An Archaeological Resource Assessment of

The Mesolithic in Northamptonshire

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1. Introduction

This paper has been prepared as part of the East Midlands Regional Research Frameworks process, and provides a first attempt at a resource assessment for the Mesolithic period in Northamptonshire. It examines the main sources of data for the period, assesses the adequacy of the current record and the possible implications of the Northamptonshire data for the other counties in the region. It also attempts to provide a list of research questions which it is hoped will form a useful way forward for Mesolithic studies within the county.

2. The History Of Fieldwork In The County

Currently there are 57 geographically separate find spots of Mesolithic date recorded on the Sites and Monuments Record (SMR), ranging from single cores or tranchet axes, two records of pebble mace heads with hourglass perforations, through ill defined flint scatters which include a Mesolithic component, to larger collections such as the private collection from Honey Hill (Elkington) (Saville, 1981b), or the circa 1910 field walking collection from Duston (Northampton), and the excavated examples such as Brixworth.

The individual Mesolithic sites in Northamptonshire are not well known from the national literature, with Honey Hill and Duston the only reasonably well-known larger sites. The private field collection from Honey Hill has been published (Saville, 1981b), while the extensive Duston field walking assemblage, collected from reinstated topsoil following iron stone quarrying and held in Northampton Museum exists only as a reference from the CBA Gazetteer of Mesolithic Sites in England and Wales (Wymer, 1977).

Martin and Hall (1980) published results from their fieldwork in Brixworth parish, identifying two sites, one of which (Site 24) is possibly a refined grid reference for the site listed in the CBA Gazetteer. This may also be coincident with the excavations that identified a diagnostic Mesolithic component in the lithic assemblages of evaluations carried out by Jackson (1990) and Thames Valley Archaeological Services (Ford, 1994, 1995), their National Grid References falling within the same field.

Evaluation trenching at Towcester Meadow (Walker, 1992) which identified an Iron Age Viereckschanze, also identified a lithic bearing horizon buried by 0.5m of alluvium and agricultural soils. The small amount of Mesolithic material was unfortunately heavily worm sorted and unstratified, but does provide us with an indication of the potential for site survival buried within the alluviated deposits of lower energy stream beds and river valleys.

Excavations at Chalk Lane Northampton (Williams and Shaw, 1981) identified an earliest phase comprising a series of stratified features comprising several pits, and a series of intersecting gullies (which were possibly geological, but contained Early Mesolithic material which could have been derived from the surrounding area) cut into the gravel terrace surface. This site is important in contributing some of the only stratified Mesolithic features yet found within the county, and also appears to be part of a wider scatter of Mesolithic activity covering the Ironstone outcrop and terrace gravels in the area of the later Saxon Burh in Northampton, close to the confluence of the two arms of the River Nene.

Other Mesolithic stratified deposits were excavated at Thrapston Quarry, Aldwincle (Jackson, 1976, 1977). A very lengthy history of human occupation coupled with later ritual use of the landscape started in the Mesolithic period, with a few of the pits and hollows across the site attributed to early prehistoric phases of activity on the site dating to this period. The site also included a multi-phase Neolithic mortuary enclosure with evidence of early Neolithic occupation predating the ritual structures, however the site has since been largely quarried.

West Cotton Long Mound, excavated as part of the Raunds Area Project, produced an extensive collection of unstratified Mesolithic finds from the mound material, probably incorporated from the contemporary land surface, while the lithic assemblage excavated at Briar Hill Neolithic Causewayed Enclosure also contained a Mesolithic component which deserves further attention (Chapman, pers. comm.), although it is thought to be early in date and therefore probably has little to contribute in terms of Mesolithic/Neolithic transitional studies within the region.

A small amount of Mesolithic material was recovered from excavations of a later Neolithic occupation horizon at Ecton (Moore, 1975), while a recent excavation in advance of development at Burton Latimer has produced ephemeral evidence of possible anthropomorphic forest clearance with a C^{14} date of 5910 ± 40 BP (4904 - 4714 cal BC) with Neolithic agricultural features overlying in a second phase, however no cultural material for either the Late Mesolithic or Early Neolithic was recovered from the earlier phase.

