

FWP36

SYNTHESIS (old chpt. 10)

The landscape (the basic resource):

environmental history: (this next piece of draft is by RJ from FWP 29):

The environmental evidence to be considered in this final discussion includes animal bones, mollusca, charred remains, local geomorphology and archaeological data. The aim is to create an animated landscape within which the social dynamics of feelings and motives can be added in the later chapters. The framework for this discussion is essentially chronological using standard archaeological periods, this offers both convenience and an all too necessary flexibility. The interpretation is aimed at determining to what extent the landscape of the study area was exploited by humans and in contrast, acted as a restriction upon human action.

Evidence for human occupation of the area exists from the Mesolithic but it is not represented in our study area (??). Work on the Mesolithic environment has confirmed that by 8500 BP the region was most likely totally wooded (Evans et al 1993, + others). The extent of clearance episodes during this period is disputed with opinions varying between there being no evidence for clearance (op cit.) and episodic clearance being widespread (Smith 198? PPS?). Elsewhere in Britain and Ireland Mesolithic clearance is an accepted reality, particularly as a contribution to the "elm decline" (???). Without widespread evidence for lithic sites on the uplands it is not possible to indicate any precedence for clearance episodes until the early Neolithic. Mesolithic studies have continuously looked more towards human exploitation and manipulation of land as a resource long before the adoption of farming

(Rowley-Conwy 1994, Gillman ?????). Our data does not allow us to test such a model and it would appear that if there was an environmental impact through clearing of land then its effect was minimal.

As with the Mesolithic, the Early Neolithic evidence is sparse on Overton and Fyfield Downs (a couple of the flints?? axe-polisher?). Initial clearance in the area may be associated with the silt formation found along the Kennet Valley associated with the Avebury Soil which had a radiocarbon date for its earliest formation of 4040 ± 60 BP (Evans et al 1993, 186). Later mollusc sequences indicating clearance of woodland include Windmill Hill, Marsden, Durrington Walls, Horslip, Beckhampton Road, South Street, South Dorset Ridgeway, Burderop Down, Dorset Cursus, Maiden Castle, and Easton Down (Evans 1966, 1971, 1972; Ashbee, Smith, and Evans 1979; Woodward 1991; Allen 1992; Entwistle and Bowden 1991, Evans *et al* 1988, and Whittle *et al* 1993). The extent of these clearance episodes is likely to have been small since the only evidence is from archaeological sites, extensive offsite analysis has not revealed evidence for major change until the Early Bronze Age (Allen 19??). The significance of this to Fyfield and Overton is possibly best represented by the alluvial deposits along the valley. It is known that woodland soils, once cleared, have a crumb texture which would have eroded very easily (Evans et al 1993) The effect of initial clearance could therefore have been drastic. Large rills appearing in the side of the hillside as heavy rain showers swept away the loose top soil. From this perspective it is unlikely that the quantity of alluvium reflects major clearance and it is just as possible to predict minor clearance producing major erosion problems. The importance of this control of the environment is impossible to gauge. The regeneration of many non-mortuary sites is known and the distinction

between this and the regeneration of apparently more utilitarian sites where regeneration took place can be explained through differing concepts of spatial importance (Whittle et al 1993). Certainly the Dorset Cursus was allowed to return to a shaded environment (Entwhistle and Bowden 1991, 21), the linear, non-natural, form of the monument being lost by the encroaching vegetation. Had the monument lost its significance? Had people directed their energies to conserving their land? Again Fyfield and Overton do not appear to have been heavily occupied at around this period but the occurrence of soil in the valleys which may have originated on the hilltops may indicate a major loss of evidence for such activity. This exploitation and reorganisation of the landscape was subsequently restricted by the results of their efforts. Monuments restricted the amount of land and type of land available, while natural loss of soil meant fields and settlements were shifted as a result of the changing environmental conditions.

It is the Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age when clearance makes its fullest impact upon Fyfield and Overton Downs. Although there are no direct sites Beaker pottery has been found under colluvium layers in dry valleys across the region (Allen 19??) and in the local area (Allen pers comm and see above). While Late Neolithic/EBA flints have been found during excavations at ... (Everton's flint report). Mollusc sequences from numerous monuments have confirmed this new or renewed clearance (Woodward 1991; Allen 1992; Entwhistle and Bowden 1991; Green 1973). The beaker burials from Overton Down XI demonstrate the use of the uplands during this period as do the quantities of beaker pottery found across much of the Marlborough Downs as surface scatters (Gingell 1992). This evidence may well include the use of land for arable such as at South Street and Red Shore (Ashbee et

