3. BACKGROUND

3.1 Archaeological background

3.1.1 The period framework

This report concerns the evidence for the past human communities who lived along the banks of the River Dee, Aberdeenshire over a period of 10,000 years from 12,000 BC to 2000 BC. There was, of course, some change to lifestyle and society over this time, and, very generally, it is divided into four main archaeological periods: Late Upper Palaeolithic; Mesolithic; Neolithic; and Bronze Age. The first two of these periods are characterised as communities of hunter-gatherers, with a more-or-less mobile lifestyle, who acquired food and other resources from an intimate knowledge of the land.

The evidence suggests that small Late Upper Palaeolithic groups arrived in the area in the 13th millennium BC, during the Late Glacial Interstadial, as conditions ameliorated after the last ice age (Table 4.1). This was a warmer phase; the landscape would have been largely open but with some stands of low woodland dominated by birch and juniper. The human communities at the time share many characteristics with communities to be found further south in the British Isles, and on the Continent, to which Britain was still connected through the landscape of Doggerland (Gaffney et al 2007). The evidence indicates that they may have travelled long distances in the course of an annual round, and that they possessed detailed understanding of the landscape within which they lived, from which they derived all the resources necessary for survival. Mammals such as reindeer are likely to have provided an important resource, and groups may have followed them and other species as they moved across the landscape. Characteristic stone tools, including particular types of tanged spear points, allow us to compare different communities one with another, and in general these groups are known to archaeologists as Hamburgian, though we have no idea how they would have named themselves. Late Upper Palaeolithic communities were adaptable and resilient (Pettitt & White 2012) and persisted through considerable environmental change including an abrupt return to cold conditions in the period known as the Younger Dryas, around 10,900 BC, though the archaeology suggests that population numbers may have dropped dramatically at the time.

Around 9700 BC a period of rapid amelioration is recorded in the environmental record, and this marks the start of the Holocene, at which time conditions improved and vegetation increased, including the establishment of mixed woodland and forest. Population numbers grew and marked changes to the lifestyle allow archaeologists to classify the communities as Mesolithic. Life still revolved around a high degree of mobility and the acquisition of all the resources necessary for survival from the land, though this was a very different world to that of the Late Upper Palaeolithic. The evidence suggests that aquatic and marine species joined land mammals and birds as significant resources. Technological developments include the manufacture of small stone blades which could be shaped into microliths among other things, and a new range of bone and antler tools.

By 3800 BC changes to local lifestyles included the earliest archaeological evidence for farming in the area and this period is known generally as the Neolithic. Population levels grew and communities became more settled. Early Neolithic occupation focused on large timber halls, though a range of other buildings is also likely to have been used. Changes to familiar everyday goods included the development of new types of stone tool that were less focused on blade technologies, as well as the introduction of innovative materials such as pottery. Farming included the cultivation of a range of crops as well as the care of domestic animals such as cattle, sheep/goats and pigs, although wild resources were still used. Settlements were more permanent and increasing human impacts on the wooded landscape are visible in the archaeological record. From around 3200 BC, further changes to the material culture mark a social and cultural change known to archaeology as the Late Neolithic. Settlements comprised several households in smaller buildings, diverse monuments were developed for burial, and, later on, ceremonial sites such as stone circles became common.

The introduction of metal took place around 2500 BC and, though it made little impact on everyday life at first, this period is known today as the Bronze Age. Farmsteads and villages of round timber and turf houses became more common

and there were different styles of pottery and other material goods. Metal goods were rare at first, but over time, the stone tools that had characterised earlier periods became less common. Different types of burial and changes to the ceremonial sites suggest that there were marked changes to belief and ritual practice at the time.

