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NOMADS IN 'WATERLAND'? PREHISTORIC TRANSHUMANCE AND FENLAND ARCHAEOLOGY

CHRISTOPHER EVANS

Until recently the prehistoric Fens could, with some justification, be considered as a relative cultural backwater. Certainly the 'openness' of its topographically subtle post-drainage landscape has influenced archaeological interpretations and the prehistoric Fens have often been envisaged as a perpetually open frontier or as a cultural no-man's-land. In response to its relative archaeological invisibility there has been a tradition of interpreting Fenland prehistory in reference to pastoralism and seasonal migrations (mobile pastoralism). Yet the results of aerial photography and the Fenland field surveys over recent years (i.e. Hall 1981) have begun to fill out its buried landscape with a vast number of hitherto unknown domestic sites/scatters and monuments, which clearly challenges the status of the Fen as some manner of drowned steppe.

Recent environmental research in the Fens has shown that what was understood to be a single episode of marine flooding (Fen Clay) in the 'inland' peat Fens must now be considered as a series of marine transgressions. This extended transgression sequence and the later prehistoric dates for peat formation in the more marginal areas of the Southern Fen (i.e. c. 1000 B.C. near Earith) suggest that given areas of the Fen margin may have been drier in prehistory than has been previously thought. It is, therefore, gradually becoming apparent that the potential for flood-free grazing in the pre-1st millennium B.C. Fens was greater than has been postulated (Pryor and French 1985, 304). As a consequence of this relative retreat of the prehistoric wetland/dryland 'frontier', it seems appropriate to re-assess the concept of Fen-related lowland transhumance systems. Transhumant land-use models have been frequently employed in Fenland prehistory and in recent years have been suggested in explanations relating to

such diverse phenomena as Neolithic causewayed enclosures (Pryor 1982), Bronze Age drove/field systems (Pryor 1976; 1980) and low-lying Iron Age forts (Clarke 1972). Yet Pryor recently has suggested a potential agricultural role in the causewayed enclosure at Etton (Pryor 1985a, 306), and previously he interpreted the nucleated Iron Age (Cat's Water) settlement at Fengate as being permanently occupied and supported by a mixed farming regime (Pryor 1984a, 210ff). These examples, and the discovery of ard-marks sealed beneath Middle Iron Age house floors at the Upper Delphs, Haddenham (Evans and Hodder 1986), could suggest that prehistoric Fenland pastoralism may have been over-emphasised at the expense of its arable component.

Prehistoric Fenland transhumance, moreover, has become something of an accepted truism in recent archaeological texts (i.e. Taylor 1977, 26), due, in no small part, to the romance of 'life on the hoof' and the manner in which nomadism serves to explain the archaeologically ephemeral. In a Fenland context this popular romanticism is particularly acute where (perhaps as a reaction to the dissection of its former watery landscape by recent agro-industry) a semi-mythical image of a rebellious and free-spirited, pre-drainage population has been celebrated (i.e. Swift 1984; cf. Darby 1940, 119–120). In this regard, it is relevant that the 'lawless' Ancient Britons who inhabited the pre-Roman Fens have been envisaged as not unlike the latter-day 'Fen Tigers', who opposed and disrupted its modern drainage (Wells 1830, 55–56; Barrett 1963, 174–185). Certainly we must guard against reading directly back into prehistory the cultural landscape of the historic Fens. It is, after all, the surface deposits which have given the Fens its character which, until

recently, so thoroughly masked its prehistory, and the price that archaeology must pay for the privilege of investigating a *buried landscape* must, by definition, be a hiatus with the historic present. Out of sheer necessity, earlier researches into Fenland archaeology often projected back into prehistory the 'wet' character of its historically known pre-drainage environment. Given this research framework, it is therefore not surprising that the distinctive watery environment of the historic Fens was understood to be a predominant and constant factor in its regional development, and to have dictated a cultural and subsistence uniformity in prehistory (Fox 1923, 119). Yet as a growing body of environmental evidence begins to suggest that the prehistoric Fenland(s) varied both locally and temporally, then the presumption of a Fen-wide prehistoric 'unity' is not necessarily valid.

We are at a stage in Fenland prehistoric studies when its basic research framework (environmental sequence, site distribution and density) is being drastically reassessed. In this current state of research upheaval, it would certainly be rash and premature to propose definitive models of regional prehistoric land-use. It is, nevertheless, relevant to question aspects of our established interpretative framework, as it is this largely 'inherited' framework which will influence the course of future investigations and determine the questions we will ask of our data in forthcoming regional analyses.

In all fairness it should be stressed that the recent application of transhumant land-use models must be understood in the context of working hypotheses and that its exponents did not propose transhumance as a definitive answer to all the problems of Fenland prehistory. In fact, a number of archaeologists are now (c. post 1984) willing largely to abandon transhumance as a major factor in the region's prehistory and this reappraisal, if nothing else, is a sign of a healthy discipline. It is, however, precisely because this shift in interpretation marks such a major break in the 'tradition' of Fenland prehistory, and because the concept of transhumance has been so very influential, that it seems appropriate at this time to re-evaluate the concept of prehistoric seasonal Fenland-use and community migration. To this end, this paper will also address the more general issues of the role of

migration-related explanations in the creation of a national and more latterly a regional prehistoric research framework, and the development of archaeological context.