al 1979; Green 1973) but grazing land is also apparent in the mollusc record from ???. Archaeologically land exploitation is well documented from the Upper Kennet Valley. Rows of sarsens on the valley floor at West Overton may be the remains of field boundaries to prevent the widespread alluviation which was taking place (Evans et al 1993). Allen (1988) has demonstrated that the occurrence of colluvial episodes occurred across the south of England at this time, possibly relating to a major agricultural exploitation of the slopes. The impact of this exploitation was to degrade the soils which were being farmed and so encourage adaptation to the changing conditions. On the Marlborough Downs the establishment of field systems during the Middle Bronze Age (Gingell 1992) may be a reaction to the loss of soils on the slopes and the burial of settlements in the valleys. A number of sections through lynchets in FYFOD (???) have shown they had formed over small walls whose size precluded any use as a barrier to livestock. Aside from the possible tenurial significance the walls may result from a conscious decision to preserve the valuable soil. Whatever the reason it is clear that human exploitation had a part to play in the fluvial degradation of the slopes and valleys. The archaeological evidence is again sparse much of no doubt lying under deposits in the valleys having either slipped down the slopes or been buried in situ. There is a contrast, therefore, between the cleared landscape within which the enclosure ditch of ODXI was dug and the recently cleared woodland over which the lynchets at FLI formed. This is a clear indication that it is not possible to speak of a wholly cleared landscape until certainly the build up of this lynchets. Gingell may well be correct in speaking of widespread clearance during the Beaker period. And Evans may also be right in suggesting much of the colluvium formed in the valleys occurred at this time. But the colluvium is not uniformly distributed and much of the

archaeological evidence comes from surface scatters and a few burials on the slopes with buried sherds found in the valleys. The early Bronze can be seen as period of intensified agriculture but not as a uniform degradation of the landscape. It may be more tactical to suggest a minimalist landscape supporting a less intensified agriculture centred around particular sites (*but then why have we been so lucky in finding them, or have we. i.e. considering the quantity of Neolithic monuments and the paucity in settlement as with the EBA are we seeing a mobile economy which caused localised but intensive, and environmentally destructive, agriculture. For that very reason settlements are difficult to locate. The Later BA then sees a realisation of the practical importance of managing the land as opposed to exploiting it. Therefore, time is spent creating field systems and complex agricultural systems rather than building monuments to the dead and worshipping the sun, i.e. people now realise the sun and the earth are not the be all and end all, it is in fact man himself who has the power to succeed*)

The later Bronze Age and the earliest Iron Age sees the first settlement excavations on Fyfield and Overton. The houses were placed in among an existing Celtic field system and it is fair to suspect a continuing use of that system. Other occupation exists across the Marlborough Downs in small settlements with their own surrounding field systems (Gingell 1992). It was suggested that these sites fitted into an economy based around the exploitation of cattle kept in the valleys, sheep from the higher slopes and arable land around the settlements themselves. No evidence of arable activity is connected with the mollusc sequence from Overton Down X, considering the enclosure lay around a settlement it is unlikely that arable activity would be represented. At the same site the small mammals and

amphibians which had been trapped in pits were characteristic of open downland environments. A similar result is apparent from the lynchet assemblages. At FDI the lynchet is made up of species characteristic of an open environment lying over a land surface which preserved molluscs of a shaded environment. The creation of the lynchets saw the clearance of land (at what date?). Elsewhere mollusc sequences are characteristic of a cleared landscape: ??????????. This image of a full and thriving landscape is supported by the results from the valley survey. There the final deposits of the West Overton formation occurred by 2500 ± 70 BP (Evans et al 1993, 189). While archaeological evidence includes a Deverel-Rimbury cremation deposit dated to 3020 ± 70 BP and a sarsen structure dated to 2980 ± 100 BP. It is clear that activity was present in the valleys and has been revealed by only limited through only limited sampling. It seems fair then to project such settlement over a much wider area. The first phases of Overton Down XI are associated with Deverel-Rimbury pottery and may be contemporary with the occupation of West Overton Valley. However, as the activity on the slopes continues into the Iron Age the evidence from the valleys 'dries up'. The Iron Age and Roman period is not represented at either the Avebury or West Overton locations (Evans et al 1993). The lack of remains from this period seems to fit with models of this transitory period recognised elsewhere (Cunliffe ???). The environmental evidence for the end of colluvial and alluvial activity and the archaeological evidence for a shift in settlement pattern are in agreement.

Such a situation may result from a changing exploitation strategy. At Overton Down XI an economy based on the exploitation of sheep for meat and cattle for their milk is found at other sites known from the Early Iron Age:

?????????????. Unfortunately the temporal context of the faunal material is not clear and we cannot define any particular phases of economic development. Elsewhere... Without indication of any continuation in the use of the field systems it is possible to propose an episodic use of the surrounding landscape. That is to say, the changing economic strategies identified at other sites can be combined with the evidence of a potentially wholly cleared landscape to emphasise the total contrast between the Early Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age. The occupation of the landscape may therefore be one of continuation but the form of that occupation changed considerably.

