

Neolithic Studies Group Seminar Papers 9

Defining a Regional Neolithic: The Evidence from Britain and Ireland



Edited by

Kenneth Brophy and Gordon Barclay

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Foreword

This volume of papers is the ninth set of proceedings from a meeting of the Neolithic Studies Group to be published. As with previous volumes, it includes reflective versions of papers given at a meeting of the group, as well as additional material.

The Neolithic Studies Group is a loose-knit collectivity of archaeologists, mainly from the British Isles and the Atlantic seaboard countries of Europe, with an interest in the Neolithic period. It was formed in the Spring of 1984, the first meeting being held in Cheltenham, Gloucestershire, UK. Since then, the Group has generally met twice a year: Spring and Autumn. The Autumn meetings are held in London and address a specific topical theme. Spring meetings are held outside London to examine at first hand the Neolithic remains of a defined area and consider recent research relevant to the region. Spring field meetings have included: western Ireland, south-east Scotland, eastern Scotland, north Wales, North Yorkshire and Humberside, Northumberland, Wessex, the Channel Islands, Sussex, Cambridge and Grimes Graves, Normandy, Isle of Mann, the Peak District, Caithness, Orkney and Brittany.

All the meetings depend for their success upon the efforts and enthusiasm of local organisers. The occasion of publishing this volume provides an appropriate opportunity to thank all those who have helped organise the Group's meetings in recent years.

Membership of the Neolithic Studies Group is open to anyone active in studying any aspect of the Neolithic period in Europe. The present membership list, which stands at around 250 individuals, includes: academic staff, researchers and students from universities and colleges in several European countries; museum curators and museum-based research and field staff; and field archaeologists from national and local government organisations and from archaeological trusts and units. There is no application procedure or subscription fee to join the Group; members are simply those currently on the mailing list. Anyone can ask to be added to the mailing list at any time, the only rule of the Group is that names are deleted from the list if the individual concerned misses four meetings in a row (ie. two years) and has not contacted the Group Co-ordinators asking to be kept on the list during that time.

For further information about the history of the Group, details of forthcoming events and publications, and details of how to join our mailing list, visit the Group's web site:

www.neolithic.org.uk

As already mentioned, the Group relies on its members to organise meetings so that this responsibility is shared round. There are two Co-ordinators who look after the mailing list and finances, and who juggle offers to arrange meetings so that there is a fair spread of venues and themes.

We hope that you will find this volume of papers published by the Neolithic Studies

Group useful, and we look forward to seeing you at one of our future meetings.

Timothy Darvill and Kenneth Brophy
(Neolithic Studies Group Co-ordinators)

Foreword by the Co-ordinators of the Neolithic Studies Group

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Preface and Acknowledgements

This volume of papers represents the rather belated proceedings of the meeting of the Neolithic Studies Group held in Burlington House, Society of Antiquaries of London, on 12 November 2001 (most of the papers were submitted in near final form in 2002). The topic of that particular meeting of the group, 'Regional diversity in the Neolithic of Britain and Ireland', drew a wide range of papers, the majority of which are represented in this volume; an additional paper (Chapter 3) was offered and accepted after the meeting. The session itself was organised by the editors of this volume. Although the day meeting itself was not organised along any thematic lines, a loose tripartite structure has been applied: *Defining regional Neolithics*; *Material culture*; and *Regional and local studies*.

The day meeting itself was driven by a series of four questions, and by way of introduction to the volume, Barclay has expanded on these, and his introductory comments made on the day, to form a comprehensive introduction to this volume (Chapter 1). This is followed by a more abstract contribution from Brophy (Chapter 2), analysing that most familiar of tools for the display of archaeological data, the distribution map. These two papers set out some of the parameters for the volume, essentially *Defining regional Neolithics* for the reader.

