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The materiality of the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition in Britain

1. Introduction

As Alasdair Whittle once pointed out (1990a, 209), the direct evidence for the transition to the Neolithic in Britain is limited, and the classes of material which might provide conclusive indications of the character of this transformation remain scarce. Stratified residential sites with both Mesolithic and Neolithic artefacts, sealed assemblages from the terminal Mesolithic, or Neolithic assemblages which demonstrate clear affinities with material from a distinct area of the European continent stubbornly continue to fail to come to light. Yet, as Whittle goes on to suggest, recent debate on the transition has continued to be lively, simply because a range of different theoretical perspectives have been applied to the existing evidence (e.g. Armit/Finlayson 1992; Whittle 1990b; Williams 1989; Zvelebil/Rowley-Conwy 1986). I would suggest that it is quite possible that we will *never* have sites which provide the kind of evidence which tells us in an unambiguous way whether a migrating continental population brought Neolithic innovations to Britain, or whether mixed agriculture was widely practiced from the earliest inception of the Neolithic. But in a sense this does not matter. What I wish to argue is that we have systematically underestimated the value of the evidence which is already available to us. This is because we tend to look upon the material culture which characterises the opening of the Neolithic period in Britain – polished stone axes, leaf-shaped projectile points, pottery, flint mines, earthen long barrows, causewayed enclosures and megalithic tombs – as a superficial manifestation of some other and more fundamental phenomenon. This other thing is the presumed *essence* of the Neolithic, which, while it is more profound than its surface effects, remains invisible to us in the present.

It can be argued that this distinction between essence and substance is characteristic of post-Enlightenment thought, which continually sets up conceptual dichotomies, only to valorise one term over the other (Jordanova 1989; Latour 1993). Once an opposition between depth and surface has been established, the distinction between a materialist and an idealist archaeology is relegated to a subsidiary status. Both materialism and idealism propose that history is determined by the operation of a causal motor which operates behind the scenes, leaving the archaeologically visible trace as the

consequence of a process which can only be inferred indirectly. In this fashion, materialist archaeologies presume that changes in material culture denote a change in the dynamic relationship between resources and population. Often, the fundamental process proposed is a demographic one, involving the growth or expansion of population. In some cases this rise in population is the consequence of agriculture, so that there is some overlap between demographic models and those which stress the geographical expansion of agriculture itself, whether by diffusion or population movement (e.g. Ammerman/Cavalli-Sforza 1971, 1973; Clark 1966; Case 1969; Renfrew 1976, 1987). In other cases, ecological processes determine an intensification of subsistence practice on the part of indigenous hunter-gatherers (e.g. Dennell 1983; Zvelebil/Rowley-Conwy 1986). Where changes in the subsistence base are seen as determining (or at least underlying) cultural changes, there is a tendency to use the term ‘Neolithic’ as a synonym for ‘agriculture’. In the case of Ammerman and Cavalli-Sforza’s papers at least, this can lead to a certain circularity of argument: the spatial expansion of agriculture is demonstrated by the presence of any trait of Neolithic culture. Moreover, either Neolithic artefacts or cultigens are taken to demonstrate the spread of a genetically distinct human population. This practice becomes most problematic in the case of Britain, where the direct evidence for an abrupt change to domesticated resources is not strong (Thomas 1991). One is tempted to question whether the models of economic transformation which have been proposed for Britain would not have been very different if they had had to rely upon the seed and bone evidence alone.

Idealist archaeologies amount to the twin of materialist ones: rather than seeing the transition to the Neolithic as either a replacement of population or a change in economic practice, they argue for a change in ideology. Following the proposition that material culture is meaningfully constituted (Hodder 1992, 12), changes in material culture have been presented as denoting a new ideational structure (Thomas 1988), while the practice of agriculture and the construction of field monuments have been interpreted as having been made possible by the introduction of a conceptual separation between culture and nature (Bradley 1993; Hodder 1990). In

these arguments, the Neolithic still has an essence, although this lies in a new set of ideas, which might involve a categorical separation between the domestic and the wild. These perspectives tend to favour an indigenous transformation rather than any incoming population: having adopted a new ideology, the Mesolithic communities of Britain would begin to make pottery, construct monuments, and exchange polished stone axes. Idealist archaeologies take it for granted that, as Hodder (1984a, 29) puts it, “if we want to say anything interesting about the past, we must include statements about past ideas”. Of course, from a processualist point of view the disadvantage of such an approach is that it amounts to a form of palaeopsychology: an attempt to get at ideas lodged in the heads of long-dead people (Binford 1987, 398). Yet so long as we perceive material culture as representing the product or consequence of actions and ideas, archaeological interpretation will generally have this metaphysical quality. Migrating populations, shifting economic regimes and changing ideologies are all intangible entities which are merely reflected in the archaeological record.

