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McDONALD INSTITUTE MONOGRAPHS

Must Farm pile-dwelling settlement

Volume 1. Landscape,
architecture and occupation

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CAU Must Farm/Flag Fen Basin Depth & Time Series – Volume II

**Buried Humanities 2012–19:
beyond the quarry window**

Mark Knight, Lesley McFadyen & Lizzy Middleton

The Cambridge Archaeological Unit (CAU)/Birkbeck fieldschool (Buried Humanities Project) involved students learning to excavate and record aspects of the deeply submerged archaeology at the Must Farm Quarry in the area west of the pile dwelling site (Figure 9.06). The project primarily comprised test-pitting the buried soil at the bottom of the Flag Fen Basin and articulating the relationship between this old land surface and the subsequent succession of Neolithic and Bronze Age peats and fen clay. Here students learnt first-hand about the prehistory of the Fens, how past settlement was obscured by thick sediment and the interrelationship of altitude (depth) and age (time) (Knight & Brudenell 2020, 1–10).

As part of this project, we would take the students out of the quarry into the Fens, as a way of connecting the sub-surface detail they had gleaned from excavating at Must Farm to the subtle surface undulations of the contemporary landscape. In minibuses, we would drive along the long, straight droves of the southwest Fens, relating gentle slopes to the edges



Figure 9.10. Partial remains of a conical wicker fish trap and a butchered (vertically halved) sheep vertebra from the later prehistoric freshwater channel within the Little Nene Roddon (Image: CAU).

