CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-56821-0 - An Ethnography of the Neolithic: Early Prehistoric Societies in Southern Scandinavia
Christopher Tilley
Excerpt
More information

Introduction: archaeology as long-term material ethnography

I have sometimes imagined what it might be like to be transported back into the past in a time capsule, to arrive somewhere in Sweden during the Neolithic and be able to observe what was really going on, stay for a couple of years and then return to the late twentieth century and write up my ethnography. I have thought how much richer, fuller and more sophisticated the account would be. I would actually know who made and used the pots and axes, what kind of kinship system existed, how objects were exchanged, and by whom, the form and nature of ethnic boundaries, the details of initiation rites, the meanings of pot designs and the significance of mortuary ceremonies.

Literally going back into the past would be the ultimate exercise in an anthropological archaeology. Its much poorer substitute, but sharing many of the aspirations, is 'ethnoarchaeology', an unfortunately labelled sub-discipline, since it gives the impression of living peoples as cultural fossils who, in some way, belong more to the past than they do to the present. Since human cultures have an almost infinite capacity for diversity it remains a moot point just what help an ethnoarchaeology, whether undertaken in Africa, Alaska or Oceania, might be to an archaeological reconstruction of a particular space-time segment of the past. The past thirty years of research and debate in archaeology have more than amply demonstrated that there are no cross-cultural generalizations going beyond either the mundane or the trivial. Similarly grand evolutionary theories positing stages or general processes of world historical development have proved to be blind alleys in which the complexities of archaeological data have been considerably greater than the models purporting to explain and fit them together.

The use of cross-cultural generalization, evolutionary theories and the results of ethnoarchaeological studies has been to attempt to bridge an apparent gulf between past and present, subject and object. Another way to grapple with the problem has, of course, been the use of generalized or specific ethnographic analogies ranging from the early use of entire living societies as direct models for past social systems to the drawing of specific inferences with regard to, for example, prehistoric technologies or economies. There has been much formalized debate with regard to what constitutes a good or plausible analogy but because the language and logic used has belonged essentially to a positivist tradition of research it has not proved to be particularly enlightening to the kind of post-positivist interpretative archaeology represented by this book. Drawing analogies with modern societies is not part of the solution to interpreting archaeological information, it is rather part of the problem –

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-56821-0 - An Ethnography of the Neolithic: Early Prehistoric Societies in Southern Scandinavia
Christopher Tilley
Excerpt
More information

how to (partially) break out of our own time-bound and place-bound consciousnesses and think *difference*. This is the challenge, and the difficulty, of archaeological research. Knowledge of contemporary societies is only useful in trying to read or understand the archaeological evidence by providing sets of concepts and ideas to try and think *through* that evidence, a medium for thought rather than a model to be either fitted to, or tested against, the data.

A debate with regard to the nature of the relationship between archaeology and anthropology has existed as long as the nineteenth-century emergence of the two disciplines. The solutions have ranged from asserting absolute disciplinary independence to attempting to collapse one into the other to all the various shades of opinion which might be expected between these two extremes. In these debates it has been primarily the differences in the evidence or 'data' that have been emphasized, archaeology tracing the patterning of objects over the long term and anthropology that of subjects in the short term. There have been a standard series of debating positions: since archaeology cannot dig up kinship systems or gender relations it cannot aspire to be an anthropology; since anthropology is locked into a synchronic fix it can tell us little about long-term process; since archaeology only deals with fragmentary surviving material traces its inferences are bound to be limited . . . and so the more antagonistic arguments go on. Or, in more conciliatory gestures: archaeology is a sub-field of anthropology; archaeology provides the time depth to anthropology, the relationship between the two is like palaeontology to biology; their common concern is a shared relationship to a wider social theory and so on.

On the whole, these debates have been couched at an abstract level and in terms of idealized representations of what the two disciplines are all about. They have generally ignored both internal diversity and uncertainty. Furthermore they have tended to be rather one-sided and parasitic since a concern with a 'mutual relationship' has been far more foregrounded in archaeology than in anthropology. While most archaeologists read some anthropology, few anthropologists seem to read any archaeology. Would this appear to be because archaeology has nothing to teach and anthropology nothing to learn? Or are there wider issues at stake?

