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### 3. 'From the Inside': A Contribution to the Debate about the Introduction of Agriculture in Southern Scandinavia

*Kristina Jennbert*

#### Abstract

The debate about the process of Neolithization is biased in many ways. A broader understanding of gender roles and social dynamics in everyday life, and in alliances and contacts between people in the Mesolithic and the Early Neolithic could be a valuable addition to future research. To obtain an idea of the way people may have reacted and thought, changed their habits, made decisions, and been in contact with other people, more complete source material concerning the different parts of society is needed. It is essential to consider ideology, religion, and mentality. I think that a holistic view of prehistoric society is necessary, but I am well aware of the complex relationship between interpretations and present-day norms, between the theoretical and the empirical.

#### Introduction

In the past decade I have made a number of contributions to discussions on the introduction of agriculture to southern Scandinavia (e.g. Jennbert 1984, 1987, 1988). My main sources have been archaeology and quaternary geology, but aspects of cultural anthropology and the philosophy of science have also been essential for my interpretation and understanding of the process of Neolithization. Social dynamics and the exchange of gifts, with the metaphor of the 'fertile gift', characterize my work about the transition from hunting and gathering to tillage in southern Scandinavia. I have argued that the prerequisites for interpreting the change from hunting and gathering to tillage can be found not only in the existing sources but also in the overarching theories. Similarly, our perception of humankind and culture, and the way in which the significance of tillage and material culture is perceived, is of major importance when considering the transition from hunting and gathering to agriculture.

In my continued work on the process of Neolithization, I have become increasingly interested in, among other things, the social and cultural dynamics of late mesolithic and early neolithic societies. I shall therefore discuss the transition to agriculture 'from the inside', that is, how people may have thought and reacted, changed their habits, made decisions and been in contact with other groups. I see the debate about gender, as well as about ideology, religion and mentality, as invaluable to the continued discussion of Neolithization.

The temporal dimension is of great importance when attempting to understand the change from hunting and gathering to agriculture. How quickly or how slowly was a knowledge of agriculture acquired? How was the new knowledge used and managed? How many generations were involved in this so-called phase of change? Here there are different answers from different archaeologists. It is all about the way in which we perceive internal social dynamics and the way people change their mental habits. People must have been more conscious of the new ideas if the changes occurred within a shorter time. The opposite must have been the case if the new ideas were introduced over a longer period.

Let me give a picture of the way I envisage people living at the mesolithic/early neolithic site of Löddeborg, a settlement in western Scania from which Denmark can be seen.

Deciduous forests cover the peninsula. Brighter forest margins open up by the sea and along river estuaries. Inside the forest, too, there are glades, created by girdling trees. A group of people have lived here for a long time. They mostly live by hunting, fishing and gathering the bounties of nature. They cultivate some grain in glades in the forest. The children play. The women and men, young and old, have their everyday chores to manage. Not so long ago they were visited by some friends from the other side of the sound. As usual, they brought a lot of things with them.

So, in this fashion: How do you understand the 'people' to be? What pictures do you have of prehistory, especially the Stone Age? (Figure 3.1)

#### Social gender

Human relations, the division of labour, and social dynamics in conjunction with the transition from hunting and gathering to cultivation are of great significance: they are the part played by *people* in the introduction of agriculture. Social gender is mostly hidden, but it can be glimpsed in some of the archaeological literature. In modern literature, the women are often given special consideration from the gender point of view, whereas older works often depicted them on different premises.

The view of women and men, of their work and life, shapes archaeological interpretations of the beginnings



Figure 3.1 Stone age family (Figuier 1870).

of agriculture. Unfortunately, women and men have often been concealed behind concepts like *structures*, *spheres*, *rich* and *poor*, *rulers* and the *ruled*. Women and men, young and old, should therefore be made visible and given a more prominent place in archaeological interpretations.

Are women creative or passive individuals? Are they tied to the household and the work of care? Are they goddesses and fertility symbols? Do men conform to, for example, the myth of 'man the hunter' or 'man the strong, tenacious farmer'? No matter what is chosen, different gender roles and different types of family structure are consciously or unconsciously constructed. These can take such forms as nuclear families, generation-bound units, or they can be divided into a male and female sphere.