To compound the problem, the notion that ideas are reflected in material culture effectively relies upon a theory of representation in which a formal relationship exists between signifier and signified, between the artefact and the meaning which is vested in it. For the Neolithic to constitute a structure of meaning which underlies material manifestations dispersed over thousands of kilometres of space and hundreds of years of time requires an extraordinary degree of fixity in such meaning. It might be objected that material culture does not so much encode meaning through its fashioning, as provide an apparatus for the creation of meaning. Thus meaning is not a static quality of things, but is constantly being created and reproduced (Olsen 1990; Tilley 1989). Even if the styles of material items and monuments being created were identical across the whole of Europe, we could not necessarily assume that they ‘meant’ the same thing in each different social context, or even to all members of a given community. The meaning which a particular person creates for a particular artefact depends upon the resources of experience and knowledge which they bring to the encounter, and the context within which the encounter takes place.

2. Characterizing the Neolithic

I would like to suggest that we should abandon the attempt to search for a metaphysical entity which underlies the cultural innovations which were introduced to Britain at the start of the Neolithic period. This belief in a hidden essence to the Neolithic (and equally, underlying numerous other cultural processes in the past) has the effect of promoting a pessimistic view of archaeology, in which the material things which we excavate, see, and feel are simply a pale shadow of something more important which we cannot directly

experience. Now, admittedly, Binford (1987, 393) was quite correct to point out that archaeological evidence exists in the present, and that the past is gone from it. And equally, we cannot see the people of the past (whether they were indigenous Mesolithic folk adopting new ways, or incoming migrants), we cannot interrogate them concerning their social organisation, we cannot watch them undertaking their daily economic tasks, and we cannot reach inside their heads for their ideas. However, it is a mistake to consider the material things which *are* available to us as a mere by-product of all of these happenings (Barrett 1988). Material culture is integral to most human undertakings, and forms the context for all of them. Material things are not simply a record of hunting, farming, cooking and eating, but are the means through which these projects are carried out. Similarly, people do not walk around with abstract ideas in their heads, which they then introduce to the world by decorating pots and building monuments. In this sense the division between an internal mind and an external material world is another modernist duality which has been extremely unhelpful to archaeology (Thomas 1996a). Thinking does not take place in a separate metaphysical world. People carry out projects and create meanings through their engagement with material things and places.

A recent example from the literature will serve to make the point. Sherratt (1995) observes the emergence of megalithic tombs around the Atlantic fringe of Europe, and consequently suggests that these monuments are in some way implicated in the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition. Following Dennell (1983) and Zvelebil and Rowley-Conwy (1986), he notes that this is a particular geographical area in which foraging and farming communities will have been in prolonged contact. In contrast with Renfrew’s (1973; 1976) argument that megaliths emerged as territorial markers under conditions of population stress on land, Sherratt suggests that the critical resource in early Neolithic subsistence practice will have been labour. Under these circumstances, early agricultural communities will have been at pains to recruit personnel. Megalithic tombs are ceremonial structures, with an accessible internal space in which activities may have taken place which involved access to the remains of the dead, the use of consciousness-altering substances, and perceived encounters with other dimensions. Thus Sherratt argues that these ritual centres may have constituted ‘instruments of conversion’, through which foragers may have been initiated and assimilated into farming populations. But here again, the monuments are presented as an epiphenomenon. They may have had a socio-economic role to play, yet the fundamental process which throws them up is that of the gradual change from hunting, fishing and gathering to farming. Megaliths facilitate this change, but they are subsidiary. I would rather argue that while a

particular subsistence economy may have been fundamental to the character of the Neolithic in south-east and central Europe, in the Atlantic zone the transition did not always involve pronounced changes in economic practice. Material things did not *attend* the Neolithic, they *were* the Neolithic.

