'The Cradle of Stonehenge'? Blick Mead - a Mesolithic Site in the Stonehenge Landscape

Transcript

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It is one of the most famous prehistoric places in the world, but much about the origins of the Stonehenge landscape remains a mystery. Stunning new information about the Stonehenge landscape, especially in the 3rd Millennium BC, has been uncovered by a number of university research teams in the 21st century, but until recently there has been very little attention to establishing its origins as the data base has been so slight (Darvill 2006, 66).

The University of Buckingham team’s discovery of a long term Mesolithic site at Blick Mead 2 km from the stones potentially transforms this situation. Visited for nearly 4000 years in the Mesolithic, recent excavations have provided evidence of the communities who built the first monuments at Stonehenge between the 9th and 7th millennia BC, and for Mesolithic uses of the area continuing into the very late 5th millennium BC and the dawn of the Neolithic. Eight radio carbon dates of the 5th millennium BC are the only such dates recovered from the Stonehenge landscape and fill a crucial missing link in the occupational sequence for the area. The full sixteen carbon date range gives a sequence which includes every millennia between the 8th and 5th and as such the site provokes a series of questions about the extent of Mesolithic activity in the vicinity before the creation of the Stonehenge ritual landscape. Of particular interest is whether later Neolithic monuments reflected this earlier activity emanating out of Blick Mead and memorialised it.

One of the reasons why no certain pre Stonehenge residential sites have been found before is because few flood plain sites have been investigated. This was part of the spur for the Blick Mead Project, along with the challenge of questioning the received wisdom that Vespasian’s Camp, where Blick Mead is situated, had its archaeology denuded due to 18th century landscaping. An analysis of the Estate records for Vespasian’s Camp showed that the Blick Mead area had in fact largely escaped this landscaping and that this area, assumed to be a 18th century water feature, was in fact part of an ancient spring complex.

Since 2005 we have been on site for just over three months of excavating days. This modest total has been due to landowner and financial restrictions which set the budget at £2000 per year for the first four years of the work enabling one long weekend dig a year. Other problems included illegal dumping of material from the A303 road which is immediately adjacent to the site. However, despite these initial difficulties by 2015 the site had yielded over 35,000 pieces of Mesolithic worked flint, 2400 pieces of animal bone, 100 kg of burnt flint and the earliest residential and activity area found in the Stonehenge World Heritage Site.

Some of the worked flint and stone comes from much further afield than Salisbury Plain. Of particular interest is a slate point which appears to have been fashioned in the Horsham Point style typical of the Sussex weald in the middle Mesolithic. The slate has been subjected to XRF analysis and is likely to have come from Wales or the Welsh borders. As such the object points to an ‘east meets west’ transmission of knowledge at Blick Mead and hints at gatherings of dispersed groups of people there. Other exotics include a sandstone tool, a unique find in Great Britain, which probably came from the West Midlands and a worked sarsen found in the residential area which is likely to have come from the Marlborough Downs area. The sense is of people from elsewhere meeting locals at the site and exchanging ideas, things and maybe genes.

The faunal assemblage discovered adds depth and detail to this interpretation. Of the 2,400 animal bones found 57% are from aurochs, the largest collection of that animal’s remains found in Britain. Killing one would have fed 200 people (Shulting, pers comm.) and along with the worked flint and burnt flint it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the site was a feasting place and close to excellent hunting grounds. Durham University and the Natural History Museum’s recent analyses of the faunal assemblage show the full range of species used at Blick Mead and the remains of burnt toad’s leg and hare suggest intensive use of resources and lengthy stays at the site too.

The Durham team has also analysed the isotopes in an auroch’s and dog’s tooth to ascertain what they were eating and where they were from. The auroch’s isotopes revealed it to be local, eating the local vegetation and drinking perhaps even at the spring. The dog’s isotopes show it to be largely eating aurochs (Rogers et al in press). However, further support for the view that people were visiting this landscape from much further afield is provided by the dog’s isotopes which show the animal as probably coming from the York area. No human remains have been found at Blick Mead, but as dogs can be taken as proxy for people, we have evidence here of at least one long journey to Blick Mead and one which was likely to have taken place in the 5th millennium BC according to a related radio carbon date. Long journeys to the Stonehenge landscape by people and animals are well attested to in the 3rd millennium BC, the time of Stonehenge in its heyday, but this the dog’s tooth and other evidence from Blick Mead suggests that the area was special in some way before the Neolithic ritual landscape was established.
What was so special about the pre-Stonehenge landscape? The large herbivores, especially aurochs, found at Blick Mead perhaps provide a clue. Aurochs were the most powerful animals in the landscape and may also have been in symbolic terms. At the time of the 9th-7th millennia BC posts on the Stonehenge knoll the basin around Stonehenge would have looked like “open woodland and open country”, and been “certainly visible from higher ground” according to snail analysis there (Allen 1995, 55 and 475). Elsewhere this area is also described as “cleared” at this time (Allen 2002, 149). Was the vegetation low because of the regular presence of aurochs and other large herbivores? Seen in this way the Mesolithic posts on the Stonehenge knoll might have been placed in part to mark the movement of aurochs and other large animals through a relatively open landscape. This part of the landscape, with its long sight lines across the Plain, predictable side valley routes where large herds of aurochs and other animals could be observed entering and departing the area could have been a place of advantage for hunters. Blick Mead, where the aurochs may have drunk and people certainly feasted and lived, and this part of the Plain with its special, perhaps sacred, hunting grounds, might have been key places and redolent with myths, traditions and associations over a long period. A recently dated post hole at Boscombe Down, south east of Blick Mead, also provides an early Mesolithic date and is situated on the slope of a dry valley. It may well be that a large area was good for hunting and that Blick Mead was the nexus point for it all.