THE AGE OF ABRAHAM

The quantity of prehistoric implements recovered from the Fen since its drainage and the distribution of barrows in the immediate uplands, have meant that it has generally been accepted that the pre-Roman Fens supported a population. Stukeley, for example, in his *Itinerarium Curiosum* (1724), remarked: 'We may be well assured that the whole country was well inhabited by the Ancient Britons both as affording abundant pasturage and in being so very secure from incursions and depredations of war and troublesome neighbours, by the different fens upon the edge of the high country.' In early researches into Fenland (pre-)history the attention given to the role of agriculture in pre-Roman times partially depended on the extent to which authors were familiar with classical sources and, alternatively, the degree to which they stressed its unique environmental conditions. The relative proximity of the Fens to the continent has suggested, to some scholars, a source of indirect cultural contact: 'On the seaward portion, the ancient Fenlanders were, like the other inhabitants of south-eastern Britain, in advance of the natives of the more inland and northern parts – practised, too, in a rude method of agriculture . . . these things belonged to the then civilization of the parts adjacent to the continent' (Miller and Skertchly 1878, 31). Yet, because of the backward projection of its historic environment into prehistoric times, relatively little attention has been given to the possibility of a major arable component in Fenland prehistory (cf. Lethbridge below), and instead, its potential for pasture, hunting, and fishing has frequently been emphasised. This was based on the assumption by some (pre-)historians that farming could only be practiced in the region if the Fens themselves were drained, which would have entailed a level of labour organisation ('civilisation') of which it was thought 'rude' Ancient Britons were incapable (Wells 18: 0, 51ff). It should, however, be emphasised that the recovery of large bog-oaks and animal skeletons from the peat in the

course of post-medieval drainage has meant that the region has been understood to have once supported a 'fruitful country', which was only later submerged by flooding (Miller and Skertchly 1878, 29). It was, therefore, the date and the extent to which the Fen basin was thought to have been inundated, which determined whether historians envisaged the pre-Roman Fenland as some manner of a drowned 'earthly paradise' abounding in natural resources or as a watery refuge and a wild morass (Wells 1830, 55).¹

If we wish to examine the application of seasonal land-use models in Fenland archaeology we must, however, look beyond a strictly regional context. For the disciplinary roots of transhumance as an explanatory mechanism lie in the concepts of prehistoric nomadism and migration – issues which have been of fundamental importance in the development of the discipline and which have been specifically relevant for explanations relating to the spread of archaeological cultures. The pastoral legacy in British prehistory ultimately derives from 19th-century evolutionary subsistence/classification schemes, when the pastoral stage was characterised as the 'Age of

Abraham', and this Biblical metaphor was frequently used to personify prehistoric pastoralists through the first half of the century (i.e. Lethbridge 1950; Curwen 1937). While in these various schema there was some debate as to the exact chronological relationship between the pastoral and agrarian stages (Childe 1926, 84), most practicing archaeologists understood pastoralism to mark an intermediate stage between hunting and agriculture. This was based on the assumption that sedentarism was understood to be a necessary prerequisite for the development of any form of civilised life.²

Set against this evolutionary background, the influence and *raison d'être* of pastoral nomadism in the practice of British prehistory during this century has assumed many guises. While some of the evidence cited in its espousal was empirically (negatively) based, many lines of argument were born out of more convoluted cultural/historical concepts whose origins lay in the 19th century, but which nevertheless lingered on as part of the 'intellectual baggage' throughout the first half of this century. In this regard it is particularly relevant that 'Beaker folk' were directly

1 Pre-20th century histories of the Fen must be approached with some caution as they tend to reflect directly their authors' attitudes towards the effects of contemporary drainage. Certainly Wells (1830) in writing the history of the Bedford Level Corporation was biased towards the civilised advantages brought about by drainage.

Alternatively, of course, we also have the Fenlanders' point of view: 'How the Great Level became a Fen' is perhaps the most archaeologically relevant, though rather overtly academic, 'tale from the Fens' (Marlowe 1926, 7–17). This legend tells of how the enslaved British escaped from their Roman oppressors and how their priests brought down a great flood upon the Roman settlements, thus creating the Fen. It was apparently the Iceni who repopulated this watery wilderness and subsequently changed their name to the Gyrvii or marsh-men (Ibid, 16). While on one hand this tale could be interpreted as reflecting a marine incursion held in 'folk-memory', on the other hand in spirit it seems more probable that it reflects historic attitudes of displaced Fenlanders towards contemporary drainage by the Bedford Corporation.

In this manner 'created' cultural (pre-)history and attitudes towards contemporary economic development in the Fens can be seen to merge in both folk and official histories.