Evidence for the latest Mesolithic / earliest Neolithic transition appears, therefore, to be sadly lacking so far in excavated sites within the county, and as this ill defined crossover phase is of crucial importance to national research frameworks (English Heritage, 1997, PC1 page 44; Prehistoric Society, 1999) it is entirely appropriate that effort be focused on attempting to identify which, if any, of the recently discovered Mesolithic find spots exhibit Late Mesolithic typological characteristics in association with Early Neolithic material.

Hall and Martin provide us with the bulk of new Mesolithic material for the county with the results of their reconnaissance field walking survey, which extends the rapid collection methodology adopted for the Fenland Project to cover the whole of Northamptonshire. Their interim report on prehistoric settlement patterns (Hall, 1985) listed some 36 new sites from the area of the county surveyed at that time, with a further 24 new sites (filtered for coincident grid references) added so far by fieldwork following that publication (Hall, pers. comm.) (see fig. 1).

This new data doubles the Sites and Monuments Record total records for Mesolithic sites from 57 to 117, and there are now more than 4 times the known Mesolithic find spots than listed in the CBA Gazetteer. This equates to the discovery of nearly 4 sites per annum since the publication of the CBA gazetteer in 1977.

As analysis of the material collected by Hall and Martin continues, key new sites are emerging which do require urgent attention and cataloguing. One such site appears to be a lithic scatter identified in Preston Capes parish, on a band of Marlestone Rock Bed on the valley sides of a tributary at the headwaters of the River Cherwell.

The site has been defined by one field walking transect (approximate site area 6.7 hectares), and compares in dimensions to just over two thirds of the area of the lithic scatter at Honey Hill (which is roughly 10 hectares). The new site appears to be extremely prolific, with a reconnaissance collection of 800 flints from one 300m x 5m transect. As an approximate 2% sample of the entire plough soil assemblage and assuming an even distribution of lithics across the whole site, this would equate to around 2,000,000 total lithics in the plough soil alone.

Table 1: Survey Sources

Source	Number Of Sites Listed	Approximate % Of Known Sites In Northamptonshire
Hall and Martin Fieldwork to date	60	51%
CBA Mesolithic Gazetteer	27	23%

Other	27	23%
Raunds Area Project	3	~3%

Part of this resource assessment has been to target the inclusion of all of this new material within the development control searches carried out by the County Council as part of the planning process, and to facilitate the update of the Sites and Monuments Record, which is a crucial first step towards safeguarding the Mesolithic of the county.

3. The Post-Glacial Environment Of Northamptonshire

Currently the closest pollen assemblages for the period are to be found in the Cambridgeshire Fens and at Narborough Bog in the Soar Valley, Leicestershire. Here the record indicates that the Mesolithic floodplain comprised an alder-hazel woodland surrounded by mixed oak woodland with up to 27% pine composition (Brown, 1999).

Throughout the Holocene, the Nene valley appears to have gone through a process of gradual change from a shifting and unstable braided river system with channels separated by shifting sandbars, probably loaded with silt and eroding wind-blown loess soils at the end of the last glacial, through an anastomosing process where fewer, more stable channels were formed and separated by gravel islands, towards a more stable, channelled flow regime (Castleden, 1976; Brown, 1999; Macklin, 1999; Parry, forthcoming).

As seen in the Seine Valley (Mordant and Mordant, 1992) it is within the smaller rapidly changing channels in this transitional braided to anastomosing floodplain that it is likely that transient Mesolithic groups exploited regular fishing opportunities, setting wicker fish traps and targeting the relatively well drained gravel islands within the floodplain as short term processing sites (Brown, 1999).

Environmental data from the county for the period is very scarce, although there is certainly potential for its recovery through the implementation of PPG 16. The floodplain of the Nene appears to offer the greatest potential for the recovery of waterlogged environmental data due to the pressure on the valley for gravel extraction. It is also likely that the floodplains of the Welland and the other rivers within the county will contain these early remnant riverine deposits, however these are under less pressure from aggregate extraction.

Several small pockets of peat have been identified on British Geological Survey maps at Silverstone and in several locations by Hall and Martin during their survey, but potentially the most important site lies in Greens Norton. Here a peat deposit some 5m x 15m surrounds a spring, is still wet and is certain to hold extensive environmental data. The sampling of this peat deposit to provide a local environmental control for the county should be identified as a key research priority, as it may provide important information for all periods.