Naturally, this line of argument will prompt the question of precisely what the Neolithic was, if one is to deny that there is a single process or structure of ideas underlying all of the changes which overtook Eurasia between the end of the last glaciation and the introduction of metals. An only partially facetious answer is that ‘the Neolithic’ is a concept, a linguistic category which has been created by modern archaeologists. Concepts are made to think with, and in the process they help us to understand the world (Deleuze/Guattari 1994, 8). However, we do well to remember that as forms of redescription, concepts are entirely separate from the worldly phenomena which they are created in order to attempt to express (Rorty 1989, 5). Through its history, the precise signification of the word ‘Neolithic’ has shifted subtly (Thomas 1993). This is probably a measure of the extent to which having a language which enables us to describe archaeological phenomena and historical processes has helped debate to move on. However, as Richard Rorty (1989, 9) has argued, there often comes a time when a set of terms which have served very effectively as a means of articulating a particular debate ceases to be helpful. At this point, academic argument may come to involve “a contest between an entrenched vocabulary which has become a nuisance and a half-formed vocabulary which vaguely promises great things” (ibid.). In that we still find ourselves attempting to cover a range of very disparate contexts with the term ‘Neolithic’, it may be that the word has now become just such a nuisance.

None the less, let us proceed by using the existing language: the Neolithic which began in Britain at around 3200 BC (4000 BC) was a new *kind* of Neolithic. The material things which represent the principal innovation of this horizon were not a reflection of this development: they *were* the Neolithic. It has been argued that material culture has an active role, that it can articulate society (Hodder 1982). This was pre-eminently the case with the inception of the British Neolithic. As Sherratt implies in the case of megaliths, all of the new material forms of the period both express and transform social and economic relationships. What I am suggesting, though, is that apart from the adoption of these various kinds of material culture there was no uniform change which overtook the whole of the British mainland. I would emphasise that I am not claiming here that all of the inhabitants of Britain continued to practice a mobile foraging economy throughout the Neolithic period. It may be that a gradual trend toward a more intensive use of food resources had already begun before the appearance of

Neolithic material culture, if we are to consider any of the evidence for pre-elm decline cereal pollen credible (Edwards/Hirons 1984; Williams 1985; Williams 1989, 512). The process by which the use of domesticated resources replaced hunting and gathering was a lengthy one, and many communities did not adopt an arable economy until the widespread introduction of enclosed fields and sedentary settlements in the Middle Bronze Age (Barrett 1980; Barrett/Bradley/Green 1991, 143). Indeed, if we wished to be pedantic on the point we could note that many people continued to practice hunting until the Medieval period. If we look at contemporary non-industrial areas of the world, it is generally the case that individual communities will be involved in different subsistence regimes, and that reciprocal relationships may exist between horticulturalists, hunters, swiddeners and pastoralists. I submit that it is because we choose to see mixed agriculture as the fundamental essence of the Neolithic that we fail to recognise the potential range of economic variability which might characterise the period. In this respect, the apparent economic homogeneity of the European *Bandkeramik* is every bit as remarkable as the uniformity of house plans and pottery styles which it maintained across central Europe (Bakels 1982; Coudart 1991).

As a result, a single field system or an individual example of plough marks found beneath a barrow comes to be interpreted as being diagnostic of a ‘Neolithic economy’, and this economy is taken as having been characteristic of Britain (or Britain *and* Ireland) as a whole. The exceptional is taken as the rule. Certainly, at any point in the Neolithic period some groups of people will have been practicing cereal agriculture, but we should see this as one element of a patchwork of food-producing and food-gathering activities which tended to increase in diversity over time. This slow trend towards agrarian subsistence had superimposed upon it a much more rapid introduction of Neolithic material culture (fig. 1). Similarly, in Ireland Neolithic artefacts seem to have been used in the farthest part of the island from the very start of the Neolithic period (Green/Zvevėbil 1990, 58). Of course, while the processes of economic and cultural change are distinct, they are also mutually influencing. Several species of domesticated plants and animals probably were introduced to Britain at the same time as pottery, polished stone tools and monument-building. I would argue, though, that their initial significance was a cultural one, and that the incentive to adopt them was social. Domesticated plants may have constituted ‘special foods’, while cattle would have constituted both mobile wealth and a source of meat for ceremonial feasting. It is arguable that domesticates of all sorts are comparatively rare from non-monumental contexts in the earlier Neolithic, and that although we have large assemblages of animal bones for the period, they almost all

