Book Reviews


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The volume contains 29 articles, approximately two thirds of which deal with the Palaeolithic, and one third the Mesolithic. There is just one contribution concerned with later prehistory, and that appropriately deals with the archaeology of the Breckland. With just a few exceptions the articles concern the archaeology of Britain: two of the exceptions deal with Africa, two with Germany, and one with Ireland. The articles vary considerably in style and content. Some are brief reviews of particular areas or subjects, largely written as tributes to John Wymer, while others are full academic papers which rely little upon their presence within a festschrift for their rationale. A bibliography of John Wymer’s publications closes the volume. The volume gets off to a brisk start with a biographical sketch of Wymer’s archaeological career by Andrew Lawson and Andrew Rogerson. This is both entertaining and informative as it trots through Wymer’s early visits to Swanscombe, his work at Reading Museum, in Africa and East Anglia before finishing with the English Rivers Palaeolithic Project. Wymer’s contribution to archaeology is appropriately praised, as is his blues playing on piano and guitar. This is followed by a personal, and rather moving, tribute from R J MacRae, acknowledging the scholarship and excavating skills of Wymer but principally invoking memories of specific field trips and finds made with Wymer; the punch line is simply that John is good fun to be with. Derek Roe’s contribution is also essentially a personal tribute, in this case to the quality and significance of Wymer’s work on the Lower Palaeolithic of the Thames Valley.

A second set of contributions are concerned with Wymerian issues either in terms of sites, regions or themes, and are principally academic contributions rather than direct tributes and memories. Deacon, for instance, revisits Klasies River Mouth and Elandsfontein, seeking to contrast the habitats occupied by Acheulean and Middle Stone Age groups, while Gladfelter discusses the chronology of the interglacial deposits at Hoxne. Wenban-Smith reconsiders the Clactonian and Acheulean industries, appropriately rejecting ideas that these are either parts of the same reduction sequence or of the same technological repertoire. He argues that we are dealing with technological change within hominid networks heavily influenced by the changing nature of raw material availability. Saville also returns to a Wymerian issue: the Mesolithic gazetteer. He examines why Scotland was omitted from Wymer’s 1977 gazetteer of Mesolithic sites, and makes up for that with a most valuable bibliographic gazetteer for Mesolithic Scotland, with a regional index.

Several of the most successful contributions are short descriptive pieces dealing with very specific types of artefacts and collections. I particularly liked Cook’s and Jacob’s observations on the bifaces from the breccia at Kent’s Cavern, and their identification of a discoidal core technology at Oldbury in Kent. These two contributions show very nicely how further information can be extracted from old excavation records, and how that can be maximised when associated with new analysis of the artefacts. I also found White’s observations on twisted ovate bifaces very useful and I was pleased to see the acknowledgement that archaeologists need to make reference to more than just mobility patterns and raw materials to explain the variability in Lower Palaeolithic industries. Gamble puts this most forcefully in his contribution: ‘The key is social technology: handaxes will always remain enigmatic if we only consider them as group artefacts or functional items’.

