

CONFERENCE REVIEWS

Neolithic Studies Group Meeting: Contemporary Research on the Mesolithic-Neolithic Transition in Britain, British Museum, 11th November 1996

Sarah Mason

Institute of Archaeology, UCL

Waiting outside the BM lecture theatre before the start of the latest NSG meeting, someone commented that, although they would probably stay for the whole meeting, the afternoon was likely to be boring, as it was 'all science'. I might not have taken so much notice if the day's events had not been explicitly billed as 'a meeting exploring an inter-disciplinary approach to the prehistory of the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition in Britain', and if the speaker had not been a current undergraduate of our own hallowed Institute, where inter-disciplinary archaeology has long been lauded. This pessimistic beginning to the day was, however, was not entirely the ill omen that it might have been, and the meeting that followed demonstrated that enlightened opinion is at least beginning to raise its head in many quarters.

The biggest problem I had writing this review, and this is undoubtedly symptomatic of the problem the meeting hoped to address, was the need to refer to people by their own or others' definitions of what they were - archaeologist or molecular biologist, for example. Interestingly, none of the people whom we would all automatically label as 'archaeologist' felt it necessary to label themselves, while nearly all of those who evidently felt they were something else, did so. In the following text, therefore, I have inserted all such words (and a few others) between asterisks. The reason for this will, I hope, be clear by the time you reach the end.

The meeting was organised jointly by an *archaeologist* (Martin Evison) and a *geneticist* (Martin Richards), and though it was undoubtedly a valiant attempt to begin to close some of the yawning voids that have grown in recent years between *scientific* and *theoretical* archaeologists, and between *processual* and *post-processual* archaeologies, at the end the jury was still out on the question of whether this will be possible, or is even desirable.

The conference was split into two sessions - the morning confined to *archaeologists* whose aims were to assess 'the nature of changes occurring during the... transition', and the afternoon which included contributions from *archaeologists*, *geneticists* and *molecular biologists* and was to address the extent to which 'inter-disciplinary studies [can] contribute to answering the kinds of questions raised in this morning's session... [and to which] specialised research [can] be incorporated into interpretations of social processes in prehistory' as well as the extent to which there is 'a need for an inter-disciplinary prehistory'.

Unfortunately, as was apologetically explained to us - due partly to reasons surrounding the way in which the conference programme grew as interest in the

genetic and molecular biological approaches to the spread of the Neolithic attracted more and more papers - much of the second session did not address the topic of the transition in Britain at all. Six of the nine afternoon papers (including that of Luca Cavalli-Sforza, who happened to be passing through and was therefore allowed to respond to some of the criticisms which were being levelled at his recent book) were more-or-less exclusively confined to the spread of the Neolithic through mainland Europe. This, together with the fact that - as seems to be a common problem with meetings held at the BM - the whole afternoon session was very rushed, with no time for any discussion, meant that the conference did not really have a chance to begin to achieve its aims. Several of the speakers discussing the European Neolithic spread have published very similar work previously, including Marek Zvelebil (Sheffield - *Agricultural frontiers forager-farmer contacts and the adoption of farming: genetic and linguistic implications* - see e.g. Zvelebil 1996), Mark Pluciennik (Lampeter - *Genetics, prehistory and the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition: problems of resolution and meaning* - see Pluciennik 1996) and Cavalli-Sforza (see Cavalli-Sforza *et al.* 1994), who expounded on his previous work, especially regarding his map of 'principal component number one', with which we were all very familiar with by the end of the day. Being ignorant of this area, I'm not sure to what extent any really new ideas were presented, as opposed to reiterations of the arguments on both sides of this most recent variant of the long-running debate between advocates of the 'colonist' and 'indigenous' models of the Neolithic spread. Though some of the heat seems to be going out of the argument (perhaps because the indigenists feel they are currently winning?), Colin Renfrew, had he been present, might have felt a little warm around the seat, as Cavalli-Sforza evidently did, with a rather too defensive rubbishing of practically all the data presented by Martin Richards (*Neolithic ripples in the European mitochondrial gene pool*).

