Acknowledgements

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References


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Lithic Studies: An Irish View

Dave Field

A joint meeting of the Lithic Studies Society, the Department of Archaeology, University College, Cork, and the Ulster Museum was based successively in Cork and Belfast from 8-12 September 1994, organised by Peter Woodman and Liz Anderson in Cork and Sinéad McCartan in Belfast. Lecture sessions were complemented by field trips to the Dingle peninsula, the Blackwater valley, Ballygalley, Tievebulliagh and Mount Sandal.

This conference provided a window through which the outlook seems healthy and comprehensive enough, for while Ireland lacked the impetus that county societies gave to lithic studies in Britain during the first half of this century, workers are consequently able to approach familiar problems with a fresh approach, and there is much enthusiasm for doing so.

Peter Woodman in his introduction to the lecture session in Cork provided the historical background, by returning to base and considering the study of museum collections. Such studies are much easier in Ireland than in Britain, basically because there are fewer museums, and archaeological material is curated in only a few of these. Of course problems occur with this material and great caution is required in analysing it. He demonstrated in particular how the provenance of early finds in turn influenced subsequent collectors and their suppliers. Nevertheless, as in Britain, and providing one is aware of the problems, the study of these collections can be useful. In this respect the existence of the townland, a subdivision of the parish and a most useful land unit, gets round the British problem of, for example, where to place an axe marked simply 'London'.

He went on to explain how the traditional view of occupation around the rivers and known flint-bearing deposits in the north-east of Ireland is slowly giving way to a more considered one. A number of fieldwalking projects elsewhere in Ireland were providing more balanced results, demonstrating that much flint is to be found in the south.

There is still a problem with the Irish Palaeolithic. A single handaxe sits in the National Museum with an uncertain provenance. Peter Woodman’s Irish Quaternary Fauna project breaks new ground by dating faunal remains from a number of cave sites. As those on the field trips saw, Shandon Cave is now largely destroyed by road building, but the early descriptions of cartloads of bones being paraded through Cork is tantalising. Kilgreany Cave, partially excavated earlier this century, is in the path of a rapidly approaching quarry face, and warrants fresh work. The human skeletal material assigned to the Neolithic has now been supplemented by cattle radiocarbon-dated to the same
period, while other material dates from the last glacial onwards.

Research into the Mesolithic period remains as strong as ever. It was particularly pleasing to see that the river bluff site at Mount Sandal is preserved as the earliest habitation site in Ireland. Other riparian sites are being investigated. Peter Ramsden’s fieldwalking project, described in his paper ‘Lithic landscapes in the Barrow valley, south-east Ireland’ identified widespread later Mesolithic activity in the Barrow valley, and suggested that earlier Mesolithic material may underlie the alluvium. Research into Rankine’s bluff sites in the Weald might repay a similar approach. Particularly interesting was the specific siting of Neolithic sites amongst the widespread occurrence of diagnostic later Mesolithic artefacts, with peaks of Neolithic activity at 100 m and 1000 m away from the river.

The later Mesolithic is characterised by the steady replacement of microliths with blades. Liz Anderson pointed out in her paper ‘The Irish later Mesolithic and the Larnian technology’ that, while Larnian cores and Bann flake are thought to be diagnostic of the Later Mesolithic, they suffer from lack of definition. Late Mesolithic/early Neolithic groups may have shared similar resources thus requiring a similar toolkit. As she suggested ‘it is easier to demonstrate change than continuity’.

Peter Woodman’s ‘Excavations at Ferriter’s Cove, County Kerry’ described his raised beach site on the Dingle, appreciated on the field trip as one of the most picturesque locations possible for an excavation. Here small shell middens are being eroded by the sea, and an area excavation has revealed a series of hearths, pits and stakeholes, with dates spanning the 5th millennium BC, the site being thought to represent a number of small-scale episodes over that time.

Derek Simpson, in ‘A reinterpretation of some lithics artefacts from the lower Bann valley’, looked at some of the collected material, in particular some of that dredged from the Bann and formerly attributed to the ‘Riverford culture’ (Mahr 1937). The problem here is similar to that of archaeological material from British rivers, in that given the geomorphological changes, it is difficult to assign an appropriate context. The sheer numbers of artefacts recovered from dredging and riverside activities, however, provide fruitful study, and the Bann is no exception with its polished axes, pebble-hammers, and perforated pear-shaped objects — the so-called ‘Bann clubs’.

Gabriel Cooney’s ‘Figures in the landscape: the Mount Oriel project and its wider context in North Leinster’ addressed problems of fieldwalking technique, in the form of methodology and the comparability of results.

Porcellanite and other non-flint rocks feature heavily in the Stone Age of Ireland. The significance of the Neolithic quarry sites of Tievebubullagh and Rathlin Island is enormous. Both sites deserve extensive survey and wider consideration. Sinead McCartan, in ‘Recent lithic discoveries from Rathlin Island, County Antrim’ described how the Ulster Museum’s work has uncovered Neolithic settlement evidence close to the porcellanite outcrop.

The establishment of a petrological survey is of tremendous interest, and almost 60 years on from the initiation of the British survey in 1936 it is possible to start from a different standpoint. Steve Mardall, in ‘The Irish stone axe project: the current state of research’, described how, of some 16,000 axes known in Ireland, 10,000 have been identified macroscopically and about 100 cored. Of the non-porcellanite examples cored, 18 have been assigned to the Cornish Groups and 6 to Group VI, while there are 11 jadeites. Indeed the importance of transported material featured widely during the conference. Derek Simpson, in ‘Artefacts of foreign stone from the Neolithic settlement at Ballygalley’ noted the presence of pitchstone, probably from Arran. The role of Ballygalley in raw material distribution was further emphasised by Dermot Moore in ‘A preliminary survey of flintwork from recently excavated sites in the north of Ireland’. Fiona Dillon’s ‘The changing pattern of flint resource exploitation in the Neolithic with particular reference to the Boyne valley area’ continued this theme, looking at flint from sites in the Boyne valley, and suggesting that preferred raw materials changed through time. Joanna Nolan in ‘Variations in the use of lithic raw material during the Neolithic period of County Donegal’ continued this theme by looking at collections from the county, noting that struck flint, some with fresh white cortex, occurred in Donegal despite an apparent absence of naturally occurring raw material.

Thanks to meticulous organisation by Liz Anderson and Sinéad McCartan the two-centre conference was highly successful and the enjoyable and informative field trips provided participants with a thorough perspective not only of the background and current results, but also of the landscape setting of recent work.

Reference


RCHM Salisbury