2 The excavation of crannog sites in Scotland and Ireland, and Bulleid and Gray's excavations at Glastonbury, as well as the publication of various studies concerning the Continental lake villages in

the 19th century (for detailed bibliographies see Daniel 1978 and Coles 1984), all clearly demonstrated that not only was prehistoric occupation to be found in watery environments but that wetlands had been capable of supporting settlements of a relatively high status. Yet even given the wealth of settlement evidence from the Swiss lake sites, there was considerable debate as to whether their occupation had only been temporary or seasonal, and Keller was to defend his arguments concerning their permanence:

'It is very evident that their earliest founders came into Middle Europe as a pastoral people . . . The endeavours of the settlers to live together in permanent abodes and in a sociable manner, is a positive proof that they had long known the advantages of a settled mode of life, such as appears in the lake dwellings, and that we have to look upon them not as wandering pastoral tribes, still less as a mere hunting and fishing people. A settled union of a great number of men in the same place, and of hundreds of families in the neighbouring bays, would never have taken place if there had not been a regular supply of provisions at all times of the year, and some beginning of social order' (Keller 1878, 491; 494 ff.).

The debate as to the nature of the occupation of the lake villages did not, however, essentially relate to environmental factors, but rather to the level of civilisation/settlement prehistoric societies were capable of.

associated with Corded Ware/'Battle-axe warriors' (i.e. Clarke 1960, 63), and were indirectly related to the Aryans (Crawford 1922, 34), whose pastoral character was verified by the wide distribution of Indo-European languages: '... at the same time the wide distribution of Indo-European speech as well as the habits of some of its users implies at least a phase of nomadism, but not of the extreme type observed among the Mongols of Upper Asia. In my opinion the state of things observed among many of the cow-keeping tribes of the Sudan, and other parts of Africa approximates most closely to the primitive Aryan economy' (Childe 1926, 84). By characterising Battle-axe cultures as pastoral/warrior nomads, their mobile economy served as a mechanism for the diffusion of language and the spread of only selected items of a cultural assemblage (barrows, axes, corded ware and beakers), as the rest of their apparently ephemeral or temporary material culture would not have survived: 'On the other hand all might be the consequence of a fairly rapid spread of pastoral tribes armed with battle-axes, but otherwise with little equipment of durable valuables; for pastoralists, using largely leather and wood and dwelling in temporary huts or in tents, would leave few remains of their dwellings for the archaeologist to find' (Childe 1950, 141 – who cited Myres 1941 concerning 'nomadism'). Given this vexed and complex lineage, and their insubstantial domestic component (Clark 1938, 265), Beaker cultures were assumed to be pastoralist-based and, at the very least, semi-nomadic in character (i.e. Hawkes and Hawkes 1949, 53–59).

In the 1930's the concept of a pastoral stage was revitalised due to the 'new functionalism' and its emphasis on the economic/subsistence-based archaeology of Crawford and Curwen (Evans n.d.). One of the main reasons for the popularity of pastoral explanations at this time relates to the sheer amount of excavation undertaken and the impact of aerial photography. For though Bronze Age field systems and settlements were earnestly sought to balance the prominence of barrows in the archaeological record, they simply could not be located and pastoralism served to explain this discrepancy (Curwen 1937, 66; 1946, 55–56; Clark 1940, 23, 29; Stone and Gray Hill 1938, 249). In this regard it should be empha-

sised that it was the invasion-introduced/non-indigenous origins of the distinct Beaker assemblage (lacking a robust settlement architecture), and its inexplicable spread, that ultimately lay behind the nomadic-related explanations in British prehistory at this time. Certainly, much of the archaeological literature produced during this period, 1930 to 1960, was largely populated with Neolithic pastoralists and Bronze Age nomads, and the 'mapped' prehistoric landscape was dotted with ambiguously-ascribed 'camps'. Given the lingering influence of evolutionary logic at this time, and if accepting that the Early and Middle Bronze Age was a period of full nomadic pastoralism, then it was argued to have been impossible for an earlier period (the Neolithic) to have achieved a higher level of cultural development (sedentary farmers). *De facto*, therefore, the Neolithic must also have been a pastoral society. It is important to realise that while set further back (temporarily) in prehistory, the arguments employed at this time were really no different than those used by 19th and early 20th century scholars, who, citing Caesar's reference that Belgae introduced agriculture into Britain, argued that the pre-Late Iron Age Britons must all have been pastoralists (Westropp 1872, 27).

Lethbridge was the main exponent of Fenland nomadism, and in his interpretative (imaginative) note concerning Leaf's Mildenhall excavation he proposed the 'seasonal migration of cannibal communities' composed of Herdsmen and Hunters into the 'Horse-Fen' (Leaf 1935, 125–127). He was even more explicit in his description of these would-be Bronze Age nomads in his later interpretation of the Snailwell Barrows: 'We may imagine a considerable seasonal migration up and down this route (Icknield Way) driving their flocks and herds from camp to camp. Family groups would separate off from the main body to go down to spend the dry summer on the Fen margins and sandy islands where the herds could find good grazing till the surface become more soggy in the autumn. Too much emphasis may easily be placed on the agriculture of this early Bronze Age in East Anglia . . . little patches of cereals may have been cultivated by less nomadic groups, but the bulk of the people very likely wandered with an almost Abrahamic organisation from Wiltshire to the North Sea and back again' (1950, 30–31).