The 'problem' with archaeology is not the limitations of the evidence, as Binford, Clarke, Renfrew and others, early pioneers of a 'social archaeology' pointed out many years ago, it is the limitations of archaeological minds. Linked with this is often an unhelpful scepticism about the potential of archaeological information for providing an interpretation of the past. The solution of the early social archaeologists was to embrace positivism and functionalism as a means of shifting an archaeological mind-set obsessed with excavation technologies and the construction of time-space systematics into a new interpretative gear. During the latter half of the 1970s and throughout the 1980s experimentation with a wide variety of other theoretical approaches – hermeneutics, structuralism and semiotics, structural-Marxism, phenomenological perspectives, post-structuralism, Critical Theory, and a concern with sex/gender systems – has radically altered archaeological thought which has become more diverse and pluralistic than ever before. This 'disunity' of archaeology finds its counterpart in anthropology which is not one, but many. Any talk of

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-56821-0 - An Ethnography of the Neolithic: Early Prehistoric Societies in Southern Scandinavia
Christopher Tilley
Excerpt
More information

'mutuality' between the two disciplines has now to negotiate its way through a maze of diversity.

For some, all this amounts to a crisis stemming from a lack of agreed goals, theories, research procedures and methodologies – a lamentable result of a so-called nihilistic 'post-modern' condition sapping confidence. To others, such as myself, it opens up a field of potentialities, a lack of *discipline* provides possibilities for innovation and fresh debate. The current practices of anthropology can hardly be boiled down to the production of holistic ethnographies based on participant observation, just as archaeology is much more than the production of excavation reports.

Over the past twenty years or so many anthropologists have increasingly expressed the need for an 'historical turn' and the need to situate the local in terms of the global and vice versa (Marcus 1992). As a consequence historical trajectories of contact, colonization and resistance have been studied. Information about historical process has been injected to temporally contextualize traditional anthropological research (e.g. Sahlins 1985; Tonkin 1989; Carrier 1992). Meanwhile archaeologists have been conducting their own contemporary research, labelled 'ethnoarchaeology' which in some studies has been, in effect, a form of anthropological research carried out in its own right rather than for the purpose of drawing better inferences with regard to the past. This has provided a more sensitized understanding of the problems and potentialities of forms of both archaeological and anthropological field research.

The paradox of the majority of ethnographic writing produced to date is that it has been in fact a kind of archaeology, involving a filtering out of the contemporary from the traditional, of Western 'influence' from indigenous 'custom', often involving the creation of a dreamtime world of ideal types, of 'traditional' village societies, the way societies ought to be, rather than the way they actually are in which the effects of colonization and an ever expanding global political economy have tended to be minimized. For example, the material reality in Melanesia will be the four-wheel drive, imported beer, pig's tusks and pearl shells but the account will usually concentrate on the significance of the latter while ignoring, or playing-down, the former. It is precisely this kind of archaeological anthropology which remains, for better or worse, of the greatest interest for the writing of an anthropological archaeology, the project of this book.

Remaining at the heart of a problematic relationship between an archaeology and an anthropology is the kind of crude picture of difference encouraged precisely by the time-ship scenario I sketched at the beginning of this introduction. For an archaeologist it is debilitating, for an anthropologist a joke. The great strength of a prehistory is its concern with the relationship between people and material culture, the manner in which material forms constitute a vital medium through which persons construct, manipulate and transform their worlds in the long term. It is, or should involve, a temporal ethnography of the artefact and a reconstruction of the manner in which material forms are related to structure and event, and were active rather than passive media in the construction of systems of signification. The humble

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-56821-0 - An Ethnography of the Neolithic: Early Prehistoric Societies in Southern Scandinavia
Christopher Tilley
Excerpt
More information

artefact is not a mere adjunct to what really matters – persons and social relations – but is fundamentally involved in the construction of those relations. Material culture is as important, and as fundamental, to the constitution of the social world as language. Taking this perspective seriously means that archaeological discourse becomes empowered. Archaeological information is not poor and terribly impoverished, capable of telling us very little compared with that available to the anthropologist, because material culture forms an essential medium of signification. And the archaeologist has the advantage of hindsight with regard to significative process in the long term. Rather than being sceptical of the potentialities of archaeological data, it is far better to take a positive attitude and appreciate and work with their richness and significance.

As regards interpreting that evidence both archaeology and anthropology *equally create* the cultural realities which they describe. There is no essential difference in the interpretative effort in either field. Knowledges are neither 'found' nor 'given' but are produced and later reproduced or deconstructed. Any interpretative understanding of the 'otherness' of the past or of the ethnographic present, is partial, fragmentary, subjectively pieced together. In an archaeology it also quite literally depends on a series of fragmentary materials which then, of necessity and in common with anthropology, become textually transformed into words and images. Both disciplines create the discursive objects and categories of which they choose to speak, producing a reading of the past and the present, a relatively empirically constrained weaving of information (evidence) into text. The event of discourse, of producing an interpretative account, which may stimulate further interpretations and criticisms is that which is of essential significance and which motivates the account which follows. Going back in my imaginary time ship might make the task of writing the past in the present a little easier but it would hardly allow it to approach the status of an absolute knowledge. The great excitement of archaeology, and why it is worthwhile pursuing, is no longer that of discovery. It is an intellectual networking of potential connections between things, in time and in space, to make sense of the past. Exploring these connections involves emplotment, metaphor and metonymy, creating a story and unravelling the potential meanings of artefacts by tracing their relationships to others.

