

# Towards a new world: Paths towards a Neolithic society in southern Scandinavia

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## Introduction

I will in this article focus on how people changed their way of life and how they perceived the landscape at the time of the introduction of farming in southern Scandinavia. How was the settlement pattern affected and did the view, and use, of the landscape change that much, and if that was the case, why? The starting-point will be the late Mesolithic Ertebölle culture in Denmark and Scania, southern Sweden. In a second part I will discuss the earliest Neolithic and the adoption of agriculture as well as the construction of the first monuments.

## The Late Mesolithic

From at least 5500 BC until 4000 BC the Ertebölle culture existed in the whole of Southern Scandinavia with concentrations to Denmark and Southern Sweden. In Northern Germany it goes under the name Ellerbek. The Ertebölle culture is perhaps primarily known for three things: the introduction of pottery, the vast kitchen middens and the large cemeteries. In the following I will introduce some of the issues that are of importance in the context of this article.

The kitchen middens on Jutland are due to their often complex stratigraphy of great importance in the interpretation of the settlement history and chronology of the late Mesolithic as well as the Earliest Neolithic. The middens are often highly structured with distinct fireplaces, working areas and dumps.

A good place to start the discussion is the Björnsholm kitchen midden in the central Limfjord area of northern Jutland (Andersen 1993:59). Close to it, an Early Neolithic grave with a timber construction was excavated (Andersen & Johansen 1992). The dating of the kitchen midden is between 5050-4050 cal BC (Andersen 1993: 61). This implies a more or less continuous habitation for about 1000 years. This is maybe an extreme as we also know of sites like Meilgård that were in use for about 500 years (Liversage 1992:102). In addition to excavations in the kitchen midden itself, an area behind it was excavated as well. Only very sporadic traces of habitation were revealed (Andersen 1993: 66, 2001:26-29). The only more substantial features found in the midden are hearths. These occur in all levels of the midden. There are however no traces of huts, pits or postholes, so it is still an enigma where people actually lived. The ones that we have belong to the older phase of the Ertebölle culture such as Bredasten in Scania and Lollikhuse (Larsson 1986; Sørensen 1995).

The answer to this problem might be that the middens were a type of coastal sites at which people performed their daily routines, fishing, hunting and so forth. They did not actually live here, though, so the question is: where did they live and what did their hut/houses look like? It might be that the middens were only a part of the actual settlement area but this notion doesn't really answer the question. We have to look elsewhere for a possible answer to this. The apparent lack of more substantial traces of huts or houses, especially from the later part of the Ertebölle culture, has been one of the most discussed issues in Scandinavian Mesolithic research over the years; why do we not find any more substantial traces of occupation (for a review see Biwall et al 1997; Cronberg 2001:81-89)? One of the most intriguing new aspects of the late Mesolithic has therefore been the excavation of several houses and huts at the site Tågerup in western Scania (Cronberg 2001: 89-149). The site is not located directly at the coast but in a sheltered position in a deep lagoon. The oldest remains are from the Kongemose culture (Karsten & Knarrström 2001). One of the houses, House I, was a circular construction rebuilt in two stages. The other one, House II, was an 85 m<sup>2</sup> rectangular longhouse with a singular row of roof supporting posts. House III has been described as a shelter, 15x4, 5 m large and with an opening towards the south.

The chronology of the houses is complicated, as discussed by Cronberg (2001:147). The radiocarbon dates are, except for two, all way too young and are mostly Neolithic or Bronze Age. The dating of the houses therefore had to be based on a study of the transverse arrowheads (Vang-Petersen 1984). This dates the houses to the early and middle phases of the Ertebölle culture. Interestingly enough a couple of pottery sherds are mentioned from House III. They are accordingly dated to the Ertebölle culture (Cronberg 2001:143). Pottery is not adopted in Denmark and Scania until c. 4600 cal BC (Hallgren 2004:136). If the interpretation of House III is correct, it is not older than 4600 cal BC. So, at last, we now have clear evidence that during the later Ertebölle period people built substantial house structures.

This obviously changes our view of the late Atlantic hunters a lot. It also, I believe, has implications for the way we should perceive the subsequent Neolithic period.

