2011 ones, but put forward new priorities that enhance the original ones.

It was also felt that there should be less specific focus on the Mesolithic/Neolithic transition and the early Neolithic, and a greater emphasis on the need to address the Neolithic as a whole. Unless otherwise stated, the research themes should be applied to the whole of the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age periods (4000 BC to 1400 BC).

Recommendations are also provided, which the panel felt would be helpful in the application of the research agenda to both commercial and research projects.

If we preserved everything we would know nothing - one key recommendation that came out of the group discussions was that excavation of Neolithic and EBA sites should be encouraged across Wales. The number of sites, and the number of significant sites, identified over the last decade reveals how much there is still to discover about these periods of early prehistory. While new insights can be gained through reassessing archived assemblages, excavation of sites under modern conditions is the key way for us to extend our knowledge – the dramatic shifts in our understanding of the periods brought about by recent excavations provides a clear demonstration of this.

3.1 Settlement

The concept of Neolithic settlement can be problematic, with a focus on identifying 'houses' and other structural remains to explain how and where people lived. In reality, evidence for domestic activity can be far more ephemeral, often constituting clusters of postholes and/or stakeholes, clusters of pits, individual pits, hearths or simply spreads of material culture. Evidence for domestic activity can also be identified in apparently 'ritual' deposits – pits containing structured deposition, for example. It is likely that evidence for Neolithic domestic activity is being overlooked because it often does not conform to preconceptions or is considered too ephemeral to be of significance.

Settlement should, therefore, be understood as being represented by a range of features including pits, trenches, postholes, stakeholes, hearths, artefact scatters, all of which could contain significant evidence relating to Neolithic domestic activity.

- What did everyday life in the Neolithic and EBA look like and how could this influence the types of settlements we are likely to find?
- How does evidence for settlement fit into patterns of land use and are there clear regional variations?
- Is the apparent bias towards early Neolithic 'houses' in north Wales reflective of a regional tradition or is it a result of modern land development patterns or better archaeological recognition?
- Is the lack of identified houses in the later Neolithic reflective of the nature of the archaeological resource or are we simply not recognising them during excavation?

Recommendations:

- Small sites, features and scatters should not be dismissed as of little value to our understanding of Neolithic settlement and should be subject to the same conditions of excavation and analysis as 'house' sites.
- Full excavation, sampling and analysis should be the normal methodology for any site containing evidence for Neolithic domestic activity.
- An analysis of data relating to clusters of artefact scatters held in the HERs could help to identify potential new settlement areas.

3.2 Human Remains

Finds of human remains of Neolithic and EBA date are rare in Wales, although it should not be assumed that poor preservation of human remains is an inevitability. The significance of any human bones of Neolithic and EBA date cannot be underestimated, and recovery and analysis of remains should be maximised.

- What do human remains tell us about diet and lifestyle of the populations and how they changed through time?
- Can regional variation in diet be identified in the human remains assemblages?
- Is the use of caves for human burials fully recognized by either archaeologists or cavers and are resources of material being missed because of a lack of co-operation between the two disciplines?

Recommendations:

- Any site where human remains of Neolithic or EBA date are recovered should be considered to be extremely significant. Full excavation, sampling and analysis of features containing human remains should be carried out, following ClfA guidance.
- The significance of assemblages of human remains should be highlighted to individuals who may encounter them, such as cavers, to ensure that all finds are reported and treated properly.
- In order to maximise the information that the resource can provide full analysis (C14 and isotope) of all human bones should be carried out.
- Reassessment of human bones stored in museum collections could reveal significant new information about the Neolithic and EBA periods.
- Retention of human bones is essential to enable future research.

3.3 Monuments

- Can we move beyond form and landscape setting of funerary monuments to consider the nature of the burial rites involved?
- Is it possible to gain greater chronological resolution in relation to changes in burial practice across key periods (eg. Early/middle Neolithic transition, emergence of late Neolithic/EBA single grave traditions)?
- What do changes in burial practice reveal about belief systems?
- Why are there so few late Neolithic monuments recorded in south Wales?

Recommendations

- The use of absolute dating techniques and total survey should be adopted as standard practice during excavation.
- All burial deposits should be subject to full excavation, sampling and analysis.