It is important to recognise in this early stage of research that it was not transhumant systems which were proposed but rather full pastoral nomadism, and both nomadism and cannibalism were the major archaeological themes for which ethnographic analogy was extensively employed (Evans n.d.). Lethbridge, for example, in his interpretation of Snailwell Barrows was obviously familiar with the ethnography of Central Asian nomads (Lethbridge 1950, 36), which could have related to the fact that Mongolia was one of the areas from which it was thought that the shape of beakers may have originated (in Leaf 1935, 125–126). Lethbridge's nomadic interpretations and Central Asian analogies were clearly accepted by R. Rainbird Clarke, who, in his *East Anglia* volume (1960) in the *Ancient Peoples and Places* series, made references to Bell Beaker and Urn folk nomadic pastoralists residing in yurt-like tents (Clarke 1960, 62, 77).

Generally in the later 1960's and 1970's a number of archaeological interpretations based on full pastoral nomadism were superseded by those which employed a more limited transhumance; that is the seasonal migration of only a portion of a community from a permanent home base. The reasons for this change of interpretation are many and represent a major shift in the discipline itself. On the one hand, it reflects the impact of absolute dating techniques and the reappraisal of migration theories based on the direct equation of a material culture assemblage with a prehistoric people (e.g. Beaker folk). On the other hand, the greater intensity and quality of excavation has meant a change in the scale of interpretative analysis. Apart from a few pioneering efforts (i.e. Fox 1923), the framework of research/interpretation before the Second World War was on a national or a gross regional scale (highland/lowland zones). Since that time much of archaeology's efforts have been directed towards a much more local regional scale (landscape archaeology), which has meant that one need not address, nor necessarily explain nation-wide phenomena/problems (i.e. migration from the Wiltshire Downs to the Norfolk Coast) in the excavation of a single site. This change in interpretative emphasis also reflects the impact of ecological approaches in archaeology as was advocated by Clark (1952) and later by Higgs and the

members of the Early History of Agriculture Project (Higgs 1972; Jarman *et al.* 1982), who emphasised the utilization of complementary environmental resources by single communities. This reappraisal of the resource base of individual societies has discouraged the division and categorisation of archaeological cultures on the basis of a single subsistence strategy. Rather, it has emphasised the complementary relationship between wild and domestic resources and arable/pastoral activities. Finally, we should also be aware of the development in the application of explanatory analogy, which has resulted in a greater emphasis on the context of analogical sources employed. At a regional level this has resulted in the application of land-use models frequently derived from local historical sources and studies in regional historic geography (i.e. Case 1963; Coles and Hibbert 1975; Fleming 1978; Pryor 1980), and in this regard Darby's (1940) and Ravensdale's (1974) studies have been very influential for archaeological research in the Fens.

This emphasis over the last twenty years on long-term regional continuities (i.e. Pryor 1984b) can, in part, be seen as a reaction to earlier theories of pan-European cultural diffusionism and the frequent inadequacy of the Three Ages chronology in a local/site context. Nevertheless, previous nomadic 'schools' of interpretation and more recent regional transhumant explanations can be considered as being inter-related inasmuch as both utilise migration, though admittedly operating at very different scales, as a mechanism to link distant material distributions/sites.

'HORN UNDER HORN'

Although most authors have not gone into detail concerning the mechanisms of prehistoric transhumance in the Fens, the summer-time translocation of a substantial portion of the home base communities has been suggested or at least implied (Bradley 1978, 55; Pryor 1980, 185; 1984a, 206), though the actual range of these migrations was not defined. In these arguments historic analogy was made between proposed prehistoric pastoral systems and documented Medieval intercommoning practised both in the Fens (Pryor 1980, 183) and Somerset Levels (Coles and Hibbert 1975, 17; Coles 1978, 148).

Under these arrangements, Medieval villages held common rights to pasture which they claimed to be theirs by ancient custom (Neilson 1920, XLIX, LII; Darby 1940, 68). Various Fen-edge communities shared pasture that often lay quite some distance out in the Fen 'half-lands' (Summers 1976, 36; Darby 1940, fig. 13), where their cattle collectively grazed 'horn under horn'. While I cannot claim any expertise concerning these sources, in the Medieval documents there would seem to be only limited descriptions as to the actual mechanisms of these pasture systems – such as the social composition of the herding group. What descriptions are available, furthermore, would often seem not to suggest any manner of major community migration, as opposed to the occasional camping of semi-professional herdsman. In fact, the relevant Somerset sources mention the 'turning-out' of animals onto the Summer 'hangings' (Coles and Hibbert 1975, 17ff) and similar references are to be found in the Fenland documents (Darby 1940, 70). Certainly these terms of reference would not suggest any manner of community migration. Conversely, the scale, for example, of some recorded cattle droves, involving substantial numbers of men, horses and boats (*ibid* 1940, 72–73), would almost seem similar to a major military expedition. The sheer size of these operations, and the very strict system of cash payments for pasture rights and their infringement (*ibid*, 67ff), should remind us that in the documentary evidence we are seeing a cash and market economy in operation which may not be at all representative of a prehistoric domestic economy.

