Palaeolithic and Mesolithic Research topics and priorities

Methodological approaches

Any consideration of research topics for the Lower and Middle Palaeolithic of the region must begin with an acknowledgement that the archaeology of the Pleistocene remains poorly integrated into broader developer-led programmes of investigation and mitigation. Defining specific research aims or topics relating to Pleistocene archaeology is arguably far less important than developing methods and procedures by which the investigation of Lower and Middle Palaeolithic archaeology can become part of 'mainstream' archaeological projects. We remain in a position where the fate of Pleistocene archaeology remains very much dependant on the stance and concerns of individual local authority archaeologists and contractors and their relationships with individual developers.

Mapping potential and collating existing data is an essential first step towards more effective curation of Pleistocene archaeology and it is notable that the Essex mapping project has informed recent fieldwork specifications, with investigation of Pleistocene deposits carried out as part of trial trench evaluations at sites believed to have potential for Palaeolithic archaeology or important geological sequences.

Beyond mapping for potential and enhancing records of known Palaeolithic finds, there are now a set of reasonably well-established methodologies for evaluating Pleistocene archaeology which can be integrated into programmes of fieldwork; typically these include programmes of geophysical survey, bore-holing, test pitting and watching-briefs. In this context it would clearly be extremely useful if comparable mapping projects could be undertaken for parts of the region which have not yet been studied in this fashion.

Key research topics for the Lower and Middle Palaeolithic highlighted in the 2011 revised research framework included the potential of systematic fieldwalking to identify new sites, especially away from the river valleys. There has been little progress on this issue.

In 2011 the erosion and loss of Pleistocene deposits along the coastline was raised as issue of particular concern in light of the discoveries at Happisburgh and Pakefield. The successes of monitoring this coastline have been noted and should be considered an ongoing priority, worthy of expansion to all areas where high potential Pleistocene deposits are exposed.

Key research topics identified for the Mesolithic in 2011 included a need to consider how fieldwork methodologies might be improved to allow the detection of Mesolithic sites, which appeared to be underrepresented by the results of developer-led projects. It was suggested that predictive modelling/better understanding of site location based on collation and analysis of the existing corpus of sites would be an important first step towards improving understanding of the period and this has been addressed for parts of the region.

Improving fieldwork methodologies for locating and investigating Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic sites remains a key concern. This applies especially to those rare, but disproportionately important sites where minimally disturbed/*in situ* lithic scatters survive, and are sometimes associated with other evidence such as faunal remains and palaeoenvironmental proxies. Within the region the best opportunities for investigating sites of this kind come from the alluviated floodplains of the river valleys and from areas of former coastal wetland. There is a real need for effective strategies for locating and investigating sites of this kind to be implemented in areas of high potential and it is

important to note that these periods are often poorly served by watching brief/strip-map-and-sample type briefs, where it is difficult to anticipate and adequately deal with ephemeral artefact scatters.

Aside from alluvial contexts, important *in situ* scatters of Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic date continue to be recovered from beneath colluvial deposits and within near surface sub-soil layers, occasionally in locations where it would be difficult to anticipate the survival of such deposits. This again highlights the need for effective modelling and sampling of deposits encountered during evaluation phases.

At present, evidence from the region makes little contribution to chronological understandings of the Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic at a national scale, with a very small number of sites with reliable associated ^{14}C dates. Where such sites are located and investigated every effort should be made to secure reliable samples for dating and the implications of such dates will invariably be of more than regional significance.

In addition to improving methods to locate high integrity sites, it is essential that appropriate fieldwork methodologies are applied in their investigation, particularly in terms of securing as total excavation/recovery as possible, together with intensive sampling and sieving of deposits and detailed spatial recording.

Fieldwalking has declined in importance as a strategy for evaluation during developer-led projects and it would be beneficial to consider methods of sampling ploughsoil artefact scatters during evaluation trenching to allow significant ploughsoil scatters to be identified.

Many new findspots have been identified through amateur fieldwork and are recorded on the PAS database. Particularly notable is the number of finds of putatively Upper Palaeolithic date, which presumably partly reflects the visibility of large and distinctive blade-based products of this period. It would be very valuable to carry out further investigations of some of these locations where the potential to recover substantial assemblages and/or locate well-preserved sites seems high.

Analysis of site location in parts of the region has revealed that there are major clusters of findspots in the lower river valleys of Norfolk and Suffolk and there seems to be a clear preference for floodplain/river valley locations. At present our understanding of sites located away from such locations is very poor and characterising some of the findspots from more 'upland' locations is necessary to determine any differences in the character of activity taking place in different parts of the landscape.

