

# Neolithic Studies Group

Autumn Meeting 2011

*Monday 7 November 2011*

*10:30 – 17:00*

*British Museum, London*

## **Britain at 3000 BC**

Organizers: Timothy Darvill, Josh Pollard, and Kenny Brophy

In the centuries either side of 3000 BC the Neolithic communities across the British Isles seem to have undergone fundamental changes marking what some have previously called the Middle Neolithic. The last quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC sees the appearance of new styles of ceramic - Peterborough and Impressed pottery in southern Britain and Grooved ware in the far north – along with other distinctive forms of material culture such as transverse arrowheads, edge-polished implements and antler maceheads. The first henges appear. There is an explosion of passage graves in size and distribution. Single graves and then cremation cemeteries become widespread. Traditional monuments such as long barrows, oval barrows, causewayed enclosures, and cursuses cease to be built, but many remain the focus of rather different ceremonies and practices. Houses and settlements change form, and there is a whiff of greater regionalization and shifting patterns of contact with the near continent. Environmental changes have been suggested, and there are shifts in settlement practices in some areas – perhaps more dispersed, with less evidence of aggregation. Natural catastrophes may have contributed to social change. The period 3300–2800 BC is one that has received little attention in recent years and the aim of this meeting is to review the evidence in the light of recent work and new discoveries. Does a middle Neolithic exist and, if so, how might it be defined? Can we trace the origin of new traditions? Was this a period of major religious and ideological change, or simply a time that witnessed reworking of existing values of earlier Neolithic ancestry?

***Practical detail:*** *New security arrangements at the British Museum mean that it is no longer possible to take cases measuring more than 40x40x50cm/8kg, or any wheeled cases, into the museum. All such cases therefore need to be left at the museum cloakroom for which there is a charge of £1.50 per item.*

## Programme

- 10:00 Coffee (available for purchase at outlets in the Great Court)
- 10:30 Welcome
- 10:40 **Towards 3000 BC**  
*Alasdair Whittle (Cardiff University)*
- 11:00 **The shape and narrative structure of the Neolithic**  
*John Barrett (University of Sheffield)*
- 11:20 **The trajectory of change: Scotland before and after 3000BC**  
*Kenneth Brophy and Rebecca Younger (University of Glasgow)*
- 11:40 **Seeds of change: archaeology and environment in Middle Neolithic Ireland**  
*Nicki Whitehouse (Queen's University, Belfast)*
- 12:00 **A tale of two tombs on a (radiocarbon) plateau: AMS dating of human remains from Knowth and Querness**  
*Rick Schulting (University of Oxford)*
- 12:20 Discussion
- 13:00 *Lunch (please make your own arrangements)*
- 14:00 **Anything 'odd' happen between 3300 BC and 2800 BC? Oh dear yes**  
*Mike Baillie (Queen's University Belfast)*
- 14:20 **Old Lines and New Circles: Recent Research at Priddy, Somerset**  
*Jodie Lewis and David Mullin*
- 14:40 **Visiting old friends: Peterborough presence at extant monuments in southern Britain**  
*Timothy Darvill (Bournemouth University)*
- 15:00 *Tea & informal discussion (served in foyer)*
- 15:30 **Middle Neolithic pilgrimage - agency or anachronism?**  
*Roy Loveday*
- 15:50 **Significant individuals - Middle Neolithic burials from the Thames Valley**  
*Alastair Barclay (Wessex Archaeology)*
- 16:10 **Dealings with the dead in later 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC Britain**  
*Josh Pollard (University of Southampton)*
- 16:30 Discussion
- 16:55 Close