The two papers that follow address the role *Material culture* plays in both defining and characterising regional trends, covering a diverse range of forms of material culture, starting with an analysis of querns by Roe (Chapter 3). Loveday (Chapter 4) considers a wider range of objects from the Neolithic of Yorkshire and beyond. Artefacts in much earlier archaeological studies were used, through typology and culture-history, to establish misguided models of Neolithic traditions in the British Isles, but these three studies aim to re-think artefacts within a different theoretical framework.

The third section of the book considers a series of *Regional and local studies*, the definition of both 'regional' and 'local' being ambiguous at best here, suggesting, as do the contributions, that a number of cross-cutting scales of identity were in operation in the Neolithic. Papers focus largely on the so-called Irish Sea Zone: Cummings (Chapter 5) focuses on north-west Wales and south-west Scotland; Watson and Bradley, and Clare (Chapters 6–7) on Cumbria; and Cooney on a series of islands off the Irish coast (Chapter 9). Ireland is considered in more detail by Carleton Jones (Chapter 10), while a diversion from the West Coast is provided by Clay (Chapter 8) in a detailed analysis of a large body of Neolithic data from the East Midlands.

One of the defining characteristics of the day meeting, and this volume, was that contributors steered clear of the 'usual suspects' – Wessex and Orkney. This is not to say that the volume contains a number of rival regions, nor indeed that individual contributors are describing clear-cut Neolithic regions. However it does suggest, along with notable historiographies of the Neolithic (*e.g.* Barclay 2001), that there is

something in the air that demands a closer inspection of the evidence elsewhere. Not only that, but interpretations should be applied that have an element of local contingency rather than drawing on universal theories applied in the old 'core' areas in the south and far north of the Britain. The papers here represent for us an embodiment of the sentiment so admirably expressed over a decade ago by Harding (1991), who described Wessex as unique, not typical.

The editors would like to thank the Society of Antiquaries of London, especially Dai Morgan Evans, for organising the use of the Society's rooms in Burlington House, and for coping with a full house on the day. Our thanks also to the contributors on that day back in 2001, and for all those who offered a paper for this volume: your patience has been noted and appreciated.

The whole concept of a 'regional Neolithic' is one that has a various potential interpretations, and we hope that this volume as a whole presents papers that grasp with this problematic but hugely exciting area of Neolithic studies.

Barclay, G. J., 2001, 'Metropolitan' and 'Parochial'/'Core' and 'Periphery': a historiography of the Neolithic of Scotland. *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society*, 67, 1–16.

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Gordon Barclay and Kenny Brophy
May 2007

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Introduction: a regional agenda?

Gordon Barclay

In suggesting the agenda for the day meeting Kenneth Brophy and I posed four questions to the speakers:

1. In what way is, and in what areas are, inter-regional contrast or variation manifested?
2. Can boundaries be recognized and if they can, are they short-lived or persistent?
3. Are some areas (*e.g.* Orkney or the Boyne Valley) of particular, trans-regional significance, or are such perceptions a product of modern concerns?
4. Can material culture be seen as a reflection of actual regional variation in the Neolithic, and if so, what role does it play in creating and sustaining identities?

The reader must decide how successfully we, and the contributors, were.

It was as recently as 1985 that Ian Kinnes pointed out that ‘There is no reason, other than that of modern political expediency, why the “Scottish Neolithic” should exist as an entity’ (1985, 16). He might as well have written the ‘British Neolithic’. Childe, (1935, 1) wrote that ‘...Scotland is not an arbitrary political division but possesses...a personality of her own’. This is not an accurate assessment, and the considerable variation in the landscape, accessibility and carrying capacity of the regions of Scotland, mean that the origin and development of human settlement will inevitably have been varied. More recently Gabriel Cooney (2000) had still to make the same argument for Ireland – that there was no homogeneous Irish Neolithic. In parts of England outside the ‘archetypal English landscape’ of the south and south-west (Barclay 2001, 2004), Frodsham, Harding and others have shown that this problem affects other parts of England in the same way as in the surrounding countries (Harding *et al.* 1996).