One of the main problems in employing historic land-use models is the specific historic factors that lie behind their generation. This is the case with intercommoning which figures in later medieval texts largely because common rights were being restricted and formalised by the expansion of manorial and monastic powers. In the wet conditions of the post-Roman Fens, the relative location of extensive mires and undrained marshes could,

moreover, have been partially responsible for the fact that common pasture often lay at a distance from Fen-edge communities. In this regard the lively debate which has arisen following Higgs' use of Medieval transhumant patterns to explain the distribution of prehistoric Megaliths in upland Spain should caution us against assuming a continuity of land-use patterns (Higgs 1976; Walker 1983). Certainly in a region so environmentally sensitive as the Fens, in which a landscape has been so radically transformed both by the inundation of water and by subsequent drainage, we must be wary against presuming a prehistoric/historical continuity of land usage.

A major factor, in attempting to come to terms with the arguments for and against a prehistoric Fenland transhumance, is that the general concept 'transhumance' exists as an ideal economic type or ecological adaption largely based on West Asian and upland European communities for which there is a substantial body of ethnographic research. Although lowland transhumant systems are historically known, there does not exist the same quantity of detailed studies as to their operation and as an economic or pastoral 'type' its criteria are not so clearly defined.³ Therefore, as it is employed by archaeologists, under the general umbrella of 'transhumance', distant pasture and extensive out-field systems may merge, and occasional overnight stays with herds are undifferentiated from limited community migrations. Whilst the underlying basis of arguments relating to prehistoric transhumance often follow an 'ideal' logic (i.e. if an environmental resource is available it will by necessity be exploited), the motives for adopting such a way of life and the actual organisation of transhumant cycles fall within the realm of the social – whose complex configurations often undermine the predictive logic of 'model populations'.

It is important to recognise that any Fenland transhumance cycle would have been a matter of social choice and/or economic

3 Evans-Pritchard's detailed study of the Nilotic Nuer (1940) is, arguably, still the most widely-read and influential example of an operative lowland transhumant system. Yet the annual dispersion of the Nuer to their cattle camps is essentially determined by seasonal drought (*Ibid.* 97) and

cannot by any measure be considered as being directly analogous with life in the Northwest European lowlands, whose character and problems are rather related to a superabundance of resources.

strategy. In this regard it is unlike many pastoral situations in the Mediterranean and West Asia, where the rigours of extreme climatic conditions effectively dictate the seasonal movement of stock between complementary environmental zones. There would not, however, have been climatic determinants forcing Fen-edge communities onto the Fen in the summer. It is simply a matter of a potential resource which could have been exploited only if communities chose to specialise in pastoral production. If such a specialised strategy was widespread then the resulting competition for pasture could result in regular seasonal migrations. But it must be emphasised that this would have been a matter of choice based on whether a potential pastoral resource was worth exploiting at the expense of splitting a community and the maintenance of two households (home base/house and summer-time camp/tent) during the course of an annual transhumant cycle.

It is difficult to imagine how Fen-edge communities would have lost access to their immediately adjacent Fen pastures and therefore whether a full transhumance, as opposed to extensive outfield pasture systems, would have been necessary. Of course, a limited number of herdsmen may have accompanied and possibly camped with grazing stock, but this is quite a different matter from the migration of communities. Those, however, whom one could ('ideally') envisage practising a limited transhumance would be those communities which occupied the hinterland immediately 'behind' or above the Fen-edge. In this capacity, river-valley systems could have functioned as migration corridors down into the Fen and this could relate to the frequency of burial and ceremonial monuments along their reaches, inasmuch as their usage by diverse groups could result in a greater need of territorial expression. Even given a hypothetical situation such as this, one would have to imagine a cut-off point where the distance needed to travel down to the Fen would out-weigh the advantages of any pastoral specialisation. One important aspect of the above argument is that it suggests that any would-be temporary pastoral stations found in the Fen might not actually relate to Fen-edge communities as such but rather to those of the Fen-hinterland.

The negative and often contradictory nature of archaeological evidence employed

in demonstrating mobile pastoralism has been fully discussed by Bradley (1972, 1978, 55ff) and, given its ambiguous nature, migratory pastoralism is as difficult to dismiss as it is to prove. In this regard it is as relevant to remember that while we are fortunate to possess a wealth of Medieval documentary evidence relating to the seasonal utilisation of the Fen, recent Fenland surveys have found almost no Medieval sites/scatters on the peat Fens proper and certainly no direct archaeological evidence of intercomming (Hall per. comm.). This indicates just how ephemeral the material traces of even historically known pastoral systems can be. It is, of course, the relative material invisibility of mobile pastoralism that is, perhaps, its most dominant trait and that makes it such a persuasive mode of archaeological interpretation.

