

# HUNTERS, FISHERS & FORAGERS IN WALES

Towards a social narrative  
of Mesolithic lifeways

Malcolm Lillie

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*This volume is dedicated to my daughter Lian  
and granddaughters Paige and Mya*

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Towards a social narrative of Mesolithic lifeways

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*Front cover: A small waterfall in the Elan Valley, Ponys © Malcolm Lillie*

*Back cover: Waun Figen Felin, Llywel, Breconsbire, Ponys © Malcolm Lillie*

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My desire to write this book is also inspired by the fact that I grew up in south Wales, not knowing (or being taught) anything about the diverse and rich cultural heritage that was all around me in Wales, I was actually surprised to discover that I had grown up only a few miles from the Roman fortress at Caerleon; where I began my commercial archaeology career with the Glamorgan and Gwent Archaeological Trust (GGAT). Despite the (apparent) paucity of the Mesolithic record for Wales, I have always felt that the Mesolithic is a period that warrants a considered and integrated approach. Unfortunately, the Mesolithic is not always easily interpreted in a British context, due in no small part to the lack of direct physical evidence for Mesolithic individuals, and a general lack of stratified sites with secure contexts (with one or two notable exceptions).

There have been a number of recent volumes that have considered, in detail, some of the key elements of Mesolithic lifeways in Wales, to a greater or lesser degree, e.g. *Prehistoric Wales* (Lynch *et al.* 2000), *Prehistoric Coastal Communities: The Mesolithic in Western Britain* (Bell 2007a) and *Palaeolithic and Mesolithic Settlement in Wales: with Special Reference to Dyfed* (David 2007). These volumes cover key aspects of the available evidence, often with exception detail and clarity, and as such, the current volume is aimed at contributing to the available literature through an holistic consideration of the ways in which the evidence for people in the Mesolithic in Europe, in general, can allow for a nuanced consideration of Mesolithic lifeways and the generation of data that moves towards a social narrative for this period in Wales.

It is hoped that the use of primary data sources held at the regional HERs of Dyfed, Clwyd-Powys, Gwynedd and Glamorgan-Gwent enhances the discussion of Wales in the Mesolithic and ensures that the dataset that has been generated provides a robust basis for the analysis undertaken in this volume. The various HER managers and their colleagues are

thanked for all of the help and advice that was proffered when I visited. In this context Marion Page (DAT) in particular, along with Nina Steele and Angharad Stockwell at Gwynedd Archaeological Trust, Sophie Watson, Charlotte Baxter, Jeff Spencer and Bob Silvester at Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust and Sue Hughes and Neil Maylan (GGAT) are all thanked for their generosity in helping me negotiate the HER databases.

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Figure 3.2 was provided by Lars Larsson and photographed by Arne Sjöström to whom I am grateful for permission to use this image. Figure 4.1 is used with the permission of Bruce Hardy and ANU E Press, and I would like to thank both for permission to use this image. Similarly I would like to thank George Nicholas for permission to use Figure 4.4 and Mike Zhilin for permission to include Figure 4.2. Clive Waddington provided Figure 4.5. Figure 5.5 was produced by Chelsea Budd, again many thanks for this. Figures 4.7 and 4.8 were provided by Professor Nicky Milner, York University and the Star Carr Project. Figures 6.4 and 6.5 were provided by Lennart Larsen, Nationalmuseet Arbejdsmark, Denmark. I would like to thank Helga Schütze for sending these, and Lars Larsson for letting me know who to contact regarding access.

After Martin Bell pointed me in the right direction both Victor Ambrus and the Council for British Archaeology were kind enough to give me permission to use the artist's

impression of the activity at Goldcliff that appears as Figure 4.9. The reader is guided to Victor's book *Drawing on Archaeology: Bringing History Back to Life* (Tempus 2006) for more reconstructions of life in the past. Catrina Appleby and Julia at the CBA are thanked for their quick response to my query about the use of this particular image.