Kinnes’ 1985 statement seems now a statement of the blindingly obvious – two decades ago it did not. Until the 1970s or 1980s the assumption, conscious or unconscious, was that there was a relatively unified British Neolithic; as Harding (1997) has commented, an approach that recognizes regionality but consigns it to a minor role in narratives, has had a dominant place in the literature. The ‘unified Neolithic’ model had four main origins:

1. archaeology had been working with limited amounts of reliable data from survey and excavation;
2. a large proportion of that data was from a limited number of areas that had seen concentrations of activity by archaeologists or in the antiquarian period. The development of explanatory models inevitably relied heavily on these data sets;
3. some of the ‘core’ areas of study were lacking certain sorts of data (particularly for settlement). In combination with the overall thinness of data, the creation of coherent narratives necessitated the drawing together of data that now seems to have more complicated relationships, and a better understood local context;
4. the data for the ‘core’ areas was given a primacy over data from other areas – it was the norm against which other material was seen to vary; that assignment of primacy, and the concentration of archaeological effort in those areas in the first place, may reflect deeper-seated concerns within the archetypal English landscape (*cf.* Barclay 2004).

The archaeological result of the ‘unified’ model was a generalized prehistory that overemphasized similarity, underplayed diversity and assigned a primacy to data and explanation in ‘core’ areas. This is a characteristic shared with written British history, but that discipline has for longer been conscious of the historical and cultural effects on the writing of history within Britain. ‘Four Nations’ history – supposedly history of the constituent parts of the United Kingdom – is largely a history of England, erected as a sort of ‘norm’, with inconsistent inclusion of references to material or events in other parts of the country. Pittock (1999, 98) characterizes it as history ‘...which seeks conformity and minimizes differences and nuances’. These descriptions are unfortunately true of many recent accounts of British prehistory (*e.g.* Longworth and Cherry 1986; Dyer 1990; Parker-Pearson 1993; Schama 2000).

The historiography of the Neolithic is a study in itself – and there can be no ‘final’ account. I have written one, relevant to my own area of study (Barclay 2001) and others need to be written for other parts of Britain and Ireland.

A consistent element in the argument for regional perspectives for the Neolithic of Ireland and Scotland is the suggestion that models erected in one area on relatively well-studied data-sets have been used uncritically to explain data in other areas. As we learn more about the Neolithic the use of broad-brush explanations becomes less sustainable. We cannot ignore the very clear evidence for inter-regional contact, such as the wide distribution of stone axes, types of pottery and burial and ceremonial practice (as represented by pottery and monument types); however, it has been strongly argued that material must be placed in its regional context before broader parallels are sought or a ‘national’ picture drawn.

As more data – better survey, aerial photography and particularly the results of excavation – have become available for non-core areas, the homogenizing models have been found wanting to explain increasingly varied data. The issue rose to the top of the agenda from the early 1990s with, on the one side, the promotion of the mobile Neolithic hypothesis beyond its natural home in southern England, and on the other, criticism by workers in northern England, Ireland and Scotland.

Of the four questions asked at the start of this introduction, the individual’s answer to the third, ‘*Are some areas (e.g. Orkney or the Boyne Valley) of particular, trans-*

regional significance, or are such perceptions a product of modern concerns?, perhaps reveals one's view of the extent to which the origins and development of the Neolithic of these islands is regionally determined, or whether one is still committed to a sort of 'core/periphery' model. That there are still lines drawn between two camps was brought home to me when one of the anonymous referees for my 'historiography' (Barclay 2001) paper noted that a criticism of it 'would be the default assumption throughout that all areas are equal, just different; that because Orkney is not Wessex, it cannot be a phenomenon of the same kind...Yorkshire may indeed be another "bright spot" between Stonehenge and Brodgar, but that does not diminish the luminosity of the other two'. This – perceptions of importance – was one of the themes Kenneth Brophy and I wanted to explore in the day meeting; to what extent are areas like Wessex, the Boyne Valley, and Orkney 'centres' in prehistory, or merely 'central' to the thinking of a majority of prehistorians? The survival of impressive monuments and the resultant prolonged attention has resulted in the latter, but not demonstrated the former. Were these 'luminous' centres of particular importance in the past, or is their modern status a reflection of the concerns of prehistorians during the last century or so? We have seen Wessex and Orkney suggested as places of pilgrimage – but are the pilgrims only modern prehistorians? Let us consider for a moment some complexes of monuments that have come to light more recently. How would our perceptions of relative importance be affected if the complexes at Dunragit (Thomas 2001, 138–40, 2004) or Hindwell (Gibson 1996) were not of perishable timber, but had survived in stone to the 19th century or beyond?

