MOMENTS IN MESOLITHIC TIMES

Synopsis of a lecture given to the Society in October 2002
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The Mesolithic in Scotland is one of the most challenging periods to study. In this short contribution, I hope to give a flavour of some of the conceptual tools that archaeologists are using to inform our understanding of the period from *c.* 9000-5000 years ago and consider some insights from recent research in the West of Scotland. The Oban area has been always been a hot spot for Mesolithic studies. The recovery of bone and antler implements and shell midden deposits in caves and rockshelters by Joseph Anderson and his contemporaries established the 'obanian' as a cultural complex. Much subsequent work has sought to understand and contextualise the meaning of these deposits, notably by Clive Bonsall and colleagues (Bonsall 1997; Macklin *et al* 2000). Other research on the west coast is currently expanding our understanding such as *Scotlands First Settlers*; a research project directed by Karen Hardy and Caroline Wickham-Jones that has focused on the seacape of the Inner Sound (Hardy & Wickham-Jones 2000; 2002). Likewise the publication of the *Southern Hebrides Mesolithic Project* (SHMP) based on Islay and Colonsay has enhanced our knowledge of island exploitation and challenged some of our preconceptions about the nature of occupation (Mithen 2000).

Studying the mesolithic period necessitates an interpretative leap as the absence of monuments and the very ephemeral evidence makes the identification of sites extremely difficult. The peat and pasture landscape, low population densities (both during the period and in terms of modern fieldworkers) has conspired to make the recovery of sites difficult. While the mobile and transitory movements following seasonal resources leave little in the way of archaeological signatures. Indeed, one could argue that the landscape is the site for gatherer-hunters. More often than not, locales are recognised by the presence of lithic artefacts: namely the diagnostic microliths and small blade cores. These pygmy flints as the Antiquarians term them are a leitmotiv of the period and once served as multiple components in composite tools. The general lack of structural remains beyond simple configurations of stake- and post-holes and hearths coupled with the often repeated use of the same places over millennia means that it is often difficult to appreciate the people behind the actions that result in the archaeological record. In my research I attempt to look at the more intimate social and symbolic actions of these gatherer-hunters by exploring some of the dominant themes and motifs that characterise their life-ways. There are a numbers of ways that we can appreciate the textures of life during the early post-glacial period. Inspiration comes from a number of sources including the landscape art of Chris Drury (Drury & Syrad 1998; www.chrisdrury.co.uk). Installations such as his hazel and dogwood circular

'shelter for dreaming' and large spheres wrought from sticks and leaves challenge the conceptual divisions between nature and culture that are such a dominant construct in our contemporary society. A common element in most modern gatherer-hunter societies is the seamless way people are connected to their environment and their intimate relations between animals, plants and other resources. We can see this in the manner people inhabit and animate their world. Structures such as the inuksuit of the Arctic are cairns that are material markers of this process. Stone structures built to populate vast, empty spaces, to point out the best routes, the most productive fishing pools. Others frame vistas and serve as portals to other worlds (Hallendy 2000). Unusual landscape features, outcrops and other elements are given meaning through naming and knowledge inculcated in place via memory and the mnemonics of remembrance. As we look around the landscape today we see places that continue to engage such mystery; for example, the Sguirr of Eigg and the Corryvreckan whirlpool. The environment should not be viewed solely as an exploitable surface or larder but as a series of e-scapes (land-, sea-, task-scapes). Similarly, animals are not simply sources of meat, bone and hide. The boundaries between animals and people are not strictly drawn but fluid. In the mesolithic we can see some of these transformative relations in the antler frontlets worn as a head-dress found at the site of Star Carr, Yorkshire and dating to *c.* 10,000 cal. BC or equally, in the antler points, such as that recovered from Drumvargie rockshelter. Artefacts that transform the essence of animals into other material forms. The restricted distribution of distinctive lithic materials in the region also lends itself to the identification of particular resources with certain places, as with Arran pitchstone or bloodstone from Rum. The very properties of the stone may hold meanings: rock crystal as solid ice, agates that capture sunsets. With more imagination we can perhaps discern the associations and elucidate the significance and character of this engagement with the world.

At another level insights can be found from exploring the routines of the daily life. We can focus on moments in mesolithic time. At Coulererach beside Loch Gorm, Islay a lithic assemblage (dating to 6530-6210 cal BC) points to the presence of inexperienced flint-knappers learning how to produce stone tools. A comparison with modern-day knappers reveals the same types of mistakes and patterns of errors as the complex interplay between stone and self is realised. In all likelihood these novice mesolithic knappers are children learning essential skills and practising on flint pebbles gathered from the nearby beach (Mithen & Finlay 2000a). At another site excavated by the SHMP, Staosnaig on Colonsay, we can discern something of the biography of places and activities. Here excavations in 1994 revealed the remains of a large circular hut (ca. 5m dia.) and associated pits that had been reused as a dump deposit for the debris from stone-tool production and quantities of charcoal and charred hazelnut shells. Microscopic analysis of this carbonised material also revealed evidence for the exploitation of Lesser Celandine, crab apple and other plant species (Mithen &