### **Man, memory and landscape**

One main issue that has been discussed over the last decade is to what degree Neolithic man changed his concept of land and the myths and stories about it. As John Barrett (1994:93) has suggested this might have a long history, perhaps going back to the Mesolithic in that those places might have been part of a much wider seasonal cycle of movement. This is also what the evidence from the middens suggests. It is obvious that they were seasonally used as well as used for different reasons – some for the hunting of swans and migrating birds like Aggersund (Andersen 1978). Certain middens like Norsminde, Ertebölle and Björnsholm have traces of earlier occupation. These pre-midden layers are radiocarbon- dated to between 4960-4600 cal BC (Andersen 2001:24).

Places like these could be termed “persistent places” and such places would have engendered a sense of time and belonging (Cummings 2002:79). Places and landscapes were used and re-used for centuries and eventually people settled down and felt at home. This involves an important change, which significantly alters people’s roles in the landscape and their view of it. They gave specific places like rocks and streams names and in creating paths in the forest they also created links between both places and people. Myths and stories are then told about it and the place thus becomes historical (Thomas 1996:89). If we go with this notion it is obvious that monuments as well as other constructions fitted into a landscape already filled with potent and symbolic places (Cummings 2002:107). If we for a minute go back to the Ertebölle culture and look a little bit further on their use of the landscape it is rather obvious that they used a diversity of ecological areas ranging from the fjords of eastern Jutland to the inland of Scania. An inland site like Ringkloster from the late Ertebölle culture on Jutland is in this context of great importance (Andersen 1975). Contacts between this site and the coastal area at for example Norsminde fjord is clear because of the existence of bones from sea mammals (Andersen 1975:85).

I will in the following argue that there is a change of focus in the settlement and connected to this also a change in how people perceived the landscape that they lived in. The focus will be on southernmost Sweden, Scania. The starting point will be the often discussed change in settlement pattern between the late Mesolithic and the early Neolithic (M. Larsson 1984). The large coastal sites were more or less abandoned as permanent settlements. They were however still used seasonally by the early farmers. New areas inland were occupied, preferably sandy soils close to water. The sites have usually been seen as small, about 600-1000m<sup>2</sup> but this notion is however under discussion today (M. Larsson 1984; Andersson 2003:175).

What actually motivated this shift in settlement and why did people move? Was the shift actually that radical? As discussed above the inland area was by no means an unknown entity. The change in settlement area might be seen as a functional response to economic changes, i.e. changes in subsistence altered the structural conditions under which the new subsistence could operate. Mesolithic man had of course knowledge of different ecological niches and the move might not have been that upsetting. Motivations for doing this, we can argue, must have been formulated into strategies by people who had a certain level of knowledge about their social and natural environment. People were active agents in the way in which the settlement sites, the farming plots and so on were chosen. They created meaningful landscapes, which helped them to develop a sense of group identity as well as a personal identity.

As noted by Magnus Andersson (2003:161) in his work in western Scania there are few if any traces of Mesolithic habitation on the Early Neolithic inland settlements. Several of the earliest Neolithic settlements also had a distinct location in the landscape. They were situated on ridges or small hills in the undulating landscape. This is especially true for the sites with large amounts of pits like Svenstorp and Månasken in SW Scania (M.

