

CHAPTER I

THE NEOLITHIC AGE

“That is clever,” said Puck. “How truly you shape it!” KIPLING.

INTRODUCTION

THE study of the Neolithic Age in this book is almost entirely confined to an examination of the distribution of the remains referable to it, in order that a topographical basis may be available for comparison when the evidence relating to subsequent periods is reviewed. Unless the range of Neolithic man in the district be determined, the significance of the distribution of finds attributable to his successors cannot be correctly appreciated. Had this not been evident, I should have commenced my survey in the first Age of Metal, as being, in the present state of our knowledge, a more convenient starting point.

The chief problem that arises for consideration, in preparing a topographical survey of the Neolithic Age, is what to include. Numerous stone implements occur as surface finds in the Cambridge Region, such as axes—chipped, ground, or polished; adzes; maces, holed axes, and axehammers; hammerstones; chisels, picks and fabricators, awls, scrapers and trimmed flakes; slugs, leaf-shaped tools and daggers; arrows—leaf-shaped, tanged, winged or barbed; gouges, and chipped or polished discs. The majority of these forms are recognized as being of the Neolithic Age, but others, which must be discussed in detail, are known to occur in deposits dating in the Bronze and later Ages.

Some of the flint used for making implements was mined at the well-known site at Grimes Graves, Weeting [N], and it is necessary to determine whether the industry centred here comes within the scope of my survey.

THE GRIMES GRAVES INDUSTRY

The mines at Grimes Graves, Weeting, three miles north of Brandon on the Little Ouse, are of especial importance, equalled perhaps only by those of Cissbury in this country and Spiennes in Belgium. The area covers over 20 acres; and the number of pits is estimated at 346.

Important excavations on the site have been carried out on two occasions—in 1870 by Greenwell and in 1914 by the Prehistoric Society of East Anglia, which published an elaborate report (*P.S.E.A. Rep.* 1915) on the work¹.

In the former excavations a ground basalt axe was discovered, but its association with the mines is open to doubt; in the latter case no trace of polished stone or of metal was found in the galleries. Hammerstones of quartzite and flint, rough chipped axes and other implements of flint, flakes innumerable, and picks of deerhorn were found in both series of excavations, and the culture picture resembled that at Cissbury in Sussex explored by Pitt-Rivers. The miners lived on the spot, their hearths being found in the cone-shaped hollows formed by deserted and half-filled pits, and piles of their chippings and rejects occur on the lips of their shafts.

Some authorities (R. A. Smith (1915*a*) and A. E. Peake, the director of the 1914 excavations (1917), may be cited) consider that the forms of the implements indicate an early Upper Palaeolithic date. The recent discovery by A. L. Armstrong (1921) on a living floor at the Graves of naturalistic engravings upon flint crust, seems to provide an additional argument in favour of this view. On the other hand, the only skull found in the 1914 excavations was “not markedly Palaeolithic,” “the shells and fauna generally point to Early Neolithic times,” and that pottery was used by the miners also suggests Neolithic date.

The view that the mines present a survival of Palaeolithic culture into the Early Neolithic Age seems best to fit the facts, and finds of Grimes Graves type are therefore marked on the map. It may be noted that apart from the Weeting area these forms are rare in surface finds in the Cambridge Region, and their exclusion would not result in any modification of importance in the distribution picture here presented.

STONE IMPLEMENTS PROBABLY OF POST-NEOLITHIC DATE

We must now consider the implements which are probably post-Neolithic, and which ought therefore to be excluded from our map of finds of the Neolithic Age.

Holed Axeheads. Numerous examples of holed implements and weapons of simple form—perforated pebbles (maceheads) and

¹ This report contains an account of previous work on the site. Accounts of further work in 1916 and subsequent years will be found in the *Proceedings, P.S.E.A.*

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celt-like tools, the latter probably used as adzes—occur in the district. That most of these are of Neolithic date is probable¹. The elaborately wrought axes and axehammers, sometimes with upper and lower faces parallel, sometimes with expanding blade, such as the fine example from Chesterford [E] in Walden Museum and those figured on Plate V, 3 and 6, are, however, in a different category. The drilled hole is usually a perfect cylinder (which is not the case with the simpler forms mentioned above), and the type belongs in Scandinavia to the cist-grave period—the beginning of the II millennium, according to Montelius. Such weapons have in Britain frequently been met with in Bronze Age burials (though rarely in this district) and the type certainly here belongs to the early Age of Metal.

