

Chapter 6

Late Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic: Research Agenda

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6.1 Nature of the evidence

A number of nationally important sites of Late Upper Palaeolithic (LUP) and Mesolithic date lie within the region, in particular sites with *in-situ* deposits in the Middle Kennet Valley, such as Thatcham. In addition, there are *in-situ* scatters with hearths on the floodplain of the Middle Thames and probably in the Lower Colne Valley, and less-securely stratified but dense flint spreads also associated with hearths in the Hampshire Greensand. Other areas may have similar remains, albeit surviving in smaller pockets, but they have not been so intensively examined, either because they are less visible or because development pressure is less intense.

Recent work has shown that the level of activity during these periods was undoubtedly greater than had been appreciated previously, but an understanding of its distribution and character is subject to distortion because investigation has been so uneven across these counties. In addition, the nature of much of the surviving evidence consists of disturbed material in the ploughzone, making identification and characterisation of LUP and Mesolithic sites difficult. Improving our understanding of the potential of these assemblages, and the most effective ways in which they can be investigated, is of key importance. This can be addressed in a number of ways:

- 6.1.1 The extent to which developer-funded work can change our understanding of the extent of LUP and Mesolithic activity in this region needs to be recognised, and sites of these dates should be more actively sought when devising mitigation strategies.
- 6.1.2 Our effectiveness in recovering what can be small scatters of material should be reviewed, and we need to improve the use we make of this material to provide a model of landscape exploitation and social structures across the region.
- 6.1.3 Fieldwalking for LUP and Mesolithic material should become a more routine part of field evaluation.
- 6.1.4 The extent to which LUP and Mesolithic sites lie buried beneath alluvium and colluvium should be more fully investigated. This would shed light on whether the density of sites known in the Middle Kennet and Lower Colne Valleys is a factor of preservation biases or of genuine Mesolithic preferences for these areas in the past.
- 6.1.5 Palaeo-environmental and geo-archaeological sampling should play a much more important role in the identification of sites, in elucidating the range of human activity and in developing a better understanding of variation across the region.
- 6.1.6 There are a number of sites investigated some time ago that should be published, for example the work undertaken in the Misbourne Valley, Buckinghamshire, and at the 'Wakes' on the Isle of Wight.
- 6.1.7 The re-examination of some old assemblages would also make an important contribution to our understanding of these periods, for example those from the Hambleden Valley in Buckinghamshire, those in Milton Keynes and the early Mesolithic assemblages from Oxfordshire and the Vale of Aylesbury. Re-assessment is also needed of material from the Thames and some of the other rivers in our catchment, for example material found in the Kennet.
- 6.1.8 Some new excavations are needed of old sites in order to test established interpretations, as suggested for 'hazel-nut plant bed' on the Isle of Wight and the land surface at Werrar (Poole 1936). Further field collection would also expand the evidence base, for example on ploughed Lower Greensand on the Isle of Wight.
- 6.1.9 Integration is needed of the results of underwater/foreshore archaeology, especially in the Solent, where previously dry-ground sites could be well preserved beneath the modern sea level.

6.2 Chronology

Chronologies for this period have traditionally been based on typographic sequences, but scientific techniques are increasingly able to provide much more precise dates from which to revise the current model.

- 6.2.1 There should be a concerted effort to improve our chronological understanding of LUP and Mesolithic flint scatters using scientific dating, particularly OSL.
- 6.2.2 The collection of samples suitable for scientific dating techniques needs to be a routine part of investigations.
- 6.2.3 More material should be radiocarbon-dated in order to establishing a more reliable chronology.

6.3 Landscape and land use

For a period from which there is little structural evidence and only limited survival of material culture, landscape studies and environmental sampling are of particular importance. A more detailed understanding of the character of the varied landscape areas present in the region would be extremely valuable, and the relationship between these and human activity needs more investigation.

- 6.3.1 Excavations in river valleys should be much more clearly focused on the wider use of these locations for settlement and the impact of settlement upon the surrounding landscape.
- 6.3.2 More work needs to be done to identify sites away from river valleys and coastal/intertidal areas, particularly open sites.
- 6.3.3 Investigation is needed into human manipulation of the woodland, if indeed this was taking place. This should not only rely on generalised interpretations from pollen diagrams, but on more carefully directed research in order to identify and model these activities on site. For example, some sites have the potential to yield stratified sequences with pollen and also identifiable inwashed charcoal.
- 6.3.4 More detailed exploration is needed of changes in landscape use over time and how these relate to climate change and vegetation succession.
- 6.3.5 The impact of changing sea levels on the populations who lived in the Solent area should be investigated, from a physical perspective and that of changing food resources. Did erosion increase in lower river

valleys as a consequence of rising sea levels, with subsequent impacts on the landscape over a more extensive area?

