2
Palaeolithic and Mesolithic

THE PALAEOLITHIC

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INTRODUCTION

The earliest evidence for human occupation in Britain is currently dated to *circa* 500,000 BP, and is attributed to the warm period known as the Cromerian complex, which predates the Anglian glaciation (Roebroeks and Kolfschoten 1994). From *circa* 500,000 BP until 13000 BP Britain lay at, and sometimes beyond, the northern limit of human occupation.

The latter part of the Quaternary is characterised by successive warm and cold phases, recorded most completely within deep-sea marine sediments. However the correlation with terrestrial geological strata remains tentative and unfortunately, despite some useful studies, the Quaternary geological record of Northamptonshire is far from being completely understood.

Northamptonshire lies beyond the southern and eastern core of counties that are rich in Lower and Middle Palaeolithic finds (Roe 1968, vii; Roe 1981, 132-133). While there has been no history of systematic Palaeolithic research in the county, some 80 Lower and Middle Palaeolithic stone artefacts (mostly Acheulian hand-axes) have been recorded from a total of 32 locations. These finds comprise less than 0.5% of the 'complex' level records on the Northamptonshire Sites and Monuments Record.

The only certain Upper Palaeolithic artefact from the county, a reindeer antler 'Lyngby' axe, has been dated to 10,320 $\pm$ 150 BP (OxA-803) (Cook & Jacobi 1994, 75). This was found during gravel extraction at Grendon in 1982 and represents the only such find to be made in this country (Fig. 2.2). However, a sizeable unstratified flint blade with triangular cross section from Northampton has been tentatively identified as Upper Palaeolithic.

2.1 A hand-axe from the Nene valley.
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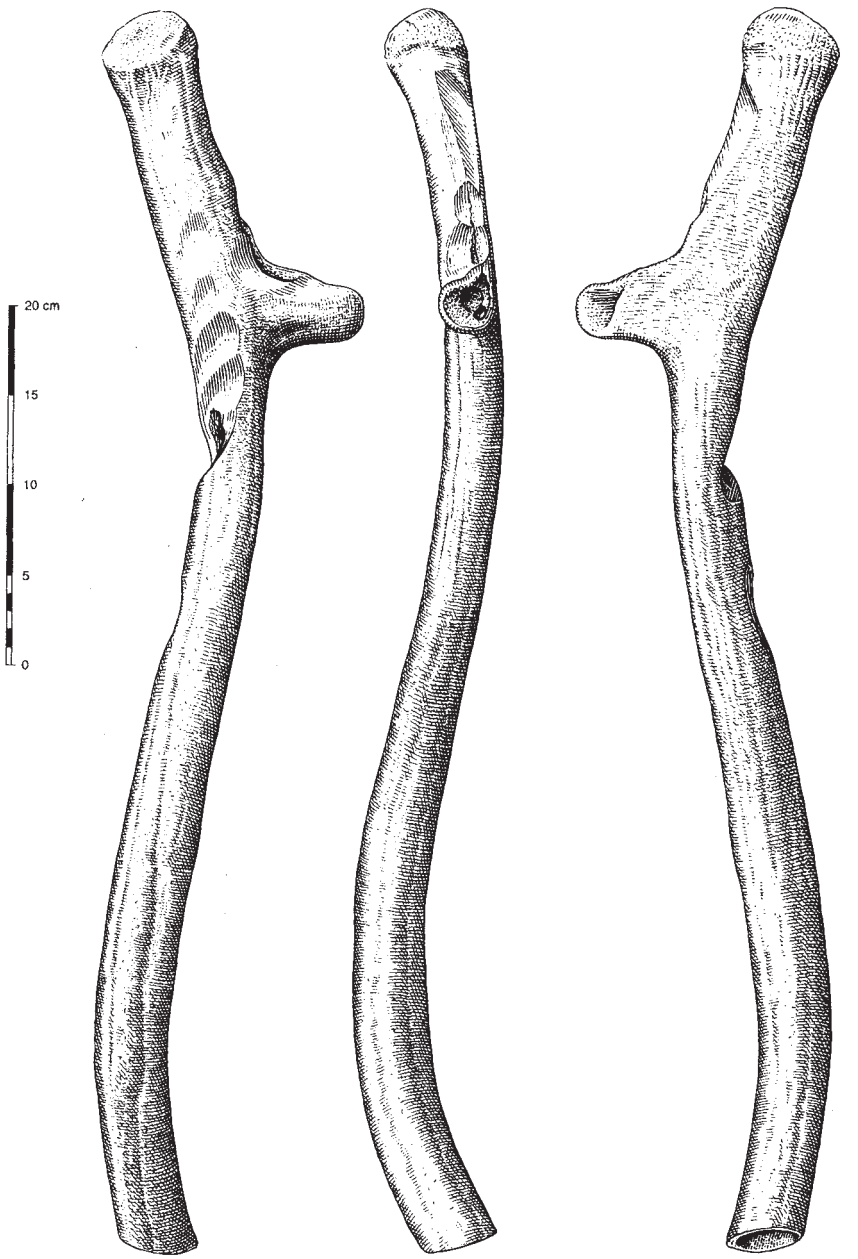
THE NATURE OF THE PALAEOLITHIC RECORD