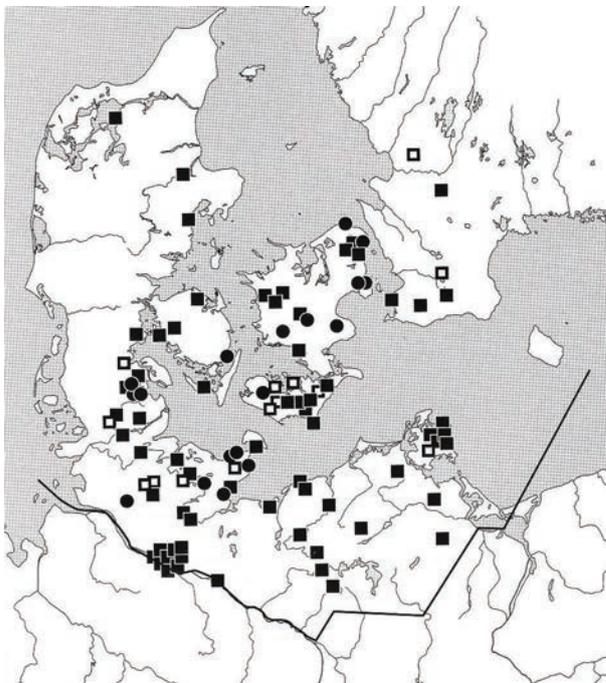
Larsson 1984, 1985). The pits are often layered, meaning that they were actually recut and reused. Large amounts of flints debris are found in the pits, but also obviously unused implements like flake axes, flake scrapers and in some cases even complete axes and vessels (M. Larsson 1984, 1985). The interpretation of these pits has usually emphasized function; they were waste pits. However, some of the pits with complete axes or vessels have been re-interpreted as ritual pits (Karsten 1994; Andersson 2003:169; Rogius et al 2003; M. Larsson 2007).

Above I mentioned that memory is important in creating new identities but also in recollecting the distant past. The coastal sites were reoccupied and used seasonally during the earliest Neolithic period. Strassburg (2000:292) mentions that there is a marked change in funerary rites 4900-4700 cal BC as for example observed at the Skateholm cemetery. People seem to use red ochre sparingly and there are very few, if any, depositions of red deer antlers. Interestingly enough, if this notion is correct, we can in the earliest Neolithic see that red deer antlers were once again deposited not in graves but in pits that very often are associated with long barrows. At the site Almhov in Malmö (Western Scania) several pits with antlers were excavated a few years back (Gidlöf et al. 2006; Rudebeck 2010: 83-253). These pits are associated with three long barrows. In for example pits 6, 232 and 3868 several parts of red deer antlers were found (Gidlöf et al. 2006:64, 65, 71). Pit 6 was radiocarbon dated to 3940-3690 cal BC (Ua-17156), which is very early in the Neolithic sequence (Gidlöf et al. 2006:61). Liliana Janik (2003:116) discusses the possible function of different animals as markers of cultural identity. In the light of the discussion above, this is a highly intriguing possibility. If the significance of different animals changed over time it might be vital for the interpretation of the ways in which the Early Neolithic unfolded and evolved. The notion of memory is important here as well.

The reuse of the coastal areas for different purposes is also evident from the earlier mentioned site, Björnsholm. Here a grave structure with an occupation layer was excavated in 1988. The stone-lined pit was found together with two large pits, a ditch and three intact pots and belongs to a group of well-known Danish Long-Barrows (Andersen & Johansen 1992:38). It was situated c 20 m to the rear of the midden. The Long Barrow was built very close to the Ertebölle midden and to the subsequent Early Neolithic settlement. This could also be seen as a way for humans to connect with both the past and the present. The construction of this Long Barrow and its use would also add to other memories associated with this place.

Above I have at some length discussed the notion of memory and the connection between inland and coastal sites in the Early Neolithic. How then did the neolithisation come about? I will argue that to understand and interpret what happened we have to go back to the late Ertebölle culture. The late Ertebölle period 4300-4000 cal BC is named import phase 5 by Lutz Klassen (2004:104) and it is obvious that there is a marked rise in the number of imported objects like shoe-last axes, copper axes etc. These foreign items evidently were loaded with potent images and had a symbolic value. They played

an active part in the transformation of society (Fischer 2002). There could of course have been other, less archaeologically visible, transfers that took place. Marek Zvelebil for example argues that furs and marriage partners circulated and that this slowly built up relations and understanding between communities (Zvelebil 2003).



*Fig. 1. Klassen import phase 5, 4300-4000 BC (Klassen 2004)*

In the period 4600-4000 other things happen. Altogether there is evidence for a change in the use of marine resources during the period 4800-4600 cal BC. It is obvious that there is a rise in the use of marine resources like oysters and during the same period of time we see a marked growth of the middens. This culminates in the period 4600-4000 cal BC (Andersen 1993:74). Evidence from excavations in the middens during the last decades has also revealed that the middens actually were divided into smaller sites

with hearths, work floors etc. (Andersen 2001:32). The notion that the late Ertebölle sites were very big is in other words under discussion. They were continuously used for a long period of time, though.