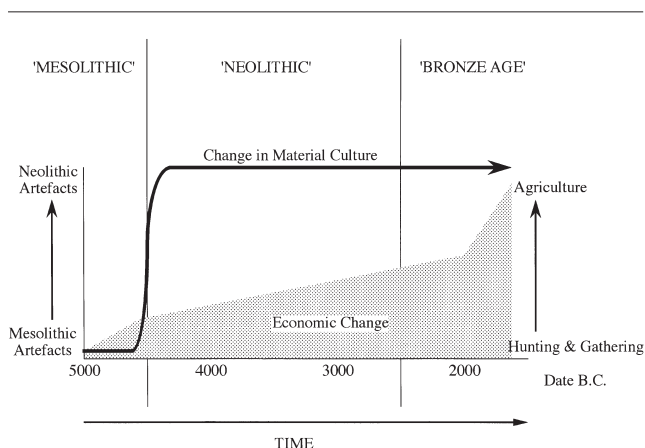


Figure 1. The relationship between cultural change and change in subsistence economy in Britain, between 5000 and 1700 BC.

come from causewayed enclosures, barrows and tombs (Thomas 1991, 28). But this is not to deny that this introduction might have had a knock-on effect in which individual communities might have opted to take up cereal farming or stock-herding, after these resources had been available for one or two generations. Clearly, though, there were whole areas of Britain in which domesticates had only the most marginal of impacts. In western Scotland, for example, Armit and Finlayson (1992, 668) argue for a Neolithic with a broad-spectrum, logistic subsistence pattern, where small-scale dwelling structures are found in camps which were occupied sporadically or seasonally. In this region, sedentism appears not to have emerged until the Iron Age. Yet despite this, the Western Isles have numerous small megalithic tombs, pottery and polished flint and stone axes, demonstrating that an abrupt adoption of Neolithic material culture need not be based upon economic change.

This argument effectively turns on its head one which was put forward by Humphrey Case (1969, 181). According to Case, cultural innovations like pottery, earthen long barrows and causewayed enclosures should be seen as a set of 'optional extras', which might be added to the more fundamental economic elements of the Neolithic package once a necessary level of economic surplus had been generated. "Demanding refinements are unlikely to have belonged to the period of early settlement, but rather to *stable adjustments* of mature and fully extended economies on favourable environments" (*ibid.*). This picture of material culture gradually being added to an increasingly stable way of life provided a means of arguing that the first Neolithic presence in Britain might be earlier than the existing radiocarbon dates from monumental contexts, and also explained why Neolithic artefacts and structures in Britain lacked exact continental parallels. Once we concede that

material culture was of critical importance to the changes which overtook the indigenous population of Britain, it is less easy to argue for this 'archaeologically invisible Neolithic'. It seems probable that the later Mesolithic communities of Britain were exceptionally diverse in their ways of life and use of wild resources, yet as more radiocarbon dates become available the picture of a more or less synchronous adoption of Neolithic material culture continues to be strengthened (Thomas 1988, 60; Kinnes 1988). What is striking is that although the construction of monuments appears to have begun more or less synchronously throughout Britain in the years between 3200 and 3000 bc (4000-3700 BC), the evidence for human impact on the environment is extremely variable from region to region. In some areas open conditions may have been established quite rapidly, while in others extensive areas of woodland remained untouched (Entwistle/Grant 1989; Waton 1982). Moreover, there is considerable evidence that wild plants and woodland resources remained of considerable importance until the late Neolithic and beyond (Grigson 1982). Thus the evidence for rapid and widespread cultural change stands alongside that for economic and ecological diversity.

