

North East Yorkshire Mesolithic Project summary: Phase 3

Introduction

The general aim of this project is to reassess the Mesolithic archaeology of north east Yorkshire, within an area focussed on the upland landscape of the North York Moors and the adjacent Tees valley lowlands. The project is being carried out by Tees Archaeology in partnership with the North Yorks Moors National Park Authority in a phased programme. Phase 1 was a desk-based assessment of the mesolithic resource and was completed in 2006. Phase 2 comprised a programme of evaluations that ran from March 2008 to January 2012. The third phase will comprise a more detailed examination of the methodologies available and the production of a series of documents and publications.

Background

Mesolithic activity is generally under-represented in the archaeological record for northern England when compared to later periods (Adams 1996) and the area of north east Yorkshire is no exception, despite there being a concentration of sites on the North York Moors in particular. Previous archaeological work in the area had focussed on surface collection of lithics and is summarised by Manby (2003). A number of these sites are prolific in their lithic assemblages (summarised in Spratt 1993), but they are predominantly situated on the central watershed of the moors and many of the peripheral areas have scant evidence for Mesolithic occupation.

Furthermore, the range of evidence is very restricted and comes principally from surface collections; few sites have undergone systematic excavation, particularly in recent years (e.g. Waughman 1996). Although palaeoenvironmental research in the area is well established (Simmons 1996), there has been very little sampling of archaeological sites, and hence there is no direct link between the environmental evidence and the lithics.

The project was initiated to address the significant gaps in our understanding of the nature of Mesolithic occupation in north east Yorkshire in order to develop a better and more complete understanding which would also contribute to the changing picture of the Mesolithic nationally.

Phase 1

The initial phase of the project collated the existing data, including previously unpublished or unrecorded material, palaeoenvironmental evidence and lithic assemblages in the hands of private collectors. A database was compiled and sites were graded according to their potential. Following assessment of the resource, six types of location were identified for Mesolithic sites. These location types were then targeted in Phase 2. in the project area, but it was clear that further work was needed with targeted fieldwork to clarify both the type of

occupation found in different locations, the relationship between different types of location and the overall chronology.

Phase 2

Phase 2 was designed to explore the six location types with targeted fieldwork in order to characterise the different types of activity at each location, the chronology of occupation at each and to provide information for future management strategies. The six location types are:-

Zone 1 – Low lying areas in the Tees Valley

Zone 2 – Lowland activity in prominent locations

Zone 3 – The lower-lying northern and eastern fringes of the present moorland block

Zone 4 – Upland activity in prominent locations

Zone 5 – The upper reaches of streams in high moorland

Zone 6 – Highland springhead basins

Evaluations were carried out in Zones 2, 4 and 6 combining a programme of shovel and trial pitting with palaeo-environmental sampling. This work had an extensive outreach element with enthusiastic volunteer participation in the evaluations and in carrying out erosion monitoring in Zone 5 locations.

In addition information worksheets about lithics were developed and provided to museums in the region to enable them to understand their collections better.

Phase 3

Phase 3 will draw together the lessons learnt from the evaluations and test the full suite of methodologies available on a Zone 2 site which was only partially investigated previously due to poor weather. The ability of Geophysical Survey to contribute to our picture of Mesolithic activity will be tested along with fieldwalking, shovel pitting and trial pitting.

This work will also be carried out with volunteer involvement and other activity will include a management brief looking at improving the management of Mesolithic sites on the moors, a popular booklet on the Mesolithic in the area and the production of an article for publication in a regional or national journal.

It is expected to complete the project in September 2013.

Bibliography

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