In discussing the nature of the evidence for this period the English Rivers Palaeolithic Project has drawn a distinction between *primary context sites* and sites where artefacts are found in *secondary contexts*, meaning those which have been disturbed and redeposited by natural agencies.



2.2 The 'Lyngby' Axe from Grendon. Reproduced by permission of the Prehistoric Society

Northamptonshire has no examples of primary context sites, although the Wollaston assemblage of artefacts and waste are thought to be largely collected from a single primary context, which has unfortunately been lost to gravel quarrying.

There are a few 'surface' findspots from the county, from fields or superficial construction works, which consist of one or two artefacts in 'fresh' condition. The extreme rarity of Palaeolithic finds from field walking surveys (for example none were

recovered during the Raunds Area Project) suggests that these surface sites are very rare and perhaps comprise few diagnostic artefacts. Indeed some of these finds could be more recent introductions, as has been suggested for a hand-axe from Borough Hill Hillfort, which was found in association with apparently deliberately deposited late Bronze Age metalwork (Jackson 1996-97).

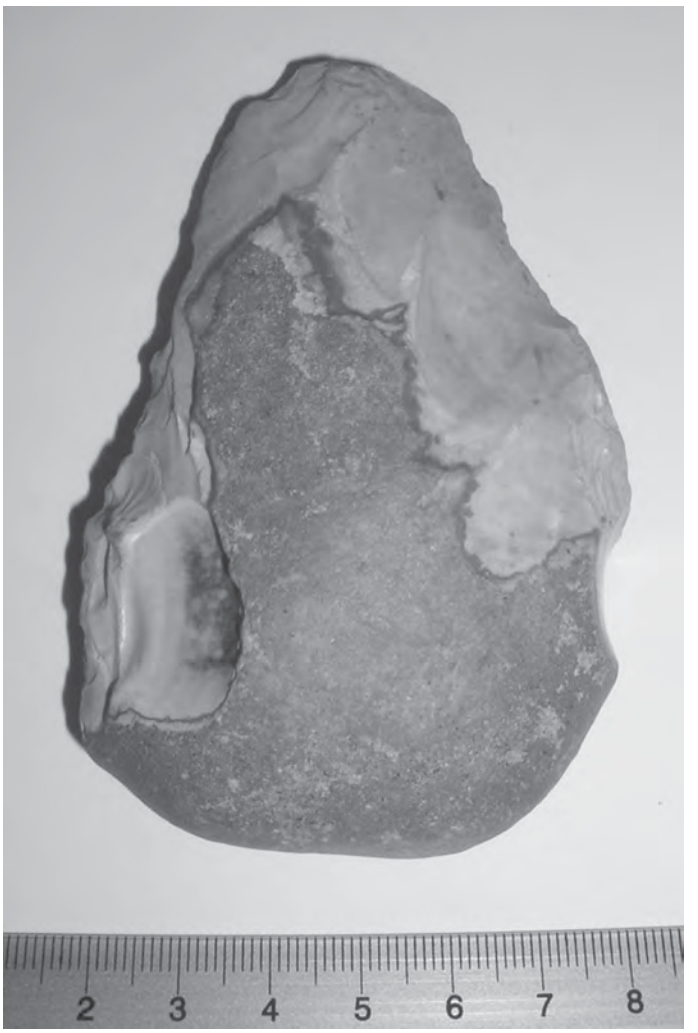
The majority of Lower and Middle Palaeolithic finds have been made during gravel quarrying in the Nene valley where individual pits have produced small assemblages of up to 10 artefacts. Most of these quarry finds are in a 'rolled' condition but a few appear 'fresh'.

