Looking at things anew

Graeme Warren*

The paper by Anderson-Whymark, Garrow and Sturt raises very important questions about how we understand Later Mesolithic Britain, Ireland and continental Europe. National research traditions have, at times, obscured our understanding of contacts and connections between areas in the Mesolithic. A focus on the distribution of a small range of artefacts has created a situation where Mesolithic cultures begin to resemble nation-states (Marchand 2014: 11). Our terminology reflects and reifies these distinctions. If we wish to understand how social geographies within Britain and Ireland change over time, it is unhelpful, to say the least, that they should have such inconsistent period terminology: the British Early Mesolithic is absent from Ireland; the British Later Mesolithic *is* the Irish Early Mesolithic; and the Irish Later Mesolithic does not exist in Britain. The continental terminology is different again, and linguistic barriers remain a problem to regional-level synthesis. Anderson-Whymark *et al.*'s engagement with the loving detail of French lithic typology is hence to be welcomed.

Some aspects of the problems caused by national research traditions are subtle: Sørensen *et al.* have demonstrated how the influence of national research traditions encourages "an idea of a static, isolated prehistoric lifestyle" (Sørensen *et al.* 2013: 2), seemingly limiting the capacity of hunter-gatherer populations for generating historical change. This emphasis on static, unchanging populations is especially significant in hunter-gatherer research: "when the subjects of enquiry are hunter-gatherers, history is too often swamped by variables that are portrayed as universal to organisms so closely reliant on natural resources" (Sassaman & Holly 2011: 2–3). All too often it appears that hunter-gatherers do not make history: it is made for them, by changing climates, environments or by technical or social advances elsewhere. These problems are manifest in models that present Mesolithic communities in Britain and Ireland as isolated from European traditions, with the appearance of farming being a result of historical changes initiated on the continent by farmers (e.g. Sheridan 2010).

Yet hunter-gatherer populations in Mesolithic Europe were characterised by complex dynamics of historical change, the spread of ideas and population movements, as well as changes to climate and the transformation of the landscape (Warren 2014). Some of these changes were related to the spread of agricultural techniques across Europe—but the Neolithic transition was only one aspect of the histories of Mesolithic Europe. Those histories involved trajectories of change, directions of contact and scales of transformation that we do not fully comprehend. In this context, Anderson-Whymark *et al.*'s research is a reminder to us of the transformative power of archaeological research—we can find the unexpected, and it can make us look at things anew.

* *University College Dublin, School of Archaeology, Newman Building, Belfield, Dublin 4, Ireland (Email: graeme.warren@ucd.ie)*

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Large-scale synthesis and site-specific details are essential if we are to understand Mesolithic Europe. Yet such synthesis is challenging—a wealth of data now exists for the Mesolithic in different parts of Europe, much of it recovered in development-led contexts, and some of it of international significance. Well-recognised problems of access to this information remain, however, especially for those unfamiliar with national research traditions and structures. Cooperative research across national boundaries, working with standardised terminology and shared thematic questions will be needed to move the bigger picture forward. This will provide a context for the details—such as the remarkable finds from Scilly reported in Anderson-Whymark *et al.*'s paper—that will contribute significantly to discussion of contact and connection between Britain, Ireland and the continent in the millennia preceding the first appearance of agriculture in Britain and Ireland.

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