In addition to the above, other direct assistance with this book, in terms of images for use in illustrating important parts of the text, and details in relation to his own work in Wales, was received from Andrew David. Furthermore Helen Fenwick took the database of Mesolithic sites that I created from the available literature and HER's and made it make sense in terms of mapping within the GIS platform. These maps form the basis of the sites distributions in Chapter 3 and the distribution maps in Chapter 1 and 2. There are limitations in the dataset, but it is, on the whole, representative of the archive for Wales.

For permission to use the Author's Prologue by Dylan Thomas I would like to thank Marigold Atkey at David Higham Associates (London) and Christopher Wait at New Directions Publishing (New York) for all their help in obtaining copyright access to this work.

Finally, I would like to thank Clare Litt and Julie Gardiner at Oxbow for their patience as this project has developed.

Any omissions in this list of colleagues and friends are, of course, purely the responsibility of the author.

The reader is directed to the new Historic Environment Record database for the Welsh Archaeological Trusts at <http://www.archwilio.org.uk/> where a searchable database exists for all archaeological periods and site types in Wales. As mentioned above the four Welsh trusts were extremely helpful when I was researching the background data for this work, and the reader might like to follow the activities of the trusts at their respective websites; Gwynedd (<http://www.heneb.co.uk/>), Clwyd-Powys (<http://www.cpat.org.uk/>), Glamorgan-Gwent Archaeological Trust (<http://www.ggat.org.uk/>) and Dyfed Archaeological Trust (<http://www.dyfedarchaeology.org.uk/>) where their work, activities and events, and downloads of a range of reports can be accessed (see Figure 0.1 for current, and past, county boundaries and unitary authority areas).

This volume was produced during my time at the University of Hull while I was also involved in teaching and various research endeavours, some of this work can be accessed online at <http://www2.hull.ac.uk/science/waerc.aspx>. My focus on teaching proved to be a factor that limited the time I was able to put into the production of this volume, but the long gestation period proved useful in allowing me time to reflect on each chapter as it developed. As ever, I hope this reflective approach proves to be a strength in the volume that has resulted from this process.