3.1.2 Prehistoric archaeology of the River Dee

The presence of stone tools has been recognised in the ploughed fields along the River Dee at least since the early 20th century (Illus 3.1). From 1906 onwards, Hilda Paterson collected material that she identified as Mesolithic from the site at Birkwood on the south bank of the river (Paterson & Lacaille 1936). Paterson's work is notable for several reasons apart from its status as an early Scottish contribution by a female lead; she quickly realised that the significance of her finds lay in that they provided the important evidence to confirm that 'microlithic' industries existed in Scotland. Together with academic archaeologists Armand Lacaille and Graham Callander, she undertook a small excavation on the 'lower' (Camphill) terrace at Birkwood, and in their resultant publication Lacaille commented on the scope for further archaeological work both at this location and elsewhere in the vicinity (Paterson & Lacaille 1936: 434). In the 1970s Dr John Grieve collected lithics from nine sites along the river downstream of Banchory, and in the 1980s James Kenworthy excavated a small trench and a series of test pits in one of Grieve's sites at Nethermills Farm in order to investigate the possibility of in situ Mesolithic archaeology (Illus 3.2; Wickham-Jones et al 2017). Since then, Grieve's work has continued to provide important base data for a number of studies. In the early 1990s, the lithic sites along the river formed part of research into the development of agriculture in the British Isles by Jane Kenney (Kenney 1993). Ten years later, slightly further back from the river and towards the foothills of the Cairngorms, fieldwalking was undertaken around Tarland by a team led by Dr Tim Phillips as part of a wider archaeological project (Bradley 2005). More recently, fieldwalking has continued in the fields around Crathes by the Over Fifties Archaeological Research Society (OFARS, subsequently changed to the North East Scotland Archaeological Research Society, NESARS), under the leadership of Heather Sabnis (http://www.stoneagecrathes.com/index.htm). Mesolithic Deeside continues this fieldwalking tradition.

Illus 3.1 Fieldwalking and a typical lithic find

Illus 3.2 Work taking place in 1981 during James Kenworthy's excavation at NM4

North of and away from the river, on the Lochton Terrace (see 4.2 'The terraces of the Dee'), the site of Warren Field, Crathes, was excavated in 2005. Still enigmatic, the Mesolithic evidence here comprises an alignment of at least 15 pits (of which 12 have been excavated), dating to the first half of the 8th millennium BC. The site has been variously interpreted as ceremonial (Murray et al 2009), and a lunar calendar (Gaffney et al 2013), though other pits at Milltimber, 13km downstream (in a different configuration, but also dating from the 8th millennium BC and later, throughout the Mesolithic period), were interpreted as hunting traps (Dingwall et al 2019b: 128–31). Milltimber also lies on the northern bank of the Dee, and the Mesolithic archaeology here, set towards the back of the Camphill Terrace, included a lithic scatter, post holes, shallow pits, hearth sites, and features interpreted as fence lines. A number of lithic scatter sites with a Mesolithic element have been recorded along the river as it approaches the sea (Kenney 1993), including the excavated site at Garthdee Road (Murray & Murray 2014), and these include excavated sites in the City of Aberdeen (Murray 1982; Cameron & Stones 2001). Some 11km north, on higher land some 2km south of the River Don, at Standingstones, Mesolithic evidence includes a possible structure, interpreted as a small upland camp (van Wessel 2019: 223–7). Ten kilometres to the east, on the coastal plain at Blackdog, nearly 5km north of the mouth of the Don, three more pits were interpreted as hunting traps and dated to the early 4th millennium BC (van Wessel & Wilson 2019: 309), and other small sites have been excavated in the area (Headland Archaeology 2018).

The lithic assemblages of the Dee include not only Mesolithic material. The river has provided a significant corridor for human groups through the millennia. Recent investigations have recorded hints of earlier activity. Lithics characteristic of Late Upper Palaeolithic activity have been found among the assemblages from Nethermills Farm, Milltimber and Standingstones (Ballin 2019; Dingwall et al 2019b; van Wessel 2019) as well as at Peterhead (Cameron & Ballin 2018), and Blackdog to the north (Ballin, pers comm). To date, however, no in situ Palaeolithic material has been excavated. Despite the lack of detail, the Palaeolithic archaeology of the Dee is significant, providing as it does a growing body of evidence for a period of Scottish prehistory about which little is known. For a variety of reasons, including cultural bias and lack of fieldwork,