Evidence for Mesolithic activity is widespread across the region. Traditionally the distribution of Mesolithic findspots has been taken to indicate the preferential occupation of river valleys, with less activity on the boulder clay uplands and a general preference for lighter sandy soils. Whilst these patterns remain compelling, there is a need to test them in specific areas through systematic survey and, equally importantly, to determine whether there are chronological and/or functional differences between sites located in different topographic and geological locations.

The discovery of the cremation deposit at Langford, Essex raises the possibility that a hitherto unrecognised tradition of Mesolithic cremation burial may be present in parts of southern Britain and emphasises the requirement for deposits of this kind to be routinely dated. Attention should also be directed to other putatively Mesolithic cut features which have been reported during excavations. There are a growing number of sites where small pits, generally containing only small assemblages of flintwork, have been suggested to date to this period and it would be useful if analysis of these features and their finds and ^{14}C dating could examine this issue in more detail.

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Analysis

In 2011 attention was drawn to the need to better characterise the nature of lithic assemblages recovered from gravel terraces, in particular assessing the taphonomy of artefacts within a derived/secondary context in gravel and sand deposits to assess their integrity and interpretative potential. Most recent work has focused on sites where artefacts are found in primary or near primary contexts and such investigation of artefacts in secondary contexts continues to be somewhat neglected.

There have been substantial developments in understanding of the chronology of the Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic in recent years and it is essential that work carried out within the region is undertaken, and contributes to, these wider themes. For both periods there has traditionally been a heavy reliance on certain typologically distinctive flint tools for dating purposes. In recent years, and particularly for the Late Upper Palaeolithic, studies of lithic assemblages have demonstrated chronologically significant differences in technology which have the potential of assemblages lacking strictly diagnostic forms to be placed in a more detailed chronological sequence. Studies of LUP assemblages from the region should draw on this growing body of work.

There has been less work of this kind in relation to the Mesolithic and dating remains heavily reliant on microlith typology. There have, however, been important developments in this area, especially in terms of the recognition of the diachronous appearance of narrow-blade, later Mesolithic across Britain and an increasingly detailed understanding of chronological developments in the earlier part of the period. Again, it is essential that work on Mesolithic assemblages in the region engages with this work.

It would be useful to apply more detailed technological studies to Mesolithic lithic assemblages to explore whether there are chronologically significant differences in raw material use, core redaction strategies and assemblage composition during the period. Such differences are hinted at in the existing data set, and can be paralleled in other parts of the country but remain poorly understood at a regional scale and might have important implications for understanding changing patterns of mobility and settlement over the course of the Holocene.

The evidence for Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic activity invariably takes the form of lithic material, often as a component of multi-period assemblages, recovered from contexts which have seen considerable post-depositional disturbance. Despite the interpretative difficulties, assemblages of this kind provide the only evidence for activity in areas where better preserved scatters are absent. They can yield important information, but require appropriately intensive sampling. Ploughzone archaeology in general remains poorly served by developer-led projects but intensive sampling through excavation of a ploughzone scatter with a major Mesolithic component at Priestly Farm, Bedfordshire, demonstrates what can be achieved when sufficient resources are available for the investigation of known ploughzone sites, and could be usefully emulated elsewhere.

The Terminal Palaeolithic record of the region is of considerable importance at a national scale and recent projects have continued to recover new and important assemblages of this date. This data set has potential for making useful inter-site comparisons in terms of assemblage composition, landscape location and possible site function. There is an emerging picture, in the region and elsewhere in southern Britain, of a high degree of variability between assemblages of this date which might indicate substantial differences in the character and duration of occupation at different locales. This

offers a challenge to the interpretation that many such 'long blade' sites represent somewhat specialised and short lived workshop or butchery sites and is an issue which the evidence from the region is well placed to address, although several major assemblages including the Kings Site, Mildenhall; Staunch Meadow, Brandon; Hockwold-cum-Wilton, Norfolk and Whiteway Drove, Swaffham Prior, are poorly documented and require further analysis and/or reporting.

Patterns of raw material use require more detailed analysis. Sites are generally located in proximity to high quality sources of flint and include abundant evidence for on-site working, but the extent to which material was transported around the landscape, and in what form, remains unclear.

One of the major difficulties facing research in the region is the frequency with which Mesolithic sites form a component of large multi-period palimpsest lithic scatters, in which not only are different phases of the Mesolithic itself represented, but later prehistoric material is also abundant. Whilst such sites will always be interpretatively challenging in terms of characterising activity belonging to specific episodes of occupation, attention needs to be paid to attempting to identify the tempo and history of occupation of such sites, even in the very coarse sense of estimating the extent of Early versus Later Mesolithic material.

