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## Mesolithic Europe

This book focuses on the archaeology of the hunter-gatherer societies that inhabited Europe in the millennia between the Last Ice Age and the spread of agriculture, between ten thousand and five thousand years ago. Traditionally viewed as a period of cultural stagnation, new data now demonstrates that this was a period of radical change and innovation. This was the period that witnessed the colonisation of extensive new territory at high latitudes and high altitudes following postglacial climatic change, the development of seafaring, and the synthesis of the technological, economic, and social capabilities that underpinned the later development of agricultural and urban societies. Providing a pan-European overview, *Mesolithic Europe* includes up-to-date regional syntheses written by experts in each region as well as a diversity of theoretical perspectives.

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## Contents

<i>Figures and Tables</i>	<i>page</i> vii
<i>Preface and Acknowledgments</i>	xi
<i>Contributors</i>	xv
One: Mesolithic Europe: Glimpses of Another World <i>Penny Spikins</i>	1
Two: Innovating Hunter-Gatherers: The Mesolithic in the Baltic <i>Marek Zvelebil</i>	18
Three: Norwegian Mesolithic Trends: A Review <i>Hein Bjartmann Bjerck</i>	60
Four: Southern Scandinavia <i>Hans Peter Blankholm</i>	107
Five: Mesolithic Britain <i>Chris Tolan-Smith</i>	132
Six: New Developments in the Study of the Mesolithic of the Low Countries <i>Leo Verhart</i>	158
Seven: The Mesolithic in France <i>Nicolas Valdeyron</i>	182
Eight: The Mesolithic of the Upper Danube and Upper Rhine <i>Michael A. Jochim</i>	203
Nine: The Mesolithic of the Middle Danube and Upper Elbe Rivers <i>Jiří A. Svoboda</i>	221
Ten: The Mesolithic of the Iron Gates <i>Clive Bonsall</i>	238
Eleven: The Mesolithic of European Russia, Belarus, and the Ukraine <i>Pavel Dolukhanov</i>	280
Twelve: The Mesolithic of Atlantic Iberia <i>Lawrence Guy Straus</i>	302
Thirteen: The Coastal Mesolithic of the European Mediterranean <i>Mark Pluciennik</i>	328
Fourteen: Mesolithic Europe: Overview and New Problems <i>Geoff Bailey</i>	357
<i>Appendix</i>	373
<i>References</i>	375
<i>Index</i>	453

## Figures and Tables

### Figures

1.1	Map of Europe showing major topographic features and key sites	page 3
2.1	The Baltic Sea basin in northern Europe: early Mesolithic	20
2.2	The Baltic Sea basin in northern Europe: late Mesolithic	21
2.3	Postglacial colonisation of northern Europe	23
2.4	Settlement patterns and the practical organisation of the landscape	33
2.5	Trade and exchange within the Baltic Sea basin	37
2.6	Burial grounds: their distribution and duration	39
2.7	Elk, bird, and bear images in the material culture of circum-Baltic hunter-gatherers	49
2.8	Regional adoption of agro-pastoral farming	53
3.1	Younger Dryas (11,000–10,000 BP) marginal moraines in Fennoscandia	67
3.2	Shoreline displacement graphs (A, B, C) and a reconstructed ten-thousand-year-old shoreline along a profile from central areas of Fennoscandia (high isostatic uplift) to areas outside the glaciated area (no isostatic uplift)	69
3.3	Annual variations in precipitation and temperatures in different regions of Norway	71
3.4a	Key artefacts in the Norwegian Mesolithic. Fosna tradition	79
3.4b	Key artefacts in the Norwegian Mesolithic. Early Microblade tradition	80
3.4c	Key artefacts in the Norwegian Mesolithic. Late Microblade tradition	81
3.5	Dyreberget ( <i>Animal rock</i> ) at Leiknes in Tysfjord, Nordland	82
3.6	Chubby adzes	83
3.7	Mesolithic skier	85
3.8	Mesolithic key sites in Norway	91
3.9	Fløyrlivatn 7, tent ring and artefact distribution	92
3.10	Nyhamna, Aukra	93
3.11	Sites mapped along an elevated shoreline at Vega, Northern Norway	94
3.12	Two examples of sites belonging to the network of sites at Vega	95
3.13	Mesolithic house foundation from Mohalsen, Vega	97
4.1	Southern Scandinavia with selected key sites	108
4.2	Southern Scandinavia nine thousand years ago and six thousand years ago	110
4.3	Microolithic armatures from Late Glacial and Postglacial Southern Scandinavia	113
4.4	Bone and antler artefacts from the Southern Scandinavian Mesolithic	114