## Abstracts

### **Towards 3000 BC**

*Alasdair Whittle (Cardiff University)*

Bayesian chronological modelling has opened the possibility of explicit, quantified, probabilistic date estimates down to the scale of lifetimes and even generations, with sequences in centuries, half-centuries and even decades. The recent project (with Alex Bayliss and Frances Healy) to date the causewayed enclosures of southern Britain, whose building probably centred in the 37th and 36th centuries cal BC, provided provisional narratives both for what came before, back to the start of the Neolithic, and for what came after, down to the 35th and 34th centuries cal BC. Interpretation accompanying the later part of this narrative suggested a socially competitive dynamic, with cursus monuments quite quickly replacing causewayed enclosures as the monumental novelty, probably from the 36th century cal BC onwards, but also a little understood period from the 36th to the 34th centuries cal BC of considerable diversity, with both archaism and innovation employed as social strategies. How does the narrative go on, towards and around 3000 BC? I note some of its already better established elements, both near and far, including for example formal modelling of the sequences at Duggleby Howe, Stonehenge and Mound of the Hostages, Tara (with new work in the pipeline on the latter two, and Knowth), and the appearance in western/north-western continental Europe of the Corded Ware/Single Grave complex, dendro-dated to c. 2800 BC. I explore what would be required to fill in the story, including major projects to date Peterborough Ware (already initiated by Peter Marshall and colleagues), Grooved Ware and henges; the challenge includes the late fourth millennium plateau. I end by reflecting on difference and connection. Does the trend of the social dynamic suggested above continue? Were Britain and Ireland really isolated from the continent at the turn of the millennium? And how do the strands of difference/communality and isolation/connection come together?

### **The shape and narrative structure of the Neolithic**

*John Barrett (University of Sheffield)*

The recent analysis of radiocarbon chronologies for long-mounds and causewayed enclosures and the increasingly refined chronologies for the late fourth and early third millennia present the image of cultural development in the neolithic as one of a series of relatively rapid transformations in the style, function and scale of material conditions.

This raises some serious questions concerning the adequacy of current explanations for the development of the period, particularly those that have placed emphasis upon localised processes and gradual change. Is it time that we returned to a more systemic level of analysis and revisited earlier suggestions of 'catastrophic' change? If so, where does this leave the issues of agency that were introduced through 'post-processual' archaeology?

### **The trajectory of change: Scotland before and after 3000BC**

*Kenneth Brophy and Rebecca Younger (University of Glasgow)*

The Neolithic period in mainland Scotland was a time of change and continuity, of tradition and innovation, of the rectangular and the round. In a very broad sense we could suggest that evidence is coming together to give the sense that rectangular and linear structures predominated in the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium, with round and oval the dominant architectural style

after 3000BC. This change is played out in a range of monument forms: from cursus to henge, from timber cursus to timber circle, from timber hall and house, to oval shelter. Yet what is striking is that both the rectangular and the round were often articulated in the same locations, trajectories of change. Timber circles were built over cursus terminals. Henges enclosed locations once marked by rectangular settings. Rectangular structures of stone, or timber, were mounded over by round barrows. In this paper, we will consider the nature of the trajectories of such important places, what they can tell us about the pivotal 3000BC, and how this might fit into the wider context across Britain and Ireland.

### **Seeds of change? Archaeology and environment in Middle Neolithic Ireland**

*Nicki Whitehouse<sup>1</sup>, Phil Barratt<sup>1</sup>, Rowan McLaughlin<sup>1</sup>; Meriel McClatchie<sup>1,5</sup>; Rick Schulting<sup>2</sup>, Amy Bogaard<sup>2</sup>, Sue Colledge<sup>3</sup>; Rob Marchant<sup>4</sup>, Paula Reimer<sup>1</sup>; Dave Brown<sup>1</sup>*(1: Queen's University Belfast; 2: University of Oxford; 3: University College London; 4: University of York; 6: University College Dublin)

This paper outlines results generated by the Heritage Council's (Republic of Ireland) INSTAR-funded research project (2008–2010) entitled '*Cultivating Societies: assessing the evidence for agriculture in Neolithic Ireland*'. The project has been concerned with examining the timing, extent and nature of Neolithic farming in Ireland by drawing upon unpublished and published data from the commercial, state and academic sectors. A particular focus has been the collection of multi-strand, complimentary information, drawing upon archaeobotanical, archaeological and palaeoecological data. A major new dating programme has formed a crucial part of the project, focusing on short-lived samples. Bayesian analyses of palaeoenvironmental and archaeological <sup>14</sup>C data have allowed us to examine linkages between environment, farming and settlement within a much stronger chronological framework – sometimes at generational time intervals – allowing us to explore the temporal and spatial character of this highly resolved dataset.