Apart from Richards, two other speakers dealt directly with DNA data - Terry Brown (UMIST) on *The lost tribes of Triticum: using ancient DNA to study prehistoric wheats*, and Jill Bailey (Oxford) on *Tracing Holocene cattle population movements using DNA*. Brown, who admitted to being a *molecular biologist* also confessed to having more interest in the evolution of plants (albeit mediated by people) than of human society. Instead of arguing that this was an equally valid interpretation of what archaeology is about, Brown's disavowal of any intention to 'impose any naive interpretations on the data' (because he worked with *archaeologists* who were all too ready to impose their own interpretations), epitomizes at least one of the problems with achieving any kind of inter- (or even multi-) disciplinary. Perhaps, though, true integration is just a matter of time - Brown's paper, together with others presented by *archaeological scientists* on the day, was at least free of the pictures of laboratory benches with fancy-looking equipment that have dogged presentations of this nature in the past, which can only be a step in the right direction. Slides with text and diagrams on a dark blue background, which always make me feel a bit uneasy, did make an appearance in some talks, though. What was most unfortunate about all the papers dealing with molecular biology and in particular DNA, was - at least according to the sceptics I was sitting with - the failure to acknowledge the serious methodological problems

which have yet to be resolved within the core disciplines, begging the question of whether data which may have an extremely insecure footing should really be let loose within archaeology.

But maybe the insecure nature of the data doesn't actually matter that much: Jim Mallory (Belfast - *Language and genetics*), in part echoing Brown's sentiments, admitted that, as an *archaeologist*, he was nothing if not a 'consummate bullshitter' and was used to making up stories based on the absolute minimum of data. Interestingly, it was Mallory and those falling into the *archaeologist*s' (rather than *archaeological scientist*s') camp who were most sceptical of the validity of the genetic data, though this maybe in part reflects an all too common tendency among those with a *scientific* background to lose all critical reasoning when it comes to applying their techniques to archaeological data. Or (as my sceptical friends would say), there is such big money to be had in the application of anything as trendy as DNA studies within archaeology, that proponents of such studies are perhaps unable to admit the potential drawbacks even to themselves ...

Well, now I've had a go at the *scientists* it's time to look at the *archaeologists*. So first some questions - why do some archaeologists think that a) 'organic remains' are not preserved in acid soils?, or b) archaeology is only archaeology if it includes the word 'social' somewhere? This latter attitude is becoming so pervasive that even those who should know better - and I'm referring to the world outside the conference here - feel that if they throw in the word it must demonstrate that they're doing 'real' archaeology.

But I digress. It appears - and is probably a promising sign - that the view of the Mesolithic which is being propounded by those whose study focuses on the Neolithic is getting closer to that of those who work principally on the Mesolithic (a convergence of views perhaps exemplified by the fact that several of the speakers at this meeting usually fall among the latter group). Thus Ian Kinnes (British Museum - *La Vache Folle, a cerealisation*), Julian Thomas (Southampton - *What kind of transition?*), and Louwe Kooijmans (Leiden - *The Mesolithic/Neolithic transition at the other end of the Chunnel*) all commented on the extent of continuity to be found from Mesolithic to Neolithic. They did tend, however, to view this with perhaps a more critical eye than is found among some Mesolithicists - after all they need to defend the uniqueness of their area of study, while many of the latter seem still to be in the process of trying to bring the Mesolithic in from the cold. Paul Mellars (Cambridge - *Mesolithic forest burning strategies and the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition in Britain*), who 20 years ago was one of those trying to hot up the period with his paper on Mesolithic fire ecology (Mellars 1976), presented again what was substantively the same paper. He did, it has to be said, admit this, reasoning that it was worth bringing up the subject again because he felt that processual and ecological approaches had got lost during the intervening years of post-processual debate on meaning. Mellars seemed somewhat uneasy during his talk, giving the impression that he was in alien territory, which prompts the question of why post-processualism has been big in the Neolithic, but has made little impact on Mesolithic studies. I think Richard Bradley once suggested this had something to

