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Mentality and the social world. The Mesolithic/Neolithic transition in Southern Scandinavia

1. Introduction

Mentality and the social world can be approached from two different angles. The first is about our own mentality and our social world and our preconceptions in tackling prehistoric societies. Our perceptions of humankind and culture are of major importance if we are to approach social structures and ideology of Stone Age societies. The second direction is to ask what kind of mentality and social world those people may have had in the time of the Late Mesolithic and the Early Neolithic in Southern Scandinavia. I suggest a deep time perspective in order to have a chance to perceive the significance of material culture and society.

The Mesolithic-Neolithic transition in Southern Scandinavia is extremely complex in nature, and involves many dimensions to be evaluated. The archaeological evidence and our conceptual frameworks concerning the situation in this area will be discussed in this context. I am going to present my perception of what may have happened during the period in question in Southern Scandinavia.

2. The modern world and the mentality of looking at other societies

In recent years there has been a considerable debate in archaeology and other disciplines about our possibilities of understanding societies of today and societies in the past. One of the topics concerns 'Us and the Others'/'Us and Them' (Fabian 1983). How do we force these ideas on the 'Ertebølle people' and on the 'Funnelbeaker people'?

The division between the Mesolithic and the Neolithic is also a division between two ideas about people. The Mesolithic individual is characterised, as Julian Thomas wrote, "in terms of adaptive responses to environmental pressures". The 'Neolithics' were described "as purposive subjects, acting in pursuit of socially-defined goals" (Thomas 1988, 59). The idea of humans characterizes the understanding of society and how it is analysed.

Elisabeth Rudebeck has presented an interesting study, revealing how six participants in the debate on Neolithisation in Southern Scandinavia (published in *Journal of Danish Archaeology* 1982-1986) argue in very different ways. She concerns the images of human beings explored in the archaeological texts using concepts such as teleology,

structural continuity versus structural change, human motives, centre-periphery, time orientation, and the Other. Inspired by H. White's classifications of historical narratives she finds both heroes and tragic figures in the narratives of the transition to the Neolithic. There is an underlying tendency either to emancipate the Ertebølle culture from our preconceptions or to make it more primitive (Rudebeck 1996). Concerning my own discussions of Neolithisation for example, I emancipated the Ertebølle culture, making it more modern, according to the analysis made by Rudebeck.

The stereotyped assumptions about people, and also about women and men, old and young should be questioned in order to discuss social dynamics, mentality and the social world. Our ethnocentric bias, our Eurocentric bias and our androcentric bias leave their distinct mark on the archaeological perception of past societies. The mentality of the modern social world evidently affects the perceptions of ideology and social structures in past societies.

Mentality and the social world correspond to ideology, which I regard as a cultural perception of the world including cultural norms of individuals and society. In mentality I also include the everyday life of human beings. In order to get some ideas of societies in Stone Age Europe the focus should be on the long-term structure of mentality and the social world. If we are to have a chance to grasp the ideology and social structure, we have to go to the inside of these societies. All cultural realities should be integrated in the understanding including such as living, eating, working, feasting, diet, health and dying. The way individual minds and collective norms work is a prerequisite for understanding ideology and social life.

From the archaeological point of view, that means that all kinds of archaeological evidence should be brought into the discussion. Trying to explore mentality and the social world calls for both the social and the economic context. The central concepts in this understanding and the study of material culture, settlements, burials and votive offerings are territoriality, communication, social differentiation, gender and people themselves.

3. The mentality and social world of the Stone Age societies

Concerning the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition in Southern Scandinavia examinations of the different archaeological

sources and considerations of current theories were recently made by Anne Brigitte Gebauer and Douglas Price (1992). The debate on the transition in this part of Europe has a long tradition where different interpretations have been presented, often in a very value-charged way. In the following I would like to discuss my present view of Neolithisation in this area, focusing on the inside of these societies. In a way, I would like to populate the past in order to have potentials to obtain perspectives on attitudes and conceptions within the past.

Over time, there are different traditions in the west and east of Southern Scandinavia respectively. I do not believe that the whole area of this region can be analysed as one entity as there are many different local traditions. The existence of the Mesolithic local groups can be interpreted according to different local traditions in the material culture within different regions (Jennbert 1984; Vang Petersen 1984). In the earliest part of the Neolithic there was perhaps a trend towards a more pronounced territoriality (Brysting Damm 1991; Madsen 1982, 1993). The archaeological evidence from artefact styles and pottery design points to a regionalisation in the Southern Scandinavia from the Mesolithic, perhaps also confirmed with human morphological studies (Petersen 1992).

I have suggested that the Late Mesolithic societies in Southern Scandinavia were not dependent on farming and that the use of farming products was mainly for social prestige and for feasting (Jennbert 1984, 1985). Social dynamics and exchange of gifts, with the metaphor of 'the fertile gift', characterise my work about the transition from hunting-gathering to tillage.

People in the Late Mesolithic were permanently settled in favourable ecological environments. The density of settlement sites in Scania (southernmost Sweden) at this time gives no indications that people were forced to adopt agriculture because of shortage of space for hunting or fishing. Grain did not occur naturally in the local Ertebølle communities, since the ecological prerequisites were lacking. Grain may therefore have been given to communities in Southern Scandinavia through exchange relations. Agricultural production is assumed to have been exclusive, of minor importance for people's survival.

