

## **Rethinking Transitions**

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‘Transitions’ – their scale and scope – are some of the most hotly debated topics within the discipline of archaeology, particularly regarding the interpretation of how patterns and trends in different categories of material culture inter-relate. This session encourages fresh debate on how we interpret change, such as the Mesolithic–Neolithic transition, in new ways. We particularly welcomes papers that propose different theoretical and methodological approaches to transitions on a range of scales from international, regional and site-specific studies, as well as those investigations tackling the identification of transitions across different types of data. Contributors are also encouraged to demonstrate how their research enhances or challenges current academic and popular narratives for explaining change in the archaeological record. Lastly, we wish to encourage critical reflection on how we engage the public with our new interpretations for transitions in the human past, and how we capture public imagination in how societies transform over time.

**Keywords:** determinism, impact, transitions, theoretical paradigm, relationality.

## **Papers**

### **On the Edge: An Investigation into the Effects of the Edge Properties of Replica Hand Axes on Functionality in an Experimental Butchery Setting.**

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The hand axe is a characteristic tool of the Palaeolithic. Whilst research into this tool form has been extensive, it has focused on finer examples, instead of rougher ones. This study is an initial effort to experimentally investigate these rougher examples in butchery tasks with new methods for recording being implemented on a replica assemblage. Initial analysis of the data suggests a relationship between edge form and functionality with linearity of a hand axe edge being a desirable trait for use. Tying this to studies of archaeological examples, as well as understanding the broader theory of the functionality has been used to further our understanding of the relationship between hand axe edge form and functionality. If a lack refinement in hand axe manufacture was a key characteristic, then alternative explanations must be sought for the presence of finer examples in the archaeological record. This is a first step towards potentially understanding future temporal changes happening within the Lower Palaeolithic.

### **Transition or Revolution? Rethinking the South African Earlier-Middle Stone Age in the Context of the Fauresmith and Pieterburg Technocomplexes**

*Patrick S. Randolph-Quinney (University of Central Lancashire, [PRandolph-Quinney@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:PRandolph-Quinney@uclan.ac.uk))*

This paper deals with interpretation of gradualism versus revolution with reference to the African Middle Stone Age (MSA). The earliest MSA dates to 315 kya and is associated with the first appearance of *Homo sapiens*, from Jebel Irhoud, Morocco. The MSA is generally defined based on blade, point and prepared core technology. However, the presence of many of these technological traits are noted in Earlier Stone Age (ESA) assemblages in South Africa, particularly the ESA sequence from Cave of Hearths, Makapansgat, which has yielded archaic

hominins rather than *Homo sapiens*. The paper will focus on the early evidence for MSA-like technologies in the ESA South African record - and investigate what this may mean about the transition from archaic to modern biology and culture South of the Sahara. It contrasts typology and technology, and how the former approach is unsuited to understand complex patterns of change through deep time.

### **Recycling Prehistory? Reality or Myth?**

*Robert Leedham (University of Central Lancashire, RRLeedham@uclan.ac.uk) and Nathaniel Welsby (University of Central Lancashire, NWelsby@uclan.ac.uk)*

Transitions are defined as a period of change from one state to another. The problem is in Archaeology a lot of the time when we start research we do not know what the state is, and even more importantly what state is supposed to change to. If we then focus on trying to identify a transition are we in danger of just recycling past interpretations rather than asking our archaeological data new questions? In Britain, the Mesolithic-Neolithic ‘transition’ (archaeological changes between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC) has remained a complex topic for over a century. This presentation targets trying to understand if we should really be calling this period of archaeology a transition at all? Instead it argues that archaeology should think again about what ‘traditional transitions’ actually are...

### **Timing the M/LPPNB Transition**

*Piotr Jacobsson (University of Glasgow, pt.jacobsson@gmail.com)*

Timing of archaeological transitions is essential to grasping their nature. An overnight transition is a very different beast from a process of change that sprawls multiple centuries. However, as “transitions” are in many ways an abstraction we cannot date them – we can only date specific features that carry materials, which we use to define the transition. Once we think about the technical detail of the method we use to date these contexts, the reality of defining the nature of an archaeological transition becomes a substantial empirical endeavour.

This paper discusses how such factors play out for the Middle to Late PPNB transition in south-west Asia. This transition is often characterized as a sudden event throughout the Eastern Mediterranean basin and beyond; however, these observations can be attributed to the shape of the radiocarbon calibration curve in the mid-8<sup>th</sup> millennium BC. Further investigation highlights the empirical challenges of timing such changes.

### **Transitioning away from arable agriculture in Middle Neolithic Wessex**

*David Roberts (Historic England, David.Roberts@HistoricEngland.org.uk) and Peter Marshall (Historic England, Peter.Marshall@HistoricEngland.org.uk)*

Recent research has strongly suggested that across much of southern and central England there was a significant decline in cereal cultivation in the Middle Neolithic, apparently in favour of the adoption of a mainly pastoral lifestyle. This dramatic transition in a central period of British prehistory has received little academic attention until recent years and remains strongly debated. Extensive analysis demonstrates that all but one of the scientifically dated cereal grains from Middle Neolithic pit groups in Wiltshire are intrusive, querns disappear from the archaeological record and domesticated animal assemblages change significantly. This paper will review the transition in this key area of Neolithic

Britain, and explore some implications for Middle Neolithic lifeways, cosmologies, monumentality and depositional practices. Recent Historic England fieldwork at West Amesbury in the Stonehenge WHS will be used to illuminate one part of the seasonal lifeways of pastoralists in the later 4th millennium cal. BC and suggest some deeper roots of practice at nearby significant Late Neolithic monuments.

