
Towards a history of the British Mesolithic

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Abstract

The British Mesolithic has often been treated as a period without history, where the only significant change is from an early Mesolithic characterised by highly mobile big game hunters to more sedentary marine-focused late Mesolithic. This presentation presents the results of a new British Academy funded project which has aimed by contrast to understand temporal change over this period on a centennial scale. This has involved collating all existing radiocarbon dates for the period and commissioning new dates for certain key sites. The patterns that have emerged are illuminating. In the early Mesolithic, different waves of colonisation can be discerned by groups with different cultural practices. A new Middle Mesolithic phase emerges, characterised by new ways of engagement with the landscape including the erection of large buildings and monuments. Similarly, significant temporal and regional differences can be seen in the late Mesolithic. As well as broader scale temporal patterns, smaller shifts took place on a centennial scale: for example mortuary practices change over the few centuries between the early and middle Mesolithic, relating to changing beliefs surrounding death and the afterlife.

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