Certainly there is a problem in the manner in which would-be Fen-edge 'camp sites' have been archaeologically defined. Bradley, for example, has used the scraper index on Leaf's Mildenhall sites to suggest that they were pastoral butchery camps (Bradley 1978, 57), but such activities are not commonly characteristic of pastoral economies; it is against the self-interest of pastoralists to consume the basis of their production and their vested interests lie rather in guaranteeing the reproduction of their herds (Dahl and Hjort 1976). The relatively dense, almost 'midden-like' (Bamford 1982, 18), pottery spreads and flint scatters which identify these Fen-edge sites, by their respective fragility and weight (by number and by raw bulk) are not common material attributes of mobile economies. It is, for example, difficult to imagine the regular transportation of large collared urns over great distances, let alone 'dried' corpses as Lethbridge would have us believe (1950, 32). From a more theoretical viewpoint one can, furthermore, argue that we really have very little idea of what constitutes a 'typical' Neolithic/Early Bronze Age domestic assemblage, or even whether such a concept is at all appropriate for these periods. Without such a predictive ('home') base-line it is certainly all the more difficult to determine what its seasonal or 'camp' component should consist of. While, without recourse to seasonal models, it is difficult to account for the lack of obvious structural features on these sites, this is not a problem restricted to the Fens alone but is a common characteristic of most apparently

domestic Neolithic and earlier Bronze Age sites (i.e. Simpson 1971, 130). In this regard it is relevant to note that Gibson, in his re-interpretation of Leaf's Chippenham Barrow 5 excavation, concluded that the proposed double-ring palisading of this barrow actually represents the traces of a large, pre-barrow, round building with associated hearths (Gibson 1980, 47–49). Similarly, the recent careful excavation of Fen margin sites at Tattershall Thorpe, Lincs., and West Row Fen, Mildenhall, have produced quite substantial Neolithic and Bronze Age settlement features (Chowne and Healy 1985; Martin 1984). The results of these recent excavations could lead us to speculate that the ephemeral settlement evidence of some earlier excavations partially reflects accidents of preservation and different excavation techniques.

It should be emphasised that the frequently proposed seasonal occupation of Fen-edge sites largely derives from the environmental evidence from Clark's excavations at Shippea Hill (Clark *et al.* 1935; Clark and Godwin 1962). Bamford, in her detailed analysis of the Hockwold-cum-Wilton Beaker sites was, however, also able to identify light structures, and the character of its occupation debris led her to conclude that the site represented something other than short-lived camps. Extrapolating from the Shippea Hill environmental data, Bamford noted that while the Fen-edge location of the site would have suited pasture, hunting, fishing and fowling, the Hockwold faunal assemblages, with the possible exception of otter, did not reflect the utilisation of Fen-specific species (Bamford 1982, 18–20). In fact, the proportion of wild species from the Shippea Hill excavations was itself very minor (Clark 1933, 278; Clark *et al.* 1935, 206). These interpretations do not, of course, exclude pastoralism as a major component in the region's Neolithic and earlier Bronze Age economies. It does, however, suggest that either these populations were largely ignoring the advantages of living

in a wet-landscape, or that as environmental evidence indicates, the Fen was relatively dry at this time (Godwin 1978). While there is certainly evidence to attest the importance of stock rearing during these periods, the environmental conditions of the Fens would not necessarily have dictated seasonal land-use on a scale that would require community migration and cannot, therefore, be used as an archaeological *deus ex machina*.

Among the more remarkable achievements of the recent Fenland surveys has been the discovery of extensive barrow fields distributed along the lowland reaches of main river systems in the Fen. There is a long tradition of associating barrows with various forms of pastoral nomadism and initially their upland distribution was understood to mark the routes of their trails and droveways (Curwen 1946, 79; Lethbridge 1950, 30). Recently, more detailed analyses into the location and population structure of barrow cemeteries have resulted in a variety of interpretations concerning their potential economic integration. Fleming, in his influential study of the Wessex cemeteries, suggested that the high density of barrows in given areas could indicate that their interred population must be representative of a broader distribution than that of a residential population. This, and the fact that they contained both male, female and infant burials, led him to conclude that these nuclear barrow cemeteries were situated in areas of summer pasture (Fleming 1971). Conversely, Green, in his excavation of ring-ditch burials at Milton Keynes in the upper Great Ouse valley, postulated that the predominance of female and infant burials could indicate that they were representative of the home base population of a transhumant community whose males were buried in the summer pastures (Green 1974, 130)⁴. Pryor has employed a similar argument in his interpretation of the Fengate burials to suggest that this area also was the home base of a transhumant community (Pryor 1976), and

4 The reader is also referred to Green's (1976) interpretation of the Stacey Bushes site in the Upper Ouse valley, in which he considered the possible symbiotic interaction between Grooved Ware transhumant pastoralists with Grimston Ware potters and farmers. Green's interpretation is remarkable for how explicitly he describes the possible complementary relationship between

these arable and pastoral communities. In the end, however, it is unconvincing inasmuch as it associates individual pottery traditions with a single subsistence basis and thereby evokes the earlier concept of a given material culture assemblage as being directly representative with a prehistoric 'people' (Ibid, 23).