This is the nub – do we start with an assumption that certain areas are 'primary' or do we have to test and demonstrate such assumptions? In approaching this issue we have to overcome decades of archaeological discourse, as well as the deeper cultural influences on the writing of history that I have set out elsewhere (Barclay 2001). However, we must be careful not to replace 'national' prehistories with micro-regional approaches that underplay the very real shared traditions, and complex relationships between regions, between Britain and Ireland, and between the British Isles and mainland Europe.

In 1996, in the publication of the Neolithic Studies Group meeting on houses, Thomas (1996, 6) suggested that we 'should think of the European Neolithic less as a unified and homogenous entity and more as a series of historical developments which are only loosely connected with each other'. This seems a useful place to start in considering the Neolithic of these islands. Clearly there are strong relationships and shared traditions, but we can see that differences are greater than used to be thought. We must explore the characteristics that suggest shared origins and traditions – for example long mounds, timber mortuary structures within them, plain round-bottomed pottery, the widespread distribution of henges – as well as those that suggest quite different approaches – the apparent absence of interrupted-ditch enclosures north of central Scotland, the vigorous early Neolithic round barrow traditions of Perthshire and Yorkshire, and regionally-constrained distributions of types of artefacts and monuments.

We are in the early stages of the exploration, but we believe the meeting, the proceedings of which form the basis of this volume, was a useful contribution to this important area of study.

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The map trap: the depiction of regional geographies of the Neolithic

Kenneth Brophy

‘A good map tells a multitude of little white lies; it suppresses truth to help the user see what needs to be seen’

(Monmonier 1996, 25)

INTRODUCTION

There is compelling evidence and a sound theoretical basis for supposing that there were regional traditions of society, of material culture, and of identity within the Neolithic of the British Isles (*cf.* Bradley 1984; Sharples 1992; Thomas 1998; Cooney 2000; Barclay 2001). One of the most effective ways of communicating the idea of regional traditions is through the use of distribution maps, a time-honoured tool of archaeological discourse for well over a century. In this paper, I will argue that distribution maps are problematic for a number of reasons. Firstly, that (obviously) they are a peculiarly modern and detached way of depicting spatial relationships that say more about the way that we organise data than any past reality. Secondly, that they are generally produced without much reflection on the mechanics and language of map-making. Finally, I suspect that the true power of maps as a persuasive tool of communication is not readily appreciated.

In (re)constructing past meaningful networks of material culture we risk falling between two extremes. On one hand there is the locational and grid referenced point in the landscape (the ‘site’ or ‘findspot’) typical of so many distribution maps, and on the other, the generalised overview (the ‘region’ or even the distribution map itself). This leaves a gap, a gap that Tilley (1994, 3) suggests is rarely successfully bridged. This is a gap that runs between the individual and the communal, one that not so much needs bridged but rather acknowledged as a subtle network of complex relationships of significance. As Ingold (2000) argues, the way that we visualise movement within the space that we inhabit is neither as a causal chain of grid references nor a top-down vertical overview, but rather a perspective rooted in inhabitation, memory, experience and emotion. So here I would like to offer a critical reflection of the way that archaeologists usually graphically depict regions in the Neolithic – through traditional mapping – because the way that we map is different from the way that we engage

with, and account for our world.