The Raunds Area Project sampled and dated a total of five palaeochannels from the Nene valley, one of which spans the Late-Devensian and early Holocene (Parry, forthcoming; Brown, 1999).

A radiocarbon date of 9370 ± 170 BP (HAR-9243) was obtained from organic sediments from the lower levels of this channel (Parry, forthcoming), demonstrating the potential for other surviving palaeochannels of Pre-boreal (Pollen Zone IV) and the Boreal (Pollen Zone V / VI) date to survive within the floodplain, some of which may contain cultural material but which can potentially contribute significantly to our knowledge of the Post-Glacial environment in the county.

Higher valley tributaries also have potential for preserving environmental deposits as illustrated by the transect of cores analysed from Apethorpe (Sparks and Lambert, 1961), which contained fragmentary surviving lacustrine deposits from the Late-Glacial, dating from late in the Younger Dryas (Pollen Zone III) to the Atlantic (Pollen Zone VIIa), in relatively close proximity (1.5 km) to a prolific find spot, albeit in a neighbouring tributary valley in Woodnewton parish (Gill Johnston pers. comm.).

Other areas of high potential for the prospection of Mesolithic cultural material not buried or eroded by later fluvial action may include the various tributary fans located above the level of Holocene river activity (Macklin, 1999) identified on the British Geological Survey maps of the county. These

relatively long lived valley bottom features may potentially preserve evidence of activity from the early Post-glacial period, and would presumably be characterised by long term reuse by Neolithic, Bronze Age and later populations.

4. Mesolithic Settlement Patterns

Hall and Martin provide some compelling evidence for the targeting of light, well-drained soils. In their 1985 paper all of the sites listed lay on well-drained soils on a sub-strate of limestone, ironstone, gravel or sand. The new sites added since that publication indicate that this pattern is true for the county in general, adding the Marlstone Rock Beds, Great Oolite Limestone, Glacial Sand and Gravel and Lower Estuarine series to the list of permeable geologies exploited. In addition, as their collection extends geographically across nearly the whole county exclusive of geology, this pattern can be accepted as a coarse representative distribution, rather than one influenced by highly selective survey work.

Recent detailed landscape survey across the Millfield Basin in Northumberland on a 1km to 3km wide transect, included close transect field walking and test pitting, bears out this selective site-targeting hypothesis (Waddington, 2000). By grouping geology and soil types into ecozones, Clive Waddington demonstrated that Mesolithic groups were *generally* targeting settlement on well drained gravels and sandstones, preferably adjacent to the wetland habitats important for economic exploitation, and avoiding wetland and clay habitats for *habitation*, although smaller sites indicative of brief periods of activity are found on these geologies, probably due to short episode hunting activities.

As can be seen in fig. 2, it is possible to define a riverine distribution for a large portion of the Mesolithic finds from the county. These tend to cluster on the gravel islands of the floodplain and permeable geologies exposed on the valley sides by the down cutting of the Rivers Nene, Welland, Ise, Cherwell.

Although the environmental evidence is lacking it is likely that during the Mesolithic, the clay land areas of the county were covered in dense Oak and Pine woodland, offering limited visibility and low calorific yields for foraging or hunting groups.

Generally site location appears to be influenced by three major considerations :-

1. Light soils for settlement sites
2. Proximity to water (Hall, 1985; Jacobi, 1978a)
3. Topographic prominence commanding reasonable views of the landscapes

The distribution map shows two major patterns. Firstly, a large set of find spots correspond with the exposed permeable geologies on the flanks of the Nene Valley with views over the floodplain. This distribution is mirrored by finds in the Welland Valley on the Northamptonshire/Leicestershire border, where the Medbourne Project has demonstrated a preference for Mesolithic communities to target prominent topographical locations on the northern bank (Knox pers. comm.), and Hall and Martin's fieldwork has added definition to the southern bank as illustrated.

