

Burial practices at the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition in Britain: change or continuity?

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ABSTRACT – *There is no doubt that the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition was a time of great change. It has been suggested that at this time people began to disarticulate their dead and use caves and monuments as ways of interacting with the ancestors. This paper looks at the transition from a Mesolithic perspective in order to identify evidence for change and continuity. It is suggested that certain practices such as disarticulation and the use of caves are much earlier in date and thus provide some continuity. Practices such as the use of shell middens for the deposition of human remains and the construction of monuments stand out as innovations, but are not necessarily the result of a new ideology.*

IZVLEČEK – *Prehod iz mezolitika v neolitik nedvomno predstavlja čas, v katerem je prišlo do velikih sprememb. Predlagano je bilo, da so v tem obdobju ljudje pričeli raztelesati svoje umrle in začeli uporabljati jame in spomenike za interakcije s predniki. V članku se ukvarjamo s preходом iz mezolitske perspektive, da bi lahko prepoznali dokaze o spremembi in kontinuiteti. Predlagamo, da so se določeni običaji, kot je raztelesenje in uporaba jam, pojavili bolj zgodaj in tako nudijo kontinuiteto. Običaji, kot je uporaba školjčnih kupov za odlaganje človeških ostankov in izdelava spomenikov, pa predstavljajo inovacije, ki niso nujno posledica nove ideologije.*

KEY WORDS – *burial; caves; disarticulation; Mesolithic-Neolithic transition; Britain*

Introduction

The transition to the Neolithic is often seen as a time of great change: domesticated animals and grain, pottery, monuments, and polished stone tools are all introduced. In Britain, this transition is usually said to occur at 4000 BC, but in recent years, research has moved towards disentangling this 'package' through the use of multi-scalar approaches, and some researchers have begun to think about change in terms of human time frames in order to identify variety, messiness, and localness (Cooney 2007.543; Whittle 2003). These approaches are coupled with scientific methods with a particular emphasis on the creation of fine-grained chronologies. The use of strict sampling methods and Bayesian statistical frameworks has enabled a better understanding of the introduction of innovations, and in the case of monument building in Southern Britain,

the establishment of a gradualist model. For instance, five important long barrows appear to have been constructed about 3800/3750 calBC up to a century or so *before* causewayed enclosures (Bayliss and Whittle 2007; Whittle 2007.382).

Other innovations such as domesticated sheep and cattle appear in the 4th millennium BC. One of the earliest dates on sheep appears to be from the site of Ascott-under-Wychwood, where sheep teeth date to 3990–3780 calBC (Bayliss et al. 2007). The most compelling evidence for early cereals come from charred cereal grain, and it has been recently argued that the introduction of grain appears at about 3800 calBC (Milner 2010), although with ongoing dating programmes, a clearer picture may emerge. Pottery seems to appear about 4000–3700 calBC,

although it has been suggested that some pottery introductions may be earlier than this at about 4200–3800 BC for certain parts of Scotland and Ireland (Sheridan 2000; 2003; 2004; 2007).

When all this evidence is brought together, it is not particularly apparent whether the different aspects of the Neolithic came together or whether introductions were slightly staggered, and how this varies from region to region. However, it is very clear that in the 300–400 years at the beginning of the 4th millennium BC, great change was occurring in Britain, in many different ways. What is still very uncertain is the process of change and what was happening to the people at this time. There are two main views. The first is that the transition was very rapid with a dramatic change in subsistence practices to agriculture (Rowley-Conwy 2004). Stable isotope data has also been used to argue for a rapid dietary shift from marine dominated foods in the Mesolithic to terrestrial foods at the start of the Neolithic, again indicating a rapid introduction of farming (for further debate see Milner et al. 2004; 2006; Richards, Schulting 2003; 2006). In addition, it has been argued that pottery and other aspects of the Neolithic were being brought to Britain with the arrival of small farming groups from the Continent (Sheridan 2007: 442).