3.4 Raw material extraction and use

- Where did people acquire flint, chert, quartzite etc for knapping? Are specific areas of the coast good for the collection of beach flint and what are the sources for other, non-flint lithic resources? Is flint being imported from outside Wales?
- What role did Wales play in the development of copper working in the period around 2400BC?
- Can we recognise a chalcolithic period in Wales?
- Can we refine our understanding of the distribution and movement of 3rd millennium metalwork within Wales?
- Can we refine our knowledge about the sources and distribution of late Neolithic/EBA mace heads and axes across Wales?
- What was the social context for access to and exchange of materials within the Welsh landscape?

Recommendations:

- Metallurgical analysis of 3rd millennium metalwork should be carried out as standard when they are recovered through excavation.
- Petrological analysis of stone axes and maces heads should be carried out as standard when they are recovered through excavation.
- Periodic reviews of materials being reported to PAS and the HERs should be carried out to identify clusters and patterning across landscapes – *the panel highlighted the hugely significant but often underrated role the PAS plays, with 40% of all recorded*

chalcolithic sites in Wales identified through the PAS.

- There is huge potential for extending our knowledge of the Neolithic and EBA periods by reviewing materials held in museum collections.
- Archives and artefacts should be brought together to allow future study.

3.5 Material Culture

No new themes were put forward by the panel, but it was felt that the study of material culture would benefit from the following recommendations.

Recommendations:

- Material culture studies should focus on current weaknesses, such as our lack of understanding of Neolithic pottery
- Assemblages of material culture from excavations in the 1950s and 1960s have not been assessed and hold great potential for further study.
- Archives and artefacts should be brought together to allow future study.

3.6 Regionality and Connections

Whilst recognizing that there is regional diversity within Wales, it was considered significant to establish connectivity between regions and with the rest of the UK.

- What aspects of the Neolithic and EBA are specific to Wales and are there areas of research that only fieldwork in Wales could address?
- Is the assumption that there was contact between the west of Wales and Ireland throughout the Neolithic and EBA borne out by the evidence?
- Can regional trends be identified in the evidence and are they real or a reflection of fieldwork (ie. are houses unique to north Wales and causewayed enclosures unique to south Wales)?
- Is there an East/West divide in Wales and does this tie into connections outside the country (ie. Is the east of Wales more connected to England and the west to Ireland)
- How wide is the distribution of Welsh axes (stone and copper) throughout the UK?

Recommendations:

- Comparative studies of Welsh sites and artefacts and those along the Atlantic fringe should be encouraged

- Petrological analysis of axes should be encouraged
- Metallurgical analysis of axes should be encouraged

The Coast

The coastline of Wales is 1400km long and being dramatically changed as a result of weather, development and other impacts. It was felt that the coast should be considered as a resource in itself.

- Is the potential of the coastal zone to provide information about the exploitation of landscapes in the Neolithic and EBA periods being realised?
- Do we fully understand the impact sea level change had on the coastline of Wales during the Neolithic and EBA?
- Is the threat posed by coastal erosion being properly exploited to increase our understanding of the Neolithic and EBA?

Recommendations:

- The strength of the Welsh coastal resource should be recognised and championed.
- Greater provision should be made to allow comprehensive investigations of sites exposed by coastal erosion

Ways of Working

Wales is a small country with a large number of heritage organisations. There is the potential for good collaboration between bodies, but this is not being fully realized.

- Better communication should be encouraged between heritage organisations in Wales to achieve better results – this must involve all sectors: commercial organisations, Cadw, WATs, Universities, local authorities etc
- The research questions posed should be routinely used to encourage excellence in both developer funded archaeology and research excavations.
- Research should be encouraged in areas where developer funded work is not happening, ie. mid-Wales.
- PhD students should be encouraged to work on 'holes' in our understanding.
- A research 'hub' should be established to allow different parts of the heritage sector to highlight research and request help. For example, a forum (or similar) where students can post requests for sites or assemblages that they could work on in support of their research. In the case of commercial sites, where developers will only pay for minimal analysis, this would enable further work to be carried out at no extra cost.