The articles dealing with the Mesolithic are also of excellent value. David describes the two groups of microliths from Seamer Carr, one associated with the remains of a possible wooden haft. These seem to be good candidates for projectiles and are significant for the on-going debate about the function of microliths. As such, they have frequently been cited in the literature before any formal publication has been available. David remains too cautious for my liking, as they seem pretty convincing candidates for projectiles, even though the microwear and residue analyses he describes were inconclusive. It is good to have these 33 microliths published but it is a pity that it has taken 15 years since their discovery. There are two contributions dealing with the Early Mesolithic of England. Roberts et al. realise the ultimate in associating radiocarbon dates of organic matter with lithic artefacts, by dating residue adhering to microliths themselves from Thatcham III, Star Carr and Lackford Heath. When calibrated their results offer some support to the division of the Early Mesolithic into a chronologically older Star Carr type assemblages, and slightly younger Deepcar type assemblages. The differentiation between these assemblage types is the theme of Reynier’s contribution. He examines whether there is a geographic and topographic pattern to the distribution of Star Carr type, Deepcar type and Horsham type Early Mesolithic assemblages. He claims there is, but I was not convinced largely because of the small
sample sizes with which he is working. For instance he argues that Star Carr type assemblages are restricted chiefly to northern England, but he only has seven, three of which are in northern England, two in southern England and two in south Wales. I am sure that when he writes that 'each assemblage-type may have operated a different settlement strategy' he is not really envisaging these artefacts wandering around the landscape themselves, but this slip does emphasise the need for Mesolithic studies, as much as those of the Palaeolithic, to do what Gamble calls for elsewhere in the volume, to 'return an individual humanity' to our studies. That said, I would not want to dismiss the value of Reynier's article: attempting to get a better handle on the variability within the early Mesolithic must be one of our priorities in Mesolithic studies and he is approaching it in precisely the right way. Scattered through the volume are further small nuggets of good archaeology. Ashton and Dean describe the refitting of a core and 14 flakes from Barnham which they proudly describe as the most complete re-fitted sequence from Britain. As they note, refitting is now an unrivalled tool for the study of technology. This is fine, but I do feel that it is time that re-fitting went beyond its gee-whizz phase, the realisation that the knapping actions from perhaps 10 minutes of the life of one individual from half a million years can be reconstructed, to exploring quite what we can learn from refitted nodules about past behaviour and cognition that is otherwise unavailable. Experimental archaeology is perhaps a good rival for refitting status, and I liked John Lord's description of his manufacture of an Obanian harpoon. This provides insights into the time taken to make such implements and consequently how they may have been treated in the past.

Healy's contribution regarding Neolithic and Bronze Age occupation in the Breckland is most interesting. Her key question is why was so much time, labour and skill invested in the extraction, at some risk, of floorstone material from Grimes Graves for products which could have been made on flint from superficial deposits? Her answer is the aesthetic appeal and value of flint that had been extracted at great cost. Elsewhere in her article, however, she notes that the floorstone can only be distinguished from other more easily obtainable flint by its cortex; when absent the sourcing of sound black flint is essentially a guessing game. It seems odd, therefore, that the floorstone should have been transported in a decortical state as by doing so it could not be identified as floorstone and consequently would loose its appeal as coming from a high cost source.

There is a lack of space within this review to comment directly on other articles: suffice to say that with further contributions from John McNabb, David Bridgland, Simon Lewis, John Gowlett, P A Harding, Katherine Scott, Elaine Turner, Stephen Aldhouse-Green, Peter Woodman, R N E Barton, Martin Street and Peter Robins, there is a wealth of further information within this volume about specific sites, regions and ideas. There does not appear a weak paper among them. Almost all have several high quality illustrations and the volume is very well produced. Overall it provides an excellent insight into the current nature of lithic studies regarding the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic of Britain (with the added extras as noted above).

The dominant message from this volume is the high regard with which John Wymer is held and his pervasive influence on the work and careers of so many stone age archaeologists. Article after article acknowledge his contribution: as a stalwart supporter of research, as the master of regional synthesis, as a fellow-craftsman to the Acheulian people, as a man with an intuitive sense, as a great excavator. Numerous others refer to how it was Wymer that introduced them to Pleistocene studies, and to his warm hospitality and congeniality. These are fine and appropriate tributes. But the greater one is the quality of the archaeology represented within this volume. It shows stone age archaeology in a very healthy state whatever it is reconstructing the minute to minute knapping actions from half a million years ago, creating regional synthesis, or describing new sites and interpretations.


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The editors have compiled a collection of papers by twenty-two authors. The foreword hints at the inevitable difficulties and delays accompanying such an enterprise and it should be noted that most of the contributions were written between 1989 and 1993, but not since updated. Notwithstanding the title, one paper deals with the Portuguese Mesolithic. Within the Palaeolithic itself there is an imbalance with a weighting towards Lower Palaeolithic and Upper Palaeolithic sites. Overall, however, a commendable range of themes is explored including raw material exploitation; the complex inter-relationships of technology and typology with raw material and subsistence; and use-wear and methodology. The terms non-flint or hard-rock seem clumsy and I would suggest using the noun 'petrolith' (from Greek πέτρα (rock) and λίθος (stone)) and the adjective