The alternative view is presented by Julian Thomas (1999; 2004), who takes the acculturationist, gradualist position. He suggests that communities in the earlier Neolithic would still have been mobile, still relying heavily on wild resources, and that domesticated animals and grain would have been bound up in symbolic and ritual aspects of society rather than playing a key role in the subsistence economy. The evidence he uses for this is that cereals and domesticated animals are usually deposited at monuments, such as causewayed enclosures.

Another way of considering the effect on people is to look at burial practices and the degree to which we see change or continuity at this time. Traditionally, burial practices and ritual practice are deemed to have changed significantly in the transition, but this paper will look at both the ways in which dead bodies were treated, and the contexts in which they are found, in order to test this assumption.

Treatment of the body

During the Early Neolithic, secondary rites appear to have been a major part of the funerary practices

with disarticulated bone found in tombs and caves (Parker Pearson 1999:50). Far from being interpreted as the results of disturbance or cannibalism, these are seen as funerary acts to honour ancestors (Parker Pearson 1993; 1999; 2000; Whitley 2002). In addition, it is believed that certain parts of the skeleton were moved from one context to another. For example, skulls are under-represented in the chambered tomb at West Kennet, but are found in profusion in the nearby ceremonial causewayed enclosure of Windmill Hill (Parker Pearson 1999:52).

But is this actually an innovation, or did disarticulation and secondary rites occur earlier? In fact, disarticulation is also the way in which most Mesolithic bodies seem to have been treated. The *only* articulated remains that currently exist are from the very early part of the Mesolithic in the 9th millennium BC at Aveline's Hole and Gough's Cave (the famous 'Cheddar Man'). All other human bone which has been found in Britain appears to have been disarticulated (Conneller 2006). In both the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods there is evidence that the bones are being treated like animal bones, and we cannot discern a significant difference in the ways in which the human remains are being treated in the Mesolithic compared to the Neolithic.

Van Gennep (1960:146) introduced the idea of liminality and rites of passage in death when he showed that a dominant part of death rituals was a transitional phase where the dead were no longer a part of the living community, but they had not yet passed to the next world. It is during this liminal stage that the dead are transformed physically from a body into bones, and metaphorically from relative into ancestor (Metcalf and Huntington 1991:34). Disarticulation of the body is one way that this process of transition can occur so that it is accepted by the society as an ancestor. For the body to become disarticulated it has to have decomposed sufficiently for the bones to be detached from the body and the decomposition process can be seen as a physical example of the transition taking place. The idea of secondary burial treatment is central to the concept of transitional states, as it entails the body, or parts of it, being moved from a temporary place of treatment where the bones are de-fleshed to its present resting place where the bones are deposited (Andrews, Bello 2006:17).

Secondary treatment of the dead can occur in several ways. Some practices use natural decay and defleshing by birds and animals to decompose the body

so that dry bones remain. For example, the Iroquois Indians in the United States and Canada lay out their dead on a raised platform (*Henderson 1987:50*) and the Ashanti place the body in a coffin rested on stilts for eighty days to allow decomposition (*Rattray 1959:115*). Archaeological evidence of the exposure of corpses can be seen in many monumental structures where the remains are found in a disarticulated state, such as Ascott-under-Wychwood where bones are severely weathered and bleached (*Chesterman 1977*) or at Parc Le Breos where bones showed signs of weathering and scavenging marks (*Whittle, Wysocki 1998*).

In ethnographic examples there is often little time taken to ensure all of the bones are collected after exposure of the body. In Balinese burial practices, remains are roughly buried and later collected for cremation; here, the focus is on the process rather than the actual remains themselves (*Metcalf and Huntington 1991:101*). The Ashanti only make a cursory attempt to re-articulate long bones before reburial (*Rattray 1959:115*). The collections of bones in Neolithic tombs suggest that selection did occur, such as at Wayland's Smithy and Fussell's Lodge, where there is a general lack of small hand and foot bones (*Whittle 1991; Mays 1998*). Many small bones, however, survive on sites such as the shell middens on Oronsay (*Meiklejohn et al. 2005*) and the causewayed enclosure at Hambledon Hill (*Mercer 1980*). Here, the interpretation is that they could have functioned as areas where the bodies were exposed.

