BOOK REVIEWS


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It’s a rare event indeed to witness the publication of such a superb and thorough study of an old artefact collection and the work reported on here is a salutary reminder of the sheer wealth of material that lies in the vaults and storerooms of museums both in Britain, Ireland and elsewhere. Almost every museum in the country could benefit from this treatment and lithics studies would be in a much healthier position for it. The nature of the resource is unknown to all but a few specialists and it’s worth considering that no catalogue of Neolithic and Bronze Age flint material to match those excellent volumes on the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic published by the CBA (Roe 1968: Wymer 1977) yet exists, and oh, how such a volume would provide a catalyst to research and assist in transforming our understanding of those periods.

William James Knowles, not to be confused with Sir Francis H.S. Knowles, familiar to many as author of those Pitt Rivers Museum publications on flint working (Knowles, F 1944; 1953), was born in 1832 and actively collecting during the latter part of the 19th and earlier part of the 20th century in Ireland. Based around the family home in Ballymena, he may have amassed some 40,000 pieces altogether but passed many on to other institutions and individuals at various points in time. The collection was separated into lots and further dispersed when in 1924 27,000 pieces were auctioned at Sotheby’s. Fortunately, on that occasion a substantial portion was purchased by Alexander Keiller who had amassed a large collection of flints from Windmill Hill (Kendall 1914; 1919), presenting some of his collection to Keiller’s second wife, Veronica and who, promptly, put them on display in their house in London. Keiller took easily to collecting and swiftly formed a collection of his own, partly as a result of his excavations, but also including items purchased from elsewhere. As the collection grew and excavations at Avebury followed those at Windmill Hill, he donated 15,000 pieces of Irish provenance to the National Museum of Ireland, the greater part of which derived from his purchase of material from the W.J. Knowles Collection.

Analysis of such a large collection is no easy task, but Peter Woodman and colleagues have seized the opportunity to revisit received classification and implement types. This is an important step for much of our received terminology has come to us piecemeal, based on small or regional groups of material and its validity rarely questioned. There is sometimes a tendency for researchers to fit atypical pieces into well-known existing typologies rather than look at them in their own right and as the authors point out some of the classifications used in Ireland were up to 150 years old. The usefulness of assessing large numbers of pieces is that it’s possible to see whether predetermined groupings are genuine or just part of a spectrum whereby one artefact type merges into another. A simple catalogue is the basis of the work and the numbering system and criteria used is described and townlands and locations listed as appendices. If there is a drawback, for this reader at least, the catalogue itself is not presented, even a CD or web-link would do, and consequently the volume acts more like a signpost. But this is a problem generally with catalogues and inventories that often become excessively large; people invariably do not wish to purchase something that reads like a telephone directory. Instead, the authors aim to provide an account of the
collection while drawing attention to the biases present both in collecting and in the modern methods and definitions used in assessing such material. Thus the volume is concerned with the creation of the catalogue and insights that it provides from the subsequent analysis.

The volume consists of eight carefully considered chapters. Firstly, as befitting for such a study there is full discussion of Knowles and the role that he played in Irish prehistory. Following this, the collection is given context, initially by discussion of the auction and how representative the remaining pieces might be and then by outlining the destination of other parts of the collection in order to assess its original size and nature. Simple lists provide an overview of the contents; 598 leaf/lozenge arrowheads, 385 barbed and tanged arrowheads, 249 hollow based arrowheads etc. Most pieces derive from the north-east of Ireland where 275 find locations are recorded, the greater number attributed to a townland, an area which can be described as more akin to the English tithing than a parish, though there is often much greater precision.

The authors take the opportunity to review the nature of Irish lithics generally and consequently this becomes the first stop for those wishing to study any aspect of the subject. The volume thus becomes indispensable. Here the chaîne opératoire is as a device to describe the processes of knapping, waste and artefact use: primary technology — the nature of cores and their attributes and blanks or material deliberately reduced from a core; secondary technology i.e. tool manufacture, maintenance and use. Stone resources and types, knapping methods and choices are all brought into the discussion along with the potential meanings of stone.

