

Frightful neighbourhood

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The coast of France—the coast of France, how near!

Drawn almost into frightful neighbourhood.

William Wordsworth, 'Near Dover', September 1802.

Hugo Anderson-Whymark, Duncan Garrow and Fraser Sturt are to be congratulated on an important find and a robust evaluation of its significance. As they point out, it was Roger Jacobi who first introduced the notion that Britain had been culturally isolated from the continent following the flooding of the English Channel; this was on the basis of stylistic differences between the microlithic assemblages found in the two areas in the later Mesolithic. Equally, although Villeneuve-Saint-Germain communities were established in Normandy early in the fifth millennium BC, and Chassey/Michelsberg groups in the Pas-de-Calais perhaps six hundred years later, the material evidence of their cross-Channel relations with British and Irish hunter-gatherers is limited. On this basis, the view has developed that indigenous people in Britain would have been unaware of the developing Neolithic in France and Belgium. Consequently, they would have had no familiarity with domesticated plants and animals, polished stone tools, ceramics, large timber buildings and mortuary monuments until such innovations were brought to these islands by migrating agriculturalists at the end of the millennium. If Mesolithic people played any part at all in the Neolithic transition, it would only have been after the arrival of settlers on these shores.

These arguments have always been less compelling than they superficially appear however, for a series of reasons. Firstly, the morphological contrast between later Mesolithic stone tools in Britain and those on the continent is not an indication of any lack of contact, as artefact style does not constitute an index of interaction. Indeed, neighbouring human groups often adopt contrasting material assemblages in order to emphasise their differences from each other. Secondly, it is unwise to assume that a comparative absence of evidence for social intercourse between two regions can be equated with evidence of absence, especially if the contact involved is unlikely to generate a material signature. As Anderson-Whymark, Garrow and Sturt note, any traces of cross-Channel contact in the sixth and fifth millennia BC are likely to be ephemeral in the extreme. The seagoing vessels used by Mesolithic and Neolithic mariners were probably composed of animal hides stretched on wooden frames, while the exchange of material goods might only have been a minor motivation for their voyages. In northern latitudes, hunter-gatherers in coastal areas invariably make use of boats and maintain extensive networks of maritime contacts. They may sometimes journey to access resources or exchange goods, but more often for the non-economic reasons of

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acquiring information and gossip, maintaining social ties and exchanging marriage partners (Ames 2002). British Mesolithic people are known to have colonised the Outer Hebrides, Orkney and Shetland by sea, and may have introduced deer to Scottish islands by boat (Grigson & Mellars 1987; Tolan-Smith 2008: 152). It is therefore barely conceivable that they would not also have navigated the Channel, the North Sea and the Irish Sea. In any case, the flooding of the Channel was a gradual process, and the use of boats in the expanding estuary would initially have been merely a means of maintaining existing social contacts.

Any positive indication of cross-Channel contact in the Mesolithic and Early Neolithic is then likely to represent the tip of the iceberg. In this connection, the authors mention the bones of domesticated cattle from Ferriter's Cove, but their own evidence from Old Quay, St Martin's, brings an important new dimension to the debate. The group of microliths from the site suggests a connection between the Isles of Scilly and the Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt area during the fifth millennium BC. Anderson-Whymark, Garrow and Sturt argue that this probably took the form of repeated seasonal visiting by maritime hunter-gatherers, who might have arrived by a series of coastal 'hops' along the south of England. If so, it is likely that they would have encountered other communities at various stages in this process, and it is entirely possible that their activities in the Scillies were a cooperative enterprise conducted alongside people from less-distant regions, as the diagnostic microliths represent only a small fraction of the lithic finds from Old Quay. It is particularly striking that the putative visitors to the site had come from the opposite end of the Channel, and this raises the possibility that the waters around Britain were frequented by numerous groups of voyagers from disparate points of origin during the fifth millennium BC.

The results from Old Quay are best considered alongside another remarkable recent discovery, the DNA from ancient wheat recovered from the submerged Mesolithic site of Bouldnor Cliff, off the coast of the Isle of Wight (Smith *et al.* 2015: 1001). The site is a well-preserved palaeosol containing Mesolithic artefacts, including organic remains, sealed by a peat deposit and dating to shortly before 6000 BC. The DNA of wheat was recovered from the palaeosol, along with that of numerous other plants. The provenience appears to be irreproachable, as unusually stringent measures were taken to guard against both contamination and false positives (Larson 2015: 946). The astonishing implication is not only that Britain was in maritime contact with the continent some while before the microliths discussed in the present article were deposited at Old Quay, but also that agricultural products had already arrived here long before the establishment of Neolithic communities on the Channel coast. In a way that effectively comments on the whole debate surrounding the 'isolation' of Britain during the Mesolithic, Greger Larson reflects that "the results highlight the pitfalls of focusing on the visible remains in archaeological contexts" (Larson 2015: 946). If valuable and exotic foodstuffs could circulate amongst hunter-gatherers remote from locations that were engaged in their production, we urgently need to re-evaluate our perceptions of the complex networks of both marine and terrestrial contacts that existed in Mesolithic Europe.

The results from both Old Quay and Bouldnor Cliff support Garrow and Sturt's (2011) assertion that British waters are likely to have been well travelled in the period before 4000 BC, and that the mariners involved would have been drawn from both 'Mesolithic' and 'Neolithic' communities. It follows that Mesolithic people in Britain would have had

ample opportunity to experience Neolithic foods, artefacts and architecture. Merely having access to any of these things is not the same as ‘becoming Neolithic’ however, which arguably involves a fundamental social transformation (Thomas 2015). By implication, British hunters and gatherers recognised this possibility, and actively resisted it for centuries if not millennia. Our explanations of how change *did* come about cannot now neglect the ‘frightful neighbourhood’ that existed between people on either side of the Channel.

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