By the period of the occupation of Overton Down XII the economy had shifted from one based around possibly equal exploitation of sheep and cattle to one concentrating on sheep, representing over 50% of the assemblage. Sheep can survive on a much poorer quality of land than cattle and this would suggest that the settlement evidence dominating by the slopes is indeed reflected by the faunal evidence which emphasises exploitation of the slopes also. Roman remains are almost non-existent in the valleys (Evans et al 1993) with the exception of the road and the possible villa site. This archaeological evidence can now be compared to the economy of the slopes where sheep were the dominant animal exploited and the archaeological evidence suggests dense and widespread landuse. The mollusc sequences from Overton Down X and Fyfield Down I show that arable activity was taking place as does the presence of large quantities of broken pottery spread on the fields presumably during manuring. Although this open landscape is well attested it must not be forgotten that charcoal was found on the site, albeit a more restricted taxa list than from the early Iron Age site. If, as has been

proposed above, the economy was heavily managed then woodland would be no exception. COMPARE TO EVIDENCE FROM ELSEWHERE FOR A DECLINING BRITAIN AFTER THE LOSE OF ROMANISING INFLUENCE.

The late Romano-British and Anglo-Saxon period is not represented by environmental evidence from within the study area. However, sections from excavations on the Wansdyke (Green 1971) have yielded both pollen and snail samples from both east and west of Fyfield/Overton. The dyke has a possible 4th-century AD origin, though it may have been use up until the late 6th-century. The samples which were studied come from two locations: Red Shore, and New Buildings, in both cases from the buried land surface. The results from Red Shore (to the west of Fyfield Down) produced pollen indicative of rough pasture with some local bracken. While at New Buildings (east of Overton Down) the sample showed evidence for a cleared area with dense woodland nearby; cereal pollen was also present in small numbers. The contrast in these two samples has been interpreted as evidence for the survival of Savernake Forest, lying to the east of the New Buildings section. However, it must also be noted that ancient forest may also have lain to the west within the Fyfield/Overton area. The presence of forest has not but in dispute, particularly locally with the presence of Roman pottery kilns in Savernake Forest. What is important is to what extent that forest covered the land during the later half of the 1st millenium. There is no evidence for regeneration of the landscape on the northerly slopes or in the valley so it is likely that the southern slopes were dominated by blocks of woodland which was potentially heavily managed. This landscape is very similar to what survives today and emphasises the permanent nature of the late prehistoric clearances.

By the 13th-century, and the occupation of Wroughton Copse, it is possible to back up observations on the economy and environment by an expanding range of documentary material. A landscape dominated by tenurial boundaries and open fields can be envisaged. Ploughing of this period finally destroys the enclosure ditch of Overton Down X while the upper deposits on lynchets contain plenty of diagnostic medieval pottery. In the valleys the sediment cycle was stable enough to allow the development of a soil in a dry open environment (Evans et al 1993, ???). Radiocarbon dates for this phase indicate the development of this layer between AD 886-1275 calibrated. The economy of the Wroughton Copse settlement is again predominated by sheep. This is a practise still followed in the area and may well have its roots in at least the Roman period if not in the Iron Age with the building of hillforts. The exploitation at this time has reached a scale reminiscent of the later Bronze Age when farmers were managing the landscape as a fragile and depletable resource.

Throughout this environmentally based narrative it has been possible to observe a number of trends which have, at my own admission, given human agencies a solely adaptive role. Such an approach is under intense scrutiny since it assumes an ever optimising aim for those taking part in its processes (Shanks and Tilley ???). However, we must look realistically at the environment which has nurtured and helped direct the lifeways within it. The presence of exposed and rapidly eroding slopes forced individuals to move their settlements either from the valley when colluvium threatened or from the slopes when no soil remained to cultivate. The extent of soil cover in earlier prehistory is accepted as is the power with which it could come rushing down the hillside (Allen ???). It is naive to ignore this. The environment was a

social issue to those who lived on the downlands and we may legitimately interpret it as such. Field systems can be seen as a direct result of this increasing realisation that the land is a resources which must be managed. Its profits can no longer be exploited on the building of ostentatious monuments. Land now becomes more important than metal, not just because metal is scarce but because land is more vital. By the Roman period on Overton Down and by the Iron Age elsewhere the form of economy can be seen to be conforming to this changed environment. Sheep now dominate the faunal assemblage as groups who survive on the hills exploited the ground to its full without destroying it. Possibly the valleys remained too unstable to settle, evidenced by the first stable soil since the Bronze Age Avebury formation being in the Medieval period.

landuse history

resource exploitation: stone

: water

: wood

tenurial

landscape through place- and field-names

Settlement

patterns

types/morphology

components/spatial patterning

components: buildings

other structures

populations and communities

Economy

Agrarian

Industrial

Religion and ritual inc. burial: