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Early Mesolithic spatial conformity in southern Norway

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ABSTRACT

Norwegian Early Mesolithic sites (9500–8000 cal. BC) are characterised by a standard lithic tool inventory with a uniform spatial distribution of the lithic debris. Generally, they are small and among the few sites on which it is possible to base analyses of site structures and patterns on an individual spatial level. Specific lithic dispersal patterns are associated with both dwellings and open-air sites. The dwellings are identified as tent rings of stone cobbles or circular areas cleared of larger stones with associated fireplaces and lithic debris. As these features are present in both coastal and mountain areas, they have been suggested as indicative of the Early Mesolithic way of life as mobile hunter-gatherers. A fundamental issue we have to deal with is the possible existence of a strict social and cultural conformity taking place among the hunter-gatherers throughout the large area southern Norway represents. Aspects of this social feature are discussed on the basis of three Early Mesolithic sites with dwelling remains from the coasts of Western and Eastern Norway as well as a mountain site.

1. Introduction

Spatial behaviour both on a macro- and micro-level has been an important part of scientific investigations of Mesolithic hunter-gatherer societies (Kroll and Price, 1991, 1). In this context, one of our research objectives is to model social and cultural features of prehistoric hunter-gatherers as reflected by the spatial arrangement of work processes and their relationship to structural features at the sites. Contextualised and in situ patterns of lithic distributions are fundamental for the interpretation of both functional and social aspects of Mesolithic sites. Among other things, the understanding of the use of the exterior and interior spaces is important for understanding the size, character and activities of the social group inhabiting a site. In Norway, these patterns of lithic distributions become even more important as Norwegian sites lack organic evidence.

Spatial studies on Norwegian Early Mesolithic sites have become increasingly important, as the number and quality of excavated sites have risen. In these studies the sites have been investigated primarily with a qualitative and subjective methodology using piece plotting of artefacts, grading the excavation units in classes according to number of artefacts pr. 50x50cm units together with contoured distributions of the assemblages and its various subgroups (Bjerck et al., 2008; Jaksland, 2012a, 2012b; Melvold and Persson, 2014; Nærøy, 1994, 2000; Solheim, 2017; Solheim and Damlien, 2013). Studies of Mesolithic sites drawing on statistical and quantitative methodology do, however, occur such as the recent study of Målsnes 1 in northern Norway by Blankholm (2008) and the Middle Mesolithic sites Hovland 1 and 3 in eastern Norway by Solheim (2013).

On a general level, in addition to recovering Mesolithic site structures (dwellings, fireplaces, pits) the definition of activity areas through the distribution of artefacts and their relation to structures have been in focus. Whereas further analyses of the specific contexts in terms of for instance functional studies, are few. To a large extent, these studies are set within or originating from a processual theoretical paradigm drawing on ethno-archaeological and experimental evidence and analogies together with middle range site models developed within this framework (Bettinger, 1991 Ch. 3; Kroll and Price, 1991). At the same time methodologically consistent presentations and analyses of sites must be valued as a basis for different kinds of theoretical perspectives as for instance illustrated by Bjerck (2017) drawing on the actor-network perspective in modelling the Early Mesolithic coastal way of life and the analysis of the early Mesolithic society drawing on a phenomenological perspective by Fuglestvedt (2009, cf. Ch. 3).

In this context, we have to define the spatial characteristics of settlement sites comprising co-residential units and discuss their social implication. A fundamental issue we have to deal with based on the Early Mesolithic evidence, is the possible existence of a strict social and cultural conformity characterising the hunter-gatherers throughout the large area that southern Norway represents. The objective of this paper is to discuss sites in this perspective. I will present three sites as examples and, due to their similarities, base the discussion on the assumption that these are site remains from a hypothesised basic social unit in the Early Mesolithic. This is a group of people who are co-residential and co-operating on a yearly or long-term basis in order to sustain a livelihood.

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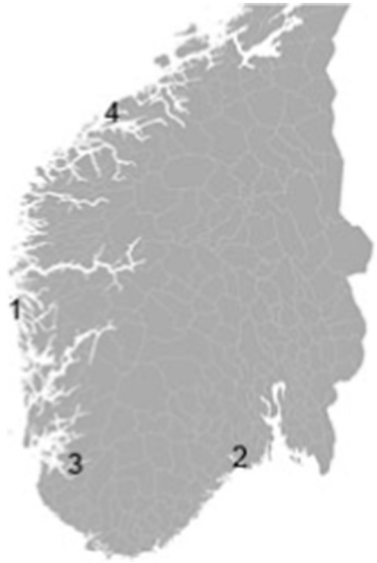

Fig. 1. Sites from southern Norway mentioned in the text. 1 - Site 43 Hidlaren, Hordaland county, Western Norway; 2 - Site Pauler 1, Vestfold county, Eastern Norway; 3 - Site 6B Fløyrli, Rogaland county, Southwestern Norway; 4 - Site 72 Søndre Stegahaug, Møre og Romsdal county, Northwestern Norway.

