

# Decolonising the Mesolithic?



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## 1 Introduction

“Decolonising the Mesolithic?” was a virtual workshop held on May 21<sup>st</sup> 2021. It was attended by 38 researchers from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, mainly, but not exclusively, active Mesolithic researchers from Europe. This short paper reports on the organisation of this workshop, and the response it elicited from its participants.

“Decolonising the Mesolithic?” was organised by Ben Elliott and Graeme Warren, with Charlotte Damm, Astrid Nyland and Henny Piezonka chairing small group discussions. Liv Nilsson Stutz and Martin Porr kindly agreed in advance to act as guest discussants. The workshop aimed to provide an initial consideration of the implications of the decolonisation agenda on Mesolithic research practice. Does the Mesolithic need ‘decolonising’ and how might this differ from other critical approaches to our practice? The meeting was discussion-driven and required significant self-reflection from the participants on their work as Mesolithic specialists.

Following Pimblott’s (2020) overview of the decolonising movement, we structured discussion to consider whether race-based science and Eurocentric approaches influenced our work. If we considered

that it did, we prompted participants to articulate ways of challenging this. There was consensus that an effort to deconstruct racialised and Eurocentric assumptions underpinning Mesolithic research would create a more equitable and critically minded discipline. This brief note summarises some of the key themes of this discussion which we think will be of interest for the broader MM community.

## 2 Five areas emerged as significant

Firstly, the distinctive character of a decolonising agenda in Europe. This was articulated through two overlapping themes. On the one hand, discussion highlighted that attempts to decolonise the Mesolithic would be very varied across different regions of Europe; not least because of the internally complex history of European colonisation. Alongside this, we recognised that decolonising our practice would be very different in Europe than in contexts where Indigenous archaeology has been strongly developed. This in turn raises significant questions around how we understand indigeneity in European Mesolithic archaeology where, in most (but not all) instances, we are not engaging with Indigenous hunter-gatherer groups or their descendants. The specific character of decolonising within Europe was also highlighted by the strong emphasis participants placed on the significant role played by English language dominance in Mesolithic archaeology.

Secondly, we explored how many of our basic terminologies and concepts reflect colonialist assumptions. This includes fundamental categories such as that of hunter-gatherer. We considered how the presentation of a 'frontier' approach to the adoption of agriculture in Europe also reaffirms such assumptions. These terms are problematic when used between specialists, but are especially challenging when caught up in broader public debates about the Mesolithic, with terms such as 'stone age', 'hunter-gatherer', 'primitive' and 'prehistoric' all also bound into racialised discourse. Particular concern was raised over discussions of 'ancestors' and 'ancestry' within the public sphere, and how such claims were operationalised. We argued that Mesolithic research needs to increase its efforts to redefine key terms to all of its audiences.

Thirdly, a significant area of discussion focussed on the ways in which Mesolithic archaeology consumes the outputs of ethnographic observations of non-European (near-)contemporary hunter-gatherers to reconstruct the lives of European communities in the deep past. In part, this is an old discussion, but our conversations focused on the ethical and moral implications of our use of such comparative approaches, a theme which has not seen substantive discussion in the Mesolithic research community. Two themes were significant. On the one hand, the use of comparative approaches runs the risk of suggesting that contemporary populations from scattered locations across the globe are in some ways the same as those from European prehistory, neglecting particular histories and recreating the collapsing of distance and time characteristic of colonialist discourse. On the other hand, it might flatten differences between Indigenous groups in the present, creating a unified and quasi-universal 'world view'. Issues around consent in using and applying Indigenous ontologies to very different contexts were raised.

Fourthly, we also noted, but did not attempt to engage with in detail, significant issues around the composition of the Mesolithic archaeological profession, especially in terms of diversity, and the (colonial) inequalities that structure many of the institutions within which we work. Whilst this is not a problem specific to Mesolithic research it remains a very significant area for further consideration and the development of engaged forms of activism and praxis.

Finally, and as highlighted very strongly in statements by our discussants and summaries by the organisers, we recognised that this process is not easy. Taken seriously, and not simply mistaken for another critical stance, ‘Decolonising the Mesolithic’ raises profound questions around how we practice archaeology; why we practice archaeology; and who we do it for. The answers can be uncomfortable and challenging and it is hugely important that we provide an appropriate space for reflection.

### 3 Summary

Participants agreed that there was a need to continue to explore the issues raised in the workshop and to establish and maintain networks to enable this. A key aim is to raise awareness of these issues – and this summary of our meeting attempts to do that. It was suggested that further development might be achieved through other free-to-attend online events and themed sessions at international conferences. There is significant potential to discuss these issues and to engage with the broader hunter-gatherer research community at CHAGS13 (UCD, June 2022).

### 4 Acknowledgements

We are grateful to all participants for their contributions and their mutual care and maintenance of an open, supportive environment for such important discussion. The organisers would like to thank the small group chairs and invited discussants for their generosity, insight, and professionalism throughout the development and delivery of this workshop.

### 5 References

Pimblott, K. (2020) Decolonising the University: The Origins and Meaning of a Movement. *The Political Quarterly* 91, 210-216.