

Recent Excavations at Star Carr: New light on an old site by Dr Chantal Conneller, Lecture 2nd November 2019 at the Auditorium, Norwich Castle 2.15pm

The lecture began with an historical overview of this Mesolithic archaeological site, five miles south of Scarborough in the eastern Vale of Pickering, dating to around 9000 BC now world famous due to the preservation of artefacts found buried deep in peat. John Moore, a local amateur archaeologist carried out a small excavation at Star Carr in 1948 and found some flints, bones and antlers. Grahame Clark, lecturer of Prehistory at the University of Cambridge, excavated 1949-1951 and published his findings in 1954. A lakeshore platform contained a range of animal remains: red deer, roe deer, wild boar, elk, auroch (wild cow), birds, badger and beaver, pine marten, hedgehog, hare, fox, wolf and bear. Also flint artefacts and waste included scrapers (for cleaning animal hides), axes (for woodworking) and 'microliths' (for spears and arrow tips).

There was considerable evidence for antler and bone working into tools: 191 antler points and 21 red deer skull cap 'headdresses' (smoothed inside and pierced with holes) thought to have been worn for shamanic rites. These are rare and very few have been found in Europe. However, the site was considered to be relatively small, home to about four or five families over a short period of time. In 1985, Paul Mellars, of the Vale of Pickering Research Trust, dug a trench about 30 metres to the east of the original excavations and found timbers which had been split and worked. Pollen analysis and chronological profiles showed repeated intermittent occupation for hundreds of years.

Dr Conneller explained why they went back to Star Carr: the area was under threat from acid effects and peat shrinkage; there was little understanding of the site, with disagreement about when it was occupied, summer or winter; new interpretations by archaeologists such as Jacobi, Caulfield, Legge, and Rowley-Conwy and Tim Schadla-Hall; disagreements about whether it was a waste disposal area or a more special site for ritual offerings in Fritton lake. Her team wanted to know how large the site was and the nature of activities on the dry land; the size and nature of the platform; the extent of deposits of unusual items; the depositional context and the temporality of occupation.

In 2004 fieldwork took place looking for items on the surface and small-scale test pitting took place in 2004 and 2005. Trenches were excavated in 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2010, and the dry land revealed some more exciting finds including evidence for a structure with postholes and a hollow in the middle. This is the 'earliest house in Britain'. Unfortunately, the peat had deteriorated badly and many of the organic remains had not survived or had turned to jelly. In 2012 a European Research Council Grant enabled work on a much larger scale using highly skilled specialists. Excavations were carried out between 2013-2015 on both wet and dry areas, revealing further structures, new timber/brushwood platforms, headdresses, barbed points and antlers. This has provided a much better idea of how the site was used and occupied through time.

Numerous scientific techniques were used including, spatial and technological analysis of the peat stratification, residue analysis, ZooMS and proteomics, chemical and Bayesian data statistics plus radio carbon dating, to determine the dry land archaeology which revealed occupational history by decades into three distinct periods

9300 - 9000 saw the pioneer clearing and woodworking on a dryland structure using flint tools. Animal remains of red deer limbs (assembled as offerings not just the remains from feasting) partly articulated and surrounded by heads.

8950 - 8750 showed busy, extensive work on both dry and wet land. 3 large wooden platforms, East, Central and West. These were several metres long but basically clean of artefacts which would enable determination of use either for the launching of boats or just access to dry land.

The Eastern platform revealed a refitting cache of flint tools and antler working so perhaps this was a place for re-shaping, re-sharpening and blade repairs. A dry land structure contained a pit with organic remains (flooring and posts – possibly a house?) and scatters of flints, middens and napping tools. Animal bones were found which showed the butchery of aurochs, red deer, elk, boar with remains of fish like pike and perch. So perhaps this was a domestic dwelling for plant and hide working. The Central platform was devoid of materials.



Wooden platform structure

Photo from the Star Carr
Archaeology project
Gallery website

The Western platform was less well preserved except for post holes. This might be a craft area with butchery waste, hearths, beads, awls. The beads were found in clusters – might have been a lost necklace or a sign of manufacturing. Here a shale pendant was uncovered with engraved motifs making it the earliest known Mesolithic art in Britain; the 'barbed line' motif is comparable to styles on the Continent, particularly in Denmark.



Picture from the Star Carr
Archaeological Project
Website

Another area of deposition full of animal bones, 22 barbed points and 11 frontlets of deer as well as tools, appeared to have happened quite quickly. Antlers were reduced for barbed projectile tips and to lessen the weight of the 'headdress' but the latter remained unfinished. It seemed a deposition of a special kind rather than site refuse. There was no knapping debris, some de-hafted used tools and food waste like ribs and long bones.



Deposition
Assemblage of antlers
and tools

Photo from the Star
Carr Archaeology
Project Gallery
website

8700 – 8500 provided little evidence but the site looked like a craft area with debris such as awls, burins, scrapers and plant working.

Interpretation: Clark had seen Star Carr as small scale whereas recent excavation shows it to have been a varied and substantial site with formal deposits, domestic dwellings, a craft work 'factory' and ritual activities which persisted for over 800 years. It was persistent in terms of a memory of the past, a central platform constructed over time, scavenging and re-sharpening of flint from past occupation, continuity of deposition.

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On behalf of the 79 members and guests present, the President, Andrew Hutcheson, thanked Dr Conneller for a very detailed and informative lecture well illustrated with photos and distribution diagrams. She then answered a number of questions from the floor. Asked whether the site could be a coastline harbour facility, she felt there was no real evidence of marine activity. As to evidence of other sites elsewhere she said this had been the impetus behind Clarke's excavation and he had drawn parallels with Maglemose in Denmark, but few places bear comparison in the UK or elsewhere in Scandinavia. Star Carr is a unique Mesolithic site. There were several questions about the antler frontlets, the meaning of the shapes and possible colouration or painting, whether they were used as disguises for hunting or for ritual costumes.