### *Figures and Tables*

4.5	Bows from the Southern Scandinavian Mesolithic	115
4.6	Typical pointed base vessels and blubber lamp from the Ertebølle culture	116
4.7	Early Neolithic pottery forms	117
4.8	The Bøgebakken site and burial ground	123
5.1	Map of Britain showing principal Mesolithic sites mentioned in the text and selected Late Glacial sites	133
5.2	Obliquely blunted points	141
5.3	Narrow blade geometric microliths	141
5.4	Uniserial barbed points	142
5.5	Elk antler mattocks	143
5.6	Late Mesolithic barbed points	148
5.7	Late Mesolithic antler mattocks	149
5.8	Bone or antler bevel-ended tool	149
5.9	Bann flakes	153
6.1	Generalised geographical terrain of the Low Countries and the most important Mesolithic sites mentioned in the text	159
6.2	Stone engravings from the Netherlands	166
6.3	The red deer antler mask from Bedburg-Königshoven, Germany	167
6.4	Verrebroek 'Dok', Belgium: simplified distribution map of high-density artefact units	168
6.5	The former river valley showing the distribution of Early Mesolithic sites in the modern Vlootbeek valley near Posterholt, the Netherlands	169
6.6	The distribution of Wommersom Quartzite	173
6.7	Findings from Den Bosch: bone chisel, perforated and decorated antler sleeve, perforated antler sleeve containing the tusk of a wild boar, and a fragment of red deer antler with decoration	174
6.8	Wooden statuette from Willemstad	175
6.9	Cross-section of a grave pit from Mariënberg, the Netherlands	176
6.10	The Venray region: simplified reconstruction of the terrain in the Late Mesolithic with the distribution of Late Mesolithic sites	177
6.11	Distribution pattern of Late Mesolithic, Linear Band Ceramic (Linearbandkeramik), Rössen, and Michelsberg sites in the Dutch Meuse valley	180
7.1	Map of France showing the location of selected Mesolithic sites	186
7.2	Montclus triangles from Félines-Minervois and Balma de l'Abeurador (Hérault)	192
7.3	Burial at Auneau, Parc du Château (Eure-et-Loir), excavations of C. Verjux	201
8.1	The upper Danube and upper Rhine region, with major subareas	205
8.2	Major sites in the Upper Danube and Upper Rhine	206
8.3	Chronology of the Late Palaeolithic and Mesolithic	207
9.1	Map of the Middle Danube and Upper Elbe regions	222
9.2	Detailed map of the North Bohemian sandstone region	223
9.3	Šakvice. A Late Palaeolithic/Early Mesolithic industry with Helwan segments	228
9.4	Dolský Mlýn Rockshelter, North Bohemia	229
9.5	Hearths with basalt pebbles from the 2005 excavations at the Okrouhlík Rockshelter, North Bohemia	234