Maceheads and hammers of deerhorn with cylindrical perforations have been found in the fens, and perforated maceheads of stone of a form natural to the former material are known. These doubtless all belong to the early Age of Metal. Examples from Burwell Fen are on Plate V, 4, 5. See also R. A. Smith (1920, pp. 6–8). J. Evans (1897, p. 193) records a quartzite axehammer found with an “urn” on Wilton Heath [N].

Daggers. Thin finely-chipped pointed-oval blades of flint, some of which show lateral notches (presumably to assist in fixing the weapon to a handle), occur not infrequently in the district. Typical specimens from Prickwillow near Ely, Haslingfield, Quy Fen and other sites are in the local collection and two are figured on Plate V, 9, 10. Dr Lucas of Burwell has a similar blade of black flint with deep side notches, derived from Burwell Fen.

Evidence of date for these local examples is entirely lacking; but identical forms have elsewhere been found associated with beakers and with jet buttons with V perforations and the whole series may belong to the beginning of the II millennium—the transition stone-bronze period. R. A. Smith (1920, p. 5) points out that the thickening at the butt-end, well marked in some of our examples, suggests connection with Scandinavia, where similar blades are of the passage-grave phase of the later Neolithic.

The doubt that may exist as to whether all these blades are of late date as is here suggested, does not affect the group next to be considered, of which we have some dozen fragmentary examples, all from N.W. Suffolk, the majority from North Stow in West Stow parish (W. G. Clarke, 1918, p. 546).

¹ It should, however, be noted that in the Late Bronze Age midden-trench at Swaffham Prior, referred to on p. 47, a water-worn pebble partially drilled in hour-glass fashion was found. There was no reason to doubt its contemporaneity with the other finds.

These are finely chipped handles of daggers—thrown away, doubtless, when the blade was broken off—of the developed Danish type, influenced by metal forms, and in Scandinavia associated with the cist-grave culture and the latest phase of the Neolithic. Attribution to the transition period in Britain may be regarded as certain.

Arrowheads. Both the leaf-shaped and the tanged types commonly occur in the district. They are found together in Neolithic deposits (Warren, 1912 *a*, pp. 110 and 114), but the tanged forms appear to have been in frequent use in the Bronze Age, and I have not marked isolated finds of such on the map.

Hammerstones. These are met with locally in inhumation burials of the Bronze and Early Iron Ages, and cannot be held indicative of Neolithic settlement unless associated with objects manifestly of that Age.

Scrapers and Trimmed Flakes. The rougher forms of flint implements such as scrapers and trimmed flakes were, it is certain, commonly in domestic use all through the Bronze and even in the Early Iron Age, and records of their presence cannot alone be used as evidence of the use by Neolithic man of any given site.

Such, for example, occurred in the late Bronze Age trench at Swaffham Prior (see p. 47); they were found by A. J. Evans (1890, p. 319) in the La Tène cemetery at Aylesford; and by the writer in a Romano-British deposit at the Fleam Dyke. Finds of these implements are therefore excluded from the map, unless their character and associations mark them as definitely of Neolithic date.

There are a few other (rare) types, such as gouges, long narrow chisels of flint, axes and adzes with expanding blades, which, one may suppose, are unlikely to have been produced independently of metal exemplars. I have, however, included these, since we have no definite evidence that they are of the Metal Age. And, in any event, error in dealing with exceptional forms is relatively unimportant. On the other hand, while fully admitting the difficulty of dating surface finds of stone implements I consider that with the reservations already made, we may safely refer the great majority of implements of “Neolithic” types found in the district to a period prior to the introduction of metal.

We may now proceed to examine the topographical distribution of “Neolithic” implements as thus defined, commencing in the north-east.