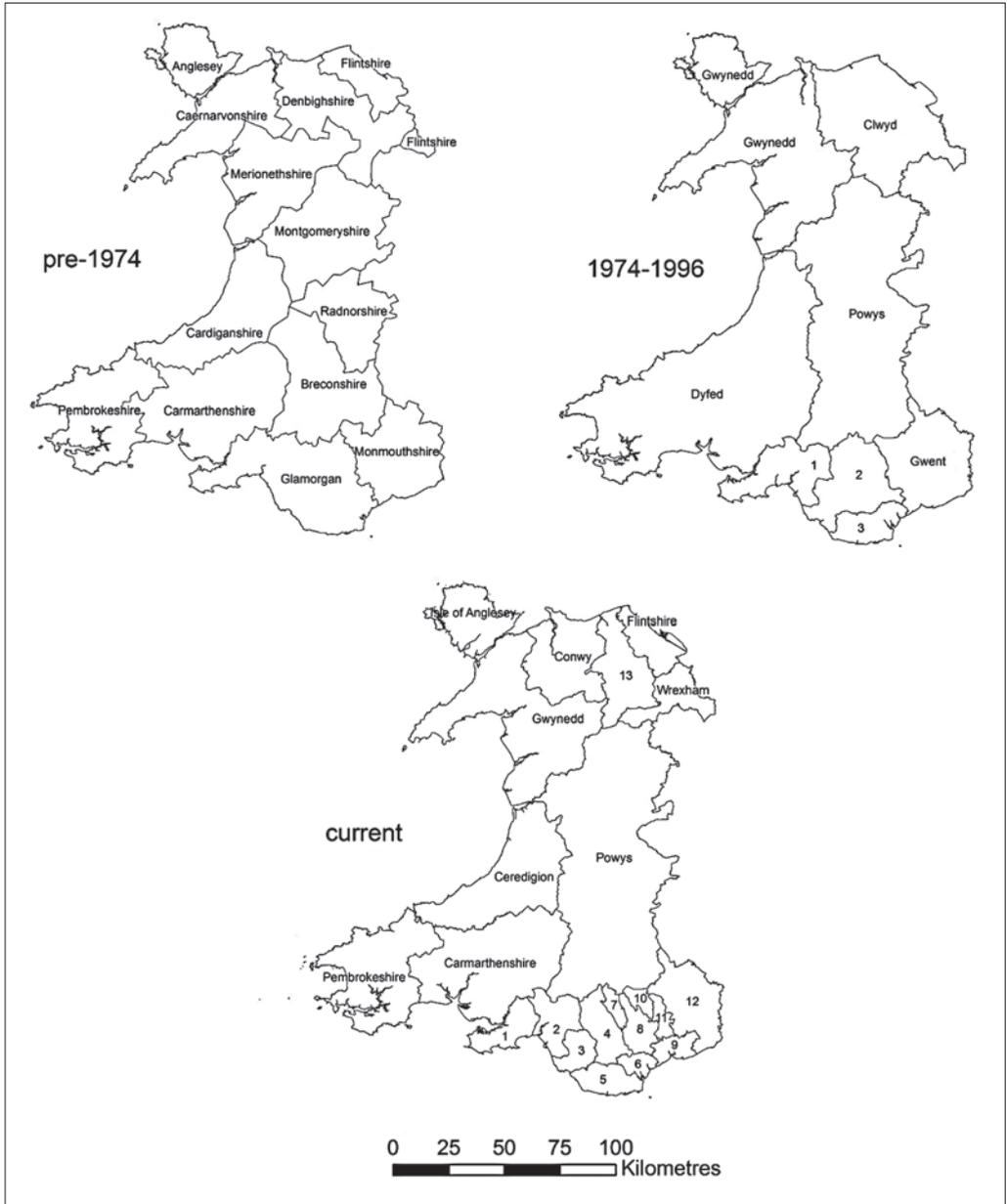


Fig. 0.1: County boundaries and unitary authorities in Wales (pre-1974 through to the present) 1974–1996: 1 = West Glamorgan; 2 = Mid Glamorgan; 3 = South Glamorgan. B. Current Map (from April 1996) – 1 = Swansea; 2 = Neath Port Talbot; 3 = Bridgend; 4 = Rhondda Cynon Taff; 5 = Vale of Glamorgan; 6 = Cardiff; 7 = Merthyr Tydfil; 8 = Caerphilly; 9 = Newport; 10 = Blaenau Gwent; 11 = Torfaen; 12 = Monmouthshire; 13 = Denbighshire.

## DYLAN THOMAS: AUTHOR'S PROLOGUE

I had, of course, heard of Dylan Thomas as a child growing up near Newport in South Wales in the 1960s and '70s, but I had never read any of his work; and did not do so until I was in my 30s. My recollection of the education system in south Wales in the 1970s is that I only learnt about English history and the only poetry that I recall is the Wilfred Owen poem with the lines *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* (although, whilst born in Shropshire, Owen apparently had a mix of English and Welsh ancestry and the borders town has both Welsh and English speakers). Unfortunately as a young student in secondary school it was generally assumed that all of the boys would end up working at Llanwern Steelworks, and there was no real encouragement to aspire to anything beyond this (perhaps "they" were right). Of the Dylan Thomas poems that I have read the following Author's Prologue is the one that speaks to me the most in relation to the key focus of my academic interests, i.e. landscapes, people and the hunter-fisher-foragers of the Mesolithic and the incipient farmers of the Neolithic. I hope it speaks to the reader in a similar fashion ...