- 6.3.6 Analysis of insect assemblages, where found, is especially important because of their rapid response to climatic and environmental change. Isotope studies on insect assemblages should be considered.
- 6.3.7 Evidence is needed of regional variation in the types of biological assemblages found at different geographical locations, for example the Hampshire Basin versus the Chalk.
- 6.3.8 Sites that are well stratified producing a wide range of well-preserved biological remains are rare, and can be regarded as of national importance. They should be carefully sampled wherever possible and analysed with particular attention to site formation processes to provide a detailed picture of local habitat and environmental history. The seasonal use of particular sites can be elucidated in this way, for example, using faunal remains and other proxy indicators.
- 6.3.9 It seems likely that the growth of underwater archaeology will greatly increase the number of sites producing well-preserved biological remains in the Solent. The development and refining of methodologies to recover this material provides an interesting challenge for the next decade, and should greatly increase our understanding of the exploitation of these landscapes.
- 6.3.10 Research is needed into evidence for animals browsing under woodland conditions in the late Mesolithic/ early Neolithic and the dating and reasons for the Elm Decline. *Scolytus scolytus*, an insect which can be a vector for Dutch Elm Disease, was recovered in late Mesolithic deposits at Runnymede, although it does not always carry the disease (Robinson 2000b, 149).

6.4 Society

The limited range of archaeological evidence for this period provides significant challenges for understanding the composition of social groups and the inter-relationship between the communities who inhabited the region.

- 6.4.1 Ways to shed light on mobility, group range and group size need to be investigated. More work on understanding the seasonal use of particular sites would be one way of addressing this issue (see above).

- 6.4.2 There is the potential in this area to undertake valuable research into the differences (or similarities) between LUP society and settlement and that of the early Mesolithic.
- 6.4.3 There should be more awareness of the potential to investigate, and attempts to gather evidence for, LUP and Mesolithic beliefs and ideologies, for example the identification of instances of ritual activity.
- 6.4.4 Some human remains from rivers may be Mesolithic in date and, if so, information from them may contribute to understanding burial practices and ritual, in addition to potentially providing evidence for appearance, pathology etc of Mesolithic people.
- 6.4.5 More microwear analysis on flint tools would provide a much better understanding of activities on site, including food resources used, food preparation methods, textile and other craft activities, and construction practices.
- 6.4.6 Any charred material found in association with human activity should be given the highest priority. Distinguishing between charcoal assemblages derived from wild fires and those from domestic areas should be possible through the use of reflectance analysis.
- 6.4.7 The collection of food remains from bulk soil samples is a priority for understanding diet during this period. In addition, a more holistic approach should be taken to investigating evidence of diet, based on integrating evidence from many sites. Should human remains come to light, isotope work to investigate diet, as well as the distances over which people moved, would be extremely important.
- 6.4.8 Mesolithic shell middens require further

attention. Data should be compared to that from the many examples in Brittany.

6.5 Material culture

Stone tools are the main surviving evidence for material culture from this period and they need to be studied in a variety of ways.

- 6.5.1 Innovative methods of analysis or lines of thought should be sought in order to gain a better understanding of this material. Samples should be collected and preserved in anticipation of new methods being applied.
- 6.5.2 Some re-assessment of the raw materials used for tools, their sources and the distance over which they have been brought is needed

6.6 Predictive modelling

Predictive modelling can be a useful tool for any archaeological period, but the full potential of the technique remains to be realised for the Mesolithic. Geo-archaeological sampling should assist in this.

- 6.6.1 Models should be developed and tested as predictive tools to locate archaeological sites and explain land use.
- 6.6.2 Particular landscapes that are under threat, and where good research projects could be developed, need to be identified and targeted. Examples include the Denham preferred mineral area and the area around Abingdon, Oxfordshire.
- 6.6.3 More work in the Solent area, both in areas presently 'offshore' but also horizons in submerged river estuaries, should prove a fruitful source of evidence and help to understand the impact of coastal change.