It is not doubted that disarticulation can be the result of deliberate human treatment of the dead as part of the liminal transition phases outlined by Van Gennep (*1960*), but disarticulation as a treatment for the dead has received differential treatment in the literature. It is a widely accepted treatment in Neolithic studies, where sorted and manipulated human bones are interpreted as evidence for ancestral worship (*Whitley 2002*). However, in the Mesolithic there is little acknowledgement that disarticulated remains represent anything more than disturbed burials. This is beginning to change as new evidence from Europe demonstrates the potential of an understanding of disarticulation in the Mesolithic (*Green 2006*).

Context for burial

There is no doubt that the monuments such as long barrows and causewayed enclosures which appear during the 4th millennium BC, at the start of the

Neolithic period, are an innovation. But it was not just monuments which were used to house the dead; caves were also used. Some studies give the impression that the use of caves is possibly reserved for 'deviant' burials. For instance, recent dating from sites in the Yorkshire Dales has highlighted 'diverse treatment' and a range of activities with regard to the deposition of human remains (*Leach 2008*). Prior to this reanalysis, the human remains from these caves were generally considered to be Late Neolithic or Early Bronze Age in date and derived from articulated burials. However, dating showed a group of five cave and rock shelters are actually Early Neolithic; the earliest known deposition of human remains in this upland region relating to Neolithic mortuary activity.

Andrew Chamberlain (*1996*) argued that there was an absence of cave use in the Mesolithic in the last 2000 years prior to the Neolithic. There thus tends to be a perception that the use of caves in the 4th millennium BC is an innovation related to an abrupt cultural transition. There is very little evidence for human remains in the Mesolithic, but most of what there is comes from a number of cave sites, Table 1 (see *Conneller 2006; Chamberlain 2001; Meiklejohn et al. 2011*). There is a very well known grouping of caves in the Mendip Hills and Southwest England. There are six sites here which have produced radiocarbon dates on human bone that date to the Early Mesolithic: Aveline's Hole, Badger Hole, Gough's New Cave, Kent's Cavern, Oreston Cave and Totty Pot. Another set of sites occurs in South Wales on the Gower Peninsula (Foxhole Cave, Paviland Cave, Worm's Head) and on Caldey Island (Daylight Rock, Ogof-yr-Ychen, Potter's Cave) and these on the whole tend to date more to the 7th and 6th millennia. There is also the site of Pontnewydd in North Wales, with a human bone dating to the 7th millennium. There are a couple of caves in England which also appear to have Mesolithic dates: Bower Farm in Staffordshire, with a cranium dating to the 8th millennium, and Foxhole Cave, Derbyshire, with a 5th-4th millennia date (see below). Finally, Killuragh Cave in Ireland has also been dated to the 5th millennium.

Fox Hole cave in Derbyshire is slightly contentious in that it has been interpreted as possibly having Early Neolithic remains (*Chamberlain 2001; Meiklejohn et al. 2011*). The cave was discovered and partly explored in 1928, with further controlled excavations by the Peakland Archaeological Society between 1961 and 1981 (*Chamberlain 2001*). These last ex-

cavations concentrated on archaeological deposits in the floor of the Entrance Chamber, the Main Passage and the First Chamber, and a sequence of deposits up to 2 metres deep was recorded. The human bones which have been dated were found in a layer which also contained wild and domestic fauna, charcoal, a Group IV polished axe, worked animal bone and teeth and some Peterborough ware pottery. Although the human bones are associated with Neolithic artefacts, the calibrated dates themselves are 5th millennium, with the date from the humerus spanning into the early part of the 4th millennium (Tab. 2).

With the transition dated to somewhere in the period of 4000–3800 BC, the dates from Fox Hole Cave, Derbyshire are arguably of Mesolithic date. There is also the example of Killuragh Cave in Ireland, which dates to the 5th millennium BC (Conneller 2006). Overall, there are very few dates for Mesolithic human bone within cave sites. However, what there is does suggest that cave sites are being used from the 10th to the 4th millennium BC. What is significant about the Early Neolithic is that in the 4th millennium BC, there is an increase in use, as noted by Chamberlain (1996), and further Early Neolithic human bones from caves have more recently come to light: e.g. in the Yorkshire Dales (Leach 2008).