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TOPOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION OF FINDS

Immense numbers of implements of all types are found on the sandy heaths and warrens in the River Lark—Little Ouse area¹. Chipped axes of flint, lanceheads, knives, borers, scrapers, fabricators, etc., are here especially common, in addition to the more highly finished (polished and partially polished) types; and arrowheads also are frequently met with. Sturge (1911, p. 253) remarked that almost every type of implement described by Evans was to be found in Suffolk; and he wrote with special reference to the district under review. W. A. Dutt (1911, pp. 259, 261) emphasizes moreover the striking abundance of all forms of Neolithic implements in this area. “Thousands of implements,” he says, “have been found in the two Icklingham parishes”; “Santon Downham has been very prolific of neolithic implements many of which are of very finished workmanship”; “Mildenhall has produced an immense number of implements,” including arrowheads and polished and unpolished axes; “a very great number of implements,” especially arrowheads, have been found at Lakenheath, and on the warrens round Thetford. Moreover, there is not a parish in the district from which a number of such implements has not been obtained, and numerous implements have been found in the adjacent fens, especially in Burnt Fen.

This abundance implies a prolonged period of occupation, as well as a considerable population. The range of types found suggests that occupation has been unbroken from Palaeolithic times onwards; and it is probable that a certain number of surface finds recorded from this area as Neolithic are of earlier date. The number of implements undoubtedly Neolithic is, however, large enough to justify the estimates given above as to the richness of the locality.

Forms which on various grounds are thought to belong to the earliest phase of the Neolithic occur less frequently elsewhere in our district; and the following reason has been offered for this. In a note to Tansley's *Types of British Vegetation* (p. 97) J. E. Marr remarks that the East Anglian Heath Region “exhibits the nearest approach to steppe conditions to be found within the British Isles.” “It is doubtful,” he continues, “if this area ever bore natural woodland”; while, as has already been pointed out, even the chalk escarpment may be held to have borne in parts natural forest. W. G. Clarke

¹ Until the XIX century this was for the most part a treeless unenclosed waste of heath; the surface soil being a layer of sand, in some parts covering boulder clay of no great thickness, in others resting directly on the chalk.

(1912) concludes that "Breckland" therefore was perhaps better suited to the mode of life of Early Neolithic peoples than any other part of England.

Though exact quantitative analysis of the products of so rich an area is impossible, an examination parish by parish of such of the finds from the district as are on record discloses interesting variations, and an attempt is made to indicate graphically on the map the results thus obtained. The Icklingham-Mildenhall-Lakenheath area and the fens adjacent are undoubtedly the richest, while the Weeting-Santon-Santon Downham-Brandon district is second only to it in productivity. Finds rapidly become less numerous as one proceeds eastward and the soil becomes less sandy (producing a modification of steppe conditions); they diminish also in the district south of the River Lark, doubtless for the same reason.

Labelled specimens in museums give little help in determining the most prolific areas within a given parish in this district; but it is generally agreed that implements are most numerous nearest the rivers and the fens, and least numerous on sites most distant from a water supply. The well-head known as Hunwell Spring doubtless accounts for a number of finds near Elveden¹.

The only area which can in our district compare with the warrens in productivity and in range of types is the fen and its borders east of the River Cam between Quy and Wicken. The chalk upland here, suitable for pasture and settlement, with perennial springs of pure water issuing from its lower slopes, forms the shore-line of the fen teeming with fish and fowl; and the number and variety of the implements derived hence, especially from Burwell (which has yielded axes of Cissbury type), may indicate occupation all through the Neolithic Age. In these eastern fens lanceheads, arrowheads, knives, saws, daggers, etc., of the most delicate workmanship are preserved as nowhere else in the district, save on the unploughed sandy warrens.

The only important hoard in our district comes from the fen borders. On a site adjacent to the Temple Springs at Wilbraham was found, in a nest, a group of four partially ground flint axes 5-6 inches in length, apparently unused, and all of the same type. These are preserved at Wilbraham Temple; the rarity of such finds makes the discovery worthy of special mention. Two chisels and an axe of flint, found together on Newmarket Heath and now in Dr Lucas' collection, also deserve record here.

¹ See Sturge (1911), Dutt (1911), W. G. Clarke (1905 and 1907, p. 397), and Clinch (1901); J. Evans (1897, Index), Clarke and Hewitt (1914, p. 432) also give useful information. The collections in the British Museum and in the Norwich, Ipswich, Cambridge and other local museums are representative. The *Proceedings, P.S.E.A.*, contain much detailed and general information.