In principle, Palaeolithic artefacts may be found in any geological deposits of Cromerian or later date. Primary context sites are most likely to survive in fine-grained sediments, deposited during warmer climatic stages and in relatively low energy environments. As seen at the Middle Palaeolithic site at Glaston, Leicestershire, there is the potential for the survival of primary context lithic and bone material at locations which share the specific combination of geological and topographic relationships that have combined to preserve this rare open air site (Collcutt 2000).

The material from Glaston survived in an open air hilltop location, with bone material (of hyena, woolly rhino and horse) being preserved by the chemical properties of the junction of the Lower Estuarine Series sands and the overlying Lincolnshire Limestones. This geological junction is fairly widespread in the east of Northamptonshire, and there is potential for the discovery of further remains in similar hilltop locations within this part the county. Further research is proposed targeting these higher potential locations.

Low energy environments may also be preserved within the alluvial deposits of the Nene valley. The potential survival of such locations within the Nene valley has been demonstrated by the discovery of a pre-Ipswichian waterhole and animal pathway, with associated mammal fossils beneath the river gravels in a quarry at Little Houghton, Northampton (Smith 1995). Similarly well preserved sites may well survive on the margins of the glacial lake deposits that underlie the Nene valley at Northampton, and may contain the remains hominid activity.

The unpublished collection of material from Wollaston gravel pit (Patenall and Richardson) appears to be a relatively fresh, cohesive assemblage comprising a hand axe, core, scrapers and flake debitage (some 20 pieces in total). Collected from a disturbed context during quarrying, it is likely that the majority of this collection originates from one deposit (now lost) and is therefore perhaps the most significant assemblage of Palaeolithic material from the county.



2.3 Hand axe from gravel workings at Wollaston

THE MESOLITHIC

GREG PHILLIPS

A HISTORY OF FIELDWORK IN THE COUNTY

There are currently 57 geographically separate find spots of Mesolithic date recorded on the Northamptonshire Sites and Monuments Record (SMR). These records range from single cores or tranchet axes to large field walking collections such as Duston and Honey Hill (Saville 1981b), as well as a few excavated examples such as Chalk Lane, Northampton (Williams and Shaw 1981) and Brixworth (Wymer 1977; Martin and Hall 1980; Ford 1994, 1995).

Of the individual Mesolithic sites in Northamptonshire, only the larger sites of Honey Hill and Duston are well-known in the national literature. The private field collection from Honey Hill has been published (Saville, 1981b), while the extensive Duston field walking assemblage (collected from reinstated topsoil following iron stone quarrying and held in Northampton Museum) exists only as a reference from the CBA Gazetteer of Mesolithic Sites in England and Wales (Wymer 1977).

Martin and Hall (1980) published results from their fieldwork in Brixworth parish, identifying two sites, one of which (Site 24) is possibly a refined grid reference for the Brixworth site listed in the 1977 CBA Gazetteer. These may also be coincident with the excavations that identified a diagnostic Mesolithic component in the lithic assemblages of the evaluations carried out by Jackson (1990) and Thames Valley Archaeological Services (Ford 1994, 1995), all their National Grid References falling within the same field.