conventional wisdom has long maintained that Scotland was uninhabited prior to the Holocene, about 8000 BC. Occasional Late Upper Palaeolithic artefacts have occurred since the 1950s (for example, Livens 1956), but it is always hard to contextualise isolated finds and only in recent years have enough pieces accrued to give credence to the presence of these early communities (Ballin & Wickham-Jones 2017; Ballin 2019), culminating in the excavation of a lithic scatter site dating to around 12,000 BC at Howburn Farm in Lanarkshire (Ballin et al 2018). Artefacts indicative of Late Upper Palaeolithic activity continue to be identified across Scotland with increasing regularity (cf the finding of a possible Hamburgian Zinken at Site 19 Dunragit, Galloway; Ballin 2021b), each new site adding to the emerging picture of the early millennia of human activity across the country. The number of Late Upper Palaeolithic finds along the River Dee suggests that this area may hold significant potential for the archaeological investigation of this period.

Later activity is also well represented. Specific stone tool types indicative of Neolithic and Bronze Age occupation are present in most assemblages, and notable excavated Neolithic sites along the watercourse include the timber hall at Balbridie, dated to around 3800 BC (Reynolds 1980; Ralston 1982), a similar site at Warren Field, Crathes, *c* 3750 BC (Murray et al 2009), various structural elements at Milltimber, between 3900 and 3300 BC (Dingwall et al 2019b), and a small structure at Garthdee Road, *c* 3700 BC (Murray & Murray 2014). In 1993 analysis of the Mesolithic and Neolithic sites along the Dee comprised a significant part of the research undertaken by Kenney (Kenney 1993).

Upstream of Banchory the archaeological evidence extends to the headwaters of the Dee high in the Cairngorm massif (Fraser et al 2020). While the density of riverside sites decreases as one moves towards the uplands, perhaps due both to the vagaries of fieldwalkers and the complexities of different farming regimes, enough lithic scatter sites have been recorded, for example at Potarch and Aboyne, to demonstrate that remains, including Mesolithic material, do exist. Around the village of Tarland, some 6km to the north of the river, Phillips' fieldwork revealed a cluster of predominantly Neolithic and Bronze Age sites (Bradley 2005: 87–97). Mesolithic activity continues high in the Cairngorms, as evidenced by the discovery of a small lithic assemblage during footpath maintenance at Chest of Dee on the National Trust for Scotland's Mar Lodge estate in 2005. This has led to an intensive series of fieldwork projects at this high altitude, including the excavation of a small structure dated to between 6200 and 6000 BC at Caochanan Ruadha above the Geldie Burn (Warren et al 2018) and of a spread of Mesolithic remains covering a range of activity from around 7600 BC, along the river bank at Chest of Dee itself (Wickham-Jones et al 2020), together with other field survey and small-scale test pitting in the area (Fraser et al 2020).

3.2 Mesolithic Deeside community archaeology group

All of the results described here represent the work of Mesolithic Deeside, a community archaeology group made up of local volunteers (residents, students and archaeologists) living alongside, or close by, the River Dee and having a fascination with Mesolithic archaeology. A grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund in 2017 provided for the group to pay for a project supervisor for a year and for a lithic specialist to report on any finds they might make. Funding from Aberdeenshire Council Archaeology Service helped to kickstart the organisation in 2016, and together with others (see Acknowledgements) their ongoing support has allowed the work to continue. Mesolithic Deeside incorporates considerable experience in fieldwalking and relevant disciplines including spatial analysis, excavation and local networking, and they work closely with the Department of Archaeology at the University of Aberdeen. On occasion they are joined by students from the university. Regular reports are produced from fieldwork, copies of which are sent (alongside the spatial datasets) to the Aberdeenshire Historic Environment Record, and there is a well-used website which is regularly updated (https://www.mesolithicdeeside.org/).

In addition to field investigation, the members of Mesolithic Deeside participate in a wide-ranging programme of outreach, including talks, demonstrations of technology and material culture, exhibitions, and information stands. These may occur at local agricultural shows, specialist activity

days and lecture evenings, as well as online sessions using internet technology. In this way the benefits of group membership and the information accrued are spread among the communities along the river.

This report, and the fieldwork on which it is based, bears testament to the value of community archaeology. As will be apparent from the name of the group, there is a certain focus of interest on Mesolithic archaeology. Although other periods are dealt with in full, the focus of the following text is, inevitably, on the Mesolithic communities of the Dee and the world in which they lived.