Bachofen's book *Das Mutterrecht* (1861) has influenced many emotional reconstructions of prehistoric societies (Reed 1975; French 1985). In other contexts a more unconscious view of social gender has created models for interpreting prehistoric societies. All interpretations, however, are tied to the ideas of the time in which they are produced; this is especially obvious in the evolutionist picture of societal and family development (Morgan 1877; Engels 1884) with its stereotyped male and female roles.

The sharp boundary which scholars, especially in early literature, have drawn between the Mesolithic and Neolithic, and between hunting and gathering and agriculture, means that the differences between the 'periods' are emphasized at the expense of the similarities. Gender roles, particularly in the Late Mesolithic and the Early Neolithic, are trapped in an evolutionist outlook. By applying a less rigid concept of the periods and by using anthropological analogies and gender perspectives, other, more satisfactory alternatives for interpreting and understanding the introduction of agriculture can be obtained.

However, studies of gender roles are nothing new in archaeological research, although one might be led to believe that they are from the feminist wave which has begun to make its mark on archaeology. The modern women's movement is naturally of decisive importance for the feminist aspects to be included in archaeology. The result is that stereotyped notions are reconsidered and social dynamics become clearer, which ultimately means that a more human prehistory is created. It is therefore fascinating to view the Mesolithic and Neolithic through these spectacles. The introduction of agriculture has a social dynamic and is a stage in prehistory in which people have been given little room in historiography (possible exceptions being the approaches of, for example, Hodder 1990; Martens 1990; Olsen 1988; Thomas 1988, 1991).

## Research perspectives — the Middle East, Europe and Scandinavia

Using a brief survey of research, I would like to exemplify the way social gender has been brought out. Let us look first at the Middle East, where Alexandra Kollontay (1921) pointed out the significance of women in the origins of agriculture (Kollontay 1976:16ff). The role of women in the discovery of agriculture was subsequently emphasized in many other works, particularly those of a literary kind. Presumably, the role of women in these works is an echo of the so-called 'oasis' theory proposed in 1908 by Pumpelly, and propagated by scholars such as Childe from the 1920s to the 1950s. In 1942 Childe wrote:

'To accomplish the Neolithic revolution mankind, or rather womankind, had not only to discover suitable plants and appropriate methods for their cultivation, but must also devise special implements for tilling the soil...' (Childe 1965:65).

Only a small fraction of this almost worldwide literature about the introduction of agriculture, whether from the archaeological, anthropological or geological point of view, has a 'feminine' perspective (e.g Stanley 1981; Zihlman 1981). Other, more abstract, concepts are more common, such as socio-cultural evolution (Braidwood

1960), changes in the eco-system (Flannery 1969; Jarman 1972), and population pressure (Binford 1968). These approaches have met a greater response and provoked most of the discussion about Neolithization in recent years.

At different points in time, people began to cultivate grain in different parts of Europe. In archaeological interpretations of this process, women and men have been virtually eliminated from the interpretative models, as in for example, the expansion horizons of Ammerman and Cavalli-Sforza (1971; cf. Barker 1985).

The introduction of agriculture to Scandinavia has been a frequent topic of debate in recent decades. Here too, people of flesh and blood are rarely seen in the various interpretations. The immigration of farmers, independent development, ecological disasters, population surpluses, survival crises and exchange of gifts are the most common expressions in the explanatory models which have been presented in the last thirty-five years (Jennbert 1987).

In recent years, however, there have been some studies, especially concerning southern Scandinavia, which deal with gender roles and social interaction in the Stone Age (Nielson and Nørgaard 1987; Mahler *et al.* 1983; Jennbert 1984; Welinder 1987; Engelstad 1988).

