

Pieces of Landscapes: An Archaeological Perspective

Dr Jodie Lewis

*Senior Lecturer and Course Leader for Archaeology
Institute of Science and the Environment
University of Worcester*

Introduction

Every summer I take University of Worcester archaeology students on an excavation, as part of their practical training. These are research excavations, undertaken to target and answer specific questions about British prehistory but they are also teaching experiences, designed to expose students to an archaeological problem “in the field” and equip them with the theoretical and methodological skills to solve it. The twin goals of teaching and research are thus firmly intertwined.

During these excavations, we have worked on a range of prehistoric sites, spanning the Early Mesolithic (8000BC) to the Early Bronze Age (1500BC). These have included settlement sites, ceremonial sites, ritual sites and funerary sites. These sites, disparate in time, can be united by studying how past humans incorporated “pieces of landscape” into their lives and subsequently the archaeological record. During the course of this paper, I will detail aspects of four of the teaching- research excavations I have undertaken, concentrating upon how parts and pieces of the landscape may have been used and manipulated in prehistory.

The Sites

Langley’s Lane

The site of Langley’s Lane lies in the Wellow Valley, on the lower flanks of the Mendip Hills in Somerset. We were alerted to the research potential of this site by the high numbers of Mesolithic flints present in the top soil after ploughing. Previous work had shown that this was a site where tufa, a calcium carbonate precipitate had formed during the Mesolithic period. Our excavations in 2004 and 2005 were concerned with identifying the horizontal and vertical extent of the tufa spread across

the valley. The most intriguing aspect of the excavation was the uncovering of a series of small pits at the very edge of the tufa formation where the tufa on-laps the adjacent slopes. Two of these were *c.*0.2m in diameter and circular in plan. The most easterly of the pits contained a handful of late Mesolithic flint work, mainly narrow blades, whereas the most westerly pit contained a small ball of tufa. This appeared to have been formed between the hands and deposited into the pit, which was subsequently backfilled. Two other slightly larger pits were also found, containing stone, worked flint and, in one case, fossils.

The site is of interest for two reasons. First and foremost, these ‘caches’ of flint blades, stone, fossils and the tufa ball seem difficult to explain on utilitarian grounds.. The second interesting point is that the pits seem to have been deliberately fashioned immediately adjacent to the tufa edge. Mesolithic activity at or near tufa deposits has previously been recorded, but the potential significance of the edge of such deposits, as markers in the landscape, has not previously been fully explored. My co-director, Dr Paul Davies of Bath Spa University, has previously argued that tufa deposits may have been viewed as ‘magical’ in the past, since to the observer the pale tufa seemingly ‘appears’ from ordinary looking water as the calcium carbonate, of which these deposits are formed, precipitates out from a soluble state. Substantial seasonal tufa deposition would, at times, render the landscape ‘white’ with tufa coating vegetation and the surface of the soil. It may be the case that these deposits were placed to respect such a boundary in the landscape.

Charterhouse

In 2006, we turned to the important Roman lead mining town of Charterhouse in Somerset. Work by a local archaeological group had revealed a series of geophysical anomalies, one of which appeared to be an enclosure. It is undisputed that the Romans “took over” an existing lead mining operation, its origins in the Later Bronze Age, but no-one has ever found evidence for the pre-Roman activity. The putative enclosure then was seen as a possible prehistoric site related to early extraction.

Briefly, our excavations revealed the geophysical anomalies to relate to natural geological features and not archaeology. However, the excavations uncovered substantial evidence for Early and Late Mesolithic activity at the site, including a deep

pit containing flints. Other work over the last 50 years has revealed evidence that Charterhouse was a significant place in the Mesolithic hunter-gatherer landscape and our work reiterated this. However, no-one has asked why it may have been an important locale and perhaps a clue is given by the “pieces of landscape” present in the ground.

I am speaking here of the pieces of heavy, silver-grey, metallic sparkling galena – lead – that would have been revealed by natural soil disturbances such as animal burrowing and tree throws. It has been suggested that whilst repeated visits to certain locales during the Mesolithic may be explained in functional terms it may also be that certain places were important cosmologically, that they had symbolic significance to the inhabitants. It is not far-fetched to conceive that places on Mendip with unusual properties, such as those where white tufa or silver galena occur, may have had an especial symbolic significance. Off Mendip, a parallel may come from Alderley Edge in Cheshire, where lithic scatters of Mesolithic date have been found in areas with extensive deposits of copper. These and other materials (such as ochre) may have been viewed as magical and talismanic and put to a variety of purposes, perhaps including their use as pigments for body decoration.

