

Remembered Places, Forgotten Pasts

The Don Drainage Basin in Prehistory

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Cover: Barbed and Tanged arrowhead from St Helen's Spring, Barnburgh, South Yorkshire.
The watershed between the Don drainage basin at Stanage Edge, South Yorkshire and the Derwent and Hope
valleys, Derbyshire

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Chapter 1

Introduction

A personal preamble

My engagement with and thinking about the prehistory of South Yorkshire and the North Midlands predates the life of this book by many years. Before that, all of my archaeological efforts and thought had been directed towards the Eastern Mediterranean. Revelation, and a gradual change in direction, began just before beginning my masters training at the University of Sheffield as a mature student. There had been a long hiatus between that and my first degree, and although I had always been involved in archaeological related activities, I believed that I must do something to get back into the swing of academic life, as well as acquire new fieldwork experience. To those ends I enrolled with what was then The Institute for Lifelong Learning (TILL) at the University of Sheffield on an advanced field survey module. The module was not merely training, but involved the recording of newly identified features on Hallam Moors near Sheffield, with the focus on practice trenches of the First World War. There I met Helen Ullathorne and Dr. Phil Sidebottom, who were teaching the module and leading the fieldwork. I have never forgotten their kindness to me and enthusiasm for the work, which was infectious. Until then I would never have believed that I could be eager to stand all day in the driving rain of a freezing and windswept Pennine moor!

In the end I never got to survey the trenches - because volunteers were requested to record late prehistoric features nearby. That was the revelation - prehistoric archaeology on my own doorstep. I had never heard of such a thing near my own home and was surprised by how well preserved, albeit rather small, the features were. I was struck in particular by how those archaeological features seemed to be deliberately sited to take advantage of local natural features, such as the monolith-like outcrop of stone atop Headstone Bank, and the spring rising between that and the location of an embanked stone circle on the hillslope to the south-west. In turn, the entire prehistoric complex, consisting of cairnfields, standing stones, barrows and small field systems happened to overlook the head of the Rivelin Valley, with fine views eastwards almost to the confluence with the Rivelin and the Loxley. Could this be a coincidence? I don't believe in such coincidences. Then I learned from my knowledgeable fellow students that there were more prehistoric sites, including barrows that were to be found in the vicinity of the Don, many miles away, into which the Rivelin debauched. Naturally I wanted to read the book, so to speak, and find out how the prehistoric landscape was organised and what the story was for the region

in which I had lived for 20 years but knew so little about. I wanted in particular to visit some of these other places that apparently were in South Yorkshire, a place hitherto that I would not have associated with prehistoric archaeology. It turned out that there was not a guide I could turn to, not even a reliable summary of the region's prehistory. That was the beginning of the long story that has resulted in this book.

Aims and Objectives

The broad aim of this book is to fill a major lacuna in the sequence of regional archaeologies of British prehistory. Regional prehistories are known from elsewhere including Cumbria (Evans 2005), Lancashire (Barrowclough 2008), Northumberland (Waddington 1999), The Humberhead levels (Van de Noort 2004), the Midlands (Mullen 2003), and Derbyshire (Barnatt and Smith 2004; Bevan 2003; Edmonds and Seaborne 2001; Kitchen 2000). The aforementioned are merely a representative selection of a widespread aspect of archaeological research.

However, the prehistory of the river Don drainage basin (including the modern regions of South Yorkshire, North Nottinghamshire, as well as significant portions of Derbyshire and North Lincolnshire), has been largely overlooked, and no work of synthesis for this region exists to date before the Iron Age.

The character of the landscape and environment, and how that changed over time, were important considerations integral to the approach taken in the interpretation, and helped to frame the chronological period to be investigated. The period covered begins with the Early Mesolithic and ends with the close of the Bronze Age. I felt that this broad period would both be manageable in terms of data collection at an appropriate resolution of detail, and logical. This is partly due to the very different nature of the landscape prior to the Mesolithic, and the very different character of the archaeological dataset beyond the Bronze Age.

Regional archaeologies addressing issues of social identity have been undertaken in the neighbouring region of the Peak District (Edmonds and Seaborne 2001; Kitchen 2000 for example) and an opportunity presented itself here to compliment that work. The main priority, however, was to put understanding of the study area on a systematic basis by drawing together information hitherto unknown in the wider archaeological community. The limited detail available with some data, and need to record very diverse categories over

a wide area necessitated the preparation of a database with relatively low resolution of detail. Nonetheless, what follows demonstrates the great potential that the archaeological data has, and indicates what might be achieved if more detailed work on aspects of the corpus of information could be undertaken.

Overview

A crucial aspect of the interpretative approach I have taken is the integration of archaeological data, of very diverse nature and sources, with the changing environment as it was lived in by successive generations of inhabitants. The environment and the archaeological data need to be considered together, and they need to be managed separately for the sake of facilitating understanding of what are complex issues concerning formation processes and detailed and specialised arenas of study. Consequently the book is divided into two halves. Early chapters lay out the intellectual framework underpinning the interpretative approach, summarise the nature and content of previous work in the study area, and discusses issues concerning the character and formation of the database, and how the environment changed during the study period. Then a chapter describes the methodology used in analysing the data in its interpretative context. The later chapters, adopting a chronological structure, show how the analyses unfold through time. Each chapter opens with a brief summary of the relevant parts of the database, and concludes with a historical narrative. The final chapter brings together what has been learned in the previous three to propose answers to the research question. Below is a resume of the chapters and their content.

1. Introduction

An explanation of the broad aims of the project, and the research question to be answered in that context, and description of the chronological and geographical parameters of the study area. An explanation of the structure of the book and summary of chapters.

2. Regional Archaeologies, Approaches to Archaeological Regions, and the Present Study.

An examination of previous regional studies, definitions of archaeological regions and study area parameters, defining the concept of 'region'. Presentation of the research question within the context of the study area parameters as constituted here.

3. A History of Archaeological Research in the Study Area

Previous scholarship in the study area, including antiquarian and historical works, with special reference to previous archaeological research undertaken.

4. Formation Processes and the Database.

A detailed review of the processes of environmental and human activity, including archaeological activity, that have influenced the character of the database.

5. The Environment of the Study Area.

A comprehensive review of the history of environmental change across the study area until the end of the Bronze Age, utilising published data.

6. Methodology

A description of the methods by which data has been collected, recorded in the database, and analysed.

7. The Mesolithic

A comprehensive discussion of inhabitation detected with material culture, studied in its landscape contexts, in the form of a historical narrative to be developed over the following two chapters.

8. The Neolithic

9. The Bronze Age

10. Confluence of Narratives: The Don Valley in Prehistory.

A discussion of and summary of the previous chapters, with conclusion, and recommendations for further work.