*Figures and Tables*

9.6	Bone implements	235
9.7	The child burial in the Zigeunerhöhle Cave	237
10.1	Principal Mesolithic and Early Neolithic sites in the Iron Gates	240
10.2	Chronology and ‘periodisation’ of the Iron Gates sites according to different authors	241
10.3	Stable isotope ( $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ and $\delta^{15}\text{N}$ ) values for Early and Final Mesolithic skeletons from Lepenski Vir and Vlasac	255
10.4	A typical Late Mesolithic extended inhumation burial at Schela Cladovei (Romania)	257
10.5	Part of a human pelvis from Schela Cladovei with an embedded bone arrowhead	265
10.6	The radiocarbon ‘gap’ in the Iron Gates	266
10.7	The distinctive trapezoidal mountain of Treskavac on the Romanian bank of the Danube	268
10.8	Final Mesolithic burial inserted through the floor of House 21 at Lepenski Vir	269
10.9	New forms of bone tools from sites in the Iron Gates	270
10.10	Blades made from high-quality Balkan flint from Schela Cladovei	271
10.11	Starčevo pottery within the trapezoidal buildings of Lepenski Vir	272
10.12	Trapezoidal buildings at Lepenski Vir	273
11.1	Mesolithic sites on the East European Plain	288
11.2	Stone tools in the Ukraine Mesolithic	289
11.3	Mesolithic sites in the Danube–Dniestr interfluvium	291
11.4	Stone tools of Mesolithic sites in Belarus and Central Russia	293
11.5	Nizhnee Veret’e bone tools, Northern Russia	297
12.1	Human settlement of Asturias, Cantabria, Euskadi, and Navarra during the Boreal and Early–Middle Atlantic Phases	303
12.2	Boreal and Early Atlantic Mesolithic human settlement of Portugal, Galicia, and Asturias	305
12.3	Asturian pick from La Riera	317
12.4	Selection of microliths, cores, and a stone ‘button’ from Vidigal	323
13.1	Map of the northern Mediterranean with main sites mentioned in the text	329
13.2	Geometric microliths and points from the Azilian horizons, from Balma Margineda, Andorra	334
13.3	Sauveterrian points, geometric microliths, and other tools, from Riparo di Romagno, Italy	335
13.4	Castelnovian blades and trapezoid geometric microliths, from La Font-des-Pigeons, Châteauneuf-les-Martigues	336
13.5	Romanellian of southern Italy, including the characteristic circular ‘thumbnail’ scrapers and various backed points and blades	337
13.6	Modern Mediterranean oak forest in Sardinia	338
13.7	Grotta dell’Uzzo, Sicily	339
13.8	Franchthi Cave, Greece	341
13.9	Two archers in a ‘Levantine’ hunting scene with earlier ‘geometric’ images, at Las Chaparros, Spain	350
13.10	Incised images at the Grotta dell’Addaura, northern Sicily	351

*Figures and Tables*

**Tables**

2.1	Regional chronologies	28
2.2	Enculturation through ritual: hunter-gatherer landscapes	45
3.1	Mesolithic chronozones	74
3.2	Key Mesolithic sites in Norway, showing sites that are prominent in the literature and current discussions	75
4.1	Late Glacial and Postglacial pollen zones, fauna, cultures, and chronology	109
4.2	Radiocarbon dates for sites mentioned in the text	111
5.1	Radiocarbon dates	135
6.1	Recent radiocarbon dates from the Netherlands and Belgium	164
6.2	Relationship between tool types and settlement types in the Vlootbeck Valley, the Netherlands	170
6.3	Radiocarbon dates from the Early Mesolithic site of Posterholt, the Netherlands	170
7.1	Selected radiocarbon dates from Mesolithic sites in France	187
8.1	Presence/absence of fauna at Late Palaeolithic sites	210
8.2	Presence/absence of fauna at Early Mesolithic sites	211
8.3	Presence/absence of fauna at Late Mesolithic sites	212
8.4	Summary of time trends in faunal representation, showing the average percentage of large mammal species per site, the average percentage of small mammal species per site, and the percentage of sites with fish, shellfish, and birds, by time period	213
9.1	Review of Magdalenian, Late Palaeolithic, and Mesolithic radiocarbon dates from Hungary, Austria, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic (except North Bohemia)	226
9.2	Review of Mesolithic radiocarbon dates from the North Bohemian rockshelters	227
10.1	List of radiocarbon dates for Mesolithic and Early Neolithic sites in the Iron Gates	246
10.2	Provisional chronology for the Iron Gates based on radiocarbon dating	252
10.3	Radiocarbon date calibration table for the period 6500–10,000 BP	253
10.4	List of ‘unsatisfactory’ radiocarbon dates from Mesolithic and Early Neolithic sites in the Iron Gates	267
11.1	Radiocarbon chronology: the Steppe and the Crimea	282
11.2	Radiocarbon chronology: Mixed Forest Region	284
11.3	Radiocarbon chronology: Coniferous (Boreal) Forest Region and Tundra	285
12.1	Radiocarbon dates for the Holocene Mesolithic of Vasco-Cantabria	306
12.2	Radiocarbon dates for the Holocene Mesolithic of Portugal	308
13.1	Selected radiocarbon determinations for Mediterranean Europe	330



## Preface and Acknowledgments

In this volume, we bring together a series of regional syntheses of the Mesolithic in different parts of Europe, intended to be of interest and benefit both to specialists and to those with a more general interest in archaeology. Mesolithic archaeology has witnessed an acceleration of activity in recent years, with many new projects, more communication across old geographical and political barriers, and calls for archaeologists to examine the Mesolithic on its own terms, rather than as an inconvenient rung in some ladder of human progress. Accounts of the Mesolithic are typically absorbed into general syntheses of prehistory, submerged in works unified by wider-ranging theoretical or methodological themes, fragmented in publications of individual site-based or regional field projects, or combined in the proceedings of specialist conferences. Here, our aim is to provide an up-to-date overview of the current state of knowledge about the Mesolithic period, a demonstration of the richness and diversity of the material now available and the various approaches to its study, and a source for those who wish to delve more deeply into the literature.