Using this process, lithic forms in the collection are then assessed against others found in Ireland, with examples from the collection providing a guide to flint tools in Ireland as a whole. Of particular importance are the pieces recorded as being found together in close association and these are given due weight. Sometimes they were found in discrete clumps and were clearly caches or hoards. The volume describes and discusses these and it is considered that the large number of hoards has implications for contemporary social actions and suggested that in part they may represent a response to the lack of flint away from the only primary source of material on the Antrim coast.

There are selected case studies, in particular, microwear analysis by Douglas Bamforth of three groups of Neolithic scrapers from the Beggartown, Three Towns and Tullynahinnion hoards. The results indicated that, perhaps surprisingly, the tools were actually used as scrapers although some also had evidence of other uses while the small scrapers from Three Towns appear to have changed from the scraping of hide to wood or possibly bone. Most had been re-sharpened for further use. A further study was carried out by Laurent Costa on the knapping technique of two extremely long blades from the Bann River Valley. Indirect percussion and platform preparation is not known in the Irish Mesolithic and these are therefore considered Neolithic items.

The artefacts are not treated as an end in themselves for their importance derives from what insight they can provide regarding prehistoric society and contemporary perception and belief. Even at a broad level the distribution can indicate the nature and extent of land-use and provide a baseline for more targeted studies. The use of digital GIS to compare relationships with land is probably the first of its kind and certainly so in Ireland. It builds on the kinds of pioneering studies carried out by Judie Gardiner (1984) and Robin Holgate (1988) in southern England and takes it to another level. As might be expected, Knowles collection predominantly derives from around his home base in north-east Ireland; Mount Sandel, the River Bann — Coleraine area, Sandhills sites particularly from around Dundrum, and the area around Tievebulliagh; all figure and the nature of these distributions can be more easily studied (and more data added) using the GIS. Here distribution is analysed and discussed by period and placed alongside soil movement and landscape changes of the early and middle Holocene, but additionally the implications of changes in agriculture of the later historic period is introduced that will have had an impact on recovered flint artefacts; the encroachment of peat and the decline in population following famine and the demise of small farms or the effect of war in bringing
land back into agricultural use. A telling photograph of the hand digging of a field to plant potatoes in the 19th century, with individuals breaking clods of earth by spade, demonstrates the extent to which people were in every sense closer to the land and will have, perhaps quite eagerly, serviced the collectors. Several areas are looked at in greater detail; the lower Bann Valley around Portglenone and the River Maine and Long Mountain areas where findspots are compared with the distribution of known bogs and alluvial deposits.; the Antrim plateau; the headwaters of the River Braid; and the Glenwhirry Valley. The analysis concludes that there is no increase in the number of artefacts found in larger townlands and that many of these take in a range of soils a little like the well-known strip parishes of the southern English chalk areas. It points to a number of significant areas that deserve further attention. An appendix lists over 60 of Knowles papers published between 1870–1914 and another provides potted biographies of many of Knowles contemporaries, museum curators, archaeologists, historians, naturalists and other collectors. The volume is lavishly illustrated with 120 fine line drawings, coloured distribution maps and graphs, along with 61 coloured photographs which supplement the text and make for a pleasant and enjoyable read. Knowles collection is huge and this assessment of it represents an equally massive achievement deserving of consideration by all members of the Society and, by no means least, it represents a fitting tribute to the memory of Elizabeth Anderson, much of whose excellent work and drawings are incorporated and whom many members of the Lithics Studies Society will recall was one of our fine and agreeable hosts during its splendid field trip to Ireland in 1994.

REFERENCES

David Field

HAGGARTY, B. & BROCKBANK, A. 2009. MEZOLITH BOOK I. OXFORD; DAVID FICKLING BOOKS LTD.
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http://www.davidficklingbooks.co.uk/davidficklingbooks.asp?ean=9780385618267

Mezolith is a graphic novel published in 2009 by David Fickling Books, a relatively small but growing publishing house specialising in children’s fiction. It is the creation of Ben Haggarty, a story teller, and Adam Brockbank a conceptual artist with a background in movie set design and story boarding (Harry Potter Series, Sleepy Hollow, Troy). Together they have created a graphic novel which is not only visually compelling but has a mythic narrative drive attempting to get under the skin of hunter-gatherer psychology. The result is an original and beautiful addition to the cannon of graphic novels, which despite having a great