Human ecology and Neolithic transition in eastern County Donegal, Ireland: *The Lough Swilly Archaeological Survey*

By Michael Kimball.

86 pages, maps, line drawings and photographs
ISBN 1 84171 064 4 £25.00

Reviewed by Caroline Wickham-Jones

This recent publication from BAR really provides two books in one, as the author recognizes in his conclusions. The first is a detailed account of a field-walking project undertaken in 1995 in the Lough Swilly area of County Donegal, and the second is an essay on the introduction of agriculture to Ireland. Each provides an interesting read, however, neither, by itself, would have provided the material for a full volume. In addition, the reader is given a free compact disc: as there is no contents list for this in the printed volume it comes as something of a 'surprise gift'. However there is no contents list on disc, making the examination of the data rather time consuming.

The first section of the volume provides a detailed background to the field study area and the practical project. In addition to geographical information, the reader is given a clear account of the research methodology and of the archaeological hypotheses into which the research was set. The work behind this project has been meticulous, including a consideration of possible observational biases in the results. At this point it is interesting to note that no previous field collection of artefacts from the area, whether Mesolithic or more recent, is mentioned. Does the reader presume from this that the survey was working in "virgin territory"? A brief discussion of previous archaeological work (or the lack of it) in the area would have been worthwhile. Ireland has produced many field collections of note, and experience elsewhere suggests that field collection from the early twentieth century still has an important bearing on the visibility or otherwise of archaeological material.

Once into the detailed account of the survey, it is noteworthy that presentation of the results only took up six pages of text: this is not a criticism of the amount of presentation, it is rather a comment on the amount of data
recovered. Projects that comprise PhD work (as this did) must necessarily be limited, perhaps this is a benefit as it means that they actually get finished and (hopefully) published. In essence this volume presents the results of the recovery of seven hundred and fifty seven lithic artefacts, together with associated field data and as such it is a good example of how to make the most of your data. Individual field totals were frequently low, but the author has applied himself carefully to maximizing his data and retrieving useful results that will hopefully pave the way for further work, both in this area and elsewhere. It is a useful example of the ways in which information from lithic collection may be maximized.

The last five chapters present a discussion of settlement, economy, subsistence and the transition to agriculture in the study area, with detailed reference in the latter section to Ireland as a whole. This is a most interesting read, providing much food for thought and application elsewhere - both inside Ireland and outside. The results of the field project are integrated with those from similar field work in order to consider various models for the initiation of agriculture.

If any criticism were to be made this reviewer would merely point out that there is, as is general in archaeology, a lack of consideration for what is not there. As archaeologists we tend to assume that the records that we retrieve represent the available record as a whole, but we know that this is not so. It affects us in our fieldwork: negative "hits" can be as interesting as positive hits but they are rarely examined in detail; is a surface collection truly representative of the contents of the soil as a whole? No, but this is rarely discussed. It also affects us in our global discussions: the lack of inland mesolithic sites in Ireland is commented on here: is this a real gap in the record? In Scotland, a similar lack of inland mesolithic sites has long been perceived, though there are hints (such as Edwards work in the SW, Edwards et al 1983) that this is not so, and the recent excavation of an upland (and inland) site at Ben Lawers, dated to the eighth millennium BP (Atkinson pers. comm.) surely indicates that this is a gap waiting to be filled. Kimball perceives a lack of regional differentiation in the Irish Mesolithic, but is there really enough evidence to be sure about this?

With regard to the compact disc attached to the rear cover, surely the time has passed for this sort of attachment, whether on microfiche or CD. It is precisely this sort of data that should be held on-line and the provision of a permanent web address, together with a detailed contents list, would allow easy access. There are now several on-line journals, and for Britain, the Archaeology Data Service in York means that the provision of permanent
access to on-line data seems to be secure. Electronic media is something that publishers of traditional paper volumes such as this must surely take into account.

In conclusion, this is a stimulating read and a good buy. It shows that even where your results may not be, apparently, great, you can still do lots of interesting things when you look at them in context.

**Bibliography**


Caroline Wickham-Jones is available at: c.wickham-jones@dial.pipex.com

© C. Wickham-Jones 2001
© assemblage 2001