Our brief to our contributors was to provide an interpretive synthesis of their region, varying the emphasis according to the available material and drawing on broad categories of information: the history of research and the definition of the Mesolithic, environment and geography, chronology, technology and subsistence, settlement and social organisation, and art and ritual. We also encouraged them to range both backwards and forwards in time to consider the nature of the boundaries that traditionally mark the beginning and the end of the Mesolithic, including the transition to agriculture.

We are, of course, acutely aware of the arbitrary nature of our selections and the boundaries they imply, and the inevitable unevenness of coverage. In a continent notable for a history of political fragmentation reinforced by barriers of geography, language, nationality, and cultural tradition, total coverage, let alone uniformity of approach, was hardly to be expected. Archaeologically, the field of enquiry has been further complicated, and indeed enriched, by different intellectual traditions, by the historical dominance of the French and the Danes, by Anglophone traditions of method and theory, and most recently by regional synthesis and diversification.

We could have devoted a single chapter to every nation-state within the geographical boundaries of Europe. But that would have produced far too large and uneven a volume, and it is questionable how far modern political boundaries are helpful or relevant in assessing the prehistoric record, although we acknowledge the influence of modern political history on intellectual traditions of investigation and interpretation. Our selection of chapters is necessarily a compromise between what we would have liked to include and what was realistically possible. Some chapters range widely across geographical and political boundaries, others focus more sharply on areas delimited by modern political borders. Some areas achieve disproportionate attention because of the long histories of study, the abundance of material, or the impact of distinctive types of new evidence or new ideas.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

### *Preface and Acknowledgments*

Others may seem underrepresented or referred to only tangentially in relation to adjacent areas. If nothing else, the volume of material presented here should leave little doubt about the substantial nature of the Mesolithic record, its potential to illuminate new dimensions of human variability, and the prospect of a truly comparative picture ranging from the Atlantic coast of Ireland to the Urals, and from the sub-Arctic to the Aegean.

The regional chapters are organised in broadly geographical order. Chapter 2 provides a wide-ranging geographical and thematic overview, focussed on the Baltic, followed in Chapter 3 by a review of Norway, where new investigations have produced a substantial and distinctive body of new material, and in Chapter 4 by a discussion of the classic material of southern Scandinavia. Subsequent chapters move from west to east across the middle zone of Europe, from the British Isles, via the Low Countries, France, and the Rhine and Danube drainages, to the vast territory comprising Belarus, Russia, and the Ukraine, and thence to the south, to the Iberian Peninsula and the Mediterranean coast.

In our editorial contributions, our opening chapter provides an introduction to the field of study, to the issues raised in subsequent chapters, and to some of the ideas that are beginning to influence a new generation of interpretation. Our final chapter provides an overview of the Mesolithic period as a whole and an indication of new directions for future research. The editorial chapters are single-authored, reflecting both the dominant input of each editor and the differences of perspective and approach among the editors and contributors. They are, nevertheless, also the result of joint effort and discussion and in their totality reflect a body of ideas to which we both subscribe, and a jointly held belief that the Mesolithic record offers an unparalleled opportunity to explore the relationship between the very large scale and the very small, between millennial and pan-continental trends and the actions of social groups and individuals.

