

REVIEWS

Lithics and Subsistence in North-Eastern England by Robert Young. B.A.R. 161, 1987. 418 pp. (inc. 179 pp. catalogue), 98 figs, 32 tables). Price £22.00 post free.

This report, subtitled 'Aspects of the prehistoric archaeology of the Wear Valley, Co. Durham, from the Mesolithic to the Bronze Age', presents the main findings of Dr Young's Ph.D. thesis. It is well-structured, and is supported by a detailed catalogue of all the lithic material considered in the discussions.

The first three chapters deal with the environmental and post-depositional background to the research. The author apologises at one point for devoting several pages of text to a discussion of the environmental constraints on artefact recovery (notably peat formation) and the effects of industrial activity (open-cast mining and quarrying) and previous fieldwork on the database, yet this is a most useful and necessary discussion for understanding the context of the surface collections. Chapter 2 provides a summary of the environmental background, stressing the important effects of glaciation on topography and soils, and suggesting a general scheme for the vegetational history of Co. Durham as a whole during the post-glacial period. Chapter 3 summarises previous archaeological work in the area, together with some of the theories and conclusions reached by earlier fieldworkers. This again is an important aspect since the author was unable to trace all the material published in earlier accounts.

Chapters 4 and 5 move on to discuss the lithic assemblages. The author was unable to trace any Palaeolithic material, and very little Early Mesolithic, although findspots were recorded in previous reports. Using the environmental evidence, however, he suggests that occupation during several of the major interglacials is likely and that future research might profit from the examination of cave deposits. The bulk of the data is Late Mesolithic to Bronze Age in date and the rest of the report concentrates on the Late Mesolithic.

The author states that his aim, in Chapter 4, is to 'give a typological account of this material, in a northern context'. He describes the major classes of artefact recovered, the raw materials employed, and their distribution, and considers several aspects of the core and waste material. Assemblages are classified as Mesolithic, Neolithic/Bronze Age (with no further typological distinction), indeterminate or 'mixed'. It has been observed in this area, as elsewhere, that groups of material of typologically distinct chronological periods are frequently encountered at the same spot. Dr Young is not convinced by arguments that this situation results from either repeated occupation of the site, or continuous occupation over long periods, but suggests that the traditional typology may be too rigidly applied and that 'mixed' sites are those at which early forms (especially microliths) simply continued in use into later periods 'because there was some technological benefit to be derived' (p.36). He concludes that 'mixed' assemblages represent the latest Mesolithic in his study area. This is a very interesting point but it is not really followed up.

Unfortunately, the author runs into serious difficulties at this point. Having suggested that the traditional typology might not be wholly applicable, and that some sites are mixed, according to that typology, it becomes unclear as to how the assemblages discussed are dated. The range of tool-forms recovered is very small and the amount of waste and core material also generally not very extensive. The typology described by Dr Young seems to conform to the traditional typology rather well and, despite a certain circularity of argument, the impression is that mixed sites stand out simply because they do represent material of different periods. The area covered by the research is c. 450 sq. miles and though 196 'sites' are listed, most of these consist of very small amounts of flintwork and 40% are classified as being of indeterminate date. The whole region produced only 78 scrapers, 120 cores (mostly from 'mixed' sites), 63 microliths, 53 arrowheads and barely 100 other classifiable tools. The present writer, having worked admittedly on material exclusively from lowland England, would hesitate in dating many of these assemblages closely on the basis of what are, for the most part, not very diagnostic types, and particularly if working from Dr Young's view on the continued use of Mesolithic forms. Since, in addition and as the report points out, there is as yet no northern equivalent of the Pitts and Jacobi standard work on metrical analysis, I am not entirely convinced by the internal chronology presented on the basis of this material.

In Chapter 5 the prehistoric sequence, or more properly, the Late Mesolithic occupation, is introduced under the heading 'Prehistoric land and resource utilisation'. The natural resources of the region and the effects of Mesolithic man on the environment are discussed and a model of resource utilisation, based on ethnographic parallels made familiar by the works of Binford, Mellars, Clark, Price and others, is described. It is considered that a nomadic, seasonal round of occupation by Mesolithic hunter-gatherer groups may be reflected in the varying composition of lithic assemblages and the specific environmental conditions and available resources in those areas where sites are located. Following the works of Mellars and Reinhardt, Price, and others, it is suggested that base camps, extraction camps and other classes of site may be identified amongst lithic assemblages within the study region.

The author re-examines his data in the light of this adopted model and produces some very interesting tables, such as Table V.1 'hypothetical schedule of resource availability'. He addresses the problem of the completeness of the tool-record on surface sites and how this may affect our interpretation of such sites on a functional basis. He suggests that three types of assemblage may be usefully identified: 'subsistence' or hunting sites might be expected to be dominated by microliths; 'domestic' or 'base' camps would have more a varied composition with scrapers and microliths in similar proportions; and specialist extraction sites might be dominated by single artefact types other than microliths.

Again, however, the author is let down by his data and the small size of many of the assemblages. A number of sites listed as extraction sites have as many tool types, and in some cases are of considerably greater size, than some of the base camps; whilst some base camps have a very limited range of forms and may have microliths but no scrapers. It is difficult to accept, for

instance, that Howel John East Field (F30) is a base camp (27 flakes, 2 cores, 1 microlith, 1 microburin, 1 scraper) when Quarry Hill (F49) is classified as an extraction camp (54 flakes, 2 cores, 1 scraper, 1 denticulate, 1 retouched flake, 1 microburin, 15 miscellaneous retouched).