But more than this, maps are not merely presentational devices. Rather they have a language and context all of their own, a heritage that has left them unquestionable and trustworthy – when in fact this familiarity only screens us from complex decision-making processes that took place in the actual construction of the map itself (Monmonier 1996). My argument is that through distribution maps we are implicitly saying something significant about the way that the past was organised over wide geographical areas projected from a finite number of fixed points within this area, translating point to space data in one all-too-easy step. We are all familiar with images of regional Neolithics, usually dots or symbols on a background map, with titles and legends, and the symbology used and data included. So this paper is concerned with how we visualise the regional Neolithics discussed in more detail in the rest of this volume.

THE STATUS OF DISTRIBUTION MAPS

‘Lurking beneath the distribution of the dots on the map was a spatial process and a causality to be discovered’

(Tilley 1994, 9)

The unquestioning use of distribution, or choropleth, maps in archaeology has survived the buffeting of various theoretical waves over the decades. They are iconic tools for displaying archaeological data and we would hardly expect an overview of some aspect of the Neolithic not to include at least one. It is a technique of depiction and persuasion in general Neolithic volumes and papers written throughout the twentieth century and beyond, from Childe (1947, throughout) to Piggott (1954, 131 and 291) to Thomas (1999, 19, 20, 130 and so on). (Although it was still possible to offer syntheses of classes of monuments without recourse to such maps in the 1930s, such as Curwen (1930) and Piggott (1939). Earlier syntheses depended more heavily on artefact drawings and rudimentary site plans (*e.g.* Anderson 1886).)

Distribution maps are part of the common currency of archaeological discourse. They have a vocabulary, a language of their own, which is familiar and understandable to us, as archaeologists. For instance, elements of the maps are regarded as a given, and need no mention in the key – from the coastline (usually depicted in unnecessarily spurious detail) and sea surface, to arrows requiring no N to show that they are pointing northwards. There is a shared understanding between creator and reader that allows us to read and recognise the meaning of the map. Whatever their actual purpose, distribution maps in archaeology are, if read uncritically (as they usually are) seen as immutable and beyond question, with the sometimes explicit, usually implicit, warning that they depict only our current state of knowledge and discoveries and as such are a white wall onto which we project our archaeological knowledge. These distributions are based on typologies and classifications – without these, we could not begin to construct our regional archaeologies (Brophy 2005).

Reading maps is not a simple process. There is more to a map than knowing how to work out grid references or understanding the nature of contours. We learn these difficult spatial and visualization skills – the translation of an abstract figure (grid

reference) to place; 3D visualization and so on – at school (*cf.* Harrison and Harrison 1988; Kemp 1989). There, we also learn how to use maps, reading them, and working with them. Only by understanding the whole and learning the rules or grammar of the map can we have understanding (or rather, a basis for interpretation). The map is a tool. Maps can also become arbiters of authority, both of the government-run Ordnance Survey, and of the cartographer. In this respect they appear to be an unquestionable, objective and utterly reliable data source.

But we should not be lulled into a cosy relationship with maps. Maps are oxymoronical, simultaneously depicting objectively the spatial relationship of the data, while at the same time asserting and proving the same relationships. Maps are mere devices, subjective documents that should be read interpretively, but appear to us as objective depictions of some external reality albeit abstractly depicted (Wood 1993; Monmonier 1996). This contradiction allows the depiction of the results of archaeological enquiry to become a persuasive version of the past. It is precisely because we view distribution maps as reliable and inherently meaningful that they can be weak and biased methods of depicting patterns in the past.

As many archaeologists have shown in recent decades, our subjective role in generating interpretations of the past is all too often ignored (*cf.* Shanks and Tilley 1987; Bender 1998, 78–86; Hodder 1999, 102–104). We should understand that maps are not neutral conveyors of data, any more than excavation and survey results are objectively derived (Lucas 2001; Hodder 1997). Maps are subjective and ambiguous, but this is rarely acknowledged.

‘And this, essentially, is what maps give us, reality, a reality that exceeds our vision, our reach, the span of our days, a reality we achieve in no other way. We are always mapping the invisible or the unattainable or the erasable, the future or the past ... And through the gift the map gives us, transmuting it into everything it is not ... into the real’

(Wood 1993, 4–5).