Not the least of the problems of dealing with a period often regarded as transitional is that it also marks a zone of overlap between different conventions for expressing dates as either 'before the present' or 'before Christ'. The position has become more confused in recent years by the refinement and widespread adoption of calibration curves and by a host of different abbreviations – BP, BC, BCE, bp, bc, cal BP, cal BC, kyr, ka, rcybp. Tree-ring counting provides the most accurate conversion of radiocarbon years to annual solar years and then only back to 8329 cal BC, or to 9908 cal BC with a degree of uncertainty. The calibration curve can be extended further back in time, in principle across the full five-thousand-year time range of radiocarbon, using uranium series dating of coral terraces and annual growth increments in varved lake-sediments and speleothems (Van der Plicht 2004). In general, calibration suggests a broadly progressive divergence of radiocarbon and solar chronologies, the former providing underestimates amounting to as much as two thousand years or more, a degree of divergence that affects the time ranges dealt with in this volume. One might argue that such divergence is of no consequence unless one is comparing radiocarbon dates with dates derived from historical records, but the intervals of time measured by radiocarbon dates may differ from their calendar equivalent by a significant amount. Within the Mesolithic period, 500 radiocarbon years may refer to as little as 280 calendar years or as much as 580 calendar years, depending on the particular part of the calibration curve, differences that are potentially significant for archaeological interpretation.

It would be a mistake to suppose that calibration has introduced more accurate radiocarbon dates. The convention for expressing calibrated dates as range within two standard deviations is a healthy reminder that a single radiocarbon date actually represents a probability distribution covering quite a long span of time. Moreover, different calibration schemes are currently in use and under continuous revision, producing somewhat different albeit minor calibrations. The problem of plateaux in the production of radioactive carbon in the upper atmosphere is an irreducible

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problem, resulting in periods within which the same radiocarbon date may refer to a wide range of calendar dates, and several of these plateaux occur in the Mesolithic period. To these uncertainties, one should add the problems of correcting for the marine reservoir effect, other potential sources of contamination from a variety of sources, inter-laboratory variations, large standard deviations especially for radiocarbon assays undertaken at an earlier stage in the development of the method, uncertainties of stratigraphic association, and the fact that a great deal of archaeological material has not been radiocarbon dated and that much will probably remain undateable.

In Europe, specialists who study Neolithic and later periods have long used the 'BC' convention, whereas those studying Palaeolithic and Mesolithic periods have preferred the 'BP' convention. That difference tends to reinforce a boundary between Mesolithic and Neolithic that is obstructive rather than helpful to interpretation. Hence, the current convention is to express the original radiocarbon date in radiocarbon years BP (before the present, that is, before AD 1950) with a margin of error at one standard deviation, and to express the calibrated version in years BC (cal BC) as a range that encompasses the 95.4 percent probability range of two standard deviations. This convention may be confusing for those used to BP chronologies and of doubtful relevance in other parts of the world beyond Europe and the Near East. It is, nevertheless, the currently preferred convention in European prehistory, and we use that convention here. Appendix 1 provides a correspondence table for uncalibrated radiocarbon years and calibrated years BC, at one-hundred-year intervals between 2,500 and 13,000 BP.

All of this suggests that although we now have very many more radiocarbon dates than before, there are some respects in which we actually know less about chronology, or at any rate rather more about the extent of our ignorance. When we first planned this volume, we intended to ask all our contributors to provide a list of radiocarbon dates for their region. That directive has proved more difficult to implement than we had supposed. Many authors pointed out the uncertainties associated with the dates in their region and the need for critical use of the resulting material. In consequence some authors have produced quite selective lists, and one or two others more generalised dating schemes. It is significant that some of the longest lists are in those regions where Accelerator Mass Spectrometry dating has been widely applied, typically in collaboration with the Oxford Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit, producing dates on individual artefacts or other items, which circumvent some of the uncertainties of radiocarbon dating.

The idea for this book originated in 1999 following a suggestion from Graeme Barker for a volume that would be part of a series on European prehistory to be published by Leicester University Press, and a first group of chapters were drafted in 2001 and 2002. With changes in the publishing world, Cambridge University Press took over the project in 2003 and encouraged us to expand the regional coverage and our editorial input with additional chapters. Some chapters have thus been in gestation for considerably longer than others, but all authors have had the opportunity to update their reviews in the light of more recent findings.

We thank our contributors for their patience; Jessica Kemp for assistance in preparing the illustrations; Robert Hedges of the Oxford Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit for advice on radiocarbon dating; Jeremy Boulton, Head of the School of Historical Studies, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, for funding assistance with the preparation of the book; and Simon Whitmore of Cambridge University Press for encouraging the project through to completion. We also acknowledge financial support from the AHRC through grant B/RG/AN1717/APN14658 and from the Leverhulme Trust through its Major Research Fellowship scheme.

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xvi

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