Shell middens are another interesting context when analysing human bone deposition. Although shell

middens are usually associated with the Mesolithic period, the deposition of human bone within the shell middens occurs only from about 4000 BC in Britain. The most well-known example is Oronsay, where human bones were found at Cnoc Coig. The midden itself is attributed to the Mesolithic period, with radiocarbon dates spanning from the 7th to the end of 5th millennium BC. There are also four dates on human remains from this site, which have recently been recalibrated to take account of the reservoir correction (Milner, Craig 2009). Two of the dates now appear to span the 4000 BC marker, while the other two date to the first centuries of the 4th millennium BC, so these appear to be very late additions to the midden (see Milner, Craig 2009 for a full discussion). Similarly, at the shell midden site of An Corran, Scotland, the midden is very definitely Mesolithic in origin, with dates that span the 7th millennium to the end of the 5th millennium, but the human disarticulated remains found at the site are 4th millennium in date.

Discussion

The question of whether new burial practices occur in the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition is a very difficult one to answer. On the one hand, the practice of disarticulation occurs in the Mesolithic and appears to continue into the Neolithic. In addition, caves seem to be used as places to deposit human bones from the 10th millennium right through into the 4th millennium, the Neolithic. Both the disarticulation of human bones and the deposition of bones in caves are also known on the Continent for the Mesolithic, and so these appear to be long-standing traditions and ones that are not new to the Neolithic period. However, there are also innovations at this time in the form of the building of new monuments and, in Scotland, the deposition of human bones in shell middens.

The Neolithic has been interpreted in terms of new ideas, motivations and changes in beliefs which accompany the new practices such as monument construction. It has been argued that monumental structures containing human remains delineated the land and marked out territory, as competition for land increased with the adoption of farming (Parker Pearson 1993; Renfrew 1976; Sherratt 1995; Tilley 1996). Another suggestion is that monuments were built to make a visual impact on the land (Tilley 1996:73) and link a community with the land by showing a long history of occupation (Parker Pearson 1993:41). It has also been posited that with the

10 th millennium	Worm's Head
9 th millennium	Aveline's Hole
	Badger Hole
	Gough's Cave
	Worm's Head
8 th millennium	Kent's Cavern
	Oreston Cave
	Totty Pot
	Daylight Rock
	Ogof-yr-Ychen
	Potter's Cave
	Bower Farm
7 th millennium	Ogof-yr-Ychen
	Potter's Cave
	Pontnewydd
6 th millennium	Ogof-yr-Ychen
	Paviland
	Foxhole Cave (Glamorgan)
5 th millennium	Fox Hole Cave (Derbyshire)
	Killuragh Cave (Ireland)

Tab. 1. Mesolithic cave sites that have radiocarbon dated human bone sorted according to millennia.

Specimen	Material	Date (uncalibrated)	Date (calibrated 95%)	$\delta^{13}\text{C}$	Lab Number
Humerus	Human bone	5185 ± 60 BP	4230 BC to 3800 BC	-20.6%	OxA-9805
Tibia	Human bone	5485 ± 75 BP	4500 BC to 4050 BC	-21.4%	OxA-9929

Tab. 2. Radiocarbon dates from the site of Fox Hole Cave, Derbyshire (Chamberlain 2001).

development of farming there was an increased reliance on the work of previous generations (Bradley 1984; Meillassoux 1972) and with this increased reliance came a need to worship and appease the dead in order to ensure the economic success of the community (Barrett 1988; Cooney 2000; Parker Pearson 1993.42; Whittle 1996).