PROBLEMATIC ELEMENTS OF DISTRIBUTION MAPS

‘They [distribution maps] have anatomies’

(Wood 1993, 138)

Distribution maps are read and interpreted in their own right as a whole consisting of a seamless blend of layers, from background topography to foreground archaeological data. Yet the apparent authority of maps is despite their abstract symbolism, the incomplete data, and often their banality. Beneath the surface of every distribution map, there are a range of visual and intellectual cues that come together to make the map comprehensible. It is only by thinking about the conventions that both restrict and govern their production that we can begin critically to assess how they impact on us, the reader.

Maps are the product of a whole series of decisions; the choice to make the map, the choice of symbols used, the choice of data to include and exclude, the scale (in time and space), the location of the boundaries, the legend, the orientation, the title and finally the caption beneath the map at the bottom of the page (Wood 1993). Most

conform to geographical or archaeological standards that it is assumed the reader will understand, accept and even expect. Some of these decisions shape the way that the chosen data is presented, and choices will change meaning. Some of these choices will inevitably influence the way that the data will be interpreted, and not always in a way that the creator of the map intended.

In this the main part of this paper I want to look at some examples of archaeological distribution maps to illustrate the main building blocks of mapmaking and how they can augment or subvert the intentions of the mapmaker. These distribution maps have not been selected for any other reason than illustrative purposes; they are representative of a host of similar maps that are familiar to all archaeologists. Importantly, I want to stress that the corollary of my earlier contention that archaeologists do not always appreciate the power or language of maps is that these maps were not designed with the intention to mislead the 'reader'. Rather I want to show that our (subconscious) understanding of maps, and the data encoded within them, is far more sophisticated than the conscious production of maps; therefore, the use of symbols, boundaries, data and scales is far more significant than we think. This paper is not a critique of mapmakers, but instead is an attempt to encourage innovative and reflective use of maps in archaeology through a better understanding of the language of maps. Reflection should focus on the reason for the production of the map as well as its design.

SYMBOLS

'Next came the biggest display – a projection of Russia and its surrounding territory and sea. Here would be shown the projected tracks of SAC bombers as they headed towards their assigned targets. The targets could also be shown. Primary targets were represented by triangles, and secondary targets by squares. These targets were mostly missile and bomber bases, with a few radar positions and defensive missile complexes. Some were near big centers of population, some were not. But it was impossible to tell from the display. Centers of population were not shown'

(Southern 1997, 29–30).

The choice of symbols used in distribution maps is both significant and telling. A semiotics of mapmaking is possible, reminding us that symbols are merely signifiers, ink marks on a page that depict something other than themselves (an object, a monument, a site) and all the associations that go with the signified. Mapmakers can employ a number of different symbologies known either as plan information or plan free information (Wood 1993). These can range from abstract geometrical symbols with a fixed grid reference, to a shape symbol sized to a quantitative scale (again spatially situated), to abstract symbols or shapes that represent what is being depicted but not to scale. The latter are often used to indicate patterns rather than exact spatial location. When deciding on symbols, variations in size, shape, colour/hue, texture and orientation have to be considered (Monmonier 1996, 19–20). Symbology can also include zones or blocks of shading with solid or ambiguous boundaries (see below).

Each symbol we see on a distribution map has to have been selected, for the spatial

data that has to be conveyed, but also in some cases for the visual imagery of the symbol, even symbol as metaphor/simile. The choice of symbology can be used to indicate patterns of relative distribution. Figure 2.1 (from Ashmore 1996, 57) depicts a fine example of this, with the chambered tombs of Scotland represented by stylised drawings of chambered tomb ‘types’. Each symbol represents many tombs, not one, and there is no mathematical equivalence to this, that is, the symbols have no specific numeric or spatial value in themselves. Nor do they represent chronological constancy – rather these tomb types span over two millennia of Scotland’s prehistory. This distribution map is generally making the point firstly that there are lots of different types of passage graves across Scotland; and, second, that they exist in discrete regional groupings.