
14 CONCLUSIONS

While the archaeological evidence indicates that Laigh Newton was intermittently inhabited over seven millennia, for most of these periods the manner of occupation left largely ephemeral and ambiguous remains. The most coherent archaeological remains discovered at Laigh Newton reveal traits common to many Neolithic and Early Bronze Age sites in Scotland (Barclay 2003, 81). Prior, though enigmatic, Mesolithic use of the site is apparent, as is evident at other sites such as Spurryhillock (Alexander 1997, 25–6) and Chapelfield (Atkinson 2002, 185–8). The rectilinear structure of the fourth millennium BC and its association with arable farming is comparable, if not identical, with other contemporary settlements. The more ephemeral structure that succeeded this during the third millennium BC follows the general development of settlement forms on mainland Scotland (Brophy 2006, 22). The limited size of the artefactual assemblages at Laigh Newton is also consistent with mainland Neolithic assemblages in comparison with those of the Northern Isles. In general, the episodic nature of settlement at Laigh Newton reflects the generally intermittent nature of occupation of places in mainland Scotland up to and probably beyond the early Bronze Age, but where perhaps a collective memory of occupation and meaning was sustained, as has been postulated elsewhere (Murray et al 2009, 69).

However, what distinguishes Laigh Newton from many other contemporary Neolithic dwelling sites is the absence of any demonstrable evidence for overtly ritual activity. While it is stridently argued by many archaeologists that the domestic and ritual nature of occupation practices within Neolithic settlements cannot be separated from one another, a notion based largely on evidence gathered from anthropological and ethnographic case studies (Darvill 1996, 79), structured deposition of ritually charged material and the ritual symbolism of buildings must be archaeologically demonstrable. That there is no archaeological evidence for such ritual activity from the Neolithic settlements at Laigh Newton, or from many other sites in Britain and Ireland (Topping 1996, 170; Conolly & MacSween 2003, 43; Jones & Rowley-Conwy 2007, 406; Bishop et al 2009, 89), suggests that perceptions that Neolithic houses should not be considered dwellings but domestic ritual monuments (Topping 1996, 163; Brophy 2007, 92; Thomas 2008, 79–80) overstate the significance of ritual symbolism to everyday Neolithic life, perhaps reflecting modern preoccupations with cultural relativism (eg Thomas 1996, 1–12) more than the reality of the evidence. That it is recognised

that prehistoric ritual activity occurred outside the domestic sphere (Bradley 2005, 35) means that it was possible for prehistoric people to separate ritual from the domestic. Assertions that ritual and domestic life in prehistory cannot be separated (*ibid*, 210) seem therefore to preclude the ability of prehistoric people to leave any archaeological trace other than for ritualised activity, which is hard to accept given that people during the following millennia appear to have had no trouble leaving very mundane archaeological remains. Even within a society where everyday activities were full of ritual, it was possible for people to deposit artefacts simply for practical reasons (Turnbull 1983, 31–2 and 41). Likewise, in a Neolithic Scotland where culture seems far from homogeneous (Barclay 2003, 81), and people did not spend all their time engaged in ritual activities (Thomas 2004, 171), it was surely possible for people to deposit material in a way that was not ritualised. Though elements of everyday activity were no doubt imbued with abstract cultural value and meanings, the archaeological evidence from Laigh Newton does not appear to allow any such interpretation to be garnered from the nature of the deposits.

Of course, only a partial understanding of the Neolithic settlement at Laigh Newton can be understood from the archaeological evidence that survived, plough truncation having removed the bulk of the archaeological remains from the record. But many other Neolithic settlements on mainland Britain are also affected by plough truncation and, if ritual activity can be recognised in the form of structured deposition in these other plough-truncated settlement sites, the absence of any such evidence at Laigh Newton, while not evidence of absence, cannot at the same time be unthinkingly dismissed as due entirely to post-deposition conditions.

However limited a picture of life the evidence from Laigh Newton offers, the nature of this evidence reflects the practical reality of life during the Neolithic, rather than the ritual perception of life. While ‘practicality’ may be unfashionable amongst some archaeologists, it is not a modern concept alien to the Neolithic (cf Richards 1996, 171), for it was practical activities that *actually* produced the food, clothes and shelter, however responsible symbolic acts may have been perceived by some. While non-domestic cultural activity is undoubtedly apparent in some Neolithic settlements, it is not apparent in all Neolithic settlements and it cannot therefore be assumed that all Neolithic people placed the same importance upon such ritualised activity, or shared the same perceptions of the world, as others did.