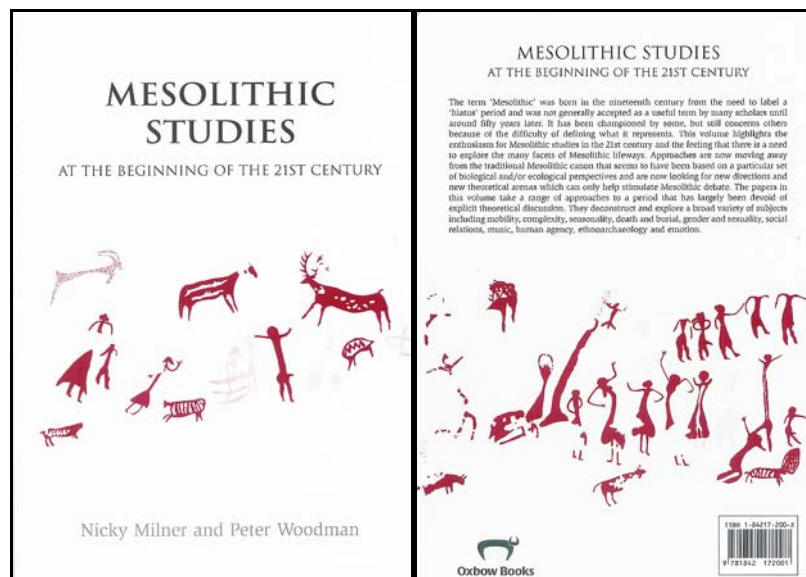


Milner, N. & P. Woodman. 2005. *Mesolithic Studies at the Beginning of the 21st Century*. – Oxford, Oxbow Books

Book review by P. Crombé



Compared to the Palaeolithic and the Neolithic the Mesolithic has only lately, *i.e.* in the 1920s and 1930s, been accepted as an equally important research area within European prehistory. Since then Mesolithic research has mainly been focussing on fairly simple interpretative frameworks by means of a mainly processual approach emphasising the role/impact of the palaeo–environment on hunter–gatherer life way. Post–processual thinking and theoretical discussions still have very limited impact on Mesolithic research in Europe. However, during the last two meetings of ‘The Mesolithic in Europe’ congress in Stockholm (2000) and Belfast (2005) the number of papers dealing with more theoretical approaches of traditional Mesolithic topics, such as mobility, seasonality, complexity, etc. increased markedly. The present publication ‘Mesolithic Studies at the Beginning of the 21st Century’, edited by Nicky Milner and Peter Woodman, is another prove of this new direction in Mesolithic research.

The volume brings together a total of 14 papers that “aim to contribute to both the deconstruction of Mesolithic canons and present new ways of thinking, new approaches and new ideas to Mesolithic studies” (pp. 7–8). At least three papers are dealing with the subject of mobility. Both Caroline Wickham–Jones and Chantal Conneller criticise and challenge the traditional interpretation of hunter–gatherer mobility as defined mainly on ethnographic data and models (*e.g.* by Binford). Especially they address the concept of the ‘seasonal round’ and ‘site types’ by claiming that both have been studied so far in a rather static way. Using data from the bloodstone project in Scotland Caroline Wickham–Jones claims that lithic raw materials in particular offer potential for identification of movement and human contact. This claim however is not original as raw material analysis is part of Mesolithic research already a long time. More original is her statement to use local rather than ‘exotic’ ethnographic data for the construction of prehistoric mobility patterns. She refers to ‘the travelling people of Scotland’ which seem to hold a wealth of interesting information, which she unfortunately does not present in her paper. The reconstruction of mobility by means of detailed and integrated settlement analysis is demonstrated by Chantal Conneller. Rather than working with oversimplified ethnographic or ethno–archaeological models she proposes a landscape–based approach on an intra– and inter–site level. Instead of focusing upon individual ‘sites’ and lithic concentrations, many of which represent palimpsests of activities that took place in different temporal scales, settlement analysis should examine chains of actions and relations between them mainly by means of extensive refitting in order to reconstruct the movement of people in the landscape. This approach is demonstrated by her work on a series of well preserved find–spots in the Vale of Pickering; by tracing manufacturing sequences on different locations combined with raw material analysis she is able to trace patterns of technological and procurement change. Although the potential of systematic refitting in the reconstruction of settlement dynamics has already been recognized a long time ago (especially in Palaeolithic research), it has surprisingly only seldom been applied on Mesolithic sites. The same holds for microwear analysis and systematic ¹⁴C–dating, two other research tools which in my opinion can contribute to a better understanding of the formation process of lithic scatters.