*Fig. 2. Shoelast axe (Photo: M. Larsson)*

From the existing evidence we have, with the exception for Dragsholm on Zealand, no graves or cemeteries from this period (Price et al. 2007:139-219). Interestingly enough we have no evidence for the use of pots in late Mesolithic funerary rituals (Koch 1998:157).

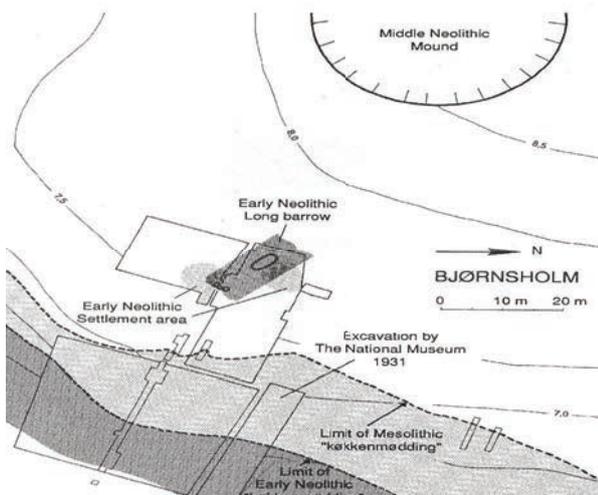
How then did people adapt to the new situation? As mentioned above there is a change in the settlement pattern at the beginning of the Early Neolithic, c 3950 cal BC. New areas inland are used; the digging of a large number of pits at some sites as well as the building of the first Long Barrows are all parts of this new scenario.

So why discard complete vessels and implements? We can, as mentioned above, not just see the pits as waste pits but as evidence for something much more profound. Richard Bradley (2000:131) has said, referring to Britain, that these artefacts were returned to the elements from which they were formed. According to Julian Thomas (1999) the digging of pits are associated with feasting and the things deposited in the pits are a

sort of remembrance of these feasts. This must in many ways have changed how people perceived the landscape. By bringing together different elements, the sites eventually became a microcosm of the landscape as a whole. To perform rituals was an important part of the structuration of society and the rituals helped people to not only connect and re-connect with their ancestors, but also with the future. This topic has been widely discussed during the last decade or so (Thomas 1991 ch.4; Bradley 2000, 2005).

*Fig. 3 (right). Grave XI from Skateholm with red deer antlers (Photo M. Larsson)*

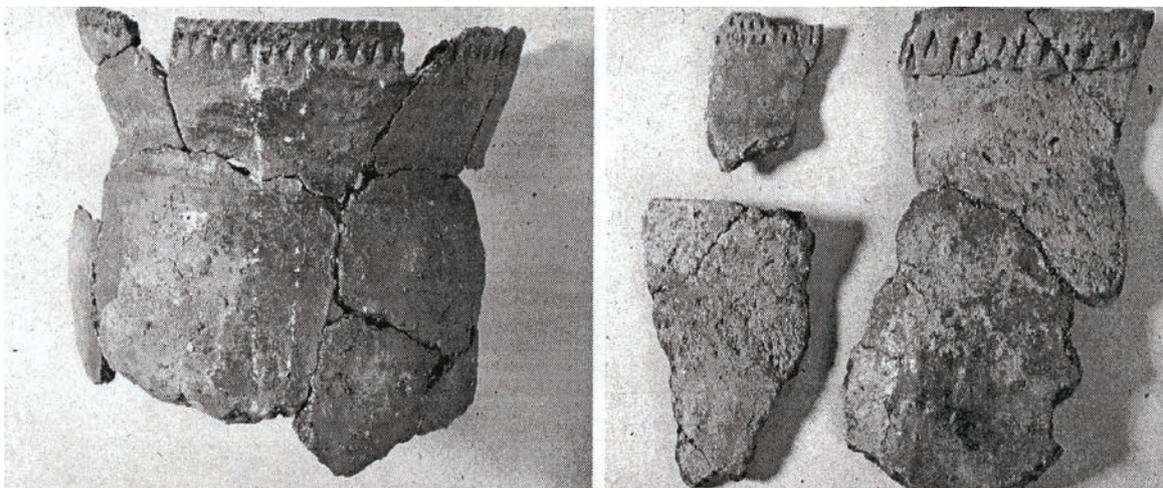
*Fig. 4 (below). Björnsholm kitchen midden (Jutland) (After Andersen 1993)*



