The Prehistoric Society

Book Reviews

FROM BANN FLAKES TO BUSHMILLS: PAPERS IN HONOUR OF PROFESSOR PETER WOODMAN, EDITED BY NYREE FINLAY, SINÉAD MCCARTAN, NICKY MILNER & CAROLINE WICKHAM-JONES


This volume is intended as a celebration of Peter Woodman’s contribution to archaeology by a selection of his friends, colleagues and former students, and the editors describe it as an ‘eclectic volume’ reflecting a range of Peter’s interests. There is a hint that the range of offerings might have been greater but for the constraints imposed by ‘factors of size and economy’. One of the virtues of a collection of papers such as this is the opportunity it offers for those inspired by the unifying theme of a single person’s career to write on topics, articulate personal reflections, provide reviews of the current state of knowledge, or present information that might not otherwise see the light of day, especially in an academic world increasingly dominated by the requirements of industrial regimentation to produce books of synthesis or short papers fit only for a limited number of international peer-reviewed journals. A potential downside is that some of the offerings accepted out of personal consideration might better not have seen the light of day or not without further revision. On the whole this volume errs on the virtuous side, and the editors have worked hard to produce a coherent volume, with the varied fare on offer organised around three main themes: Artefacts and Antiquarians (6 chapters); Fieldwork (10 chapters); and People and Animals (5 chapters). Each theme is usefully prefaced by an editorial that summarises the papers on offer and provides links to Peter’s own career, and there is an Abstract, an Editorial Foreword and an Index to set the scene and aid the reader.

As might be expected, there is an emphasis on the Mesolithic and on the archaeology of Ireland, but the scope extends more widely, with papers on later material, notably from the Irish Bronze Age, on other parts of Europe, and on methodological or theoretical themes of pan-European or wider interest. Papers fall into broadly two categories, those that deal with Ireland or its near neighbours in Scotland and northern England, between which there are many similarities in terms of perceived marginality and the history of Mesolithic research, and those on European or broader themes.

Some papers present new data and interpretations on quite specific issues, others offer broader reviews, such as the papers on Scotland, or an overview of the current state of progress on large-scale investigation of major sites such as Belderigg (Ireland), Star Carr (England), and Zvejnieki (Latvia).

Several themes emerge from the combination of papers on offer. One is the impression of an Irish Mesolithic that is quite distinctive in the sites and material available for study in comparison with other areas of Europe, and indeed in its fauna and landscape settings. At first sight the Irish material seems thinly distributed and unpromising, and one is reminded that when Peter first began his career, the established view was that there was no Mesolithic in Ireland or little to speak of except in the north. Flint as a raw material is rare, but papers here show that other materials such as chert and high quality volcanic and quartzitic materials of limited occurrence have generated evidence of quarrying activity and networks of distribution that can be tracked through careful analysis to provide insights into patterns of social geography in their wider landscape setting. Evidence of extensive artificial platforms and islands in a number of locations hints at a scale of landscape modification that one does not usually associate with Mesolithic activity. Papers by Clarke and Finlay, respectively on coarse stone tools and microlith fragments, are exemplary in showing how previously neglected and supposedly uninformative types of material can be made to yield new insights through the posing of new questions and the analysis of new categories of information.

Another pervasive theme is the perennial issue of the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition, which is in process of long drawn out deconstruction, added to by a number of contributions here, particularly on the appropriateness or otherwise of such categories as ‘complex hunter-gatherer’ (Finlayson), the problematic dating and dietary interpretation of late Mesolithic and early Neolithic Danish burials (Brinch Petersen and Meiklejohn), new data on early cattle domestication (Price and Noe-Nyggaard), new field investigations of the Zvejnieki cemetery in Latvia (Larsson), one of the largest in Europe, and used repeatedly throughout the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods, and the evidence of stone-walled reindeer pitfalls in Sweden, unknown before the Iron Age, but posing questions about earlier hunting techniques (Bang-Andersen).

As often, when reflecting on the variation of evidence between different European countries (and between different periods), one wonders how much of the pattern is due to the vagaries of evidence preserved or hidden from view, and how much reflects genuine differences in patterns of social and cultural behaviour. Are sites like Zvejnieki or Star Carr major ritual centres on the European scale, and if so why here, or the rare survivors of a more widespread
pattern? Is the emergent distinctiveness of the Irish Mesolithic a function of the evidence currently available, or a symptom of a distinctive regional tradition, reinforced perhaps by isolation from Britain and mainland Europe?

Given the personal focus of this volume, many authors have taken the opportunity to weave into their discussions reflections on Peter’s own career and personality, offering some insight into the personal and social context that informs archaeological investigation. There is much comment, ranging from the anecdotal to the systematic, on the serendipity of new knowledge and new horizons that comes with chance encounters – with individuals, with artefacts in the field, or with overlooked finds in Museum store rooms, and some acknowledgement of the largely unspoken role played by enthusiasts and individual collectors in the discovery of new material. Some of this overflows into self-confessed romanticism about the virtues of imagining such stories for the human actors of the prehistoric past. As often with such ‘touchy-feely’ interpretations, one is left with an impression of pervasive uneasiness in the current state of archaeological theory, perhaps even a lack of confidence, that archaeological analysis can be conducted with a combination of insight and empirical rigour to explore new questions and open up new intellectual horizons without risking the extremes of tedious description on the one side, or romantic fiction on the other. In fact, there is much in this volume to counter such tendencies. Space does not allow a fuller discussion of everything on offer, but there is much food for thought and a clear sense of new challenges, new questions, and a vista of new problems to stimulate future investigation.

It is perhaps appropriate, in the spirit of this volume, to recall some of my own encounters with Peter, which, though infrequent, are no less memorable for that. The first was at the Prehistoric Society Conference on the Mesolithic of Northwest Europe held in London in 1976, organised by Paul Mellars and presided over by the magisterial Grahame Clark. Such an audience with its mix of steely-eyed senior academics and inquisitive amateurs would be daunting for any young researcher – I certainly found it so, but Peter spoke with enviable ease and wit. More recently, at an international workshop in Francophone West Africa, Peter startled many in his audience during one of the discussions by breaking into articulate French, albeit briefly and with an unmistakable Irish accent.

This is a handsome volume, well produced, thoughtfully structured, generously illustrated, carefully edited, and economically priced, and the first in a new series produced by the Prehistoric Society. There are few errors, but one that could not help but attract attention, which seems to have escaped the proof-reader’s eye, is the variant spelling of Mount Sandel, ‘Sandal’ is not, as far as I am aware, sanctioned by any ambiguities of Irish-English spelling, and such oversight for this, of all archaeological sites in Ireland, will no doubt earn a cheerful rebuke from its excavator along with a demand for penance served over a dram of the proverbial Bushmills.

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