This day winding down now  
 At God speeded summer's end  
 In the torrent salmon sun,  
 In my seashaken house  
 On a breakneck of rocks  
 Tangled with chirrup and fruit,  
 Froth, flute, fin, and quill  
 At a wood's dancing hoof,  
 By scummed, starfish sands  
 With their fishwife cross  
 Gulls, pipers, cockles, and snails,  
 Out there, crow black, men  
 Tackled with clouds, who kneel  
 To the sunset nets,  
 Geese nearly in heaven, boys  
 Stabbing, and herons, and shells  
 That speak seven seas,  
 Eternal waters away  
 From the cities of nine  
 Days' night whose towers will catch  
 In the religious wind  
 Like stalks of tall, dry straw,  
 At poor peace I sing

To you strangers (though song  
 Is a burning and crested act,  
 The fire of birds in  
 The world's turning wood,  
 For my sawn, splay sounds),  
 Out of these seathumbed leaves  
 That will fly and fall  
 Like leaves of trees and as soon  
 Crumble and undie  
 Into the dogdayed night.  
 Seaward the salmon, sucked sun slips,  
 And the dumb swans drub blue  
 My dabbed bay's dusk, as I hack  
 This rumpus of shapes  
 For you to know  
 How I, a spinning man,  
 Glory also this star, bird  
 Roared, sea born, man torn, blood blest.  
 Hark: I trumpet the place,  
 From fish to jumping hill! Look:  
 I build my bellowing ark  
 To the best of my love  
 As the flood begins,

Out of the fountainhead  
 Of fear, rage red, manalive,  
 Molten and mountainous to stream  
 Over the wound asleep  
 Sheep white hollow farms  
 To Wales in my arms.  
 Hoo, there, in castle keep,  
 You king singsong owls, who moonbeam  
 The flickering runs and dive  
 The dingle furred deer dead!  
 Huloo, on plumbed bryns,  
 O my ruffled ring dove  
 In the hooting, nearly dark  
 With Welsh and reverent rook,  
 Coo rooing the woods' praise,  
 Who moons her blue notes from her nest  
 Down to the curlew herd!  
 Ho, hullaballoing clan  
 Agape, with woe  
 In your beaks, on the gabbing capes!  
 Heigh, on horseback hill, jack  
 Whisking hare! who  
 Hears, there, this fox light, my flood ship's  
 Clangour as I hew and smite  
 (A clash of anvils for my  
 Hubbub and fiddle, this tune  
 On a tongued puffball)  
 But animals thick as thieves

On God's rough tumbling grounds  
 (Hail to His beasthood).  
 Beasts who sleep good and thin,  
 Hist, in hogsback woods! The haystacked  
 Hollow farms in a throng  
 Of waters cluck and cling,  
 And barnroofs cockcrow war!  
 O kingdom of neighbors, finned  
 Felled and quilled, flash to my patch  
 Work art and the moonshine  
 Drinking Noah of the bay,  
 With pelt, and scale, and fleece:  
 Only the drowned deep bells  
 Of sheep and churches noise  
 Poor peace as the sun sets  
 And dark shoals every holy field.  
 We will ride out alone and then,  
 Under the stars of Wales,  
 Cry, Multitudes of arks! Across  
 The water lidded lands,  
 Manned with their loves they'll move,  
 Like wooden islands, hill to hill.  
 Huloo, my proud dove with a flute!  
 Ahoy, old, sea-legged fox,  
 Tom tit and Dai mouse!  
 My ark sings in the sun  
 At God speeded summer's end  
 And the flood flowers now.

Dylan Thomas

Author's Prologue from *The Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas: the Centenary Edition* (Orion Publishing Group 2014). Poems © the Trustees for the Copyrights of Dylan Thomas. Reprinted by permission of David Higham Associates Ltd (World excluding US, its territories, and Canada Rights), and from *The Poems of Dylan Thomas*, copyright ©1967 by the Trustees for the Copyrights of Dylan Thomas. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp (US, its territories, and Canada Rights).