2. The Early Mesolithic in southern Norway

The focus here is on sites from the Norwegian Early Mesolithic period dated to between 9500 and 8000 calibrated BC (Fig. 1). All dates referred to are calibrated. The chronological framework for the Norwegian Stone Age used in the present paper has been proposed by Bjerck (2008a). The status of research on the Early Mesolithic has recently been summarised by Bjerck (2008a) twenty years after Indrelid (1978) made a similar summary and discussion of the Mesolithic archaeological evidence. According to Bjerck, the Early Mesolithic was a period of initial colonisation and enculturation of a deglaciated landscape by a marine-oriented, hunter-gatherer society. The strong marine orientation of the Early Mesolithic economy was also underlined by Indrelid (1978, 151). It was a population with a high degree of mobility based on the use of sea vessels in coastal areas and where seal is suggested as the main prey in a mixed marine economy (cf. Bang-Andersen, 2003a, 2003b). The use of sea vessels also heavily influenced the location, structuring and spectre of activities on the land-based sites as illustrated by among other, the similarities and characteristic patterning of site structures and artefact assemblages (Bjerck, 2008a, 2017).

However, throughout the archaeological research history the migration northwards of the reindeer has been argued for as a main prey for the population moving northwards (Indrelid, 1978). The social, ideological and economic role and importance of the reindeer for the Early Mesolithic population has recently been discussed and seen as an important part of Early Mesolithic livelihood by Fuglestvedt (2009, 2012). Additionally, the reindeer is the primary resource objective for the population inhabiting the high mountain sites such as the sites investigated by Bang-Andersen (2003a, 2003b, 2012). Although there are some differences in opinion on the economic adaptation concerning which resources have played the most important part of the economic base, there is a general agreement based on the archaeological evidence, that these hunter-gatherers had a highly mobile lifeway which seems to have endured for more or less a thousand years. This is a fundamental analytical parameter for the present analysis.

Furthermore, the artefactual and site evidence from a large number of Early Mesolithic sites along the coast recently mapped by Breivik (2014), suggests the existence of a culturally homogenous group with a unified lithic technology over large areas (Bjerck, 2008a; Fuglestvedt, 2009; Berg-Hansen, 2017). On the site level, we can discern unified lithic dispersal patterns. Investigated sites are uniform in terms of sizes, structural details and dispersal of lithic debris (Nærøy, 2000; Bjerck, 2008b; Fuglestvedt, 2012). These features have served as a basis for interpreting the sites as evidence of high residential mobility of small groups, which are assumed to be family-based. However, some logistical activities seem to have taken place, as reflected by very small sites.

The marine oriented model of explaining the process of migration by the population into coastal areas of present day Norway seems reasonable and in terms with new knowledge of the process of deglaciation of the coastal areas of southern Norway and western Sweden (Bjerck, 2008a; Bang-Andersen, 2012; Glørstad et al., 2017). However, the issue here is to understand the relationship between sites both in the coastal setting and in relation to the seasonal mountain resource exploitation, based on site patterns and in terms of the character of the social groups involved.

An interesting question in this context becomes how the population managed the balance between what seems to be a strict socially and economically structured coastal adaption with a presumably defined division of labour between the individual members of the group, and long-range movements between the coast and mountain areas. Admittedly, flexibility in the dispersal pattern of a hunter-gatherer lifeways responding to seasonal and annual fluctuations in the resource base, may be a very relevant way of explaining the relation between coastal and mountain resource exploitation. Furthermore, the long range, task group (i.e. male hunting group) exploiting the reindeer resources in the mountain seasonally is also an obvious model (Bang-Andersen, 2012). However, an interesting question is whether there is a tension or incompatibility between a family-based marine oriented mobility and long range logistic movement of parts of such a hunter-gatherer group. The model developed by Bjerck argues that the boat technology structured the organisation of these hunter-gatherers to a strict set of activities (i.e. a specific division of labour) both on the sea and land, and of the composition of the social group as a whole involved in a sustainable year-round pattern.

The analytical challenge is to understand the spatial and functional configuration of the sites and their interpretation in terms of the social group involved and their activities. Does comparable site structures in different ecological and economic zones imply similarity or differences in the social composition of the group? On the other hand, is a pattern of utilizing the same organisational principle on the sites independent of the social group being present throughout? What role does the aspect of social conformity play in this context? Is it possible to argue that a high degree of site similarities indicate a high degree of conformity to a particular way of life and social structure, i.e. is it the same group of individuals using these sites?

3. Sites in southern Norway

3.1. Site 43 Hidlaren, Hordaland County, Norway

The coastal site 43 Hidlaren, in the municipality of Øygarden in Western Norway, was excavated in 1992 (Nærøy, 2000, 117). The site included a circular area cleared of larger stones, which is interpreted as a dwelling with an interior space of 10–12 m^2, Fig. 2. It contains a distinct lithic distribution inside this area and some debris outside, with a total area of lithic debris of 37.5 m^2.

The lithic inventory consists of 1300 artefacts, including arrowheads and various retouched flakes and blades, Table 1. Lacking ^{14}C-dates, it can be technologically dated to the Early Mesolithic period based on its core reduction strategy. Furthermore, typologically, the predominance of single-edged tanged arrowheads may indicate an early phase of the Early Mesolithic (Fuglestvedt, 2009, 116).

3.2. Site Pauler 1, Vestfold County, Norway

The large coastal site Pauler 1 in Eastern Norway excavated in 2007, covered 1200 m^2 with 16,000 artefacts, including nine spatial units, Fig. 3 (Åhrberg, 2012, 3). Based on typological evidence and site