There are hints that this riverine distribution pattern was mirrored within the Ise Valley, which extends north from the Nene in a major tributary valley and cuts through similar geologies. However, as reflected in figures 1 and 2, large scale development and quarrying in this area has had a severe impact on archaeological fieldwork and destroyed large areas of the valley landscape. Fourteen sites are recorded on the SMR in the upper reaches of the tributaries of the Ise, and near the headwaters of the Ise itself (see below), and a small amount of additional field walking material collected prior to extensive quarrying has been identified (Burl Bellamy, pers. comm.) and havs recently been examined, adding three new sites within the upper Ise valley around Geddington.

Secondly, a cluster of find spots can be seen in the north-west uplands (fig. 3). If this distribution is examined more closely it can be seen that the sites are exclusively located upon either Northamptonshire Sand and Ironstone, Glacial Sand and Gravel, or Marlestone Rock Bed. These are the best drained geologies within a largely Upper Lias Clay and Boulder Clay environment.

Obviously if the distribution is correct the north west 'uplands' appear to have attracted a higher Mesolithic population over time than the other 'upland' areas between the river valleys in the county. One hypothesis for this anomalous distribution could be that the area, situated at the heads of the Ise, Welland, Warwickshire Avon, and the Brampton Arm of the Nene acted as a 'crossroads' zone between river systems for the groups which were exploiting them so frequently as proposed above.

If this hypothesis were true it would be one example of a general trend in site concentration between the heads of river valley systems which could be tested across the region. Indeed within Northamptonshire a second smaller but less well defined concentration can be seen to the south of the county between the headwaters of the River Cherwell, Tove and Great Ouse, again mostly on permeable geologies such as Great Oolite Limestone, Marlestone Rock Bed, and Northamptonshire Sand and Ironstone.

5. Chronologies

Finally, chronological studies within the county have hardly begun. The analysis of the Honey Hill assemblage by Alan Saville tentatively assigned a large component of the microlithic assemblage to a bridging phase of the Mesolithic on purely typological grounds, after Jacobi's (1978b) reassessment of the Horsham material and characterised by obliquely blunted points and other points with inverse basal retouch (Saville, 1981b). Lithics from other sites need to be reassessed in the light of recent typological advances, while Duston and Preston Capes require a thorough analysis followed by some form of publication.

6. Conclusions

The results of landscape survey within the county are impressive, indicating that in Northamptonshire less than 50% of all Mesolithic sites were held on the SMR. Recovery of sites will not have been total due to the relatively coarse survey methodology, which will undoubtedly have missed smaller single episode sites which potentially could fall between the survey transects, but as the Northamptonshire results show, counties lacking a similar survey resource probably have significant numbers of undiscovered Mesolithic sites.

The general trend towards selective use of permeable geologies coupled with the possibility of landscape zones used as common routes between river valleys is also an intriguing phenomena which deserves closer scrutiny within the region, and poses significant research questions about the use of river valleys as common route ways in what was a highly mobile economy. For example, are the lack of sites within the Watford gap glacial gravels a distribution influenced by natural barriers further downstream? Specifically the river channels within the Brampton Arm may have discouraged regular river crossings resulting in only 6 sites on the Marlestone Rock Beds between the Brampton Arm and Watford Gap area, and none on the Glacial gravels forming the western slopes of the Watford Gap at all (fig. 3).

7. Research Questions – An Action List Towards A County And Regional Research Agenda

1. Within the valleys, highlight gravel islands and alluvial fan deposits as high priority area in evaluation and recording strategies.
2. Revise field walking methodologies utilised on the permeable geologies to target the more important single use sites (circa 2 – 5 m diameter).
3. If possible every effort should be made to set up a sister project to the Cambridge Mesolithic Project run by Tim Reynolds and Simon Kaner of Cambridgeshire County Council, to carry out systematic field walking over some of the key sites identified by the fieldwork of Hall and Martin, and to explore the potential for recovery of environmental deposits from the period.
4. Carry out chronological analysis of lithics, starting with more closely dating the known assemblages on typological grounds. Include assessments of Hall and Martin's collection, and seek to identify sites where Late Mesolithic and Earliest Neolithic material are present on the same site.
5. Recover good local environmental evidence for the period – both from the floodplain from palaeochannels, localised peat deposits and buried within the upper reaches of tributary streams to identify local conditions.

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