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Preface

This volume is the outcome of a conference held at the Royal Museum in Edinburgh on 5–7 November 1999, organized by the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland. As Research Convener for the Society at the time I felt it important that the Society should be promoting major international conferences on particular phases or aspects of Scotland’s past, seen non-parochially in a wider UK and European perspective. Following my own research orientation, but also with the thought that such a conference might become the first of a chronologically themed series, I proposed Scotland’s very earliest prehistory as the topic. The Society’s officers and committees embraced my suggestion, initially with some scepticism (‘a whole weekend on the Mesolithic?’), but subsequently with enthusiasm as preparations developed over the course of eighteen months under the overview of the Society’s Director, Fionna Ashmore, who was a strong supporter from the very start. The Prehistoric Society and the National Museums of Scotland joined with the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland as co-hosts of the conference, and it became clear there was considerable interest from potential speakers and delegates.

One of my intentions in choosing the topic was to raise the profile of Mesolithic studies in Scotland by demonstrating that this is an exciting, lively, and significant area of research. To this end it seemed important to ensure there was time for open discussion following each session at the conference, and I have included these discussions in this publication to give a true flavour of the entertaining and stimulating – frank but friendly! – interchange of views which took place.

Another firm intention was that, while the focus was Mesolithic Scotland, the conference should not be restricted in coverage or attitude. It was important to set what was known of this period in Scotland within the context of the rest of the UK and Ireland, and to expand horizons by looking at aspects of Mesolithic archaeology of particular potential relevance in other parts of northern Europe. This ambition was realized by talks which covered aspects of the Mesolithic in virtually the whole of the British Isles (England, Scotland, Wales, and the Isle of Man), Denmark, Ireland, Norway, Poland, and Sweden. Equally I felt it essential when looking at the Scottish evidence to ensure that the physical and biological environment in which Mesolithic people found themselves in Scotland was fully explored, rather than just the conventional archaeology.

An approximation of the extent of northern Europe early in the Holocene, with the names of the countries represented in this volume superimposed.

It was gratifying that the conference attracted a large audience, including many amateur enthusiasts and Fellows of the Society with a special interest in, or just a vague curiosity about, the Mesolithic period. Very many of the most important Mesolithic discoveries throughout Europe have been made in the first instance by amateurs and Scotland is no exception in this regard, so it was particularly pleasing to have Reg Cadow, the discoverer of the Morton site (Cadow 1989), as an enthusiastic participant in the conference. Reg’s subsequent death while this publication was in preparation is a matter of deep regret.
Clearly it is important that Mesolithic research is not undertaken within an academic vacuum but produces information which is communicated to the wider public. Recent fieldwork projects in Scotland, such as the Southern Hebrides Mesolithic Project (Mithen 2000), the Scotland’s First Settlements Project (Hardy & Wickham-Jones 2002; 2003), and the Manor Valley Project (Cowie 2000) have done just that; in some cases involving local people directly in practical Mesolithic research. Also the state heritage organization, Historic Scotland, has sponsored two imaginative series of popular archaeology books, each of which has included highly successful books which form a coherent compendium of information on the Mesolithic in Scotland, and the rest of the UK, and well beyond.

The complete programme of the actual conference is given below (page xv). It was immensely gratifying to be able to assemble in one forum so many of the major specialists in this field and my very sincere thanks go to all the speakers for their willing participation. The only talk listed which was not actually delivered at the conference was that by Dr Andrew Kitchener, who was unfortunately taken ill on the weekend. All the talks, including that of Dr Kitchener, have been turned into papers for this volume with the exception of two – those by Clive Bonsall (see Bonsall et al. 2002a & 2002b; Parker et al. 2002) and Dr Tony Pollard (see Pollard 2000). In the publication the papers are presented in a different sequence to that in which the talks were given at the conference, and an introductory chapter has been added to provide background for the papers which follow. Talks as presented during the conference were of necessity quite brief, and in the written versions all have been expanded, some very considerably and sometimes with a recast emphasis and with additional collaborators.

For me, while the conference itself was a hugely enjoyable, adrenaline-fuelled occasion, the editing process to produce this volume has been an experience of an altogether different nature! What seemed such a straightforward, simple undertaking in the abstract, became in the reality a struggle to fulfill in competition with other unforeseen commitments and complications. To those contributors who were exemplary in the rapidity and quality of presentation of their submissions (and re-submissions), I apologize for the lapse of time involved. In fact all contributors were given the option of updating their papers in 2003 and much new material and many new references have been added. Patrick Ashmore in particular has very helpfully updated the listing and analysis of radiocarbon dates in his contributions. No publication can be entirely up-to-the-moment of course, and the recent exciting discoveries of Mesolithic ‘houses’ at East Barns, Dunbar, East Lothian, and Howick, Northumberland (Denison 2003; Goeder 2003; Waddington 2003), are a reminder that the database is ever-growing and changing in character. Nevertheless, I believe this volume represents a very significant collection of papers which together form a coherent compendium of information on the Mesolithic period in Scotland, the rest of the UK, and well beyond.

This volume is respectfully dedicated to John Coles, in recognition of his many contributions to Scottish archaeology, but in particular his work at, and publication of, the site at Morton in Fife, which kick-started the modern era of Mesolithic studies in Scotland (Coles 1971).

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Marchmont, Edinburgh
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References


Hardy, K. and Wickham-Jones, C.R. 2003. Scotland’s First Settlers: an investigation into settlement, territoriality and mobility during the Mesolithic in the Inner Sound, Scotland, first results. In L Larsson et al. (eds), Mesolithic on the Move: Papers Presented at the Sixth International

Note on the presentation of radiocarbon determinations

It will be seen that, following current convention for Palaeolithic/Mesolithic archaeology, and for Quaternary studies in general, most of the contributors to this volume use ‘dates’ in the form of radiocarbon (¹⁴C) years BP (before present = before AD 1950). Radiocarbon determinations are often cited in the text in abbreviated form using the uncalibrated centrum (prefaced by ‘c.’ for circa) to indicate this is both an abstraction and a ‘shorthand’ for an age range which may extend for several centuries either side of that figure. The inherent problems of using radiocarbon years are described by Ashmore (this volume, Chapter 6), and calibration into calendar years of all the Scottish determinations is very helpfully provided by him (Chapter 7). It is important that readers appreciate the significance and limitations of the BP convention, but at the moment there is no generally accepted alternative to this form of chronological presentation.

Where the laboratory numbers of determinations are included, they use the conventional abbreviations to identify laboratories (e.g. OxA = Oxford Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit, Research Laboratory for Archaeology and the History of Art, Oxford University).

Note on places

In most cases site names and locations have been reproduced in the form in which individual contributors submitted them, with or without more specific geographic indicators, though where necessary the references cited should provide clarification. For Scotland the position is complicated by the move in 1975 from Counties to Regions and Districts, which were in turn replaced in 1996 by the current Council Areas. Where practical the current Council Area designations have been used, but some older, in many ways more informative locators - such as Wester Ross - have been retained. In the text the name of the Inner Hebridean island of Rùm is standardized thus, following the current Gaelicized usage of the Ordnance Survey, rather than the Anglicized version of ‘Rhum’, which was in general use during the 1980s-90s when the Mesolithic site at Kinloch on Rùm was excavated, published, and publicized.