Plants in Neolithic Britain and beyond


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Reviewed by Helen Evans

Introduction

This edited monograph was produced as the result of a Neolithic Studies Group Seminar in 1998. It comprises fifteen papers covering a variety of approaches to plants in the Neolithic. The volume is a good companion to Topping's Neolithic Landscapes (1997), as both explore landscape occupation as a tool to characterise regional Neolithic landscapes, rather than rely on the presence of monuments. Alistair Whittle is the only author to appear in both volumes. Whittle provides an introduction to the volume, entitled Bringing Plants into the Taskscape. He draws together many of the themes explored by the subsequent chapters, outlining the problems and potentials of the broad range of issues under consideration.

Investigations of plant and insect remains usually remain separate from studies of monuments, lithic scatters and landscape studies. To bring these categories of evidence into the ‘taskscapes’ of the British Neolithic is to pursue a truly multi-disciplinary approach to landscape interpretation. It is slightly disappointing that only a few of the papers address the Mesolithic/Neolithic transition, most jumping straight into cows and crops, avoiding the difficult bit. The book splits into four thematic sections focusing on; insects, subsistence practices, landscape characterisation and ‘other ways’ of seeing plants in the Neolithic.

Insects

The first section deals with insect remains and the part these play in environmental reconstruction, with papers from Mark Robinson (Coleopteran evidence for the elm decline, Neolithic activity in woodland, clearance and the use of the landscape) and Clive Warsop (Plants by proxy: plant resources on a Neolithic crannog as indicated by insect remains). Both papers use insect remains surviving in waterlogged material as proxies for vegetational
material. Robinson's largely descriptive paper provides insights into the intensity of grazing / browsing in relation to the degree of tree cover at a series of excavated Neolithic sites. As many beetles feed on taxa normally only seen on pollen diagrams, Robinson's study illustrates the importance of paleoentomology in Neolithic environment reconstruction. Warsop's paper deals with waterlogged material from the Crannog at Eilean Domhnuill a Spionnaidh, North Uist. Although again largely descriptive, the paper illustrates just what nasty stuff was contained in these middens, which Warsop likens to those at Skara Brae.

**Subsistence**

The second section, of which there are six papers, deals with subsistence practice from varying standpoints. The first two of these concern the ever ongoing debate over the importance of wild versus domestic foods (or cereals versus hazelnuts) in the earlier Neolithic. Glynis Jones (*Evaluating the importance of cultivation and collecting in Neolithic Britain*) argues that taphonomic biases account for the relative lack of cereals in Neolithic Britain. In contrast Mark Robinson (*Further considerations of Neolithic charred cereals, fruit and nuts*) reiterates the views expressed in Moffett et.al. (1989), drawing from further research and arguing for the importance of wild food in Neolithic diets. However as Whittle points out in his introduction, the question of the relative balance between cereals and hazelnuts is not the same as that of the importance of plant foods in total versus animal products.

Michael Richards' paper (*Human consumption of plant foods in the British Neolithic: direct evidence from bone stable isotopes*) approaches the animal versus vegetable issue stressed by Whittle. His research on human bone stable isotopes emphasises regional diversity, again illustrating that there was not just one Neolithic in Britain, and you are what you eat. His research indicates that samples of human bone taken from some long barrows illustrate primarily animal based diets, whilst samples from others indicate largely plant based diets. Evidence from Hambledon Hill long barrow shows individuals in the barrow shared similar diets (a local tomb for local people) whilst burials from the ditches represent a variety of dietary habits. This is potentially a neat illustration of the 'mosaic' of early Neolithic subsistence regimes on both a national and regional scale.

Again emphasising a Neolithic archaeology of difference, Corrie Bakels (*The Neolithicization of the Netherlands: two ways, one result*) outlines the differences between LBK (Linearbandkeramik) settlement and agricultural practices as opposed to non-loess coastal sites which appear to have more in common with the British Neolithic. The paper has real potential, however it is
largely a discussion of environmental factors and topography, with little in the way of integration or interpretation.

Frances McLaren (Revising the wheat crops of Neolithic Britain) looks at the importance of new scientific techniques to assess the pattern and direction of the spread of cereal cultivation. She goes on to consider the implications of a damp climate on husbandry practices. This was a difficult paper to follow, I have to admit I understood better what she was saying after reading Fairbairn's paper (On the spread of plant crops across Neolithic Britain, with special reference to southern Britain). Using anthropological ideas of exchange and social relations in small scale societies, Fairbairn brings together the potential symbolic, functional, and practical aspects of the introduction cereal crops into Neolithic Britain. This paper is really a call for contextualisation in archaeobotany, highlighting the conceptual division between utility and symbolism as the product of a battle between processual and post-processual archaeologies.

Landscape
The 'landscape' section of the volume comprises a variety of different approaches to analysis and characterisation. Michael Allen (High resolution mapping of Neolithic and Bronze age chalkland landscapes and landuse: The combination of multiple paleo-environmental analyses and topographic modelling) investigates ways of looking at human interaction with physical ecology and land use development using environmental reconstruction maps in relation to landscape. His final interpretation traces ten steps of agricultural intensification from the Neolithic to post-Bronze Age. It is an odd approach, but potentially useful and highly illustrative, drawing heavily on the work of Smith (1984).

