

PART 6

Conclusions

'In conclusion it is only fitting to emphasise that, useful though the investigations at Star Carr have been in helping to fill a gap in the prehistory of north-western Europe, much remains to be learnt. The Star Carr excavations have opened up rather than closed a field of prehistoric research'.

(Clark 1954, 191)



Conclusions

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At the time of writing it is almost 70 years since the first evidence for Mesolithic activity at Star Carr was recorded. In that time the site has variously been interpreted as a residential base camp occupied by small family groups, a hunting camp, an industrial site and site of ritual deposition (e.g. Clark 1954, Pitts 1979, Andresen et al. 1981, Legge and Rowley-Conwy 1988, Mellars and Dark 1998, Chatterton 2003). Common to most of these interpretations is the view that Star Carr was only occupied at certain times of the year by a highly mobile group who moved to sites on the surrounding uplands or to the coast in order to exploit seasonally available resources. As Conneller (2003) has argued, these different interpretations of Star Carr have all sought to place the site into one or other of a limited range of functional categories that relate to a broader but equally limited set of practices within the surrounding landscape. In doing so, the possibilities of Mesolithic lives are reduced to a narrow range of activities undertaken within a seasonal cycle that repeats, without change, for generations (Conneller 2005).

The results of the excavations carried out at Star Carr between 2004 and 2015 have transformed our understanding of the site. In doing so they have shown that life in the Early Mesolithic was too complex to be reduced to a narrow set of site types and have revealed the significance of historical changes in the ways the site was occupied. The results of the excavations have also challenged many of our more traditional assumptions regarding the character of Mesolithic society. The small-scale excavations and fieldwalking surveys carried out in the opening years of the project showed, almost immediately, that the spatial extent of activity was far greater than Clark had appreciated, whilst the discovery of a post-built structure on the dryland (the eastern structure) and part of a second timber platform in the wetland hinted at a more settled way of life than has traditionally been assumed (Conneller et al. 2012). Once larger excavations took place the sheer scale of activity at the site became apparent, with three large timber structures in the wetland and at least four post-built structures on the ground above the lake shore. Associated with these was evidence for an extensive range of different technical and economic practices, aspects of which were structured by values relating in particular to the treatment of animal remains. Far from being uniform and unchanging, the analysis of the faunal and artefact assemblages (and in particular the programme of refitting) and the radiocarbon dating showed that the nature, focus and

Figure 14 (page 339): Photograph of the digging team on the last day of the 2015 excavation season (Copyright Star Carr Project, CC BY-NC 4.0).

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scale of these activities changed throughout the time that Star Carr was occupied, as different generations used the site in different ways.

This understanding of the site has only been possible due to the scale of the excavations. Though the small trenches and test pits excavated in the opening years of the project helped to establish the extent and the character of the archaeology, it was the open-area excavations that provided the opportunity to fully appreciate the spatial and chronological complexity of the site. Though the detrital wood scatter was first encountered during the excavation of trench SC33 in 2010, there was no indication of the character of this deposit until the area was excavated more completely from 2013. Similarly, the size of the timber platforms and their spatial and chronological relationships were only revealed during the open-area excavations even though both the central and western platform had been identified during earlier phases of work. What is more, the eastern platform lay undetected until the final season of excavation, having been missed by trench SC22 by less than half a metre. Equally, the structures on the dryland only became apparent once relatively large areas were opened and cleaned and some features were clearly missed during the excavation of some of the smaller trenches. The importance of large, open-area excavations to our understanding of the Mesolithic has also been demonstrated through the important work on other European sites, such as those at Motala, Sweden (Carlsson 2007), Lundby Mose, Denmark (see Chapter 12), and Syltholm, Denmark (Sørensen 2017), each of which have changed our understanding of the nature of society in this period.

The excavations at Star Carr have also thrown new light on the sophistication and range of Early Mesolithic technology and material culture. The platforms are particularly important in providing a rare glimpse into the scale of woodworking technologies. The woodworking traces recorded on the timbers show, conclusively, that these were the result of deliberate human action, whilst their sheer size differentiates them from any other structure from this period. Their function remains ambiguous due partly to the lack of material culture associated with them, but they were all constructed in similar parts of the site and were almost certainly laid down to stabilise the lake sediments and provide access through the wetland. The structures found on the dryland have also been an important addition to the story. Though they only survive as postholes and hollows, they have provided further evidence of Early Mesolithic architecture, whilst the associated material culture from the eastern structure in particular has revealed the complex dynamics of occupation, with material cleared out into adjacent middens and tools brought in for repair and curation.

Other forms of material culture recorded from the site are rare in the context of the British Mesolithic: the engraved shale pendant augments the sparse record we have for art whilst the bow and digging sticks are thus far unique in Britain. Added to this is the increased evidence for technical and craft activities, notably the techniques used to work wood, the methods of manufacture of the antler frontlets and the evidence for the use of plants. Drawing this data together with the results of the spatial analysis of the faunal material and the refitting of the lithic assemblage it has been possible to appreciate the richness and complexity of the material aspects of people's lives.

Although Star Carr is unique within its landscape (Conneller and Schadla-Hall 2003), we should not assume that the site is not representative of wider trends within contemporary, Early Mesolithic society. With this in mind we conclude by briefly drawing out a number of points relevant to our understanding of life in the European Early Mesolithic.