Healy has argued that the lack of barrows in association with the south-eastern Fen-edge Beaker sites could suggest their seasonal occupation (Healy 1984, 116). Given the logic of these arguments, the discovery of barrow cemeteries extending along the lowland river valleys and out into the Fen, presents us with some problems if we continue to consider seasonal Fenland usage on a region-wide scale. For if the distribution of barrows is representative of home base communities (an argument which involves major presumptions concerning the sexual division of labour), then the 'home base' has shifted quite far out into the Fen from its former Fen-edge location. The interim results of the field surveys would suggest, furthermore, that the distribution of Fenland barrow fields and dense artifact scatters is largely mutually exclusive and this makes any direct association of barrows with domestic/home base activities unlikely (Hall n.d.). While taking the converse argument one can still state that the Fenward distribution of barrows might represent the location of summer pasture, but that seasonal migrations were actually of a greater distance than has been supposed if they originated from the (historic) Fen margin.

Of course, the reversed and opposing logic of these interpretations can simply make us sceptical as to the nature of archaeological evidence and particularly arguments relating to pastoralism, whose criteria seems to be so fluidly or weakly defined. Yet, one can argue that it is our concepts of grand, region-wide patterns of land-use and migration that are inappropriate and that their presumed scale is only representative of the coarseness of our data. What we might instead be seeing are much more localised land-use patterns which, while still utilising seasonally available pasture, also involved much greater permanent settlement in the 'Fen' than has been previously assumed. The relevance of this point should be obvious, for one of the reasons why lowland transhumance has become so widespread as an interpretative framework is the afore-mentioned notion of prehistoric wetlands as an open-zone in which social/cultural differentiation was suspended in the face of ecological determinants. Certainly in part, the recent basis of transhumant-related interpretations reflects the optimism of 1970's Rescue archaeology and the anticipation that 'Fengate-like' field systems were to be found

continuously around the Fen-edge, which naturally led to predictions of high locally concentrated population densities. Thus far, however these predictions have not proven to be justified and the Nene Valley/Fengate system still retains its unique status (Pryor and French 1985, 304). Recent excavation, furthermore, in the lowland reaches of both the Welland (*ibid.*) and Ouse Rivers system (Evans and Hodder n.d.) have suggested much local diversity, and rather than seeing each area as necessarily relating directly to the Fens, what must be investigated is the context of their local development and the extent to which they are reflective of the river systems of which they are a part. Similarly, more major divisions seem to be emerging in the Fenland survey data, with there being a relative higher concentration of ceremonial and funerary monuments in the river valleys of the western Fen margin as opposed to denser 'domestic'/open artifactual spreads along the south-eastern Fen-edge. Given the logic of earlier (pre-1960) research frameworks, one could interpret these varying distributions as being complimentary and as separate components in an overall Fen-wide system. What, however, these various distributions may denote is the sub-regional and temporal fragmentation of any pan-Fenland prehistoric 'unity' apart from shared factors of preservation due largely to late prehistoric/historic environmental conditions.

'LOCAL KNOWLEDGE' AND REGIONAL ARCHAEOLOGY

If the 2nd millennium B.C. field systems excavated at Fengate were related to a transhumant cycle (Pryor 1976; 1980), then their relative longevity of use would accord well with Bradley's description of pastoral cycles as 'rigidly liturgical movements' (Bradley 1978). Yet, the almost Biblical stability suggested by this characterisation is perhaps more representative of the resolution of our data than any prehistoric pastoral organisation. Certainly, in anthropological studies mobile pastoralism has often been considered as a highly flexible social/economic adaption sensitive to the density of permanent settlement and the competition for pasture as is reflected in the very choice and range of migration.

If we accept that local seasonal variations in the Fens may not have been so extreme, then cognitive attitudes towards the environment and also the potential range of environmental strategies available are important factors in determining the character of seasonal land-use. For extended seasonal familiarity within an environment could generate new adaptive strategies as 'local knowledge' (Geertz 1983) is acquired and as the 'geography of knowledge' expands (Thrift 1985). In this context the processes of temporary migration and 'primary' colonisation are not unrelated, inasmuch as the scope and accuracy of the perceived and 'decision' environment (Hammond 1981, 225ff fig. 8, 10) are increased in relationship to the 'real world' through the agency of landscape familiarity and past experience therein. This acquisition of landscape knowledge can be considered as being 'practical' inasmuch as it is a learning of 'the way of the world' based on trial and error procedures in the face of a physical universe (Geertz 1983, 73ff). This is not to say, however, that such knowledge is empirically-based or universal in its applications for human locational strategies and environmental adaptation are rarely governed solely by mechanistic critical-threshold factors. Rather, they are structured according to the extent of experience and local environmental knowledge, which will ultimately determine the potential range of subsistence flexibility and the locational alternatives available (extra-territorial familiarity in terms of a change of locale). We must, of course, recognise the potential for environmental catastrophe, but most instances of environmental change are gradual and usually operate on a time-scale greater than would have been obviously appreciable by a single generation (i.e. increase in rainfall and peat growth) and the human response to these situations would vary according to the manner in which a landscape was culturally perceived.