Anthony Brown (Floodplain vegetational history: clearings as potential ritual spaces) explores the possibilities of social and ritual aspects of economic and environmental data, highlighting the difficulties faced by palynologists in the interpretation of their data in non-subsistence terms. His case studies, floodplain island sites in the East Midlands, are very science oriented, and it is difficult to bring this way of writing together with the more theoretical material. On the basis of a lack of evidence for grazing or cultivation (or economic use) on some sites which have archaeological evidence, Brown considers that their principal use and importance may have been social and cultural rather than paleo-economic. Clearly these sites can not be taken to represent all clearings, but may fall into a special category of land use, especially given the putative importance of river confluences and marginality in prehistory. I liked
the thinking behind this paper, and it illustrates that an absence of paleo-environmental evidence for occupation does not mean that it did not occur.

Phil Austin's paper (The emperor's new garden: woodland trees and people in the Neolithic of southern Britain) again emphasises the difference between scientific interpretations and those with a more social aspect, saying that trees and woodland exist in the 'environment' reconstructed by paleo-environmental specialists but not often in the 'landscape' evoked by sociological interpretations. Taking on ideas from anthropology, social theory and Ingold's (1993) 'taskcape' as a basis for exploring these dynamics, Austin explores some of the ways in which trees and woodland can play a role in articulating social concerns like the transmission of memory, knowledge and the maintenance of social relationships. He also engages with concepts such as the tree as a metaphor for life and symbolic or worldly order, and the role of trees and woodland in informing people's perceptions of place and time.

There is a growing body of evidence suggestive of the symbolic perception of trees in the Neolithic (e.g. Brown, 1995; Evans et. al., 1997; Pryor, 1998; Brennand & Taylor, 2000). Woodland does now figure prominently in some accounts of Neolithic landscapes (e.g. Edmonds, 1999), however generally these narratives are not often environmentally specific. Austin's is a good interpretative paper which needed to be written!

Other ways
The last three papers in this volume deal with 'other' ways of seeing and interpreting plants and plant remains in the Neolithic. Linda Hurcombe's paper (Plants as raw materials for crafts) details the plants used in temperate Europe for contemporary craft products, as well as the much more limited archaeological evidence. She rehearses the biases and problems of identifying archaeological craft material through residues and impressions, and the potential for pollen records to identify raw materials. There is little in the way of context or interpretation, and it is not particularly well written, but it does need to be reiterated that organic goods ('crafts' just makes me think of craft 'fayres',) would have been of undeniable importance to domestic, social and symbolic life during prehistory.

John Swogger's paper (The altering eye: reconstructing archaeobotany) is an exploration of the ways in which plants have been and can be interpreted and brought into focus through archaeological reconstructions. Drawing on environmental records from excavated Neolithic sites, Swogger has provided interpretative drawings for a variety of audiences using traditional black and white line illustrations, but also some more modern web-based design. Some of his ideas are interesting, but I really didn't like his drawings, the people are
incredibly clichéd which is ironic given that Swogger considers himself to be drawing 'outside the box'.

Mary and Graham Dineley's paper (Neolithic ale: barley as a source of malt sugars for fermentation) is an interesting one. They outline their experiments using barley for the production of 'prehistoric' ale, rehearsing evidence of cereal based residues on pottery from Scottish Neolithic sites. They see the large rectangular buildings often interpreted as LBK style houses as Neolithic breweries, in fact according to the Dineleys', the whole of Skara Brae was a giant brewery, mainly on the basis of the presence of its (allegedly unanalysed) slime filled drains.

The stone buildings of Skara Brae, the very large grooved ware vessels, the surviving internal furnishings and the existence of a planned drainage system for the settlement provide good support for the idea that sweet malt products and ale were being manufactured from the grain during the Neolithic (p. 151).

The brewing of ale is taken to explain the rapid adoption of cereals throughout Europe and the British Isles. This is a complete reinterpretation of Neolithic material previously associated with cereal processing, domestic structures and pottery. It is a very individual interpretation, however it remains as largely unsubstantiated as many others put forward for these structures. It must be said that beer drinking is largely unconsidered (if tacitly implied) in many interpretations of the British Neolithic. One assumes however, that as much as perhaps some of us would like alcohol consumption to be the prime reason for the onset of agriculture in British prehistory, there may have been other factors involved. It is worth a read though, a top paper!

Conclusion

I think the objective of this volume was to contextualise palynological data and bring its interpretation into wider accounts of the Neolithic. To a great extent, it has done that, although there are a few papers which are inaccessible to those of us that are not environmental specialists. However I don't think anyone with an interest in Neolithic landscape occupation would deny the importance and relevance of such material to the subject. It is very good to see a collection of papers which bring together scientific approaches with interpretation and at a landscape level. Saying this, it is difficult to assess what sort of readership this volume was aimed at. There are some very clearly written, interpretative and explanatory papers, there are some which I found very difficult to penetrate, and there were a few with sections of both. The later group highlight the very problems inherent in a multi-disciplinary approach, sections pertaining to different approaches are written in the
particular style appropriate for that discipline. Many of the papers are clearly written, although some illustrate the pitfalls of environmental specialists trying to write for a wider audience. In conclusion, this is in many ways a good and interesting volume with a diverse range of papers, most of which are well worth a read.

**Bibliography.**


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