Evaluation trenching at Towcester Meadow (Walker 1992) notable for the discovery of an Iron Age temple enclosure, also identified a lithic bearing horizon buried by 0.5m of alluvium and agricultural soils. The small amount of Mesolithic material was unfortunately heavily worm-sorted and unstratified, but does provide us with an indication of the potential for site survival buried within the alluviated deposits of lower energy stream beds and river valleys within the county.

The excavations at Chalk Lane, Northampton (Williams and Shaw 1981) identified a series of stratified features comprising several pits, and a series of intersecting gullies which were cut into the gravel terrace surface. These were possibly geological, but did contain Early Mesolithic material that could have been derived from the surrounding area. This site is significant in contributing some of the only stratified Mesolithic features yet found within the county. The site also appears to be part of a wider scatter of Mesolithic activity covering the Ironstone outcrop and terrace gravels in the area of the later Saxon *Burh* in Northampton, close to the confluence of the two arms of the River Nene.

Other Mesolithic stratified deposits were excavated at Thrapston Quarry, Aldwincle (Jackson 1976, 1977). A very lengthy period of human occupation, coupled with later ritual use of the landscape started in the Mesolithic period. A few of the pits and hollows across the site are attributed to early prehistoric phases of activity on the site dating to this period. The site also included a multi-phase Neolithic mortuary enclosure with evidence of early Neolithic occupation that predated the ritual structures, however the site has since been largely quarried.

West Cotton Long Mound, excavated as part of the Raunds Area Project, produced an extensive collection of unstratified Mesolithic finds from the mound material. This was probably incorporated into the mound from the contemporary land surface (Parry forthcoming).

The lithic assemblage excavated at Briar Hill Neolithic Causewayed Enclosure also contained a Mesolithic component which deserves further attention, although it is thought to be early in date and therefore unfortunately may have little to contribute in terms of Mesolithic/Neolithic transition studies within the region (Chapman, pers. comm.).

A small amount of Mesolithic material was recovered from excavations of a later Neolithic occupation horizon at Ecton (Moore 1975), while a recent excavation at Burton Latimer has produced ephemeral evidence of possible anthropomorphic forest clearance with a single C^{14} date of 5910 ± 40 BP (4904 - 4714 cal BC). Neolithic agricultural features overly this in a second phase, but unfortunately no cultural material for either the Late Mesolithic or Early Neolithic has been recovered from the earlier phase.

Evidence for the latest Mesolithic/earliest Neolithic transition appears to date, to be sadly lacking in excavated sites within the county. As this ill defined

2.4 Two Mesolithic tranchet axes from the Nene valley

crossover phase is of crucial importance to national research frameworks it is entirely appropriate that further effort is focused on attempting to identify which (if any) of the recently discovered Mesolithic find spots exhibit Late Mesolithic typological characteristics in association with Early Neolithic material (English Heritage 1997, PC1 page 44; Prehistoric Society 1999).

Hall and Martin provide us with the bulk of new Mesolithic material for the county with the results of their reconnaissance field walking survey, which extends the rapid collection methodology adopted for the Fenland Project to cover the whole of Northamptonshire. Their interim report on prehistoric settlement patterns listed some 36 new sites in the county, with a further 24 new sites added so far by fieldwork following that publication (Hall 1985 & pers comm)

This new data doubles the SMR total records for Mesolithic sites from 57 to 117, so that there are now more than 4 times the known Mesolithic find spots than listed in the CBA Gazetteer (See 2.4). This equates to the discovery of nearly 4 sites per annum since the publication of the CBA gazetteer in 1977.

As analysis of the material collected by Hall and Martin continues, key new sites are emerging which do require urgent attention and cataloguing. One such site appears to be a lithic scatter identified in Preston Capes parish, on a band of Marlestone Rock Bed on the valley sides of a tributary at the headwaters of the River Cherwell.

