Fieldwork to Investigate the Location of the Tanged Flint Point from Millfield, Stronsay.

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Aim

To test the site of the tanged flint point from Millfield Farm, Stronsay for the survival of other archaeological remains.

Background

In the 1920s a tanged flint point was discovered by the farmer at Millfield and sent to the Hunterian Museum, Glasgow. It was published with two others by Livens in 1956. Livens drew very early (Upper Palaeolithic) connections to these artefacts and other authors have since concurred with this, notably Morrison and Bonsall in 1989. However, tanged points are also a component of more recent, early Postglacial (Mesolithic) tool kits, for example in northern Scandinavia, and it is possible that the Orkney artefacts relate not to Palaeolithic, but to Mesolithic occupation.

Little is known about the Mesolithic occupation of Orkney, but recent work by the author has revealed the existence of several flint assemblages with microlithic components (D&E 1990), and others are being uncovered by current fieldwalking projects (Richards pers. comm.). Recent geomorphological work suggests that Orkney (together with Caithness and northern Sutherland), may have become deglaciated by 14,000 years BP allowing open grassland to develop (Firth 1990, I). (Mesolithic Orkney is the subject of a longer paper by the author, at present in preparation).

The 1993 work was designed in the hope that further remains might be discovered at Millfield and that these could be used to shed light on the age and context of the site.

Method

A total of 135 test pits were dug at 10m intervals across an area of 11600 square metres around the original findspot of the flint. Each pit measured roughly 3m x 3m and they were dug through the ploughsoil to its base. All artefactual material (ancient and modern), was removed and catalogued.

In the SW corner of the field a silage pit had been excavated and this was surrounded by rough pasture. The test pits extended into the rough ground, and two exploratory trenches were dug in the spoil tips from the silage pit.

Figure 1: Location Map
Location

The field lies at a height of 20m above present OD and slopes gently to the NE. The present coastline lies some 500m to the north. Across the field the ploughsoil is c 0.3m deep, below it lies a fine orange sandy till. At the coast flint pebbles are visible in exposures of the till, and they may be collected from the beach.

Sea level in the early post-glacial period is likely to have been much lower than today: c -34m OD at Kirkwall 11,000 years ago; and c -16m OD 9600 years ago (Firth 1990).

Results

A total of 44 pieces of worked flint were recovered, as well as one flake of quartz and three hammerstones. There were also two fragments of glass, seven sherds of modern pottery and one piece of clay pipe. No features, prehistoric or otherwise, were noted in the sub-soil surface.

Over half of the flint artefacts (24) came from the spoil tips of the old silage pit. The rest of the material was thinly scattered across the field with no particular concentrations. The more recent artefacts were scattered in the upper (W), half of the field.

The lithic assemblage comprises mainly debitage, but there are five bipolar cores and three retouched pieces: a flake awl; a broken edge retouched piece; and a broken piece with microlithic retouch.

Discussion

The lithic assemblage confirms the existence of the prehistoric site at Millfield, but the fact that it was concentrated in the spoil tips of the silage pit suggests that the site was destroyed when the pit was dug. There was no indication of surviving remains outside the silage area.

The lack of diagnostic material in the assemblage makes it difficult to clarify the date of the site. The use of microlithic retouch might suggest a Mesolithic date, but little is known of the Orcadian Mesolithic, and this technique might simply reflect the manufacture of tools on small flakes from pebble cores. It is likely that raw material could be collected locally, and the use of bipolar cores probably reflects the knapping of pebble flint.

Conclusion

The prehistoric site at Millfield was located, but the remains have apparently been destroyed and it is impossible to date them. Further work is unlikely to be worthwhile.

Figure 2: Flint Artefacts: 1-5 bipolar cores; 6 awl; 7 microlith; 8 broken edge retouch; 9 original tanged point (now lost).
Clarification of the context and affinities of the tanged flint point from Millfield therefore remains uncertain. There are no other obvious early finds from Stornsay, but little research has been done on the island. Archaeological work suggests that settlement on Orkney extends back further than previously believed, and it is likely that the islands were ice free from early on. Lower early Postglacial sea levels mean that much of the original land surface has been lost, but it is possible that this area still has much to offer our understanding of the early settlement of the British Isles.

Acknowledgements

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Professor Peter Woodman first suggest that the tanged points might relate to Mesolithic settlement, Callum Firth has been of great help with questions over the geomorphology. Colin Richards is always ready to share the results of his fieldwork in Orkney - thanks are owed to them all.

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Neolithic Communities of the Evenlode Valley

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Of all the tributaries of the Upper Thames the river Evenlode possesses the most striking series of meanders in its lower course. They run through what has been termed the 'Evenlode Gorge', a stretch of some four miles where the river swings from side to side in an incised floodplain approximately ten miles northwest of Oxford.

Between 1984 and 1992 a fieldwalking survey has been carried out in this part of the valley, as and when ploughing has allowed. All over the Upper Thames region, both in the valleys and on the hills, a thin scatter of flint debris may be found. Previous work in the Thames valley (Holgate 1988) has tended to suggest that concentrations of Later Prehistoric flint material, which are usually taken to represent settlements, are restricted to the valleys, often just above the line where periodic flooding might have reached. The present note, an interim report on an ongoing study, shows that this pattern is repeated in the Evenlode Gorge section where the low domes between the meanders provided choice settlement sites from the Late Mesolithic to the Early Bronze Age.

So far, four settlement sites or concentrations of artefacts have been identified, and two of these have been exhaustively surveyed by gridding fieldwalking. The grid squares were staked out in squares of 20 x 20 metres and each square walked systematically up and down so that practically all exposed flint material was spotted. Map 1 shows the location of the sites which are described below.

Site 1. Lower Ridings Farm. Not surveyed in detail, but a long dog-leg transect of grid squares was taken starting on the hillside and running down into the valley floor. Thirty one of the 36 grids yielded material but only at the foot of the hill was there any concentration of finds. In the light of the evidence from Sites 2 and 3 it is unlikely that this concentration is the result of natural downslope movement, and probably results from its location just above the floodplain. On the hillside itself, the scatter of flakes and cores suggested that the manufacture of flint artefacts was also carried out away from the settlement area in the adjacent hunting or farming territory.

Site 2. Lower Westfield Farm. This was the most prolific site, yielding over 1400 artefacts from 231 grid squares (Map 2). The main settlement here was located just above the floodplain in the arc of a large meander. The railway line now bisects the meander close to this area and it