3. The archaeological context

I have argued elsewhere (Thomas 1996a, 1996b) that Mesolithic communities in Atlantic Europe should be seen as active participants in the creation of this new kind of Neolithic. As we have mentioned, the introduction of Neolithic material forms into Britain and Scandinavia was preceded by a prolonged period in which Mesolithic and Neolithic communities were routinely in contact with one another. The effects of this exchange and interaction seem to have been different at different points in time. It seems possible that the Limburg and La Hoguette pottery styles document the adoption of ceramic technology by indigenous communities from the very earliest *Bandkeramik* incursions into western Europe (Lüning/Kloos/Albert 1989). Later, groups like the Ertebølle and Swifterbant seem to have appropriated various elements of the Neolithic repertoire (pigs, pottery, shaft-hole adzes etc.) from the *Bandkeramik*, Rössen and Lengyel communities of central Europe, although these appear to have used to augment a mobile foraging way of life, rather than to transform it in any decisive way. However, with the emergence of the Cerny group in central northern France and the earliest TRB on the North European Plain, a rather different process may have been beginning to operate. Both of these entities are generally described as 'Neolithic cultures', although both involve an expansion of activity beyond the loess zone. Indeed, the material relating to these two traditions has a distribution which spans what had hitherto been areas of both Mesolithic and Neolithic settlement (fig. 2). Both of these

