Sussex Archaeological Society Autumn Conference: Farming Hunters or Hunting Farmers, 15th October 1994

David Iguaz
Institute of Archaeology, UCL

This one-day conference attracted a large number of members of the Sussex Archaeological Society, far surpassing the remarkably few professional archaeologists present; a surprising fact considering the wide range of topics presented and the background of all the speakers. Considering the theme under discussion - the Mesolithic/Neolithic transition in Western Europe and the British Isles - it is all the more astonishing that a larger professional presence was not noticeable. It has to be said, however, that the main objective of this gathering was not to reach out to the academic archaeological community, but to disseminate research on the topic to the Society members who did attend en masse. Ultimately, I have to ascribe the lack of professional archaeologists at the conference to the fact that they could not face attending a conference in Sussex at 9.15am on a cold autumn Saturday morning; a reasonable excuse, I guess. Nevertheless, the auditorium was packed to maximum capacity, showing that this particular topic still moves peoples’ hearts, and is as innovative as it was a decade ago.

An incredible diversity was displayed by the speakers, drawing examples from all corners of Europe and beyond, and encompassing many disciplines to demonstrate the wide-ranging nature of archaeological study.

After a brief introduction by Barry Cunliffe the conference was started by Luis Oosterbeek from Portugal, who analysed the various processes that occurred in the Iberian peninsula during the Neolithic. To answer the question why, instead of how, it started, he postulated a mixture of resource exploitation, demographic growth, social differentiation, technological improvement and ideological regeneration for the neolithisation process. Also included was the all-important factor of individual initiative - something which in my opinion tends to be undervalued. He suggested it is important to analyse those concrete aspects which ‘remain essential’, and which only archaeology can attempt to resolve. Oosterbeek highlighted the importance of regional discontinuity in Iberia - a factor that differentiates it from other regions in Europe and means that the theoretical paradigms applied to other parts of the continent should not be applied here.

Gabriel Cooney analysed the particular position of Ireland on the Neolithic map of Europe. Although considering that processes here form an integral part of those occurring in Britain and on the continent and that Ireland should be viewed in that context, Dr Cooney also suggested that Ireland, because of its particular geographical characteristics, developed a distinctive environment and therefore a different settlement history from that of the rest of Europe from early Mesolithic times. He saw Ireland sited at the end of the neolithisation chain, and therefore at the end of an agricultural expansionist process. Perhaps the adoption of a new subsistence strategy by gatherer-fishers was the reason for the emergence of agriculture in Ireland between 4600 and 4000 BC. Maybe we will never know.

Julian Thomas presented a highly structured paper in which he made us realise that people in Britain in the Mesolithic/Neolithic transition period were not the mere
recipients of ideas from continental Europe but were themselves part of a larger cultural process. I agree that such a process was lived through at a local scale, but it is clear where the ‘large scale cultural process’ came from, no matter what you want to call it.

Christopher Tilley tried to take a stance ‘outside’ of archaeology, from which position he made so much sense it seemed hard not to agree with him. He rightly described archaeologists as perpetually formulating solutions only to reassess them later on. He started by describing the studies on the Mesolithic as ‘ecological relationships with hazelnuts’ and continued with the Neolithic which he depicted in terms of ‘social relationships with each other’ [Editors’ Note: a reference to Richard Bradley’s The Social Foundations of Prehistoric Britain]. These are the prehistoric foundations of Britain.

He then broke away from the general European theme to outline the view the Australian aborigines have of their surrounding landscape. Every piece of landscape is ideologically linked to the past and can be explained in mythological terms. Similarly, he cited the case of the Western Apaches in North America, where features in the landscape are not just inanimate places from where game and food are extracted, but are imbued with meanings which create special relationships with the people around them. Tilley argued that understanding this aspect of human-environment relationships is crucial for understanding the European Mesolithic.

He continued by pointing out that site location was determined neither randomly nor primarily by economic reasons. He rightly dislikes the practice of boxing everything into social, political and economic terms and would prefer to see everything as a seamless web where everything interacts. Coming closer to home he discussed case studies from three regions: southwest Wales, the Black Mountain area of southeast Wales and Cranborne Chase in Dorset. Southwest Wales in particular was an area crowded with sites during the Mesolithic. Although there was a change in the relationship between land and the sea from the early to late Mesolithic due to a change in sea level, late Mesolithic sites are located in the same spots as are early Mesolithic, perhaps indicating a realisation of ancestral worship. In fact, some of the sites are situated almost equidistant to visible places in the landscape, such as outcropping rocks, peaks or the coast. During Neolithic times we have, according to Tilley, a sedimentation of belief systems going back to the Mesolithic. These systems, and the continuity of the relationship between people and land become visible for the first time in monumental form - in other words, the Neolithic is a symbolic crystallisation of the Mesolithic.

Tilley’s talk represented an intake of fresh air and an introduction of new ideas to the study of a transitional period where traditional thought requires much revision.

The last talk of the day was given by Peter Drewett and aptly dealt with the local situation during neolithisation in the Sussex area. Unfortunately, the data from this region are rather scant and little is known of the Mesolithic from the area. It is thought that organic material represented an important part of the Mesolithic assemblage and, in this area in particular, little of this has survived. The situation during the Neolithic is slightly better, but again is characterised by the absence of organic remains and the dominating presence of lithics and ceramics. The conclusions drawn were simply that the ‘arrival of Neolithic ideas’ in Sussex was neither a rapid process, nor one especially welcomed by the indigenous inhabitants.

In conclusion it has to be said that the constant reassessment of the Mesolithic/Neolithic transition referred to by Tilley was once again in evidence at the Sussex
conference, with only a slight degree of innovation being introduced. The conference did, however, serve its purpose, by incorporating most of the data that has been produced on the subject and interpreting it in new and different ways.