Marcham worked flints

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Worked flints were found in all the excavated areas and shared similar characteristics. There were no obvious concentrations, and the artefacts were disturbed during later activities on the site.

Certain factors set limits on how these artefacts can be interpreted. Most were made from pebbles which would have been difficult to work. As a result, there is little to suggest a consistent approach to making artefacts: the exceptions are Mesolithic blade cores. At the same time, subsequent disturbance means that it is difficult to identify traces of use damage. On the other hand, all the flint had to be introduced to the site – it did not occur there naturally. Even the smallest pieces must have resulted from human activity. It is not clear where the flint was obtained, and it could have come from a variety of local sources. Very few were of the fine quality associated with deposits on the chalk.

Four diagnostic types are represented: 23 scrapers, 6 arrowheads, 2 or 3 microliths, and 2 rods or fabricators. They suggest an outline chronology.

The microliths are of two types: two small obliquely-blunted points; and a possible rod microlith. They need not be contemporary with one another, and Conneller (2022) assigns these forms to her Middle and Late Mesolithic phases respectively.

The flint arrowheads are more diagnostic. Two could date from the Early or Middle Neolithic periods: the base of a leaf-shaped arrowhead, and small but intact example of the same form. A larger ogival arrowhead has Middle Neolithic parallels. There is also a transverse arrowhead of Late Neolithic date. Two arrowheads date from the Chalcolithic or the Early Bronze Age. One is barbed and tanged and the other is tanged. The latter type had an extended currency and remained in use until the Middle Bronze Age.

Most of the scrapers are undiagnostic, but a single example characterised by shallow pressure flaking might be Late Neolithic or Early Bronze Age. Two small scrapers have parallels at Beaker or Early Bronze Age sites. Those made from cortical flakes probably date from later phases of the Bronze Age or Iron Age. The remaining items are two flint rods or fabricators. Such artefacts had a long history, but their currency extended into the Middle Bronze Age.

Two technologies are represented in the collection. The first was based on the production of blades or narrow flakes; some had been deliberately segmented. The assemblage includes the specialised cores for producing them, and three core rejuvenation flakes. This method of working is well documented on Mesolithic sites, but it is impossible to suggest a more specific date. At one time specialists distinguished between broad-blade and narrow-blade industries, but this approach has gone out of favour. In any case the size of the pebbles would make it impossible to detach large pieces of flint. There is a further problem. Although the collection includes regular blades and blade cores, it also features less regular narrow flakes. That might be due to the poor quality of the raw material, but artefacts of this kind are known at Early or Middle Neolithic sites. The evidence from Marcham is ambiguous since the assemblage contains arrowheads dating from these periods.

Apart from the other arrowheads and two small scrapers there are few signs of activity during the Late Neolithic or Beaker periods. Most of the debitage could be of later date. Pebbles were worked unsystematically, many pieces retained large areas of cortex, and there is evidence of knapping errors. These features suggest a period when metal artefacts were available (Ford et al. 1984). At Marcham that must have been the case between the Middle Bronze Age and the Iron Age. At the same time, the variety of retouched items was restricted as they were replaced by metalwork. In the end, the commonest type in southern England - sometimes the only one - was the flint scraper. It is consistent with the evidence from the site.

This is not a large assemblage, and it seems unlikely that Marcham was intensively used before the Middle Bronze Age. That is consistent with its wider setting. The distribution of earlier prehistoric artefacts focuses on the Corallian ridge, especially during the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods and more artefacts have been found there (Briggs, Cook and Rowley eds. 1986, Maps 2-4). The results of field survey in the Vale of the White Horse support this conclusion as they are strikingly like those of this project. Again, Mesolithic and Early Neolithic artefacts occurred on the low ground, but in this case there was no Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age material (Tingle 1991, 38). In those phases the main focus of activity was on the limestone to the north.

A useful comparison is with Tubney on the Corallian ridge which was also occupied during the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods. The site has seen detailed excavation. The earliest material is especially striking. Two concentrations of Mesolithic artefacts were excavated in their entirety. They contained 2,100 and 4,000 items respectively (Bradley and Hey 1993). A later excavation sampled even denser concentrations of Mesolithic flintwork. In this case they were estimated to contain between 45,000 and 50,000 items (Simmonds, Anderson-Whymark and Norton 2011). By comparison the Mesolithic collection from Marcham Frilford is extremely restricted. The Neolithic to Early Bronze phase at Tubney was associated with very few artefacts, but they did include a transverse arrowhead similar to that from Marcham.

References

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