This book is an attempt to write an interpretative narrative of the past in the form of a temporal ethnography of the southern Scandinavian Neolithic, covering a time span approaching 3,000 years. The account starts at the beginning of the late Mesolithic and concludes at the end of the middle Neolithic A Funnel Beaker (TRB) tradition. As with any story, the account could have continued, or started, with an earlier origin point. Some of my own research and interpretations of the change from the middle Neolithic A to the middle Neolithic B (Battle-Axe/Corded Ware and Pitted Ware traditions) are summarized elsewhere (Tilley 1982, 1984, 1989).

In this book I discuss the prehistoric sequence in Denmark and in southern and western Sweden comparing and contrasting the development of different regional traditions and attempting to integrate a wide variety of different types of evidence from the symbolism of landscape to the construction of monuments to the meaning

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-56821-0 - An Ethnography of the Neolithic: Early Prehistoric Societies in Southern Scandinavia
Christopher Tilley
Excerpt
More information

of different artefact forms. Part I is divided into two chapters discussing changes in the late Mesolithic Ertebølle and Lihult traditions, leading to the adoption of agricultural practices and the building of monuments during the early Neolithic. Part II, divided into five chapters, focuses on the relationship between megalithic tombs and society during the middle Neolithic, discussing monument construction and use, the relationship between tombs, settlement and landscape, mortuary practices, and the deposition of artefacts in a wide range of contexts from cult houses to votive deposits.

As an essential part of the study, I have attempted to provide an up-to-date synthesis of both recent and older excavations and research for those who may know little about southern Scandinavian archaeology. Given the huge database that has been accumulated over the last 150 years in a part of Europe, and in a time period, that can justifiably claim to be one of the best documented anywhere in the world, the task is enormous. Starting to write this book I suspected the task was hopeless; having finished it my suspicions are confirmed. Inevitably the picture painted of the Mesolithic and Neolithic in these pages uses a brush with very broad strokes. To make the account manageable the synthesis provided has inevitably left out more than that which has been discussed. Since most of my own research has been undertaken with reference to the Swedish material the account, in some chapters, is inevitably biased towards it. I have been less sensitive to local regional variation during the middle Neolithic in Denmark than I would have liked. I hope that others may take up that gauntlet. My excuse is that it would have delayed publication for at least another decade. I apologize in advance to those regional specialists who feel essential 'facts' are missing or ignored. Since the literature on this period is more than replete with discussions of chronology and typology, I have largely omitted any substantial discussion of these matters, simply accepting in broad terms the various divisions and phases that have been proposed by others. All radiocarbon dates cited are given in uncalibrated years BC.

I wanted to write an *imaginative* book that would further stimulate an interest in the earlier prehistory of southern Scandinavia and one that would breathe some life and social meaning into the accumulated serried arrays of artefacts in museum collections, and documented structures in texts, from a wide variety of archaeological contexts in different regions. To attempt to write archaeology as material ethnography one must avoid the tendency to reify artefacts and substitute them for social relations. It requires textually embedding those artefacts back in terms of sets of relations and meanings that may have encompassed them. Above all, I have tried to stress the symbolic and political dimensions of the evidence, material culture as embedded in the everyday structures of social life, from a general comparative perspective, without which (concentrating on one area or site) it is often difficult to see the wood for the trees.

There has been an unhelpful tendency in both 'traditional' and 'new' archaeology, to separate out two domains of human action and experience: the utilitarian and the functional, and the symbolic and stylistic aspects of material culture with the latter constituting some kind of remainder after the first has been taken account of.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-56821-0 - An Ethnography of the Neolithic: Early Prehistoric Societies in Southern Scandinavia
Christopher Tilley
Excerpt
More information

Throughout this book I deny the relevance of that kind of distinction. For example, animals or grain are not first and foremost sources of food, and secondarily of symbolic importance, but both simultaneously.