A Danish project undertaken by Nielsen and Nørgaard (1984, 1987) concentrates on the internal relations in

society. After a penetrating critique of theoretical frameworks in historical perspective, the authors present an interpretation of women's and men's work in stone age Denmark. The division of labour between the genders is viewed as a dynamic factor in societal development. Women dominated reproduction and the private sphere in the Late Mesolithic and Early Neolithic. Women are assumed to have had the main responsibility for agriculture until the introduction of the plough. Then the work process became more specialised and efficient, and women's work became more dependent on that of the men. The basic assumption is that all societies have an asymmetry between the genders and that male dominance depends on conditions of production.

In contrast, external relations are emphasised more in my own work (Jennbert 1984, 1991), where women are seen as a significant link in the introduction of agriculture to southern Scandinavia. The Neolithization process is interpreted here as a slow, gradual process dependant on external and internal relations.

An interpretation of the prehistoric situation in Scania demonstrates that there was a long, slow change towards a more differentiated social system from the early Ertebølle period. People were permanently settled in a favourable ecological environment in the Late Mesolithic. The density of settlement sites in Scania at this time gives no indication that people were forced to

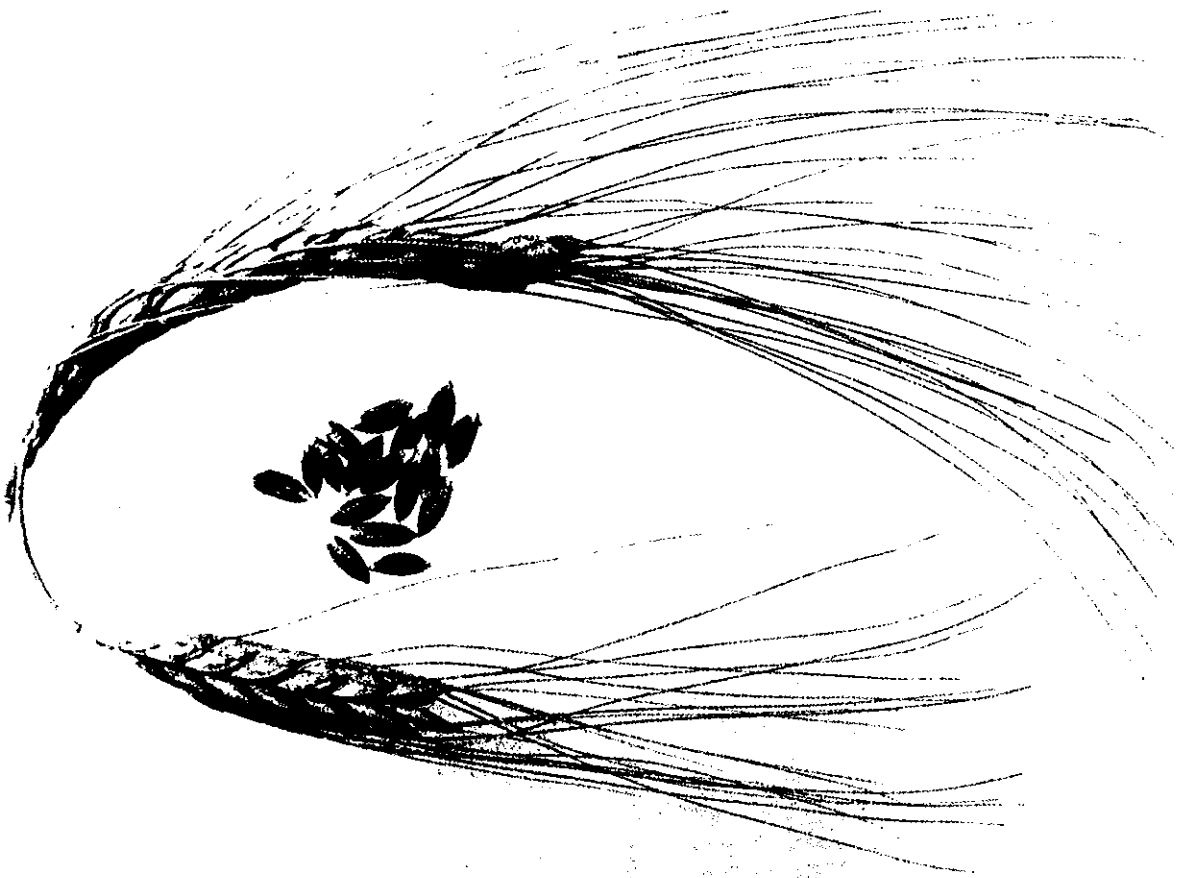


Figure 3.2 A fertile gift, *Triticum dicoccum* (Photo Inger Kristiansen).