The site has been defined by one field walking transect (approximate site area 6.7 hectares), and compares in dimensions to just over two thirds of the area of the lithic scatter at Honey Hill (which

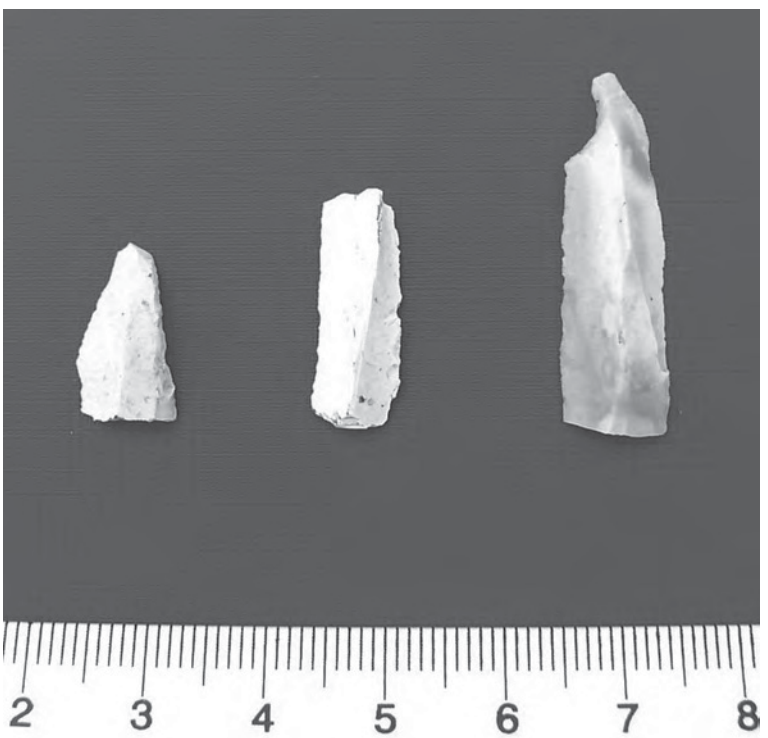
is roughly 10 hectares). The new site appears to be extremely prolific, with a reconnaissance collection of 800 flints from one 300m x 5m transect. As an approximate 2% sample of the entire plough soil assemblage and assuming an even distribution of lithics across the whole site, this would equate to around 2,000,000 pieces of worked flint in the plough soil alone.

Following the Mesolithic resource assessment (Phillips 2000), opportunities for additional field-work on Mesolithic sites have been sought through agri-environment initiatives. Surface collection was carried out in a field to the north of Elkington parish, lying 1.25 kilometres to the west of the large Mesolithic settlement scatter at Honey Hill.

The field is situated on a flat hilltop overlooking the Avon valley and is partially bisected by a steep combe that forms an isolated promontory of Middle Lias Silts and Clays. Surface collection began in the south-east corner of the field and initially no finds of worked flint were recovered. However, around the edge of the combe and at the tip of the promontory a small but dense concentration of worked flint was located. The assemblage comprised 108 pieces of worked flint together with 11 burnt but apparently unworked pieces. The assemblage included eight broken and intact blades, a blade core and two microliths. Both of the microliths were broken, but one appears to be a plain obliquely blunted point. The remaining retouched pieces were two scrapers; one has been made from a core fragment while the other is almost perfectly round with complete peripheral retouch. All of these pieces have parallels with the assemblage recovered from Honey Hill, which itself lies on Northamptonshire Sand and Ironstone (Tingle pers comm).

THE POST-GLACIAL ENVIRONMENT OF NORTHAMPTONSHIRE

Currently the closest pollen assemblages for the period are to be found in the Cambridgeshire Fens and at Narborough Bog in the Soar Valley, Leicestershire. At Narborough, the pollen record indicates that the Mesolithic floodplain comprised an alder-hazel woodland surrounded by mixed oak woodland with up to 27% pine composition (Brown 1999).



2.5 Blades and microliths from Elkington

Throughout the Holocene, the Nene valley appears to have gone through a process of gradual change. From a shifting and unstable braided river system, with many channels separated by shifting sandbars, fewer, more stable channels formed and were separated by gravel islands, leading towards a more stable, channelled flow regime (Castleden 1976; Brown 1999; Macklin 1999; Parry forthcoming).