In constructing the account I have constantly worried about what the limits of archaeological discourse might be. Was I going 'over the top'? Would others deem the account acceptable or not? What anyway is 'acceptability'? And to whom? Of course, I found no solution. One of the primary roles of the discussion of specific ethnographic examples in the text is not to produce an interpretation – they were added after an interpretation of the archaeological data – but to 'normalize' what might otherwise appear 'unwarranted' arguments and interpretations. To an older or to a more traditional generation of empirically minded archaeologists much here will be deemed untrammelled subjectivism. To some students and younger archaeologists (in body or in mind), I hope that the account may seem to be rather conservative: I stopped where I should have gone on. What I hope to have provided, at the very least, is a series of interpretations which can be reacted against, a forum for debate. Ultimately this boils down to the question of what kind of account of the past do we want and how does that account respond to our social need today? The past can be studied for itself and in itself and an 'objective' account provided, consisting of the enumeration of artefacts, structures, deposits, dates. A dry as dust archaeology is the result. This book is a study of the past in and for the present, a very contemporary intervention, resulting in the construction of a present-past. The fidelity of the account is not to the truth of the past, whatever that might be, but to the future of archaeology and the fresh, more daring and more innovative interpretations and debates which will emerge.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-56821-0 - An Ethnography of the Neolithic: Early Prehistoric Societies in Southern Scandinavia
Christopher Tilley
Excerpt
More information

PART I

The late Mesolithic and early Neolithic

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-56821-0 - An Ethnography of the Neolithic: Early Prehistoric Societies in Southern Scandinavia
Christopher Tilley
Excerpt
More information

1

The original affluent society

The last hunter-fisher-gatherers in southern Scandinavia which comprises Denmark and southern Sweden (Figs. 1.1 and 1.2), lived during the period 4500–3200 BC. To the south of these groups Linearbandkeramik farming populations, which had spread from the south-east of Europe, Greece and the Balkans, occupied the rich loess soils of the central European plain. For a period of around 1,300 years the hunter-gatherers had direct or indirect contact with the farmers but their economy and way of life was not significantly transformed. In this chapter I want to examine why this was the case and discuss the nature of these societies and their cultural construction of a distinctive lifeworld.

Virtually no human presence is recorded in Denmark and southern Sweden until about 12,000 years ago. After the enormous ice sheets of the last glaciation began to retreat, southern Scandinavia was gradually populated by communities of plants and animals and human groups who were dependent on them. These were initially reindeer hunters inhabiting a tundra environment. Temperatures rose and the land warmed up. A succession of different forests replaced one another, at first composed of birch, later of birch and pine and finally forests of deciduous trees marking a mature or climax stage of a natural ecological succession. As these plant communities changed so did the animal species and the possibilities for human exploitation. The transformation of the vegetation caused the retreat of reindeer but created a favourable environment for other species – aurochs (now extinct wild cattle), elk, red and roe deer and wild pig. Numerous lakes left after the retreat of the ice sheets began to infill with sediments and reed communities and there were complex changes in land and sea levels. The sea began to rise with the melting of the ice, and so did the land with the burden of the ice sheets being removed, but at different rates and different times creating marine transgressions and regressions in relation to the coastline.

The period from 8200 BC to 3200 BC is conventionally termed the Mesolithic and covers the time sandwich from the disappearance of the late glacial reindeer hunters to the beginning of the adoption of some agricultural practices in the Neolithic. I shall mainly discuss the evidence from Denmark and Skåne, southern Sweden, because it is best known and documented through excavations, but will also briefly refer to and make comparisons with the archaeological material from the Swedish west coast, Bohuslän, and Västergötland. This time span for Denmark and Skåne has traditionally been divided into three phases, named after important excavated sites, which will be retained in this account, the Maglemose dated to between 8200 and

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-56821-0 - An Ethnography of the Neolithic: Early Prehistoric Societies in Southern Scandinavia
Christopher Tilley
Excerpt
More information