The spring at Blick Mead provides evidence for people congregating and feasting, but until 2015 we had not found where they were living. Then an excavation on the terrace adjacent to the spring to the east uncovered the oldest residential and activity site in the Stonehenge World Heritage Site dating to the very late 5th millennium BC. For the first time we are presented with an opportunity to consider the possibility of late Mesolithic and early Neolithic people making contact in the area. In terms of the residential area, people appear to have utilised a large tree throw as a shelter and modified it with a flint wall and connected perhaps animal skins to it by a post or posts. An intensively fired burnt flint mound was also discovered close and may have been used as a form of conductor heater for the inhabitants. Within the shelter lay some especially small microliths, so tiny it is hard to imagine them being purely practical objects. Many pre literate societies physicalise narratives and it may be that tool making like this was something that children did as a special act of memory that also helped to enculture them.

The five radio carbon dates very recently obtained from the terrace site (4236-4041 Cal BC) are highly significant as they show Mesolithic culture persisting at the dawn of the Neolithic. These dates make Blick Mead the latest Mesolithic site in England, but on a human scale they bring the transition from Mesolithic to Neolithic culture into a personal focus for the first time as the grandchildren of these people, perhaps even the people themselves could have been the first to meet Neolithic incomers there. Of interest too is that this date range chimes well with that obtained from a “cow bone” found underneath sarsen 27 at Stonehenge. This had been traditionally understood as the first Neolithic date in the area, but with the evidence from Blick Mead it looks as though the Stonehenge knoll remained important to people throughout the Mesolithic period. Did Mesolithic ideas and associations with this and other sites in the landscape persist into the early Neolithic?

The earliest Neolithic monument in the Stonehenge landscape is a ceremonial pit found on Coneybury Hill (Richards, 1990) dating to the early 4th millennium BC. It has been called the ‘Coneybury Anomaly’ due to the geophysics result that discovered it, but the name could also describe the culturally ‘mixed’ nature of its contents. Mesolithic styles of blade flint work are present with early Neolithic types and domesticated grain. Wild animals (including fish) make up nearly half of the large faunal assemblage which makes the Anomaly unique in Britain (remains of animals found in Neolithic pits are almost always domesticates and no other pits contain fish). In light of the evidence for large congregations and feasting events at Blick Mead, it is tempting to view the Anomaly assemblage as large scale feasting debris chosen to signify different material cultures. The prominent location for this event on a ridge overlooking the future site of Stonehenge to the east and Vespasian’s Camp to the west is also suggestive of a high profile and place aware display.

Coneybury Henge was built close to the Anomaly in the early 4th millennium BC which suggests it was still being remembered about a thousand years later. Also visible from Coneybury Hill was so called ‘Bluestonehenge’ built around 3000 BC. A scatter of Mesolithic lithics dating from across the Mesolithic period was also found at this site by the Stonehenge Riverside Project. Christie’s discovery of a pit containing pine charcoal at the western end of the Greater Cursus (Christie et al 1963) is also suggestive of Mesolithic activity being incorporated into a Neolithic structure. The Cursus is a monumental east- west route and both its direction and topography parallel the suggested route taken by aurochs posited above. The latest dating carbon date from the terrace scoop at Blick Mead is of the same mid Neolithic date range as the Cursus (c. 3500 BC) and many Long barrows in the area, such as Winterbourne Stoke. For some time it has been understood that memories went a long way back in this landscape, but they may have gone back even further than has been realised hitherto.

Isotopic analysis of the Winterbourne Stoke skeleton showed him to be repeating travelling far to the west, probably Wales. This putative Welsh connection has encouraged experts to speculate that there was a long term special relationship between Wales and Stonehenge and that was later memorialised through the movement of bluestones from the Preselli’s to the area around 3000 BC. Of interest is that both the SPACES and Stonehenge Riverside Project teams have shown that the areas favoured for quarrying these stones in Wales had a Mesolithic footprint.
It is interesting to speculate that if we applied typical hunter gatherer animistic belief systems to the motivations for moving stones such a long distance then we would understand that movement as being integral to animating the spirit in the stone. Seen this way the building of Stonehenge would not be regarded as building a temple to a God or Gods, a temple is a much later classical construct anyway, but creating God itself. It is unlikely that Mesolithic beliefs like this were transmitted to early Neolithic peoples and utilised a millennium later, but such a perspective does at least cast fresh insight into the non-practical motivations for moving stones. Stonehenge might have been even more special and inspirational than we thought it was.

One of the final acts at the last excavation at Blick Mead was a member of the sieving team finding rare ripple flaked oblique arrowhead in the colluviums above the Mesolithic residential area. This type of tool is only associated with later Neolithic ritual sites and in Wessex has just been found at Marden henge, Durrington Walls and Bluestonehenge (at the start of the Avenue). Its presence at Blick Mead is important as it suggests the site was part of the wider Stonehenge ritual and ceremonial landscape at the time of Stonehenge in its heyday around 2500 BC. It has been recently argued it was understood as a place of origin in the landscape (Parker-Pearson 2015, 43).

Conclusion

Before Blick Mead we did not know that the pre Stonehenge landscape was already well known and utilised for several millennia before the establishment of its later ritual character. Blick Mead was the ‘first place’ in the landscape and one that endured as a culturally desired and determined one throughout the Mesolithic and perhaps beyond. As a result the late Mesolithic at least may well emerge as a new starting point for the better known archaeology of the Stonehenge landscape with Blick Mead as its origin point.

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