As seen in the Seine Valley (Mordant and Mordant 1992) it is within the smaller rapidly changing channels that transient Mesolithic groups could have exploited regular fishing opportunities, setting wicker fish traps and targeting the relatively well drained gravel islands within the floodplain as short term processing sites (Brown 1999).

Environmental data from the county for the period is very scarce, although there is certainly potential for its recovery through the implementation of recent planning legislation. The floodplain of the Nene appears to offer the greatest potential for the recovery of waterlogged environmental data, due to the pressure on the valley for gravel extraction. It is also likely that the floodplains of the Welland and the other rivers within the county will contain these early remnant riverine deposits, however these areas are under less pressure from aggregate extraction.

Several small pockets of peat have been identified on British Geological Survey maps at Silverstone and in several locations by Hall and Martin during their survey, but potentially the most important site lies in Greens Norton. Here a deposit of peat some 5m x 15m surrounds a spring, is still wet and is certain to hold extensive environmental data (D. Hall pers comm). The sampling of this peat deposit to provide a local environmental control for the county could provide important information for all periods.

The Raunds Area Project sampled and dated a total of five palaeochannels from the Nene valley, one of which spans the Late-Devensian and early Holocene (Parry forthcoming; Brown 1999). A radiocarbon date of 9370 ± 170 BP (HAR-9243) was obtained from organic sediments from the lower levels of this channel (Parry forthcoming). This demonstrates the potential for other surviving palaeochannels of Pre-boreal (Pollen Zone IV) and Boreal (Pollen Zone V/VI) date to survive within the floodplain, some of which may contain cultural material, but which in any case can potentially contribute significantly to our knowledge of the Post-Glacial environment in the county.

Higher valley tributaries also have potential for preserving environmental deposits as illustrated by the transect of cores analysed from Apethorpe (Sparks and Lambert 1961). This contained fragmentary surviving lacustrine deposits from the Late-Glacial, dating from late in the Younger Dryas (Pollen Zone III) to the Atlantic (Pollen Zone VIIa), in relatively close proximity (1.5 km) to a prolific find spot, albeit in a neighbouring tributary valley in Woodnewton parish (G. Johnston pers comm).