do with hazelnuts, and he may be right - but I digress again. The most dissenting voice of the morning, at least in terms of views of the nature of the transition, was perhaps that of Jane Murray (Edinburgh - *Peau noir, masque blanc: self-image in the Mesolithic-Neolithic Transition*), who suggested that there was little evidence from Scotland to support the evolutionary, pre-adaptationist model of increasing intensification in the Late Mesolithic, which seems to be the most favoured current paradigm - and then, by some sleight of hand (Karl Marx seemed to be involved) slipped in a re-awakening presence for Mesolithic peoples adapting the Neolithic package to their own needs after a phase of deconstruction, in a manner she felt (but did not explain how) to be analogous with a punctuated equilibrium model.

Lest this, and the lack of discussion at the meeting, suggest that there was rather a lot of agreement among speakers, have no fear - there was plenty of academic infighting going on (and not all of it regarding the genetic evidence), much of which undoubtedly passed over my head. It was impossible to miss, though, Ian Kinnes' asides on those fond of building 'castles-in-the-air' or taking refuge in arguments derived from Gallic and German philosophers, largely because of the combined sharp intakes of breath (or were some of them sniggers?) among the audience.

Martin Evison (Sheffield - *Anyone for transition?*) performed a high-speed summing up, questioning his own sense in organizing a meeting on a transition which at times seemed no longer to exist; and pointing both to the continued paucity of good data as a major drawback, and to some of the possible difficulties facing an inter-disciplinary approach - especially the possibility that the limitations of each discipline might impose more constraints overall than opportunities. He did, however, suggest there was hope for a way forward by repeating Ian Kinnes' pleas for 'debate rather than competitive assertion', and a critical approach to everything. His suggestion of inter-disciplinary refereeing of papers was a novel idea that I think might go a long way to achieving some of the hoped-for aims. As Evison's remarks suggest though, there still remains, even in the thoughts of an organizer of the meeting, some confusion as to what constitutes an inter-disciplinary, as opposed to multi-disciplinary, approach.

That an inter-disciplinary (or at least multi-disciplinary) prehistory is necessarily a good thing seemed to be accepted by most speakers. What the feelings of the attendees as a whole was regarding these matters is hard to judge, given the lack of discussion - but in one brief floor interchange it was clear that not all was consensus - Kinnes' suggested 'critical' approach being described as deeply pessimistic or realistic depending on viewpoint. Mark Pluciennik, however, who was certainly among those who had grasped the difference, suggested that, although *biologists* and *archaeologists* do not understand each others' methods and interpretations, maybe they don't really need to, given that they are interested in fundamentally different questions, and, as he said, *'vive la difference'*. This reviewer certainly came away with the feeling that, while it is perhaps increasingly possible to describe the current approach to questions about this particular part of the past (as to many others) as multi-disciplinary, many of the arguments of each discipline are so embedded in their own language and epistemologies as to be virtually

incomprehensible on their own terms to those not familiar with them, and the hoped-for 'inter-disciplinary prehistory' seems a long way off. If, however, it is worth striving for, it will be necessary first of all to clarify in many minds the difference between multi- and inter-disciplinarity, to do away with the (often self-) perceived dichotomy between *archaeologists* and *scientists* (as strong in the minds of the latter as the former on the evidence of this meeting), to encourage both *scientists* and *archaeologists* to 'engage' (I think that's the right term) with both archaeological data and theory, and - most importantly - to adopt the call, advocated by several of the speakers, for critical approaches to all kinds of data (and theory). And, of course, we've got to decide what word is to appear between the asterisks.

References

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