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Dr Lucas of Burwell informs me that in Burwell Fen the stone (and bronze) implements are found lying on the clay below the peat, and it is on record that finds in other fens have been similarly situated. How is this to be accounted for? The probability that subsidence took place in the fenlands as elsewhere in Britain in Neolithic times has been referred to in the introduction. Reid (1913) holds that this downward movement ceased early in the II millennium. Warren (1912 *a* and 1919) has established the fact of subsidence of the Essex coast before and during occupation by the beaker folk.

A subsidence of the Fen Basin contemporary with that described by Warren would readily explain the occurrence of scattered implements on the clay or marl as in Burwell Fen, and the surprising number of implements, almost all of stone, in Burnt Fen. We may suppose that the Undley-Mildenhall promontory in Neolithic times extended nearly to Littleport, and that the Burnt Fen area was part of the East Anglian heathland, so rich in remains of this Age. The growth of peat in the shallow meres produced by subsidence was doubtless slow. Soham Mere and Whittlesea Mere may be regarded as the last surviving patches of open water in our area.

The distribution of the remaining finds in the region covered by our map may now be briefly analysed.

A few implements are met with in the fens west of the River Cam—at Whittlesea Mere, Manea and in the Isle of Ely—and finds in the Old West River at Aldreth may indicate an ancient ford near the present High Bridge.

In the Cam Valley it is noticeable that finds and sites rich in worked flint occur in parishes adjacent to the main river and its tributaries, or as at Oakington, Histon, Coton and Cottenham on patches of gravel or dry chalk upland which here in primitive times were probably enveloped or bordered by forest. The barrenness of the Great Ouse Valley is in striking contrast to that of the Cam, and suggests that *narrow* belts of open country offered comparatively little inducement to settlers.

The upper waters of the several streams which, running south and east, drain the densely forested uplands of Hertfordshire, Essex and Suffolk, provide the only possible routes in primitive times from the coastal districts and the lower Thames Valley through or into so forbidding an area: on their banks, moreover, well-drained gravel terraces replace the cold wet claylands. Into these natural gateways, then, pushed Neolithic man; and we find traces of his passage or settlement in almost every one.

A few finds, on the line which traffic proceeding along the chalk belt is forced to follow by the nature of the country and the position of the fords across the Essex Cam, the Bourn, the Kennett and the Lark, suggest that the "Icknield Way" may be as old as the Neolithic Age; consideration of the Long Barrow at Therfield [H] will provide us with further reasons for supposing that the route from the south-west along the chalk escarpment was in use at all events during the last phase of the Age. The traditional alignment is indicated on the map; the Way is discussed in detail in Chapter IV.

It is more necessary in this than in any later Age to warn the reader that the picture of settlement and of distribution of population presented by the Regional Map will be misleading, unless it be borne in mind that it is a composite picture, and cannot accurately reproduce any given phase of an Age the duration of which may possibly be counted in millennia. It may well be that in the closing phases of the Neolithic the preponderance of population in the East Anglian heath district was appreciably modified, and that it was then more in accord with that which is manifest in the Bronze Age; the map of this Age will suggest that the chalk escarpment bordering the fen and the River Cam maintained as large a population as did the heath.

Our knowledge of the actual sites where Neolithic man dwelt is scanty. Apart from the heath district and the region round Saffron Walden (Morris, 1922) only a few records deal with sites rich in flint flakes, scrapers and cores probably of the period. Detailed record of living-floors or middens such as would give indications of the mode of life, etc., of the inhabitants in the Stone Age, is conspicuously absent.

THE VALUE OF THE MAP RECORD

It is a widely held opinion that the preparation of a topographical map of Neolithic finds in this district is useless; that the whole of East Anglia was occupied in the period, and that implements are found everywhere. With this view I disagree; and it is indeed clear from the map that finds though widely distributed fall into well-defined areas and alignments, and are in fact almost entirely confined to those parts which under natural conditions may be assumed to have been more or less dry, well drained, and open, or which provided a line of route more or less easy, from one open district to another. The barrenness of the large triangle of forest west of the Cam, in particular, is striking evidence of the correctness of the contention here advanced, and of the importance to the archae-

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ologist of a study of soils and subsoils. The scanty traces of occupation of the fen islands may be due partly to their wooded character, partly to their inaccessibility. The possibility that malaria may have hindered occupation both of fen and of forest cannot be excluded, but it could hardly have been a controlling factor.