# INTRODUCTION

... Human niches are defined to a large extent by technology, even among foragers. There are horse-mounted, bow-and-arrow hunters of bison, harpoon hunters of walrus who travel in kayaks, salmon weir-fishers, and spear, blowgun, and net hunters... (Marlowe 2005: 54)

As the above quote from Marlowe highlights, there is no single “type” of hunter-fisher-forager society in the present, and as such, we would be in error to suppose that there would be a single “type” in the past. In the Mesolithic period, throughout Europe, hunter-fisher-forager communities occupied a diverse range of ecological zones, exploiting resources from coastal, lacustrine and riverine contexts and from lowland to upland areas. The nature of the archaeological evidence for this activity is as diverse as the environments that were exploited, but unfortunately it is often ephemeral in nature. In general, the archaeological record for past hunter-fisher-foragers is complex, difficult to disentangle, and often fragmentary, at best. With this in mind, this volume will endeavour to characterise past hunter-fisher-forager settlement, subsistence and economic activity during the Mesolithic period in Wales, with reference to the remainder of Europe, between *ca.* 10,200 and 6000 years ago.

In order to ensure that an holistic overview is generated it will be necessary to link the discussion of the welsh evidence throughout the text with examples from the wider regional context, as the welsh evidence is fragmentary and relatively limited in terms of directly dated, well excavated stratified activity sites and burials (Grimes 1951). As such, the discussion throughout this volume will include a diverse range of examples from other areas of Europe (and further afield) in order to illustrate the dynamic, complex and vibrant nature of Mesolithic society. In this respect the author believes that the study is not weakened by the use of examples from outside of the modern political boundary of Wales as, during earlier prehistory, such artificial boundaries have no significance. Furthermore, throughout the Mesolithic period, the land area currently under the North Sea formed a dryland plain linking Britain to the rest of northwest Europe, and whilst the North Sea is a natural barrier today, this was not the case during the earlier part of the Mesolithic period. As a consequence, we are in effect simply studying an area of land that was originally joined to, and on, the northwestern edge of the European landmass. In a similar manner, around the coasts of Wales, the “submerged forests” that we see at low tide, attest to the fact that the landscapes exploited by earlier Holocene hunter-fisher-foragers was more extensive than the landscape that we see/use in the present, although these coastal landscapes were changing across the Mesolithic as sea levels rose. As a consequence we need to attempt to visualise an extensive, rich and diverse lowland

landscape that was exposed by much lower sea levels, and which has subsequently been submerged as the ice sheets of the later Pleistocene have receded and released their melt waters into the earth's oceans, raising them by >100m in certain areas of the world (see discussion in Chapters 1 and 2). Our modern perceptions of landscape are markedly different to those of our hunter-fisher-forager ancestors, and as we know, our subsistence strategies are markedly different as well! Fortunately, we have reliable evidence, dredged up from the bed of the North Sea, that indicates that hunter-fisher-forager groups in the later Pleistocene would have been able to cross the North Sea plain from as early as *ca.* 21.8–11.8 thousand years ago (kyBP), and indeed that much earlier traverses would/could have been undertaken. As the Devensian ice sheets retreated and climate ameliorated human groups would have explored and travelled in search of new environments, from which, a diverse range of resources, habitation sites and focal points were integrated into their experiences of the world; and where these new experiences could be both engaged with and used to expand the groups knowledge and shared commonality. The fundamental needs of hunter-fisher-forager societies, e.g. food, shelter, warmth, companionship, social, economic and ritual interactions, would have differed across the Mesolithic period (these are considered in Chapters 3–6 of this volume). We should always remember that whilst a relatively small group size was often the optimal way to exploit the environment prior to the adoption of agriculture (see discussion in Chapter 7), this would have necessitated a considerable degree of co-operation in order to ensure group continuity, but also that whilst co-operation was important, it is likely that both intra- and inter-group conflicts would have occurred. Individual choice could, and undoubtedly would have influenced socio-political, economic and ritual actions, and as with society today a single individual's actions could have a profound influence on the group's internal and/or external dynamic.