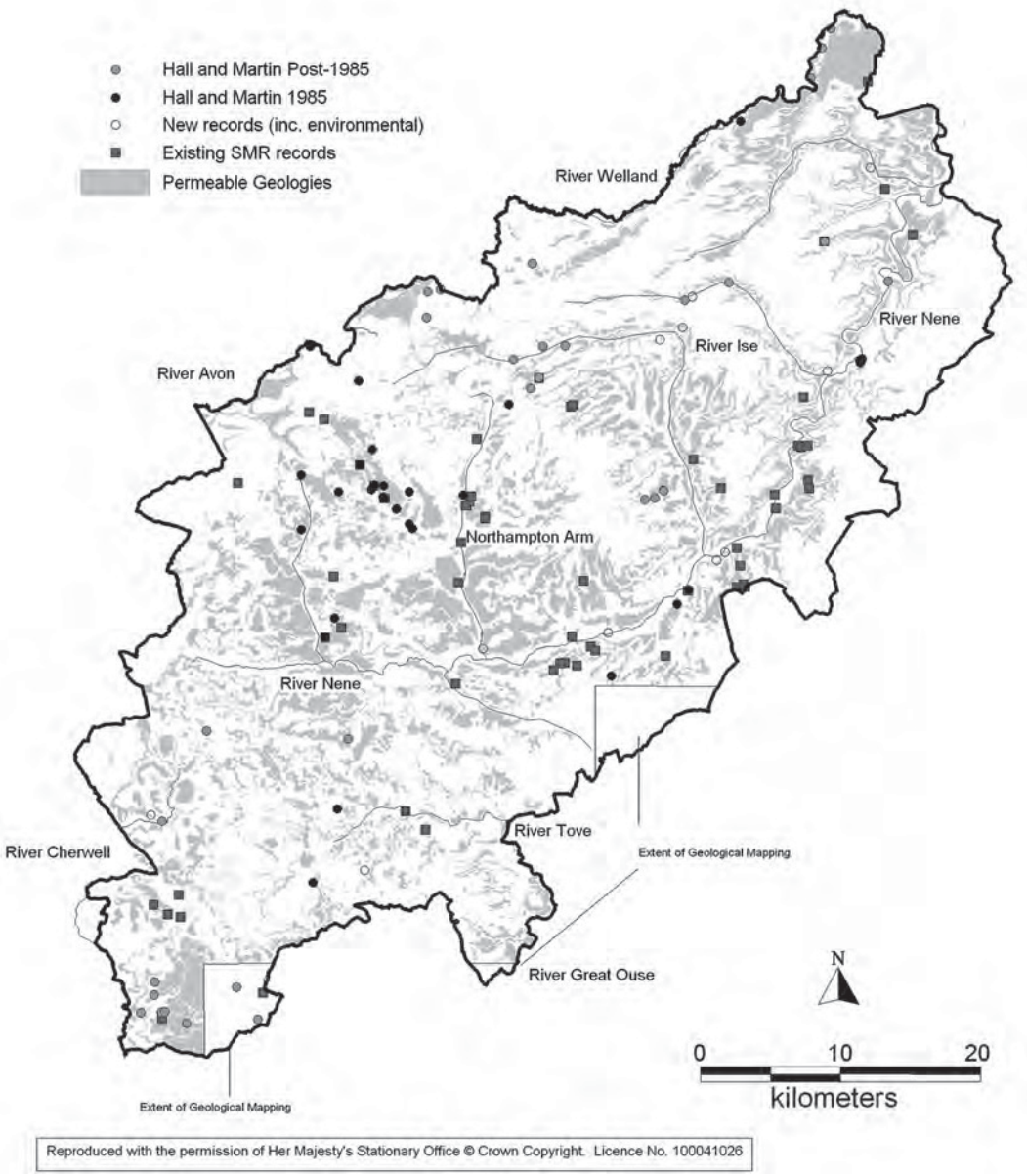
Other areas of high potential for the prospection of Mesolithic cultural material not buried or eroded by later fluvial action may include the various tributary fans located above the level of Holocene river activity (Macklin, 1999) identified on the British Geological Survey maps of the county as Alluvial Fan. These relatively long lived valley bottom features may preserve evidence of activity from the early Post-glacial period, and would presumably be characterised by long term reuse by Neolithic, Bronze Age and later populations.

MESOLITHIC SETTLEMENT PATTERNS

Hall and Martin provide some compelling evidence for the targeting of light, well-drained soils by Mesolithic groups as settlement sites. In their 1985 paper all of the sites listed lay on well-drained soils on a substrate of limestone, ironstone, gravel or sand. The new sites added since that publication indicate that this pattern is true for the county in general, adding the Marlestone Rock Beds, Great Oolite Limestone, Glacial Sand and Gravel and the Lower Estuarine series to the list of permeable geologies exploited. In addition, as their collection extends geographically across nearly the whole county exclusive of geology, this pattern can be accepted as a coarse representative distribution, rather than one influenced by highly selective survey work.

Recent detailed landscape survey across the Millfield Basin in Northumberland on a 1km to 3km wide transect, included close transect field walking and test pitting, bears out this selective site-targeting hypothesis (Waddington 2000).

By grouping geology and soil types into *ecozones*, Waddington demonstrated that Mesolithic groups were *generally* targeting settlement on well drained gravels and sandstones, preferably adjacent to the wetland habitats important for economic exploitation, and avoiding wetland and clay habitats for *habitation.* It should be noted however that smaller (and there-



2.6 The distribution of Mesolithic sites in Northamptonshire

fore more difficult to detect via field walking) sites indicative of brief periods of activity are found on these geologies, probably due to short episode hunting activities (note the Elkington site and its scale compared to the nearby Honey Hill site).