In this regard, the more dynamic model of wetland-use proposed for the Dutch Assendelf polders (Brandt *et al.* 1984, fig. 5), in which transhumance is considered as a stage between reconnaissance and seasonal foraging visits on one hand, and permanent settlement in previously summer pasture on the other, would seem to have greater interpretative scope. In fact, rather than envisaging Fenland transhumance as some form of

stable or optimal economic strategy, it may be more appropriate to consider it both as a means of landscape/subsistence investigation and as a response to environmental and social stress. One could, therefore, imagine that transhumant systems might have arisen during the earlier Neolithic colonisation of the Fen basin, when its potential for supporting domesticated stock was first being explored. Alternatively, the deteriorating conditions of the earlier 1st millennium B.C. could also have given rise to Fen-edge transhumant systems as a response to greater competition for local pasture. Certainly, it can be argued that the deposition of rich metalwork hoards in the peatbog from this time (Fox 1923) denotes the status of the Fen as a distinct cultural/environmental entity. Similarly, the discovery of such a wetland-specific site as Flag Fen (Pryor 1985b) by its relatively isolated location out in the Fen proper, could suggest social and environmental instability. Yet, thus far, the Early Neolithic and Later Bronze Ages are the only periods in later Fenland prehistory for which transhumant land-use models have not been proposed.

At issue here is not so much the specific dynamics of any proposed transhumant systems as the manner in which archaeology envisages societies interacting with landscapes and how we model 'concave' (Coles 1978) or low-landscapes. The targetting of localities by site catchment analysis for example is to suggest a state of environmental/site stasis which effectively situates settlements solely in terms of environmental resources often with scant regard to social constraints and interaction. Certainly the blanket application of this form of landscape modelling to such a fluid or sensitive landscape as is the Fens is a questionable procedure (cf. Tilley 1979). At a higher level, moreover, the assumption of prehistoric and archaeological regionalisation based on historic landscape entities ('Fenland archaeology') is largely to pre-determine the outcome of what is, after all, a central issue of our investigations. For the 'region' is a temporally and socially situated 'field' of context (Barrett n.d.) which is generated and structured by societies interacting with their environments (Giddens 1985). If we accept beforehand (historic) regions as given prehistoric entities and unquestionably assume long-term continuities of social and subsistence practises in

these landscapes, then there would really seem to be very limited purpose in further archaeological research at this level, as we are destined only to justify that which we already know.

In this regard it is essential to recognise that 'regional archaeology' does not represent a separate field of research which is somehow removed from the more general issues of archaeological theory by its recourse to environmental factors and by the extent to which it deals in hard data. Surely it must be apparent that archaeology in the Fens has often been directly influenced by broader theoretical concepts (i.e. Stages of Civilisation, Invasion and Migration theory), whose interpretative influence has at times lingered on at a regional level after it has been abandoned as a general theoretical approach. What is unique to regional archaeology is its greater emphasis on and interaction with local landscapes and cultural histories, but this certainly does not divorce it from the central problems and themes of national/international archaeology.

It has not been the intention of this paper to deny that the prehistoric Fens may have been seasonally exploited for pasture, but rather to question our all-too-frequent and vague employment of the concept of lowland transhumance. Given the current state of flux in archaeological research in the Fens, it is essential to recognise what are the conceptual foundations and theoretical ramifications of our inherited land-use models. Yet, the issue of regional transhumance/migration relates not just to questions of prehistoric economy and social organisation, but also reflects upon the procedures of archaeological investigation itself. This is because migration is a mechanism which interrelates sites/phenomena over wide distances and its application, therefore, directly relates to scales and stages of archaeological research. Certainly, migration-related explanations fulfill an essential unifying role in sparsely investigated archaeological landscapes inasmuch as they bridge blank spaces in our distribution maps. But through time and cumulative research the central role of migration theories is often diminished as archaeological landscapes are eventually infilled with sites. In other words, the accredited mobility of prehistoric Fenland populations has often related more to the distances between our distribution dots at any

given time than it has to questions of prehistoric environment and economy.

An underlying issue which the paper has attempted to address is the manner in which archaeology as a discipline 'colonises' its own landscapes – what are the routes by which archaeological context is either constructed or recognised. Presently we are at a stage in Fenland researches in which as our own 'local knowledge' increases it will largely fragment and undermine the pan-regional models we have constructed. Certainly it will be a long time before we will be able to discuss or model again such a thing as a 'Fenland archaeology' with any confidence. This procedure is not just an exercise in abstract reductionism, but can be taken as a measure of the establishment of archaeological knowledge not necessarily dependent on the pre-conceptions of the historic cultural landscape. Archaeology in association with environmental sciences must define its own landscape entities if we ever hope to understand prehistoric land-use and social organisation in a local and regional context.

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