BOOK REVIEWS


The discovery of a single chance find - a tang of a Neolithic plano-convex knife - sparked a small-scale rescue excavation to investigate a possible Neolithic settlement site at Ferriter's Cove on the western end of the Dingle Peninsula in Ireland. The brief field season, directed by Peter Woodman of the University of Cork in 1983, led to more extensive work following the realisation that the site was predominantly later Mesolithic rather than Neolithic as had been expected. This book presents the results of the fieldwork project and explains the importance of Ferriter's Cove to our understanding of the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition in Ireland.

This monograph follows the traditional format we have come to expect of an excavation report. It commences with an introduction to the project and a description of the local geology and topography. The excavations revealed a large number of features, so all significant stake holes, fire spots and concentrations of lithic artefacts or faunal remains are described in detail.

Three chapters are devoted to the lithic assemblage. Refitting has been used to demonstrate the different reduction strategies for the removal of flakes and blades from a range of raw materials as diverse as beach pebble flint and local volcanic tufts. A section on use wear provides ample evidence for a range of tasks being undertaken at this site using unmodified flakes and blades. The detailed descriptions and illustrations of the few retouched tools and stone artefacts provide a useful reminder of the differences that exist between the later Mesolithic knapped assemblages of Ireland and those of England and Wales. However, similarities also emerge in the discussion about the polished stone axes, which places these and a grindstone very firmly in the Mesolithic. This interpretation challenges the traditional view that polishing did not take place in the Mesolithic and mirrors a debate taking place in Wales where discoveries of ground axes at The Nab Head and at Ogmore-by-Sea have also come from later Mesolithic contexts.

The organic remains from the site are also interesting and reports on the range of fish, bird and molluscan species provide evidence for seasonal use of the site. But it is undoubtedly the mammal remains that are the most important discovery at Ferriter's Cove for, not only has the excavation uncovered later Mesolithic human remains, but also early Neolithic cattle bones and a single, undated sheep tooth.

The report pulls the threads together from the specialist reports in two chapters to provide a detailed interpretation of the site and to place it in its broader context. Ferriter's Cove thus reveals discrete activity zones where use is demonstrated to be short-stay and seasonal. The stakeholes are interpreted as drying racks, whilst the fire spots are shown to be outdoor hearths. The marine component of the human diet is linked to the quantity of fish bone and shellfish middens on the site. But it is the early dating of the cattle at the site that makes this report significant as the interpretation of the dating evidence reopens a debate about the origins of the Irish Neolithic.

This report was a pleasure to read, it is clearly presented with splendid line drawings of all the significant finds and contains some useful colour plates. The only minor criticism is that site plans would benefit from keys, for that accompanying the first drawing does not contain all the symbols represented on later plans and sections. The solid evidence that this report provides for the existence of Stone Age archaeology in south-western Ireland and also for the early dating of the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition in Ireland makes this essential reading for those with an interest in this period. This book should certainly stimulate further discussion on this subject.

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All aficionados of what this Society's most well-kent face habitually describes as "the master substance" will relish this initiation into the architectural use of...