Disarticulation in the Neolithic is very much perceived to be tied into ideas of ancestor worship and monuments, which were not simply places to dispose of the dead, but places where the ancestors resided, giving their sanction to the use of that land by descendants (Parker Pearson 1993.41). Although monuments seem to be an innovation at this time, both caves and monuments alike have been argued to offer entry into the earth, into confined and dark spaces (Barnatt, Edmonds 2002.124). Caves form constant and fixed elements of the landscape and as such have characteristics that are predictable over time; these include the fact that there is restricted space in these “naturally confined locations” (Pasma 2004.9). The confined space and restricted light in caves has been argued to be a contributing factor in their nature as ritual locales, which mean that they may be seen as mysterious places (Barnatt, Edmonds 2002.121; Conneller 2006.154–157; Tolan-Smith, Bonsall 1997.217). They have been seen as entrances into the earth, liminal places between light and dark, where only small numbers of people could enter the unfamiliar worlds (Barnatt, Edmonds 2002.126) and they are less suitable for general residential activities which require space and light (Tolan-Smith, Bonsall 1997.217). These interpretations of the nature of caves are supported by ethnographic examples, such as the Saami in Northern Scandinavia, who believed in a three-tier world (Bradley 2000.11–12). They believed the world was split into three horizontal levels – the sky, earth, and underworld – and that there were entrances to this underworld at specific points in the landscape. The similarity between the restricted space in caves and chambered tombs has been suggested by Barnatt and Edmonds (2002) to show that they could have been used as interchangeable and equally appropriate places for burial, and reflect the playing

out of similar beliefs about life, death, and rebirth.

The fact that Mesolithic shell middens contain human bones which date to

no earlier than the 4th millennium BC has been used to argue that these places may have played a role in allowing people to hark back to older identities as a way of negotiating change at this time (Warren 2007.323). Perhaps these are also seen as territorial markers and an ancestral link with these places, as suggested by some for the monuments (see above).

Whether one decides to agree with these interpretations or not, the fact that there is some continuity in both disarticulation and cave use suggests that in the Mesolithic, people may have had similar types of beliefs to those posited for the Neolithic people. They may also have seen caves as entrances to unfamiliar worlds and may have disarticulated the dead and performed secondary rites because they too needed to maintain links with the ancestors. The new innovations of monument building and placing human bones in shell middens may have been a re-affirmation of those ideas. Our problem for Mesolithic studies is that there are fewer remains, and so they have tended to be ignored and un-theorised (but see Conneller 2006) which has helped to perpetuate a bias towards the Neolithic viewpoint in the study of the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition (Warren 2007).

The evidence that we have does not tell us any more about whether these were hunter-gatherers or incoming bands of farmers. That is more likely to be answered through a DNA studies (e.g. Malmström et al. 2009). What is clear is that the situation is likely to be very variable, regional, and ‘messy’ as discussed at the start of this paper. What we also have to take into account is the time frame being analysed. In the ‘grand narrative’ the transition appears to be rapid, but if we consider it in terms of human experience and change over generations, it becomes more comparable to the Roman period in Britain, which took a similar length of time, about 400 years, and which witnessed similar major innovation and change, as well as indigenous acculturation. It is also important to consider why change occurs. Changes in burial practice are not always related to a change in belief or religion: over the last 100 years or so in Britain the number of people who are cremated has risen from 0% to over 70%. This

is due to a number of factors but does not represent a change in religion. There is a temptation to see something new, like the introduction of monuments, as the material representation of a change in ideology or religion; however, we have to also consider the possibility that these innovations are related to older customs.

Conclusion

In sum, the greatest change in terms of burial practice at the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition is the introduction of monuments, but as we have already seen, Barnatt and Edmonds (2002) suggest that

chambered tombs and caves could have been used interchangeably. The fact that disarticulation also occurs in the Mesolithic, and caves are the main place where we find the bones, suggests that there is some continuity rather than change in practice during the Early Neolithic. Finally, the idea that there is a new ideology or a new form of ancestor worship does not fully consider the Mesolithic evidence prior to 4000 BC. It is important that false divisions are not created through the use of binary oppositions such as Mesolithic:Neolithic, hunter-gatherer:farmer, indigenous:incomer which can obscure the variability and complexity of the transition (Warren 2007).

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