SOLENT THAMES RESEARCH FRAMEWORK RESEARCH AGENDA
LATE UPPER PALAEOLITHIC AND MESOLITHIC

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Nature of the evidence

There are a number of very important sites from this period within the region. Of particular significance are areas of Late Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic activity with *in-situ* deposits in the Middle Kennet and Lower Colne Valleys. In addition there are in-situ scatters with hearths on the floodplain of the Middle Thames and less secure but dense flint spreads also associated with hearths in the Hampshire Greensand. Other areas may have similar remains, albeit surviving in smaller pockets, but have not been so intensively examined either because they are less visible or development pressure is less intense. Recent work has shown that it is undoubtedly the case that the level of activity during these periods was greater than has been appreciated to date but an understanding of its distribution and character is subject to distortion because investigation has been so uneven across these counties.

The nature of much of the surviving evidence consists of disturbed material in the ploughzone, making identification and characterisation of 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. Palaeoenvironmental and geoarchaeological sampling also has a major role to play: in the identification of sites, in elucidating the range of human activity and in developing a better understanding of variation across the region.

- The extent to which developer-funded work has changed our understanding of the extent of LUP and Mesolithic activity in this region needs to be more fully appreciated, and the biases this has introduced recognised.

- The contribution of small scatters of flint should be recognised and their importance in understanding the full range of Mesolithic settlement and economic activity. Methods of most effectively retrieving this evidence needs to reviewed.

- Fieldwalking should become a more routine part of field evaluation.

- The extent to which further LUP and Mesolithic sites lie buried beneath alluvium and colluvium should be investigated.

- The extent to which the density of sites known in the Middle Kennet Valley and Lower Colne Valleys is a factor of preservation biases rather than preferences in the past should be more fully examined.

- Re-examination of some old assemblages (eg those in the Hambleden Valley, Milton Keynes and Vale of Aylesbury, early Mesolithic assemblages in Oxfordshire) is required.

- Re-assessment is needed of material from the Thames and some of the other rivers in our catchment, for example material found in the Kennet.

- Publication of important old sites would be useful eg Misbourne Valley in Buckinghamshire and the 'Wakes' on the Isle of Wight.

- Some new excavations, possibly on old sites, as suggested for 'hazel-nut plant bed' on Isle of Wight or land surface at Werrar would test established interpretations.

- Some new field collection, eg on ploughed Lower Greensand on Isle of Wight would expand the evidence base.

- Integration is needed of the results of under-water/foreshore archaeology, eg in Solent where previously dry-ground sites could be well preserved beneath the modern sea level. More work on submerged and partially submerged landscapes will be important.

Chronology

Chronologies for this period have traditionally been based on typographic sequences. Scientific techniques are increasingly able to provide absolute dates, which might lead to revisions in the current model.

- There is a need to improve chronological understanding of LUP and Mesolithic flint scatters, using scientific dating particularly OSL.

- More material radiocarbon dated, including using new techniques such as dating burnt animal bone, would assist in establishing a reliable chronology.

- Collection of samples suitable for scientific dating techniques needs to be a routine part of investigations.

Landscape and land use

For a period where there are few structures and limited survival of material culture, landscape studies and environmental sampling are of particular importance. The relationship between the varied landscape areas and human activity needs more investigation and more integration of the detail from particular locations would also be valuable.

- Excavation should be targeted in river valley situations to provide much better information about riverine settlement and the use of and impact upon the surrounding landscape.

- More work needs to be done to identify sites away from river valleys and coastal/intertidal areas, particularly open sites.

- Investigation needed into human manipulation of the woodland if, indeed, this was taking place.

- Changes in landscape use over time, with investigation into any patterns that are apparent.

- Sites producing a wide range of well-preserved biological remains which are well sealed 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.

- It seems likely that the growth of underwater archaeology will greatly increase the number of sites producing well preserved biological remains. The development and refining of methodologies to recovery this material provides an interesting challenge for the next decade and should greatly increase our understanding of utilisation of these landscapes.

- Evidence is needed of regional variation in the types of biological assemblages found at different geographical locations eg Hampshire basin versus chalk.

- Research is needed into evidence for browsing under woodland conditions in the late Mesolithic/ Neolithic and the dating and reasons for the Elm decline. *Scolytus scolytus*, the vector for Dutch elm disease was recovered in late Mesolithic deposits at Runnymede.

- 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.

Society

The limited range of archaeological evidence for this period raises major challenges to developing an understanding of society and its organisation.

- Ways to shed light on mobility/group range and group size need to be investigated. In addition more work is needed on seasonality in the use of sites, for example using faunal remains and other proxy indicators.

- Differences between LUP society and settlement and that of the early Mesolithic should be identified.

- Attempts should be made to investigate LUP and Mesolithic beliefs/ideologies, e.g. identification of more instances of ritual activity.

- Some human remains from rivers may be Mesolithic in date and, if so, information from them may contribute to understanding of ritual.

- More microwear analysis would help us understand activities on site, for example, food resources and food preparation methods.

- A more holistic approach should be taken to investigating diet, based on integrating evidence from many sites.

- Any charred material found in association with human activity should be given the highest priority. The distinction of charcoal assemblages derived from wild fires or domestic fires should be possible through use of reflectance analysis.

- Mesolithic shell middens require further attention. Data should be compared to the many examples in Brittany.

- Collection of food remains from bulk soil samples would help an understanding of the diet during this period. Isotope work on any human remains that may be retrieved in the future could provide more evidence on diet, but the sample size at present is vanishingly small.

Material culture

Stone tools are the main surviving evidence for material culture from this period and the material needs to be considered in a variety of ways. Waterlogged sites may provide additional evidence.

- New methods of analysis or lines of thought which might be applied to this body of data should be considered.

- Some re-assessment of materials used for tools, their sources and distance over which they have been brought is needed.

Predictive modelling

Predictive modelling can be a useful tool for any archaeological period, but the full potential of the technique has not yet been realised. Geoarchaeological sampling should assist in this.

- Models could be tried as predictive tools to locate archaeological sites and model land use.

- Particular landscapes which are under threat, where good research projects could be developed e.g. Denham preferred mineral area and Abingdon need to be identified and targeted.

- 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 explore the impact of coastal change.

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