One particular aspect that has emerged is evidence for major environmental change in the middle of the fourth Millennium BC, shown from 3600 BC in Irish bog oak records (Barratt *et al.* submitted). This is mirrored in other precisely-dated palaeoenvironmental records from Northern Europe and coincides with apparent changes in the landscape, possibly related to less intensive land use and re-afforestation at this time. There are potential hints for changes in cultivation within the archaeobotanical record, although these may be complicated by low numbers of study sites. Coincident with these environmental, landscape and cultivation changes, are potential changes in the Neolithic archaeological record, both in Ireland and Britain, dated through Bayesian modeling. In Ireland, there is an emerging, strong body of data that suggests that we have far fewer signals of human settlement for the Middle and Late Neolithic, with a lull in radiocarbon dated settlement activity from around 3300 cal. BC to just after 3000 cal. BC, when the archaeological record is almost completely dominated by burials of the passage tomb tradition. This may be at least partially related to low archaeological visibility of settlement structures, but this may not be the whole explanation. It thus seems possible that environmental changes may have had cultural consequences.

### **A tale of two tombs on a (radiocarbon) plateau: AMS dating of human remains from Knowth and Quanterness**

*Rick Schulting (University of Oxford)*

The potential for much finer-grained chronologies for the Neolithic through the use of large series of radiocarbon dates in conjunction with Bayesian modelling has been amply

demonstrated in recent years, with the earlier part of the period in Britain and Ireland having especially benefitted. However, due to a plateau in the calibration curve, the late 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC presents a particular challenge in terms of providing comparable results. This presentation reports on two such attempts, one involving the passage tomb cemetery at Knowth, Co. Meath, and the other the single chamber tomb at Quanterness, Orkney. While there are considerable difficulties, and the precision is less than that obtained for the earlier Neolithic, the results nevertheless help inform on our understanding of the use of developed passage tombs at this time, and in particular on possible relationships between the Brú na Bóinne and Orkney.

### **Anything 'odd' happen between 3300 BC and 2800 BC? Oh dear yes**

*Mike Baillie (Queen's University Belfast)*

From a tree ring viewpoint, it was interesting when it was discovered that two long oak chronologies - from the East and West of England - both started within 10 years of 3200 BC. It was doubly interesting when it was found that one of the most severe 'narrowest ring' events in the Irish oak record started in 3199 BC. The decline could be seen clearly in a bristlecone pine chronology from Western America, starting that same year. The obvious question was what caused this abrupt environmental downturn? Unfortunately there is no immediate answer but volcanic eruptions and cosmic impacts are two obvious possibilities.

When we add in the freak "3200 BC" ice-initiation event pointed out by Lonnie Thompson, plus the "Ice Man" from the Alps, plus the theoretical initiation of the Maya calendar in (possibly) 3114 BC, plus anomalous sulphate in the Greenland ice, we are left with a century of so that badly needs 'explanation'. Note that these issues do not depend on change in the archaeological record, they just happen to coincide with archaeological change. This talk will amble through a range of relevant issues.

### **Old Lines and New Circles: Recent Research at Priddy, Somerset**

*Jodie Lewis and David Mullin (University of Worcester)*

The Priddy Circles are four large earthwork enclosures, stretching in a line for over 1km, located on the Mendip Hills in Somerset. Their date and function has been much debated, largely due to the morphology of the monuments: they have external ditches and internal banks which seem to have been revetted by wooden posts. Although E. K. Tratman, who was involved in excavating a number of trenches across Priddy Circle 1 in the 1950s, suggested that the monuments were henges of Late Neolithic date, the lack of artefacts and radiocarbon dates, together with the unusual layout and construction, has led to speculation. Our recent excavations at Circle 1 has shown that Tratman's interpretation of the constructional sequence was erroneous and that the monument is of more than one phase, with the earliest dating to c.3000BC. This paper will consider the results of the new excavations and suggest that the Circles represent a new form of circular monumentality, with similarities to the first phase of Stonehenge. However, their architecture and arrangement can also be likened to earlier monument traditions, and a link will be made between the Circles and cursus monuments. It will be suggested that rituals associated with death and procession may have been performed at this site and that these associations lasted until the Early Bronze Age.