### **Death in Transition: Understanding the Origins of Multi-Stage Neolithic Burial**

*Rick Peterson (University of Central Lancashire, RPeterson@uclan.ac.uk)*

The emergence of collective burial rites is one of the defining characteristics of the British Early Neolithic. Previous models for the start of this funerary practice have suggested that chambered tomb construction belongs to a period after the initial transition from the Mesolithic to the Neolithic. However, multi-stage burials from caves are likely to date to very early in the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC, and it is extremely probable that they pre-date the modelled start of the Neolithic. There are two possible explanations for this. Multi-stage cave burial may be the earliest manifestation of the Neolithic but because of the lack of accompanying material it has not been recognised as a culturally 'Neolithic' practice. Alternatively, there may have been a Mesolithic multi-stage burial rite which was the inspiration for Neolithic collective burial. If this were the case, it would be clear evidence of cultural continuity between the Late Mesolithic and Early Neolithic.

### **Hengeland: The Results of Multimodal Geophysical Surveys on four Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age Henge Monuments in the Milfield Basin, Northumberland**

*Mike Woods (Manchester Metropolitan University, michael.woods2@stu.mmu.ac.uk)*

Magnetometry and resistivity surveys have been carried out across four Neolithic/Early Bronze Age henge monuments in Northumberland; Coupland, Marleyknowe, Akeld Steads and Wooler.

The results from these surveys have revealed previously unknown aspects of the architecture of these henge monuments. A secondary ditch at Coupland henge was found through resistivity survey and anomalies closely associated with the henge at Wooler and Marleyknowe suggest later use of the henges in the Bronze Age. Evidence for the decommissioning of Akeld Steads and a lightning strike at Coupland has also been discovered in the magnetometry data.

This lecture will present the results of these surveys and will focus on the use of the landscape during the Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age transition and the implications these finds have on our knowledge of Northumberland's Prehistoric Archaeology.

### **Killing off the Beaker Folk, again**

*Anna Bloxam (UCL Institute of Archaeology, anna.bloxam@gmail.com)*

Recent aDNA research has shed new light on genomic variation associated with the spread of Beaker material culture. In revealing a massive population replacement across the Neolithic–Bronze Age transition within Britain, the genetic work has re-directed attention to the migration/diffusion debate. This had previously been played out using archaeological evidence - primarily the stereotyped Beaker burials. I argue that a broader reconsideration of

the available burial evidence is required in order to move past the culture-historical view of period change and bring archaeological data back into the forefront of academic and popular understandings of this transition period. Presenting a new analysis of Beaker-period burial practices, I seek to re-examine the evidence for relationships between groups and peoples in Britain during the period of genomic change, and consider from this how we can build a more nuanced understanding of the cultural changes that occur at this time.

## **The Influence of the Modern Idea of Progress in Historical Studies: The Iberian Peninsula in Late Antiquity as a Case Study**

*Fernández Cadenas Nerea (University of León, nferc@unileon.es)*

Traditionally, the analysis of the transitions produced throughout History has been conditioned by the modern interpretation of the idea of social progress that moves between concepts such as decline or splendour.

One of the periods most affected by this methodological paradigm is Late Antiquity (centuries V - VII) in which phenomena such as the constitution of independent political realities, for example Visigoths in the Iberian Peninsula, have been interpreted as a symptom of decay with respect to the Roman system.

This presentation will analyse the rural archaeological record of the Iberian peninsular, comparing it with the contemporary sources, and thus casting this analysis in a new perspective, and eliminating an outdated linear and progressive view of history. It will endeavour to re-interpret the processes of change that occurred in the 5th–6th centuries AD. This was not a period of cultural decline, but a period of change; the values that led to the foundations of Medieval Society.

## **Iron before the Iron Age? Not Any Old Iron!**

*Dot Boughton (Finds, Archives and Environmental Officer, OA North, dot.boughton@oxfordarch.co.uk)*

What is a transition period? When does it start and when does it end? And is a transition period for, say, material culture, the same as for, say settlements or pottery?

In terms of prehistoric metalwork, iron appeared alongside copper-alloy objects some time before the first hillforts were built. However, in terms of settlement chronology, the appearance of hillforts is almost fool proof evidence for the start of the Early Iron Age. In a number of hoard contexts (pre-dating hillforts) iron metalwork was found alongside copper-alloy metalwork: this is, in essence the Bronze Age-Iron Age transitional period, but there is no 'period' in our time lines, only, well... a line. Instead, we now 'squeeze' this transitional period in the first part of the Early Iron Age, mainly because these metalwork hoards are not Late Bronze Age hoards, nor are they found in Early Iron Age contexts either! What are the semantics for understanding this transition?

## **Twitter Paper**

**No turning back: the transition from hunting and gathering to farming in the Atacama Desert**

*Adrián Oyaneder Rodriguez (University of Exeter, a.oyaneder@exeter.ac.uk)*

The transition from foraging to the domestication of plants and animals in the Atacama Desert (ca. 3,000 yr BP) seemed to spark the emergence of social complexity, sedentarism, and the end for Hunter-Gatherer lifeways. Nonetheless, ethnohistorical data together with archaeological evidence suggest the opposite, thus to challenge current narratives this work propose an alternative perspective where the key is to ignore simple versus complex dichotomy and look deeply at the sources of evidence available.

To test this proposed new narrative Camarones Valley was the sampling area; a river valley located at the core of the Atacama that covers longitudinally from the Andean cord to the Pacific. Therefore, historical sources together with the revision of archaeological surveys were analysed to prove that after the aforementioned transition Hunter-Gatherers and Hunter-Gatherer Herders inhabited this Desert without interruption.

Keywords: Atacama Desert, determinism, Andes, Prehispanic period