

The importance of star carr mesolithic archaeological site



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Star Carr is considered to be an important site for understanding the Mesolithic period. Consider why this situation exists and outline what factors limit the available evidence for hunter-gathers in Britain during this period.

To understand Star Carr, we must place the site in context with the larger Mesolithic landscape of Britain. Is Star Carr important and if so why? What evidence does Star Carr show us of Mesolithic hunter-gathers, and what does this evidence suggest. Along with these questions we must also look at how much evidence there is for hunter-gathers in Britain and what role Star Carr plays in this evidence. Answering these questions along with, why there is such limited evidence in Britain for Mesolithic hunter-gathers is what this essay will look at.

Star Carr which is located in The Vale of Pickering, Yorkshire, gained the status of 'Type Site' after J. G. D. Clark's excavations which started in 1949. This status placed on Star Carr was mainly for the level of organic preservation, which is unrivalled in any other British Mesolithic site (Hunter & Ralston 2009). The preservation could be largely contributed to the wet environment in which a lot of Clark's finds were recorded from. The wealth of finds Clark recorded at Star Carr included: large amounts of flint (both worked and waste), a birch wood platform on the lakes edge and lots of deer antler along with other animal remains. The finds make the importance of Star Carr unquestionable although how these finds got there and the purpose of Star Carr is a different argument (Clark 1954).

Star Carr is arguably the most reinterpreted site in European Prehistory. The main areas of reinterpretation seem to be firstly and arguably the most important, which season was Star Carr actually occupied, winter or summer?

Clark's initial interpretation of the evidence led him to believe that the site was a major base camp occupied by four or five families during the winter months. The lack of evidence for fish such as pike at Star Carr which would have been present in the glacial lake Star Carr is situated near could possibly show that the site was used during the winter months, as evidence from Europe suggests Mesolithic pike farming was carried out during the summer months. This lack of evidence plus the positive evidence of a large amount of Red deer antlers, approximately 102 mature stag antlers that were recovered from the site is what strongly suggests a winter base camp (Clark 1954). In contrast to this Legge & Rowley-Conway (1988) et al suggest that the function of Star Carr may have been more specialised, such as a hunting camp and not occupied by a whole family or extended family but by five or six hunters.

The second main argument seems to be of the function of Star Carr. Along with the previously mentioned theory by Legge & Rowley-Conway, another explanation for the large amounts of antler found at Star Carr could be that Star Carr was a specialised industrial site working both antlers for tools and tanning hides for clothes. This would suggest that the antlers were brought to the site to be worked and that Star Carr is not the kill site. In conjunction with this theory, the recovery of rolls of birch bark, which is believed to have been used as a tanning agent would suggest it was a summer camp and not as Clark thought a winter one. The warmer temperatures would aid in the tanning process as well as making the hides easier to work as the deer would be carrying less fat which would need to be removed from the hides by the hunters (Pitts 1979). This theory seems to be a better evaluation of the

evidence as if the site was either a base camp occupied by a family or a hunting camp it would not be unreasonable to find more evidence of butcher and food preparation.

Clark reports evidence for burning of the lake side vegetation. One of the theories for the burning of the lake side vegetation may have been for easy access to the water for canoes. This would enforce the idea of Star Carr as a specialised camp, and the finished goods could have been moved around the lake to other settlement sites (Mellar & Dark 1998). If Clarks theory on Star Carr is correct this would suggest that by burning the vegetation the families at Star Carr were encouraging pray animals close to the camp to eat the fresh growth, making them easy targets. The evidence of a birch wood platform at the lakes edge also suggests a hunting platform may be for hunting flocking birds, and this would also give further evidence to Clark's theory of a winter camp (Clark 1954). The importance of the platform at Star Carr is not in question only the purpose it was built. The platform is most of the evidence for wooden artefacts from Mesolithic hunters in Britain (Adkins 2006).

The availability of a sustainable food source doesn't seem to be in question at Star Carr. The evidence for: wolf, deer, pig, beaver and even hedgehog were found along with other remains and a large number of birds such as grebes, ducks, cranes and storks (Clark 1954). Although this evidence does suggest a varied and sustainable food source which would go to supporting Clarks theory, it doesn't help with the debate of both which months Star Carr was occupied or the primary function of the site.

Along with these main debates other aspects of Star Carr have also attracted differing theories. The duration that Star Carr was in use, plus examining the larger settlement pattern of humans in Mesolithic Britain and the role Star Carr plays in it, as well as the total area of settlement for the site. The debate has been added to since the further excavations that were carried out between 1985 to 1997. One of the most important discoveries of this excavation was to show that the occupation at Star Carr was spread over a much larger area than Clark thought (Mellar&Dark 1998). This evidence plus the differing dates obtained from the new excavation, (10, 700 to 10, 400 BP compared to Clarks original date of 9488 plus or minus 350 BP) show a difference of a thousand years, do suggest that Star Carr is still not fully understood and will keep posing more questions than giving answers.

To look at Star Carr as a part of the larger picture of Mesolithic hunter gathers in Britain and compare the finds may suggest possible answers to some of the questions surrounding Star Carr. The main problem is the limited amount of sites to compare with Star Carr. One possible site is Thatcham in the Kennet Valley in Berkshire. This site may be useful as a comparison to Star Carr as topographically the situations are similar; both sites are based on the margins of ancient lakes. From the range of artefacts recovered from Thatcham some similarities can be seen, red deer, wild pig along with elk and wild bird remains were all recovered from both sites. A major difference between Star Carr and Thatcham is at Thatcham there were very little wooden and antler artefacts found, especially worked pieces with barbed points. This could suggest that whilst these sites are similar in date and situation they had different functions (Hunter & Ralston 2009). The

limitations for comparisons to Star Carr add to the confusion of understanding Star Carr.

Although there are many theories as to why we have found little evidence of Mesolithic hunter gathers in Britain, such as we looking in the wrong places or most of the settlements were coastal and the evidence has been lost due to coastal erosion, I believe by looking at the indidunous tribes of North America may give another possible answer. These hunter gather tribes have existed for centuries leaving little or no evidence on the landscape. There nomadic lifestyle wi9th temporary camps only left the occasional fire pit as evidence they were ever there. The burial rituals of some of these tribes would also not be clearly visible to archaeologists today. The practise of cremating the dead on rocky out crops would leave little structural evidence as the timbers were generally wedged in between rocks and not placed in pits. The evidence of the burning could also be lost through natural erosion of the rock surface were the evidence would of been present. If hunter gathers existed in Britain with a similar life style, the possibility of finding much if any evidence other than sites like Star Carr is not likely. This would elevate the importance of existing sites which includes Star Carr in the Mesolithic landscape of Britain.

To conclude the elevation of the importance of Star Carr seems in some part to be because of the limited evidence throughout Britain for any settlements of Mesolithic hunter gathers. This fact plus the differing theories on Star Carr itself most place some confusion over the importance of Star Carr in

Mesolithic Britain. After saying this, there is no confusion over the

importance of Star Carr as a individual site for the archaeological record of <https://assignbuster.com/the-importance-of-star-carr-mesolithic-archaeological-site/>

Britain, but if Star Carr is a 'type site' we will only know if more evidence is found throughout Britain and if there is ever an agreement over the function of Star Carr.