Stanton Drew

I am going to move forwards in time now, to the site of Stanton Drew. Stanton Drew, south of Bristol, is the site of the second largest stone circle in Britain. There are in fact 3 stone circles and recent geophysical survey revealed that each contained earlier timber features, including the largest timber circle in Europe. The complex at Stanton Drew dates to the Later Neolithic and would have been an important centre for ritual and ceremonial activities. In 2002 I established the Stanton Drew Environs Project, which involved excavation, test-pitting, geological studies of the stones and environmental sampling and field walking to better understand this nationally important monument. Here, I will concentrate on some observations about the stones of the circles.

At least four types of stone were used in the construction of the monuments – two types of sandstone, dolomitic conglomerate and oolitic limestone. All of the potential sources occur within 12 kilometres of the site but the stone that occurs closest to the

site (Inferior Oolite) is represented by only a few stones, suggesting that factors other than convenience were in operation. The conglomerates are present in the largest quantities and they are to be found about 8kms distant. These are striking stones – knobble, shaggy, conspicuously red from iron impregnation and containing large crystals of quartz. Indeed, antiquarian accounts note how this makes the stones “shine eminently and reflect the sunbeams with great lustre” (William Stukeley). Quartz was a highly significant and regarded material in prehistory, seen in its use in monuments, pit deposits and indeed even laid surfaces, such as the Herefordshire “Rotherwas Ribbon”. The source of these stones at Stanton Drew is thought to be the slopes Mendip Hills, where they lay in blocks on the surface. I would suggest that the aesthetic and symbolic qualities of this stone, together with the way it occurs in advantageous surface slabs, is responsible for its dominance. Writing in the 19th century, Lloyd-Morgan stated:

"I have no doubt that superstition or religion supplied the motive force for the energy which displayed itself in the removal...of blocks of rock so huge; and I should suggest that the germ of this lay in the attribution of the occurrence of huge blocks of stone lying on the surface to superhuman or diabolic agency." (Lloyd-Morgan 1887:49)

Old Down

My final example moves us even further forward, this time to the Early Bronze Age. In 2007 and 2008, we carried out fieldwork at an undated mound in Chilcompton, on the Eastern Mendip Hills. The low, oval mound had been suggested to be a Neolithic long barrow, Bronze Age round barrows or a heap of spoil relating to the adjacent, decommissioned small railway. Our excavations quickly revealed the mound to be in fact two Bronze Age round barrows, funerary monuments dating to around 1800BC. They were rich in well-preserved archaeological finds, including cremated human remains, shale, jet, amber and faience beads, bronze metalwork and miniature pottery vessels. This is a very important excavation, for modern round barrow excavations are incredibly rare, with most evidence derived from unscientific 200-year old antiquarian explorations. The barrows had a complex construction sequence and we are able to closely date every phase, which has resulted in national academic interest in our project. However, what I would like to mention two aspects of the excavations which

fit into the theme of this paper. The first is related to the construction of the eastern barrow. We found that this monument was like a “Russian Doll”, composed of five mounds of stone and turf, each capping and enclosing the previous. There was no practical need to make the barrow from alternate layers of turf and stone, suggesting a deliberate elaboration, a meaning to the use of these materials. Interestingly, the barrow had no quarry ditch and neither was the turf stripped from the ground before it was constructed, meaning that the materials *had* to have come from elsewhere. It is possible that this was part of the ritual of construction, with different groups responsible for the acquisition of different materials. It might also indicate structuring principles in operation, which dictated the way materials could be used together in the Earlier Bronze Age.

My second point about this site concerns a late phase of activity at the two barrows. One of the final, visible, Bronze Age acts was to place circular kerbs of stones into the margins of both mounds. It is the choice of these stones that is of interest. The stones were white, weathered, chalky and oddly-shaped. Their precise origin is unknown but they were introduced from elsewhere, most likely from a streambed. Their placement would have made the barrows stand out. In this green-brown landscape, the two rings of white stones would have caught the light of the sun and the moon. Yet, the shape of the individual stones too is unusual – those involved in the project thought that they had a bonelike quality and all of our visitors too asked if they were bones. Is this deliberate, Bronze Age skeuomorphism that also conveys the message that these were monuments of the dead, monuments that contained bones?

Conclusion

In this paper I have concentrated on the prehistoric use of “pieces of landscape” – minerals, turves, stones, fossils – that may have been selected because of real or perceived qualities they possessed. Such qualities could have been aesthetic, functional, textural, symbolic or superstitious and these may have been enmeshed within broader meanings of people, places and histories. Studying such “pieces of landscape” may take us just one step closer to understanding these.