In the great majority of cases we know nothing of the provenance of an implement beyond its derivation from a given parish; it may therefore be urged that in many cases where a parish contains both open and forest land the site mark has without justification been placed on the open country (in order to bolster up a case) and that the validity of the conclusion arrived at is thus seriously impaired.

The principle adopted, in this and subsequent period maps, where the exact provenance of an object is unknown, is to place the suitable symbol on the modern village, as the centre of the parish¹. It is a definite, simple and obvious system, and precludes bias, conscious or unconscious. That the village is usually to be found on the dry well-drained site rather than the cold wet forest land is indeed true, and may be held to increase the probability of Neolithic man having made a similar choice; but the real answer to the criticism lies in the fact that of the many parishes situated entirely in forest country in our district hardly one has yielded undoubted Neolithic implements.

That Neolithic man hunted in the woodlands may be taken as certain; that outcasts took refuge there is highly probable; and that stone implements will from time to time, here and there, be found in such areas is to be anticipated; but it is clear from the rarity of such finds hitherto recorded, that settlements of this Age in the forest were very infrequent.

Polished axes and other implements have been found in the forest at Chrishall [E], and a polished axe at Sampford [E]. Rude implements (flakes and scrapers), possibly of Bronze Age or later date, are, as Dr Garrod informs me, here and there found in the forest area north of Huntingdon.

THE STONE AXE

It is not proposed to discuss in this chapter the character or distribution of the several types of implements found in the district. A brief note on the most characteristic weapon of the Age, the axe, is, however, desirable.

The axe, chipped, ground, or polished, is the commonest of all

¹ Save in the East Anglian heath area, in the present Age only, where a different method is adopted, for reasons already stated. Fen finds, moreover, are in this and subsequent Ages sited broadcast over the particular fen from which they come.

implements deriving from areas other than the heathlands of the north-east. It need not of course be concluded that the *variety* of weapons and tools (of which axes form only a small percentage) found on the heathlands is a phenomenon peculiar thereto; the probable explanation is that the collection of implements in these areas is carried out mainly by experts, and all artifacts are sought for; in other districts implements of high finish or striking form alone would be likely to be preserved by labourer or ploughman. It follows that the recorded finds in such districts inadequately represent the activities of Neolithic man therein; and were knowledge more widespread discoveries indicating closer settlement might confidently be looked for¹.

The range of axe-form found in the district is bewildering, and we have very slight data to go upon in indicating a chronological succession of types; but examples of practically every variety—from the (presumed) earliest to the latest—met with in Eastern England are to be found here.

The chronology of the stone axe in the Middle and Late Neolithic has been worked out in Scandinavia by Montelius and his school; and if Northern parallels could be accepted, a broad classification would be possible for this country. The axe of chipped flint with pointed butt, for example, met with in our eastern fens as well as on the East Anglian heathlands is a pre-dolmen type dated by them early in the IV millennium; its successor, the thin-butted axe, common in our region, belongs to the dolmen period (3400—2400 B.C.). Late forms of this axe showing squared sides are common; but the square section ultimately reached, by a development of this process, in Scandinavia, is represented in Cambridgeshire only by a few examples the provenance of which is not satisfactorily established.

The finely wrought and highly polished axes with sharp-pointed butt, of thin and flat or flattened-oval section, made of jadeite or other semi-precious stones, magnificent examples of which from Warkworth Street, Cambridge, Histon and Burwell Fen are in the Cambridge Museum, probably came from Brittany, where they are contemporary with the dolmens and “mark a definite phase of the Neolithic”; but their ultimate place of origin is obscure. The Histon specimen is figured on Plate V.

The present state of knowledge of this subject has been admirably reviewed by R. A. Smith (1918, esp. table on p. 499, and 1919 *a*, pp. 17–20).

¹ A recent survey by Morris (1922) gives the information we require for Saffron Walden and its neighbourhood, and confirms the opinion expressed in the text.