It is possible to define a riverine distribution for a large portion of the Mesolithic finds from the county. These tend to cluster on the gravel islands of the floodplain and permeable geologies exposed on the valley sides by the down cutting of the Rivers Nene, Welland, Ise, and Cherwell.

Although the environmental evidence is lacking, it is likely that during the Mesolithic, the clay land areas of the county were covered in dense Oak and Pine woodland, offering limited visibility and low calorific yields for foraging or hunting groups.

Generally Mesolithic site location appears to be influenced by three major considerations: Light soils for settlement sites, the topographic prominence commanding reasonable views of the landscapes and the proximity to water (Hall 1985; Jacobi 1978a)

The distribution map (2.6) shows two major patterns. Firstly, a large set of find spots corresponds with the exposed permeable geologies on the flanks of the Nene Valley with views over the floodplain. This distribution is mirrored by finds in the Welland Valley on the Northamptonshire/ Leicestershire border, where the Medbourne Project has demonstrated a preference for Mesolithic communities to target prominent topographical locations on the northern bank, and Hall and Martin's fieldwork has added definition to the southern bank (Knox pers. comm.).

There are hints that this riverine distribution pattern was mirrored within the Ise Valley, which extends north from the Nene in a major tributary valley and cuts through similar geologies. However, large scale development and quarrying in this area has had a severe impact on archaeological fieldwork and destroyed large areas of the valley landscape. Fourteen sites are recorded on the SMR in the upper reaches of the tributaries of the Ise, and near the headwaters of the Ise itself (see below), and a small amount of additional field walking material collected prior to extensive quarrying has been identified (Burl Bellamy pers comm). This has recently been examined, adding three new sites within the upper Ise valley around Geddington.

Secondly, a cluster of find spots can be seen in the north-west uplands. If this distribution is examined more closely it can be seen that the sites are exclusively located upon Northamptonshire Sand and Ironstone, Glacial Sand and Gravel, or Marlestone Rock Bed. These are the best-drained geologies within a largely Upper Lias Clay and Boulder Clay environment.

Obviously, if the distribution is correct the north west 'uplands' appear to have attracted a higher Mesolithic population over time than the other 'upland' areas between the river valleys within the county. One hypothesis for this anomalous distribution could be that the area, situated at the heads of the Ise, Welland, Warwickshire Avon, and the Brampton Arm of the Nene acted as a 'crossroads' zone between river systems for the groups that were exploiting them.

If this is the case, it would be one example of a general trend in site concentration between the heads of river valley systems that could be tested across the region. Indeed within Northamptonshire, a second smaller but less well defined concentration can be seen to the south of the county, between the headwaters of the River Cherwell, Tove and Great Ouse, again mostly on permeable geologies such as Great Oolite Limestone, Marlestone Rock Bed, and Northamptonshire Sand and Ironstone.

CHRONOLOGIES

Chronological studies within the county have hardly begun. The analysis of the Honey Hill assemblage by Alan Saville tentatively assigned a large component of the microlithic assemblage to a bridging phase of the Mesolithic on purely typological grounds, after Jacobi's (1978b) reassessment of the Horsham material. The assemblage is characterised by obliquely blunted points and other points with inverse basal retouch (Saville 1981b). Lithics from other sites need to be reassessed in the light of recent typological advances, while material from Duston and Preston Capes requires a thorough analysis followed by some form of publication.

CONCLUSIONS

The general trend towards selective use of permeable geologies, coupled with the possibility of landscape zones used as common routes between river valleys is also an intriguing phenomena. It deserves closer scrutiny within the region, and poses significant research questions about the use of river valleys as common route ways in what was a highly mobile

economy. For example, is the lack of sites within the Watford gap glacial gravels a distribution influenced by natural barriers further downstream?

The results of landscape survey within the county are impressive, despite the fact that some survey methodology is likely to be too coarse to reveal some of the smaller, single episode Mesolithic sites. However as the Northamptonshire results show, other counties lacking a similar survey resource probably have significant numbers of Mesolithic sites awaiting discovery and elucidation.