Nick Milner also partly addresses the problem of 'seasonal rounds' as defined on the basis of seasonality studies of faunal remains. First she states that the reconstruction of seasonal rounds or settlement systems and movement is difficult as faunal assemblages (just like lithic scatters) usually represent palimpsests of long term activities; in most studies these assemblages are conflated into a hypothetical year. A second criticism is that the concept of seasonal rounds is too largely dominated by economic approaches and is at times environmentally deterministic. She rightly reminds us that other factors such as social and ritual ones may have determined Mesolithic food consumption. By contextualising the data and looking for patterns or changes in different contexts within a site she claims to be able to encompass these problems. To demonstrate this approach she compares the seasonal signatures from oysters found in different levels of the Danish shell midden of Norsminde. This leads to the observation of a clear shift in the exploitation of oysters from the Mesolithic to the Neolithic, a shift from a predominant gathering in spring to one in summer. Although she claims that this pattern is not only related to economic or environmental events, in our opinion it still remains to be proven that social or ritual motives have played a significant role.

A number of papers are directly or indirectly dealing with the Meso/Neo transition. Manuel Gonzalez Morales and Miguel Fano Martinez state that in Portugal this transitional period is tackled in the last few years from more than just a processual perspective. Interesting are the differences in view between the authors and P. Arias; the former advocating the introduction of new external groups, while the latter proposes a scenario of gradual acculturation of local hunter-gatherers. The latter topic, also known as the frontier model, is also addressed by Dušan Borić. After deconstructing this model, which according to him is too much based on a 'static equilibrium' and a too great dichotomizing (e.g. forager/farmer dichotomy), he presents a rather detailed account on the data from the Danube Gorges in terms of the transition towards the Neolithic. Of particular interest in the discussion are the stable isotope data from burials found in roughly contemporaneous houses 21 and 24 at Lepenski Vir. Borić mentions certain factual problems in previous studies which brings under review the theory of a sharp subsistence dichotomy between the Mesolithic and Neolithic realms. In his opinion the stable isotope data point to a more complex picture and less sharply defined boundaries, but rather fuzzy horizons of change. The frontier or substitution-availability model is also heavily criticised in the paper of Kathryn Fewster. Based on her ethno-archaeological research in Botswana she discusses the transition to agriculture in south-eastern Spain. The ethno-archaeological data from the Basarwa and Bamangwato tribes, the former being hunter-gatherers, the latter agro-pastoralists, is used to test the frontier model and to construct alternative models or explanations for the transition from the Mesolithic to the Neolithic in Spain. Of particular interest in this discussion is the fact that the hunter-gatherers of the Basarwa tribe did not adopt agro-pastoralism despite the fact that they had intimate knowledge of, and exposure to, agro-pastoral practise as they were engaged to herd the cattle of the Bamangwato and to work in the fields owned by the Bamangwato in exchange for milk and occasionally meat. Also interesting is the fact that the Basarwa produced a number of wooden items used in agricultural processing, such as grain pounding mortars and pestles, however which they did not use themselves but sold to the Bamangwato. Applying these data to the Spanish prehistory, characterised by the occurrence of mountain, river basin and coastal sites, interesting possibilities for alternative explanations are offered. One should however ask whether the Botswana situation is not too unique to be used in a generalised way in the neolithisation debate of Europe.

In his paper Peter Woodman rightly states that Mesolithic research too much focuses on well-made artefacts, in particular microliths, whereas artefacts outside the accepted norm (usually termed as abnormal or odd) which are often made in non-flint are usually ignored or seen as a threat to the self-evident truths. Rather they should be seen as a way of expanding our views of the past. As Woodman suggests some of these 'strange' implements made in non-flint might be made and/or distributed not solely for functional but maybe also for social or symbolic reasons.

Sex and gender are addressed in two papers. Farina Sternke presents the results of a technological analysis of a Danish Ertebølle assemblage from the shell midden of Sparregård to deconstruct the stereotypical and gender-exclusive notion 'man the flintknapper'. The analysis of cores and flake axes indicates the presence of one or two highly skilled flintknappers as well as some 'opportunistic' knappers and trainees. The production of flakes by means of direct percussion with a hard hammer from multiple striking platforms on discarded blade cores is linked to less skilled groups of knappers. Furthermore this secondary flake-production is labelled by Sternke as "an expedient lithic household production", serving *ad hoc* daily activities and favouring a potentially female dominated task. In our opinion the observed patterns of lithic technology can be interpreted in other ways; for example it needs to be demonstrated further whether the flake-production is really the work of other group members than those who knapped the blades. In other words the different knapping techniques applied on the same cores might as well reflect functional choices made by one and a same knapper rather than by two different knappers, a highly skilled one and a trainee. As a matter of fact the need for simple expedient flakes with usable cutting edges does not demand a sophisticated knapping technology at all. Furthermore in our opinion Sternke's social interpretation of the lithics needs to be tested against the results of other analyses, e.g.

