



Lanton Quarry School's Pack

Neolithic Period Teachers' Information sheet

The Neolithic is the period associated with the first farmers and dates from c.4000-2500 BC. Many people now think that the changes that took place around 4000 BC did not simply include new methods of obtaining food, but also a new ideology that changed how people related to the natural world. Whatever happened around 4000 BC, it involved one of the most fundamental changes ever to take place in Britain. It included major technological developments, such as the first use of ceramics, as well as an increase in the amount of food that was being produced. This allowed larger populations to be supported; and with more mouths to feed more labour would have been needed to work the land. People, therefore, meant wealth, and wealth meant power, as surplus food could be exchanged for other materials such as flint and stone axes. This cycle appears to have led to competition for power, which is thought to lie behind the construction of the first monuments: long barrows and chambered tombs. These statements in stone and earth were the first permanent human constructions, signifying not only human control over the landscape but also territorial control by specific groups.

Settlement

The evidence for Neolithic settlements in Northumberland consists of relatively flimsy structures that may not have been occupied all year round. Sites at Thirlings, in the Milfield basin, and near Bolam Lake produced various arrangements of stone-packed postholes, together with a number of small stakeholes situated around them. The postholes were not the kind of massive features that could have supported a large 'longhouse' but rather represent supports for less durable structures within short-lived settlements that were maybe only occupied seasonally.

At a site called Coupland, which lies to the west of Lanton Quarry, three pits were excavated that showed evidence that fires had been lit within them, as the surrounding gravel had been scorched and fire-reddened. The soil in the pits was black in colour, as it was filled with charcoal, as well as charred hazelnut shells, broken pottery and some burnt flints. These were thought to be cooking pits resulting from settlement activity at the site, though the settlements themselves had left no surviving trace in the soil. These pits, known as hearth pits, are thought to be the remains of occasional settlement by Neolithic communities who lived in lightly-framed structures for short periods of time. Given the presence of hazelnuts on this site, together with other gathered foods at the Thirlings site, it is clear that some aspects of the hunter-gatherer lifestyle continued alongside this move to small-scale agriculture.

Diet and subsistence

People in the Neolithic period are thought to have kept cattle and pigs, as well as growing crops and hunting and gathering. Evidence from excavations on Neolithic settlement sites in Northumberland show that emmer wheat, barley and oats were all grown.

Quernstones, used for grinding grain into flour, have been found at one of the Milfield sites, showing that people probably ate bread as one of their staples. At the same time wild nuts and berries, such as hazelnuts, hawthorn and bramble, were being collected and used on the same site. Elsewhere there is evidence that people were using an object called a hurdle panel to create dams which would enclose fish. The many finds of leaf-shaped arrowheads across the north-east show that

hunting continued to be an important aspect of Neolithic life. Therefore, some Mesolithic subsistence practices appear to have continued side by side with the new farming strategies adopted by early Neolithic groups.

Tools and Technology

The production of pottery is associated with the beginning of the Neolithic period. Clay becomes pottery at around 550 - 600°C and this can be achieved in an open fire. In Northumberland these first ceramics have been found at a number of sites and all show the same basic characteristics. They have thick walls and are well-made vessels that have slightly out-turned, or rolled-over, rims. They have round bases and have a bag-shaped form with a distinctive shoulder below the neck. The bag-shaped profiles of these pots are thought by some people to have evolved by copying the form of leather bags that were previously used for cooking and storage. This type of pottery is usually referred to as 'Grimston Ware', after a site on the Yorkshire Wolds where some of the earliest finds were made. It rarely has any decoration, and coarse materials, usually crushed sandstone or quartz, were included in the clay to prevent cracking of the pot during firing. Many of the pot fragments show evidence of burnishing which is smoothing of the pot surface to make it watertight and provide a more attractive finish. Being round-based, these pots could be placed directly on to a fire where they would make ideal cooking vessels, particularly as the round base spreads heat evenly - in much the same way as a wok. Although these pots are usually referred to as coarsewares, they are well-made and robust.

The traditions of making flint tools changed dramatically in the Neolithic period compared with the previous period, the Mesolithic. This was due to the introduction of new tool forms and production techniques. At the same time, though, some aspects of tool production remained the same. This again highlights the fact that people in the Neolithic period retained some hunter-gatherer characteristics. Overall, the main features of the early Neolithic flint tool making are an increase in the variety of tools being produced, a change in where they got their flint to include large-scale flint mining and stone quarrying, and the use of new techniques such as grinding and polishing. Typical forms associated with the early Neolithic include leaf-shaped arrowheads, laurel-leaf points, end-scrapers, serrated blades and flakes, and ground and polished stone axe-heads.

Monuments and Religion

It was during the Neolithic that the first burial monuments were constructed: long barrows and chambered tombs. Built in stone and earth, these monuments were the first permanent human structures. They signified human control over the landscape. The construction of these structures marked an important move away from the previous period, the Mesolithic, and it is thought that they were built to highlight ancestors' rites to certain areas of land. The different types of burial mounds in Northumberland suggest that there could have been different regional groups, or maybe it was simply down to availability of building materials. Either way, these monuments focussed people's attention on a certain place in the landscape, perhaps for religious reasons.

As well as burial mounds, people during the Neolithic period built enclosures. These monuments were intended to highlight the differences between 'inside' and 'outside'. They separated the natural 'wild' world from the human-controlled enclosed space within. They were not initially intended to be defensive monuments however some were used for defence later on in the period. During the later Neolithic circular monuments became common and included timber circles and stone circles. Although archaeologists do not know what the function of these monuments was they believe that they reflected rituals, worship and maybe sacrifice.

The largest concentration of henge monuments in Britain can be found in the Milfield basin, though these sites are considerably smaller than those in other regions. There are at least eight henge-type monuments in the Milfield area and possibly more.