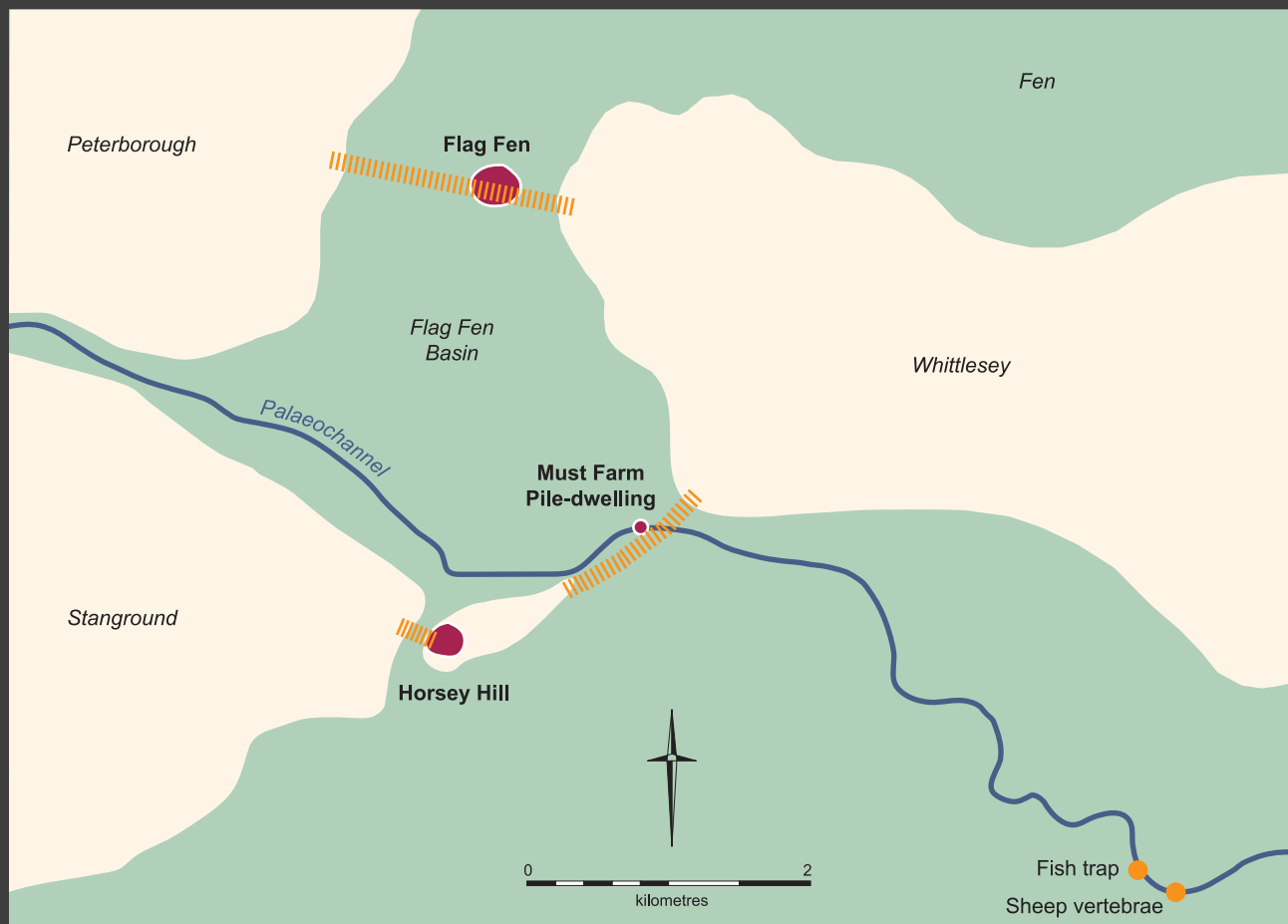


Figure 9.11. Location of the fish trap and sheep vertebra relative to the Flag Fen Basin and the Must Farm pile-dwelling settlement (Image: CAU).

of former ‘islands’ and sudden unannounced humps to silt-choked palaeochannels, crying ‘roddon’ as we bounced out of our seats. We followed the sinuous course of the Little Nene Roddon and its accompanying later prehistoric freshwater channel – the same channel which contained the Must Farm causeway, pile-dwelling settlement, logboats, fish weirs and fish traps (Ch2, this volume). This involved visiting present-day farmsteads, as these are invariably built upon the consolidated sediments of the roddon itself. At one of these farmsteads we would meet Philip Green, who helped machine the overburden at the pile-dwelling excavations, and who handily owned a tracked 360° excavator. Here Philip would dig a bucket-width test pit to reveal a sediment sequence equivalent to that which the students had recorded at Must Farm Quarry (upper peat, fen clay and lower peat). At the same time, we would cut a narrow transect across the top of the Little Nene Roddon in search of the freshwater channel and its familiar grey, shelly silts.

On a sunny day in 2016, we machine excavated a 0.5 m wide transect across the freshwater channel, reaching the base 4 m below the surface, and cleaned up the side of a nearby ditch, which cut through the same feature, providing two small exposures of channel sediment. The team hand-sorted the upcast river silts searching for ecofacts and artefacts, anything that would make a contextual link to the Must Farm stretch of the river, 5.5 km upstream. Amongst the freshwater mussel shells, alder cones and willow leaves we also found waterlogged woodchips (a common find at the settlement site) and, intriguingly, a single sheep vertebra (Figure 9.10). The sheep vertebra was butchered by being halved vertically (evidence of the carcass having been split down the sagittal plane, separating it into two equal portions), an early first millennium BC butchery technique observed on pig and deer vertebrae at the Must Farm pile-dwelling settlement (Rajkovača, Vol2 Ch26) and commonly found at contemporary settlement sites in and around the Flag Fen Basin (Rajkovaca

2020a, 269; 2020b, 344, fig. 6.25). Then, to our collective amazement, preserved in a large lump of sediment from the very base of the channel we uncovered the flattened, partial remains of a wicker fish trap (Figure 9.10), similar in form and context to the 24 Middle Bronze Age fish traps found in the 2011–12 Must Farm palaeochannel investigations (Figure 6.08) (Robinson et al. 2015; Robinson Zeki et al. in prep.).

In this pair of ‘pinprick’ interventions, kilometres away from the Must Farm discoveries (Figure

9.11) we achieved a key goal of the CAU/Birkbeck Buried Humanities Project: to demonstrate that the deeply buried landscape patterns articulated within the Must Farm Quarry aperture were emblematic of Cambridgeshire’s wider peat fen. The intensity of activity associated with the Must Farm palaeochannel was not discrete to the southeast margins of the Flag Fen Basin, but was indicative of the level of activity in the channels and sediments ‘out there’ in the greater, fathomless Fenland Embayment.

such a model can be replicated. What is certain is that collaborative working between a range of specialists and institutions (both academic and commercial) will be vital for building a better understanding of wetland occupation in the future, and in turn, will pave the way for better management strategies.

There is some urgency to this work as deposits which have ensured the protection of archaeological remains are eroding away and becoming critically destabilized from the dual impacts of agriculture and climate change. Few sites are likely to be in same league as Must Farm in terms of preservation, but many will be far better preserved, at present, than their dryland counterparts. It is these that will provide the environmental record to enable a textured

reconstruction of landscape inhabitation in the later Bronze Age. As Must Farm has shown, this record tells us just as much about human action in the dryland as it does in the wet – something no other resource has come close to offering. The interior of the Fens therefore holds enormous potential for Bronze Age studies, with Must Farm highlighting just how game-changing work in this environment can be, given the opportunity, appropriate resourcing and the right collaborative working frameworks. Of course, there is still much more that can be done with the Must Farm material and its archive, and in this respect, this will not be the final word on the site itself. If anything, it is the start, but more importantly, it is an awakening for a new era of Fenland Archaeology.