micro wear analysis. Laura Pugsley on the other hand focuses on the Mesolithic burials of Skateholm and Oleneostrovski Mogilnik in order to investigate sex, gender and sexuality using interpretative archaeology, multi-vocality and reinterpretation. She suggests Mesolithic researchers should focus their inquiry not on the ideas of difference and category or individuals but rather concentrate on patterns and group diversity. Cemeteries are also the focus of Liliana Janik's paper, in particular the cemetery of Zvejnieki. Looking at differences between age/sex categories and fluctuations in these differences over time of particular grave goods, *i.e.* bone pendants and fishing/hunting tools, she tries to reconstruct social interaction. The results seem to indicate that pendants, which are usually interpreted as hunting trophies given by males to other group members, probably had another symbolic meaning related to other cultural values. Also temporal differences in the number of graves with bone pendants might point to a certain dynamic in the process of negotiations between individuals and their culture. Most important is the lack of evidence of male dominance or any female/male dichotomy, reinforcing the idea that all members of the community were involved in social interaction and decision-making. Also the analysis of tools in the graves of Zvejnieki point in the same direction. Tools related to fishing and hunting occur both in adult and non-adult graves, and in female and male graves; according to Janik this might suggest that these tools were buried in graves for a reason other than that they indicated that the person they were buried with had been engaged in the activities such tools would have been used for. No age or sex category seems to be excluded. Through this approach she claims to have deconstructed the existing models in which men have most influence over community life by means of hunting.

Burials are also used as a proxy for past emotions, as in the case of the Ofnet grave analysed by Daniela Hofmann. Hofmann states that the two main but conflicting interpretations of this remarkable context (the massacre versus the reverential burial theory) are too strongly dictated by the emotions of the researchers to be fully understood. She calls for the need to contextualise Ofnet in order to gain insights into other aspects of Mesolithic life such as personhood and ideas about death and prestige. Unfortunately this will be possible not until a whole series of problems related to Mesolithic research in Bavaria, such as sporadic excavations, old badly conducted and reported excavations, etc., will have been solved.

Mesolithic music is a last topic discussed in this volume. In his paper Iain Morley gives a detailed and critical overview of the artefactual evidence (flutes, phalangeal whistles and bullroarers) of musical behaviour in the Mesolithic, which is much less numerous compared to the Late Palaeolithic. As possible explanation for this reduction Morley mentions differential preservation conditions which might be caused by a shift in the settlement locations from caves in the Palaeolithic towards open-air locations in the Holocene. Rock-art, especially Levantine rock paintings in Spain, is another indirect source of information. Despite the absence of detailed illustrations of music instruments, except perhaps the representation of castanets or clappers, rock-art contains a wealth of information about predominately female dance scenes, which might be related to hunting and specific rites.

In conclusion in this volume many traditional Mesolithic 'canons' based on environmental and/or ecological arguments are deconstructed mostly in a (sometimes too) radical way and replaced by new ideas in which the social dimension of cultural remains is emphasised. The main merit of this publication is that it stimulates the reader to view the Mesolithic from (a) different angle(s) and to open his/her mind. However one should be careful not to become overoptimistic or to fall into the same 'mistakes' as processual archaeology. A lot of interpretations presented in this volume are still very much theoretical and need to be further explored and tested against the archaeological and ethnographic data. Furthermore in some contributions the emphasis on social action/interaction is so strong that other factors such as environment and subsistence are not taken into account any more. Replacing environmental determinism by 'social determinism' may not be the aim. In our opinion the best way to extract the maximum amount of information on Mesolithic behaviour is by combining both processual and post-processual thinking. This will be the real challenge of Mesolithic research in the beginning of the 21st century.

Finally we somewhat regret the absence of contributions by 'continental' scholars. Indeed all contributors invited to write in this volume, except for Manuel Gonzalez Morales and Miguel Fano Martinez, are connected to a British or Irish institution. This might give the wrong impression that theoretical thinking and interpretative archaeology is restricted to the Anglo-Saxon academic world, whereas on the continent there are numerous studies which perfectly fit within the concept of this book.

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