Having classified many of the assemblages on a functional basis, the report concludes with a consideration of some of the main areas in which lithic scatters are concentrated, in terms of site catchment analysis. It is argued that there is evidence for the seasonal occupation of some areas and the probable exploitation patterns for particular groups of sites are examined. There is little evidence for cereal pollen at the elm decline and it seems that agriculture may have spread slowly into the upland area alongside some pastoral activity and continued hunting and gathering.

There is no adequate discussion of the Neolithic or Bronze Age, despite the title of the volume, though the present writer noted in passing the high incidence of leaf and barbed-and-tanged arrowheads compared to transverse forms; the concordance of the distributions of the first two types and very different distribution of the latter.

This report inspires mixed feelings. The author's enthusiasm and thoughtful approach to the subject are obvious and there are some useful and though-provoking discussions. The report clearly emphasises the need for careful background research when dealing with surface lithic collections and takes a well-rounded approach to the environmental context. The adoption of the Mellars and Reinhardt model for the Late Mesolithic seems to have been a considered decision, the site catchment analysis is carefully handled and the author's data collection methods and analyses suggest that, given better data, he could have produced some startling results. Sadly, in the end, it is the quality of the data which is at fault and leaves the report begging many questions - a problem which faces all postgraduate researchers and one for which the author cannot be blamed.

One final point - rather larger 'period' maps than those included, showing the location of sites with their catalogue numbers, would have been useful for those of us who do not 'know' the exact location of the River Wear... and ... its archaeology, particularly its prehistory'.

Julie Gardiner, March 1988

Lithic analysis and later British prehistory: some problems and approaches edited by A.G. Brown and M.E. Edmonds. B.A.R. 162/Reading Studies in Archaeology 2, 1987. 199 pp., price £12.00. post free

Since it is notoriously difficult to review this type of multi-author volume without being selective and generalising, it seems only fair to begin with a list of the contents:

- F. Healy, 'Prediction or prejudice? The relationship between field survey and excavation', pp. 9 - 17
- R. Entwistle and J. Richards, 'The geochemical and geophysical properties of lithic scatters', pp. 19 - 38

- R. Bradley, 'A field method for investigating the spatial structure of lithic scatters', pp. 39 - 47
- J. Gardiner, 'Tales of the unexpected: approaches to the assessment and interpretation of museum flint collections', pp. 49 - 65
- S. Ford, 'Chronological and functional aspects of flint assemblages', pp. 67 - 85
- M. Tingle, 'Inferential limits and surface scatters: the case of the Maddle Farm and Vale of the White Horse fieldwalking survey', pp. 87 - 99
- S. Ford, 'Flint scatters and prehistoric settlement patterns in south Oxfordshire and east Berkshire', pp. 101 - 135
- A. Myers, 'All shot to pieces? Inter-assemblage variability, lithic analysis, and mesolithic assemblage 'types': some preliminary observations', pp. 137 - 153
- M. Edmonds, 'Rocks and risk: problems with lithic procurement strategies', pp. 155 - 179
- R. Bradley, 'Flint technology and the character of Neolithic settlement', pp. 181 - 185
- M. Edmonds and J. Thomas, 'The archers: an everyday story of country folk', pp. 187 - 199

Listing the contents also gives the potential reader a clear idea of what kind of a volume this is, once it is appreciated that by 'later prehistoric' in the title the editors mean Mesolithic to Bronze Age. The 'approaches' under consideration are largely those of fieldwalking and theory, and, like fieldwalking in a British winter, the going is mostly heavy. The only paper I can honestly say I read with positive enjoyment was Julie Gardiner's, the first part of which should be required reading for all those who, either as custodians or researchers, come face-to-face with flints in museum basements. Lithic collections in museums have been ignored for too long by prehistorians, whose lack of interest is partly to blame for the lack of concern shown towards this material by museum professionals. One problem Gardiner does not mention is that of the 'School Loans factor': in many museums lithic material which is not from the immediate vicinity or is judged for other reasons to be 'unimportant' has been dumped into the School Loan Collections, where it is liable to come adrift from its provenance and to become damaged or even lost. It is difficult to quantify such losses, but there are grounds for suspecting that this 'School Loans factor', particularly in the case of lithic items, is of alarming proportions.

I am sure it is not entirely coincidental to my enjoyment of Gardiner's paper that it is the only one in the volume to contain an artefact illustration! Next in terms of user-friendliness come the papers by Bradley and Healy, which are admirably brief and well-written. Further test-cases need to be examined, but it may be that Healy will be seen to have hit upon a phenomenon of absolutely fundamental importance for the understanding of surface collections. Her thesis is that lithic depositional contexts changed during the Neolithic period with a trend away from subsoil features - Earlier Neolithic debris often becoming incorporated in the fill of subsoil features, Later Neolithic debris more often being discarded on the contemporary land surface - hence the relative rarity of Earlier Neolithic compared with Later Neolithic lithic material in the ploughsoil. The suggestion in one of Bradley's papers, that sediment is more of a Later Neolithic trait than an Earlier one, thus explaining the