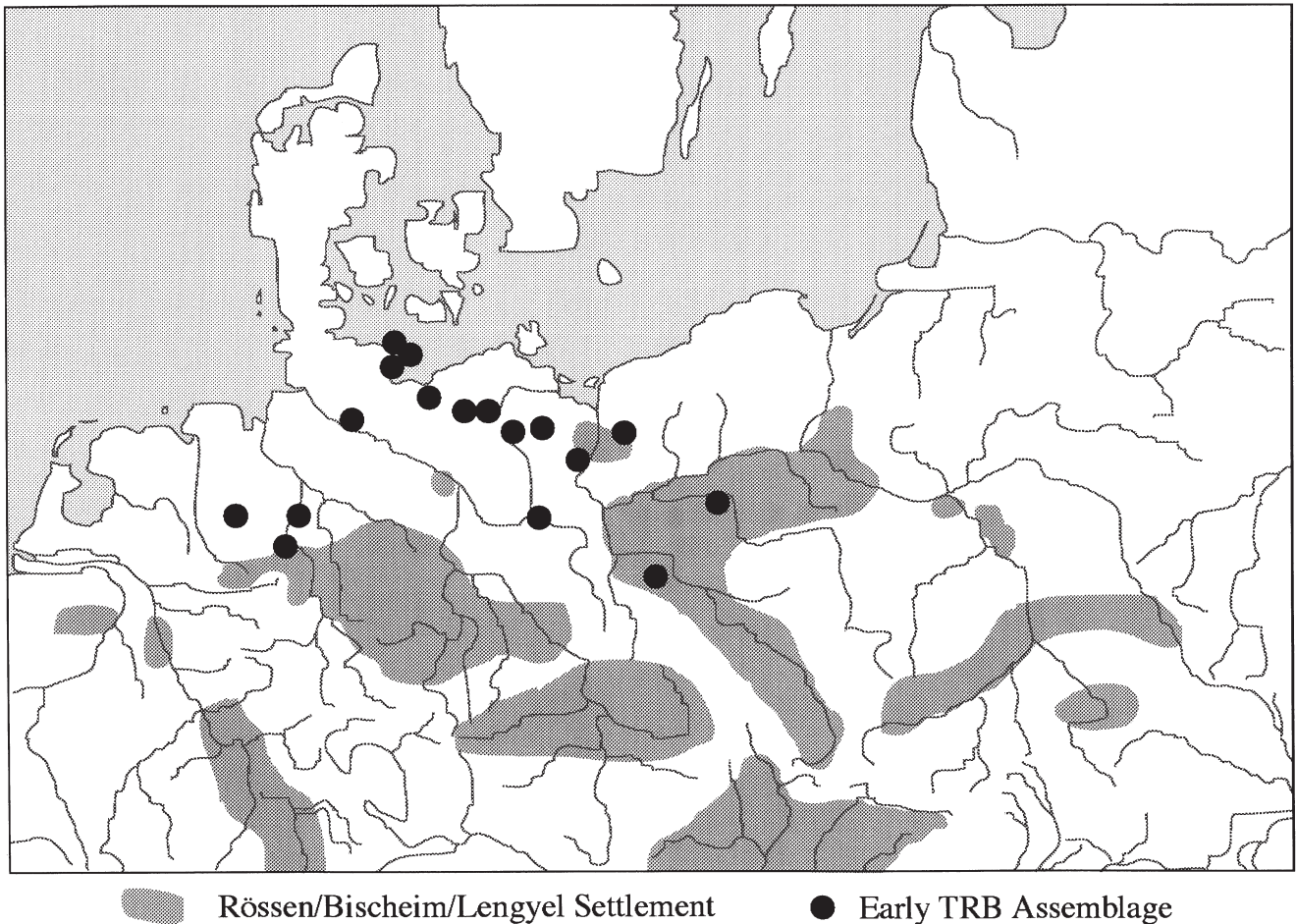


Figure 2. The spatial relationship between post-*Bandkeramik* settlement and the earliest TRB assemblages in central/northern Europe (re-drawn from Midgley 1992, figs. 6 and 67).

groups have been suggested in the past to have been the outcome of a merging of Mesolithic and Neolithic communities (Midgley 1992). It certainly seems plausible that these distinctive new cultural formations emerged from a phase of heightened interaction between foragers and farmers. This is perhaps preferable to the bald choice which Solberg (1989, 276) presents us with, in which TRB ceramics in Scandinavia must be either an internal development from the Ertebølle, or the result of a population movement from the south.

Significantly, it is within the early TRB and Cerny contexts that many of the distinctive elements of the Atlantic Neolithic can be recognised for the first time. These seem to involve a drawing-together or hybridisation of elements which derive from both the Atlantic Mesolithic and central European Neolithic traditions. Very often, when we compare

the Atlantic Neolithic with its predecessors, it seems that artefacts of distinctively 'Neolithic' form came to be incorporated into practices which are 'Mesolithic' in inspiration. Repeatedly, themes like the deliberate deposition of objects, conspicuous feasting, the complex treatment of the dead, and the introduction of symbolically-charged places into the landscape occur in the later Mesolithic record of north-west Europe. These are exactly the kinds of practices which we might consider to be characteristic of the Neolithic in Britain or Scandinavia. To give some examples, we could mention the cist burials, animal bone deposits, fires and stone cairns at the Breton shell middens of Téviec and Hoëdic (Péquart/Péquart 1954), and the formal pit deposit containing animal bone, antler, decorated shell and bone from Beg-er-Vil, also in Brittany (Kirk 1991). In south-east England, enigmatic later Mesolithic pits at Abinger,

Farnham, Hassocks and Selmeston, some of which contain very large quantities of struck flint (Drewett/Rudling/Gardiner 1988, 17-20), may represent antecedents of the formal pit deposits of the Neolithic (Thomas 1991, chapter 4). This kind of deliberate deposition is much less easy to substantiate in western *Bandkeramik* contexts. Equally, we might mention deliberately deposited artefacts, like the arrow shafts from Loshult in Scania (Larsson 1990).

Most of the burials of the *Bandkeramik* were simple pit graves, sometimes in cemeteries, but late Mesolithic funerary practices seem to show more affinity with the British or Scandinavian Neolithic. Graves at Skateholm in Scania, for instance, are surmounted by burnt timber structures, and there is evidence of funerary feasting, dismemberment and disarticulation. The Janislawice grave, in Poland, contained a crouched burial with traces of red ochre, numerous worked and unworked animal bones and at least 42 struck flints (Tomaszewski/Willis 1993). Mesolithic settlement sites like Ageröd I in Scania have produced isolated human skeletal elements, suggesting the circulation of body parts. Also at Skateholm, the so-called Structure 24 seems to have been a monumental focus of some sort, perhaps used for the processing of the dead, involving burning and deliberate deposits of flints and animal bones. Here, the excavator explicitly compared the structure with the timber structures which have been found beneath Neolithic earthen long barrows in Britain and Scandinavia (Larsson 1988). And of course, while arguments can be made which derive the earliest earthen long mounds and megalithic tombs from the domestic structures of the central European *Bandkeramik*, Rössen and Lengyel (Hodder 1984b), the burials which are found beneath them are deposited according to Mesolithic practice (Midgley 1985). The earliest long mounds and long enclosures are found in Cerny and early TRB contexts, and represent a materialisation of the fusion of Mesolithic and Neolithic traditions.