### **Visiting old friends: Peterborough presence at extant monuments in southern Britain.**

*Timothy Darvill (Bournemouth University)*

The later fourth millennium BC seems to be a period of contradictions in southern Britain. Some traditions cease, some appear to continue more or less unchanged or develop in new ways, and some new practices emerge. Thus, for example, no new long barrows or causewayed enclosures appear to be built after about 3300 BC, but pit clusters span the period, become more regular in their layout as time goes on, and perhaps contribute to the development of pit-defined henges and related structures. Against this changing broad picture the presence of Peterborough Ware and associated material culture becomes increasingly problematic, especially at established monuments past their main periods of usage. Most of it seems to occur in secondary contexts, but what kinds of activity does it represent? And why is it present? Taphonomy is relevant here because many large monuments provide suitable contexts for preservation that are lacking elsewhere, and there may be a bias in the distribution of finds because of the concentration of archaeological activity. But behind these constraints it is possible to glimpse a few patterns, especially as attempts to re-enter or reinvigorate already ancient monuments.

### **Middle Neolithic pilgrimage - agency or anachronism?**

*Roy Loveday*

The Middle Neolithic (c3500-2900 cal BC) witnessed a very significant transformation in the forms and geographical extent of monument and material culture types, and culminated in the celebration of individuals through accompanied, articulated burial. What drove these changes? Apart from a focus of antler maceheads and Ebbsfleet ware occupation in and around the lower Thames valley, current dating points to the primacy of cursus – a new monument type in England and Wales. It seems reasonable therefore to implicate these monuments, and the nucleated complexes that appeared at this time, in the widespread change. Their striking similarities across considerable distances (eg. Maxey – Dorchester upon Thames 120km) suggests direct copying at nodes in extensive inter-regional networks, perhaps most plausibly articulated through the medium of pilgrimage.

In addition to its obvious material outcomes - intensity of construction, monumentalisation and long distance replication - pilgrimage can also, through the generation of potentially huge ritual fields, forge greatly expanded social identities that encourage the convergence of material culture. But can we validly apply the slippery, catch-all concept of pilgrimage to the Neolithic? Familiar exemplars are drawn almost exclusively from world religions or imperial formations (eg Gupta, Inca) that are clearly anachronistic. The process additionally presupposes considerable individual freedom and safety of movement that must be questioned in a Neolithic marked by increased evidence of violent death. Can we understand the origins of pilgrimage and recognise forms that might both be appropriate to the Neolithic and result in the patterning we observe?

### **Significant individuals - Middle Neolithic burials from the Thames Valley**

*Alastair Barclay (Wessex Archaeology)*

The Thames Valley has long been recognised for its array and sequence of Middle and Late Neolithic burials that have been found since the 1930s. Most are known from the Upper Thames gravels. However, over the last 20 years developer-funded archaeology has added many new burials, in particular from the Middle Thames gravels. At the same time advances

in radiocarbon dating mean that we can now directly date cremated bone and construct more precise chronologies, in particular those that equate to what some have referred to as a 'Middle Neolithic' period or the 34<sup>th</sup> to the 29<sup>th</sup> centuries BC. Whilst the calibration curve for the start of this period is certainly problematic, towards the end it is most conducive to closer scrutiny and the ordering of events. The scope to examine what went before and after the 30th century BC is certainly within reach, and the ability to see how particular events are ordered, sometimes within human life spans, will ultimately provide a more historical narrative. In the Middle Thames Valley in particular new discoveries have identified ring ditches that could have inspired the eclectic group of class I henges and cremation cemeteries that could predate the better known examples from Dorchester-on-Thames and further afield. This paper will review the state of current knowledge, outline some new discoveries and consider some of the questions and potential for future research.

### **Dealings with the dead in later 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC Britain**

*Josh Pollard ( University of Southampton)*

A conventional view sees earlier Neolithic traditions of collective burial replaced during an often poorly defined late Neolithic by occasional individual burials, which themselves are envisaged to be precursors to the single grave tradition of the Chalcolithic/early Bronze Age. This view has been rightly critiqued by Alex Gibson among others, and we now recognise cremation as a recurrent if not common late Neolithic rite. So what do middle Neolithic funerary traditions look like? Is there coherence? Focussing especially upon the evidence from England and Wales, this paper highlights the diversity of practice, and perhaps the instability of any sense of 'tradition'. What such diversity might say about social tension, fission and fusion and mobility is also explored.