
The Mesolithic footprints at Formby: Adapting to a dynamic coastal environment

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Résumé

In the early Holocene period, the drowning of large areas of coastal land took place as the climate warmed and meltwaters flooded into the expanding oceans. In the northwest of England, a large land basin flooded to form the Irish Sea. As this process took place, humans and animals were forced to adapt to a dynamic and constantly fluctuating environment. As old landscapes and pathways disappeared, new ones developed. At the intertidal margins, an expanse of reedswamp and saltmarsh formed which, too, was inundated for varying periods of time. However, in the calmer warmer weather of the late spring and summer, many species of fauna were drawn on to the mudflats where they could wallow in the cooling mud, drink the brackish water, feed on reed and sedge shoots or for some predators, to hunt. Preferred areas within this intertidal landscape developed for certain species, whose tracks can be traced at particular locations within the muddy beds. Known behavioural tendencies, also revealed in the tracks left by some species, show their engagement with this environment at chosen times of day – as some breeds moved on to the marshes, others moved away. The humans who shared this landscape understood the affordances offered by these predictable behaviours. Their trails run along and across those left by many species of fauna, reflecting a network of activity preserved in the hardened mud. Persistent return to the mudflats, traced in the impressions running through the laminated layers forming each bed, reflect an embodied knowledge of this coastal landscape learnt in childhood. The ability of humans to adapt to the daily tides, the changing seasons and the fluctuating sea-level, suggests a spatial-temporal relationship not only with a dynamic environment, but also with the life that dwelt within it.

Mots-Clés: footprints, coastal, landscape, pathways, humans, fauna

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