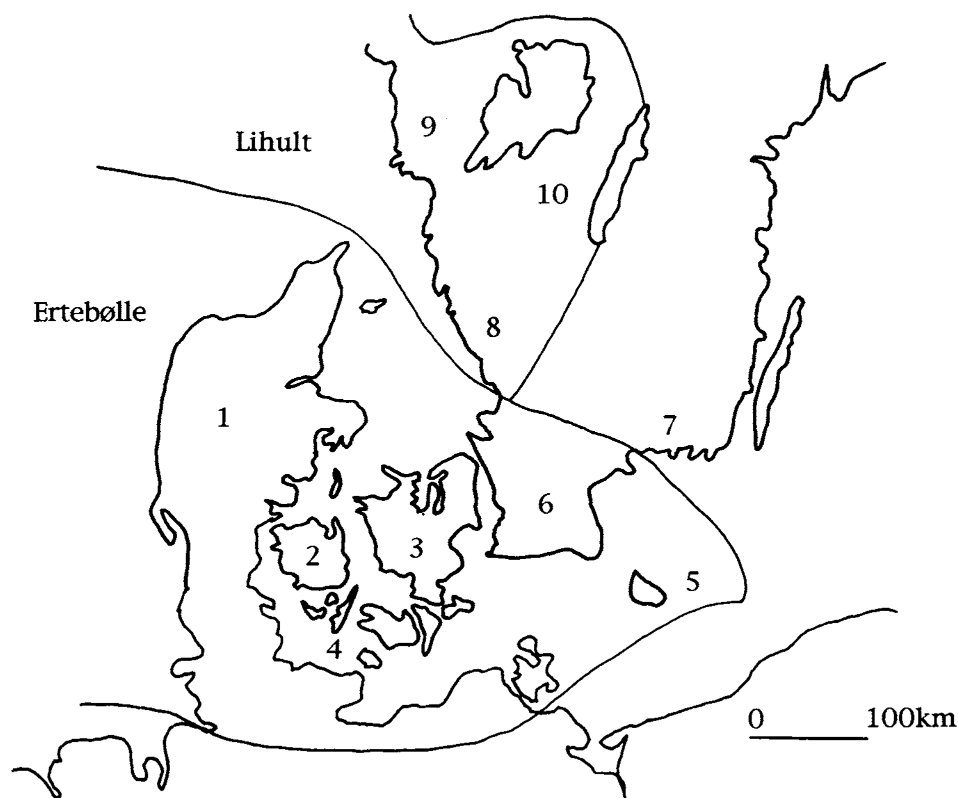

Figure 1.1 Areas of southern Scandinavia discussed in the text and the approximate distribution of different cultural traditions during the fifth millennium BC. 1: Jutland, 2: Funen, 3: Zealand, 4: Langeland, 5: Bornholm, 6: Skåne, 7: Blekinge, 8: Halland, 9: Bohuslän, 10: Västergötland

5700 BC, the Kongemose lasting from 5700 to 4500 BC and the Ertebølle spanning the period 4500 to 3200 BC.

A very large number of Mesolithic sites are known from the Swedish west coast, mostly only from surface finds. In the Göteborg area alone surveys have identified 1,200 sites (Cullberg 1973). Most of the excavations that have been undertaken are in the more heavily settled and exploited coastal zone of Bohuslän. Inland Mesolithic sites from Bohuslän and Västergötland are less well known although surveys have located substantial numbers of surface finds from around the larger lakes such as Mjörn.

The post-glacial sequence on the west coast of Sweden has been traditionally subdivided, on the basis of stone tool technology, into three cultural phases, the Hensbacka, Sandarna and Lihult after important type sites. Most of the discussion of the Mesolithic on the Swedish west coast has been confined to a debate about the relative chronology of the flint assemblages and the relationship of the cultural phases identified here to the sequence established earlier by archaeologists in Skåne and Denmark (e.g. Alin 1955; Fredsjö 1953; Cullberg 1972; Welinder 1973; Sjögren 1991). More recently there have been a number of attempts to interpret the Mesolithic evidence from an ecological and social perspective with Cullberg and

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-56821-0 - An Ethnography of the Neolithic: Early Prehistoric Societies in Southern Scandinavia
Christopher Tilley
Excerpt
More information

Figure 1.2 The distribution of the Ertebølle in southern Scandinavia and the area of central Europe occupied by the first farming (Linearbandkeramik) societies. 1: Ertebølle, 2: Linearbandkeramik (after Jennbert 1984)

Persson in particular, and others, carrying out an interesting series of studies (Cullberg 1972a, 1975, 1975a, 1976; Persson 1981; Wigforss et al. 1983; Andersson et al. 1988; Nordqvist 1988). As regards chronology Fredsjö and Cullberg have attempted to erect an independent lithic chronology for the material related to sea level changes examined by means of studying the relationship of finds to shoreline displacement curves. Welinder has also attempted to date changes in lithic technology by relating them not only to the shoreline but also to the lithic sequence established in southern Scandinavia arguing for synchronous developments such as the introduction of the handle core, typical for the Lihult tradition, around 6500 BC. Sjögren (1991) in a detailed discussion has recently questioned the usefulness of the traditional tripartite division of the material and most scholars working with the Mesolithic material from the west coast no longer see much value in trying to date the finds here by attempting to relate them to those in Skåne or Denmark. It is now generally accepted that the final Mesolithic Lihult phase broadly corresponds to the time span of the Ertebølle of southern Scandinavia but has its own local characteristics and can be dated roughly to between *c.* 5000 and 3000 BC.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org