Returning to the finds from the bed of the North Sea, these include both archaeological artefacts and environmental evidence, often encountered as net snags by the many trawlers that exploit the rich, albeit still threatened, resources that the sea has to offer (NSPRMF 2009). These finds include flints, harpoons and re-worked or carved fossil mammal bones, alongside unmodified finds, dredged up from areas such as the Dogger, Brown, Leman and Ower Banks, and German Bight – the former and latter areas might be recognisable from BBC4's shipping forecast as produced by the UK Met Office. As the term bank might suggest, these areas, whilst currently submerged, would have been areas of higher ground in the North Sea plain prior to its inundation. As discussed below, recent studies have sought to illustrate and characterise the archaeo-environmental potential of the lands beneath the North Sea (e.g. Coles 1998; 2000; Flemming 2002; 2004a; Ward *et al.* 2006; Gaffney *et al.* 2007) and other areas such as Liverpool Bay and the Bristol Channel (e.g. Dyfed Archaeological Trust 2011). Furthermore, there is also palaeoenvironmental evidence for the presence of birch, pine and willow recovered from freshwater peats at a depth of –46m MSL on the southeastern slope of Dogger Bank, which are dated to *ca.* 9.9–9.0 kyBP<sup>1</sup> (Ward *et al.* 2006: 209, and references therein).

The archaeological remains from the North Sea include a barbed antler point that was dredged up in 1931, in a lump of peat, from *ca.* 36m depth, in between the Leman

and Ower Banks (Godwin 1960; Ward *et al.* 2006). Other finds include human remains recovered from the southern Bight, which confirm Mesolithic occupation in the southern areas of the North Sea between 11.6 and 9.2 kyBP (Glimmerveen *et al.* 2004), and which were found in association with bones of wild boar and red deer. Flemming (2002) has reported the fact that, quite literally, hundreds of finds of fossils and artefacts are dredged up from the North Sea annually, although unfortunately as noted by Ward *et al.* (2006: 215) it is only recently that a concerted effort has been made to accurately record the locations and depths of such find spots. Furthermore, the accurate dating of finds and palaeoenvironmental remains is still lacking.

As noted above, in the context of the current study of hunter-fisher-forager groups in Wales during the Mesolithic period, it should always be remembered that the changes in sea level affecting the North Sea Basin are also influencing the nature of the coastline, along with the landscapes and seascapes, around Wales throughout the latter part of the Pleistocene and into the Holocene period. This situation is of fundamental importance to our understanding of this period as the biases that are introduced by rising sea levels appear to be considerable, and of course, human groups would have consistently been negotiating and renegotiating their landscape interactions across this period.

The situation during the earlier part of the Holocene is diverse in terms of landscape developments (Chapter 2) and human responses to these changes are equally diverse (Chapters 3–7). The land area currently occupied by the modern country of Wales is topographically varied, and as such would also have supported a wide range of fauna and flora, available to the hunters, fishers and foragers of the Mesolithic period. Wales is in excess of 20,700 sq kilometres (8,000 sq miles) in area, and *ca.* one-third of this area lies above the 244m (800ft) contour, i.e. is classed as upland (Silvester 2003; Caseldine 1990). However, by contrast, this obviously means that *ca.* two-thirds of this land area is, by definition, lowland. It is also immediately apparent that a significant proportion of the landscape is intimately linked to coastal, estuarine or riverine environments. This diversity in relation to landscape features would have produced an extremely rich mosaic of environments for exploitation by human groups throughout the earlier Holocene period.

It should also be noted, however, that Wales itself is not an island (Silvester 2003), and that during the earlier Mesolithic period hunter-fisher-forager populations would have moved around the landscape of Britain, and the North Sea Basin, interacting with other forager groups and exploiting the wide, and developing, range of environments and species (of both plants and animals) that they would have encountered as the ice sheets of the Pleistocene retreated. Subsequently, warmth adapted species expanded into those northerly areas of Europe that were previously covered by the Devensian ice-sheets and the permafrost zones that extended beyond them. The gradual replacement of open grasslands by warmth-adapted plants and animals at the start of the Holocene period (i.e. *ca.* 10,200 or so years ago) is a shift that would have occurred at other times in the Pleistocene as the glacial (and stadial) cold periods were interspersed with warmer interglacials (and interstadials).