So, if it is claimed that the first agriculture was important in survival I cannot agree. An evaluation of economic practices is a qualitative research process, where we have both archaeological and palaeoecological information. The archaeological and palaeobotanical records are too vague in order to make such quantitative interpretations. And from an archaeologist's point of view the discipline does not at all give any objective picture of the past.

Since people cannot live in isolation, there must be contact areas between groups of people. Gifts and return gifts can be important elements in the contact network. Gift exchange

often depends on prestige or diplomacy, or is motivated by both. Gifts can circulate, or they can be handed over as tribute; they can be given for reasons of both peace and war. They are not in themselves functional. Another important aspect of exchange relations is the exchange of women or men in marriage alliances. I therefore see marriage alliances as a significant feature of the pattern of alliances that must have existed between the fully fledged Neolithic societies in Europe and the hunter-gatherer societies in the late Ertebølle period in Southern Scandinavia.

Social differentiation and social structure cannot be discussed without considering gender. It is a way of thinking about the world. I am well aware of the difficulties of interpreting social gender, since today's outlook inevitably dictates our picture of prehistory. Following the gender perspective, unfortunately, women and men often have been concealed behind concepts like structures, spheres, rich and poor, rulers and ruled. Women and men, young and old, should therefore be made visible and given a more prominent role in archaeological interpretations. Are women creative or passive individuals? Are they tied to the household and the work of taking care of others? Are they goddesses and fertility symbols? Do men conform to, for instance, the myth of 'man the hunter' or 'man the strong farmer'? (Jennbert in press). No matter what we choose, we consciously or unconsciously construct different gender roles and different types of family structure. Gender roles, particularly in the Late Mesolithic and the Early Neolithic, are trapped in an evolutionist outlook with its stereotyped male and female roles. There is much more work to be done on this topic.

What about the people themselves? Medicine, magic and religion are concepts which were more important to people in ancient times than in our modern, secularised world. Another field which could be discussed in this sense and in terms of mentality is diet, health and attitudes to diseases. Stable-isotope and trace-element analysis of bones from the Mesolithic and Neolithic in Sweden have shown that the dietary patterns are not correlated to any specific archaeological culture or period (Lidén 1995). Studies in pathology in osteological evidence within Mesolithic and Neolithic populations have suggested that there is no major difference in status of health. No biological evidence suggests that stress was involved in the transition to the Neolithic (Meiklejohn/Zvelebil 1991; Lidén 1995). Another perspective is population density. Gebauer and Price presumed that around 3100 bc there is no evidence of increasing population in Southern Scandinavia. They presume that not until around 2900-2800 bc, particularly around 2600 bc did the population increase (Gebauer/Price 1992, 108).

There is great potential in burials in terms of an interest in mentality and ideology. Changes in burial practices took place throughout the Stone Age in the form of constructions,

the handling of the body, and the types and composition of grave goods. Continuity and the width of variation in burial practices reveal tradition and renewal in society. This probably occurred in conjunction with changing family relationships and new areas of contact, and with other cultural links and other associated religious and ceremonial influences. The burial customs shed light on the relationship between social and ideological concepts. Analyses of burial rituals would then supplement other important categories of archaeological sources with interpretations of the customary concept of death.

The view of death and religious expressions were subject to slow and successive change during the Stone Age, within individual attributes and a collective consciousness. The archaeological material, albeit of limited extent, illustrates people's reactions in relation to death, or life *in senso*.

Looking at graves as memorials gives us an opportunity to trace tradition backwards and have some ideas about the changing ideas regarding death. Changing mortuary customs reflect changing traditions, that is the mental norms, which were important to the reproduction of the society. Graves and mortuary practices are projections of mentality and the social world which bind individuals together as a consequence of social fellowship. Death as one of life's "rites of passage" and the societal conditions together with other ritual practices offer a possibility to apprehend a picture of mentality and social norms.

For nearly 20 years now, we have had rich archaeological evidence of graves and mortuary practices in Mesolithic times. At the moment, there are 3-4 large cemeteries, altogether about 130 graves (Kannegaard Nielsen/Brinch Petersen 1993; Larsson 1993). Our knowledge of Neolithic mortuary practices has also been modified during the last few years. Especially in the west of Denmark, excavations of long barrows have given us other perspectives on mortuary practices (Madsen 1993), also in south Sweden excavations have given new results (Larsson 1992). In the earliest part of the Neolithic there are a few earthen graves, which have similarities with the earlier mortuary practices. With the occurrence of the long barrows we have perhaps a status differentiation even more marked than hitherto. Still the situation is hard to evaluate, since the empirical facts are few in number. There is, however, a trend of continuity, rather than a major break in mortuary practices, thus reducing our conceptual gap between the Mesolithic (more primitive) and the Neolithic (more advanced) mortuary practices.