The first is that the scale of activity and the degree of permanence within the landscape seen at Star Carr stand at odds with the traditionally held view of Early Mesolithic society which is generally perceived in terms of small group sizes and a high degree of mobility (Conneller et al. 2012). The construction of the timber platforms, and perhaps to a lesser extent the dryland structures, indicate a significant investment in terms of labour and resources in this particular place in the landscape. This is matched by the long-term, enduring practices at the site which are reflected in the ongoing deposition of animal remains, osseous artefacts and worked flint into the lake edge wetland. The building of the platforms also implies the presence of relatively large numbers of people at the site given the volume of wood that was involved in their construction. This also applies to the tasks that are represented by the very large assemblage of animal bone in the area investigated by Clark. Even taking the most conservative estimate of the minimum number of individuals (MNI) represented by this material, this is a large number of animals that were hunted, processed and consumed in a relatively short period of time. When taken together with the spatial extents of the site (which cover an area of over 19,500 m²) and the scale and intensity of activity exhibited within the artefact and faunal assemblages, the evidence certainly points towards periods when there was a significant focus by relatively large numbers of people on this

particular place in the landscape. Recent analysis of the faunal assemblage from the site of Norje Sunnansund, in south-east Sweden, suggests a subsistence strategy that is consistent with a sedentary population, broadly contemporary with Star Carr (Boethius 2017). Whilst the people who lived at Star Carr were not necessarily sedentary, the site provides strong evidence for greater focus on particular places in the earliest Mesolithic (particularly in comparison with the preceding Upper Palaeolithic period), with meaning and significance attributed to specific locales. Our narratives of the Early Mesolithic need to provide more nuanced understandings of the way people inhabited their landscape and one that takes account of historical change.

The second broader point that can be taken from this project is that the use and deposition of animal remains and of other materials were structured by factors that went beyond technological and economic considerations. The selective use of antler for the manufacture of barbed points has already been noted by Conneller (2004; 2011), to which we could also add the use of elk metapodials for bodkins. There are no functional reasons for the exclusive use of these specific materials for these particular tasks (bone is used in the manufacture of projectile points in the Scandinavian Mesolithic, for example) and the decision to use them appears to relate to other values. Similarly, whilst some instances of deposition within the wetland reflect ad-hoc disposal, others are suggestive of more deliberate, structured practices. The material from the detrital wood scatter reflects the deposition of complete, articulated red deer limbs (and potentially complete carcasses) into the wetland, along with skulls of elk and red deer (either in an unmodified state or having been worked into frontlets). This is not the casual disposal of butchery waste but the deliberate deposition of large, unbutchered parts of animals (or possibly even complete animal bodies) and the selection and deposition of specific body parts (in this case, skulls). It is possible that the near-complete dog skeleton also represents a deliberate act of deposition though the lack of associated material culture makes this interpretation more tentative. There are also aspects of the assemblage in the area investigated by Clark that indicate that this has been curated (and in some cases undergone some initial selection and treatment) prior to deposition.

Acknowledging the role that cultural practices played in the treatment of particular materials has important consequences for our understanding of the European Mesolithic. To begin with, the economic nature of Mesolithic sites is often defined on the basis of the character of the faunal assemblage and particularly the representation of different elements of the animal's body. As it becomes more apparent that cultural practices can play a part in the way animal remains are treated, curated and deposited, we must revisit some of these interpretations and develop new ways of inferring forms of economic activity from faunal assemblages. Furthermore, identifying these practices provides insights into the beliefs of Mesolithic people, an area of enquiry that has had far less attention than in other periods of prehistory. Ethnographic accounts of contemporary hunter-gatherers describe how the treatment of animals is often bound up within a broader understanding of the world where non-humans are considered to be 'alive' in the same way as humans. Within these animist ontologies, the use and deposition of animal remains (as well as other materials) is governed by rules, adherence to which ensures future success in tasks such as hunting or the collection and working of plant materials. Whilst we should be cautious of imposing the beliefs of contemporary hunter-gatherers onto the past, we should explore the possibility that similar ways of seeing the world existed in the European Mesolithic and structured the way that materials made from animal bodies, and other materials, were used and discarded.

The third point is that the people who inhabited Star Carr had their own history; one that was defined both by continuity and change. To begin with, there are clear differences in the scale and intensity of activity throughout the time the site was occupied. The early centuries of occupation were characterised by low-level but repeated episodes of activity focused on relatively discrete parts of the site, with the later centuries witnessing far more extensive occupation at a more intensive scale. Forms of activity also changed as woodland became established over areas of more open ground and the lake edge wetland developed from reedswamp to fen and carr. At Star Carr itself, the development of the wetlands led to changes in the focus of activity on the site; the construction of the timber platforms occurring as conditions at the lake edge became shallower and boggy, whilst activity that had originally been limited to the dryland areas began to encroach onto the terrestrialised fen during the final centuries of occupation. Although it is difficult to see archaeologically, other aspects of people's lives would have changed as the animals they hunted and the plants they collected responded to the developing environments and the geomorphology of adjacent coastal areas changed radically. Whilst such changes may not always have been perceptible to people living through them, the inhabitants of Star Carr clearly had an awareness of their past. The central platform respects the alignment of the earlier detrital wood scatter, possibly formalising an earlier pathway through the wetland used by earlier generations.

Similarly, the deposition of material in the area investigated by Clark referenced practices that were undertaken centuries before, when antler frontlets, worked flint, barbed points and the bodies of animals were placed into the wetland by the detrital wood scatter. This continuity of practice suggests that cultural traditions were passed on through generations and that people undertaking such acts of deposition were aware that similar acts had been carried out at the same location, and in similar ways, by their ancestors. It is tempting to suggest that the practices of animal deposition that took place in the early history of the site may have structured its future reoccupation as a persistent, significant place. Through following these lines of evidence, we can begin to view the people inhabiting Star Carr, and other sites across Northern Europe, as people with history and awareness of their own place within a much wider world.