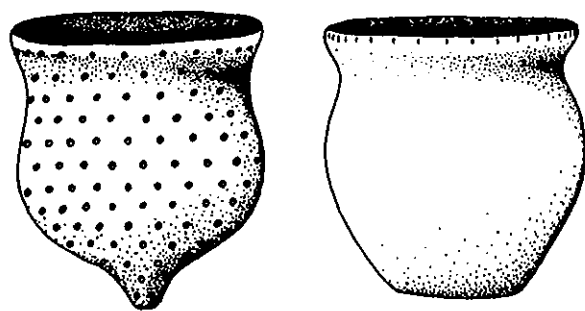


Figure 3.3 Ertebølle (right) and Funnel Beaker (left) pots.

adopt agriculture due to a shortage of space. Grain did not occur naturally in the local Ertebølle communities, since the ecological prerequisites for wild grains were lacking. Grain can therefore have come to southern Scandinavia as a result of relations of exchange (Figure 3.2). Agricultural production is assumed to have been exclusive, and of minor importance for people's survival.

Since people cannot live in isolation, there must be contact interfaces between groups of people. Gifts and return gifts can be important elements in the contact network. Gifts can be circulating, or they can be handed over as tribute, they can be given for reasons of both war and peace. Another important aspect of exchange relations is the exchange of women in marriage alliances (Orme 1981). I therefore see marriage alliances as a significant feature of the pattern of contact 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. Women in Central Europe had a knowledge of agriculture and by bringing the 'holy grain' with them, women could have had a decisive role in the introduction of tillage to Scandinavia.

My study and that of Nielson and Nørgaard (1984, 1987) represent different ways of trying to get behind the archaeological source material. They can serve as examples of recent approaches which attempt to make women and men visible and which attempt to explain their role in the introduction of agriculture. I am well aware of the difficulties of interpreting social gender, since the current view of the world inevitably dictates our picture of prehistory.

### Ideology, religion and mentality

To obtain an idea of the way people may have reacted and thought, changed their habits, made decisions, and been in contact with other people, more complete source material about the different parts of society is needed, it is essential to consider ideology, religion and mentality. I do not think that the introduction of agriculture meant

a drastic economic change: instead, agriculture was part of a cultural and social transformation. Farming was not necessary for economic reasons but was necessary from an ideological point of view.

Another way to approach Neolithization is therefore to make the social and cultural dynamics visible by including the archaeology of death and votive offerings. This requires data consisting of mortuary practices and other symbolic actions. People's decision to change their living habits can also find expression through material culture. The forms and decoration of pottery (Figure 3.3), for example, can be analysed in terms of the ideology and mentality of the people who lived with them.

### The continued debate

The views I have put forward here have not led to any ready answers about how people lived and made decisions in conjunction with the change from hunting and gathering to agriculture. However, I would stress the importance of looking at aspects of society, culture and people if we are to have any chance at all of arriving at a possible interpretation and understanding of the introduction of agriculture.

The question of the origin of agriculture has a long research tradition. The addition of a perspective dealing with human relations, ideology and mentality could help other interpretations to emerge. The debate about the Neolithization process, which is in many ways loaded with values, would be widened. A broader understanding of gender roles and social dynamics in everyday life, in alliances and contacts between people in the Mesolithic and Early Neolithic could be a valuable addition to future research. I think that a holistic view of prehistoric society is necessary, but I am well aware of the complex relationship between interpretations and present-day norms, between the theoretical and the empirical. In my opinion, the discussion of the Neolithization process would gain new depth if the following points were included in the debate:

- 1) the temporal dimension addressed in terms of human generations;
- 2) the gender perspective; and
- 3) ideology, religion and mentality; for example, the archaeology of death and votive offerings.

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