There is also of course a profound resemblance between the kitchenmiddens and the Long Barrows both in their sheer size but also in the way human bones were deposited. From the Björnsholm midden, scattered human bones were found (Andersen 1993:78). This connects the midden as a place of both life and death to the later Early Neolithic monument. Through narratives going back centuries in which these sites and middens figured meaning and remembrance took on a new dimension and they were transformed into something much more potent in the Early Neolithic. The digging of pits and the associated depositions as well as the deposition of pots and axes in rivers and lakes helped people to connect and re-connect with not only the ancestors but also with the future. Rituals were thus an important part of the structuration of society and they helped people in times of change. In turning to the past and linking up with the ancestors, ritual was a way for the people to adjust to a new situation. The dispersed settlements, the sites with the large amount of pits and the Long Barrows provided the basis for a common identity

among the people who lived at and used these sites. Peter Bockugi (1988:190) has written that they were the settlements of the ancestors that legitimated that the surrounding territory was used. It is by contextualising the new in relation to the old that innovations are rendered intelligible and legitimate, and given a place in the lived experience of human communities. At the local level, the adoption of domesticated plants and animals, and of new technologies and artefact styles, must have been conducted strategically by people who had a certain level of understanding of their own material conditions and collective history - 'knowledgeable social actors'.

Thus we can view the first monuments as a medium to preserve social order and it was at the same time part of a communal activity. The building of a monument significantly alters people's roles in the landscape and their view of it. Structures are both the medium and the outcome of social practices (Parker Pearson & Richards 1994:3). This notion has been expressed rather elegantly by Matthew Johnson (1994:170) as follows: "Landscape is all about a sense of place; architecture is simultaneously a moulding of landscape and the expression of a cultural attitude towards it".



*Fig. 5. Early TRB pottery (Oxie group) (After M Larsson 1984)*

There is one last remark to be made regarding the way in which material culture or symbols helped to constitute a new world. I would here draw the attention to the obvious similarity between the flint inventory of the Ertebölle culture and the earliest Funnel Beaker culture (Oxie group). The existence of transverse arrowheads, flake axes and singular core axes in the latter has been noted and discussed as evidence for a close connection between these. This close connection actually only exists in the earliest Neolithic (Oxie/Svenstorp) and is gone in the later stages (Bellevuegården/Virum; cf M Larsson 1984:162; Fischer 2002:351-355).

Christopher Gosden (1994:35) has proposed that standardized material forms provide a support for people when dealing with rapid changes in society. This might thus be seen as a part of the communal memory. Mixing old and new elements made it possible for people to create "a new world" (Thomas 1996:37). Public meanings especially of ethnic identity and interpretations were negotiated and contested. In times of rapid change

people used, re-invented and re-used both new and old principles while still being able to communicate, as we have seen, through the medium of material culture.

What I have argued for in this article is that there are many similarities between the late Ertebölle culture and the Early Funnel beaker culture in their use of material culture. Still, the changes that we can observe are profound: a new settlement pattern, a new economy and the building of the first monuments. The re-use of the middens and the coastal sites, the use of red deer antlers and the similarity in material culture all point to a common history. Implicit knowledge, habitual practice and material culture may be seen as forms of cultural inheritance which are passed on to new generations and modified by innovation. In addressing this process it is important to recognise that artefacts, architecture and landscape are not merely the result of human action, but the media through which human projects are carried forward.

They also imply the legitimacy of age and tradition; they are a matter of deep structure that does not change (Bell 1997:210). Taken together the past helped people not only to connect and re-connect with the ancestors, but also with the future. In this way a “New world” was created. Or was it a “sign of the gods”? (L. Larsson 2007:607)

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