If we can imply that the introduction of formally Neolithic traits into Britain, Ireland and Scandinavia follows on immediately from this heightened interaction in western France and on the North European Plain, it is evident that the kind of Neolithic which was being adopted in these areas was different in character from the Neolithic of central Europe. We have seen that while changes in subsistence practice were taking place in Britain at this time, they were not universal. Very similar forms of material culture were being adopted throughout Britain, and I would argue that these had a transformative role to play in social relationships. However, I suggest that the changes which took place were by no means uniform, and that the new artefacts and structures were used in different ways in different social and geographical contexts. As Armit and Finlayson (1992, 672) argue, the varying conditions into which new forms of

material culture were being introduced were to some degree conditioned by the previously existing regional traditions of the Mesolithic. The new material forms had no fixed or embedded meaning: they represented a resource, a means by which meanings might be created and reproduced at a local scale. This suggests that future work on the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition in Britain should be directed particularly toward the investigation of differing patterns of change which are likely to be manifested at the regional level (Whittle 1990b, 103).

4. Conclusion

What had emerged from the encounter between Mesolithic and Neolithic traditions in northern Europe was an acute recognition of the way in which the material world might be used as a system of symbolic elements. These could be manipulated and reconfigured in such ways as to introduce very specific significances into particular locations. This is not to argue that the Neolithic was simply a symbolic system: these were physical things which were involved in the activities and transactions of everyday life. But the integration of the Neolithic in the form in which it arrived in Britain lay in the way that artefacts facilitated the attribution of significance to places, people and things, and the establishment of relationships between them. The particular objects and practices which were being introduced all fit into this pattern. Pottery vessels were implicated in the interpersonal transactions of food preparation, serving, and feasting. Flint mines, which are an innovation of the post-*Bandkeramik* period in northern Europe, created a formal context for the production of valued items, and also represented an enduring transformation of landscape. Similarly, earthen long mounds and causewayed enclosures were created by opening the earth and creating a significant place. Polished flint axes were taken out of the flint mines and circulated from hand to hand before they were returned to the earth, along with broken sherds of pottery and animal bones, in the ditches of the enclosures or in isolated pits. These pits, sometimes forming clusters resulting from a series of intimate acts of deposition (Brown 1988; Healey 1988), might then serve to preserve in memory particular places to which people would repeatedly return. Human bones were placed in the chambers of the barrows, and the ditches of the enclosures. There is a certain symmetry about the relationships which were being established between living people, dead people, artefacts and the earth, and yet I would resist the temptation to assert that they were underlain by a uniform structure of belief. These objects and practices were the material equivalent of a language, and they might be used to express a range of different messages.

Neolithic material culture afforded for the aboriginal inhabitants of Britain the opportunity to create these

relationships, and to transform the meanings of their landscapes through their engagements with material things. The question is, why, after they had resisted for hundreds of years any temptation to adopt a Neolithic which was principally agricultural, should they now adopt a Neolithic composed of material symbols? A simple answer lies in the flexibility and ambiguity of the material itself. If Neolithic material culture facilitated the creation of connections between persons and places without implying any particular economic regime of ideological system, it might enable the integration of very diverse communities. A Neolithic monument does not *mean* any one thing (Olsen 1990, 200), is not connected with any one practice, yet its physical presence can occasion the co-ordination of a range of different practices. A polished stone axe can be given as bridewealth, or to establish a debt, or can maintain an alliance. As soon as these connections and relationships are in existence, they can serve as the basis for mutual assistance in times of hardship, but they can equally be manipulated by individuals or groups as a means of building up influence and authority. The perceived benefit of a repertoire of new cultural forms could be at once altruistic and selfish, at once relating to the interests of communities and segments of those communities. But above all, the significance of the kind of Neolithic that was introduced to Britain lay in its *materiality*, and thus in the persistence of its various elements. Monuments and artefacts do not merely transform social and economic relations, they serve as a repeated reminder that things have changed, through their continual presence in people's everyday lives.

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