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 gridfieldwalking. The gridded sites 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-legged 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
Map 1. Location of Sites
is possible that the settlement extended into the field beyond, which has not been ploughed. There were however significant secondary concentrations of artefacts riverwards from the main settlement including arrowheads, blades, hammerstones, scrapers, awls, cores and potboilers. The occurrence of implements which would have been primarily used in a domestic context, such as potboilers, awls, scrapers and hammerstones, over the whole of the gridded area suggests that homesteads were widely dispersed, perhaps shifting with time as the perishable dwelling structures became dilapidated (Map 3).

Site 3. Opposite Grintly Hill. The second most prolific site from which over 500 artefacts were recovered from 59 grid squares. This is almost a mirror image of Site 2, occupying the next meander downstream, and in this case cut by the railway so that the riverward section could not be gridded. Although settlement was on a smaller scale, the same pattern of clustered finds is evident.

Site 4. Near Swan Bridge. This site comprises two fields either side of the railway on very gently sloping ground adjacent to the floodplain. A gridded survey has not been carried out, but fieldwalking has yielded a moderate concentration of flake debris and, so far, a small number of implements. It is noteworthy that no debris at all has been picked up on the floodplain itself. This may be because remains from settlement in the floodplain have been sealed by subsequent alluvial deposits. I am informed by Gill Hey that a similar situation has been noted in the Oxford Archaeological Unit’s excavation in the floodplain of the Thames at Yamton, four miles northwest of Oxford.

Site 4 is close to a ring ditch located just above the floodplain, which was inadvertently ploughed by the landowner in 1992. No flint material was found in the vicinity of the ring ditch itself. This site is in a much less pronounced meander and would not seem to have been so large or enduring a settlement as those represented at Sites 2 and 3.

Table 1 shows the composition of the assemblages from the four sites. The material from Site 2 has been commented upon by Phillipa Bradley of the Oxford Archaeological Unit and by Dr Robin Holgate of Luton Museum. It shows a chronological continuity from the Late Mesolithic to the Early Bronze Age. Amongst the Mesolithic material is a double-platformed bladelet core with 16 separate flake scars as well as a number of bladelets. The range of arrowheads covers leaf, chisel, oblique and barbed and tanged types (Fig 1, 4-19). The leaf arrowheads are generally in the range of Green’s Type 3b (Green 1980) including ‘ogival’ forms. The barbed and tanged examples are of Sutton B type, which according to Green is a predominant type in the Oxfordshire area. On the basis of Green’s dating of arrowhead types (1984), a start date of not later than c 3250 cal BC and an end date not earlier than c 2500 BC is suggested for the main occupation at Site 2 (i.e. the terminal point of the ogival arrowhead and the beginning point of the Sutton type). However, the maximum timespan for the occupation, according to Green’s arrowhead date ranges, is much greater with the leaf arrowhead beginning before 4000 BC and the Sutton type extending beyond 1500 BC. The other three sites suggest a similar time scale insofar as their smaller number of finds permits.

The general impression from the material from all four sites is of variable but mostly uninspired knapping skills using sparse flint resources. The latter is evident from the small size of many of the cores. The one object of real beauty in the collection, a polished axe fragment from Site 2, seemed to have been broken in use but not reshaped into anything else.

The present author is not in a position to make further comment on these finds, but it is hoped that some service has been done in making a reasonably precise record of the material so that others may derive more information from them. In the cabinets of Stow Museum in Gloucestershire, there is a collection of several thousand arrowheads amassed by Royce early this century. Unfortunately this enormous resource is virtually useless except for basic typology, because no provenances were recorded. What is more,
the areas from which these artefacts were collected, (presumably radiating outwards from Royce's home at Lower Swell just west of Stow on the Wold), have been permanently impaired for further fieldwork because of selective searching. Today, perhaps, we know better. But it is still worth repeating that it is the duty of every fieldwalker to record all that is found, and to grid search where material appears to be concentrated. Although not as destructive as the more elaborate dig, fieldwalking is still an irreversible activity.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Gill Hey of the Oxford Archaeological Unit for reading a previous version of this manuscript and making valuable suggestions.

References


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Figure 1. Artefacts from Site 2. 1) Thumbnail scraper; 2) blade; 3) awl; 4-8) leaf arrowheads; 9-11, 14) oblique arrowheads; 12-13) chisel arrowheads; 15 barbed and tanged arrowhead roughout; 16-19) barbed and tanged arrowheads.