It has been said that with the beginning of the Neolithic, there is evidence of votive offerings. But in the Mesolithic there are also votive offerings. In the offerings, we have a continuity in traditions, not a break between the Mesolithic and the Neolithic in a European context (Bradley 1990). According to Per Karsten the Mesolithic offering deposits in

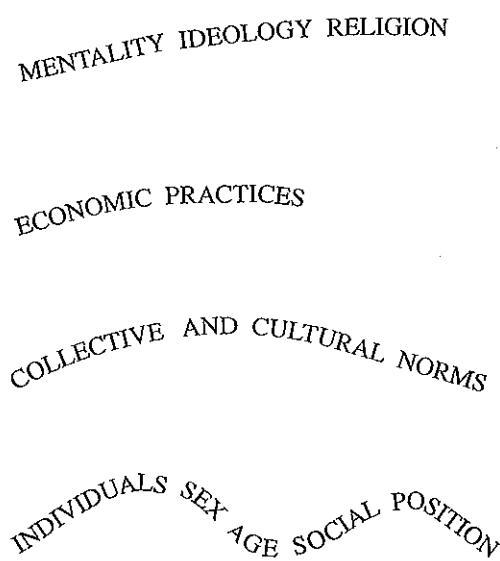


Figure 1. Currents of time and the variation of aspects of society.

south Sweden are found in the same context and areas as the Neolithic ones – in wetlands and in context of large stones on firm ground. The archaeological evidence is, however, limited, but Karsten suggests that a change in the character of votive offerings took place in the Late Mesolithic and that the transition from the Mesolithic to the Neolithic shows a continuity in offering customs (Karsten 1994).

4. What may have happened?

Concerning the scenario in southern Scandinavia, many discussions and ideas have been put forward. The main interest, as I understand it, is to look at the transition as a slow and gradual process from the Mesolithic. I would like to use the concepts of mentality and ideology in terms of currents in the flow of time (fig. 1). The figure shows the flow of time where the concept mentality is understood as slow altering. Different aspects of individuals and societies change at different rates, either slower or faster. In this perspective the abstractions such as cultures, periods, economic practices, mortuary practices have no privileged position in research. The many archaeological boxes we employ restrict the reasoning of the past.

To obtain ideas about mentality and the social world we need a complete source material about the different parts of society. However, there are lots of questions according to the significance of the archaeological sources. Due to the archaeological evidence from 5000-2000 bc we do not, of course, have a comprehensive knowledge of all kinds of

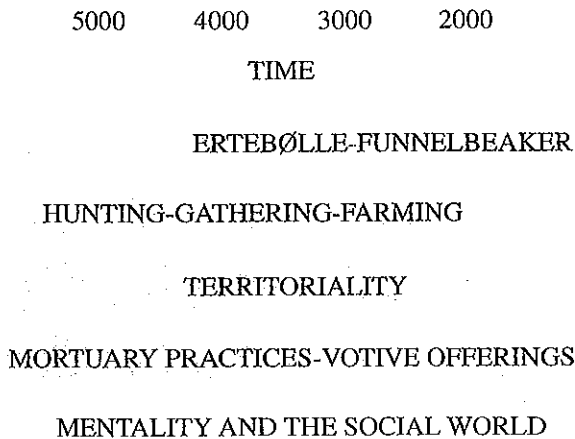


Figure 2. Continuity in Late Mesolithic and Early Neolithic.

archaeological data. Looking over time, we can, though, distinguish certain tendencies in our apprehension of what was actually changing in 5000-2000 bc (fig. 2). During the course of time there is a slow altering of mentality and ideology.

Personally, I do not think that the first agriculture had any strong effect on vegetation, as I understand farming to be a more exclusive production in society. Perhaps, later on, during Neolithic times, farming may have interfered more in the landscape (around 2600 bc). The real difference in social competition may have been around 2700-2600 bc. The shift that has been of central importance for the archaeologist, that around 3200-3100 bc, is not a major shift in the social domains or social organisations.

5. A conclusion: all in a name?

The views I have put forward here have of course not led to any ready answers about mentality, ideology and social structures. It is hard to find a solution to what happened in mentality and the social world during the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition in southern Scandinavia. It is obvious, however, that discussion of the whole process in a long-term perspective is a more convincing way than just comparing the two periods as largely different cultural entities.

Finally, I would like to make some critical remarks about the concepts that are essential to our understanding of the mentality and the social world and to the perception of the Stone Age societies in question. Words have different meanings to different people. We do not have a common language. I think that 'the change from the Mesolithic to the Neolithic' is a very good example of this. We need to theorise the use of language. The thought and modern mentality are in 'unfree freedom'. Take another example: the concept Neolithisation. What a

word – with such a pessimistic attribution to the decision-making by human beings! Hunter-gatherers allowed themselves to be 'ized', not as conscious social actors, but by default, through no activity of their own. There are several other concepts, as for example hunting-gathering, farming, Ertebølle culture, Funnel Beaker culture, just to name a few.

I would like to suggest that these concepts are undermining our scope for going beyond our preconceptions and further, of gaining a more holistic view of societies in a long-term perspective. The understanding of past societies is problematic and this is among other things connected with the language and mentality of our modern world. I think that the words and concepts we use should be given serious consideration.

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