One striking aspect of the Mesolithic record of the region is the substantially greater proportion of findspots of 'Early Mesolithic' broad blade microlith forms than Later Mesolithic narrow blade forms. This pattern was first observed by Jacobi in Essex and has been paralleled in a recent study of Norfolk, Suffolk, Cambridgeshire and Bedfordshire. Although Jacobi suggested this pattern reflected a genuine decline in activity in some areas during the Later Mesolithic, coincident with changes in ecology and resource availability, this is a pattern that needs testing through more systematic work and in light of future discoveries, especially given the diminutive size of Later Mesolithic microlith forms and their corresponding underrepresentation in assemblages which have not been subject to rigorous collection/sampling.

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Synthesis

The need to better understand the geological context of extant collections of Palaeolithic artefacts was raised in 2011, especially in terms of re-visiting the sites of older, poorly provenanced or contextualised collections to investigate the geological sequence and where possible acquire new samples of artefacts and dates. This aspiration remains largely unfulfilled.

Emphasis was given in 2011 to the need to provide local authorities with information necessary to adequately protect the Palaeolithic resource. In particular it was suggested that the incorporation of geological and palaeoenvironmental data into HERs should be a priority.

In 2011 research topics for the Upper Palaeolithic were largely limited to the observation that the evidence for the Late Upper Palaeolithic in the region in particular required further study to 'characterise and model' the evidence for activity. There has been some progress on this issue.

In 2011 the need to better understand and model Holocene sequences and environments from river valleys, offshore and wetland areas, and the implications of this for Mesolithic settlement and the preservation of sites was highlighted. There has been considerable work in this area, including understanding the off-shore palaeo-landscapes of 'Doggerland' and the history of sea level rise during the early Holocene, assessment of alluvial sequences of river valleys in certain areas and modelling of the palaeolandscapes of parts of the Broads. There do, however, remain many areas, including major river valleys, where understanding of Holocene geomorphology and environments remain relatively poor.

A central research topic for these periods is in documenting the scale, distribution and character of occupation in the region and interpreting these patterns in terms of the dramatic climatic and environmental changes that occurred over the course of the Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic. The very sparse record of Early Upper Palaeolithic activity in the region is characteristic of lowland southern Britain more generally and at present there is little scope for detailed interpretations of this period. The identification of new findspots would be of importance in expanding the known distribution of activity, whilst the recovery, almost a century ago, of an Early Upper Palaeolithic leaf/blade point and associated fauna within a deposit of fluvial sand on the floodplain of the Colne at White Colne, Essex, demonstrates the potential for the survival of undisturbed sites of this date under some, probably very rare, circumstances. The same points largely apply to that part of the Late Upper Palaeolithic record belonging to the Late Glacial Interstadial (i.e Creswellian/Final Magdalenian and Final Palaeolithic (Hengistbury-type and Federmesser assemblages)), which, taken at face value, suggests relatively limited, episodic occupation by small populations. It is notable, however, that there are significantly more findspots of Final Palaeolithic date than those belonging to the Creswellian/Final Magdalenian, and this might indicate that the latter part of the interstadial saw somewhat more sustained/intensive activity. In adjacent parts of the continent, especially in the Low Countries, Final Palaeolithic sites are extremely common in some areas and future work, both in terms of new fieldwork and reassessment of older assemblages, should attempt to assess the extent to which Final Palaeolithic activity may have been underestimated and/or how it differs from the continental record.

The Mesolithic/Neolithic transition remains a key research topic for the region, especially given the ubiquity of scatters with both Mesolithic and Neolithic material. Given the progress in understanding the Early Neolithic sequence in recent years, it is important to recognise the poor chronological

control we have over the Mesolithic, a period that spans over 5,000 years. As Frances Healy has recently emphasised, at many sites where both Early Neolithic and Mesolithic material are found the activity they represent could often be separated by millennia, and at present, unlike some other areas of Britain, evidence from the Mesolithic side of the transition can contribute little to ongoing debates on the subject. One area that could be of considerable interest is comparing, in detail, lithic assemblages from what seem to be the earliest Neolithic sites in the region (e.g. those associated with very early dates and/or carinated bowl pottery) with those from discrete Later Mesolithic assemblages, although absolute dating of the relevant Mesolithic assemblages might be seen as an essential pre-requisite for this.

There is an urgent requirement for detailed and up-to date and readily accessible regional/county based syntheses of the Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic to be produced. For most areas the most recent of these kinds of accounts remain those of Jacobi for Essex and parts of Norfolk and Suffolk (Jacobi 1980, 1984, 1996), since which time there have been significant changes in our understanding of the periods, as well the accumulation of much new evidence.